

BOOK REVIEW

***Voices of Peace: “They were Just Like Us”* by Sarah Kabir (Colombo: author publication, 2018, 289 pages), Rs. 1200/-.**

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This volume presents a rather unique collection of narratives. The narratives are from a sample of twenty former combatants on either side of the battle in the North-East War in Sri Lanka. The narratives are presented as “voices of peace”, as the ex-combatants from Sri Lankan security forces and LTTE reflect on their struggles in life during and after the war. Now that over one decade has passed since the end of the war, the ex-combatants can have a relatively detached view of how the war devastated their lives, how far they have rebuilt the lives and livelihoods so devastated and what are the remaining challenges they face 10 years after the end of the war. This collection is unique because it brings face to face the narratives of those who fought with each other in the battlefield. In these narratives not only the formerly rival groups talk to each other, but also in the end to the public at large, including policy makers, rebel leaders and commanders who made vital decisions during and after the war about strategies of war, reconciliation and peace.

In the author’s own words,

“This is what “Voice of Peace” (VOP) offers: a platform for the affected, but mostly unheard voices of Sri Lanka’s protracted conflict, a safe space to give them ownership of the ongoing peace process. VOP recognises the journeys of those who were actively involved in, and acknowledged during the war- but have been ignored during this moment of ‘peace’. By viewing people as experts of their own lives, VOP offers an opportunity to

listen to their histories, their present, and their hopes for the future. It offers a combined narrative of the two camps that once stood opposite each other at the frontlines of a battle field ...” (p. 13).

Thus, the author seeks to contribute to the empowerment of the affected parties through the process of storytelling. One positive feature of the publication is that it provides a range of stories and experiences that challenges simplistic one-sided assumptions and questionable categories like war heroes and victims and liberators and terrorists by presenting the actual life stories and reflections of all combatants irrespective of who they were, during and after the war. Not all narratives presented, however, are untainted voices of peace in so far as they are also expressions of continuous ethnic polarisation, mutual suspicion and frequent lapses in state-society relations. We will come back to this point later in this review.

The book is structured according to specific domains in life such as why they joined the forces or LTTE, where we can compare and contrast the experiences and background of selected persons in the two groups of former fighters in the same chapter and as part of a common narrative. The objective is not so much to understand each individual as a separate case study as in the typical anthropological case study format but engage the relevant aspects of life of ex-LTTE fighters and security forces personnel in ways that help us understand their common and divergent experiences. Each chapter

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is, thus, a listing of fragments of narratives of selected individuals relating to a specific aspect with a brief one-page introduction about the theme of narratives. This does not give us the whole story relating to specific individuals as a single narrative but a series of quotes from different individuals relating to one particular aspect of life. While this approach is not very helpful in gaining an in-depth understanding of complete life stories and exploring the larger social and political processes in post-war Sri Lanka, it helps in understanding the unity and diversity of specific aspects of life of those who were on different sides of the battle front. The best illustration of the effectiveness of this approach is when the experiences of the war disabled on either side of the divide are told in Chapters Four and Five. Irrespective of on which side of the divide they are, there is much that is common to all war-disabled, even though war-disabled from the security forces are formally treated as ‘*ranaviru*’ (war heroes) and housed in state-sponsored “*Ranaviru Sevana*” in some instances. The two final chapters, Chapter Seven: Peace and Reconciliation and Chapter Eight: Our Future, seek to draw lessons from the narratives with a view to inform peace, reconciliation, post-war reconstruction and development processes.

Why joined?

Many ex-LTTE cadres had joined LTTE out of sheer poverty and lack of options in life with some coercion on the part of LTTE, especially in the case of child soldiers. The following examples illustrate the processes involved:

“After the O-level exam results were released, most of those who had failed joined the LTTE. Those with money could pass the exams, because they could afford tuition. If I had money, I would have left to London. The rich were able to leave the North. They could learn Sinhala and inter-marry. They could escape. The rich had a choice, but for the poor, joining the armed groups was the only way out. Ultimately, it was the poor who fought for the Tamils. I am one of those people...” (Thileepan, 47: p. 38).

This clearly shows that joining the LTTE was not an inevitable outcome, but one forced upon poorer individuals with limited capabilities because of their lack of options. As Thileepan’s statement clearly shows, those with higher incomes and better resources explored other options including out-migration.

The war-related displacement was another factor that complicated the lives of many youth in the North.

“When there is no war, and poverty is the only issue, you can still focus on your studies. But

the main reason my studies were interrupted was the war. I came from a family of nine. None of us could achieve any of our goals. When our neighbourhoods started to be attacked, we had to let go of these goals. My brother dreamed of becoming a teacher, but he wasn’t able to because of the war. Our parents had a lot of expectations for us, and hoped that we would study and do something good for society. They hoped that someday we would be respected people in society. My hope was that I would get a good job. But I made a mistake at the last moment, so I couldn’t fulfil this expectation” (Kumaran, 44: p. 38).

Even though those joining the Sri Lankan Army were not as desperate as LTTE recruits were, poverty was an important factor in the army recruitment too.

“I was working in a house, away from my village. When I came home on holiday, my friends said to me, “Machang, we are going to join the Army”. So I decided to join too. I joined because of poverty. I thought if I went to war, I could earn a decent salary and help my parents. I also thought it is better to die than to continue to live the way I did. I had so much determination then...” (Samantha, 29; p. 38).

Similarly, social and political tensions in their home areas played a role in recruitment to the Sri Lankan security forces too, as evident in the following narrative:

“I joined the SLAF by coincidence. I was an athlete in school. I participated in the under-17 athletics open nationals and won my event. An SLAF officer was the chief guest at the event, and he was looking for new recruits. I didn’t even want to go for the interview. They sent vehicles to pick me up, and I went for the interview in school uniform. I had never been keen to join the SLAF, but I was happy to get in because the JVP issues were ongoing then. ... There were some people from my village who were not on good terms with me—being in the SLAF would give me protection from those problems” (Suren, 47: p. 42).

While grinding poverty and severe social disruptions remained important background factors that contributed to the recruitment of troops on either side of the ethnic divide, feelings of social injustice, discrimination and progressive neglect and violence by the state clearly played a more significant role in determining why the Tamil youth joined the LTTE. This structural imbalance between the two groups of storytellers consequent to the war does not come out in the book, partly due to the way narratives are presented.

Memories of war

Chapter Two is about memories of combatants relating to the war era. This includes successes and failures in major combat operations, life threatening events, traumatic experiences such as loss of limbs, life changing events during the war such as love and marriage, and memories of life under the LTTE and military takeover. Interestingly, many of the fond memories relate to rare moments when social bonds were established across various divides as in the following instances:

"During the 1996 World Cup, I was with the SF on the front line. When we won, we celebrated together; we fired shots into the air and so did the LTTE. And whenever Murali took a wicket, we noticed them celebrating too" (Pasan, 42: p. 58).

"In the SLN, we treat our subordinates as equals, and navy men are well educated. We have had a very cohesive relationship with our fellow navy men, and since that practice was inculcated in our daily work, we've always been more approachable than SLA to civilians. A ship is a restricted space, so you can't maintain distance from your subordinates like the SLA can. Being Commanding Officer didn't mean I wouldn't mingle with the others. Sometimes we'd play basketball together, when the seas were calm. When a suicide boat attacks it kills every one. We die together" (Sanjeeva, 50: p. 65).

Interestingly, the fond memories of LTTE cadres often related to life under LTTE control.

"We weren't afraid. We choose the LTTE. We wanted to die for a cause. We believed in Prabhakaran and trusted him. He was the best leader in the world, and like a god to us. We had genuine respect for him. He never smoked or drank, or committed any wrongdoings. When we joined we wanted to see Prabhakaran before we died. I wanted to see Prabhakaran more than anyone, and I will never forget the moment I finally did. He was a great leader. He'd eat with us, and never distanced himself from us although he was the leader. We didn't have to salute him. We never referred to him as 'Sir'—he was known fondly as *annai* (brother)" (Anonymous, male: p. 92).

This clearly shows that whatever evils he represented to those on the opposite side of the battlefield, to some of his followers, at least, he was their saviour.

"During LTTE rule, we had no caste divisions. Everyone was treated the same. My family was high caste, so I taught my mother not to think of ourselves as better than others, as the LTTE taught me" (Senthuran, 47: p.75).

Thus, many years after the end of the war, some of the ex-LTTE cadres tend to have fond memories of the LTTE era. This may not be a voice of peace as such but something that has to be recognised by those who want to facilitate the re-integration of ex-LTTE cadres into the social mainstream.

It is, however, wrong to think that all ex-LTTE fighters continue to have a positive view about LTTE and its leaders.

"We feel betrayed by the LTTE leaders. There is no second thought about it. The top LTTE leaders fled overseas or joined with the government, and they have a better life now. We stayed back and fought. They live lavishly, with swimming pools, while those who really suffered have not got any help. Whatever they are eating is not food—it's Tamil people's flesh and blood. There will be *karma* for them—they won't be able to escape their sin" (Kannan, 27: p. 211).

This is also by no means a voice of peace. However, this is also an important voice to be recognised in working towards a peaceful future.

Memories of the last phase of the war

In Chapter Three, titled "Sliding Doors", the combatants narrate their experiences during the last phase of the war. Given the vastly contested reports about casualties during the last phase of the war, the narratives from the two sides about their experiences during the last phase of the war are particularly significant. This was also a moment where military personnel, LTTE fighters and civilians, many of whom were in LTTE hostage, came face to face, particularly when the last two groups crossed over to the declared safe area.

"I was involved in SLA's humanitarian operation between 2007 and 2009. Calling it that gave our operation more advantage internationally. And that is what we were doing—saving the civilians. I don't think calling it a humanitarian operation is wrong. There were certain mess-ups of course, but that is given in a war" (Kirthi, 49: p. 102).

"It wasn't war we were part of, but making peace. From February 2009 until the war ended, we were

helping the civilians who crossed over. There were lots of women coming over so we needed to be there. They came after lot of hardships, with only their cloths and deeds in shopping bags...So many came over to us at Nandikadal. There wasn't space to move...We kept the women and men separate. We gave them water and food. Many almost collapsed because of the heat. It would be about 4 pm when we ourselves would be able to drink some water, but even then, if a child came and asked for water I would give them mine. We also helped a mother give birth. We took care of them as much as possible. Our morning food would only come at noon. We would most often give it to the children when it came...They were also very grateful when we did little things like that...No one talks about these good things and that makes me sad" (Shanuna, 29: p. 104-105).

These narratives of male and female soldiers described these encounters as a moving humanitarian response on the part of security forces. The accounts of LTTE cadres, however, tells a vastly different story.

"We surrendered in 2009 but have since got nothing we were promised. At the point of surrender, they removed our cloths. We were not treated like humans. No food or water was given...I surrendered as a LTTE cadre and was separated from the civilians. I was sent to prison. My wife and children were sent to Chettikulam camp for nine months. My family was given a small hut and food. I am not saying they weren't looked after but they faced lots of difficulties while in detention. They didn't have any communication with me or other family members..." (Anonymous, male: p. 106).

"I don't know the words to describe the sadness we endured, and there are no pictures to attest to it. There were so many people in such a little space. They fired and fired. I am not making this up just because I was with the LTTE. We were boxed in. They hit and hit us...Words can't tell you the troubles we faced..." (Senthooran, 47: p. 103).

Not all LTTE cadres, however, had only negative experiences to report.

"When in rehabilitation, I was treated like a pet. Four officers from the SLA were like fathers to me... I feel it was a very good chance given to me. They gave me counselling. A guru from India did the counselling. It was a very good programme.

They also gave us vocational training, and they treated us well. The officers were really very good people...Even now I maintain a good relationship with them" (Kumaran, 44: p. 110).

"When I was in rehabilitation, SLA officers played chess with me. We shared biscuits and food. I couldn't communicate much though because of language barrier..." (Ponkalan, 37: p. 117).

The narratives in this segment of the book clearly point to the structural imbalance between the two groups of fighters, particularly during the last phase of the war. As noted earlier, this theme is not pursued in the book in its preoccupation with voices of peace.

Returning to civilian life

Chapter Four: Moving from War to Peace, describes the ways in which former combatants become readjusted to normal family life, the challenges they faced along the way and how far and in what ways they have coped with the traumatic experiences. This chapter reveals a number of ways in which combatants on either side of the ethnic divide experienced more or less common life-changing events during the war, in the form of war-induced disability, separation from the family and readjustment to normal life since the end of war. While state agencies have come forward to help the security forces personnel affected by disability, family bereavement and trauma, ex-LTTE cadres largely turn to their families and civil society organisations in coping with these challenges.

Chapter Five continues the theme of return to civilian life by focusing on initiatives like the formation of Civil Security Department (CSD) where some civilians including, ex-LTTE cadres are employed by the state in economic activities initiated by this new department. While this may be seen as an innovative strategy that seeks breaking the barriers between ex-LTTE cadres and the security establishment, it also had the effect of distancing the beneficiaries from the fellow Tamil civilians. The resulting ambivalence is reflected in the following narrative from an ex-LTTE cadre:

"I was initially scared to join the CSD. I didn't show up the first time I was called, so I was called again. I joined ten days after they opened. My leg was trembling on my first day. We first came with fear and suspicion. When we joined the LTTE, we were proud. But the day I joined the CSD, I felt like I was doing something against my people. So there was a difference at the time. But the commander here made us comfortable

and so we've stayed on. He understands us like our leader did. It's the lower-ranked officers who tend to be racist. If the Commander's not here, then we'd get worried. If there are more leaders like this in the North, it will really help this area" (Anonymous, male: p. 145).

As for the war-disabled, there were serious grievances even among the ex-army officers.

"The SLA doesn't help disabled soldiers enough. I have seen how they get injured. Once twelve soldiers got caught in a landmine. One soldier lost both his legs and a hand. He was left with only one hand. That is how cruel it was. We saw how and why they got injured, and so I believe the compensation they got is not enough. While houses may have been built, not every disabled soldier gets one. They give some houses to the disabled and some to soldiers still serving. Out of a 100 they built, only around 75 would go to the disabled" (Anonymous, male: p. 164).

Chapter Six deals with perceptions of the combatants about changes that have taken place since the end of the war. Obviously, these perceptions are coloured by their experiences during the war and the life afterwards. "Being in the SLA but seeing both sides, I can say that the Tamil community has been set back 30 years. And Sri Lankans as citizens regressed" (Kirthi, 49: p. 188). Judging by their narratives, there are some positive perceptions as well. For instance, Thileepan, 47, had this to say about their so-called enemies. "...I can't believe I fought with these people who are like brothers to me now. They show me love and respect.... I regret what happened..." (p. 201).

Prospects for peace

The two final chapters in the book are futuristic in outlook. Chapter Seven explores thoughts about peace and reconciliation. Chapter Eight, titled "Our Future", concludes that both parties clearly do not want to go back to war again. This is because both parties have suffered enough and they have come to the realisation that the war creates unsurmountable problems for the current and future generations as well as natural resources like forest, sea, lagoons, marine resources and so on.

This is, however, not to say that peaceful coexistence is guaranteed in post-war Sri Lanka. On the contrary, there are multiple grievances and many unresolved problems conveyed by these narratives. They range from civil-military relations to debt burden among civilians in the North. At the social level, family breakdown, alcoholism, suicide and lack of trust in systems appear to be widespread among all parties, including military and ex-LTTE cadres. Unfortunately, the book does not try to summarise or analyse these problems using the vast body of literature already available, perhaps assuming that such an analysis is outside the scope of a book dedicated to giving voice to people who directly experienced war in the battlefield. Granting that giving voice to affected people is indeed necessary in peace and reconciliation as well as in post-war development efforts, it is equally important to situate the narratives, including voices of peace and voices of aggression, within the larger context of social, economic and political realities in the affected populations. Even though this is a useful collection of narratives that is unique in many respects, it remains at the level of an assemblage of segments of life of these survivors of the war irrespective of where and the circumstances under which they are located in post-war Sri Lanka.