

Rajani Thiranagama : Making of a new revolutionary

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Speech delivered yesterday on the twentieth death anniversary of Rajani Thiranagama.

On the morning of 22 September 1989 I was asked to come to a safe house in Colombo to receive an urgent message from Jaffna. Some friends of mine were waiting there with a messenger who had come from Jaffna and who had had lunch with Rajani on the previous day. She wasted no time or words in delivering the message. « Your wife, Rajani, was shot by a gunman yesterday afternoon on her way home from the university. She was fatally wounded in the attack. Your children are with their grandparents. » The woman herself was deeply shocked and was in a state of distress. It would have been the most difficult message she had to ever deliver to a totally unknown person within such a short time in such a few words. I still remember the incredible speed with which my head started spinning and how speechless I was.

The woman who brought the message of Rajani's death for me in Colombo later became an invaluable friend who was right beside our family's side in London whenever we needed support.

Rajani demonstrated an extraordinary courage and unwavering commitment in her quest for justice and human dignity against all the parties embroiled in a brutal armed conflict where the lives of ordinary masses were placed at risk of displacement and death. Women and the children had to bear the brunt of it. Between 1987-89 the Tamil people had to witness the most destructive war the community had ever seen between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan army and then it continued unabated between the Tamil Tigers and the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). In the Sinhalese south the situation became alarming as the JVP started assassinating the left activists who supported the devolution of power to the Tamil people under the 13th amendment.

This account of Rajani's life attempts to trace the journey of a new revolutionary from an ordinary young Tamil medical student who became conscious of the experience of her community and the meaning of her ethnic identity, to a tireless human rights activist who paid the ultimate price for what she believed in. She had no hesitations. This is the story of a new kind of revolutionary. It also tries to unearth her political contribution, as it has as much significance to the current situation as it did 25 years ago.

Rajani began her political life through the Student Christian Movement (SCM) which was very active among the students in the mid-1970s and beyond and got involved in the political issues of the day. As those issues needed to be analysed within a wider socio-economic context, at times other political groups had offered more space that could not be ignored. Rajani and her other colleagues did not hesitate to use such forums while keeping their links with the SCM. The end of the mid-1970s also marked the end of relative peace in the student movement. At Peradeniya an innocent student, Weerasoorya, was gunned down by the police. This sent the shockwaves through the student movement and the universities were closed down by the authorities. For the first time, schools in Colombo had joined the protest following the Weerasoorya murder. The public were fully behind the

student movement. The Colombo Medical Faculty, for the first time in its history, went on a strike against the murder of Weerasoorya by the police. Rajani was at the forefront in organizing the strike at the Medical Faculty. This was the reason I met Rajani in September 1976. Our meeting marked a new chapter in our lives and the decision we would make from now would change not only our lives but also our family forever. We fell in love and got married on 28th August 1977 in the midst of anti-Tamil riots in Colombo. Rajani was still a medical student and I had just begun an academic career in the University. We sometimes called ourselves 'the unity of opposites' in relation to our social, cultural and ethnic differences.

In Rajani's journey from an ordinary politically conscious Tamil woman to an extraordinary new revolutionary, her marriage was the first step. Rajani broke her barriers and got married to a Sinhalese man who had spent many years in prison. And my own social profile of being brought up in a poor peasant family in the Sinhalese down south was quite unimpressive to her middle-class community. Rajani's courage and human understanding in accepting me as I was, bewildered even some of our political friends, whose understanding of inter-ethnic relations in both communities had serious defects at the time, as it does today. They were the sons and daughters of the generation of parents, including my own, that formed and belonged to the 1956 Sinhalese social mobility. As far as our families were concerned, they had to accept the inconvenient truth about our relationship and marriage. Rajani also accepted the continuation of my political commitment as before. We also came to terms with the fact that our family was not going to be a family that would make both parents available for the children throughout their childhood. Any political involvement in Sri Lanka would be a very dangerous affair just as it is today. These were hard and painful decisions. As far as our family was concerned, ideologically and politically, it departed from the accepted family norms of its existence and Rajani's contribution was crucial in this transformation. Without Rajani's deep understanding, unhesitant approval and courage we would not have built a family unit that would withstand the political and survival test of our times. Then the birth of our daughters Narmada (1978) and Sharika (1980) made us wonder at times about the level of our political commitments. This was a very emotive, painful and difficult issue. That was a huge responsibility we had failed to anticipate.

Rajani's consciousness in its evolution took a dramatic turn when she had to work in Haldummulla, a predominantly Sinhalese village on the Balangoda - Haputale Road with a scattered Tamil people of up-country origin. Tamils were the poorest of the poor there. One day Rajani had to inform the mother of a young boy who was a patient in the hospital that her son would be transferred to the Badulla Hospital. That would be the only chance of his survival. The woman begged Rajani not to transfer him simply because if he died in Badulla she would not have the money to bring his body back home. However, he was sent to Badulla, ignoring her plea, and he returned home after a full recovery. Rajani found it extremely difficult to deal with such situations of poverty and the sufferings and how it hampered any possibility of a dignified human existence. It left an un-erasable scar on her conscience. Finally in 1980 we both decided that medical practice was not the best employment in such circumstances and decided to leave for Jaffna. Rajani opted for teaching and joined the Medical Faculty in Jaffna University.

In 1983 Rajani started campaigning to release her sister Nirmala Rajasingham from jail who had been detained under the PTA. Prior to this, Rajani had treated injured Tamil militants. Rajani left for England by the end of 1983 on a Commonwealth scholarship to commence her postgraduate studies. Her initial exposure to militant Tamil Tigers and her campaigning for her sister both had contributed to her joining the LTTE. I visited her in mid-1984 in London and it appeared then that there was no going back on her part. She did not wish to return to Sri Lanka through legal channels. I came back to Sri Lanka and this was tantamount to a farewell as I felt there was a huge wall between us. We decided to part and go on our separate ways. However, Rajani was too honest, politically

straightforward, truthful, fiercely independent and committed to her beliefs for the LTTE to handle. These were the personal qualities of a new kind of revolutionary Rajani came to represent in her personal and political journey, which resulted in the ultimate sacrifice for the right of dissent in the Tamil community. Rajani also possessed certain qualities that made it possible for her to connect with ordinary people. After I left for Sri Lanka, within a couple of months Rajani had left the Tigers. She returned to Jaffna with her two daughters against the advice of the family and friends in 1986. In April 1987 from Jaffna Rajani wrote to me, « I am very worried. It is difficult to live here. Most depressing is the dark valley we are walking through -particularly, Inhumanity everywhere. Amma is scared, she is scared for the children that I would talk out loud or do something ». Against these depressing and gloomy political backgrounds Rajani fused together her new political outlook which consists of the right to dissent against the rule of the gun and the freedom to organise structures that would ensure democratic freedom with human dignity. One of the major components in her outlook was her feminism - in empowering women and building structures to strengthen the independent voice of the woman. She worked for the formation of Poorani for destitute women. These structures and political ideas ideologically and politically went against the military project of the Tamil Tigers. They were poorly equipped with political ideas and organisations that would be capable of having a mature dialogue with dissenting voices. Rajani's joint authorship of *The Broken Palmyra* with others brought these ideas to people's attention. Her pioneering role with other university academics in forming the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR J) marked a milestone in human rights in the Tamil community. This work and these political ideas sent shockwaves through the professed monolithic structure of the Tamil Tigers. The UTHR rightly introduces Rajani as a olive wire of the organisation even today in its website. The Tamil Tigers understood the possible political danger from Rajani. The Tigers would not hesitate to stop the live wire of the organisation for good. Rajani's life and death shows how long, arduous and painful the road to victory is when human dignity and the right to dissent are violated by those who choose to use violence to resolve political issues.

It is also necessary to reflect on the validity of Rajani's ideas in relation to the current political situation. To use Rajani's phrase still, we are walking through a dark valley, and inhumanity is everywhere. One of the fundamental issues today is the fear to speak out or the right to dissent. The dark shadow of the ethnic war has not entirely disappeared. Unless the democratic space is expanded with maximum devolution of power to the Tamil community peace will be as elusive as ever.

It is possible that in both the Tamil and Sinhalese communities there will be more and more people like Rajani, as the political barriers for which Rajani had to give her life, as a new revolutionary in support of their fundamental democratic right of dissent, are still not removed. Those who follow Rajani's path will make our world a better place.

For twenty long years I have been coming to terms with the terrible pain and anguish Rajani would have felt a few seconds before her death and my inability to share that with her. I know how she would have felt. Once she wrote to me saying that, « If anyone knows me in this world like pages of a book it is you. » I owe so much to her, for the depth of my love for her, and for the true understanding of the beauty of human love that our relationship taught me.

Rajani and I loved Bob Marley's music. She particularly liked one song with which I would like to end by quoting « Get up stand up, Stand up for your rights ».

P.-S.

* From The Island :

<http://www.island.lk/2009/09/26/features4.html>