

Indien

A ruthless job

Who are the suspects?

MANOJ JOSHI
in New Delhi

NOTHING could have saved Rajiv Gandhi from the explosion that took his life at Sriperumbudur. The fanatical dedication of the suicide squad, the sophistication of the device and the proximity of the blast all ensured the catastrophe. Most security officials are agreed that it is next to impossible to stop a dedicated suicide squad from completing its mission. However, in the case of Rajiv, there was a special problem — Rajiv's own desire to shrug off the security blanket which he felt was stifling him. The needs of electioneering compounded the problem. It is possible that the squad (or squads) has been stalking Rajiv for some time now.

The utter ruthlessness of the technique, that is of strapping explosives to a person wearing a belt and detonating it at an angle that ensured that the blast hit the former Prime Minister on the head, points to the kind of perversion of "education" and "dedication" that has resulted from the trouble in the South Asian region. It is well known that Rajiv often used a kevlar bullet-proof jacket of a quality that can stop a pistol bullet and even shrapnel from a grenade or explosive. It was obviously decided by the perpetrators that to ensure 100 per cent "kill" probability, an explosive would have to be used, and to ensure that he did not escape, the human bomb was so rigged that it would ensure that the blast hit him on his unprotected face.

Who are the suspects? In the shadowy world of terrorism and death, of double and triple-cross, there is no end of suspects. In India itself there are the naxalites and the Kashmiri, Khalistani and United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) militants who could have done it. Abroad, again there is no shortage of speculative probables — the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the organisation for all seasons, or Muslim fanatics, Pakistani intelligence, and considering Olaf Palme's murder some other elements cannot altogether be

ruled out. But we will try and analyse the issue from the point of view of motive, *modus operandi* and known capability.

The explosive, RDX or cyclo-trimethylene trinitramine (cyclonite), is one of the most widely used explosives, but this does not mean it is easily available for you and for me. With great difficulty an ordinary person with some money could procure, say, some gelignite or even gun-cotton which is used for blasting in the quarries or in road-making, but RDX is used only by those in the business of death. It is made into a plastic compound by mixing on an 88:12 ratio with plastic. The resulting substance is as malleable as putty and can be coloured through mixing with other compounds into a dirty yellow, light blue or black. It is a stable explosive and regarded as particularly serviceable for the tropics in that it is not as unstable as gelignite. Again, the skill in rigging up the device used is not something available off the shelf.

Sitting in the heart of darkness as it were, somewhere not too far from Sriperumbudur, is the chubby, innocuous-looking man who controls the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the most fearsome guerilla group the world has seen since Sheikh Hassan bin Sabbah founded the sect of assassins. The power of the LTTE has not been established because of its military prowess alone, but in the extraordinary fanaticism of its members exemplified by acts such as the death on September 26, 1987 after 12 days of fasting of Thileepan, and a week later of Kumarappa and Pulendran and other LTTE leaders and nameless cadres who chose to bite the cyanide capsule rather than surrender.

The power of the group has also been established through the use of terror and political assassination as a weapon. There has been talk of an even more secretive group called the "Black Tigers" who specialise in suicide mission assassinations. The assassinations began in the late 1970s with the killing of Alfred Doraiappa, the Mayor of Jaffna, at the hands of LTTE

supremo V. Prabakaran himself. After that came Alalasundaram, Sri Sabaratnam and his colleagues, A. Amirthalingam and his associates, K. Padmanabha and his comrades.

Besides taking out Sri Lankan Tamils opposed to the LTTE, the organisation has carried out a series of bomb blasts in Colombo and its most notable strike earlier this year was the killing of Ranjan Wijeratne, the Sri Lankan Minister of State for Defence. In recent times, for diplomatic and political reasons, so to speak, the LTTE has not admitted its complicity in actions such as the assassinations of Amirthalingam and his colleagues. In fact, according to reports, they officially denied any complicity. Later reports suggest that they accepted their role. The assassination of Wijeratne, carried out by detonating through remote control 60 to 100 kg of explosives packed into a car or van as his bullet-proof car went by, was again "categorically" denied by the LTTE through its London office.

Four years ago, in July 1987, from a room where he was a "guest" of the Government of India, Prabakaran called an aide in Madras. "Just let me get out of here, and I will show this Rajiv Gandhi," were his ominous words. The sudden change in the Sri Lankan scenario, with India becoming a participant in an agreement from being a partisan supporter of the militants, could not but have engendered such thoughts. For Prabakaran, the moment was particularly bitter. Not only were the militants forced to accept an agreement well short of Eelam, but he was a virtual prisoner in the hands of the Indians. His personal security was one thing that was worrying him; the other was the need to reorient the movement to meet the Indian challenge.

Interestingly, the expression of Prabakaran's momentary anger has been kept under wraps by the ubiquitous intelligence agencies that were tapping his phones. The Government wanted to project the very opposite of the real situation. They wanted the Tamils, the Indians and the world

to believe that the LTTE had consented, after expressing some understandable reservations, to the agreement.

In the next two years, the organisation had to face the brunt of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) sweeps. Despite excellent tactics and superb defences, the LTTE — with a much smaller combatant strength — could not but have suffered grievously. Despite attempts to minimise it, the IPKF campaign did result in a loss of civilian life. No operation of the type fought in Sri Lanka can avoid that. These losses bred their own cycle of hatred and provided a ready source of recruits for the LTTE. There were accounts of IPKF soldiers being killed by little old ladies pulling grenades out of their saris and blowing themselves with them. Other accounts spoke of ambushes that used the presence of non-combatants for cover.

One of the facets of LTTE capabilities — one that the IPKF quickly learnt to dread — was its ability to use explosives with great precision and with devastating impact. The initial IPKF thrust into Jaffna saw the extensive use of IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices), often mere jerry-cans filled with 5 kg and more of plastic explosives that opened up Indian T-72s and BMPs like a can of butter. Ironically, the explosives the IPKF had to face had been supplied by Indian intelligence agencies just a few months earlier when the LTTE appeared to be heroically struggling against the Sri Lankan Army's Operation Liberation.

The LTTE also displayed an innovative ability with weapons; it designed its own rocket-propelled grenades and mortars; and even attempted to test fly an aircraft! But its deadliest abilities were in the field of remotely-controlled detonation for which it used electronic switching devices. These are essentially like TV remote control devices but used to set off a detonation. Other devices use the line-of-sight radio command principle such as that available for toy cars. These were obtained from Singapore and the LTTE has used them by the score and even improvised their reuse.

There is also a mirror possibility that the killer/killers may have been Sinhala chauvinists. According to one IPKF veteran, if hatred is the barometer, it is difficult to judge who is likely to hate India and Indians more, the chauvinist Sinhals or a section of Tamils of Sri Lanka. The Sinhala hatred, nurtured by extremists in the Buddhist clergy and encouraged by politicians like Ranasinghe Premadasa, has its roots in history. But there is

also a contemporary context. This has been the support India extended to the Tamil militant groups till the dramatic turnaround of the Accord of 1987. The attempt by a Sri Lankan naval rating to assault Rajiv Gandhi at the guard of honour following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement was a manifestation of this feeling. The scores of Sinhals who have died at the hands of the Tamil militants have their own pool of recruits who could have decided to avenge a loss or a perceived loss.

However, while the Sinhala extremists have been second to none in their bloodthirstiness and fanaticism, they have not displayed the dare-devil sophistication and precision that is the hallmark of the LTTE. The attempt on J. R. Jayewardene was a failure and, after all, Lalith Athulathmudali did get

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away. There are not too many who have escaped an LTTE strike. The Janatha Vimukti Perumuna in its heyday showed no demonstrable skill with explosives. In fact most of the bombings in Colombo were the handiwork of Tamil militants — in fact, Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS) was suspected at times but the real expertise came from the LTTE.

Another possibility that cannot be ruled out is that this was a solo operation, the act of a family or a person who felt deeply wronged in the bitter years the Indians first supported the Tamil militants. It could have been the act of one family whose members may have been victims or a reported/unreported atrocity by the Tamils/Sinhals or Indians.

But there is the issue of motive and this brings in a wider net. There is the CIA, the Khalistanis, the Kashmiri militants and ULFA and whoever one can think of. The LTTE, according to reports, scores low in this area because according to reports, Rajiv Gandhi had been talking to LTTE representatives for a rapprochement. In fact, there has always been a minority of officials dealing with Sri Lanka who have argued that it is in India's interests to support the LTTE. This line of think-

ing came to the fore especially before India decided to pull out in late 1988.

Conversely, this itself would give a high score to the Sinhala chauvinists since by their reading, a return to power of Rajiv Gandhi could signal another interventionist phase of Indian policy in Sri Lanka and in covert alliance with the LTTE again. In the spy-vs-spy world of Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka is a player and its agencies do keep a tab on what is going on.

The Khalistanis have the motive, the capability (though not the LTTE level) and the fanaticism. They could have also conducted the strike using the services of another group.

Cooperation among terrorists is not unusual. The choice of Tamil Nadu may have been for them a perversely clever calculation. Who would expect them to strike in Tamil Nadu, of all places?

In the ultimate analysis, since nothing much will come through normal methods of providing proof, the only way is to ask the questions: Who had the motive? Who had the cadre motivated enough to become a live bomb? Who had the demonstrated capability with explosives? Who has had a history of staging assassinations? The answer ought to be fairly obvious.

It would be sheer luck if the judicial commission gets anywhere with its investigation. The professionalism of the assassins is likely to extend to covering their footprints. In fact, as things often happen in the underworld of terrorism, the assassins may not even know who they are working for. They may well have been Sinhala or Tamil individuals manipulated by someone else. Anyway, if the commission can confirm Khalistani or Sri Lankan Tamil or Sinhala complicity, what can be done?

If the assassins come from Jaffna or elsewhere in Sri Lanka — and present indications are that they do come from there — neither Indian nor Sri Lankan investigation agencies will be able to operate there. Terrorists are not state entities which can be coerced or punished in a conventional way.

There is certainly the need to ensure that the guilty are punished, or word will get around that you can kill Indian leaders and get away with it. But where is the instrumentality of international justice? India cannot send its army, navy or air force; that would be using a sledge-hammer to kill a fly. The problem is that India lacks the covert capability to track down and punish its enemies. The Research and Analysis Wing is a mediocre service, nowhere in the league of the international players. These are times when the country exposes its feet of clay. ■

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