

"Sinhala suicide bomber": the case study of a police-media frame-up

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20 July 2000

The press coverage of a suicide bomb attack in Colombo on June 14 provides a graphic example of the way in which events are seized upon and distorted by the Sri Lankan media to justify the government's prosecution of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the racist treatment of Tamils. As this story reveals, literally anyone can become grist for the mill with catastrophic consequences.

The bomb explosion occurred in the early morning on a busy highway at Wattala, a suburb eight kilometres from the centre of Colombo. Three people were killed on the spot and 13 others were injured. Immediately, the state radio announced that a bomb had been aimed at an air force bus carrying wounded personnel. The police concluded that the bomber rode a bicycle fitted with explosives.

The following day, the media dutifully reported that the bomb blast had been the work of the Black Tigers—the LTTE's suicide bombers. It was an open and shut case. The LTTE has never publicly accepted responsibility for its bomb attacks and was unlikely to contradict the story. Then the police claimed to have found indications that the bomber may not have been Tamil, but was Sinhalese instead. The media promptly fell into line without a word of criticism. On June 16, the lead article of the English language daily the *Island* was headed "Sinhala carpenter rode explosives- packed bicycle."

According to the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) Daya Jayasundara, the bomb attack had been carried out by a carpenter named Padmasiri Medis from Koralawella, a coastal village in Moratuwa, about 18 kilometres south of Colombo. "We have no doubt that he rode the bicycle," Jayasundara said.

The police and the press went into overdrive to offer

an explanation as to how a Sinhalese could have been induced by the LTTE to carry out the attack. The police chief told the press that the police were investigating the bomber's links with the LTTE and that a search operation had already resulted in "a number of key terrorist suspects" being taken into custody. Padmasiri, he said, had been in financial difficulty. He had taken money from several people and, according to his wife, the family had pawned their house.

No slander was too great. Based on police reports, the government-owned *Daily News* concluded that "investigations point to [a] teenage terrorist having hired the carpenter from Moratuwa, a heroin addict and a gambler, who was in severe financial straits, to transport the bomb, which was in a bag hanging on the handle bar of the cycle. He [the DIG] said the police are checking on the possibility that the drug addicted carpenter was hired by the LTTE to transport the bomb from one point to another and exploded in the collision with a motor cycle."

The Sinhala-language daily *Divayina* wrote: "The Wattala incident reveals that attempts are being made to use Sinhala people, though in an indirect way, for attacks in Colombo. There are enough people who would betray the nation and country for money."

The police went to the area where Padmasiri Medis lived and arrested his wife, Neeta Medis. They also queried his neighbours, asking whether the deceased had had relationships with Tamils. When the police were unable to extract a statement from Padmasiri's wife by threat and duress corroborating the police version of events, she was remanded for five days.

On June 17, the story changed again. A postmortem into Padmasiri's death found that "the carpenter, a Sinhalese, had died of multiple injuries from a bomb explosion and the pattern was more suggestive of his

being a victim and not the bomber ... there were no burn injuries on the body of the carpenter, showing he had not carried the bomb on his person, but that he had been near the explosion.”

Most of the media did not bother to even report the medical conclusions. The implications were all too obvious. If a Sinhalese carpenter can be blackguarded as a drug addict, gambler and traitor, his wife arrested and “a number of key terrorist suspects” rounded up and arrested on little or no evidence, what about other cases? It underscores the treatment that is routinely meted out to Tamils by the police and army and passed over in almost total silence by the Colombo media.

Hundreds of Tamils have been held without trial for months and even years as “terrorist suspects”. A few weeks ago hundreds of Tamil students from Moratuwa University were rounded up as “LTTE suspects” only to be released later when it was found that there was not a shred of evidence against them. Neither the media nor the police issued statements correcting their initial reports.

In the case of the “Sinhala suicide bomber”, the consequences have been just as devastating for Padmasiri's family and neighbours, who are angry over the media campaign and the false police story.

Padmasiri's wife said she had refused to give a false statement implicating her husband, even though the police threatened her. Egged on by police and media reports portraying her as the wife of an LTTE supporter, other women prisoners had tried to assault her. “I was detained for five days and released on June 20. Not only did I lose my husband but I also had to languish in jail,” she told a reporter.

“He had been a furniture vendor since he was 15 years of age. He earned an income selling furniture in various areas. As Padmasiri had no money he got furniture on credit and settled the amount later. On June 13, though he went to Wattala, Padmasiri could not do any business. The next day in the early morning he went to the same area, as he kept his goods there. He was caught in the bomb blast. We lived and educated our children with the meagre income he earned with this hard labouring. Now everything is over.

“This war must be stopped. We can walk on a street without fear only after that,” she said.

Padmasiri lived in a coastal shanty area. Most people are engaged in carpentry and selling furniture. But there

were only a table and a few chairs made of cheap wood in his home. His wife explained: “The income gained from selling is disproportionate to our hard labour. On some days even earning 100 rupees (\$US1.20) is so difficult. One rarely earns 500 rupees a day. Some days we don't even have a cent. Then we have to get loans.”

His sister-in-law said: “Padmasiri's children are ashamed to attend school because of the lies in the papers. They are targets for harassment as LTTEers. It is not only the kids, we also face this propaganda. Some people regard us as LTTE sympathisers. In all the places here, people live on one meal a day. As the prices have gone up due to the war they find even one meal is difficult. Ending the war is better for the country.”

People in the area defended Padmasiri. One of his neighbours, Wilson Mendis, said: “Padmasiri was a good man. The newspapers said he was a drug addict. That is a big lie. He did not even smoke a cigarette. All he did was chew betel leaves. He carried furniture from four or five in the morning and returned after dusk. Where was the time for such a man to associate with the Tigers [LTTE]? A most innocent man, who was never involved in mischief and trouble, was lost.”

Another commented: “These papers did a dirty deed. They did not look for the truth. Padmasiri couldn't sell goods on June 13, so he went again on June 14 to where he kept them and was caught in the explosion. We have to sell a piece of furniture worth 200 rupees, keeping at least a 50-rupee margin. We are struggling to live in dire conditions. Fabricating these type of stories about people living in such difficulties is very wrong.”



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