

Sri Lankan Conflict and Tamil Nadu: Terror, Bare Life and Necropolitics

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According to the United Nation's report released on 25 April 2011, its panel of experts has found that the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the blacklisted guerrilla/terrorist organization) as well as the Sri Lankan State have committed "serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law ... some of which would amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."¹ The UN Panel confirmed the charges against the State and the insurgents of decimating helpless civilians during the final phase of the war, particularly during the nine months from September 2008 till 19 May 2009, when the Sri Lankan Army advanced into Vanni and resorted to heavy bombings causing the death of innumerable civilians. "Around 3,30,000 civilians were trapped into an ever decreasing area," and could not flee the shelling as they were held hostage by the LTTE. The Government silenced the reporters through intimidatory tactics, like making people disappear through white vans ("Report"). Thus,

...in conclusion, the Panel found credible allegations that comprise *five core categories* of potential serious violations committed by the Government of Sri Lanka: (i) killing of civilians through widespread shelling; (ii) shelling of hospitals and humanitarian objects; (iii) denial of humanitarian assistance; (iv) human rights violations suffered by victims and survivors of the conflict, including both IDPs and suspected LTTE cadre; and (v) human rights violations outside the conflict zone, including against the media and other critics of the Government. The Panel's determination of credible allegations against the LTTE associated with the final stages of the war reveal *six core categories* of potential serious violations:

(i) using civilians as a human buffer; (ii) killing civilians attempting to flee LTTE control; (iii) using military equipment in the proximity of civilians; (iv) forced

recruitment of children; (v) forced labour; and (vi) killing of civilians through suicide attacks [*italics mine*] (“Report” 2011).

The above report, from a panel of experts appointed by the UN to probe into the alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka, reveals the predicament of civilians caught in the warring zone between the tyranny of the State and the terror of the ultras.

Such a dark and horrendous climactic moment points to the long and drawn-out conflict that had its greatest impact on its closest neighbor Tamil Nadu, in India, for reasons not merely of geographic and linguistic proximity or ties due to the long history of migration during the colonial and the pre-colonial times, as exemplified by the violent response of the LTTE to the atrocities of the Indian Peace Keeping Force by the shocking assassination of the ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at Sriperumbudur in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu. By exploring the ramification of the suicide bombing of Rajiv Gandhi through the long and the protracted trial and sentencing of Perarivalan (one of the three accused in the case, others being Santhan and Murugan), this essay argues for how the specter of the suicide bombing is still haunting the Tamil psyche by underscoring its centrality for regional politics and media. Thereafter by zeroing in on the figure at the heart of that specter Dhanu, the female suicide bomber who assassinated Rajiv Gandhi, this essay seeks to address the specificity of juridical machinery/justice in the context of the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict and its bearing on bare lives. Towards the end, an essay in *Kalachuvadu*, the renowned literary magazine founded by the iconic Tamil writer Sundara Ramaswamy, which caters to the Tamil readers in India as well as the diaspora, is studied in detail for its focus on LTTE’s divided response to Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination and the mobilization of Indian support after the genocide (Yatheenthira). The essay, “Puligalin Veelchiyum Tamilaga Atharavu Sakthigalin Arasiyal Purithalum (The Fall of the Tigers and the Political Awareness of the Tamil Supporters),” by Yatheenthira recalls some of the significant observations and critique of academicians and intellectuals like M. Thirunavukkarasu, P. Ragupathy, Keethaponcalan, L. Piyadasa and A. J. Wilson, and the political strategist and negotiator (of the LTTE) Anton Balasingham, in its contemplation on the failure of the LTTE in the dramatically changed post 9/11 scenario for the guerrillas.²

Walter Benjamin's discussions on terror and the State becomes central in my analysis, as his profound thoughts on emergency, violence and the State resonate with the repercussions of the terror and the violence of the LTTE both inside and outside the boundaries of the Indian State/sovereignty. Benjamin observed: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight" (Walter Benjamin, 1996: 267). Giorgio Agamben rearticulates Benjamin's blurring of the rule and its exception in his exploration of the relationship between sovereign power and bare life; however, I am more concerned with the ethical side of the violence, and thus take recourse to the concept of "bare life" as espoused by Benjamin in his essay "Critique of Violence." Also translated as "mere Life," "bare life" for Benjamin, is not defined by violence, it is the life before life with all its ethical possibilities; what marks bare life as different from life is *Schuld*, i.e., guilt or debt. In the specific context of Dhanu's case, as the suicide bomber of the LTTE, she carries the guilt or debt of violence; nonetheless, the ethical possibilities are foreclosed for her as she has to live under the state of emergency/exception that had become the norm—both under the LTTE as well as the Sri Lankan State.³ Additionally, this essay will engage with the predicament of Perarivalan whose (manipulated) confessional statement has resulted in more than two decades of his confinement: the erasure of a sentence from his statement epitomizing the insignificance of his bare life in the eyes of the law. And here I think Achille Mbembe's concepts of necropolitics and necropower offer insight on thinking about the failed guerrilla war that led to the most recent genocide in history and the subjugation of bare life to the will of authority. I will, therefore, engage with Mbembe's explication of necropolitics as the "subjugation of life to the power of death," which reconfigures "the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror," to analyze the complex intersection of law and violence, suicide bombing and trauma, and justice and bare life (2003: 40).

Kalachuvadu: Footprint(s) of Time

Kalachuvadu (Footprint of Time) as a magazine has been in the forefront of creating a space for serious writing in Tamil, especially on the Sri Lankan-Tamil conflict during the last decade right from its beginning. Two months after the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the December 2011 issue has the LTTE leader Prabhakaran on its cover with a cover story by Yatheenthira, one of the regular and highly discussed contributors from Sri Lanka, who retrospectively analyzes the

causes for the failure of the LTTE in this tragic conflict from the Tamil perspective. Yatheenthira foregrounds the domino effect of 9/11, which led to drastic changes in state policies in tackling terrorism during the last decade, as the defining factor in the crushing of a guerrilla organization like the LTTE (“Puligalin”). (For a brief outline of the recent history of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, see Appendix 1.)

Yatheenthira notes that such “a shameful end” of the Tamil Tigers could be reasoned out by people to different causes depending on where they come from: the pro-Tiger camp could point to the Indian Government, supported by the US, as primarily responsible for the annihilation of the LTTE. The people on the opposite side could hold the fascism of the Tigers as singularly responsible for their self-destruction. According to Yatheenthira, although the critique of the Tigers’ dictatorial behavior and their silencing of any differing voice is just, the undemocratic ways of the LTTE is not the primary cause for their downfall: it is the ramification of the terrorist attack of the 9/11 in the US which sounded the death toll for armed freedom struggle anywhere in the world. Though the LTTE was listed among the banned terrorist organizations, the US and the West did not equate Prabhakaran with Bin Laden. Nevertheless, they did want him to convert to the modern “coat-suit attire” or the traditional white *vettisalvai* (conventional dhoti/an unstitched piece of white cloth wrapped around the waist and a matching white shawl) costume from his guerrilla uniform (“Puligalin”).⁴

According to Yatheenthira, Prabhakaran’s failure to give up his uniform, which emblemized his ignorance of the changed political scenario, led to the strategic failure of the Tigers in the war since the Sri Lankan Government used the favorable post 9/11 situation of unconditionally targeting the ultras to its full advantage (“Puligalin”). This recalls the remarks of Norwegian cabinet minister Erik Solheim who, as a mediator of the peace talks with LTTE, told the media that Prabhakaran was a “military genius” but ignorant of “international politics” (Narayan Swamy). This is exemplified, in Yatheenthira’s opinion, by LTTE’s underestimation of India’s aspirations and emergence as a superpower in the region during the last decade: it disassociated itself with its (former) spokesperson and chief negotiator Anton Balasingham’s apology for the assassination of India’s former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Balasingham had confessed to NDTV, a leading Indian television channel:

As far as that event [assassination of Rajiv Gandhi] is concerned, I would say it is a great tragedy, *a monumental historical tragedy* for which we deeply regret and we call upon the Government of India and the people of India to be magnanimous to put the past behind and to approach the ethnic question in a different perspective [italics mine] (NDTV Exclusive).

However, S. P. Tamilchelvan, the leader of the political wing of the LTTE rejected Balasingham's "politically clever" apology without even consulting him, and according to Yatheenthira, Balasingham was thereafter sidelined by the LTTE till his death in December 2006. After giving his reasons for the decimation of the Tigers, Yatheenthira reveals the purpose of his essay: he wants the people in Tamil Nadu, who have supported the Tamil cause in the past, to look carefully at the dismal result of their investment in the (Sri Lankan) Tamil cause and share responsibility for the current predicament of Sri Lankan Tamils ("Puligalin").

Assassination of Rajiv Gandhi: The Terror and Its Specter

Though Yatheenthira is right in pointing out the changed scenario for guerrilla organizations like the LTTE after 9/11, the singular event that diluted the support for LTTE in India was its momentous assassination of Rajiv Gandhi on 21st May 1991 through a suicide mission almost a decade before 11th September 2001: initially the tigers received their training in guerrilla warfare in Tamil Nadu, as observed by Yatheenthira, but after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination the equation between the Tigers and the people of Tamil Nadu changed as the LTTE was banned in India, and their support base moved to the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the West. Nonetheless, the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict is ubiquitous in contemporary Tamil Nadu politics and media, and could be reasoned out to its potential for sloganeering on Tamil sentiments during elections: the local political parties in Tamil Nadu (mainly the DMK [*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*/Dravidian Progressive Front] and the AIADMK [*All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam*/All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Front] have appropriated the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict for their own selfish interests.

The major political parties of Tamil Nadu play with the sentiments of most of the people of Tamil Nadu, and their ambivalence towards the Tigers and their emotional support of the

marginalized Sri Lankan Tamils and their legitimate struggle for equality. The Rajiv Gandhi assassination proved to be the point of bifurcation for most of the people in Tamil Nadu, when the largely pro-Tigers sentiment turned into a disapproval of their tactics of terror as the means to a separate Tamil land. However, appealing to the shared genetic, linguistic and cultural roots of the Sri Lankan Tamils continues to strike a chord among the people of Tamil Nadu. Therefore, the regional political parties continue to recycle the Sri Lankan Tamil cause either by associating with or by distancing themselves from the LTTE as the Tamil nationalist or terrorist organization depending on their political objectives. For instance, even Vai. Gopalsamy, the chief of the MDMK (*Marumalarchi Dravida Munetra Kazhagam* [Revivalist Dravidian Progressive Front]), who has a record of unconditionally supporting the LTTE and standing up for the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils, was a prominent member of the National Democratic Alliance spearheaded by the anti-secessionist and Hindu right-wing BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party*) in 2000 (Subramanian 2000). As recently as in 2011, the specter of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination had returned to haunt Tamil Nadu politics and occupied center-stage as the diverse political parties were competing to capitalize on the public sympathy for the three accused, Santhan, Perarivalan and Murugan: they had been sentenced to death in 1999, and their petition for clemency rejected by the President in August 2011 (Viswanathan 2011). Consequently to exploit the public sympathy, if M. Karunanidhi, the ex-Chief Minister and the leader of the DMK, asked the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Congress Party President (and the widow of Rajiv Gandhi) Sonia Gandhi to free Santhan, Perarivalan and Murugan as they have already spent twenty years in prison [from 1991 to 2011] (NDTV Correspondent), the Tamil Nadu Government under Chief Minister Jayalalitha tried to preempt him by moving a resolution, which urged President Pratibha Patil to reconsider the mercy petition of the accused which had been declined after an inordinate delay of eleven years,⁵ that had been unanimously adopted by the cabinet. However, their political stunts were inconsistent with their actions: while Karunanidhi had endorsed the death sentence of the three accused in 2000 when he was the Chief Minister, Jayalalitha is known for her outspoken anti-LTTE stance (Viswanathan 2000)

This exploitative politics surrounding the fate of three death-row inmates points to the state of emergency that Benjamin undergirds as the rule not the exception when it comes to the predicament of the oppressed: Santhan and Murugan from Sri Lanka, and Perarivalan from

Chennai were sentenced to death by the Supreme Court in 1999 for being part of the group that conspired to kill Rajiv Gandhi, but the manner of their trial has been questioned not only by the local and the national press but by organizations like the Amnesty International:

The three men were amongst 26 people sentenced to death by a special court at the Poonamallee jail complex in Tamil Nadu, *under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act, 1987 (TADA) – a law that contained provisions that were incompatible with international standards for fair trial*. On appeal, a three-judge Supreme Court bench confirmed the death sentences of Murugan, Santhan, Perarivalan and a woman, Nalini, while acquitting 19 persons of the murder charges and commuting the death sentences of three others. In April 2000, the Governor of Tamil Nadu commuted Nalini's sentence to life imprisonment, but rejected the mercy petitions of the three men. A mercy petition for the three men was sent to the Government of India in April 2000 and eventually only decided upon at the beginning of August 2011 [*italics mine*] (“Urgent Action” 2011).

The TADA epitomizes the permanent state of emergency which dictates the lives and deaths of deemed terrorists: the fact that the Supreme Court acquitted nineteen of the twenty-six people, and among the remaining seven, freed three of them and sentenced four to death, indicates the arbitrariness of the trial conducted by the special court and its conceited and undemocratic methods. The confession of the accused when they were detained under TADA has proved to be the decisive evidence, though the court has ruled that these accused are being convicted for the murder of Rajiv Gandhi and not for any act of terror against the people (Pro-LTTE). Thus, the trial by a court (TADA) set up for emergency cases becomes the basis for justice: the outlaws are tried by the State flexing its muscles outside the law through special courts, set up for extracting confessions behind closed doors.

This legal situation mirrors Benjamin's differentiation between natural law (where the end justifies the means) and positive law (where the means justify the end): the accused have conspired to assassinate a Prime Minister as a symbolic revenge for the acts of violence against the Tamils and the rape of Tamil women by the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) that he had deputed, and in a similar vein, the State through its special court, created specifically for the

secretive and speedy trial of the terrorists, is justifying the means toward the end of bringing these deemed terrorists to justice (Benjamin, 1996: 236-7). Though Benjamin rejects natural law and its justification of ends and duly considers the justification of means of the positive law, his objective is to lay bare the “ultimate insolubility of all legal problems” as both natural and positive laws are embedded in violence: “law making” and “law preserving ” violence (236-7). He is interested in the dialectics between these two apparently polarized forms of violence mainly to expose the way law links them irrevocably (251).

The Case of Perarivalan: Battery Cells and the Bare Life

The specter of Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination is still haunting Tamil Nadu, perhaps even more heavily than in the past, due to the recent revelation by a retired police officer who was involved in the investigation of Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination. The documentary, *Uyir Vali: Sakkiyadikkum Sattam* directed by Brahadeeshwaran and produced by a group of activists and People’s Movement Against Death Penalty, was released on 24th November 2013 (*Uyir Vali*). It has an interview with the former CBI SP (Central Bureau of Investigation, Superintendent of Police) V. Thiagarajan wherein he says that he did not record verbatim the confessional statement of Perarivalan that was instrumental in his being sentenced and substantiated the making/assembly of the bomb for the assassination (*PTI* 2014).

The statement of Perarivalan, as recorded by Thiagarajan, affirms that he knew about the plot: “...moreover I bought two nine volt battery cells (Golden Power) and gave them to Sivarasan [the conspirator who later committed suicide]. He used *only these* to make the bomb explode” [italics mine] (Janardhanan 2013). In the wake of the documentary, in an interview given to *The Times of India*, Thiagarajan revealed that Perarivalan confessed to his purchasing of the battery cells, but denied any awareness of the making of the bomb: ““But he said he did not know the battery [cells] he bought would be used to make the bomb. As an investigator, it put me in a dilemma. It wouldn't have qualified as a confession statement without his admission of being part of the conspiracy. There [sic] I omitted a part of his statement and added my interpretation. I regret it,’ he said, adding that if he had a chance, he would have corrected the mistake” (Janardhanan).

Except for the two nine-volt battery cells that Perarivalan gave to Sivarasan, there is no material evidence against him. Nonetheless, this would prove fatal for Perarivalan as Thiagarajan modified the recorded confession as: “*Ithu than Rajiv Gandhiyin kolakku payan paduthappettathu*,” [these (the battery cells) were the ones used for the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi]. Later “While acquitting 19 accused in 1999 (in the absence of any other concrete evidence in the making of the bomb), Perarivalan's was the only TADA confession statement that the Supreme Court upheld in the case finding it ‘believable’” (Janardhanan). Twenty-two years after Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination and the (unjust) incarceration of Perarivalan, Thiagarajan confesses that he “always felt a little uneasy” in Perarivalan’s case, particularly because of the fact that the “wireless intercepts between key accused Sivarasan and the LTTE leader 'Pottu' Amman reveal that the former had not disclosed the plot to anyone.” His much-delayed revelations, he says, are in “good conscience” (PTI 2014). Nevertheless, Perarivalan’s tragic predicament of twenty-two years of incarceration without proper trail and the ambiguity surrounding his future, though his death sentence has now been changed to life, further attains poignancy when seen from the perspective of his old but spirited mother Arputhammal who has been fighting for his acquittal and release ever since (*The Hindu* 2014). Disconnected to her isolation is the indifference of the Law as the Supreme Court, which could not heed to her desperate pleas for the last two decades, has commuted Perarivalan’s death sentence to life on 18 February 2014, only after the unduly delayed but rare admission of Thiagarajan (Vaidyanathan 2014). Subsequently, though the decision of the Tamil Nadu Government under Jayalalitha to free Perarivalan, along with six others convicted for Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, has been welcomed by most of the people of Tamil Nadu across party lines,⁶ the instrumentalization of the predicament of Perarivalan, mainly to exploit the public sympathy for the oncoming elections this year, is again in full swing.⁷ Nonetheless, Arputhammal’s invocation of Gandhi and Buddha in the context of her son’s innocence, and the values of truth and justice, draw attention simultaneously to her recourse to lawful means for justice and the State’s inhumane power over life and death: “This is the land of Mahatma Gandhi and Buddha. An innocent man should not be executed by the state. Both Justice K. T. Thomas and lead investigator D. R. Kaarthikeyan have spoken out against carrying out the death penalty. My son has topped the Plus Two examination in prison and he has reformed many others by involving them in education, sports and cultural activities.” (Vijay Kumar 2013).

According to Benjamin, “if violence is totally excluded in principle” there is no way to “conceive of solution to human problems.” He looks at the ubiquitous legal violence as “mythic” because “in its archetypal form [it] is a [bare] manifestation of the gods” and their power over life and death. Looking for a solution, Benjamin contrasts such “bloody,” mythic violence, to the divine violence that is “lethal without spilling blood” (294 -7). While Agamben draws from Benjamin’s divine violence to argue for politics as the sphere of pure “mediality without ends” (2000: 117), Slavoj Žižek criticizes such waiting for “some magical intervention.” In a recent interview on “divine violence” in *Soft Journal*, Žižek argues, “Benjamin is pretty precise. An example he gives of divine violence is a mob lynching a corrupt ruler! That’s pretty concrete” (2014). Rather than the loaded concept of the divine violence which might offer a solution, but only with the rupture of the rational with the irrational, it is Benjamin’s idea of “bare life” which he contrasts with legal violence, that resonates with the specificity of the deemed terrorists/conspirators who have been sentenced to life on charges of the assassination of a country’s preeminent leader. For Benjamin, “bare life” (of the former) is a “pure naked form of vitality” over which law (State) exerts its power. “Blood is the symbol of [bare life]...Mythic violence is bloody power over [bare life] for its [law’s] own sake” (250). Agamben’s analysis of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” underscores the link between “bare life and juridical violence”: “Not only does the rule of law over the living exist and cease to exist alongside with bare life,” but the dissolution of bare life is coeval with “the dissolution of juridical violence” (1998: 65). Herein lies the specter that haunts Yatheenthira’s as well as most post-war diagnoses of the Sri Lankan conflict: it is the figure of the (unmentioned) suicide bomber Dhanu. Trained by the LTTE, she had come to Chennai on a suicide mission and bombed herself and killed the ex-Prime Minister to the shock of the entire nation, and in particular the people of Tamil Nadu.

Though Benjamin was writing about violence and justice in the specific context of the genocide of the Jews and the geopolitics of Hitler's Germany during the Second World War, the paradigms of the holocaust and the concentration camp quite well parallel the Sri Lankan Tamil genocide and the predicament of the Tamils who have been confined in camps after May 2009. Like the Jews, Tamils have been targeted not only because of their ethnicity or linguistic and religious difference but also because of their affluence: “Tamil fears,” like that of the Jews regarding National Socialist Party, “that a less tolerant government might come to power were

realized" in 1956 "when a Buddhist backed coalition called the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)" came to power. "The SLFP was largely elected by non-Westernized Buddhist majority who no longer wished to be controlled by English-speaking elite, many of whom happened to be Tamils," and "Tamils became the scapegoats for a population suffering from political as well as economic discontent" (Wayland 2004: 412).

Dhanu: The Bare Life and the Mythology of the Suicide Bomber

One of the defining images of terror in the Tamil imaginary is that of the suicide bombing of Rajiv Gandhi as his mortal remains were retrieved as fragments after the explosion of the powerful bomb and its specter still haunts the discourse surrounding the Sri Lankan Tamils: when the LTTE-trained Dhanu approached Rajiv Gandhi on his arrival near the dais for a public meeting at Sriperumbudur, 30 miles from Chennai in Tamil Nadu, and on the pretext of bowing down at his feet activated the RDX bomb strapped under the belt inside her saree, the bomber and the bombed were instantly reduced to pieces and all that remained was mangled fragments of flesh and Rajiv Gandhi's costume reduced to its bare form (as could be seen in the pictures that are among the most circulated in the Indian media).



1. Rajiv Gandhi. Courtesy: *Reuters*

2. Dhanu/Thenmozhi Rajendran (in the middle).

Courtesy: Tamil Bi-Weekly *Junior Vikatan*



3. After the bomb went off. Courtesy: Tamil Weekly *Nakkeeran*



4. Searching for the remains. Courtesy: the newspaper *Deccan Chronicle*



5. Rajiv Gandhi's remains—Courtesy: The Indira Gandhi Memorial Museum, New Delhi.

This is far removed from the overwhelming spectacle of international terrorism, associated with Al Qaida and its attack on the twin towers on 11 September 2001, marked by the sublime visuals of the gray smoke going up toward the sky as the debris were falling down on the foggy streets of New York. The traumatized people in unbelief were running for their lives towards the camera on television screens across the globe to the horizontal scrolls at the bottom announcing, “it is a live coverage” of an event. In contrast, the visuals of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination mirror the low-key “bare life” quality of its dark protagonist, the suicide-bomber Dhanu, whose action took the lives of fourteen others along with her apart from her target and literally scattered them as pieces on the bare ground, as exemplified by the remains of Rajiv Gandhi which was retrieved from the site of his assassination (BBC 1991). Like 9/11 this too was an act of transnational terror, where players from across the borders were involved, but the spectacle of terror in this case is subsumed by the specter of the mangled flesh and the specificity of the bomber herself, whose image invokes the Benjaminian bare-life figure especially in her action of dissolving herself to dissolve the juridical violence of the State: ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, though mirroring the transnationality of the suicide-bomber Dhanu through his power to deploy the Indian forces across the borders in Sri Lanka, epitomizes the “bloody”

mythic violence and its power over bare life (and its death) to preserve “law” for its own sake and not in the interests of the “life” of the “bare” Dhanu.

Nonetheless, Dhanu’s narrative too reflects the mythical violence of the Other in its impulse towards an end that is justified, and journalists and scholars have tried to reconstruct her narrative mainly from the memories of people associated with her and through interviews. The discourse in the Tamil media is centered on the gang rape of Dhanu by the IPKF, as alluded to by the popular Tamil film director Mani Ratnam in his debut film in Hindi *Dil Se* (1998): Meghna, the heroine of *Dil Se*, is from the Northeast India where too there is a subnationalist conflict and problems centered on autonomy and armed warfare. We see her turn into a suicide bomber as she was gang-raped by the personnel of the BSF (Border Security Force) when she was a child, and the film ends with the bomb wrapped on Meghna attending a public event as she is embraced by her lover Amar, signifying the trauma (of Rajiv Gandhi’s death) that still haunts the Indian imaginary. One of the collaborators on the story was Sujatha, arguably the most popular Tamil writer of the second half of the last century, who was known for his showcasing of quotidian figures at the intersections of momentous historical and socio-political events, which enabled the juxtaposition of history/politics with spectacle. In the case of Dhanu, the research by Mia Bloom reveals the mythical aspect of her narrative which serves the cause of justifying the means of the Tigers and their suicide bombings:

Allegations of Dhanu’s rape have never been proven and sources within the Indian government assert that she was still a virgin at the time of her death. Although such sources have cause to lie, in my interviews with the Tamil Tigers, they too do not think she was actually raped. There have been questions raised about whether her mother might have been the victim of sexual abuse by the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) when they intervened in the country in 1987–1990, but the main reason why Dhanu became a Tiger is that her brother was a well-known cadre who had died and she was carrying on the family tradition.⁸

The Power of Death and the Subjugation of Life

This lineage of carrying on the mantle of death (for a cause/an organization) necessitates thinking about the power of death over life as espoused by Achille Mbembe. He argues for terror as a “defining feature” of late-modern colonial regimes that symbolizes experiencing permanently the condition of “being in pain” (2003: 38-9). This indicates the predicament of the Sri Lankan Tamil people, not only in their history of oppression by the independent Sri Lankan State (from 1948 onwards, as elaborated in Appendix 1), but also with their confinement within camps after the war on the suspicion of their past ties with or support for the LTTE: “fortified structures, military posts, and road blocks everywhere; buildings that bring painful memories of humiliations, interrogations and beatings; ...parents shamed and beaten in front of their” own children (38-9).

The very act of the suicide bombing in this case exemplifies the subjugation of life to the power of death through a war where the body does not merely conceal a weapon but is transformed into one, “not in a metaphorical sense but in the truly ballistic sense”:

In this instance, [Dhanu’s] death goes hand in hand with the death of the Other. Homicide and suicide are accomplished in the same act. And to a large extent, resistance and self-destruction are synonymous. To deal out death is therefore to reduce the other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flesh, scattered everywhere, and assembled with difficulty before the burial. In this case, war is the war of body on body (*guerre au corps-à-corps*). To kill, one has to come as close as possible to the body of the enemy. To detonate the bomb necessitates resolving the question of distance, through the work of proximity and concealment (36 -7).

Mbembe’s delineation of the suicide bomber is a vivid retelling of Dhanu’s fatal act, and gives a detailed picture of the Benjaminian moment of dissolution, attained through concealment and the carefully planned erasure of distance. Such a war of (bare) body on the (sovereign) body is marked by the “willingness to take the enemy with you,” and closing the doors on the “the possibility of life for everyone.” This logic is in contrast to that of the sovereign’s legal violence, “which consists in wishing to impose death on others while

preserving one's own life" (2003: 37).

The willingness to perish with the enemy, thus, marks Dhanu's act as fundamentally different from the legal violence of the sovereign. By disavowing the instinct to survive, even as the "bare life" through the power of death undermines the sovereign/State and its law-preserving violence by freeing itself from its clutches, it also through its suicidal and the simultaneously homicidal act underscores the aporia which marks the relationship between life and law: on the one hand bare life, as epitomized by Dhanu, is invested in the justification of ends as she perceives her cause as just (both as a Sri Lankan Tamil against the political marginalization of the Tamils, and as a woman against the aggression of the IPKF), and therefore expects that law (to come/be enacted) should serve her just cause/justice, but paradoxically it is the same law, (once) enacted and enforced by the sovereign/State, that violently controls her life in order to preserve itself—often at the cost of the destruction of the bare life itself. It is this aporetic relationship between law and life, written on the bodies signified by the sovereign and the bare life, which enmeshed with each other as mangled pieces of flesh, in the "war of body on body," that haunts the Tamil psyche and the Tamil/Indian media even two decades after the momentary/momentous war was over.⁹

Dhanu's suicide/homicide, thereby, marked a caesura in the history of Indian politics as the sovereign and the affected subject literally dissolved together punctuating a singular moment in Indian history, although assassination of iconic leaders is not uncommon in India, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi and Indira Gandhi. The instance of Dhanu/Rajiv Gandhi's death is unique: the discourses surrounding Jihad and terrorism associated with the Palestinian cause though have parallels insofar as linguistic nationalism and the demands for an autonomous state is concerned yet are far removed from the specificity of LTTE's open embrace of suicide bombing as a means without recourse to and through the disavowal of religion, and its strategy of often using woman suicide bombers as exemplified by the case of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. The specificity of Dhanu's defining act of terror, through its enactment in Tamil Nadu with its highest percentage of Tamil-speaking population in the world, draws attention to the unbearable heaviness of belonging to a very ancient culture, and the fraught destiny of its unfortunate descendants who migrated either through necessity or the force of the colonizer.

The contemporaneity of the inextricable link between bare life, law and transnational governance in world politics is exemplified by Sri Lankan government's reluctance to cooperate with UN inquiry into alleged war crimes and human rights abuses in recent times (Aneez and Sirilal 2014). In this case, the legality of the transnational, which contributed to the killing of Gandhi, is trying to disrupt the national preservation of secrecy. Nonetheless, as long as powerful governments, as exemplified by the US in the case of Edward Snowden, are invested in such preservation of secrecy at the cost of democracy, human rights, and freedom, in the name of security and surveillance, apolitical organizations like the UN can only draw our attention to the fact that the State will constantly reinvent itself, even in these times of transnational governance, to exercise its uncontrollable power over bare life through the mechanism of law.

Notes

¹ The U.N. published the report dated 31 March 2011, on 25 April 2011, through its news service. See for details: "Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka," The United Nations, *Un.org*, 31 March 2011, Accessed 20 Feb. 2014.

² Many of these scholars have been deeply engaged with the conflict in Sri Lanka, particularly from 1983 onward. For instance, M. Thirunavukkarasu, former lecturer, Dept. of History, University of Jaffna.

³ For details see, Walter Benjamin, 1996.

⁴ Yatheenthira refers to the use of the traditional vettisalwai dress by moderate Tamil politicians to gain votes from people during the elections. Thus, it epitomizes adherence to the rules of electoral politics.

⁵ However, according to the Presidential news release the delay in the ruling on the mercy petition was only six years. See for details: Viswanathan, 2011.

⁶ For the positive response to the decision by the State Government, see Mohan, 2014.

⁷ See for details: TNN, 2014.

⁸ See for details on the events surrounding Dhanu's past, Bloom, 2005. Bloom, however, emphasizes "that checkpoint rape on the part of Sri Lankan military in Tamil areas (e.g., on the east coast) has certainly mobilized female Tamils, encouraged abused women to join the organization."

⁹ According to Agamben, sovereignty is invested in the potential of law for violence rather than its capacity for maintaining peace or rendering justice. See for details Agamben, 1998.

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Appendix: 1

A brief history of the Sri Lankan-Tamil conflict

Ceylon gains independence from the British in 1948 (after 133 years of rule starting from 1815 onward). The next decade sees a wave of Sinhala nationalism fuelled by the anti-Tamil and pro-Sinhalese and Buddhist fundamentalist sentiments, leading to the anti-Tamil riots in 1958 that leave thousands of Tamils displaced and 200 killed ("Sri Lanka Profile"). Ceylon officially becomes Sri Lanka in 1972 and Buddhism is made the state religion, further antagonizing and alienating the Hindu majority Tamils and a substantial Muslim population whose mother-tongue was Tamil. Subsequently, the disquietude and the apprehension towards the oppressive Sri Lankan State in the Tamil-majoritarian northern and eastern part of the island becomes the major cause for the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 1981, the Sri Lankan police are "accused of burning the Jaffna Public Library," with its rare collection of Tamil books and archives, entrenching further the divide between the Sinhalese and Tamils. The simmering resentment leads to the LTTE ambushing 13 Sri Lankan soldiers which results in anti-Tamil riots and the killing of hundreds of Tamils, and LTTE's first war for Eelam (the autonomous Tamil nation) with the State in 1983 ("Sri Lanka Profile").

Six years later in 1987, the Government forces the LTTE back into Jaffna, and its agreement with the Indian government allows for the deployment of the IPKF—Indian Peace Keeping Force ("Sri Lanka Profile"). Three years later the IPKF, accused of killing the Tamils and the raping of Tamil women, leave after suffering heavy casualty fighting the LTTE in the North. The Second Eelam War begins in 1990, and it exposes LTTE's fascistic tendencies,

intolerance and non-secular policies, as it forcefully evicts thousands of Muslims from their traditional homeland in the North, and leads to their notoriety as hardcore suicide bombers as they are implicated in the assassination of the Indian ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in Chennai (South India) in 1991, and two years later, in 1993, assassinate Sri Lankan President Premadasa in Colombo. In 1994, President Chandrika Kumaratunga comes to power, with a promise of ending the war and invites LTTE for “peace talks.”

But the “Third Eelam War” begins in 1995 when a naval craft is sunk by the LTTE; Kumaratunga is wounded in a bomb attack in 1999 by the LTTE, which also destroys half the airline fleet in the Bandaranaike Airport in 2001 severely harming the Sri Lankan economy and defense. Next year sees the Norwegian mediated peace efforts result in ceasefire as the ban on the Tigers is lifted and the LTTE drop their demand for a separate state. However, Tigers pullout of peace talks, and in 2004, a rebel faction led by Karuna splits from the Prabhakaran-controlled LTTE, and tries to assume control of the East, but soon the Tigers overcome the renegade leader and take control of the East. The Tsunami hits Sri Lanka badly in December 2004 as 30,000 people die leading to resentment among the Tigers and the State in the sharing of the 3 billion dollars Tsunami aid among the Sinhalese, Tamils and the Muslims (“Sri Lanka Profile”). In November 2005 Mahinda Rajapaksa gets elected as the President in an election boycotted by most Tamils. Soon after, between 2006 and 2009 the war escalates with heavy casualties on both sides. The Government declares its victory in May 2009, and announces that the Tigers have been vanquished and its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran has been killed in the fighting. The surviving Tigers lay down the arms and surrender. The fate of many civilians remain shrouded in mystery till this day as a large number of them are in camps, and are denied easy access to the media and the outsiders (“Sri Lanka Profile”).