

Keeping memories alive 20th anniversary of Rajani's assassination

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One night in 1983, soon after midnight Rajani woke me up and whispered to me that she had been asked to treat an injured boy from the *Iyakkam* (movement). For her, this was an act of compassion by a doctor towards her patient. For me it was a political act. I was frozen. I turned back and slept. I was caught up in the agony of belonging to the oppressor and the woman I dearly and unconditionally loved trying to 'liberate' her own community by undertaking her bit in the struggle. This whisper and the brief political argument that followed opened cracks in our relationship which grew wider and wider.

Rajani had an enormous influence on those around her. She was a mother of two young children, Narmada aged 11 years and Sharika aged 9 years respectively, at the time of her death. She was 35 years old. Rajani had begun to demonstrate an extraordinary courage and vision in her political activism defending human rights and took an uncompromising position whenever these rights were violated. The armed confrontation between the Tamil Tigers and the IPKF was at its peak at the time and no dissent was tolerated. She had had links with the LTTE and had treated injured Tamil militants before at the inception of Tamil tiger militancy. Then they were only a small band of armed men. Times had changed. Her assassins had been waiting for her on her way home after work at the Medical Faculty and she was gunned down near her home in Kokuvil, Jaffna on 21st September 1989 about 4.00pm. They came behind and called her by name. Then she was still sitting on the bike, turned back and looked at them. Eyewitnesses say that she tried to cover her forehead with her bare hands seeing the gunmen pointing the pistol at her head. They demonstrated extraordinary cruelty against a woman who had only her bare hands to cover her head against the bullets. Even after she fell on the ground they shot the back of her head with two bullets to make sure that she would not be alive to criticise them again. They showed no mercy towards the woman who had showed them such compassion and had treated them when they were injured. Her young daughters hearing the gun shots wondered who the victim would be this time.

The purpose of this account is to make some personal reflections and analysis on the life shattering individual experiences suffered by us as a young family in the unprecedented political upheavals for decades simply because we did not wish to be just observers. It also attempts to trace the political journey of two individuals with an intimate relationship in relation to the wider political process that engulfed the country.

First meeting

I met Rajani in September 1976 when the student unrest was rapidly spreading within Sri Lankan universities and there was a renewed militant student activity among the university students. An innocent student, Weerasuriya at Peradeniya had been gunned down by the police and the student militancy grew stronger in the face of such atrocities against the student movement. These were extraordinary times. The political unrest in the country had already begun to change our lives and our lives in turn were set to change the political course of the country, even in a small way, to a point of no return. I had just come out of prison for the second time after spending long years in prison in 1976. Rajani, a young Tamil woman with Christian religious background and radical

political thinking had just started to influence the medics at the Colombo Medical Faculty with her thirst for justice and democracy against a repressive state apparatus that had a hallmark of historical discrimination and violence against Tamils. I had just become a university academic by this time. When we met and forged our relationship it was clear that our lives would never be the same again, for us, as well as our children who were yet to be born. We got married on 28 August 1977 in Colombo, without a ceremony, in the midst of anti-Tamil riots in Colombo. On the day we got married we stayed in Rathmalana with a Sinhalese friend of mine and her father loaded his shot gun and kept awake all night in order to protect us as a number of Tamil families had been attacked on the previous night in the neighbourhood. Our marriage brought together two ethnically, socially, politically and culturally diverse individuals into a relationship based on human understanding and deep love which appeared unshakable at the time. Once she wrote to me saying that her love for me was as deep as the ocean. With all these differences, one of the most interesting issues was how far our loving relationship with all its complexities would serve to protect our marriage during a politically divisive time when the two communities were at war and in which the Tamil minority was at the receiving end. Both Sinhalese and Tamil popular cultures had been at war with each other and the Sinhalese considered their culture was superior.

Ethnic differences

Our ethnic differences would have appeared unbridgeable at the very beginning, as I was a product of the 1956 Sinhalese Buddhist social mobility that had been created by my parents' generation of people who were part of the *Panchamaha Balavegaya*. (*Sanga, weda, guru govi, and kamkaru*) and in turn the 1956 and its perpetuation. Its ideology had shaped our thinking and political outlook as young people who had very little to do with the Tamil community and understanding of their issues. The political issues Rajani tried to grapple with as a young medic had in fact become intractable due to the ideological and political outlook perpetuated by the 1956 social mobility amongst the Sinhalese youth, which discriminated against the minorities in Sri Lanka. This was a big advantage for the JVP to build their pro-Sinhalese political project in the late 60's, throughout the 70's and 80's. Rajani was able to understand this political trend when she studied and worked in the Sinhalese areas and in Colombo. The JVP's pro-Sinhalese project showed that the Tamil democratic struggle had to be fought by the Tamils themselves as it did not accept the Tamils had specific democratic and political grievances to be resolved. It was this kind of political rejection in the Sinhalese South that drew people like Rajani to support militant organizations in the Tamil community.

Social class

Socially, we belonged to two different social classes. Rajani had a middle class upbringing in Jaffna. I was brought up in a poor peasant family in the South and the only life chance opened to me was education. As a young boy I had to walk to my school miles and miles with my bare feet. My childhood poverty and deprivation and how I had to overcome these as a young boy was very distressing to Rajani to the extent that I never wanted to explain the full extent of my past to her beyond a certain point. It was a lottery that I managed to succeed in my education. Rajani had no issue whatsoever about my social class vis-à-vis her middleclass background. She defended me strongly within her own middle class family members and outside whenever it came to their attention that I had not been living up to their middle class norms.

We were also politically different and in reality these political differences played a divisive role in our marriage. I had near religious belief in the Marxist-Leninist/Maoist political agenda and Rajani wanted to apply the revolutionary success stories in other countries to Sri Lanka as pragmatic examples of social justice. It was also due to this pragmatism that Rajani became closer to the Tamil Tigers in her own political journey. In the same way this core ideological belief of pragmatism

benefited her to turn her energy and emotions into human rights campaigning later in her political life when she left the Tamil Tigers.

When I met Rajani I had only just left prison I still had scars of torture all over my body and while in prison I had never expected to live again let alone have a relationship. Rajani showed extraordinary courage to accept me as I was with all the differences between us, with my own social and political past which was such a contradiction to her own middle class life and aspirations. She had to battle it over with her family. Rajani had accepted that I would one day leave her and go in order to fulfil my political responsibilities. It was also accepted we would not meet again once I left the family. My generation had undergone a tremendous change in their mind set and all our personal needs and aspirations had to be suppressed for political justice and the emancipation of the poor. We also had a very deep sense of family ties and gratitude and the need to provide for our parents who underwent untold sufferings to bring us up. This sentiment and obligations we had suppressed in the belief that social justice followed by the armed revolution would resolve this for ever. Rajani had been coming to terms with a life with our children without my presence and her expressed determination to look after them on her own. This idea was no longer sustainable when the demands upon us required us to sacrifice our expectations and throw away our perceived traditional roles. This is what exactly Rajani did. We thought at the time that even if we were not there our children would be looked after by others, particularly our comrades.

1983 anti-Tamil riots

The 1983 anti-Tamil riots had an unprecedented influence on every Tamil's conscience and their dignified existence became untenable: either you had to accept your unequal status and keep quiet or you had to fight for justice and democracy. For the Tamil community it seemed there was no way out. However, Rajani was still unclear about the political line to be taken in search of justice and democracy. My views were clear in this regard. I never wanted to join any political organisation which would not allow you to get out if you disagreed with them. Without that kind of internal democracy it becomes a very dangerous affair if they take up arms. Additionally, here was another issue which we did not pay adequate political attention to as youthful political minds: even nominal parliamentary democracies could withstand armed struggle and demonstrate flexibility in recreating political space defeating the resolve of armed combatants. In Sri Lanka still the political space had not been closed. We were in a hurry and the political space for the democratic struggle had not been exhausted. The failure of the JVP armed struggle in 1971 and 1987-89 as well as Tamil Tigers' recent military defeat has to be viewed in this context, despite its own organisational and structural weaknesses.

Rajani's pragmatic mind and her compassion were drawn to the Tamil Tigers' political project. Rajani left for England in 1983 on a commonwealth scholarship and by the beginning of 1984 Rajani had joined the Tamil Tigers in London. I visited Rajani in May 1984 in London. Following a very painful but comprehensive discussion it appeared that there was no space for the continuation of our marriage except our joint responsibility for our daughters. We decided to part and I went back to Colombo. Rajani had become a seemingly unwavering member of the Tamil Tigers' military project. Once our relationship had appeared to be unshakable but there were no guarantees in a time of war that we could maintain it with such divergent political views. The deep human love that brought us together over our differences had vanished for ever. Rajani became very distressed but her political loyalty was placed above the loyalty that had existed in our relationship. We had decided to go our own ways as our political and personal differences were irreconcilable. Our differences had their own dynamics in a relationship that became dysfunctional.

After a couple of months of my return to Colombo, Rajani had resigned from the Tamil Tigers. She wrote a letter to me breaking the news and assured me that our relationship was still as strong as

during our happiest times. Rajani acknowledged our separation in these words *in all my trials and tribulations you stood by me in strong love but I was cruel to you...* Rajani was always open and frank. For me still there was no guarantee that it could ever be the same again. On my part I had moved on. During this time the political suppression had become acute and I was keeping a low profile. Rajani would now be returning home to her beloved people and Jaffna, to resume her work in the University after completing her Phd.

Rajani arrived in Jaffna in 1986. She became the Head of the Anatomy Department. Rajani's political transformation was becoming impressive. She was evolving as a human rights activist and her feminist outlook brought a new political dimension to her politics and she pioneered a new kind of people's political agenda in Jaffna. She became a tireless campaigner for freedom and democracy against the rule of the gun. She pioneered the formation of the University Teachers of Human Rights (UTHR J) with three other academics which drew anger and wrath from both IPKF and militant groups particularly the Tamil Tigers. Rajani and others recorded all the human rights violations from all sides in the conflict. She believed the human life was so precious that no human life should be eliminated for political reasons. She also supported and was actively involved in Purani, a refuge for destitute women. She became a remarkable mother, a tireless activist and respected academic in an environment that posed a great danger to every human being there at the time.

From time to time Rajani visited me with the children in Colombo in order to make sure that they did not miss their father. During this time she also began to write *Broken Palmyra* with some others in the UTHR this made her an obvious target of the Tamil tigers. When I read the manuscript I had no doubt what the outcome would be if it was published. I advised Rajani that she would have to lie low and that they would not spare her if she went ahead with its publication. She agreed but the UTHR (J) had to make the decision. By the time she was gunned down, it had not been even published. The Tamil Tigers knew that it was going to be published.

Rajani clearly understood the danger to her life if she continued campaigning but she did not wish to scale down her activities and stop what she felt she had to do. Such was her indomitable courage and determination during such difficult times in the history of Tamil militancy.

Rajani was buried in her family cemetery in Nallur on 25 September 1989. I walked with my two young daughters hand in hand, the most difficult, most painful and saddest of walks in my life. Along with her, the happy days of our family were buried and the family was never the same again without her presence. We have not been able to visit her grave for twenty long years. Each day her daughters passed without their mother, brought home to them their irreplaceable loss. They joined other children in Sri Lanka who lost their parents due to the war. The irony was that it was me, not Rajani who had expected to die in the struggle and she had accepted that her role would be to care for the children. But the total opposite happened. At the beginning of our relationship I never thought that I would end my political career for the responsibility of looking after my children. I thought that my involvement in Sri Lankan politics would result in my death. That did not happen. Instead Rajani gave her life for the human rights of the Tamil people and I had to be alive for the children. I looked after them until they were independent. But my tribute goes to Rajani. It was Rajani's solid foundation she laid in their formative years that helped me to complete the task. This situation was not specific to my children or family. Such was the dramatic transformation of the political situation and its impact on individual members in the Tamil community within a short period of time of militant activity.

Before she was gunned down, in early September Rajani was in Colombo on her way back from England after a short trip and waited for me in Colombo before travelling back to Jaffna. But I could not make contact with her. She left Colombo in disappointment. Before leaving Rajani wrote a few lines on the back of the cover of the book she bought for me in London and left it for me. This was

her last note to me.

To

Him, who lives out of the paradox of deep tenderness and love -with the strive of Bakunin's characterization of 'a revolutionary has no interest of his own, no cause of his own...no habits, no belongings he does not even have a name' If in this era of cataclysm and overwhelming terror - when no victories are won or end seen - if it is only reverence that this woman can pay to him who carries fire in his heart and burning determination in his spirit let it be only that

Rajani 1989.

After Rajani wrote this, she went to Jaffna. Then I received a message on 22nd September which I never wanted to hear. Her death brought the demise of my political career. Rajani's death also made our relationship brief but our memories have become life long with rich life experiences.

The commencement of Rajani's political journey with the Tamil Tigers brings to the fore questions about why people join certain militant organizations where dissent will not be tolerated and where criticism might lead to death. I had discussed this issue with Rajani over and over again. The elimination of 'traitors' was a common practice in Sri Lanka in both JVP and Tamil militant organizations. Both the JVP and LTTE killed their political adversaries and these killings showed no mercy and some of them demonstrated unimaginable brutality.

Any responsible political organization must explain to the people why they had to resort to such brutal eliminations of their critics. The JVP has failed to do it so far and it's unlikely that they would do it after so many years have passed since their gruesome murders were carried out. They have not ruled out that they would not do it again. They eliminated those Sinhalese who advocated granting the rights of the Tamil people under the 13th amendment during 1987-89. Both the JVP and Tamil Tigers should take this issue seriously as it is a demonstration of their democratic credentials. If they choose to eliminate their political dissent without dealing with them in a democratic manner now, there will never be room for democratic freedom in the future even if they were to succeed in installing their dictatorships over the masses of people. Rajani's death and her political legacy shows that ordinary human beings, when faced with acute degradation of human freedom under the rule of the gun will never be silent and their political reaction will be more powerful than the gun. I salute Rajani for being one of such heroic women. Rajani was asked not to return to Jaffna in 1977 from England by the family and friends in the midst of a very destructive war during a time many professionals were leaving Jaffna, but she felt very strongly to get back to serve her community. Rajani refused to listen to the same advice just before her death on her return to Jaffna.

Rajani's assassination had weakened the Tamil democratic movement. Those who are responsible for her death should accept their political mistake if the Tamil democracy is to become a mature, responsible and viable political force in the coming years. This is because her assassination was symbolic of the political indecency, dictatorial and anti-human nature of Tamil militancy that went off track, leaving a huge political vacuum in the Tamil community.

Even though Rajani was assassinated the political ideas she fought for will never be vanquished. The pro- people political ideas she developed and analysed in Broken Palmyra provides a very powerful critique of Tamil militancy which in the name of Tamil liberation was becoming a ruthless military apparatus and using people cynically to build a dictatorship.

The Tamil democratic struggle needs peoples structures in every sphere of life that would guarantee their rights and freedom and these structures should be strengthened against corrupt politicians and

the rule of the gun.

To commemorate Rajani's life and her contribution to human rights a commemoration meeting will be held on 25th September 2009 at 6.00pm at BMICH in Colombo by the Rajani Thiranagama Commemoration Committee.

P.S.

* By Dayapala Thiranagama. From The Island Midweek:
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