1. A history of discrimination

‘Why didn’t he hit back?’ asked Prabhakaran. It was indeed a simple question. ‘He should have at least hit them back and shown some resistance. Is it not a natural surviving instinct?’ he thought.

Prabhakaran’s father, Thiruvenkadham Velupillai, was taken by surprise when his four-year-old son raised that question. Prabhakaran’s father had been an ardent follower of Thanthai Thelva. The title Thanthai (meaning ‘father’ in Tamil) suited S.J.V. Chelvanayagam very well, who had founded the Federal Party and was looked upon as a fatherly figure by the Tamils of Ceylon. He was also known as the ‘Tamil Saint’. But unlike his doting father, Prabhakaran was not inclined to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious father.
Prabhakaran was born to Thiruvengadam Veluppillai and Parvathi of Velvettithurai on 26 November, 1954, as the last of their four children. His siblings were Manoharan, Jegatheeswaran and Vinodhini. Prabhakaran, the youngest, was the family’s favourite and everyone affectionately called him ‘Durai’ (meaning ‘lord’ or ‘master’). As a child, Durai invariably had a place on his father’s lap and also in his heart. Veluppillai and his fellow supporters of the Federal Party would usually meet at his home in the evenings and discuss about the racism and linguistic chauvinism exhibited by the Sinhalese politicians and the various attacks unleashed on Tamils. Little Prabhakaran would keenly listen to those conversations, but rarely reacted to them.

Veluppillai’s ancestors had constructed Hindu temples where they lived. Veluppillai himself was the treasurer of Vatheswarar Temple — also known as Valavai Sriw Kovil — which was the largest in the coastal town of Velvettithurai. This temple was constructed by Prabhakaran’s ancestor called Thirumuniyar Venkatachalam. Prabhakaran’s ancestors had also assisted in the construction of two other temples — Nediyakadu Pillayar Kovil and Valliathu Murumath Amman Kovil. Prabhakaran’s mother Parvathi hailed from a family in Point Pedro, a town not far from Velvettithurai. Called Meethi Vallee Nagalingam family (Terraced house of Nagalingam), they were also known for building temples.

Annual festivals in Valavai Sivan Kovil were celebrated with grandeur, during which famous nagaswaram and bharathanatyam artists from the southern Indian state Tamil Nadu performed. Swami Krupananda Varjiyar, a renowned Harikatha exponent from India, gave musical discourses in 1950s and 1960s.

Prabhakaran’s father Veluppillai was an ardent fan of Varjiyar and took Prabhakaran with him to listen to the discourses, not only in Velvettithurai but throughout the Jaffna peninsula. Prabhakaran respected the sagacious holy man as did his pious mother and sought his blessing during every visit. Varjiyar took pleasure in answering soul-searching questions from the excited youngsters. Varjiyar had once reportedly told Prabhakaran’s mother that her son would one day emerge a Hindu revolutionary. Almost half a century later, Prabhakaran indeed turned out to be an armed revolutionary.

Prabhakaran was naturally upset when he learnt about the priest’s burning. He had revealed this in his interview to N. Ram that appeared in *The Hindu*, in 1986: ‘Ours is a god-fearing society and people are religious-minded. The widespread feeling was, when a priest like him was burnt alive, why did we not have the capability to hit back. That was one atrocity that made people think deeply.’

Another incident agitated him further. In an interview to the Indian magazine Sunday, in 1984, he said: “The shocking events of the 1958 racial riots had a profound impact on me when I was a schoolboy. I heard of horrifying incidents of how our people had been mercilessly and brutally put to death by Sinhala racists. Once I met a widowed mother, a friend of my family, who related to me her agonizing personal experience of this racial holocaust. During the riots, a Sinhala mob attacked her house in Colombo. The rioters set fire to the house and murdered her husband. She and her children escaped with severe burn injuries. I was deeply shocked when I saw the scars on her body. I also heard such stories of cruelty. I felt a deep sense of sympathy and love for my people. A great passion overwhelmed me to redeem my people from this racist system.”

As Veluppillai’s family listened to this shocking incident directly from the lady nearly a year later, they were horrified. Prabhakaran quivered in rage. But he was also clear on one thing. They should hit back. ‘They won’t do these things if they knew we could hit back’, said Prabhakaran.

For the first time in the history of the island, the Tamils who were displaced were called ‘refugees’.

Prabhakaran was critical of the Sinhala leadership that added fuel to the fire instead of curbing the well-directed violence on Tamils. He was even more critical of the Tamil political leadership that was still preaching non-violence.

On the morning of 25th September, 1959, Taldowe Somarama Therewa had fixed up an appointment with the then Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike at his residence in Rosemead Place, Colombo. Solomon Bandaranaike was the instigator behind the 1958 ethnic violence. As Bandaranaike hastened to pay obeisance to the Buddhist monk, Somarama Therewa whipped out a revolver from the folds of his robe and shot the Prime Minister point blank in the stomach.

Solomon Bandaranaike had become the Prime Minister with the full support and blessings of the Buddhist monks. In return, the Buddhist clergy had asked him to declare Ceylon as a Buddhist Sinhala nation. It was an order, not a request. Bandaranaike was not quick enough to reject, and the delay upset the Buddhist clergy. Bandaranaike had to be disposed off.

Wijeyananda Dahayake succeeded Solomon Bandaranaike as the Prime Minister of Ceylon. His rule could not last long as he faced a no-confidence motion in the Parliament on the controversy surrounding Bandaranaike’s assassination. The Parliament was dissolved on 5 December 1959. In the ensuing elections, Sri Lanka Freedom Party swept the polls, thanks to the sympathy wave created by Solomon’s demise.

Solomon’s widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the Prime Minister in June 1960, creating history as the first ever woman head of state in the world. During her husband’s tenure, an act called ‘Sinhala Only Act’ had been passed in 1956. This law mandated that Sinhalese would be the only official language for the government and judiciary. Though the law was enacted, it was not enforced. Sirimavo’s first task, however, was to enforce the law strictly. She declared that from 1st January 1961, the Government and courts will start functioning only in Sinhalese.

Federal Party and Chevanayagam pleaded with the Prime Minister to permit at least the courts in the North and the East of the country, the traditional homeland of the Tamils, to function in Tamil. Sinhala political parties came together and convincingly defeated this motion in the Parliament.

The year 1961 turned out to be an eventful year in the self-determination struggle of Tamil people in Ceylon — it saw the violence of the oppressor silencing the non-violence of the oppressed. The armed might of the Sinhala chauvinism crushed the ahimsa of the aggrieved Tamils.

The Government was making every arrangement to enforce the ‘Sinhala only act’ from 1st January 1961. The Federal Party called for a march on 28th January and it went off peacefully without any untoward incident. The Government did not relent and hence the march was blocked. This led to a conflict in which many Tamils were killed and many others were arrested.
Chelevanayagam went ahead and organised a satyagraha protest in front of the Jaffna Secretariat. People wholeheartedly supported the satyagraha. From Jaffna peninsula in the north, it was extended to Batticaloa on 27th February and to Trincomalee on 4th March, and other areas such as Mannar and Vavuniya subsequently.

Chelevanayagam's peaceful protest was violently put down by the Sinhala Government. Federal party leader Elambararam was killed by the police in an attack in Trincomalee. Chelevanayagam felt humiliated and he decided to move to the next stage of the ahimsa struggle, civil disobedience, following the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi.

On 14th April 1961, the Tamil New Year day, Chelevanayagam launched the Tamil Postal Service signalling that the Tamils will henceforth not recognize the Sinhala Government's postal system and will run their own. To promote this, Chelevanayagam himself sat in the Postmaster's chair at the Jaffna Post Office and sold Tamil Postal Service stamps.

Srimavo Bandaranaike declared emergency on 17th April and arrested all the Federal Party leaders. Nine leaders including Chelevanayagam were detained till October, and several others were not released for three years.

As the 1961 satyagraha was being crushed, a small group of 20 members from the Federal Party formed a secret organisation called Puli Puviru (The Army of Tigers) with the blessing of V. Navaratnam, a veteran leader of the Federal Party and a Member of Parliament from Kayts constituency. At this point in time, Prabhakaran was only six years old.

In the meantime, Srimavo Bandaranaike stepped up her activities. The Government issued a circular in December 1961, which stated that Government servants should obtain minimum proficiency in the official language Sinhala to retain their posts, as well as to earn their annual salary increments and promotions. This forced several Tamil-speaking civil servants to quit their jobs and emigrate to countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia, Malaysia, Britain, Canada, and the United States. Several joined the United Nations. Life was even more difficult for other Tamils who sought Government jobs.

In 1962, Srimavo Bandaranaike nationalised all the schools in the country, leaving no room for private schools. Tamil medium schools in the Sinhala areas were gradually superseded by Sinhala medium schools, leaving Tamil students there no other options but to study in Sinhala. Schools in the North and East were allocated lesser funds. The syllabus promoted Sinhala language and supremacy of Sinhalese race over that of Tamils, and it was imposed on the Tamils against their wish. In short, nationalisation translated into Sinhalaisation.

Tamil political leadership spearheaded by Chelevanayagam's Federal Party could only oppose this move, but couldn't stop it.

Earlier in 1944, Ceylon, like the neighbouring India, was on the threshold of gaining independence from the British Rule. A commission, headed by Lord Soulbury, recommended a new constitution for independent Ceylon. Members of the Soulbury Commissioners met representatives of all the communities in Ceylon.

The Sinhalese made sure that the new constitution did not concede anything to the Tamils. The leader of All Ceylon Tamil Congress, G.G. Periyar, known as MGR, represented the Tamils. GG was a lawyer by profession and practiced criminal law. (Much later, in the 1970s, GG would head a team of lawyers to defend the deported Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi in the Sarkaria Commission trial, set up by Indira Gandhi to investigate corruption charges against him.) GG served as a district councillor in Ceylon prior to its independence and Chelevanayagam was part of the Tamil Congress under GG's leadership.

When GG addressed the Soulbury Commission, he advocated equal representation in the number of seats for Eelam Tamils who are traditionally from the North and the East, the hill country Tamils of Indian origin who were brought by the British from India to work in the tea plantations more than 200 years ago, and the Tamil-speaking Muslims in the East. The Sinhalese vehemently opposed this and Lord Soulbury sided with the idea of equal representation. In the new constitution, the Tamils got a separate state for the Tamils within a federal Ceylon, but their voice was not enough. Lord Soulbury recommended a unitary system instead of a federal system, a decision he later regretted in his letter dated 30th April 1964 to C. Sumneralingam, a Tamil political leader.

When the Soulbury Constitution came into effect, Don Stephen Senanayake became the first Prime Minister of Ceylon in 1947, and the country was yet to become independent. Senanayake introduced some rapid changes that immediately affected the hill country Tamils working in the tea plantations.

The hill country Tamils were brought from India during the early years of colonial rule. British plantation owners found the Sinhalese lazy and unwilling to put in laborious work, the kind of hard work the plantations demanded. Hence, Indians from Tamil Nadu state were brought in as indentured labourers to clear and establish plantations. These Tamils made themselves part of Ceylon and became its permanent residents. It was due to the sheer hard work of the Indian Tamils that tea plantations could be established in the Kandy hills region. In fact, they could justifiably feel that they were integral part of the country because tea remains the single largest export item for that country even today.

The Sinhala political leadership wanted to get rid of the hill country Tamils and the 1948 Citizenship Act did exactly. Suddenly close to a million hill country Tamils were stripped of their citizenship overnight and made stateless. India objected to this move, as did the Eelam Tamils in Ceylon. The subsequent Ceylon Prime Ministers tried to send the plantation workers back to India by pressurising the Indian administration.

The then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was against taking the plantation workers back. From 1959 to 1964, he insisted on an honourable solution to the plight of the Tamils of the Indian origin in Ceylon. He was against any form of repatriation. Once he assured a leader of the Ceylon Worker Congress that he will never accept repatriation of the Tamils to India. But that promise died along with Nehru in 1964.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, the next Indian Prime Minister, deviated from Nehru's stance. Despite powerful Tamil Nadu based ministers such as T.T. Krishnamachari and C. Subramaniam holding important portfolios in his cabinet, Shastri agreed to take back 5,25,000 Tamils from Ceylon while Ceylon reluctantly agreed to repatriate Tamils to 5,000 Tamils over the next 10 years. The fate of a further 1,20,000 still stateless Tamils was kept in abeyance, to be decided at a later date. By October 1979, when the pact was due to end, Sri Lanka had granted citizenship only to 1,60,000 and by 1982, up to 4,00,000 people still remained stateless in Sri Lanka.

When Don Senanayake deprived hundreds of thousands of Tamil of Indian origin of their citizenship, G.G. Ponnampalam, the representative of Tamils from the North and East, did not oppose it. But Chelevanayagam was upset and agitated.

Chelevanayagam spoke movingly in the Parliament: 'You are now hitting at the weakest section of the Tamils, you are hitting at the innocent and the meek that are labouring in the chill and the cold of the hill-country plantation regions producing your wealth. We will know where we stand when our turn comes back, we will know when the next piece of legislation in this series comes, the one dealing with our language.'5

Chelevanayagam immediately parted ways from the Tamil Congress and declared: 'We were first denied our share in the Government. Next, our electoral strength was reduced by the denial of citizenship to our Indian Tamil brethren. They have started taking away their state aid and military assistance. [Only] the federal structure will get the Tamils their legitimate share in the Government and put an end to the Sinhala attempt to grab our territory.'

Chelevanayagam inaugurated Federal Party in 1949 with a declaration of the establishment of an Autonomous State for the Tamil-speaking People of Ceylon within the structure of the Federal Union of Ceylon.'

As time passed by, an up and coming Sinhala politician in Senanayake cabinet, Solomon Bandaranaike, aspired to become the Prime Minister. He quit the ruling party, the United National Party (UNP), and established the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). With 'Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism' as his weapon and shortcut to power, he promised to declare Sinhala as the only official language within 24 hours, if elected to power. As expected, he came to power in 1956 with the full support of Buddhist monks.

Tamils were greatly shocked. Chelevanayagam registered his protest in a peaceful Gandhian manner by performing satyagraha at the Galle
Face Green opposite the Parliament building on 5th June 1956, when the “Sinhala Only Act” was to be passed in the Parliament. There were 250 satyagrahis who sat cross-legged at the Galle Face Green, when an organised band of Sinhala hooligans brutally attacked them. Police stood mute witnesses, and did nothing to prevent the attack on the elected representatives, right in front of the Parliament.

At around the same time, Bandaranaike drove in his car to the Parliament to introduce the Sinhala Only Act. A senior police officer went up to the Prime Minister and asked his permission to chase away the thugs. Bandaranaike disagreed and replied, ‘Let them have a taste of it.”

A violent mob of more than ten thousand gathered at the Galle Face Road, and threw some of the satyagrahis into the Beira Lake near the Parliament House. Chevannelagam, a frail old man suffering from Parkinson’s disease and using hearing- aids, was dumped into the dirty waters of the lake. Just before that, he witnessed the beating up of both his sons.

V N Navaratnam, a Member of Parliament, received severe injuries in both his legs and was hospitalized for several days. Other members of the Parliament from the Federal Party such as Vanniyasingham and Naganathan were thrashed badly, and their clothes were torn apart. Amirthalingam, who was to play a decisive role in the coming years, was also a notable victim. Despite blood oozing from his wounded head, Amirthalingam entered the Parliament with the help of his colleague Suntheralingam, to whom Lord Soulbury would confess in a few years that he perhaps committed a mistake by recommending unitary constitution for Ceylon.

As they entered the Parliament, Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike welcomed them as ‘Honourable wounds of war’, amid jeers and hooting by the Sinhalese members of the Parliament. 5

Suntheralingam retorted, ‘Yes, the war began on 2nd June 1956.’

What is remembered as ‘Trincomalee convention’ that took place in Trincomalee on 17th August 1956 was an important event in the self determination struggle of the Tamils. Scared by the riots that took place two months ago, a large number of Tamils had gathered in the eastern port city, Trincomalee. The convention, in its resolution declared three demands. They were: equal status for Tamil language, citizenship for Tamils of Indian origin and federal system in the constitution. The Trincomalee convention presented an ultimatum to Bandaranaike. If the Federal Party’s demands were not met, the Tamil people would launch a direct action campaign of non-violent civil disobedience. The ultimatum expected the Government to respond within one year, that is, by 20th August, 1957.

Federal Party observed 4th February 1957, Ceylon’s Independence Day, as a day of mourning. The ultimatum was fast approaching and Bandaranaike did not dare to face a civil disobedience. He met Chevannelagam on 26th July, 1957 and an agreement was signed.

The pact contained three important arrangements that provided safeguards for the Tamil-speaking people. They were:

- Recognizing Tamil as a National Language without disturbing the position enjoyed by Sinhala as the Official Language and using Tamil as the language of administration in the Northern and the Eastern provinces.
- Setting up autonomous regional councils for the North and the East.
- Bringing colonization schemes under the subjects reserved for the regional councils and giving the councils the power to select the allottees and the personnel employed to work in those schemes.

This was the kind of opportunity the opposition UNP was looking for, especially after being voted out of power. UNP leader J.R. Jayewardene went on a march to Kandy. There was a contest between rival Sinhala parties for capturing power by showing who protected the Sinhalese people better. Jayewardene claimed that Lord Buddha with his almighty powers would not let the Bandaranaike–Chevannelagam agreement go through.

Sinhala protesters gathered in front of Bandaranaike’s home. Most of them were Buddhist monks. They were expecting, as part of the secret understanding they had entered with Bandaranaike during the election campaign, that Ceylon would become a Sinhala-Buddhist nation under his regime. The Sinhala Only Act, according to them, was the first step towards that. But, now, things were taking an unexpected and ugly turn.

The protests from Buddhist clergy frightened Bandaranaike. The priests demanded that the document he signed with Chevannelagam be torn to pieces in their presence. The Prime Minister obeyed and brought out the original document he and Chevannelagam had signed and tore it to pieces right in front of the monks. But that was not enough. Eventually, a Buddhist monk later shot and killed Solomon Bandaranaike.

Dudley Senanayake, son of first Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake, came to power for the third time in 1965. He too had entered into an agreement with Chevannelagam. If Chevannelagam’s party helped Senanayake come to power, the Tamils will be given some basic rights. The pact essentially agreed on the following:

1. Tamil will be the language of administration and record in the Northern and the Eastern provinces. Legal proceedings will be conducted and recorded in Tamil in these provinces.

2. Priorities should be observed in allocating land under colonization schemes in the Northern and the Eastern provinces were laid down as follows: (a) In the first instance, land should be granted to the landless persons in each district; (b) Secondly, to the Tamil-speaking persons residing in that district; (c) Thirdly, to other citizens in Ceylon, preference being given to Tamil citizens from rest of the island.

Now it was alain Solomon Bandaranaike’s widow Srimavo Bandaranaike’s turn to protest. Srimavo took to the streets along with Buddhist clergy. When the protesters resorted to violence, the police opened fire, which ended in the death of a Buddhist monk, Dambawaya Ratnasara. The opposition leaders vowed to avenge the killing of the monk.

Dudley Senanayake immediately declared emergency and enforced a dusk-to-dawn curfew. The emergency was in force until the end of the tenure as the Prime Minister.

During this period, some army personnel joined hands with some extremist elements to overthrow Dudley Senanayake’s Government through a military coup. Army Commander Major General Richard Udugama was arrested in the failed coup attempt. Amongst the 31 suspects arrested were a General, a retired civil servant, a captain, 20-odd privates, corporals and sergeants, a Buddhist monk and a few civilians.

In the meantime, a five-member committee comprising Chevannelagam, Tiruchelvam and Amirthalingam insisted that the Government implement Dudley-Chelva pact. Dudley Senanayake coolly told them, “I thought that after some months you will not insist on your demands.”

At the same time, he could not afford to lose the support provided by the Federal Party in the Parliament. So, Senanayake suggested that the Federal Party prepare the draft of the District Council Bill for the consideration by the cabinet, which could be the first step towards decentralization of power.

Tiruchelvam, an expert legal, prepared a draft District Council Bill on behalf of Federal Party and handed it over that to the Prime Minister. The opposition vehemently protested against the move to consider the draft bill. Senanayake acquiesced, and issued a statement on 17th October 1966: “My opponents in recent times have been conducting a propaganda campaign that I have entered into an agreement with the Federalists. All I have done is that I have formed a Government with the help of the Federalists.”

Chevannelagam was disappointed and shocked. He met journalists as a dejected man on 20th June 1968 and told them of his meetings
The betrayal by Senanayake severely annoyed V Navaratnam. He warned that Sinhala leadership could not be trusted and suggested that separation, not federalism, should be the only solution. He conditioned his own Federal Party for extending support to the Government despite having their demands rejected. The Tamil people also criticized Tiruchelvam for continuing in Dudley Senanayake's cabinet. But Navaratnam's voice was not heard in the Federal Party, as the charismatc Chevanayagam still believed in Federalism.

In 1969, V Navaratnam left the Federal Party and voiced a demand for independence of Tamils from the Sinhala domination. In the meantime, C Sutharaveli printed booklets on 'Eelam Tamils' Freedom Struggle' and started distributing them amongst the Tamils in Ceylon. Thus, the first strong protests against a federal solution and a solution that called for a separate Tamil Eelam came from these two - Navaratnam and Suntheralingam.

Despite the powerful and moderating voice of Chevanayagam, these two leaders were successful in sowing the seeds of freedom struggle in a few young minds.

2. Seeds of militancy

Prabhakar's father, Thiruvengadam Velupillai, was a Government servant. He served as a district land officer for many years. Their was an average middle class family with middle class values and aspirations. Velupillai was content with a safe job and a peaceful life. He believed that good education alone could make his children achieve this.

Prabhakaran's elder brother Manoharan took up a Government job after completing his studies. His sisters were also married to Government servants. Velupillai wanted Prabhakaran to pursue a career in the reputed civil services, but Prabhakaran could not fulfill his father's ambition. His ambition was not to serve the Government, but to fight against the racist Sinhala administration and form a Government for the Tamils.

Prabhakaran's parents were devout and god-fearing. His mother Paravathi observed fast on auspicious days. The family frequently visited the temples. They also had a pooka room at home with a big statue of Lord Siva and smaller idols of Lord Ganesha and Muruga. The children including Prabhakaran offered early morning prayers every day and chanted the Thevaram. Among the photos of gods and goddesses were pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Velupillai was an ardent supporter Chevanayagam, a hardcore Gandhi.

As the district land officer, Velupillai noticed that the Government aided and abetted gradual colonisation in the Tamil traditional homeland, especially in the eastern region, by bringing in larger number of Sinhalese there. This resulted in a change in the ethnic landscape and the dilution of Tamil identity.

Chevanayagam had often warned: 'It won't be feasible to paint a picture without a wall'. He meant that protecting the traditional homeland and preventing it from being consumed by Sinhalese should be taken up much ahead of demanding other rights for the Tamils. As Velupillai discussed this with his friends Prabhakaran would intently listen to such conversations. The little boy widened his socio-political views by being a keen observer and listener.

Prabhakaran was of the opinion that the Tamils loved to talk big, but rarely acted upon it. He concluded that Tamils were submissive by nature and they had failed in choosing an appropriate method of struggle. Prabhakaran also felt that the Tamils needed to follow the methods of Subash Chandra Bose and Bhagath Singh - revolutionaries of the Indian National Movement - rather than those of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

While his father adored Gandhi and Nehru, Prabhakaran hung the portraits of Subash Chandra Bose and Bhagath Singh on the walls. He was impressed by Bose and reflected that in an interview later on, 'Subash attracted me particularly, since even as boy he went in search of spiritualism, and finding the life of a recluse dissatisfying, returned to normal life. Yet, repeatedly he retreated to spiritualism... During moments of great difficulty and crisis, I followed his ideals and learnt lessons from his life with fascination. He became my special hero, and some of his inspiring speeches gripped me.'

Prabhakaran, during a 1994 interview to the Tamil magazine, Velichom, recalled: 'As a child, I was the pet and the darling of the family. Therefore, I was hedged in by a lot of restriction at home. My playmates were children from the neighbouring homes. My childhood was spent in a small circle of a lonely, quiet house.'

Prabhakaran's mother Paravathi was an expert cook. Prabhakaran developed a healthy interest in cooking at a young age and fiercely competed with his sister Vinothini in this department.

Prabhakaran was only six years old, when Sirimavo Bandaranaike enforced 'The Sinhala Only Act' in the Tamil regions in 1961. Chevanayagam protested by peaceful Satyagraha means, which was brutally crushed by the Sinhalese army. On 16th April 1961, the army resorted to firing on protestors in Velvetthiru, wounding three youngsters and killing one. Prabhakaran visited those wounded in the Valvettithurai. He got a first hand account of the manner in which Sinhala army treated the Tamils there - torture, rounding up innocent civilians, arrest people without reason and ill-treating women.

While going out with his father, Prabhakaran saw policemen and army personnel beating up innocent people, which created an indelible scar in his mind. He later mentioned in an interview that he grew up in an environment where the people hated the army.

Authorities justified their arrests and round-up as an attempt to curb smuggling. Valvettithurai is referred to as smugglers' paradise in Colombo's intellectual circles, partially because it happens to be Prabhakaran's birth place. Valvettithurai, however, became infamous by this name only after Ceylon obtained independence, in 1948. A prosperous trading port and shipyard during the days of the Jaffna Tamil Kingdom and later during the Dutch and Portuguese rule, VTV, as Valvettithurai is known, produced great sailors who built ships that sailed all the way up to the North America. During the British rule, India and Ceylon were not considered separate countries as both were British colonies. Ceylonese frequently crossed the Falk Strait and traded with people in India.

Thiruvengadam Velupillai was very particular about his children's education. Prabhakaran's first two years of schooling was in the eastern town of Batticaloa where his family moved following his father's transfer. Then Velupillai moved back to Valvettithurai with his family. Prabhakaran enrolled in the Aladi Sivagnam Elementary School.

After primary education, Prabhakaran went to Urikkadu Chidampara College in Valvettithurai for his high school education. Prabhakaran studied till Class Ten, but did not take the public examination. He was an average student in studies, for he was more interested in politics than education.

But this upset Velupillai, who waken his son to get a good education and a respectable job. Worried about Prabhakaran's lack of interest in studies, Velupillai arranged for private tuitions in the evenings. This turned out to be a decisive moment in Prabhakaran's life. The
Venugopal Master implanted three significant seeds of thought in Prabhakaran's young mind. He told Prabhakaran that the Tamils in the North and East were a nation of their own with their own culture and history and had their own kingdoms in the past. It was the British who brought Sinhala nation and Tamil nation of the island forcibly together into a single country. He further told Prabhakaran that the submissive Tamil political leadership would lead the Eelam Tamil to slavery and eventually extinction in a short while.

Venugopal Master also explained to Prabhakaran that nowhere in the world a parliamentary democratic setup had resolved ethnic conflicts successfully. The unitary Parliament system in Ceylon represented only the aspirations of the Sinhalea majority. Armed domination of the Sinhalese majority could only be confronted with armed might, and that alone could win back the Tamils their freedom.

Thus, it was Venugopal Master who sowed the seeds of Tamil nationalism and separatism in Prabhakaran's mind. Venugopal Master himself was influenced by Suntheralingam and Navaratnam, and thus these two had indirectly influenced Prabhakaran's thinking.

Venugopal Master had served in the Federal Party youth wing and had accepted the leaders' ideologies without questioning. However, he was eventually disillusioned with the party's leadership. He then joined Navaratnam's Suyatchi Kazhakam (Self Rule Party) that worked towards achieving freedom of Eelam from Ceylon.

An avid reader, history books and biographies of revolutionary leaders and great warriors were young Prabhakaran's favourites. He also developed good understanding about Indian freedom struggle. In particular, Subash Chandra Bose's brave words, 'I shall fight for the freedom of my land until I shed the last drop of my blood' inspired Prabhakaran.

He said in an interview, 'It is through books that I learnt of the heroic exploits of Alexander and Napoleon. It is through my habit of reading that I developed a deep attachment to the Indian Freedom struggle and martyrs like Subash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. It was the reading of such books that laid the foundation for my life as a revolutionary. The Indian Freedom struggle stirred the depths of my being and roused in me a feeling of indignation against foreign oppression and domination.'

Prabhakaran further elaborated on Subash Chandra Bose: 'His disciplined life and his total commitment and dedication to the cause of his country's freedom deeply impressed me and served as my guiding light.'

Even after becoming a guerrilla fighter, Prabhakaran's pursuit of reading did not stop. Sankar Raji, a leader of Tamil militant organisation EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students) said that he saw in Prabhakaran's room books, on Chue Guevara, Fidel Castro, Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung, apart from some of the 'Teach Yourself' series of books, one of them being 'Pistol Shooting'.

In May 1969, Education Minister I.M.R.A. Iririyagolla ordered that three Tamil schools started by low caste Hindu untouchables in Jaffna be taken over by Sinhala Buddhist schools and announced that he would be present at the takeover ceremony. This announcement enraged the Tamil youth. They took it up as a challenge and a large number of volunteers gathered to stage a massive satyagraha campaign on that day.

Federal Party leadership intervened, tried to cool down the youth and dissuaded them from marching ahead. However, the youth wing of the party was determined to register its protest against the sinhala minister. Police permission was refused for the march. But the agitated students decided to defy the ban. The Government deployed navy personnel as well as police force in order to control the situation and provide security to the three schools. In the end, Federal Party leadership persuaded the youth to give up their agitation.

This move resulted in several youngsters breaking away from the party to start their own groups. One such group formed was Kuttipimani and Thangathurai, from Vavvettithurai, Prabhakaran's hometown. Thangathurai's real name was Nadarajah Thangavelu. Kuttipimani's real name was Selvarajah Yogachandran. This little known group organised a secret meeting in Jaffna and decided to resort to armed struggle.

Thangathurai was an admirer of Yasser Arafat and his Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). He therefore wanted to name his new organisation as Tamil Liberation Organisation (TLO). The little group created history by taking the first step in what will be a protracted armed struggle for self-determination in the history of Sri Lanka.

3. Taking to arms

Members of TLO regularly met at a spacious house in Point Pedro. Discussions usually centred on revolutions and revolutionaries. Prabhakaran, at the age of 14, was the youngest among the group of fifteen. Kuttipimani, Thangathurai, Periya Sothi, Sinna Sothi, Chetti alias Thanabalasingham, Kannady Pathmanathan, Sri Sarabatnam and Sivakumar attended these meetings and talked about making bombs and collecting arms.

Venugopal Master's influence and association with the radical youth of the Thangathurai- Kuttipimani groups brought about a considerable change in Prabhakaran. He and his friends experimented with bomb making. In the initial attempts, the chemicals they collected from firecrackers served as an ingredient. Later on, they tried them with the chemicals pilfered from the school laboratory. They filled an empty soda bottle with chemicals and closed it with a cork. An incense stick was inserted through the cork and it was named ‘bomb’.

The plan was to explode the ‘bomb’ during lunch break and the place chosen was the school toilet. The little rebels waited outside until everyone finished using the toilet. Finally, Prabhakaran and another boy placed the ‘bomb’ inside the toilet, lit the incense stick and ran out. They waited anxiously for the explosion to occur. But nothing happened. Prabhakaran lost his patience and tried to take a look, but was prevented by the others.

Then the ‘bomb’ exploded. Delighted, the boys started laughing. As they were thrilled at their success, one of them spotted the principal of the school. The principal noticed them too. They rushed back to the classroom and sat quietly. The principal walked straight to Prabhakaran's class after inspecting the toilet. He knew that the mischief-makers would have come from that class as the students attended Venugopal Master's private tuition and everybody in Vavvettithurai knew that the Master was a proponent of armed struggle.

When the principal demanded to know who had done the mischief, no one answered. The principal let them go as he was aware of the anger prevalent amongst the youth. He however warned them to keep the mischief outside the school.

Prabhakaran knew that the real game was to be played outside. Sheer courage would not serve any purpose; he needed weapons. He could not fight the Sinhalea army with his bare hands. He was badly in need of a gun, but did not have any means to acquire it. After lot of contemplation, Prabhakaran approached Venugopal Master.

'Master, I need a gun.'

Venugopal Master was surprised. ‘You first learn kambadi,’ suggested Master. Kambadi is also known as silambattam, a Tamil martial art, in which a two metre long, cured bamboo stick is wielded as a defensive and offensive weapon.

Prabhakaran was disappointed. He thought the master had underestimated his passion. ‘How could one confront the guns of the army with sticks?’ thought the Master. On the other hand, he knew why his pupil was asking. 'Master, the enemy is showing off his sticks.'

Prabhakaran went on to explain his purpose. He wanted to take his own weapons. "I want to bring the enemy to his knees," he said. "I want to take up arms against the enemy." Master, the enemy is showing off his sticks."

Venugopal Master was impressed. His pupil's loyalty and determination were evident in his words. "You will learn kambadi," he said. "But you must also learn the strategy of war. You must learn how to use your weapons effectively."

And so it began. Venugopal Master taught Prabhakaran the art of kambadi. Prabhakaran learned the various techniques of using the stick, from basic defence to advanced attacks. He practiced every day, honing his skills and honing his will.

And then came the day. Prabhakaran was ready. He had the skills and the will. He was ready to confront the enemy. His path was clear. His goal was set. He was ready to fight.
Prabhakaran was heading a closely-knit group of like-minded friends determined to fight the Sinhala domination. This group was different from the Thangathurai-Kuttimani group, in which Prabhakaran was an insignificant member. There, he was the youngest and was called thambi (younger brother), whereas here, he was the leader.

Prabhakaran and his friends came to know that a rowdy called Sambanthan had a pistol and was willing to sell it for Rs 150. The moment they decided to buy a weapon, they had started a fund. Each member contributed 25 cents (a cent is one hundredth of a Ceylon Rupee) a week from their pocket money given to them to buy candles. The secret group accumulated Rs 40 in twenty weeks.

In an interview given to a magazine called Velicham, Prabhakaran said, ‘Determined to buy this pistol somehow, I sold a ring which had been presented to me during my sister’s wedding. It fetched Rs 70. Altogether we now had Rs 110.’ He had sold the ring he received as a gift during the marriage of his elder sister, Jagatheeswari.

Prabhakaran and a friend took a bus to Point Pedro where Sambanthan lived. Prabhakaran didn’t have enough money, but thought he could persuade the seller to either reduce the price or agree to accept the balance money later, recognizing the patriotic nature of their mission.

Sambanthan could not believe his eyes when he saw two boys in shorts enquiring about a gun. His first reaction was to chase them away. However, their eagerness to see the weapon made him relent. He let them have a look at the gun and made sure they did not touch it.

‘This is not a play gun. You children should not even touch it,’ he said.

Prabhakaran was almost in tears. Though he had seen a gun before, this was the first time he had a chance to view it from close quarters. He was disappointed that he could not touch it. He asked Sambanthan to show him how to operate it. Sambanthan declined saying that it was not a weapon for boys and asked why they needed the gun.

Prabhakaran said he needed the gun to fight the police and the army who represented Sinhala domination over the Tamils. ‘We must drive them away,’ said Prabhakaran firmly.

‘For what?’ questioned Sambanthan.

Prabhakaran replied, ‘In order to free the Tamil nation and reclaim the lost pride.’

Sambanthan was surprised. ‘We have political leaders to look after these matters. You had better go and study now. May be some day, when you grow up, you can think of these radical things. Now you can go.’

Prabhakaran did not come there to go back empty-handed. He asked reluctantly, ‘Will you sell the pistol to us if we bring the balance money?’

Sambanthan declined, and Prabhakaran returned back to Valvettithurai with a broken heart.

Perhaps some day he will be in possession of a cache of weapons, he thought. For that, it was imperative for Prabhakaran to become physically and mentally strong. He and his friends learnt about the physical exercises taught in the army. They also obtained details about the torture techniques used in police investigations. If they ever got arrested, they wanted to be prepared to withstand such torture.

Prabhakaran and his friends started learning the basics of karate and judo. They exercised well to condition their bodies to endure prolonged suffering. They would prick their nails with sharp needles, tie themselves up inside gummy sacks and lie in the hot sun for the whole day or lie on top of bags containing hot chillies with only underpants on. These were usually the torture techniques deployed by the police and the army.

Around 25 youngsters were part of the Kuttimani-Thangathurai group. The members called Thangathurai as ‘mama’ (uncle). Both were born in Valvettithurai and so were most of the group members.

In the first half of 1970, Thangathurai purchased two revolvers, .22 calibre and .38 calibre. He had planned to use them for shooting practice and as a prototype for manufacturing them locally. The responsibility of copying and manufacturing similar revolvers fell on the shoulders of Kannady Pathmanathan and Prabhakaran. Kannady Pathmanathan was a radio mechanic by profession and was known for his technical proficiency. Prabhakaran, a keen observer and improviser, was asked to assist Kannady.

Thangathurai recalled this to a journalist T Sabaratnam, ‘We knew nothing about making revolvers. In fact, most of the boys saw those weapons for the first time. I asked Kannady and Prabhakaran to try. They sat on the veranda of the house we regularly met in, with a few screwdrivers and hammers. They dismantled the revolvers in no time. They placed the pieces carefully on a newspaper and then assembled the revolver. Both possessed remarkable powers of observation and an excellent memory.’

Kannady Pathmanathan and Prabhakaran did not stop there. They soon mastered the art of manufacturing similar revolvers and even managed to make bullets. Prabhakaran also learnt shooting perfectly. At first, they used the chemicals in matchsticks. Then, they used the chemicals in firecrackers. The guns and bullets used during the early days of the armed struggle were entirely homemade.

The year 1970 saw some dramatic changes in the political arena too. Dudley Senanayake’s five year regime came to an end. He ruled the country for 1,825 days, of which the country was placed under emergency for 1,086 days. The nation prepared itself for a general election.

Federal Party once again put forward a federal concept. The party’s election manifesto said: ‘The Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon believe that a federal type of constitution that would enable them to look after their own affairs alone would safeguard them from total extinction. Only under such condition could the Tamil-speaking people of this country live in dignity and with their birthright to independence as equals with their Sinhalese brethren.’

V Navaratnam, who led the Federal Party in the previous year and had formed the Thamil Suyatchi Kasagam (Tamils Self-Rule Party) and Suntharalingam campaigned for the establishment of a separate state for the Tamils and named it Eelam. They were defeated in the polls as Tamils voted for Chelvannayagam and the Federal Party. Despite this, Navaratnam and Suntharalingam were successful enough in sowing the seeds of separation in the minds of the youth.

Venugopal Master, in an interview to the writer Sachi Sri Kantha, said in 2004, ‘Suntharalingam’s brain was on a different plane from the others. Regrettably, he was an eccentric individualist — as typical of mathematicians — and he couldn’t nurture a team of followers. Thus Eelam nationalism didn’t pick up steam then.’

Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) came to power with the support of the communists. Srimavo Bandaranaike was sworn in as the Prime Minister. Dudley Senanayake handed over his United National Party to JR Jayewardene and left active politics after his party’s poor performance in the polls.

Srimavo appointed Dr Badruddin Mahmood as the Education Minister. He introduced a bill of historic importance in Parliament that created an irreparable damage in Ceylon’s prolonged ethnic conflict. He introduced an act called ‘The Standardisation Act’ in the
Badi-ud-din told the Parliament that Sinhalese were discontented with the university admission scheme which resulted in Tamil domination of the prestigious professional courses such as medicine and engineering. The minister said that predominantly Tamil examiners awarded more marks to the Tamil students and they also helped the Tamil students during the practical examinations. ‘The cabinet feels the need to correct these injustices done to the Sinhala students,’ declared the politically motivated Tamil speaking Muslim minister who was more Sinhalese than the Sinhalese themselves.

As a first step towards the ‘corrective’ measures, he said that the Government was going to abolish practical exams altogether. The second step was media-wise standardisation. In short, standardisation meant that the Tamils needed to score more marks than the Sinhala students to get admitted to the professional courses.

At first, Tamil representation in the Parliament was reduced by depriving the voting rights of the hill country Tamils. Then, the Tamils were not permitted to conduct their own affairs in their own language. State aided colonisation and encroachment shrunk the traditional homeland of the Tamils. Tamil youth, who were already agitated, were further infuriated by the Standardisation Act.

Tamil students apprehended that the media-wise standardisation would benefit the Sinhala students at the cost of the Tamil students. Ponnuthurai Satyaseelan, a university student, gathered other Tamil students and organised a massive protest march. At the end of the march, they approached the Federal Party leaders and wanted them to protest against the media-wise standardisation. The leadership did not understand the seriousness of the student revolt while the students found the politicians’ answer evasive.

Satyaseelan declared openly, ‘We never had any faith in the Tamil Congress. It is too conservative and insensitive to new ideas. The Federal Party too is getting fossilised and is losing its grip on the problems of the youth, especially the students. We need a new organisation to voice our grievances.’

Thus, Tamil Students Union (TSU) was founded in November 1970. Many, including Sivakumaran joined this organisation. At the beginning, membership was restricted only to GCE Advanced Level students. Later on, it was extended to students in the lower classes and school dropouts too. That was when Prabhakaran joined the organisation at the age of 15.

Amirthalingam, who was out of the Parliament after his loss in the 1970 general elections, was asked by Cheivanayagam to organise and manage the youth wing in the Federal Party. A TSU delegation met Amirthalingam in December 1970 and urged him to do something about the standardisation issue on behalf of the Federal Party.

Amirthalingam brought the issue up in the party’s General Council Meeting that took place within a month, and told the gathering that standardisation had angered the youth and explained the ground realities. As a result, the General Council appointed a 11-member committee headed by Thanthai Chehva. When the committee tried to meet the Prime Minister, it was directed to meet Badi-ud-din Mahmood.

Badi-ud-din told them that he would do anything for them except changing the Standardisation Act. He further said that it was a collective Cabinet decision and he was merely implementing it. He had no authority to alter it.

Earlier on 15th June 1970, Deputy Minister for Cultural Affairs, Somaweera Chandrasiri, paid a visit to Urumpirai Hindu College. He was considered to be a Sinhala extremist and the dissenting Tamil youth despised him. Sivakumaran placed a bomb underneath his car. This was recorded as the first act of violence indulged by the Tamil militant youth.

No one was killed in that incident or injured in the incident. The car, however, was blown to pieces. Sivakumaran was arrested following this bomb blast, which influenced other youth to take up the armed revolution.

4. Ceylon becomes Sri Lanka

Like Sivakumarar’s, Prabhakaran’s first act of violence also took place in 1970. Prabhakaran and three of his comrades did not target anyone’s life, but decided to set a state run bus on fire. The decision was based on their belief that destroying state property was the best way of showing their protest against the actions of the state.

They finalised a time and place that would allow them to escape easily after the incident and also made sure that no innocent public is harmed. A bus running between Valvettithurai and Point Pedro was chosen as the target, after it returned to the shed in Point Pedro its last trip in the night.

Prabhakaran and his comrades waited with a can of petrol and a match box at a dark corner near the bus shed. As the bus was approaching them, Prabhakaran’s friends, who were all in their teens, panicked and ran away. Yet, Prabhakaran was unfazed. He swiftly rolled a large log of a coconut tree they had kept with them onto the road. As the driver and the conductor of the bus got down to remove the log, they were chased away by Prabhakaran. He splashed the petrol on the empty bus and set it ablaze.