

# More book extracts in Ceylon Today

Here's an article published in [Ceylon Today](#) (15 November 2015) focused around extensive extracts from my new book – albeit on aspects of the story of Norwegian involvement in Sri Lanka that will probably be of most interest to students of the island's recent history rather than the lay reader.

Still, both the stories Mohan hones in on are good ones: unfettered Indian – or more specifically, Tamil Nadu – support to the LTTE in the 1980s; and smuggling LTTE strategist Anton Balasnigham out of the country for an urgently-needed kidney transplant – with a bit of help from the Norwegians . . .

## MGR was Prabhakaran's 'Cash Machine'

**SULOCHANA RAMIAH MOHAN**

Political and cultural history of the tiny mango shaped island on the planet earth attracted the world, way back in the 60s when Sirimavo Bandaranaike was made the first woman Prime Minister in the world. But in the aftermath of the 1983 'Black July', whenever a Sri Lankan introduced his or herself to anyone anywhere in the world, the immediate reaction one would get was that 'Oh it's that guerrilla fighting country isn't it? That is how Sri Lankans were recognized and that level of popularity for Prabhakaran was due to the blessings ushered by former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), 'Ronald Regan of Tamil Nadu', which cannot be disputed. Every time Prabhakaran ambushed and killed the government forces-

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Today, LTTE's 30 years of war has been reviewed and retold by many persons locally and internationally exposing how the war began, and who were the actors who played for them and against them before being wiped out. **Mark Salter**, author of the book [To End a Civil War: Norway's Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka](#) has done the very same, but with more information that was not revealed before.

Since Oslo's involvement with then peace envoy Erik Solheim and Vidar Helgesen, who went on to become household names in Sri Lanka on account of their role in their country's peace facilitation effort, Salter has some very interesting 'inside stories' of this association.

One of the chapters in Salter's book talks about how MGR has been the 'pillar' of Prabhakaran's revolt. MGR's (the silver screen's) 'revolutionary leader' in fact adored the 'real life revolutionary leader' Velupillai Prabhakaran and this fact was revealed by Prabhakaran himself.

### **Freedom fighter or war monger**

From the year 1970 to mid-1987 Tamil Nadu government has been 'dear' to Prabhakaran. The Tamil Nadu people recognized him as a 'freedom fighter' and admired his personality while others

called him a 'war monger'. Prabhakran himself recalled how MGR had been his backbone in running the LTTE's strategic war operations and helped him to become the most powerful guerrilla outfit known in the world.

MGR heard about Prabhakaran when he and his rival – PLOTE leader Uma Maheswaran, exchanged fire at Pondy Bazaar and the Tamil Nadu Police arrested Prabhakaran and his fellow fighter Raghavan on the same day.

They were granted conditional bail. Prabhakaran recalled in an interview that 'Tamil Nadu people started to see them and their politicians began to support them'. When Prabhakaran was about to be repatriated to Sri Lanka after the shoot, the first man to oppose it was MGR along with Nedumaran and Vaiko.

While number of Tamil militant groups were operating in Tamil Nadu, MGR attempted to unite them, had called a meeting of the leaders of those groups. MGR wanted to see who this man called Prabhakaran was, making news in the tiny island – Sri Lanka. Instead of Prabhakaran, his senior cadres Shankar, one Subramaniam and Dr. Anton Balasingham went to meet MGR in Chennai.

### **MGR – Prabha's ATM**

Prabhakran referred to MGR as 'Anna' (elder brother) while MGR assiduously promoted the struggle from the very first day he met Prabhakaran. MGR who met Sankar, Dr. Anton Balasingham (Bala) and Subramainam initially had promised he would do anything for the LTTE, in fact MGR could be called the 'automated teller machine' (ATM) of the LTTE.

On the second occasion it was Prabhakaran who met him along with Shankar. It is revealed that Shankar smilingly had told MGR that they needed weapons to protect their Tamil homeland. "How much do you want?" was the next question. "Is it possible to give us Rs 20 million posed Shankar, and MGR has queried "is that enough?" It is said even Prabhakaran was surprised

when he had said he would not hesitate to give that cash. “We could not believe it when he agreed to give us that money. Was he saying he is going to give money?” Shankar and Prabhakaran could not believe their ears but looked at each other puzzled. The following day MGR met Prabhakaran and handed over the money he needed. It is said that MGR kept giving money for Prabhakaran every time he asked.

Salter’s book [To End a Civil War Norway’s Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka](#) also recollects MGR’s friendship with Prabhakaran as told by Bala to Solheim.

Bala revealed to Solheim that in the 1980s MGR was immensely popular among Indian Tamils; a popularity that stemmed partly from his having played the hero underdog in many films ... MGR ‘adopted’ Prabhakaran and gave massive support to the LTTE.

Bala told Solheim how he and Prabhakaran had become the darlings of MGR, and received vast amounts of money as a result.

“On one occasion, for example, Bala related to me how by chance the LTTE had refused to attend a meeting of Tamil militant groups summoned by MGR’s main political rival Karunanidhi. That was much to the taste of MGR. The following day Prabhakaran and Bala were asked to meet him. The Tamil Nadu first minister simply asked them: ‘How much do you need?’ Prabhakaran mentioned an amount in millions of rupees and MGR apparently replied, ‘That’s far too little, you need more.’ Then he went to his bookshelf, picked up a huge pile of cash and put it into Prabhakaran’s hands—ten times the amount that Prabhakaran had asked for. Later, when the weapons had been purchased and delivered to Chennai harbour, MGR again came to the LTTE’s rescue. The military hardware was loaded into cars and taken with police escort to the safe house where Prabhakaran and Bala were hiding. Later it was transported across the Palk Strait to Sri Lanka,” Solheim narrates.

It is said on several occasions Prabhakaran ran to MGR and he

just kept assisting without any hesitation. While the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister was increasingly protected and kept out of the public eye, Prabhakaran and his clan could always meet him. "He never treated us as talking to a Chief Minister. MGR told us to take the struggle forward till we capture Eelam," in an interview Prabhakaran gave on Vanni news.com.

"He said in our struggle his part is always there and would support us throughout till we take the Eelam. I will give you weapons too he said. That support made us strong and could take forward the struggle successfully during that period," the LTTE leader said. On screen and off screen the two 'revolutionary' leaders admired each other's friendship as their thinking was on the same line – heroism, patriotism, nationalist, love for the people, mothers and children.

Despite the Indian government applying pressure on the LTTE to stop the arm struggle and applying conditions on him, Prabhakaran was adamant because MGR was there to say don't listen to the Centre. MGR said the pressure was not from him, and the two leaders boosted each other's on screen and off screen images till their deaths, many opined.

### **The kidney transplant saga**

Bala, spokesperson and advisor to the LTTE had been ailing from a kidney related disease and was a chronic diabetic like Prabhakaran. However Bala suffered immensely till he met with his death. The book To End a Civil War Norway's Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka quotes how Bala had to reach Oslo for a kidney transplant and then President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's (CBK) government knew about it.

The Government of Sri Lanka often had to 'rough out' or 'rub shoulders' with the LTTE due to their tactics and on this occasion where Bala fell seriously ill, thought it would be ideal to 'fix a deal' when the call to help move Bala out of Sri Lanka for medical assistance came from Prabhakaran.

A kidney transplant appeared to be the obvious solution” Solheim says in Salter’s book. “In Norway there are two ways to get an organ: through a close relative, or you sit in line and wait for one as a result of a traffic accident or some such event. Bala had found a relative, a Vanni Tamil with the right blood type who offered a kidney.

At a certain point Bala informed that the kidney donor transport had been organised, but he requested that the donor should be allowed to stay in Europe afterwards. ‘At our request the young man was brought to Jakarta by the LTTE. We had a very able ambassador there, Sjur Torgersen, with wide experience of ‘out of the box’ diplomatic activities. Sjur took care of him and put him on a plane to Europe. It was the man’s first trip outside Sri Lanka and I still recall his surprise over the escalators at Amsterdam Airport. He gave his kidney at the Norwegian National Hospital, and later went to the UK, where I think he remains to this day,” Solheim notes. The transplant took place in Oslo in February 2000.

Solheim explains further that the operation itself was kept secret, basically [out of deference to] Colombo. But the news was out in the Tamil community in Oslo within hours of his arrival in town. There were Tamils working at the hotel where he was staying as well as at the national hospital. They recognized him in a second, while no Norwegian even blinked. It speaks loudly for the discipline of the Tamil community that no one leaked this to the media. What was the reaction to all this from Colombo? ‘We kept them informed’, says Solheim. ‘They had no difficulty with the way in which Bala had managed to get out of Sri Lanka. Chandrika said it was a humanitarian issue. And after she announced the peace process, news of Bala’s kidney transplant was taken positively.’

The book states that after it became apparent that the terms for allowing Bala to exit the country being put forward by GoSL were unacceptable to the LTTE, a decision was taken to ‘smuggle’ him out of the Vanni by the Sea Tigers i.e. by ship

to Phuket, Thailand on 23 Jan. 1999, 'most likely with CBK's knowledge and consent.

Events leading up to Bala's departure from SL are also covered in some detail in Bala's own book *War and Peace* and Adele Balasingham's book '*The Will to Freedom*'.