

## Information Bulletin No.4

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### PADAVIYA-WELI OYA: BEARING THE BURDEN OF IDEOLOGY

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When ordinary folk in search of a bare living are caught up in a vortex resulting from cross-winds of ideology, their destiny is one they lack any control over. This has been the fate of the Sinhalese settlers in the Padaviya-Weli Oya area, no less than that of the Tamils forcibly evicted and rendered refugees. The author of 'For a Sovereign State' quotes from a speech attributed to D.S.Senanayake by his grandson: "...The final battle for the Sinhala people will be fought on the plains of Padaviya. You ...will carry the Island's destiny on your shoulders. Those who are attempting to divide this country will have to reckon with you... the last bastion of the Sinhala". Whether D.S.Senanayake was ever in this state of mind, or had actually viewed Padaviya in these terms is uncertain. But the quotation does reflect the state of mind of the author and several of his associates from the elite in political circles, the administration and the military, during the mid-80s. This was when the communal violence of July 1983 triggered off a full-blown separatist war.

The troubles of Padaviya began in 1956 when, like in Gal Oya, Sinhalese employees on the scheme attacked Tamils. In the sequel the Tamil view of Padaviya became coloured as that of a dark region on the boundary of the Northern and Eastern Provinces forbidden to Tamils. This history made Padaviya a natural base for extending military backed settlements into the North-East. This is what happened from mid-1984.

By the end of the year 1984 the forces had forcibly evicted Tamils from 5 GS Divisions in Mullaitivu District and Tennemaravady in Trincomalee District [see UTHR(Jaffna) [Special Report No. 5](#); From Manal Aru to Weli Oya : The sprit of July 1983]. The first evictions were achieved through harassment by newly settled convicts who were backed by the forces. The final order was broadcast to the villages by the armed forces using loudspeakers on Christmas Eve 1984. The people were given 24 hours to vacate. The first Sinhalese settlers brought in were prisoners settled in the Open Prison Camp established in the premises of Kent and Dollar farms. The first ever massacre of Sinhalese by Tamil militants took place here on 30th November 1984. Both communities became victims of massacres and counter massacres. Nearly 2700 Tamil families were displaced. The attempt to solve their problem under terms of the Indo-Lanka Accord which provided for the return of displaced persons was thwarted in September 1987 when the LTTE launched the Thileepan fast for reasons of its political survival, leading to events which culminated in war with the IPKF. The LTTE has never been serious about solving the problem of the displaced even during the long talks with President Premadasa until June 1990. The festering sore has rather been politically useful and a ready source of recruits. The story of Sinhalese settlers trapped in an oppressive militaristic environment where they are mere chattels has been no less tragic. The beneficiaries were neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamil people.

M.H. Gunaratne's, 'For a Sovereign State', though very frank and truthful where his own feelings and those of his circle are concerned, the people whose cause they ostensibly championed have become mere abstractions. In nearly all reporting that followed, the feelings and expectations of the people have become subsumed in a military discourse. They became virtual auxiliaries in military calculations. The story of these Sinhalese who were victims of circumstances remained largely untold. We will now attempt a sketch of their story from some of their own accounts.

H.N. Somadasa of Walapane, Udapusselawa, came to Padaviya at the age of 21 in 1956 as an irrigation employee. Following the communal violence which sparked off that year, he was remanded. Asked what led him to join in attacks on Tamils, he replied, "There were many Tamils employed on the scheme. A rumour was spread that Tamils were going to takeover the entire scheme. We became angry and attacked them. I later discovered that the rumour was false and felt ashamed". Asked who spread the rumours, he replied "Why, the papers had them!". He, like the other employees of the scheme received land in Padaviya in lieu of gratuity. The violence ensured the exclusion of Tamils from the scheme. The few Tamils who remained were a dwindling lot. With reprisals sparked off by the LTTE's Kent & Dollar farms massacre of 1984, the small Tamil presence came to an end. The Tamils who survived the last incident were protected by their neighbours.

Jessie Nona, an orphan from Veyangoda, came to Padaviya in 1957 with her brother who was given land. She later married and had children in Padaviya. In 1984, her brother's son who was serving a term in Anuradhapura prison for an illicit liquor offence was brought to the newly opened Open Prison Camp at Kent & Dollar farms in 'Weli oya'. Since Jessie Nona's daughter had no land in Padaviya, the mother accompanied the daughter to start a shop in the 'Weli Oya' settlement. She and her daughter survived the massacre of 30th November '84 and fled back to Parakramapura in Padaviya. Her nephew had been killed in the massacre.

Jessie Nona's eldest son had died of snake -bite. Her younger son who joined the army had come home in December last year (1994), upon hearing that his mother was very ill, being bitten by a snake. At home he heard of a tragedy involving his marital relationship. The heart broken soldier went away by himself in a state of insanity. The mother, who has his little son, has not heard of him since.

An activist in a leftwing political group said that he with others from the group had gone to Kent & Dollar farms just after the November '84 massacre. The survivors had told them that the settlement of prisoners was being used to further harass Tamils into leaving the area. They were told that young Tamil women were abducted, brought there and gang-raped, first by the forces, next by prison guards and finally by prisoners.

H.A. Dhanapala (55), originally from Balapitiya, was married and settled in Ibbagamuwa near Kurnegala, where he worked as a road construction worker for 10 years. He became unemployed when the road Development Authority was formed. He then used to go to Polonnaruwa District as a seasonal labourer for paddy harvesting. There in 1984 he heard that Dimblagala Thero, who had led the march to occupy Maduru Oya basin the previous year, was offering people land north of Padaviya. Dhanapala went to the Pimburattawa school, was selected by the Thero and was taken to the new settlement at Sinhapura, Weli Oya.

Life there was dangerous. Army positions were interspersed with civilian dwellings. Nights were interrupted by firing noises. As time went by many of his neighbours left, leaving their dwellings empty.

Dhanapala's only son is in the army. Of his three daughters, one is in Weli Oya married to a soldier, one married in Parakramapura and the other has left the area. Following the August `94 general elections, the army left its positions among civilian dwellings and withdrew to the main camp. Asked why, Dhanapala said that according to local talk this resulted from a complaint at high level that soldiers were misbehaving with civilians, particularly the women. Asked whether it had increased the danger to civilians, he replied that since that time (August `94) there had seldom been firing noises in the night. "Perhaps", he added, "the Tigers only regarded the soldiers as the enemy, and not us civilians". But he could not be sure. Why then did he stay on under these conditions? His reply was that he had nowhere else to go and make a living, and he had no other means. [\[Top\]](#)

## General perceptions in Weli Oya

The movement for Peace with Democracy had organised a rally in Parakramapura for the end of January, which a number of people from Weli Oya were to attend. On hearing of this, the Brigadier in charge of the Weli Oya military district warned the organisers that people from Weli Oya are not to carry slogans or banners. If they do, he said, he would remand the local organisers.

After conferring in Padaviya, the local organisers told the Brigadier, "These slogans have been carried all over the South and this country is supposed to be returning to democracy. There is no reason why this area is special and slogans should not be carried here. We will face the consequences". Eventually people from Weli Oya came in several tractors carrying slogans and no one was remanded. The incident illustrates how the army views the people. Their life is completely militarized. An old man put it, "even to piss, we have to get permission from the army". Children who go to school, it is said, do not look at the black board, but look at the jungle for signs of danger- as children in Jaffna used to look at the sky for bombers. This much is just the surface.

There are many deeper complaints. The army positions are among the civilians. Several of the men said, "We do not know if the army is protecting us or we are protecting the army". In the nights, they said, men among the civilians are sent into bunkers with shotguns, while in their homes the women are abused by soldiers. We also reliably learnt that the women are sometimes forced to pose for pornographic pictures which are marketed within the army by enterprising soldiers. Under such a regime discipline plummets and the army itself tends to disintegrate. Civilians are forced to involve themselves in theft among soldiers. If a soldier on patrol fails to return, another soldier may steal his money and belongings and deposit them with civilians until he could take them away. An ironical remark is not infrequently heard: "For what these fellows do to us, only the Tigers could teach them a lesson".

Through their sons, relatives or neighbours, most of these people have close connections within the army. Yet, like with many rural Tamils whose sons are in the LTTE and other groups, their feelings are mixed with deep reservations.

The people are keenly aware that Tamils had lived there before them, who were then driven away. They also feel that LTTE recruits who are in the area are from among the Tamils who

were driven away-"They know the foot paths better than us or the army". In justification of the settlement exercise, the people had been told that the leasing out of large tracts of crown land in the area by mostly absentee Tamils (in the 60s) marked a sinister development. The people were however aware that the Tamil families driven out by the forces are poor farmers. [\[Top\]](#)

## **A fate beyond comprehension**

The peace meeting at Parakramapura, Padaviya, pulled in one of the largest crowds. Many were women who walked in the afternoon sun carrying infants. The people themselves talked as though they were caught up in a vicious trap of poverty, militarisation and bereavement that was beyond their comprehension. It was well for their peers in Colombo to romanticise the fate imposed on them as of being the 'last bastion of the Sinhala'. But the people were themselves hopelessly tired and were looking for fresh hope.

Asked about the impact of the war, Somadasa said that every year about two or three dead bodies of soldiers are brought for internment to his village of Siyawa, Padviya. The village has about 200 families. Considering ten years of war, the impact is quantitatively of the order of what an average Tamil village in the East would have suffered.

Piyadasa (50), originally from Madawachiya, explained: "Many young boys from here have joined the forces because rains have failed for the last seven years and the reservoir does not store enough water. Consequently the people are unable to make ends meet through cultivation. During the rainy season (Yala, October -December) our fields tend to flood. Cultivation at this time (rain -fed cultivation) thus tends to be unreliable. Our main crop is therefore during the summer(Maha) season. This depends on water from the reservoir". Farmers questioned said they have cultivated about four times in the last three years. For families without an income apart from cultivation, life is hard.

Gunawathie (40) originally from Madawachiya is unmarried. Her family derive their main income from helping two brothers who cultivate the family plot of 3 acres. They manage because of support from the state(eg.dry rations) in the event of crop failure. That also means state patronage. Padaviya's problems may have partly to do with environmental stress resulting from deforestation of the catchment area that accompanies large settlement schemes, as people look for more land. But for the people who were transplanted and promised a bright future, they have instead been caught up in a web of state patronage and militarisation in which assorted groups of politicians, 'patriots' and war mongers try to cash in. To the people the past seems to have been better- a past when Tamils lived among them. Yet, behind the pall of violence Weli Oya or Manal Aru carries a Message of hope now 2500 years old, and almost forgotten. An inscription by King Uttiya identifies Naval Neeravi Malei in the region as being associated with Buddha's second visit to this country. At this spot he had made peace between the two warring Naga chieftains Mahodara and Chulodara. The legend probably refers to the fact that Buddhism was preached in this area at a very early date close to the time of Buddha himself. The legend tells us that the message of the Buddha brought peace between warring ancestors of people presently inhabiting this island- ancestors perhaps of both Sinhalese and Tamils alike.

'Weli Oya' has drawn considerable outpourings of emotion from people with little direct interest in the area. If it is allowed to become a political foot-ball, it could seriously threaten the prospects of peace. It primarily rests with the government to take initiatives to defuse Weli

Oya as a politically contentious issue, by providing justice to both the Sinhalese civilians used as pawns in a military game as well as to the Tamil civilians. In doing so the government should make it clear that it has no hidden agenda to Sinhalese predominantly Tamil areas through military and administrative sleights. By so doing it could also demonstrate to the people & the world at large that this government's approach to solving the ethnic problem is qualitatively different from the past attempts. To this end we strongly suggest the following:

**1. The Tamils who were displaced from the Manal Aru (Mahaveli system L) area to be resettled in their native places with adequate compensation.**

**2. The Sinhalese who, out of reasons of poverty or some other social disability (eg. convicts), were taken to Weli Oya under a misapprehension to lead a life in which they were effectively human shields for the army, to be assisted with alternative arrangements to start a new life.**

**Delay would mean that sooner, rather than later, the government would find itself in a quagmire.**