

THE BLACK TIGERS AND THE CULT OF PRABHAKARAN

Since the beginning of his war against the Sri Lankan state and (on occasion) rival Tamils, Prabhakaran has displayed an absolute ruthlessness in his choice of tactics and targets. The apotheosis of his dark but calculated stratagems are the Black Tigers, suicide bombers deployed into the South of the country to linger for months or years before detonating their charges. The tactical reasoning behind suicide bombing, and its potential efficacy, has been considered by a variety of thinkers¹. But less often considered are the methods by which a suicide bombing campaign is created and sustained for years on end, even in the face of clear failure to achieve real strategic advantage. Leaving the military and political success of the Black Tigers to be debated by others, this correspondence is the beginning of an exploration of the means by which the LTTE and more particularly Prabhakaran himself “constructs” these living bombs.

By necessity, many of the sources I rely upon as guides in this exploration will be journalists, not academics. Academics have contributed significant insight into many of the issues I touch upon, but I have found little anthropologic or sociologic research on the figures at the centre of my focus: the Black Tigers themselves. Unsurprisingly, Prabhakaran has seen little advantage in exposing his elite force to the penetrating questions of social scientists. In contrast, many journalists have interviewed Black Tigers, either because Prabhakaran saw an advantage to allowing such interviews prior to the bombers’ deployment in the South, or because after that deployment the bomber grew disillusioned and chose to speak to a reporter. While we may hope that journalists will adhere to the highest ethical standards of their profession, the reports I draw on have rarely been tested by academic scrutiny. Consciously or unconsciously reporters and their sources may report falsely, and my arguments are at the mercy of such biases. Nonetheless, I feel comfortable continuing because this essay is not an attempt at a definitive statement on the subject of Prabhakaran and the Black Tigers. Rather, it is a letter to the larger academic community written in hope of beginning a discussion of how Prabhakaran moulds his elite bombers and how these methods illuminate his leadership of the larger LTTE.

¹ For a brief and accessible overview, I recommend John Daly’s 2002 work “Suicide Bombing: No Warning, and No Total Solution” in *Jane’s International Security* (available online); Caleb Carr’s scholarly book *The Lessons of Terror*, Scott Atran’s “Mishandling Suicide Terrorism” published in *The Washington Quarterly* in Summer 2004; and RAND analyst Bruce Hoffman’s June 2003 article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, “The Logic of Suicide Terrorism”.

Many students of military history argue that the strategic utility of suicide bombers is questionable, but on a tactical level suicide bombing succeeds admirably, at least initially, in terrifying opponents. This unnerving effect extends from a variety of sources, beginning, of course, with the suicide bomber himself or herself. Global humanity has grown familiar now with the broadcast images of suicide bombers filmed before their deaths; these seemingly inhuman but strangely normal young people, objects of both fear and wonder. But less mentioned, and perhaps most fearsome, is the lingering presence behind the bombers of the mentor who deployed them, a revenant figure of terror who might be dubbed the "bomb master". If the suicide bomber is a bullet, a shell, then someone has pulled the trigger to fire that shell. If suicide bombing campaigns occur, then someone has remained alive to plan and coordinate them. It is important here to note of Atran's observation that there is no record of autonomous suicide bombing. The kamikaze pilots of Japan were recruited and given their mission by their commanders, just as the bomb-makers of Hamas and the al Aqsa Brigades create elaborate training and weapons for their assassins. Similarly, the LTTE's Black Tigers report an extensive period of indoctrination and preparation before their missions. The phenomenon of a lone killer who picks up a grenade and spontaneously makes a decision to commit murder-suicide seems nonexistent. A guide, a tactician, and a recruiter must facilitate the suicide-bomber's mission. Given this requisite role in the creation of suicide bombers, the importance of the bomb master cannot be overstated. Most obviously, without someone who remains alive, who trains and equips one suicide bomber and then makes preparations for the next, the phenomenon of suicide bombing is unsustainable. But more importantly, there is little evidence that without the bomb master suicide attacks would begin at all.

How does the bomb master recruit and indoctrinate those who actually carry out the attacks? Regardless of the country or context in which the master "makes" his bomb, certain commonalities exist across cultures. First is the commonality of recruitment. By preference, a bomb master recruits a young man or occasionally (increasingly) a young woman. Typically, the process is not open to everyone in the community, but only to those who prove their purity in some way. In Imperial Japan, young men wishing to become kamikaze pilots had to demonstrate exceptional dedication to the Emperor, and in Sri Lanka, the LTTE strongly prefers men and women who are virginal and young. Following this selection, the bomb masters institute a period of indoctrination during which the recruit is isolated from family, friends, and familiar surroundings. In a process confirmed by a variety of journalists who have paid brief visits to such trainings, the only people to whom the

bomb-to-be talks to for months are the bomb master and his assistants, or sometimes other suicide bombers who are also being indoctrinated².

These journalists also confirm that in the cases they investigated, regardless of the larger ideology on whose behalf the bomb master worked he or she invariably used a religious base for the indoctrination. Even the commanders of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, the suicide-wing of the avowedly secular Fatah movement and the only Palestinian suicide bombing group that does not call for an Islamic state, use explicitly Islamic messages in preparing their suicide bombers. Given the nature of the sacrifice about to be made, concerns about the afterlife are to be expected and the bomb masters typically address these concerns with reference to religious scriptures containing descriptions of paradise. Moreover, during the process of indoctrination the bomb master will refer to whatever texts or examples the religion has to offer concerning valour, righteousness and sacrifice for the good of others. The individual's community is described as a bastion of righteous religion that is under threat and must be defended. Hoffman, Joshi, Pratap, Hasan, and Levy have all detailed the way in which the individual in question, the bomb under construction, is completely inculcated with the certainty of his or her righteousness and the spiritual reward that is to come³.

In Sri Lanka, at Prabhakaran's direction, the LTTE recruits for its Black Tiger suicide squads those young Tamils who have been particularly traumatized, often through the deaths of their family members, other times after suffering rape or some other outrage at the hands of Sri Lankan military. In addition, the LTTE looks for "pure" young people, preferably virgins, who practice habits that are considered religiously clean. The recruits are isolated somewhere the Wani, where LTTE trainers indoctrinate them in to the cult of the Black Tiger. The exception to this isolation is the recruits' extraordinary contact with the notably reclusive Prabhakaran. According to reports from Joshi, Pratap, and Levy, Prabhakaran vets and approves each bomb-to-be himself. In the past, he often gave his Black Tiger recruits the staggeringly rare honour of a personal meeting on recruitment and a shared meal before deployment, events that posed a great risk for Prabhakaran even

² In addition to the work of Hoffman and Daly, much of the information drawn upon here is taken from descriptions published by the journalists Bernard-Henri Levy, Charu Lotta Joshi, Anita Pratap, Nasra Hassan, and Erik Schechter. Please see the end of this paper for full references.

³ Besides the LTTE and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the other notable secular groups practicing suicide bombing include the Marxist-Leninist Kurdish Workers Party, or PKK, in Turkey and the Syrian Nationalist Party and its offshoots. I have been unable to find consistent descriptions of the methods used by these groups to recruit and indoctrinate their suicide bombers.

in an era when he moved more freely. Today, restricted and cautious, the leader maintains his personal relationship with his bombs-in-progress by telephone and other regular personal communication.

During their indoctrination, all recruits are required to undergo various trials and ascetic practices—fasts, tests of endurance—in order to continue the process. There is a deep emphasis on Tamil history. A strange juxtaposition of messages exists in the camps. On the one hand, recruits are fiercely dehumanized and forced to practice demeaning and dangerous activities (according to the extraordinary testimony of a Black Tiger recruit interviewed by Levy young women who are not virgins are required to carry a live hand grenade tucked in their genitals for days). On the other hand, they are constantly told how valuable they are, and the importance of their sacrifice. Importantly, this sacrifice is expressed generally as a successful enactment of *dharma* (in Hinduism, the modes of behaviour appropriate to an individual's caste, position, and circumstances).

This motif of religious practice extends even beyond the moment of detonation. As Levy quotes his former Tiger source, dubbed Srilaya, the goal of the Black Tiger is not just to kill the target but for the suicide bomber's head "...to break clean off, remain intact, and roll to the right place, decided in advance by the leader." In the rare instances of human sacrifice recounted in Hindu texts, it is proper presentation of the severed head which pleases the deity⁴. This parallel is hardly coincidental.

The arguable result is to make Hindu recruits feel that their destiny, their road to *moksha*, release from suffering and reincarnation, is through suicide. But this is paradoxical given the specific and very strong strictures against suicide contained in mainstream Hinduism. Although much concerned with the abnegation of self, all major strands of Hinduism hold suicide as a fantastically irresponsible way to end human existence. Only rarely does a being earn the opportunity to be born as a human. To end that life before it is proper is to both to squander a rare privilege and to attempt to subvert the ordered consequence on which the universe is based, and these transgressions will cause serious negative repercussions. Typically, the consequence of suicide is to wander the earth as restless and starving spirit until the time allotted to the squandered physical existence is finished. The term generally employed in Hinduism to discuss suicide, *atmahatya*, literally refers to the murder of the self.

Some strands of Hinduism do have room for acceptable forms of suicide. There are some instances of devotees sacrificing themselves directly to their deities, most notably the devotees of Jagannath who throw themselves under the heavy wheels of the god's processional. There are also those curious, occasional devotees

⁴ See Weinberger-Thomas and others.

who committed auto-decapitation (using ingenious devices with circular collars of blades). And, of course, there is the much publicized and protested practice of Sati, in which a widow voluntarily throws herself on the funeral pyre of her recently deceased husband. Nevertheless, despite the attention rendered it Sati is a rare practice and one not broadly dispersed among the world's Hindus. The only really widespread and generally legitimated form of suicide in Hindu tradition is that of *prayopavesa*, in which an ascetic at the end of his or her life renounces food and a medical attention⁵.

None of these forms of suicide can be considered a model for honourable death via suicide bombing. Even the more acceptable *prayopavesa* can only be carried out by a seasoned ascetic come to the end of his or her sustainable physical health. Hinduism has a strong warrior ethic, which encourages those whose *dharma* is to fight (the *Kshatriya*) to carry out their duty strive to kill their enemy to the best of their ability and skill. Killing one self in order to kill the enemy would be an inherently non-skillful and inappropriate means for a *Kshatriya*. The only form of suicide-attack in some way equivalent to the suicide-bombing is the suicide blood-curse of the Charan bards, whose inviolable status was in part preserved by the horrible fate of attackers touched by Charan blood. There are instances of aggrieved Charans committing suicide singly or *en masse* to protest against an unjust ruler or attacker. Such suicides were thought to bring down upon the head of the offending party a curse so potent that those potentially so afflicted would scramble to make recompense to the suicide(s)' survivors. However, far more common was for a Charan to sacrifice a family member, often a daughter, and even instances of this are rare. Moreover, there is no evidence that Prabhakaran draws on the stories of the

⁵ I feel here I must add two caveats. The first is that Hinduism is a vast, complex, and subtle faith subscribed to by a significant proportion of all humans ever to have walked the earth. There may be many cases of religiously-sanctioned Hindu suicide of which I am ignorant.

The second is that in writing about subjects such as Sati or human sacrifice I am uncomfortably aware of the fascination these topics have held for generations of Orientalists and travel writers. The sensationalism surrounding these topics has led to an embarrassing overemphasis which continues to distort Western understandings of Hindu cultures. Nonetheless, in considering suicide bombing, a subject I consider of real importance today, I find useful points of reference in these topics. I implore readers, especially Hindus, to trust that my attention stems not from an interest in exoticism but in a sincere desire to understand a difficult issue. Sati and human sacrifice occurred just as suicide bombing occurs now. If examining one can illuminate the other, then the discussion should begin. Should the reader remain interested in these topics, I recommend Catherine Weinberger-Thomas' *Ashes of Immortality: Widow Burning in India* for her discussion of both Sati and the Charan suicide curse.

Charans, which in any case would have little meaning for Tamil Black Tiger recruits.

A similar lack of local relevance leads me to reject an interpretation of suicide bombing as some sort of aggressive Sati. On the surface, the idea holds some merit—Sati is traditionally explained as the highest manifestation of a woman's *dharma*, an event through which the universal *Shakti* principal manifests to the glory of the woman and the benefit of her community. Clearly, the explanatory power of such an ideal in justifying suicide bombing would be enormous. However, although a source of considerable Western and Indian outrage over the last two hundred years, the practice of Sati (both in its voluntarily and less than voluntary forms) is actually isolated in relatively few Hindu communities (most of them in Northern Rajasthan and Bengal). Sati is largely unknown in other parts of India and entirely unknown among the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Additionally, although female Black Tigers have commanded media attention (in part because of a general fascination with women warriors, in larger part because of their extraordinary successes), fully two thirds of LTTE suicide bombings have been carried out by males for whom the "Homicidal Sati" model would be a difficult fit.

How then has Prabhakaran been successful in recruiting and fielding suicide bombers? As described above, the creation of suicide bombers requires tapping into roots of religious tradition, and Hindu tradition specifically forbids suicide. The contradiction seems almost irreconcilable. Of course, almost all major religions preach against suicide and this has not prevented suicide bombers being recruited in the name of traditions other than Hinduism. How these other bomb masters reconcile the paradox inherent in asking their bombers to kill themselves in the name of a religion that forbids suicide lies beyond the scope of this paper. But in the case of Sri Lanka and the Black Tiger suicide squad, the answer can be found if we return again to the question: "How has *Prabhakaran* been successful in recruiting and fielding suicide bombers?"

As described above, one of the best known aspects of the Black Tigers is that Prabhakaran himself vets and approves every applicant to join its ranks. He takes a personal interest in the function of the Black Tiger training, and at every stage of the process the recruits are reminded that their mandate comes from the leader himself. To some extent this is only expected, given the incredible cult of personality that Prabhakaran has instituted through out the LTTE. But in the case of the Black Tigers the connection between recruit and Prabhakaran goes further. Anita Pratap, one of the few journalists to interview Black Tigers after their indoctrination but before their deployment (and with, necessarily, the permission of Prabhakaran for the interviews), quotes a Black Tiger named Sunil as saying "For us, he is mother, father, and God all rolled into one."

Prabhakaran has tapped into one of the strongest Hindu traditions, that of the *guru*, literally “the dispeller of darkness,” the figure responsible for leading his followers into enlightenment. These ascetic teachers have the mandate to instruct other human beings in the ways of religious mysteries, guiding their disciples through correct action to fulfill their *dharma* and thus achieve better rebirth or even release from suffering. Moreover, the instructions of the *guru* come first and foremost in the religious progression of the student. It is said that should a student come before his or her *guru* and God, the student should first pay homage to the *guru* since the *guru* is responsible for leading him or her to God. Observing the elaborate rituals and indoctrination, as well as the personalized care that Prabhakaran directs towards his bombers reveals that Prabhakaran has established himself as a teacher responsible for instructing his students in how to live by the correct *dharma*s so that they may transcend this life. Moreover, although the way Prabhakaran has publicized his early asceticism to build a mythology legitimising his military leadership has been amply analysed by Swamy and others, few writers have considered the religious overtones of these stories of sacrifices. Prabhakaran is simple in practice, abstemious, possessed of higher dedication, understanding, and powers. Prabhakaran the bomb master is Prabhakaran the self-created *guru*, who avoids Hinduism’s traditional condemnation of suicide by establishing himself as the only proper authority on matters of religious importance.

This conclusion leads to an interesting illumination of Prabhakaran’s use of Hindu tradition in his leadership of the LTTE as a whole. Not only has Prabhakaran adapted the tradition of the *guru*, the guider in *dharma*, as a means of indoctrinating his suicide bombers, but he has extended this metaphor to the rest of the LTTE as well. Prabhakaran has made himself more than a beloved leader in war and politics. He has also become the *guru* who issues the commands and guidance that improve the *dharma* of his LTTE followers, the leader and teacher who alone can instruct his students in how to live righteously and in how to leave this life in the appropriate manner. This relationship is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the almost yogic asceticism Prabhakaran prescribes for the Tigers—abstention from sex, from certain foods. It can also be seen in other rituals that Prabhakaran prescribes, such as carrying the gold plated cyanide capsule, which are not classically Hindu but that tap into critical conceptions of death and duty. This understanding of Prabhakaran’s relationship to Hinduism further explains why he advocates Hindu practice within the ranks of the LTTE. Not only is such practice a critical cultural tradition for the Tamils, but it reinforces the manner in which Prabhakaran exercises control over his legions.

This is *not* to say that Prabhakaran is a Hindu fanatic disguised as a lapsed Methodist Christian, nor to argue the nonsensical idea that the LTTE is a religious group masquerading as a secular liberation movement. Religious feeling may

include belief, even fanatical belief, but belief is not the totality of religious experience. A religion's symbols, stories, and ideas also describe useful metaphors by which humans map the relationships between their lives and the progress of history. Just as absurd as arguing that the LTTE is in fact a fundamentalist Hindu insurgency is the argument that in placing their faith in a secular organization Tamils lose all sympathy for religious appeal. Prabhakaran understands both the necessity to his cause of secularism and the importance to his people of Hindu tradition; he therefore casts himself not as an explicit Hindu leader but as an implicit Hindu *guru* to consolidate his command.

What are the implications of this? While any consideration of Prabhakaran and the LTTE should take a multi-faceted approach, considerations of religion have remained strangely absent. This is particularly odd, given the LTTE's notably vicious attacks against the shrines and reliquaries of other religions⁶. It is odder still given the research published by Tambiah, Bartholomeusz, and others that considers Buddhism's influence on the decisions of Sinhalese political leaders. Just as Buddhism can influence the love and loyalty to Sri Lanka of even secular Sinhalese, Hinduism is a strong influence on the ideology of the LTTE, an influence that Prabhakaran understands and exploits. Admittedly, Prabhakaran has subverted many strongly held Hindu traditions, including prohibition on suicide, but also as regards traditional notions of caste. But Prabhakaran subverts them by remaining within a Hindu framework, not by rejecting that framework. Any attempt to understand or negotiate with Prabhakaran should keep this strange, subverted Hindu framework strongly in the foreground.

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⁶ For descriptions, refer to Professor Kingsley de Silva's excellent article in his *Conflict and Violence in South Asia*.

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