

# One Temple, one Bomb, and three lines of Political Narrative

Twenty years of civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and predominately Sinhala-Buddhist government forces has cost the tiny island nation of Sri Lanka an estimated 65,000 lives. But it was the 1998 Tiger attack on the country's most venerated Buddhist shrine which struck the majority Sinhala-Buddhist population the hardest. The bombing of the Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relic) resulted in unprecedented news coverage and in doing so exposed the inherent socio-political biases within the Sinhala media. Using the accepted standard that a newspaper's front page presents the most newsworthy, alluring coverage and is the publication's window, this paper examines the country's three main stream Sinhala daily newspapers the Government owned Dinamina, and the independent Divayina and Lankadeepa.

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**B**omb explosions, separatist violence and carnage are not new phenomena in war-ravaged Sri Lanka. But a terrorist attack on the proverbial heart of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, on eve of the country's fiftieth independence celebration was a strike like no other.

The timing, target and fallout from the bombing of the Dalada Maligawa - the country's most venerated Buddhist shrine - affected Sinhalese Buddhist sensibilities to such a degree that it resulted in unprecedented news coverage – greater even than bomb attacks with a much higher human or economic toll.

Within a matter of hours of the explosion, the Sri Lankan Government proscribed the LTTE without parliamentary debate or official documentation - providing fodder for a predictable tussle between the government and the main opposition party. Two days after the blast in Kandy, Deputy Minister of Defence General Anurudha Ratwatte resigned

in what his opponents called a well-orchestrated political gambit. Amid anti-Ratwatte effigy burning, the President rejected the Deputy Minister's resignation and he was controversially reinstated.

Coinciding with the resignation drama, an Indian court passed the death sentence on elusive Tiger Leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran and 25 other Tigers, in connection with the 1991 assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and the recently liberated Jaffna - the former stronghold of the LTTE - was readying for its first election in more than fifteen years.

This paper analyses the front-page news content of the three mainstream Sinhala daily newspapers in the week following the Maligawa attack – the government owned Dinamina and the privately owned Divayina and Lankadeepa. The paper discusses the political machinations, cultural nuances and editorial leanings inherent in the coverage of what was arguably one of the most eventful weeks in contemporary Sri Lankan history.

The paper outlines the political background of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict and highlights the politico-media stronghold maintained by a handful of Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie.

### **The birth of a nation and seeds of Tamil discontent**

At the turn of the nineteenth century, parts of Sri Lanka – Ceylon, as the British knew it – had been in the hands of colonial rulers for more than four centuries. Its last kingdom in the Kandyan citadel had fallen eighty years before in 1815. With calls for independence echoing in neighbouring India, Ceylon's English-educated elite was edging to take control of the country's governance. From its British colonial ruler's point of view Ceylon was a model colony, and its national leaders - unlike their Indian counterparts – were willing to negotiate independence rather than fight for it. The only Ceylonese people involved in negotiations were the Sinhala and Tamil upper-middle class political elite – the bourgeoisie – and self-made merchants, who had been admitted to the upper echelons of Sri Lankan politics to fill the vacuum in indigenous representation created by the British. As such, Sri Lanka's independence settlement in 1948 was determined along class boundaries and did not represent the needs of either the Sinhala or Tamil working class – an argument supported by draconian legislations such as the Citizenship Act of 1948

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### **The birth of a nation and seeds of Tamil discontent**

which disenfranchised thousands of Indian Tamil Estate workers who had been brought into the country by the British to work in the tea estates.

### **Post Independence and Sri Lanka Tamil Relations**

By its very nature, the class-based independence secured by the new English-speaking dominion left the door ajar for another independence struggle – this time led by the working class, and more importantly the populous Sinhala speaking working class. For this group, independence meant little more than the passing of the national leadership baton from one party of English-speaking elite to another. Sensing the worker's discontent and campaigning on a Sinhala revivalist platform, nationalist and founder of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. SWRD Bandaranaike was swept to power in 1956 – and as Prime Minister began a program of change which, by its Sinhala-oriented nature, drove a wedge in Sinhala-Tamil relations.

Bandaranaike's power settlement in the mid-1950's stressed a superior position for the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese majority, a notion validated through a skewed interpretation of democracy – namely the Sinhala speakers' numerical superiority. The movement also equated Sinhala nationalism with Sri Lanka nationalism, thus alienating the country's Tamil speaking minority (De Silva, 1998). The gulf was widened through the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956, which made Sinhala the country's only official language.

The language bill sparked post-independent Ceylon's first race riots, and in August 1956 - less than two months after the bill was enacted - the pro-Tamil Federal Party called for parity of status for Tamil as a language. More significantly they also demanded the establishment of a second tier of governance, which would provide an autonomous federal state in the Northern and Eastern provinces - essentially laying the foundation for Sri Lanka's present separatist conflict<sup>1</sup>. Despite many negotiations between the Tamil pacifist Samuel James Vellupillai Chelvanayakam's Federal Party, and successive Sri Lankan governments, the Sinhala-Tamil rift widened culminating in the Tamil's Vaddukoddai Resolution in May 1976 – which expanded on the concept of autonomy and called for a completely separate state. Following the resolution, the Federal Party which had earlier joined forces with the Tamil Congress to form the Tamil United Front (TUF) in opposition to Sinhala's nationalist Republican constitution in 1972, remerged as the more boldly titled Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

## **Moderates to Militants: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam**

The eruption in Tamil politics in May of 1976 also marked the birth of Tamil Militancy. It was at this time Velupillai Prabhakaran founded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – which was to be one of many militant Tamil Youth groups to emerge from Jaffna simultaneous to the Vaddukoddai resolution.

During the next decade the LTTE catapulted itself from a ragtag group of disenchanting Tamil youth to a formidable guerrilla force capable of taking on even India – the world's seventh largest army. It was not long before the LTTE was making headlines as the most powerful terrorist group in South Asia.

Today the LTTE is proscribed as a terrorist organisation in a number of countries including Australia (2001), Britain (2001), India (1991) and the United States (1997). A Sri Lankan ban imposed in 1998 was however lifted in September 2002 ahead of peace talks with the government. As the region's most dominant militant and terrorist group, the LTTE has been accused of assassinating heads of state in two countries - Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India and President Ranasinghe Premadasa of Sri Lanka. It is also alleged to have carried out more than 200 suicide bombings since the 1980's - the highest hit-rate for any terrorist group in the world (Schweitzer 2000).

## **The vernacular press and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie**

The press in Sri Lanka dates back to English language The Colombo Journal published by the colony's British Governor – Wilmot Horton on January 01, 1832. The Journal operated for only two years before it closed down – but by then the floodgates had opened and the newspaper industry had begun to carve a niche in the social and political consciousness of the Ceylonese.

The Sinhala language press in Sri Lanka developed at almost at the same time as The Colombo Journal, but rather than producing newspapers, began with the missionary press's periodical – *M.,sika Th%ogga* in 1832. Christian missionary publications dominated the country's limited Sinhala market until the first non-Christian publication – the literary periodical *Yatalaba* in 1854. Ten Buddhist periodicals were published between 1860 - 70 to counter aggressive Christian proselytisation. The press eventually began developing commercial news-based products in the mid 1880's, though a strong Sinhala Buddhist bias was still evident. The first Sinhala

newspaper Lak Mini Pahana – edited by Don Johannes Panditatilaka – hit the streets in 1862, and was soon followed by a raft of radical Buddhist newspapers including Anagarika Dharmapala’s Sinhala Bauddhaya (1906) and Piyadasa Sirisena’s Sinhala Jatiya (1901). While the news agenda of Sinhala newspapers have significantly changed during the last century, their parochial nature has continued, especially with respect to the current ethnic conflict.

By 1990, three Sinhala daily newspapers had gained dominance in Sri Lanka – the government-owned Dinamina, and the privately-owned Divayina and Lankadeepa.

Dinamina, first launched on February 7 1909 by veteran journalist HS Perera, was bought by media magnate D R Wijewardene’s Lakehouse newspapers in 1918. In July 1973, Dinamina, and indeed Lakehouse’s whole stable of well-circulated English and Sinhala papers, was taken over by Sirima Bandaranaike’s government under the controversial Associated Newspapers Ceylon (Special Provisions) Act.

The tightening grip of state control at that time also gave birth to two independent media groups – the Upali group in February 1981, led by D R Wijewardene’s nephew Upali; and D R Wijewardene’s son Ranjit’s new venture, the Wijeya group, a few years later.

The Upali Group of Companies entered the newspaper industry with the launch of its Sunday papers Divayina and The Island in 1981, which subsequently became daily newspapers with wide circulation. Wijeya newspapers owned by DR Wijewardene’s son and heir Ranjith Wijewardene bolstered its small stable with the purchase of the Times of Ceylon (English) and the Lankadeepa masts from the government - relaunching the Times as the Sunday Times in 1987 and the Lankadeepa under the same mast in 1991.

Lakehouse (Associated Newspapers Ceylon) remained in government hands despite a change in federal power from Sirima Bandaranaike’s coalition government to JR Jayewardene’s United National Party.

The ownership of the three major Sinhala mainstream newspapers is significant in that, it converges media control in the hands of a small group of Sri Lankan bourgeoisie – the same middle class families who were also at the helm of post-Independent Sri Lanka’s political power - the Senanayakes, Bandaranaiques, Jayewardenes, Wijewardenes and the more aristocratic Ratwattes.

The United National Party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the country's politico-media nexus.

Since independence a little over 50 years ago Sri Lanka has been ruled predominately by the United National Party (UNP) – their power broken only periodically by occasional shifts of governance to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. But more notable is the fact that irrespective of political allegiance, and with the exception of President Ranasinghe Premadasa (1988 - 1993), Dingiri Banda Wijetunge (1993 - 4) and SLFP's Vijayananda Dahanayake (1959 - March 1960) – barely nine years in total, Sri Lanka has been governed by a small handful of political families and indeed dynasties.

These dynasties include UNP Prime Ministers Don Stephen Senanayake (1948 - 52), his son Dudley Shelton Senanayake (1952 - 53; March 1960 - July 1960; 1965 - 70) and relations Sir John Lionel Kotalawela (1953 - 56) and President Junius Richard Jayewardene (1977 - 1988); and the SLFP Prime Ministers Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike (1956 - 1959), his widowed wife Sirima Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike (July 1960 - 1965; 1970 - 77), their daughter President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (1994 - to date) and her uncle (mother's brother) Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte.

The SFLP is clearly dominated by the Bandaranaike family and through marriage the Ratwattes, while the UNP is dominated by the Senanayakes, Kotalawelas, Jayewardenes and more recently the Wickremasinghes. Despite their political differences all six families are indivisibly linked through either blood or marriage. The same is true for the relationship between the country's media families – sharing not only blood and marriage connections with each other, but also with the political elite.

The proprietors of the two major independent newspaper groups Upali and Wijeya are direct descendents from the newspaper patriarch D R Wijewardene. Wijeya Newspapers is owned by D R Wijewardene's son Ranjith and his family, while the Upali group was run by D R Wijewardene's nephew Upali until his death in February 1983 - and is now operated by his widow Lakmini Ratwatte Wijewardene and her father Seevali Ratwatte.

All four independent newspaper players – Ranjith and Upali Wijewardene, and Lakmini Ratwatte and her father Seevali, are in turn related to political leaders. JR Jayewardene, and Ranjith and Upali Wijewardene are first

cousins<sup>2</sup>. Similarly Lakmini Ratwatte is related to the UNP's Jayewardene dynasty through her marriage to Upali Wijewardene, and to the SLFP's Bandaranaike dynasty through birth – in that she is the daughter of Sirima Bandaranaike's brother Seevali.<sup>3</sup>

By its very nature, the other major newspaper organisation – the State-owned Lakehouse group clearly falls under the same politico-media nexus given it was taken over by the government in 1973 and has since been controlled by respective heads of state including Sirima Bandaranaike, JR Jayewardene and Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

This bourgeoisie politico-media control is also significant from a Sinhala Nationalist point of view in light of the pivotal role these families played in Buddhist revivalism.

At the heart of this was the Wijewardene family, beginning with the mother of newspaper magnate DR Wijewardene – Helena Dep-Wijewardene. Helena, her husband Don Phillip, their seven sons and two daughters were a typical upper middle-class Buddhist family. After her husband died, Helena and son Don Walter devoted much time and money into restoring the popular Raha Maha Viharaya (temple) in Kelaniya which has been destroyed by the Portuguese invaders. It was to be the start of the family's connection to well-known Buddhist temples and organisations.

In later years, Upali Wijewardene became the Basnayake Nilame (chief patron) of the Raja Maha Viharaya (temple) in Kelaniya – a position he inherited from his father (Don Walter); and Ranjith Wijewardene and his sons are patrons of the Hunupitiya Gangarama temple in Colombo. Former President JR Jayawardene (Upali's nephew) and his brother Corbet were also heavily involved in the temple having learned Buddhist teachings as children from Upali – Corbet later became a monk.

The Bandaranaike, Jayewardene and Wijewardene families have also made significant contributions to Sinhala nationalism – the most notable being SWRD Bandaranaike's ill conceived Sinhala-only language bill in 1956, which became a landmark in the Tamil-Sinhala ethnic split. But the nationalistic streak developed well before 1956.

DR Wijewardene, though never a politician, was a key player in Sri Lanka's push for independence, primarily through his involvement with

the country's leading lobby groups and through his newspapers' reformist views. In 1913 he was elected secretary of the Ceylon National Association and a few years later the Ceylon Social Reform League (1917) whose purpose was to promote the case for responsible self-governance. Both groups were partners to the National Congress (established in 1919), which agitated for change through constitutional reform. By the mid 1920s DR had become a quasi-consultant to Sir Geoffrey Butler – one of four men tasked with reviewing Ceylon's constitutional development who eventually recommended adult suffrage and an alternative system of government.

In the midst of this DR Wijewardene's eldest brother businessman Don Phillip Alexander was arrested and charged for inciting civil unrest following Muslim- Buddhist clashes in Kandy. Don Phillip was part of the Buddhist Temperance movement, which by World War I had become increasingly anti-colonial and was viewed with suspicion by the British.

The Sinhala-Buddhist bent of these prominent families has continued from those early post-colonial days to more contemporary times with all three major press groups – Lakehouse, Wijeya and Upali taking a distinctly parochial view of the ongoing ethnic conflict in the north.

### **The Dalada Maligawa: the epicentre of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism**

Literally meaning the palace of the tooth relic – the Dalada Maligawa temple is said to hold the tooth of Buddha and as such, is Sri Lankan Buddhists' most sacred national site. The relic has been considered an object of great significance since it was first brought to Sri Lanka in the fourth century. Over the centuries the relic moved south as the ancient kingdoms migrated, until Vimaladharmasuriya I (1592-1603) finally placed in its current shrine at Senkadagala in the Kandyan citadel. Since the fourth century the relic has also been considered the as both the possession and responsibility of the kingdom's rightful ruler and as such the person in possession of the relic is traditionally considered heir to the Sri Lankan throne. The traditions of the temple have remained unchanged for centuries and the temple itself is one of the few 'living' Sri Lanka monuments with a cultural relevance that has endured despite the cultural colonisation of European invaders.

### **An Attack at Dawn**

Shortly after dawn, at 6.10am on January 25, 1998 – just ten days before

the country was to mark its 50 year of Independence with a gala ceremony in the Kandy, a truck loaded with explosives ploughed through a security barricade outside the Dalada Maligawa and detonated.

Seventeen people died in the blast, while 23 others including a Buddhist monk and a police officer were injured. Insofar as Sri Lankan bombings go, the human toll was at the lower end of the scale. It was the choice of target and the possible destruction of the sacred tooth relic which made this particular bombing extraordinary.

The three suicide bombers on board the lorry bomb were widely believed to be members of the Liberations Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). They reached the temple after driving the truck along nearby Raja Road firing at roadblocks. When the vehicle finally exploded – it was close enough to the sacred shrine to destroy most of the front entrance and decimate murals, plasterwork and carvings more than four centuries old. The saving grace, from the Sinhalese Buddhist perspective, was that the tooth relic and the chamber that houses it remained untouched.

The Octagon – the temple’s signature frontage sustained serious damage to its walls and roofing while the Mahawahalkada or Grand Entrance, which took the main impact of the blast, was destroyed almost beyond repair. Ancient statues, which graced the front foyer of the main building, were cracked and chipped, while a pair of elephant reliefs – deemed to be Kandyan masterpieces - were completely lost.

But the Maligawa complex is not only a Buddhist site – the area also houses three shrines or Devales dedicated to the Hindu gods Vishnu and Natha and the Goddess Pattini. The oldest of these, the Natha Devale, directly faces the Dalada Maligawa. It is the oldest building in the ancient capital dating back to the 14th century and reportedly built by King Vikramabahu III. (<http://members.shaw.ca/sanuja/dalada.html>). In the January 1998 blast the Devale’s outer wall was cracked with some parts blown away.

The Maligawa is also a neighbour to the one of the oldest in-use Christian churches in the country, Kandy’s St Paul’s Church – an Anglican church built during Ceylon’s British occupation. Some of the church’s stained glass windows were broken during the attack.

### **Front page news: from the nationalist impact to political face saving**

There is little doubt that an attack of this magnitude on such an historic

and sacred site, coupled with the death of worshippers, the temple's association with national identity and the blast's proximity to a landmark national celebration – was indeed a worthy front page news story for Sinhalese mainstream media, and given that all three major English newspapers are run by Sinhalese Buddhists, a nationalistic pro-Buddhist coverage is perhaps to be expected.

On January 26, the day after the attack, all three newspapers dedicated their front pages to stories relating to the temple bombing. The coverage included, half to three-quarter page photographs of the damage – which was very uncharacteristic of the generally text-heavy *Divayina* and *Lankadeepa* that are known to position more than a dozen stories on their front page at once. The *Lankadeepa* carried a single front-page story allocating most of its page to a photograph, while the *Dinamina* and the *Divayina* followed similar patterns only breaking away to print a story about the government's determination to hold the Independence Day celebrations in Kandy as planned

The Government owned *Dinamina* lead with a story headlined *Tigers explode bombs in front of the Maligawa* – followed by a strap line underneath which read – *No damage to the sacred tooth relic or its chamber.*

*Lankadeepa* printed a similar headline which read *Tiger lorry explodes at the entrance, Octagon and entrance heavily damaged*, preceded by a reverse strap-line which read *Sacred tooth relic unharmed: no damage to the inner chamber*

The *Divayina* also lead with a banner headline reading: † *Massive damage to Dalada Maligawa and stretching the full way across the front page under a half-page photograph.* The headline was followed by a thin strap-line – *No damage to the inner chamber containing the sacred relic.* †

While the headlines themselves are not greatly significant, it is important to note that all three papers made special reference to the relic's safety. † It would be fair to assume that had the relic been destroyed, Sinhala-Buddhist anger would have been almost impossible to contain and, considering the country's record, could easily have led to anti-Tamil riots across the country. The newspapers' swift assurances therefore may be more than simply a matter of reporting the issue of greatest public interest, but also an exercise in responsible reportage.

The continued assurance however may also be interpreted as a subtle

defiance, a reminder to the Tigers that their attack had fundamentally failed; a position supported in later media reports such as the news article in the *Dinamina* nearly a week later on January 31, headed Praba (Tiger leader Vellupilai Prabaharan) is not satisfied with the Maligawa attack. This later story claims that according to a special investigation team probing the Maligawa bombing, military sources monitoring LTTE radio communications concluded that the Tiger leader was not satisfied with the magnitude of the Maligawa blast.

The newspapers' nationalistic streak is also evident in the fact that there was virtually no attempt in the whole six days of coverage to seek LTTE comment on the attack.

The media readily accepted the government defence department's supposition of LTTE guilt in and reasons for the blast, and made no apparent move to seek Tiger comment on either the bombing or the organisation's subsequent ban. It is important to note here that while the LTTE media maintains a low profile in Sri Lanka, they are reachable through normal journalistic contact bases and at that time had an operational press secretariat in Katherine Road, London. The LTTE ban, which included contacting the rebels, was not in place until four days after the attack.

The dailies' seemingly united approach to this point begins to diverge significantly once the fallout from the blast begins to land. The future of the Independence Day celebrations, the cost and expected speed of the repair work, the investigation and the question of who is responsible for the attack, begin to reveal each of individual newspapers' editorial bent.

### **The week that followed**

For the state-owned *Dinamina*, the week's coverage was not surprisingly pro-government. While it did cover the attack, reassure citizen's of the relic safety and follow the story over the ensuing days, by the very day after the attack it began also to take on a "business as usual" approach, illustrating the front page not with a Maligawa image – but a dateless and disconnected soft-news photo of President Chandrika Kumaratunga "showing maternal love despite her busy schedule". Key stories such as Ratwatte's resignation were completely overlooked in favour of positive pro-government news.

The independent *Lankadeepa* opted for a staunchly nationalistic approach but with an overall pro-UNP stance. It was the only one of the three

newspapers examined, which gave opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe coverage, and it did so prominently and often. This may be explained through one of two reasons. Either it was economically prudent to provide the public with an opposition to the state-owned media for such an emotive event, or it could be a matter of family allegiance – namely that Mr Wickremasinghe is the nephew of Lankadeepa proprietor Ranjith Wijewardene.

Divayaina by tradition is anti-government but is also careful not to promote a pro-UNP stance. During the week following the Maligawa blast, Divayaina was critical of the government but gave very little opportunity for the UNP to secure any mileage from the attack. While this may give Divayaina a sense of balance, albeit by default, Divayaina's editorial content does have a subtle bias of a different nature - one favouring the socio-political heritage of its owner Seevali Ratwatte. The Ratwattes are parochial Kandyan aristocrats, holding significant power in class-driven Sri Lanka, which retains cultural traditions such as caste consciousness particularly in regard to arranged marriages.

### **Dinamina**

As a state-owned paper, Dinamina's pro-government coverage is not surprising, but it is perhaps the blatant nature of the favourable press which is most interesting.

While other newspapers and services devoted most of their coverage in the first days after the attack to analysis of what happened and who was to blame, Dinamina wasted little time deflecting blame away from the government and ensuring coverage was both reassuring and suggestive of a government firmly in control.

The clearest example of the “business as usual” line appears in the first three day's coverage. On the second day after the attack the front page is illustrated with a photograph of President Kumaratunga, not inspecting the blast site or visiting hospitals like leaders of the past, but in a distinctly motherly pose holding a child at a non-connected event - an almost literal transposition of a “Mother Lanka” notion.

The absence of a timely photo is particularly noticeable when according to British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Associated Press coverage; the president toured the blast site and even spoke with distraught monks on the afternoon of the attack. Instead the “Mother Lanka”

photograph is the one and only time in a week's front-page coverage the president appears in either pictures or words - not a single quote or comment is attributed to her in six days of news. This Mother Lanka approach, reassuring and unruffled, is extended further in the next day's front lead story headlined; Land at concessionary rates to build houses, which moves the focus well away from the temple attack to the positive news of cheaper house blocks, suggesting a government unmoved by attempts to distract and unseat them. This defiant approach permeates the whole week's news. Even those stories which do gravitate around the attack, such as the offering of 10,000 rupees for victims, counter attacks on LTTE targets and rebel arrests, support the Mother Lanka/government-protector notion, instilling a sense of righteous satisfaction.

Defiance against the attackers is a key part of the "protector" strategy. Stories claiming the Independence Day celebrations will forge on unhindered are backed with those claiming the temple restoration will be swift and simple, and smaller ones proclaiming that democratic elections in the former Tiger-stronghold of Jaffna will be the start of peace and of the end of public support for terrorism.

There is even a further stab at the LTTE with a small story headlined Students come from Jaffna with the Independence Student's Declaration. Jaffna's involvement in the Independence Celebrations is tokenism at best - Jaffna historically having very little at all to do with the 1948 Independence movement. The student visit, particularly in the context of sending messages to the Tigers, is almost a symbol of Jaffna returning to the national fold - severing ties with the rebels and involving Tamil children in an affair that essentially had a distinctly Sinhalese tone.

There is also a concerted effort to downplay the Tiger's apparent victory with stories like Praba not satisfied with Maligawa attack designed to give readers an almost smug sense of satisfaction, in that despite the destruction wrought by the LTTE blast - the cadre essentially failed their leader by failing to destroy the sacred relic.

As a vehicle for state propaganda the Dinamina was also tasked with delivering coverage that presented the strength and efficiency of the ruling authorities. In an attack of this nature, it would not have been enough for government authorities simply to be defiant; they must also take action against the perpetrators and their plans.

The Dinamina over all six days ensured this government action was given

front-page prominence. Stories headlined; Investigations being held, Security also for Kalutara temple, Tight Security in Kandy, Kandy Security will not be loosened and Two Targets attacked by air, killing 100 Tigers were written as testament to the government's response to the attack, reassuring the public that its leaders were actively seeking to prevent further attacks and punish those responsible for the temple bombing.

The story that claims 100 Tigers killed, is a particularly interesting one in that it was not repeated in any other non-state paper. Despite dynastic or political allegiances - the death of 100 mutual enemies would normally have been significant news in any pro-Sinhala paper and its absence raises questions of its authenticity. Instead both Lankadeepa and Divayina claimed Tiger's actually attacked two army camps - a story that despite its broader coverage failed to make it to the front of the Dinamina.

The other area where the government must be seen to be particularly responsive is in the restoration of the temple itself, given the site's religious, political and cultural significance. The newspaper, in keeping with its mandate, ensured the temple's welfare was addressed from the outset with a story on the very first day after the attack, essentially claiming that restoration work would begin that same afternoon. It was followed the next day with a story headlined Two Million from the President's fund for the Maligawa restoration committee to speed up the work and another on the third day with guarantees there was enough manpower and timber to support quick restoration. But as other newspapers began to question the prudence of a rushed repair job on such a venerated site, the Dinamina reported that the government had sought professional advice and would "do the job properly" with the full consent of the temple's custodians and chief monks.

For its part as a state-owned publication, the Dinamina initially resists promoting its pro-government stance through anti-opposition coverage. It is not until the end of the week that it begins to criticise the opposition UNP – a move which followed three days of attack from the non-government media.

In respect to the opposition outcry over General Anuddha Ratwattes's resignation and subsequent reinstatement, Dinamina completely omits any reference to the President's involvement in the political interplay and ensuing controversy, and the day after the minister's resignation leads

with a story headlined; The monks and the people are with you; (We'll) turn out backs on the opposition's greed for power - the entire country implores Ratwatte to reaccept Deputy Ministership - marches and demonstrations all over the country. However the story fails to note that the President herself had already rejected Ratwatte's resignation<sup>4</sup> and reinstated him - fuelling a controversy in non-government media over the legality of his re-employment.

In fact, considering Dinamina is essentially under the president's control, her conspicuous absence from the front pages of the state-owned paper, despite her roles as president Defence Minister and Commander-in-chief of the military, is an interesting strategy. It can be argued that by removing her from front-page view and distancing her from the debate over security lapses, blame and retaliation – attacks aimed directly at her are minimised. Most of the criticism in the non-government papers focus on Deputy Defence minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte or the government as a unit – personal attacks are rare. There are no quotes or comments emblazoned on the front page to draw counter comment and no pictures to analyse (bar the aforementioned un-related image).

Adding to this, Dinamina counters criticism of the government with a scathing set of stories on day six. The first, headlined; If Ranil were asked about proscribing the LTTE he would have wanted three months to reply - (media minister) Mangala Samaraweera, portrays the UNP as indecisive and lacking real leadership, and highlights UNP plans to give ethnic minorities a greater say in the country's governance, which is a highly unpopular stance given the recent attack. A second story headlined; Campaign launched to bring Cooray into the UNP leadership, supports the notion of poor leadership, by reporting that a prominent monk has called on former minister Sirisena Cooray - once right hand man to Sri Lanka's most controversial president the 'low-caste' Ranasinghe Premadasa - to oust Ranil and "cleanse the germs" which have invaded the party. Sitting alongside these two stories is a soft-news article - the placement of which can hardly be described as coincidental - about soldiers rescuing elephants stuck in mud. The elephant just happens to be the official political symbol of the UNP.

## **Lankadeepa**

In direct contrast to Dinamina, Lankadeepa is a government critic. It's coverage in the six days following the Maligawa blast does not only

adopt a pro-UNP tone but also gives significant column space to uncontested comment from the principal religious players in Kandy at the time of the blast – the Asgiriya and Malwatte Mahanayakes (chief Buddhist monks) and the Maligawa temple’s Diyawardena Nilame (chief patron). It can be argued that the tendency towards both a pro-UNP and Buddhist stance stems, at least in part, from the political, family and cultural background of Lankadeepa’s proprietor - Ranjith Wijewardena. Mr Wijewardene is chief patron of the Gangarama Buddhist temple and is uncle to UNP opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe. His newspaper’s coverage essentially questions the government’s ability to protect its people, and places the blame for the attack firmly at the feet of the President and her deputy defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte.

The day after the attack (day one) Lankadeepa, like its counterparts, led with reasonably straightforward accounts of the attack, but by day two its anti-government agenda was obvious.

The main story headlined; A contractor working in the Maligawa work site is missing since the explosion, seems innocuous, but coupled with other stories on the page one line in particular stands out. The story makes particular note of the fact that the suspect contractor had been “given the (Maligawa) contract by a government ministry”.

This story is followed by an unmistakably critical story headlined The truth must be told, irrespective of who it offends – the Maligawa bombing is something the government asked for. In this article the Malwatte Mahanayake makes the first of his attacks on the country’s administration, telling UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe that it was the government’s decision to hold Independence jubilee celebrations in Kandy which made the Maligawa a target. In a smaller down page story the Malwatte again targets government decision making and judgement in a story headed Malwatte Mahanayake blames ministers and parliamentarians after the bombing, claiming they supplied inadequate security for the temple. Neither story makes any attempt at all to present balanced reportage, indeed the only suggestion of government or defence force credibility is in small stories detailing the progress of investigations, which report the capture of a Tiger suspect and the subsequent identification of two of the temple bombers.

On day three the Diyawardena Nilame enters the debate, asserting his authority as the temple’s chief custodian. In a story headlined: Systematic

restoration: work will not be hurried to please anyone - Diyawardena Nilame, the patron defiantly rejects the government 's knee-jerk suggestion that the temple would be restored quickly. The 'anyone' of his comments is arguably directed at point-scoring politicians and the president. Just who has jurisdiction, over the temple, the president or the Diyawardena Nilame, has never been tested before, but it is clear the patron considers himself in a safe position as chief authority - a sense of security perhaps bolstered by history. Former president JR Jayawardena once tried but failed to control the appointment of the Nilames of his time. The position of Diyawardena Nilame traditionally belongs to aristocrats with unbroken lineage to chieftains of the last Kandyan kingdom. It is a position enshrined in legislature and almost impossible for a middle-class bourgeoisie politician to overthrow without being seen to undermine the country's cultural, historical and political foundations.

In the six days of front page Maligawa coverage Kandy's religious authorities are the most frequently sourced of all Lankadeepa contacts. No less than seven stories revolve around these three personalities all with direct quotes, a further three articles quote councils or groups they are part of. Most of these stories are critical towards the ruling party with little or no effort to balance their attacks with counter-comment from the SLFP leadership.

On January 29 the Asgiriya prelate blames sections of security forces for the attack while the Malwatte Mahanayake makes note of saying he'd already refused to participate in the Independence celebrations because of security concerns. The Malwatte Mahanayake goes further calling for the temple to be reopened so people can see the damage inflicted by the terrorists and can worship the relic. The monks' nationalistic sentiments seem to gain momentum at this stage and there is no editorial effort to question the prudence of his call. The push to reopen what is essentially not only a crime scene, but a structurally unsafe area and a fragile one in terms of historic preservation, arguably has more to do with fuelling religio-nationalist sentiment than a mere exercise in curiosity and a need to pray.

The reopening article is followed the next day by one headlined: Hoist white flags to mourn- Malwatte Mahanayake, a story littered with emotive language as the Malwatte calls on all Sri Lankan Buddhists to declare January 31 a day of mourning and condemnation – not for the 20 people killed in the blast nor the sacred relic, which by all accounts remained undamaged, but for the fact the Tigers dared desecrate a holy monument.

The story is repeated in Divayina and followed through to the 31<sup>st</sup> by both non-government papers but the Lankadeepa's coverage was clearly designed to encourage a deep sense of loss and drama.

By this stage the Diyawardene Nilame has also launched a fundraising campaign for the Temple's restoration - a campaign promoted at no cost, and on the front page of the Lankadeepa over the next week. A public fundraising campaign itself is perhaps to be expected - but this particular campaign is in direct competition to one launched the same day by President Kumaratunga. In the following day's non-government Divayina newspaper the Nilame lashes out at the president's campaign claiming it is fraudulently named because she plans to use the donations, not specifically for the temple, but for the whole precinct including the damaged Hindu and Christian churches. Clearly from the Nilame's perspective a "Maligawa" restoration fund should be for the temple only, which is exactly the type of fund he is promoting and receiving free advertising for in Lankadeepa. Lankadeepa makes no mention of funds or collections for other damaged shrines or churches, nor does it question how those ancient buildings will be restored or financed. Its key concern is that of the Buddhist heritage.

The same can be said of Lankadeepa's coverage in general. During the week's front pages, there is a conspicuous absence of any other religious representation. Disconnected stories about cannabis arrests (January 30) rice stockpiling and an unlicensed bus driver (January 29) are given front page positioning ahead of any stories of damage to nearby Hindu and Christian churches or condemnation from other religious leaders.

In addition to adopting a pro-Buddhist perspective, Lankadeepa is a distinctly anti-government/pro-UNP vehicle - an inclination born of the family ties between Ranjith Wijewardena and his nephew Ranil Wickremasinghe.

It begins subtly on January 27 crediting all bomb-investigation work as being spearheaded by police authorities and not, as the state-owned Dinamina reported, by Deputy Defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte. It is also at this time that the conspiracy theory surrounding the mystery government contractor takes root, an idea furthered a few days later when the Lankadeepa asks; (Were the) steel barricades removed according to a Tiger plan? This story questions why the contractor, who was attached to the Ministry of Cultural affairs, removed the temple-funded protective

barricade from around the Maligawa just one month prior to the attack, despite pleas from the Diyawardene Nilame for them to remain.

On January 31 the story is revisited this time from the angle of the Kandy police superintendent, questioning why the government has not yet come forward to investigate the barricade's removal. Interestingly Lankadeepa neglects to question what investigations the police have conducted on the matter so far and why, when the rest of the bomb blast investigation is under the purview of police, this particular element should be any different.

Lankadeepa's attack on what it sees as government ineptitude is extended to its coverage of post-bombing security measures. While Dinamina presents an national atmosphere of tight security and thorough searches as proof of government efficiency and strength, Lankadeepa adopts an approach that suggests inconvenience, with a story headlined: Public movement hindered because of Kandy road closure. There is also arguably an insinuation also that despite the security measures, the government remains unable to protect its people, with stories headlined Kelaniya bridge also a Tiger target and Five bombs intended for Batti (Batticaloa), generating a sense of fear – particularly as Kelaniya and Batticaloa are in very different parts of the country.

Lankadeepa's questioning of government, efficiency, judgement and even suggestions of impropriety can be seen to be part of a wider anti-government strategy. Perhaps one of the most overt strategies is in the coverage of General Ratwatte's resignation and reinstatement. It is the only newspaper of the three Sinhala dailies which makes the UNP's protest rally, calling for the government and the minister's own resignation, front-page news. It allocates space for the UNP to claim the government is unfit to rule because they failed to protect the temple. Both Dinamina and Divayina only address the resignation call the following day and interestingly Divayina, which is owned by Ratwatte's brother, targets the chief of police for resignation instead of the minister.

The resignation saga gains momentum on day four, Lankadeepa leading with a story saying the President has refused her General's resignation and that he resigned because he admitted he could not protect the relic. In this article the editorial strikes an interesting balance of highlighting the minister's self-confessed failure to protect the temple while also being careful not to completely ignore the General's previous military exploits that are widely viewed by parochial Sinhalese as great victories.

Irrespective of the numerous political and social nuances associated with the deputy minister's relationship with media policy makers in some quarters - this news-reports also provide a glimpse of the relatively comfortable niche, circumstances have carved for the minister with respect to mainstream Sinhala media.

vWhile not a supporter of Ratwatte's political allegiance, Lankadeepa can hardly be seen to be dismissive of someone who is essentially a national hero for the bulk of its readers. It is in Ratwatte's supposed reasoning for his resignation that the Lankadeepa's partiality is revealed - it highlights the fact the Ratwatte himself admits to failing in his duty, it does not make the claim itself. By contrast in the Divayina's version of events, Ratwatte claims he resigned because he was pained by the destruction of a temple he grew up with as a child, making no mention of his own failure at all. In later Lankadeepa stories the Deputy's resignation and reinstatement is openly debated, with the largest slice of coverage taking an anti-Ratwatte pitch on the legality of his reinstatement. Even a mid-sized story recounting a pro-Ratwatte demonstration is countered by a story of the same side positioned along side it headlined; Anuruddha's resignation is like a soap opera - Ranil Wickremasinghe.

## **Divayina**

Divayina in terms of political allegiances presents as the most balanced of the three Sinhala dailies. In the week's front-page coverage, the nationalistic sentiment apparent in its counterparts is also key feature, complete with condemnation from the Buddhist leadership.

But perhaps the most interesting bias in Divayina is one that veers away from political and religious affiliations but is rooted firmly in family, caste and class. Of the three papers, Divayina has a distinctly pro-Kandy and pro-aristocrat bent. Kandy police are editorialised as hard working and competent compared with their Colombo counterparts, and even General Ratwatte's resignation drama is downplayed and softened. It is critical to remember at this point that unlike opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe or the Lankadeepa proprietor Ranjith Wijewardene, Divayina owner Seevali Ratwatte is directly from Kandyan aristocratic stock. Although the Ratwattes, Wijewardenas and Wickremasinghes are all inter-related within three generations, the Ratwatte's are the only ones directly linked to Kandyan aristocracy of old. Even President Chandrika Kumaratunga who's mother bore the Ratwatte name before marrying SWRD Bandaranaike is not considered aristocratic - both because her

Ratwatte heritage is maternal but also because she was widely rejected by her family when she married the popular but low-caste Vijaya Kumaratunga against her family's wishes.

In the days following the blast all three Sinhala dailies necessarily make the Maligawa's restoration a front-page priority. Divayina's coverage is equally as comprehensive as its counterparts, making similar calls for the Temple restoration to be done properly though stories as early as January 27 headlined; Restore the Maligawa archeologically and No Hurry. It could be argued that Divayina's concern for the Maligawa's historical preservation may stem from the temple's centrality to Kandyan life and aristocracy, but it is more likely the coverage was essentially newsworthy from a broader Sinhalese Buddhist perspective.

The tendency towards pro-Kandyan editorial coverage is perhaps most notable in the reportage of General Anuruddha Ratwatte's resignation and reinstatement, and coverage of the progress of police investigations.

From the very outset Divayina essentially 'clears' Kandy police and Ratwatte of any wrongdoing or failure – pointing the finger of blame instead to authorities in Colombo. On the day after the attack a story headlined; Government didn't fulfil their duty and a pointer headline reading Asking the Government to resign: Demonstrations on Kandy Road target the government broadly but steer clear of directly blaming the general or local officers.

By January 28 when the Lankadeepa is calling for the General's resignation, Divayina targets instead the Colombo-based Inspector General of Police (IGP).

The Divayina's almost overt attempt to shift the blame for the minister to one of his subordinates – the IGP – could be interpreted as a possible example of family politics superseding party politics in Sri Lanka's complex and interrelated political nexus. The newspaper is co-owned and managed by the deputy minister's brother Seewali Ratwatte.

There is little doubt the Divayina's front page was particularly stacked against IGP Rajaguru, when taken in context with its two deck reverse headline stretching fully across the page reading, "Though 50 police officers were requested for Maligawa protection, but Colombo officials did not respond – police chiefs in Kandy say". There is a clear, and uncontested suggestion that the Kandy police had correctly analysed the risk to the temple from attack, but that Colombo had failed to respond.

In a similar manner, while the government and defence forces are under fire, Ratwatte survives the coverage relatively unscathed.

The Divayina of January 30 published three stories on the Ratwatte resignation, the first containing a photograph of pro-Ratwatte demonstrations in Colombo. In an article headlined “Street marches requesting the General not to resign” the paper said two demonstrations had been staged in Kandy and Colombo urging the minister to reconsider his decision. A second, and apparently neutral story headlined “According to the Constitution: ministers has resigned whether President accepts or not” – Barrister Irriagolla. The paper said that leading lawyer Gamini Irriagolla had said the ministers resignation was valid according to section 47 of the constitution irrespective of the President’s decision. However, rather uncharacteristically, the paper also published an anti-Ratwatte story headlined “Let us see if Anuruddha sticks to his decision” – Mervyn De Silva. The article quoting Mahajana Eksath Peramuna Party (MEP) Central Committee member Mervyn De Silva accuses the government of making a mockery of democracy.

The Divayina’s position on this day’s front-page seems to be a deviation from the pro-Ratwatte stance taken by the paper earlier in the week, but the story packaging reveals it is not a particularly serious attack. Unlike the Lankadeepa, which published both a pro-Ratwatte and anti-Ratwatte story boxed together, the Divayina strategically placed its three stories with the pro-Ratwatte article at the top-right hand corner of the page as a photo-lead, while publishing the anti-Ratwatte article at the bottom of the page quoting a relatively insignificant politician in the greater UNP/SLFP power challenge.

The Divayina’s position becomes clearer in its article the next day (January 31) titled “Pressurise (the govt) into offering (Ratwatte) the position of overall commander of the forces”. The story quotes Harischandra Wijetunga, leader of the nationalist Sinhalayae Mahasammatha Bhumi-puthra Party appealing the Buddhist clergy and the public to call for a promotion for deputy minister Ratwatte to the position of Overall Commander in Chief of the Armed forces – a position currently held by the Executive President herself under the constitution. In strongly emotive language Mr Wijetunga says most people including clergy believe there is no-one else who can save the country other than Deputy Minister Ratwatte, and since the Minister does not even have the power to approve protection for the sacred Tooth Relic to a level par with that of a

government minister, it was clear he required more power.

With the ability to protect the relic out of Ratwatte's hands - the proverbial buck stops with the president and chief of the armed forces Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Strikingly, the latitude afforded Seevali Ratwatte's brother is not handed down to his niece.

The story on January 27 headlined; Only those who are fit to protect the tooth relic are a suitable king – Malwatte Mahanayake; is followed by a statement from the Rambukwelle Vipasse, the most venerable Mahanayake of the Malwatte Buddhist order (co-custodian of the relic), who argues that according to ancient tradition “only pious and intelligent men who are capable of protecting the tooth relic are fit to rule the country”. The prelate's comment may be interpreted as evidence of pre-colonial monarchical sentiments that remain strong or have been revived in post-colonial Sri Lanka, but his comment about ‘pious men’ – also begs the question as to how the Buddhist temple views the country's first female Executive President. The positioning of the story on the front page is hardly a decision that can be seen to be supportive of Kumaratunga. Kumaratunga has long been viewed as an outsider by many members on her mother's side of the family, largely because of her low-caste marriage.

For the Ratwattes, caste and kin are an integral part of their proud heritage, so perhaps it is not surprising given their penchant for aristocracy that Divayina was also the only newspaper to give front-page coverage to the pending visit of British royal Prince Charles. Prince Charles, who was to be a guest of honour at the February 4 Independence Day ceremony, made Divayina's front page on two occasions, complete with small headlines – despite barely rating a mention at all, even in related stories, in other papers.

There is one other couplet of stories with a distinctly pro-Kandy perspective; the first is on January 26 headlined Demonstrations on Kandy Road - editorialised as a protest of Kandyan outrage over the government's failure to protect the temple and relic. It is an event that according to other news sources including Lankadeepa, results in minor rioting and subsequently 50 arrests for violence. Following the story the next day however Divayina makes no mention of the arrests, but criticises pro-Tamil websites for showing “incorrect pictures” of the riots painting

Kandyans in a poor light. Divayina does not go so far as to deny the riot, but virtually claims they were justified given the attack on the temple - which the editorial argues was not “detailed” enough in the internet story.

## **Other news of the Week**

### **LTTE Ban**

After more than 19 years of civil war and 200 suicide bombs it was the attack on the Maligawa which finally saw the LTTE banned in Sri Lanka.

When the move came the January 28 edition of the state owned Dinamina published a story simply headlined “LTTE Banned”, which said the government had decided the previous night to proscribe the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – making it a completely illegal organisation, both locally and internationally Surprisingly the traditionally nationalist and by their very nature anti-LTTE, Lankadeepa and Divayina paid little or no attention to the ban they had campaigned for or many years – instead launching a debate over the validity of the ban.

The pro-UNP Lankadeepa broke the news with its article headlined (The Government) broke the bilateral agreement by proscribing the LTTE on their own accord, with a black reverse sub-head under it reading The UNP was not informed according to the agreement – Ranil accuses. The story quotes opposition UNP leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, who argues that the government’s decision to proscribe the LTTE without consulting or informing the UNP, was a violation of the accord signed by him and the President in April 1997, through British intervention. The Divayina by contrast completely missed the story on the day, but followed up with an article on January 29 headlined UNP appoints committee to examine the truth behind the LTTE proscription. It claimed the UNP working committee had appointed a group to look into the governments’ “undocumented” banning of the LTTE.

After a two-day silence, the government owned Dinamina entered into the debate with its story headlined If Ranil was asked about proscribing the LTTE he would have wanted three months to reply – Mangala Samaraweera (Cabinet media spokesman) – a pointed reference to the three months it had taken for the UNP to respond to the government’s Devolution Package Proposals.

**Jaffna election:**

Although the first democratic election in 15 years in the former Tiger stronghold would have, at any other time, been an issue of major front-page news value, it became lost in the Sinhalese press under almost a weeks worth of comment, reaction, drama and political debate surrounding the Temple bombing - an emotive issue seriously effecting the Sinhalese Buddhist majority.

Preoccupied with damage control the state media Dinamina failed to preview Jaffna's historic election on the day before the polls, leaving that task to the non-state Divayina and Lankadeepa. The Lankadeepa published a two paragraph story on January 28 simply headlined Jaffna Elections tomorrow. The story says 16 provincial bodies in the Jaffna district and the Pachchillaipalli Pradeshiya Sabha in Kilinochchi are set to poll at 422 booths to elect 234 representatives. The Divayina, in line with its pro-Kandyan, religio-nationalistic and aristocratic bent however, published a negative story headlined Election fever declines – which claim Tamil political parties have said the enthusiasm for the Jaffna Provincial council election has died down.

Despite the initial oversight, the state owned Dinamina reserved its picture lead for the Jaffna election on January 29, publishing a positive story headlined Jaffna's small elections today. The article quoted elections commissioner Dayananda De Silva who says all preparations have been finalised and more than 1500 officials have been posted for election duty in the Jaffna and Killinochchi Districts and the Pachchalai Pallai Provincial council. Presenting yet another positive angle, the Dinamina claimed the election was off to a smooth start in the next day's papers, with headlines reading Jaffna's small election begins peacefully – greatest interest show on the island of Kytes. The story claims no violent incidents were reported as of 1pm on the January 29 and more than 10% of people had polled in the first hour despite "slight" delays due to security and transport problems. The return of democracy to the Jaffna peninsular is very much an SLFP government victory - proof of their successful defeat of the Tigers in the purported Tiger homeland. With this in mind it is perhaps not surprising the coverage was overwhelmingly encouraging. In contrast the privately owned Lankadeepa claimed less enthusiasm in its story headlined Jaffna Elections Peaceful: 10 percent vote in three hours. The paper claimed 10% of people had cast their votes by noon though there was a lack of enthusiasm in certain places. The Divayina

also continued with negative reportage, which had become characteristic of its election coverage. The Divayina article headlined Jaffna Elections lukewarm the paper said the election received only a passing interest and no significant polling was recorded by midday.

### **Rajiv Gandhi assassination:**

India and more particularly the Gandhi family have long been accused of supporting the LTTE in the early stages of the Sri Lankan conflict, with the Tigers even using India as a place of refuge. However India's attempts to control the rebels soured the India-LTTE relationship culminating in Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 assassination by the LTTE's first female suicide bomber Dhanu. Despite the killing, the LTTE still enjoyed the favour and refuge of the Indian State of Tamil Nadu - a province which shared the LTTE's separatist ambitions in relation to India and the Indian Central Government. But when on January 28, an Indian court handed down the death penalty for Vellupilai Prabhakaran and 25 other LTTEs charged with murdering Rajiv Gandhi, that avenue of free association with Tamil Nadu was closed. The conviction also had serious ramifications for Prabhakaran in terms of his movement between countries and his international reception.

But much like the LTTE ban, the Gandhi assassination verdict received little attention from the Sinhala press. The state owned Dinamina broke the news with a story headlined 26 Tigers found guilty in Rajiv Gandhi case - 16 are Sri Lankan Tamils. The story was continued the following day in an article headed Death penalty to all 26 Tigers guilty of Rajiv killing. The second story is based on an analysis of Indian newspaper editorials, which were "satisfied" with the guilty verdict, but critical of the fact it took seven years to be reached. Both stories however failed to analyse or even comment on the judgement's impact on Sri Lankan politics.

Both privately owned dailies also followed the state newspaper pattern and published straight news stories as opposed to analysis. The Lankadeepa story headlined 26 LTTE's found guilty of Rajiv Assassination - Prabhakaran is one of them, 16 are Sri Lankans, and the Divayina story headlined Tigers should take responsibility for Rajiv assassination did not capitalise on a story which ultimately is about their nearest neighbour issuing the death penalty for Sri Lanka's "public enemy number one". This is not such a surprising omission however, given that

for most parochial Sinhalese, Prabakharan facing a death penalty is hardly a dramatic concept. For most there is no other way Prabakharan would or should be brought to justice. The Indian ruling is largely academic.

## **Conclusions**

In the absence of an industry-accepted code of ethics directing media practitioners to report news without undue bias, it is not unreasonable to assume that the line between radical journalism and biased-reporting in Sri Lanka may be crossed.

There is also little doubt, that newspapers which are not only funded, but wholly-owned by the government will act as political organs for the ruling party, leaving a market void for independent or anti-government media. As such the anti-government bias of privately owned newspapers may often be explained as both commercially profitable and altruistically necessary.

However, an analysis of the news coverage during a highly charged and politically loaded week provided an insight into biases deeper than simply the need for non-government coverage. The study showed the week's main news was determined by two major factors - one that transcended the newspapers' masts to direct all three to a common view, and another that highlighted divergent perspectives.

All three papers analysed in the study showed evidence of an insular Sinhala-Buddhist bias, which united the three papers in their coverage and condemnation of the attack on the sacred temple. The newspapers' coverage was emotive and raw, echoing the sentiments of witnesses quoted in the Associated Press coverage the day after the attack which read –“You terrorists, kill us, eat us, but don't attack our shrine where Buddha lives”.

However, once the outraged nationalistic sentiments were calmed, the three papers departed from each other – not only along the obvious political lines, but also along family, class and caste biases. The study showed it was the power interests of the country's bourgeoisie politico-media dynasties that truly determined the nature of front-page news in this week. The Dinamina, as expected, toed the government line, attempting to deflect criticism of the president, while Lankadeepa took the opportunity to support the owner's nephew - the opposition leader. The Divayina in contrast wavered in its political allegiance,

maintaining its traditional anti-government stance while protecting the newspaper owner's brother – the deputy defence minister – and settling instead on a pro-Kandyan class and caste bias. In the end it was not so much altruistic notions of media freedom against a government propaganda vehicle that determined Lankadeepa and Divayina's particular slant on the non-government coverage, but their own self-serving interests.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Federal party also demanded for an acceptable settlement for the Indian Tamil citizenship issue.

<sup>2</sup> JR Jayewardene is the son of EW Jayewardene and DR Wijewardene's sister Agnes; Upali is the son of DR's brother Walter and Ranjith is DR's own son.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly the politico-media connections continue into the electronic sphere. Sri Lanka's first television station ITN was started in April 1979 by Shan Wickremasinghe - half-brother of current UNP Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe. When the government took over ITN three months later Shan Wickremasinghe left, but started another television operation Telshan Network Limited (TNL) a few years later, which today is arguably the quasi-mouthpiece of the UNP.

<sup>4</sup> Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, C. (1998, January 29). Re: Hon. Gen. Anuruddha Ratwatte resignation [Official communication with Minister Ratwatte]. Released by Sri Lankan Department of Information, January 30, 1998.

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