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## Book Review: Road to Nandikadal: True story of defeating Tamil Tigers, Colombo, 2016.- Major General Kamal Gunaratne

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Guest Column by Prof. Charles Sarvan

Epigraph: *Those who have power in the present, control the story of the past; and those who control the past, shape the future.*

(Adapted from Orwell's dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.)

As readers well know, the word "prejudice" comes from to pre-judge; to judge or form an opinion without first independently examining the evidence. Going by what I had read about this book, I confess I was prejudiced but, having gone through it, my former opinion was confirmed. "Pre-judice" became "post-judice", an instance of *postjudice* confirming *prejudice*. (Or is the latter – consciously or subconsciously - conditioning the former? After all, as Heidegger noted, even objectivity is judged by a subjective self.) To express it bluntly, I think this on several counts is a very poorly produced work. Yet it has proved popular with the first-printing of the English translation being immediately sold out - a reaction not without its significance in what it suggests about the reading-public. In what follows I attempt to explain the grounds for my opinion, fully accepting that it is only one, fallible, "reading"; that others will have different approaches and evaluations: disagreement and the resulting variety of readings are to be welcomed.

To begin with, there are many grammatical mistakes, lapses in expression, not to mention linguistic infelicity. However, the responsibility here is not that of the good Major General but of his translator. No doubt, the work would have benefitted from editorial oversight. (How the text reads in the original 'Sinhala', I don't know.) The author's excursions into figurative language result in absurd images such as Indian fighter-jets being seen as hooligans raping Sri Lankan airspace: raping airspace?

This leads me to another regrettable feature, that of the author's emotionalism: I could feel hot blood coursing through my body like an electric shock (p. 107). I would have crushed the aircraft and flushed them down the toilet. (Again: flush aircraft down a toilet? It's ludicrous.) Wasn't this "a rape of our beloved Motherland"? (p. 108); driving a dagger through the hearts of Buddhists (p. 421) etc. One wonders whether the Major General had in mind a particular segment of Sinhala-readers who would admire and applaud such an inflammatory, vulgar, style. If so, it's not a compliment to them. His emotionalism leads to an extreme and simplistic contrast between the LTTE (the most brutal terrorists, ruthless, cruel, barbaric murderers, maniacal attackers) and his soldiers who go into battle with a loaded weapon in one hand and a book on human-rights in the other (p. 2), "the finest and most gallant soldiers on earth". No doubt, there's loud applause, and the heedlessly galloping Major General needn't pause to clarify with which other armies, world-wide, the comparison is being made, nor the criteria for his comparative evaluation. Readers are not expected to stop, reflect and scrutinise independently but to be swept along with the tide of high patriotic passion.

To make a minor but not insignificant point, Major General Gunaratne who makes clear his fervent commitment to Buddhism writes: "I lit the traditional oil lamp at an auspicious time given by my wife who had consulted an astrologer" (p. 644). This is nothing but primitive superstition. ("Primitive" is here intended in the sense of "primordial".) Superstition is the product of human ignorance and fear. In turn, the emotion of fear spawns hatred and cruelty. But Buddhism (besides compassion for all beings) rests on pillars such as rationality and morality. Belief in astrology is 'primitive' superstition, part of the weeds, stones and cobwebs the Buddha attempted to clear away. The question prompts itself: Is the Major General a true Buddhist or does he remain a prisoner of superstition, and of empty ritual, however fervent?

But more is at stake here than lapses in language, style, emotionalism and primitive superstition. *Nandikadal* can be seen as a *Mahavamsa* of the Eelam War: I use the indefinite article "a" because there must be other *Mahavamsa*-type works on the war in Sinhala being enthusiastically received. Scholars (most of them Sinhalese) have investigated the *Mahavamsa* and established that it is an imaginative construct – which *Nandikadal* surely isn't.

So the comparison I suggest between the ancient and recent text is based on factors such as bias, one-sidedness, anger, hatred and, above all, the effect the work will have on the beliefs and feelings of the populace. Even those who admit that the *Mahavamsa* is a story are affected by it subconsciously. (Gunaratne refers to Vihara Maha Devi, the mother of King Dutugamunu, as "the greatest heroine in our history", confident readers know the story and will respond appropriately.) Stories from the *Mahavamsa* are related to children at home, in

school and in the temple. (I recall a Tom Paxton Vietnam 'protest-song': "What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine?" The son answers he learnt that our government is always right, and that war is good.) The uncritical will read this book, particularly in Sinhala, and will carry its marks on their mind. To use in quite another context words from the poem 'Missing Dates' by Ezra Pound, "Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills... / The waste remains, the waste remains and kills".

Gunaratne is innocent of historical cause-and-effect; of actions and consequence, and makes not even passing mention of what might have led to the emergence of the Tigers. They are suddenly there, gratuitous and wicked. To the best of my recollection, Commodore Boyagoda in his memoir, *A Long Watch* (reviewed by me in Colombo Telegraph, 18 November 2016) doesn't once use the word "terrorist" while Major General Gunaratne constantly deploys that pejorative term. "Terrorist" is currently *the* term of political abuse. The following is from my *Public Writings on Sri Lanka*, Volume 2, pp. 53-4:

"The 'Final Report' presented to the UN Secretary General on 13 November 2006 by the 'High-Level Group' points out that state terror has done far more damage than that unleashed by terrorist groups. To their list of the Holocaust, the Stalinist repression, the genocide in Cambodia, the Balkans and Rwanda (3.12) one can add the two World Wars, North Korea, Burma under the military junta, certain dictatorships in Africa and South America, China under Mao – the list is long, and the destruction and death caused by governments is much more gross (the word "greater" is inappropriate here) than that carried out by "terrorists". Indeed, there is no comparison. In the First World War, 15% of the casualties were civilians; in the second, it reached 50%. This destruction of life was caused not by terrorist groups but by states. And yet, it is not state terrorism but that carried out by individuals and groups that make the greatest impact. The reasons are several..."

This is not to defend the reprehensible but to attempt to view it in some of its complexity. Abuse generates much heat (emotion) but produces no light (understanding). Margaret Trawick in her *Enemy Lines: Childhood, Warfare and Play in Batticaloa* (California, 2007) writes that terrorism is repugnant but goes on to add that some of the worst acts of terror have been “committed in the name of my own country, the United States”. But Major General Gunaratne seems incapable of dealing with complexity, taking instead the simple way of seeing things in sharply contrasting categories: good versus evil; the brave versus the fanatical; the dedicated versus the brainwashed. The state is always good and right; its opponents, bad and wrong. Terrorists unleash haphazard violence, not on those in uniform but on innocent civilians. However the author, either unaware of or indifferent to the definition and meaning of words, uses the term “terrorist” even when fighting the Tigers as “a professional standing army” (p. 408). He writes that during the July ’83 anti-Tamil pogrom many Sinhalese and Tamils lost their lives (p. 38), turning a blind eye on the appalling horror that was unleashed on thousands of innocent Tamils women, children and men. Prabhakaran, killed, is found not to be wearing a cyanide capsule, as was required of his soldiers, both men and women. Gunaratne’s explanation is immediate: cowardice. I have no idea but perhaps Prabhakaran was confident that his bodyguards would shoot him, and so prevent his capture and humiliation? After all, the Major General himself had asked his “buddy” (sic) to finish him off if he were wounded and unable to commit suicide (p. 232). In the absence of an explanation, one shouldn’t rush to conclusions but be content with the discontent of not knowing. “Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge” (Darwin).

Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, is demonised as the one who terrorised the “great” and “beloved motherland” for almost three decades. (Here again, there is facile assumption and easy assertion: “beloved motherland” therefore, *ipso facto*, “great”, with no attempt to substantiate the “greatness”. This is not to deny Sri Lanka’s greatness but to draw attention to vacuous rhetoric.) Given to easy, emotional, exaggeration the author writes that Prabhakaran instilled terror in the mind of “every” Sri Lankan (p. 11). The high point of the Major General’s life was when his soldiers dumped Prabhakaran’s bleeding corpse at his feet like that of a dog. The weaker the enemy was, the less your victory; conversely, the more formidable the enemy, the greater your triumph. And so, to cast greater glory on “his” victory, credit is paid to the terrorists. They were well-trained and excellent fighters, with a lot of patience and endurance (p. 51); “motivated, brave and committed”. The diabolical “terrorists” invented their own devices: anti-personnel mines, hand grenades and rifle grenades. They were even capable of entering our camps stealthily, and helping themselves to food from our kitchens (p. 539). They were not “a bunch of cowards” (p. 133), and the Indian army, one of the largest armies in the world, suffered its worst humiliation ever in “their proud history”. (One would think the defeat was at the hands of the Major General and the Sri Lankan army.) On reconnaissance missions, the terrorists would “swim across the lagoon, creep through the defence lines stealthily at night, hide during the daylight hours and survey the camp at night”. Recovered notebooks reveal that their note-taking was “meticulous and professional” (pp. 327-8). In order to criticise the decision to establish “a sea-faring battalion within the army”, he lavishes praise on the Sea Tigers: see, p. 393. I know full well that contradictions can, and do, co-exist but the author does not draw attention to them; seems to be unaware of them. So too we read that though Prabhakaran was evil, a veritable devil, he was no religious fanatic. Given the adulation accorded him, female LTTE fighters would have readily gone to bed with him but though he “had ample opportunity to exploit such a situation to the fullest, he was not known to be a womanizer” (p. 17). He neither

consumed alcohol nor put away millions for his personal use (Gunaratne). Sitting “deep in wanni jungles”, Prabhakaran “beautifully orchestrated” a trick whereby weapons destined for the army were loaded onto an LTTE ship (p. 411).

Undiscussed contradiction is there also in the presentation of the Sri Lankan army. They are generally held up as being brave, patriotic, noble, fired by sacrificial love for their great and beloved “motherland”. But on the other hand we read that it was “sheer economic necessity” (p. 25) which drove them to enlist. They were mostly children from remote, rural, villages whose parents were very poor. It was economic desperation, rather than love of country and people. The rate of desertion was high (p. 234) and recruitment difficult (p. 237). Failing repeatedly; experiencing many defeats (p. 297), the army was in danger of falling apart (p. 287). There was much corruption (p. 303), and those soldiers who were wounded and had no ‘influence’ were neglected (p. 304). Soldiers who had served their mandatory years and were entitled to an honourable discharge we forcibly kept on (pp. 402-3). There was outright deceit: soldiers who had left after 12 years of service, and those who had retired after 22 years of service, were invited to join “with an assurance they would not be deployed in operational areas and duties (pp. 404-5). Hundreds enlisted but “these promises were cast aside”. The government and the supine, sycophantic, media “disseminated utter lies and then covered it up with more lies” (p. 415).

The ‘Just-War’ theory, studied by ethicists, historians, theologians and military leaders, has three criteria: the grounds for going to war; secondly, conduct during war and, thirdly, the morality or otherwise of post-war settlement and reconstruction, known as *jus post bellum*. Major General Gunaratne confines himself largely to the second, and that too, from a military and not from an ethical perspective. Fair enough: he was a frontline commander, and shares his experience, thoughts and feelings. One understands but still regrets the limitation and the silence.

It’s also outside the aims of *Nandikadal* to pursue what might otherwise be interesting aspects. For example, there is the case of (Tamil) Captain Daya Nadarajasingham, and his younger brother, Captain Lakshman Nadarajasingham, who trained “hundreds of snipers” (p. 199) to kill Tamil Tigers, and later changed their name to Rajasinghe. Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, there were Jews who deplored being born Jewish; denied and distanced themselves from all things Jewish. They were known as “self-hating Jews”. Chinua Achebe wrote that white imperialism projected inferiority onto the African - but the real damage was done when Africans began to accept and internalise this negative image of themselves. In Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Ocol* we have this defeated, despairing, cry:

Mother, mother

Why was I born Black?

Were the Nadarajasingham brothers self-hating Tamils? “Mother, mother, why was I born Tamil?” Or is it a matter of survival? “Absurd as it may seem, life or death can hang on a vowel or consonant. Tamil names, for example, Rajaratnam, tend to end with a consonant; Sinhala names with a vowel: Rajaratne” (Sarvan, *Sri Lanka: Literary Essays & Sketches*, 2011, p. 186).

In her study, *Shadows of War*, Carolyn Nordstrom quotes what an army commander told her in a private conversation. If a Sinhalese soldier is killed or wounded by a Tamil Tiger, the others go berserk. “They open fire on everyone, they destroy everything in sight, they rape and torture... they lob bombs into homes and schools...We can’t dismiss them – we’d have no army if we did” (University of California Press, 2004, pp. 71-72). The Report of the International Truth & Justice Project titled *A Still-Unfinished War*, July 2015, reports that soldiers kicked and stepped on the dead bodies of dead LTTE cadres, and sexually humiliated the corpses, particularly those of women (Report, p. 49). Gunaratne was undoubtedly courageous in battle but he lacks moral courage to face the entire truth – as do those Tamils who refuse to admit that the Tigers made grave mistakes; committed grievous crimes and “sins”. Kamal Gunaratne has the utmost contempt for those who stand up for human rights and justice: where were they when the Tigers were carrying out terrorist attacks? (pp. 75-6). As I have written elsewhere, one wrong does not cancel out another. No, the world is left with two wrongs, and made all the more a sadder place for it. He remarks that LTTE cemeteries were “beautifully constructed and landscaped” (p. 52) but does not mention that in a vindictive and wanton act of sacrilege, they were bulldozed.

The victorious Duke of Wellington surveying the carnage after the Battle of Waterloo commented that nothing except a battle lost can be half as sad as a battle won. Devoid of the honesty born of moral courage, Major General Gunaratne also lacks imaginative, human sympathy: indeed, bravery takes many different forms. He repeatedly draws attention to grief and sorrow on one side but doesn’t pause to note that such extreme and excruciating pain is endured on the other side as well: they are also human; equally sentient human beings. During a visit on 7 December 1970 to a monument marking the Warsaw-Ghetto Uprising, German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, having laid a wreath, knelt in a gesture of remorse and penitence. Since all LTTE leaders, including those who had surrendered, were slaughtered (they were mad dogs and there’s no cure for rabies, is the explanation offered by the good Major General: p. 18) none is left of the leadership on that side to express regret. On the other side, Gotabaya Rajapaksa is thought to be the one who licensed and incited crude and appalling cruelty. It’s most unlikely that he’s visited by belated conscience and compassion: quite the contrary!

A vainglorious (excessively boastful) work, the book is splattered with pictures of the author, either by himself or in the company of others. The dustjacket alone, front and back, has four pictures of him. What is embarrassingly immodest are the pictures under the caption, ‘Immortal leaders of the final war’: the first of 16 portraits is duly that of the Commander of the Army but the second is that of our hero who thus bestows immortality on himself. The very next set of pictures titled, ‘Close-knit band of the 53 Division’, begins with one of the author, and ends with a group- photograph where he is again present. Subtly and not-so-subtly, the impression is conveyed that much of the credit for the final victory goes to him. The restraint and self-effacement of Commodore Boyagoda come to mind but I am sure it is Gunaratne’s work that will be popular; that will be accepted as one of the authoritative accounts. One recalls Orwell’s words: those with power in the

present write the story of the past; will create History. For a more nuanced study one must turn to other books, such as *Total Destruction of the Tamil Tigers* by Paul Moorcraft (reviewed in my *Sri Lanka: Paradise Lost?*)

War is failure. Irrespective of cause, responsibility and blame, all wars are a sign of failure, the human failure to co-exist with our fellow human beings without degenerating into, and resorting to, violence. Yet, as Barack Obama pointed out at Hiroshima (27 May 2016), violent conflict appeared with the very first man. On every continent, the history of civilization is filled with war, whether driven by scarcity or greed; nationalist fervour or religious zeal. We justify violence in the name of some higher cause, observed Obama but, sanguine as ever, he also added that we *can* learn; we *can* choose to tell our children a different story, one that describes a common humanity, one that makes war less likely, and cruelty less easily accepted. *Road to Nandikadal* does the opposite.

If I may be permitted a personal note, I was glad to come across the name Tilak Ponnampereuma (p. 309). So long ago it seems a previous birth, he and I shared a room at Ramanathan Hall, Peradeniya. My mother (died 1988) told me that during successive anti-Tamil riots (prior to the pogrom of July 1983), Tilak would drop by to check on her. Finally, I thank Nadarajah Suseenthiran of Berlin for lending me a copy of this book. Of course, the shortcomings are all mine.

*(This article first appeared in Colombo Telegraph and is being republished with their consent.)*

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