

## ***Sri Lanka's minority media at the crossroads***

***By Ameen Izzadeen***

***This paper analyses the behaviour of the minority media in different phases of the country's history and the challenges they face today. The term minority media refers to the print and electronic media catering to the minority communities – the Tamils who make up 17 per cent of the country's 20 million population and the Muslims, who are 8.5 percent of the population. For the purposes of this paper, the main concentration is on the Tamil media, which is further divided into three categories – independent Tamil media owned by Tamils, independent Tamil media owned by Sinhalese, and Tamil media run by the state. The development of the minority media in Sri Lanka is examined in three phases: 1) The early history of the minority media; 2) The minority media during the civil war; and 3) The minority media after the civil war. The nature, objectives, challenges and the threats faced by the minority media in each of these phases differ. This paper looks at the challenges the sector has faced and the threats to journalists from state and non-state actors. Two international headline-hitting cases – that of Sivaram and Tissainayagam who wrote about minority politics - are discussed in detail. The paper also examines the concept of embedded journalism in Sri Lanka and the development of the modern media.***

***Ameen Izzadeen is Deputy Editor and International Editor of the Sunday Times, Colombo, and a visiting lecturer in international relations and journalism.***

### ***1. Introduction***

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, although the ethnic mix is predominantly Sinhalese. The country is blessed by the teachings of four main religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. However, ethno-religious differences unfortunately gave rise to mutual mistrust and dragged the country into a devastating armed conflict that lasted for three decades. As a result, moves aimed at striking a national identity – a Sri Lankan identity – fell by the wayside. Instead, the country saw the rise of ethno-nationalism – with ethnic groups more interested in protecting their own interests than building a national identity.

Even in post-civil-war Sri Lanka, attempts to bring about a Sri Lankan identity that will rise above petty ethnic differences have not yielded the desired results. In neighbouring India, which is ethnically much more diverse than Sri Lanka, many people have no problem in saying, "I am an Indian first, then a Tamil, Malayali, Punjabi or Gujarati." In Sri Lanka, the lack of progress in the creation of an over-arching national identity is largely because aspirations, issues, challenges

and problems facing the people differ from community to community. These differences are also reflected in the media representing each community.

Concerns over poverty, weak rule of law, lack of good governance and democracy deficiency usually cut across all ethnic boundaries, but in the Tamil media the importance of these issues is measured by their impact on the minority communities. Even in the Sinhala media, threats to democracy, good governance, the rule of law and even freedom of expression, received lukewarm treatment at the height of the war because the priority was the national security and national interest. This divided approach has weakened the media's role in Sri Lanka, especially in strengthening democracy.

## **2. One country, divided media**

When people in Sri Lanka woke up on 14 February, 2012, instead of the joy usually associated with Valentine's Day, there was anger. Many of them woke up to the news that transport costs had been jacked up by 20 percent following a sharp price hike in fuel. The previous day, 13 February, private bus operators staged a lightning strike, virtually paralysing the country.

Sinhala and English newspapers carried banner headlines and led off with the bus fare hike story. But most Tamil newspapers led with a different story – that of a news conference held at the United States embassy in Colombo the previous day. The US Assistant Secretary of State, Robert Blake, and the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, Marie Otero, who addressed the news conference, had said the United States would back a resolution against Sri Lanka at the upcoming United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) sessions. They also said that they were hopeful that the Sri Lanka government would implement a credible domestic mechanism to deal with allegations of human rights and humanitarian law violations, especially during the last stages of the war.

Veerakesary, Sri Lanka's oldest Tamil national daily, in its lead story gave weight to the announcement that Washington would support an anti-Sri Lanka resolution at the UNHRC sessions. The Island, an independent English language newspaper with pro-Sinhala nationalist credentials, also carried the Blake-Otero news conference, but it was not the lead. The lead story was about Iran's assurance to Sri Lanka on the supply of oil despite US sanctions. The bus strike and fare hike story was placed near the lead story. However, the Island news story on the US officials' news conference had no mention of the US decision to support the resolution against Sri Lanka. Its headline read: US Calls for Domestic Solution for HR Violations in SL'. Sri Lanka's largest selling English daily newspaper, the state-run Daily News, did not carry the Blake-Otero story.

The same dramatic difference of emphasis was noticeable in the different media's coverage of the end of the 30-year separatist war. When the war ended on 19 May, 2009, all Sinhala and English dailies devoted page after page the following day to report various aspects of the victory. Scores of photographs filled the front and inside pages. The huge fonts on the front and inside pages were not only symbolic of the importance of the news being reported but also an expression of jubilation. The Divaina, an independent daily which supported the government's military approach to solve the ethnic problem, led off on 20 May, 2009 with the story on troops recovering the body of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran. Pictures showed jubilant soldiers and people celebrating on the street. Inside page articles glorified President Mahinda Rajapaksa. One headline described Rajapaksa as king of Sri Lanka.

There were no pictures of Tamils celebrating. They did not celebrate. A majority of the Tamils were in a quiet and sombre mood. Many felt that the victory the Sinhalese people were celebrating was a victory against the Tamils.

The Divaina also carried a front page editorial in which it praised Rajapaksa for not only bringing victory but also for standing firm against the pressure from the international community – euphemistically the West – which wanted the military offensive stopped to protect the people trapped in the war zone. The paper took a racist swipe at David Miliband, the then British foreign secretary, who visited Sri Lanka during the last stages of the war and urged the Rajapaksa government to ensure the safety of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone. The paper's political cartoon depicted Rajapaksa carrying the carcass of a tiger by the tail.

In contrast, the Colombo-based Tamil weekly Sudar Oli – now a daily – in its 24 May edition – the first issue after the war had ended – carried articles that would not find a place in either Sinhala or English dailies. One article was headlined: “*Azhivil varaltru vetri kanum thetku*”, meaning “The South sees historic victory in carnage”. Dismissing the President's claim that the victory was not against the Tamil people, the writer argued the countrywide celebrations indicated it was a victory of the majority over the minority.

The paper carried pictures of the displaced Tamil people and highlighted their plight. Now that the war was over, the Sudar Oli editorial opined, a fair solution to the Tamil question was an illusion because “the Sinhala racists believe that a solution to the Tamil problem was not necessary.” The editorial, though it expressed pessimism, called on the government to address the grievances of the Tamil people. Like the Divaina editorial, the Sudar Oli editorial was also critical of the international community, but for a different reason. The Sudar Oli blamed the international community for not doing enough to save the Tamil people.

On 19 May, 2009 when the war officially ended, President Rajapaksa announced that the country had been reunited and there were no minorities in Sri Lanka. But the manner in which different newspapers in different languages covered the news shows that far from building a national identity after the war the media continue to sustain the ethnic divide.

The division of the media on ethnic lines was more acute during the 30-year war; so much so that the ethnic prejudice was evident even in the coverage of the 2004 tsunami, the national calamity in which more than 34,000 Sri Lankans perished. The Colombo-based Sinhala and English media – print and electronic media alike -- gave more space and time to stories from the Sinhala-dominated south while the Tamil media concentrated more on stories from the North and East. The answer to the question ‘why did the devastation caused by the tsunami in the north-east -- the region that suffered the most in the 2004 Boxing Day catastrophe -- not receive enough coverage in the Colombo-based Sinhala and English media?’ is either that the region was geographically far away or that it was due to ethnic prejudice.

There are national newspapers in Sri Lanka in the country's three main languages – Sinhala, Tamil and English. A national newspaper is called ‘*Jathika Puwathpatha*’ in Sinhala or ‘*Thesiya Paththrikai*’ in Tamil. However, some critics ask how the Tamil newspapers could use the term ‘national’ or ‘*thesiya*’ to describe themselves when their focus is largely on issues affecting the Tamil people. To some degree, the criticism also applies to Sinhala and Sinhalese-owned media where there is little empathy for the Tamil grievances.

In their own defence, the Tamil national newspapers or *Thesiya paththirikaikal* say if a newspaper is to be commercially viable, it should cater to the needs of its readership. News

evaluation should be based on the reader appeal of the stories. Since Tamil papers are bought largely by Tamil-speaking people, it is natural that Tamil newspapers with countrywide reach give pride of place to stories that appeal to them. If Sinhala language newspapers can focus their attention on matters concerning the Sinhala people – the majority in Sri Lanka – they ask why cannot Tamil newspapers give more weight to Tamil grievances and the problems the Tamil-speaking people are facing. Their argument is plausible. If the Tamil media are not taking a national outlook in their reporting and are accused of doing little to promote the national identity, the Sinhala media also should face the same charge. The Sinhala media's contribution to the rise of Sinhala nationalism and the 'twist' in their presentation of the Tamil side of the story are also reasons for the widening ethnic divide.

It is more difficult to generalize about the role of the English language national media. Some newspapers are seen promoting Sinhala nationalism while others have tried to promote a Sri Lankan identity, though an ethnic undercurrent is discernible, depending on the ownership of the media.

Against this backdrop, the Tamil-language media are described as minority media, a description essentially based on the minority status of their ethnicity, though the Sinhala and English language media are not referred to as majority media. In Sri Lanka, the minority media can be further categorized as minority media controlled by a member/members of the minority ethnic group and minority media controlled by a member/members of the Sinhala community or the majority ethnic group. For instance, Dinapathi (a Tamil daily) and Chinthamani (a Tamil weekly) were owned by the Independent Newspapers Ltd, a newspaper group owned by a Sinhala family. This newspaper group, which also published Sinhala and English newspapers, wound up its business in the mid-1980s following financial losses. Wijeya Newspapers Ltd., publishers of the Sunday Times, Daily Mirror, Lankadeepa (Sinhala daily and weekly), also run a Tamil news website called Tamil Mirror. In addition to this, the state-run Lake House group publishes the Tamil newspaper Thinakaran (daily and weekly).

The vigour with which the Tamil media owned by the Tamils cover Tamil issues is lacking in the coverage of Tamil issues by the Tamil media owned either by the state or the Sinhalese. This is because the structure of identity differs from community to community. For the Sinhalese Buddhists, who comprise 70 percent of the population, their Sinhala-Buddhist-ness is synonymous with their Srilankan-ness, but for most Tamils who make up 17 percent of the population their ethnic identity often supersedes their national identity or their Srilankan-ness. In other words, their Tamil-Hindu-ness or Tamil-Christian-ness have difficulty in fitting into the groove of Srilankan-ness which they feel has been monopolized by the majority community. And for Sri Lanka's Muslims, the second largest minority group (8 per cent of the population), it is their religious identity that often comes to the fore, although they are a Tamil-speaking community. An ethno-centric outlook has come to stay in the minority communities partly because of past history and partly because of the lack of force in successive governments' measures aimed at developing an all-encompassing Sri Lankan national identity.

### **3. A journey into history**

There were no newspapers or printing presses when the Sinhala king, Dutugemunu (161 BC to 137 BC), defeated the Dravidian (Tamil) Chola king Elara. Details of this battle, which still evokes Sinhala triumphalism over the Tamils, were passed on from generation to generation until the monk Mahanama in the 5th century AD wrote the Mahawamsa or the Great Chronicle, considered one of the longest unbroken historical accounts of early Sri Lankan history. It has come in for criticism for its alleged ethnic prejudice in favour of the Sinhala-Buddhists.

The arrival of the printing press in the country in 1737 during the Dutch colonial period led to the de-monopolisation of the task of recording events for posterity. However, till about the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of writing history, literary works and other messages on Ola leaves prevailed.

The early development of the print media in Sri Lanka had its origins in the spread of Christianity and the measures taken by the Sinhala Buddhists and the Hindu Tamils to resist it. This daunting task and the subsequent challenges faced by the Sinhalese, the Tamils and the Muslims defined the shape and tone of the media throughout its subsequent history. As colonialism took root in Sri Lanka, some Sri Lankans, including the elite, embraced not only the way of life of the colonialists but also their religion – which brought them economic benefits and guaranteed upward social mobility, especially if they were educated in missionary schools.

To stem the tide of Christian publications and to counter the propaganda carried out by the pro-Christian Jaffna-based newspapers such as *Morning Star* (in English) and *Udaya Tharakai* (in Tamil), Hindu intellectuals such as Arumuga Nawalar published Tamil literary works such as *Kanda Puranam*, *Sethu Puranam*, *Thirukkural* and *Thirukkovaiyar* in the north.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the zeal to preserve Hinduism and Tamil culture saw the emergence of monthlies and weeklies, magazines and newspapers. Even the English publications printed in Jaffna devoted a few pages to Tamil. For instance, the *Literary Mirror* published in Jaffna by I.C.W. Kadirvelpillai had a Tamil language section.

In 1862, Kadirvelpillai launched *the Ceylon Patriot* to pose a challenge to the *Jaffna Freeman* launched by Nicholas Gold. *The Ceylon Patriot* styled on the lines of *the Indian Patriot* promoted Tamil patriotism against colonialism. The newspaper had a Tamil section called *Ilangabhimani* (meaning Ceylon Patriot), which was very popular. In 1867, Legislative Council member A. Kanakaratanam bought the two rival newspapers and amalgamated them. The merger only strengthened *Ilangabhimani* and helped grow Tamil readership.

It is also worth mentioning here that even the Sinhala print media had their origins in the propagation of Christianity by the missionaries and in counter-moves taken by Buddhist clergy and intellectuals. In 1832, '*Masika Thegga*' (meaning monthly gift), a monthly magazine in Sinhala was published aimed at carrying the message of Christianity to Sinhala students. Subsequently, *Lanka Nidhanaya* (Sri Lanka Treasure) and *Kolamba Katholika Sangarawa* (Colombo Catholic Magazine) were printed to propagate Christianity in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. These magazines carried articles ridiculing Buddhism and Hinduism. In response, the Sinhala Buddhists in 1860 published *Lankalokaya*. Subsequently other publications such as *Lakminipahana*, *Lakrivikirana* and *Sarasavi Sandaresa* and *Dinapatha Pravurthi* came to be published in Sinhala.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Tamil media, based largely in the north, gradually shifted their focus from matters of religion to matters of politics, against the backdrop of Tamil-language revivalism. Similarly, Sinhala-Buddhist revivalism dominated politics in the South. Though Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil Hindu revivalism were largely in response to colonialist moves aimed at proselytizing the local populace, they had a destructive as well as a constructive role in the shaping of a national Sri Lankan identity.

### ***The Independence struggle***

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a joint Sinhala-Tamil struggle for independence. The Jaffna Youth Congress, founded in 1924, was the first Sri Lanka youth group to fight for *Poorna Swaraj* or complete independence from the British. Inspired by the Indian National Congress and Mahathma Gandhi's non-violent approach, their movement was committed to secularism and worked together with Sinhala leaders. The Jaffna Youth Congress's patriotic fervor was such that they opposed the 1931 Donoughmore Reforms on the basis that they did not concede enough self-rule.

No narration about Sri Lanka's independent history is complete without the mention of brothers Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam. The two Tamil leaders, the former in particular, joined Sinhala leaders to spearhead the campaign for independence. But later, when the British colonial rulers introduced more political reforms, the Tamils began to feel insecure because these reforms naturally favoured the majority Sinhalese within a democratic structure. The Ponnambalam brothers felt they were being betrayed by the Sinhalese leaders. More blows to the Sinhala-Tamil unity followed when the Tamil political leadership boycotted the State Council in 1936, accusing the Sinhalese leaders of manipulating the formula for choosing members of the board of ministers.

When new political reforms were being negotiated in the 1940s, the Tamil leadership demanded a 50-50 representation in the new legislature – 50 percent of the seats to be allocated to the majority Sinhalese and the rest to the minorities. However, Lord Soulbury, who was heading the reforms commission and who later became the Governor General, gave more weight to a multi-party system and universal suffrage, to the great disappointment of the Tamil leadership.

Throughout this period, a few Tamil papers, such as the Jaffna-based *Hindu Organ*, adequately highlighted both the growing political tension between the Tamils and the Sinhalese and the Tamil side of the story vis-à-vis the political reforms. The two main Colombo-based Tamil newspapers at the time reported the developments, but their coverage lacked the force with which the Jaffna-based media reported and interpreted the growing ethnic tension. The Colombo-based Tamil newspapers were the *Veerakesari* (1930 to date) founded by P.P.R. Subramaniam Chettiar, a wealthy journalist, who came from India, and the *Thinakaran* (1932 to date) owned by D. R. Wijewardene, a Sinhala stalwart who campaigned for the country's independence. This was the time when journalists, even Tamil journalists, enjoyed a greater degree of media freedom. There was no undue pressure from the colonial government on the independent media.

The years that followed Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 witnessed an escalation of the Tamil-Sinhala political conflict. The Sinhala political leaders' moves in the 1950s to declare Sinhala the official language, replacing English, and the Tamil leaders' resistance to such moves, together with their demand for a federal constitution that would guarantee devolution of power to the Tamil-majority regions of the north and the east, dominated the news in the Tamil media. Intermittent ethnic conflicts, and the government resettlement programmes, which the Tamil leadership and the Tamil media saw as Sinhala colonization of the Tamil areas, also occupied a big space in the Tamil media. A significant development during this era was the setting up of Sri Lanka's only broadcasting station, Radio Ceylon, which later became the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. The state-owned radio with English, Sinhala and Tamil channels became the virtual mouthpiece of the government of the day.

#### **4. The minority media during the civil war**

The three decades from 1980 to 2009, during which the country saw a southern insurrection from 1988 to 1990 largely by the Sinhala youth and an armed separatist rebellion in the north and the

east, were the worst years in Sri Lanka's journalistic history. It was during this period that, for the first time, a journalist was abducted and killed. Popular television journalist Richard de Zoysa was abducted from his Colombo home by a state-sponsored goon squad on 17 February, 1990 and his body was found the next day on the beach south of Colombo. Scores of journalists went underground while some fled the country. At least one editor – Vijitha Yapa of the Sunday Times – was forced to resign during the government's brutal crackdown on the southern insurgency. Though the insurrection, which was led by the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), ended in 1990, the practice of threatening, attacking, abducting and killing journalists did not. According to Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS), 34 journalists were killed from 2004 to 2009. Of these, 30 were Tamil journalists, and one Muslim. Among the Sinhalese journalists killed was the Sunday Leader Editor Lasantha Wickrematunga, who wrote his own obituary, wherein he held the government responsible for his death. (He died on 8 Jan, 2009 after an armed gang brutally attacked him inside a high security zone in a Colombo suburb).

With the Tamil issue taking a militaristic turn in 1983, the Tamil media faced pressure from the government and numerous militant groups. Tamil media editors and journalists received death threats from militant groups, particularly the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and also from military-backed groups such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) or the so-called Karuna group, an LTTE breakaway group led by its erstwhile eastern commander.

### *Laws restricting Tamil expression*

If in the past, the Public Security Ordinance and emergency regulations were invoked by governments to check the media and impose censorship, the period after 1983 saw the implementation of a reinforced Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). This piece of legislation was initially enacted in 1979 as a temporary law with a view to suppressing any recurrence of the JVP insurrection of 1971. But it was made permanent in 1982 to deal with the growing Tamil militancy. The provisions of the new version of the PTA, together with emergency regulations (under the Public Security Ordinance), were used to threaten journalists with arrest and also to gag the media. While the government was armed with the draconian laws, goon squads, which operated with the connivance or blessings of the powers-that-be, also held a gun at journalists' heads.

Journalist Dharmaratnam Sivaram, a well-respected Tamil journalist who wrote in English, told a lecture audience in Canada in 1999 that the bases for repressing the media and restricting the freedom of expression in Sri Lanka are enshrined in the country's constitution itself.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Public Security Ordinance, Sivaram saw the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka as one of the most repressive instruments against the exercise of freedom of expression. The Sixth Amendment prevents citizens of Sri Lanka from advocating separatism. But Sivaram saw it as an affront to the right to exercise one's views within a democratic framework. He said:

“The Sixth Amendment to Sri Lanka's constitution inserted as Article 157A hangs like the sword of Damocles over Tamil journalists. The threat of civic disability, the forfeiture of property etc., for 16 years since the introduction of Sixth Amendment in 1983 has created a generation of Tamil journalists who, over the years, have taken it for granted that the freedom of expression is a concept that does not apply to them. The owners of mainstream Tamil media have contributed in no small measure to this state of affairs.”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tamilnation.co/conferences/cnfCA99/taraki.html>

### ***Government advice and self-censorship***

In addition to draconian legislation, the editors, publishers, television and radio channel owners came to be lectured at regular meetings with the President of the country – a salient feature of the media policy of the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapaksa. At these meetings, the President would make a gentle but firm request for the editors and media bosses not to be the voice of the terrorists. Although it was not like Margaret Thatcher's requests to the media to black out the Irish Republican Army, Rajapaksa's gentle message was chilling enough for the Tamil editors and media bosses to impose self-censorship.

Sri Lanka's journalists were known to resort to self-censorship during the reign of terror that prevailed during the 1988-90 southern insurrection and the various phases of the government's war against the LTTE. But the kind of self-censorship the Tamil media exercised during the last years of the separatist war stemmed from their own dilemma: they were caught between the proverbial devil and the deep blue sea. The LTTE regularly summoned Tamil editors for meetings at its headquarters in Kilonochchi in Sri Lanka's north and gave guidelines. Lost in this exercise was objectivity. If the Tamil media resorted to self-censorship out of fear, sections of the Sinhala and English newspapers cooperated with the government out of patriotism or their opposition to terrorism, just as the CNN did during the Iraq wars.<sup>2</sup>

In this dangerous clime, one newspaper in Jaffna shone but it shone like a shooting star and died. Run by Tamil human rights activists, the Saturday Review was born in 1982 and died in 1987, three months after its office was bombed. In this short period, the newspaper highlighted human rights violations by Sri Lankan troops and the separatist militants, though it supported the liberation struggle of the Tamil people. Its journalists were arrested and tortured. The newspaper was banned under the Public Security Ordinance. Even after the ban was lifted, the newspaper continued with its bold journalism but decided to wind up in the face of continued harassment and death threats.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Sivaram, Sivaramya and Tissainayagam***

As the space within which the journalists in Sri Lanka could operate became more and more dangerous and small, being a journalist with a commitment to objectivity was a recipe for disaster. For Tamil media personnel, whether they wrote in Tamil or English, writing about human rights violations by both sides of the conflict was an invitation for a bullet in the head. After the death of the Saturday Review, the need for a Tamil voice that could operate within this dangerous space was badly felt.

Dharmaratnam Sivaram, who later became the editor of the Tamilnet, filled this vacuum. A Gandhian-turned-militant, Sivaram took to journalism after his group, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam, surrendered its weapons and entered the democratic process under a deal worked out by India and Sri Lanka. In 1988, he was introduced to journalism by Richard de Zoysa, the first journalist to be killed in Sri Lanka. Sivaram worked as a freelance Inter Press Service journalist. But it was after he joined the Island newspaper that he became popular. His columns, which he wrote under *the nom de plume* Taraki, gave the southern readers an insight

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/mar2003/cnn-m05.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iataj.org/pressfreedom.pdf>

into the Tamil militants' mind, their struggle and their aspirations. He knew not only the geography of the area where the battles were being fought but also the socio-economic and political life of the people in the north and the east – the areas where the LTTE was strong. As a result, his articles were looked forward to by political leaders and military commanders. Sivaram knew the limits to which he was allowed to go in exercising his free speech, but often he would stretch the limits, earning the wrath of the government and even the LTTE.

Sivaram's Taraki column later appeared in the Sunday Times and the Daily Mirror. He wrote in Tamil for the *Veerakesari*. A headstrong journalist, he would express his displeasure when the editors who wanted to avoid unnecessary confrontations with the government changed a word or two. In 1997, Sivaram reorganized the Tamilnet and made it one of the most visited Sri Lankan news websites during the war period.

By 2006, when the peace process collapsed and the war resumed, Taraki's Tamilnet was seen to be overtly pro-LTTE. He was critical of the breakaway LTTE group or the Karuna group. In one of his columns, Sivaram alleged that Karuna had embezzled LTTE funds and floated a company in his wife's name. Karuna is today a deputy minister in the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime.

During his lecture tours of Western capitals, Sivaram criticized the government and spoke in favour of the Tamil's right to self-determination. Ultra-nationalist Sinhala politicians branded Sivaram a Tiger – meaning an LTTE member. His house was searched twice and he was once taken in by the police only to be released because he was too well known not only among the local readership but also among the diplomatic corps.

A fun-loving intellectual, Sivaram was abducted by a group of armed men who came in a white van when he was strolling towards a bus stand opposite a police station in Colombo after a drinking session with friends at a pub. It was 28 April, 2005. The following day, his body was found in the high security zone around the parliament complex. Senior journalist D.B.S. Jeyaraj, whose columns are as much sought after as Taraki's had been, hinted in an article that Sivaram was killed by the Karuna group or Karuna himself.

The killing drew wide condemnation, especially from the international community. The government arrested a person, but the case remains unresolved.<sup>4</sup> Journalists and academics in Jaffna and the media personnel in the LTTE-controlled areas protested over Sivaram's killing. In the Sinhala-majority south, the Free Media Movement held a demonstration. But apart from this, there was very little protest in the south. Sivaram himself saw this division along ethnic lines in the journalistic fraternity. In a paper he presented in a Canada seminar, Sivaram quoted B. Sivakumar, the editor of Tamil journal *Sarinihar*, published by the Movement for Inter Racial Justice and Equality, as saying:

"The organisations in Colombo that are supposed to protect the rights of journalists do not come out in protest when Tamil media people are arrested or harassed. Or they put out carefully worded statements reluctantly. These are the very organisations that agitate against the state very vociferously when non-Tamil journalists are arrested or intimidated. This is due to a feeling among them that all Tamils may somehow be linked to the LTTE."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.tamilweek.com/Karuna\\_Sivaram\\_0010.html](http://www.tamilweek.com/Karuna_Sivaram_0010.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://tamilnation.co/conferences/cnfCA99/taraki.html>

Such apathy in the journalistic fraternity was seen in Tamil journalist Sivaramya's case. In May 2006, Tamil broadcast journalist Sivanathan Sivaramya was arrested by the police on suspicion she was an LTTE suicide bomber. Ironically, the arrest was made at a UNESCO ceremony to mark World Press Freedom Day. Sivaramya pleaded that she was a journalist attached to the state-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and she wanted to attend the ceremony which was held at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall. But the police accused her of trying to kill a senior minister. She was taken to the dreaded Terrorist Investigations Department for interrogation. The protest over Sivaramya's arrest in the local journalistic fraternity was only a whimper, but the international cry was loud enough to get her released on bail. She later filed a fundamental rights case and obtained redress.

Jayaprakash Tissainayagam was not as lucky as Sivaramya. But he was not as unfortunate as Sivaram to end up as a lifeless corpse. Tissainayagam was a journalist cum human rights activist. Unlike Sivaram, Tissainayagam's writing did not have a political slant. His commitment to human rights issues and his determination to end oppression were evident in his columns. Tissainayagam is ethnically Tamil, but wrote in English for national English newspapers. He started his journalistic career in 1987 at the Sunday Times newspaper. Later he left the Sunday Times and edited the Northeast Herald magazine, for which he received funds from foreign NGOs committed to promote democracy and good governance.

When he realized that the kind of material that found space in his magazine could no longer be entertained due to the worsening situation vis-à-vis media freedom in the country after the war escalated, he wound up the magazine and resorted to web journalism. Months after launching a website, which he named Outreach, Tissainayagam was arrested. That was on 7 March, 2008. The arrest took place following a raid on a printing press which operated from a building where Tissainayagam's Outreach office functioned. Months before his arrest, he began a weekly column for the Sunday Times. He was issued clear guidelines as to the limits within which he could express his views. This is because the newspaper did not want to be seen by the authorities as giving a platform to pro-LTTE views. He was told: 'Tamil issues yes', but not in a way that would help the LTTE's cause of separatism.

While he was detained by the Terrorist Investigations Department, his house was raided and detectives found two old copies of the North East Herald. The articles in these issues had been written at a time when Tamil journalists like Tissainayagam believed that there was still some space to express Tamil opinion. No charges were brought against him for six months. As international pressure mounted on the government, police on 25 August, 2008 took him to court. He was charged with writing to incite 'ethnic disharmony'. His was the first case where a journalist was charged under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

In September 2009, the Colombo High Court found him guilty and sentenced him to 20 years rigorous imprisonment in a judgment that received worldwide criticism. Amnesty International in a statement denounced the judgment as a direct violation of Tissainayagam's right to freedom of expression and more broadly as an assault on press freedom in Sri Lanka. The organization called for the immediate release of Tissainayagam and an end to the use of the PTA to silence peaceful dissent. He was subsequently offered a presidential pardon, which was seen as a move to placate the European Union which was at that time threatening to suspend special concessions granted to Sri Lanka under its GSP (General System of Preferences) Plus programme.

While the Tissainayagam case drew international attention, with even US President Barack Obama citing him as an example of journalists being jailed for expressing their views, the media fraternity in Sri Lanka was divided. Many journalists in the Sinhala media adopted the view that

the police were simply doing their duty and “let the courts decide the case”. Once again the Sarinihar editor was proved right. Perhaps Tissainayagam was arrested at the wrong time – at a time when patriotism had replaced objectivity for a national cause.

### *Embedded journalism*

The last years of the war also saw the entry of embedded journalism into Sri Lanka’s media. Embedded journalism, which proved highly controversial during the Iraq war, became a feature of the late stages of Sri Lanka’s own war, when journalists from some newspaper and television groups embedded themselves with the army and covered the frontline in a way that pleased the military.

Meanwhile, journalists who refused to be embedded and who tried to be independent earned the wrath of the powers-that-be. The Sunday Times Defence correspondent, Iqbal Athas, had to leave the country following a series of articles that highlighted alleged irregularities in military procurement, while the Nation Defence correspondent, Keith Noyahr, was abducted and almost killed for critically commenting on the manner in which promotions were given in the military.

### *The new media*

As governments during the civil war period tried to muzzle the traditional media with emergency regulations and other tough laws at their disposal, developments in information technology made their efforts somewhat meaningless. The emergence of web journalism offered the news-starved masses the other side of the story which the closely-monitored traditional media could not give out of fear of adverse repercussions.

With the traditional Tamil media both in Colombo and Jaffna unable to give an objective account of what was taking place in the war-affected areas because of threats from both sides, news websites such as Tamilnet operating from overseas carried stories explaining the situation at the war front and the plight of the civilians trapped in the war zone. These Tamil websites gave more weight to separatist viewpoints – and the government and the military leadership branded them Tiger mouthpieces. The paradox, however, was that even the Colombo-based independent media would occasionally publish a Tamilnet account of the war situation, though the objective was to give credibility to a government claim or undermine the LTTE.

Besides the English language Tamilnet, which is funded by the Tamil Diaspora, there were other websites in Tamil. Chief among them was Puthinam.com. This website, now defunct, gave graphic accounts of the civilian casualties during the last stages of the war. Many video clips the website posted, showing the civilian plight at that time, were included in the award-winning Channel 4 documentary – Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields.

To counter the challenge posed by the new media, the government also launched several websites. Among them, defence.lk, a website maintained by the Defence Ministry, occupied the number one position among all Sri Lanka-based websites on the Alexa ranking during the last stages of the war. (Alexa is the leading provider of free, global web statistics based on visits and other data. They maintain and update a table which helps one to know the popularity of a website within a country). Also supporting the government’s position was Asia Tribune, a website edited by a Tamil businessman, which carried stories critical of the LTTE.

Parallel to the web journalism, the electronic media also developed. The LTTE carried out its propaganda work effectively through its radio station ‘the Voice of Tigers’ – *Puligalin Kural* – in Tamil and its satellite television station ‘National Tamil Television’. In Colombo, the government’s liberal economic policy paved the way for more private radio channels in Sinhala, English and Tamil. But the Tamil channels – which were largely owned by the Sinhalese, except for the channels owned by the Maharaja group – were more than careful in their news coverage. They did not want to earn the wrath of the government and lose their broadcast licences, as happened to the ABC Radio Network in 2007 via a court order.

To counter the LTTE propaganda and reach the Tamil people, the state-run SLBC Tamil service started a special daily evening programme critical of the LTTE but in favour of the government ally, the Eelam People’s Democratic Party, led by Minister Douglas Devananda.

### 5. *The minority media after the war*

The war officially ended on 19 May, 2009. But it did not herald an end to the troubles the minority media in Sri Lanka had been facing. Although the LTTE has been eliminated, the threat from goons who are alleged to be sponsored by politicians from the ruling coalition persists. On 28 May, 2011, two years after the war had ended, S. Kavitharan, a journalist attached to the Jaffna-based *Uthayan* newspaper, which was the sole media voice of the Tamils in the government-controlled areas of the north throughout the war period, was attacked by an unidentified gang.

Kavitharan and his media colleagues had come under constant attack from a pro-government paramilitary group which had warned them not to publish photographs or articles about LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. A month after the attack on Kavitharan, the newspaper’s news editor G. Kuhanathan was brutally attacked by an unknown gang. Investigations into the attacks on the *Uthayan* journalists have seldom led to successful prosecutions.

The *Uthayan* newspaper, which is run by E. Saravanabhavan, who is a member of parliament for the main Tamil opposition party, the Tamil National Alliance, continued its journalistic duty and paid a heavy price. During the war years, its office was burnt. A leaked US embassy cable posted on the WikiLeaks website had quoted President Rajapaksa’s brother Basil Rajapaksa as saying he had asked ministers Douglas Devananda and V. Muralitharan alias Karuna, a former LTTE commander who broke away from the group, to rein in their members, who had become a law unto themselves.<sup>6</sup> Rajapaksa’s comments, according to the cable, came in response to a question from the then US ambassador in Sri Lanka, Robert Blake, who later became Assistant Secretary of State in charge of South and Central Asia.

In February 2009, the *Uthayan*’s editor in chief, N. Vidyatharan, who also edited the sister paper, *Sudar Oli*, from Colombo, was arrested by security officers at a funeral parlour where he had come to pay respect to a dead relative. Many of those present knew it was another ‘white van’ abduction and they would never see him again. They were right. However, following international diplomatic pressure, the government admitted that he was in police custody.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://colombotelegraph.com/2012/02/03/wikileaks-looked-like-epdp-and-sl-navy-burnt-the-uthayan-basil-to-us/>

Even after the end of the war, the *Uthayan* and other independent Tamil newspapers operated with the same kind of threat that existed during the war years. The situation persisted until the government ended the state of emergency in September 2011.

In the post-war, post-emergency period, the independent Tamil media have displayed a little more courage to write about matters affecting the Tamil-speaking people, who also include the Muslims of Sri Lanka, despite unofficial 'guidelines' issued to them at the President's regular meetings with editors and media bosses. At these meetings, the presidential grouse often is that the Tamil media carry news items detrimental to the sovereignty of the country or that they act as the mouthpiece of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil political alliance representing the Tamil people in parliament. During the war years, the TNA, like the Tamil media, was careful not to antagonize the LTTE. But the party's policies drew attacks from ultra-nationalist Sinhala leaders who accused it of being a mere mouthpiece of the LTTE.

V. Thanabalasingham, editor of the Colombo-based Tamil daily *Thinakkural* told me in an interview in February 2012 that in the post-civil war era, the independent Tamil media were being accused of "working for the Diaspora". In post-war Sri Lanka, the word 'Diaspora' tends to be used by critics to denote overseas Sri Lankan Tamils, who work against the interest of the country. In other words, the Tamil Diaspora is an LTTE ghost. Thanabalasingham points out that in the post-war period, probably in deference to the 'unofficial' government guidelines, no mainstream Tamil media glorify the LTTE. "It looks like it is the government which is in need of an LTTE. It wants a bogey to distract the people from the real issues such as economic hardships," he said. Thanabalasingham said that in post-war Sri Lanka, the minority media has a cardinal role to play in highlighting the real issues facing the Tamil-speaking people. One such issue he identifies is the presence of the military, which largely consists of the Sinhalese, in the traditional Tamil areas. "The militarization of civilian areas in the north has denied the traditional-minded Tamil people their right to privacy...."

The new-found courage with which the independent Tamil newspapers publish news is rarely seen in the Tamil electronic media. With the exception of the *Shakthi* television and radio channel, which are run by the Tamil-owned Maharaja Group, which also runs *Sirisa*, the popular Sinhala TV and radio channels, and the English language MTV, most Tamil independent radio channels, which are owned by Sinhala businessmen, are cautious when reporting Tamil issues or carrying opposition viewpoints. The state controls three Tamil national TV channels – *Nethra*, *Wasantham* and *Vetri*. Hence, for the 'other side of the story', the news-hungry Tamils depend on Maharaja's *Shakthi* or satellite television channels beamed from Tamil Nadu in India or internet-based radio and television operated from Europe. However, satellite television is still a feature associated with city and urban life and yet to touch the village life.

While independent Tamil newspapers such as *Thinakkural*, *Sudar Oli*, *Udayan* and *Veerakesari* give prominence to the issue of militarization of Tamil areas, the Tamil leadership deficiency in the post-war period, the rehabilitation of the displaced Tamil people and the need for a political solution to meet the aspirations of the Tamil people, the Sinhala newspapers, the Sinhalese-run English newspapers and the state-controlled Tamil media hail the military victory and highlight dangers posed to the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of the country. The Sinhala and Tamil media's reporting on allegations of human rights violations and war crimes committed by the security forces during the last stages of the war also differs. The minority Tamil independent media give more weight to the Western nations' concerns over accountability, while the Sinhala media and the Sinhalese-controlled English media display shades of nationalism and seek to protect the troops and hit out at western nations for their call for accountability.

The polarization of the media that was visible on the eve of Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948 and throughout the post-independence period – including the war years – in varying degrees continues to be a salient feature of the Sri Lankan media scene. Issues such as democracy, freedom of expression and the all-important spiralling cost of living took a back seat at the height of the war, but are gradually coming to the forefront in the post-war media. But, again, there is a difference in the manner in which they are presented in the Sinhala-dominated media and the Tamil media.

Thanabalasingham claims that the independent Tamil media highlight dangers to democracy in a much better way than the Sinhala media. Thanabalasingham's book "*Oorukku Nallathu Solven*" (I will tell the good to the country), an anthology of *Thinakkural* editorials written by him is a testament to his statement. But the objective is what makes the difference. In the introduction to the book, Professor Karthigesu Sivathambi, says "a Tamil daily in Sri Lanka has two vital functions: (a) it has to report all major national events and (b) it has to indicate how those events affect the Tamils/Tamil-speaking people. This attitude is the core of the independent Tamil media in Sri Lanka." The Tamil journalists will defend this approach by saying that their news and editorials have to cater to their readership's taste and expectations; and that such an approach is vital for a newspaper or a media group to be commercially viable. Unfortunately, these ethno-centric media policies sustain ethnic divisions and do not contribute positively to the development of a national identity. Besides, such divisions weaken the media's power and their role in promoting or strengthening democracy. In this sense, media unity assumes utmost significance. Media unity does not merely mean the coming together of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim journalists on World Press Freedom Day. It essentially means uniting for a purpose, the purpose being democracy promotion which includes ensuring full media freedom with responsibility, the independence of the judiciary, the effective functioning of the rule of law, transparency in governance and public accountability.

Such a media unity with a common purpose could emerge only after the Tamil political question is effectively addressed. A political solution based on meaningful devolution of power to the Tamil regions could enable the Tamil media to divert their energy to highlight national issues such as the state of the economy, media freedom and the lack of good governance – with the entire nation's interest at heart, instead of only the interest of the Tamil-speaking community.

## **6. The Muslim media**

Parallel to the Tamil media, there exists a Muslim media in Sri Lanka. Its existence further confirms the division of the media along ethnic lines in Sri Lanka. The Muslims of Sri Lanka are largely a Tamil-speaking minority scattered all over the island. A large number of Muslims live in the country's Eastern Province. Thus the language of the Muslim media is largely Tamil, though newspapers and magazines carrying the Muslim viewpoint are also published in Sinhala and English. Though a Tamil-speaking minority, the Muslims in Sri Lanka claim they are a separate community. Hence their political aspirations, they insist, are different from those of the Tamils.

The beginning of the Muslim media in Sri Lanka is no different from the beginning of the Sinhala or Tamil media. Their main objective was to protect Muslim identity from Christian missionary influence.

The early Muslims wrote Tamil using Arabic script. Books were handwritten in Arabic-Tamil or *Arwi* until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But with the inception of Tamil printing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslims resorted to Tamil letters extensively in their publications. This was because the *Arwi* or Arabic-script presses were not available in the country.

The first Muslim news magazine in Tamil was printed in 1873. It was named '*Puthinalankari*' – a name coined by joining *puthinam*, meaning news, and *alankari*, meaning beautiful woman. In its editorial, the editor justified the publication of the magazine in these words: "Just as the other communities benefit from the newspapers, the Muslims also should benefit."

Two years later, a Muslim weekly, *Shingai Warthamani*, came out. It was followed by a fortnightly *Shingai Nation*. Both these news magazines were printed in Singapore. A significant publication that contributed immensely to the Muslim literary and political revival was Siddi Lebbe's *Muslim Nation* in Tamil. However, none of the Muslim magazines or newspapers that started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century lasted for long.

In the 1930s, the Muslim readership was attracted to Tamil publications and since then, Tamil newspapers have been giving some voice and space to Muslim issues. Occasionally a Muslim newspaper or magazine would hit the news stands. Significant among them are the Al-Hasanath magazine, a publication of the Sri Lanka Jamath E Islam, and the Al Islam (in English), monthly. Both these low-circulation publications are more than 40 years old and they highlight Muslim domestic and international issues. Today, the Jamath E Islam also publishes *Prabodaya* in Sinhala, underscoring that the Muslim community's main concern is their religion rather than the Tamil-language.

A significant development during the civil war years was the emergence of Tamil national newspapers with a Muslim slant. Giving voice to the Muslim political revivalism in the late 1980s, *Navamani* newspaper echoed the policies of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, a political party which derives its strength from the Muslim-dominant areas in the Eastern Province.

In the post-war era, the Express Newspapers Limited, the publisher of *Veerakesari*, Sri Lanka's oldest Tamil paper, started *Vidivelli*, a Tamil newspaper with a Muslim focus. Other national newspapers, such as *Thinakaran* and *Thinakkural*, today devote considerable amount of space to highlight Muslim issues and make an attempt to identify with the Muslim community. These newspapers under their masthead publish the Muslim Hijra calendar date along with the Gregorian calendar date and the Hindu calendar date.

However, Muslim politicians and activists complain that in spite of some space given to Muslim news in the Tamil press owned by the Tamils, there exists an anti-Muslim bias. For instance, they say the problems of the internally displaced Northern Muslims – who were the victims of the ethnic-cleansing policy of the LTTE during the war years – are not given the right exposure in the Tamil-run Tamil media. The Muslims say that this antipathy stems from the Tamil community's desire to derive maximum benefit from the limited resources available for resettlement of the displaced Tamil people. Moreover, the Muslims charge that the villages from which Muslims were evicted by the LTTE are now being occupied by the Tamils. So where there is a conflict between the Tamils and the Muslims, the Tamil-run Tamil media are not impartial, Muslim activists claim.

The Muslim issues which the Tamil-run Tamil media shun are published in the country's only Muslim-run Tamil newspaper – *Navamani*. But the inadequacy of this newspaper in drawing the attention of policymakers to such issues has made Muslim activists, politicians and community leaders turn towards the English language national newspapers. The Sunday Times, the Sunday Leader and the new newspaper, Ceylon Today, have been giving some space to highlight Muslim issues. But such generosity is linked more to moves aimed at wooing the Muslim readership than to any concern for the Muslims' quest for justice. The Muslims – and the Tamils – form a

substantial segment of the readership of English newspapers, 70 per cent of whose readership is in Colombo and the suburbs or areas where a large number of Muslims and Tamils live.

## **7. Conclusion**

Sri Lanka's media scene is at the crossroads. There is a pressing need to close the gap between what the media are and what they should be. Such an exercise is necessary in the long-term interest of the country, democracy and the reconciliation process.

Although the state of emergency has been lifted, there is little guarantee that it won't be imposed again under the Public Security Ordinance (PSO). In the Tissainayagam case, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) emerged as an effective weapon to intimidate journalists.

Together with the PSO and the PTA, the absence of a Right to Information Act has added to the woes of journalists, especially the Tamil media journalists, although the constitution of the country recognizes the freedom of expression as a fundamental right.

Media unity is essential in the journalists' fight for the enactment of a Right to Information Act. Such an act will not only allow the journalists to do their duty in an environment free from threats and intimidation but also ensure corruption-free, good governance.

In this struggle, not only should Sri Lankan journalists of different ethnic identities unite, but also journalists from the region and the rest of the world. It is disheartening when journalists in India – where a Right to Information Act exists – do not ask questions about media freedom in Sri Lanka and the government's failure to enact such a Right to Information Act when they interview Sri Lankan leaders.

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