

Sri Lanka: A tribute to Rajani Thiranagama — a beacon for the Left

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A tribute to the Tamil doctor, feminist and human rights defender of Jaffna, Rajani Thiranagama, on her 25th death anniversary. She was killed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. This is an occasion to revisit the issues of self-determination, the strategy to prioritise certain forms of struggle over others, and the question of rebuilding the left - matters which are relevant not only in Sri Lanka but everywhere in the world.

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The 25th death anniversary of Rajani Thiranagama fell on 21 September 2014, and was marked in Jaffna with a series of events to honour her memory.

As the invitation to the memorial events explains:

Rajani remains an inspiration and symbol of hope to many in Sri Lanka who desire a just peace with democracy and dignity for all, especially minority communities in the country. We hope to explore spaces for a democratic practice in which people are able to participate. While we cannot speak for all communities, we wish to raise political questions about the different oppressions that pervade society. We are looking for spaces in which the voice of the people could be heard, in the economic, social and cultural arenas, which in sum make up the politics of a place. The post-war period offers us a space to question nation, class and gender; of paramount importance in all this is to focus on the needs, aspirations and (self) expression of communities who have been dispossessed during the long period of war and in the current context of development and post-war reconstruction.

A doctor, lecturer in Jaffna University, feminist, author, and human rights defender, Rajani was shot dead by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as she cycled home from work 25 years ago. She knew her life was at risk when she returned from a research trip to the United Kingdom a few months earlier, but was so convinced she was needed in Jaffna that she did not heed the warnings of friends. Many moving tributes to Rajani have been made over the years, but a theme that has been less explored is her contribution to socialist practice: a contribution that is relevant not just in Sri Lanka but worldwide. From an early age Rajani was involved in left politics, through which she met Dayapala Thiranagama, a Sinhalese activist from the South, and later married him. Her subsequent activism can be seen as an attempt to live out her principles in one of the darkest periods of Sri Lanka's history. It is especially important for the left in Sri Lanka to learn from it. In the 1960s, the abandonment by the major left parties of their earlier policy of principled opposition to Sinhala nationalism resulted in fragmentation of the left and a decline that has yet to be reversed.

The Nationality Question

Dogmatism is perhaps an even more dangerous enemy of socialist thought and practice than repression, because it undermines them from within. An example that resonates in Sri Lanka is the debate between Lenin and Luxemburg in the second decade of the 20th century on the right of nations (which at that time often meant something similar to what is now referred to as ethnic groups) to self-determination. The context in which the debate emerged was the messy situation in east Europe. Unlike west European imperial powers, which had colonised countries overseas, the East European and Ottoman empires had expanded by annexing adjacent countries. In the same region, migration had produced mixed populations, with linguistic and regional minorities in most countries. Lenin, coming from imperialist Russia, contended (1914, 1916) that nations like Poland and Ukraine should have the right to self-determination, including the right to their own state. Luxemburg, coming from oppressed Poland, objected (1909) that that would result in handing over power to right-wing nationalists; she argued instead for equality, comprehensive minority rights (especially language rights) and local self-government for these nationalities. Lenin conceded that socialists in imperialist countries should support progressive and socialist elements in these nations rather than leave the field open to right-wingers, yet continued to insist on their right to form their own state.

This is an important debate, arising in an attempt to grapple with a complicated political situation. Lenin's formula was obviously correct for colonies in the period of anti-imperialist struggles. Yet it does not work for very small minorities, geographically scattered ones, or, indeed, multiple minorities big and small in the same country, as in Sri Lanka, for whom Luxemburg's formula is more appropriate. A careful appraisal of the debate would conclude that valid points were made on both sides, which were united in their opposition to nationalism and their commitment to socialist internationalism. Yet in the years to come, Lenin's position became entrenched as the orthodoxy among Marxist-Leninists.

As Rajani's elder sister Nirmala Rajasingam points out, in the 1960s and 1970s, armed liberation struggles against western imperialism were widely seen, by their supporters as well as opponents, as struggles for socialism or communism. In a context where arbitrary arrests, torture, disappearances and extrajudicial executions of Tamils by an increasingly authoritarian and repressive state were punctuated by massacres of Tamils, she and Rajani saw no contradiction between their socialist principles and the struggle for a Tamil state in the north-east of Sri Lanka, although Dayapala, who had himself been a victim of arrest and torture by the same state, disagreed strongly. First Nirmala and then Rajani became active supporters of the LTTE.

However, it was not long before they realised that any commitment to socialist principles was incompatible with the right-wing Tamil nationalism of the LTTE. They parted ways with the organisation in the mid-1980s, and Nirmala escaped first to India and then to the UK. While it is obvious that criticising an organisation which regarded critics as traitors worthy of death requires physical courage, it is less evident that becoming fiercely critical of an enterprise in which one has invested emotional energy also requires moral courage. That moral courage as well as political clarity were displayed clearly in *The Broken Palmyra*, which Rajani co-authored with fellow-academics Rajan Hoole, K Sritharan and Daya Somasundaram (1990). The book deals with human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan security forces and the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF), but it also reveals the ugly record of abuses by the LTTE and other Tamil groups. In fact, this is in some ways its focus: the palmyra, a symbol of Tamil society, can bend before the blast of external repression, but it breaks only when something is rotten within. The authors' agony at seeing the society they loved torn apart by fratricidal violence and innocence desecrated by the induction of children into armed groups comes through loud and clear.

University Teachers for Human Rights – Jaffna (UTHR-J) (2000), of which Rajani was one of the founding members, had a similar focus. In an immensely complex political situation, where the Sri Lankan state, the IPKF, the LTTE, and other Tamil militant groups all played an ever-changing oppressive role, Rajani confronted each and every perpetrator with incredible courage, and defended the human rights of all victims, even when they belonged to the organisation which eventually killed her.

Opposing All Forms of Oppression

Unlike dogmatic supporters of the right to self-determination, who continued to provide critical support to the LTTE even when it became clear that it was destroying Tamil society by slaughtering other militant groups, killing unarmed Tamil critics and conscripting Tamil children, Rajani was quick to realise that it had become a reactionary force rather than an emancipatory one, and opposed it accordingly. Rather than adhering to a dogma that did not apply in this case, she was faithful to the more general socialist principle of opposing all forms of oppression. This is absolutely indispensable today, not just in Sri Lanka but everywhere in the world, where far too many socialists flounder about supporting one oppressor against another, sometimes even resorting to the dishonest cover-up of atrocities committed by the one they support. The result of their short-sighted subordination of some struggles to another one which they see as more important is that it precludes solidarity between the victims against both or all oppressors. This becomes most evident when we look at one site of oppression that Rajani refused to treat as subordinate to any other: patriarchy and male domination.

Over the years, feminists have learned to deal with the intersectionality between different forms of oppression, as a consequence of which some people who are oppressed in one relationship may be oppressors in another, while others are subjected to multiple oppressions. This has resulted, especially in the case of socialist feminists, in a rejection of a simplistic division of society – or, indeed, the world – into “good guys” who have to be supported and “bad guys” who must be opposed. Rajani’s chapter in *The Broken Palmyra* is entitled “No More Tears, Sister”, and anyone who reads it would understand at once that she writes as a socialist feminist for whom the subordination of women is in no way a lesser enemy than racist discrimination and persecution. In the midst of a devastating war in which multiple armed actors were killing one another as well as unarmed civilians, she found the time to set up and run the Poorani women’s shelter along with Pat Ready, a Sri Lankan burgher. Poorani was not just a shelter for women fleeing from violence, but also a place where women were empowered by mutual support and collective labour to challenge social restrictions on their freedom and autonomy. The involvement of working-class women gave it an added importance.

It is not surprising that the LTTE could not tolerate this. Some commentators have pointed to the fact that many LTTE fighters and suicide bombers have been women, suggesting that they played some kind of equal role in the organisation. Women becoming active fighters certainly challenged traditional conservative social norms, but the use of people as cannon fodder – or, worse, human bombs – does not indicate respect for them as persons. On the other hand, women who led conscription squads and the training of female conscripts undoubtedly had power, but they also had to imbibe the cruelty and authoritarianism required for the harsh treatment of mothers who refused to part with their children and girls who tried to escape from their captors; they thus became links in a chain of domination and subordination. By contrast, any attempt by women to make independent decisions about the struggle for emancipation was met with hostility by the LTTE. The Mothers’ Front, which had played an important role in demanding the release of young Tamil men subjected to mass arrests by the Government of Sri Lanka, was effectively deprived of its autonomy by the

LTTE in 1987. Rajani was the first of many women, including mayor of Jaffna Sarojini Yogeswaran, who were killed or driven to suicide by the LTTE for their defiance of its dictats. After Rajani's death, Poorani was infiltrated by the LTTE, taken over, and shut down.

In a situation of widespread misogyny and violence against women, ethno-religious identity politics serves as a potent divide-and-rule strategy to weaken women's resistance to male domination. In post-war Sri Lanka, subtle moves to marginalise Muslims and Christians in the North, and the Bodu Bala Sena's lumpen attacks on Muslims, Christians and even Buddhist monks who oppose attacks on minorities in the South, serve to further weaken women already divided along Sinhala-Tamil lines. Combating such divisions has to be an important part of any strategy to fight against patriarchy and male domination, not just in Sri Lanka but elsewhere in the world, where, for example, the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sunni Islamic State, both guilty of heinous atrocities against women, battle for domination in west Asia.

If we try to sum up the elements of Rajani's politics that are sorely needed today, I would suggest the following: (1) an uncompromising commitment to discover and report the truth, even if it conflicts with one's preconceived notions and is hard to accept; (2) an ability to deal with complexity in undertaking any analysis, seeing the multiple dimensions of any real-life dilemma and taking the trouble to take all of them into account; (3) the categorical imperative to stand up for the oppressed regardless of who they are or who is oppressing them, which today would mean fighting against oppression based on class, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or anything else.

In the years following Rajani's death, two more leading members of UTHR-J, Rajan Hoole and K Sritharan, were forced to flee in order to avoid the same fate. However they continued to bring out regular UTHR-J reports on the basis of information provided by a dedicated network of grass-roots fact-finders who risked torture and death to bring the truth to light. Unlike human rights defenders who felt that the case for defending the human rights of Tamils would be weakened if atrocities committed by Tamil groups were publicised, UTHR-J highlighted and condemned massacres of Sinhalese and Muslim civilians and the wholesale ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the North by the LTTE. This ability to see and report on all human rights violations, regardless of who the perpetrators and victims were, won them the prestigious Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders in 2007.

The UTHR-J reports are significantly different from ordinary human rights reports. Instead of contenting themselves with reporting on violations, they also engage in analysis of why the violations are taking place and engage in critiques of the ideologies driving them, for example, the ideology of nationalism. In this sense they follow the precedent set by The Broken Palmyra and Rajani's politics. Furthermore, they also report meticulously on every example of solidarity or compassion, even from quarters which can least be expected to display them. The abhorrent doctrine of collective guilt regards all members of a group or community (for example "the Tamils", "the Sinhalese" or "the Muslims") as guilty for the actions of some. The refusal of UTHR-J reports to do this makes them a valuable resource in undertaking the difficult task of reconciliation.

Keeping Rajani's Legacy Alive

However, in the post-war period, this is not enough. The task of analysing and fighting against the deeply corrupt form of capitalism dominant in Sri Lanka as well as the unbearable burden it places on working people and the poor is an urgent one, and can only be undertaken in conjunction with socialists in other parts of the country. A political system where absolute power is concentrated at the top must be replaced by a more democratic one, but this depends on working out a strategy to

combat the blatant divide-and-rule tactics of a repressive regime along with its collaborators among the elite of most communities, and on building up solidarity between all victims of oppression. Nor are capitalism and the regime in Sri Lanka detached from economic structures and political actors operating globally. Participating in international efforts to understand how they operate and how to resist their domination would be an essential part of such an agenda. What this means in practice is rebuilding the left from the bottom-up by bringing together the best elements from the old left parties, the new left parties and the non-party left to intervene in mass struggles and promote solidarity across existing divisions. That would be the best way to keep Rajani's legacy alive.

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P.S.

*<http://www.epw.in/commentary/tribute-rajani-thiranagama.html>

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