

University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka

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On the occasion of the release of *No More Tears Sister*, a film on the life and times of Rajani Thiranagama

Fifteen years after Rajani Thiranagama's brutal murder at the hands of the LTTE, the Canadian National Film Board has released a film based on her life. *No More Tears Sister* documents Rajani's intellectual and activist journey from militant politics in the seventies to her commitment for the human rights of ordinary people, for democratic space and dissent and her courageous stand against internal terror which led to her murder in 1989. We, who worked with her in UTHR, welcome the long overdue examination of the life of a Tamil woman whose unwavering commitment to social justice, to her people and to Sri Lanka remains part of our determination to carry on writing UTHR reports and to open up a democratic space within and outside Sri Lanka to talk about the rights of ordinary Sri Lankans. The significance of Rajani's life and political writings have not faded in fifteen years. This film allows us to reflect upon Rajani's political legacy and the current political climate in which the murders like Rajani's continue unabated.

Rajani like many socially committed youth joined the LTTE only to find that it was rigidly authoritarian, undemocratic and committed only to extending its military power. While many disillusioned by what they saw within the LTTE left the country or disappeared into obscurity, Rajani refused to be silenced. She felt responsible for her contribution towards extending the LTTE's power over the community. A socialist and a feminist, she believed that she owed it to the people to challenge the State, the LTTE and other undemocratic forces and build democracy from the grass roots and give people a voice in their future. Coming from a generation where revolutionary violence was accepted as a concomitant of struggle, she saw how it could lead to draconian abuses and mass murder. She valued life and the right to it irrespective of whether it was that of a friend or enemy. Towards the end of her life she came to the unshakable conclusion that all politically motivated killing was wrong – as she showed by her own example, even to protect one's own life.

When Rajani came together with us to form UTHR we were working at a time when political killings and child recruitment were rampant. Our work, while exposing all killers, explored the political underpinnings of the killings and the tragedies of families and individuals affected. This was of special concern to the LTTE, because it went to the heart of its ideology. According to the LTTE, its killings were a sacred ablution by great heroes to clean the society of traitors, and to criticise or even discuss them was supreme treachery. Our documentation shows that persons, motivations, actions and attitudes were much more complex, and appealed to the community to transcend artificial dividing lines and recognise the essential humanity in all. *The Broken Palmyra*, centred on the Indian Army's operation to take Jaffna, was coauthored by Rajani and three others in the same spirit.

Reflecting on Rajani's life and death, we find it no coincidence that that her murder happened in the midst of a ceasefire announced then by the Indian Government and the withdrawal of its Peace Keeping Forces. Rajani's murder came in the wake of the Premadasa government's appeasement of the LTTE – the precursor to today's not so original peace process presided over by Norway. Rajani's murder was quickly followed by mass arrests of dissidents and another round of war triggered by the LTTE's inability to cope with the expectations of peace and internal problems within it. Thousands perished in its torture camps and bunker prisons, including two students Chelvi Thiagarajah and Manoharan who were close to the UTHR (Jaffna). Once more we are amidst a peace process riddled with killings, abductions and mass imprisonment in bunkers with its routine of torture similar to those testified by the LTTE's detainees in the early 1990s(Report 9, 10 at www.uthr.org). Internal cracks in the LTTE are more in evidence than ever before. As for the peace process itself, there are few illusions left. The excitement of three years ago where expatriate Tamils thought they had a role to play in

rebuilding the North-East is gone. It was Rajani's vision as a teacher to produce a socially committed medical cadre. Today Jaffna, which sent thousands of doctors overseas, finds its main teaching hospital shockingly understaffed. Rajani wanted a plural and tolerant University, but today not only Sinhalese but also Tamil speaking Muslim students are with good reason afraid to study in Jaffna, once renowned for its education.

To many of us close to Rajani, the legitimisation of LTTE's politics in the name of peace is a travesty of justice. UTHR(J) has consistently strived towards creating space for internal accountability within the community. We hoped that external actors too would enhance that space. But in the current peace process, neither the Government nor the other peace makers are interested in accountability. The MoU signed under the ceasefire agreement does not include any mechanisms to ensure accountability, and there is no monitoring of human rights violations in the LTTE held areas. Large scale child recruitment and daily political killings by the LTTE do not seem to be taken count of by the peace brokers.

Given the current political climate, it is hard not to compare it with what Rajani wrote in the late 80's, and so prophetically. *There were no mass organizations which could effectively mobilize the people or voice their needs and opinions...there were all the externals of change: murals, Tiger courts, ribbon cutting by the Tigers! But the people had no role. They were spectators, bystanders...unable to determine the course of their struggle.* Her analysis of the LTTE and its politics is as relevant now as it was then. Rajani held that the LTTE's fascist politics, rather than liberate the Tamil people, would instead bring tragedy and domination. She predicted the impact it would have on the Tamils in the East as well as on the Muslims. Hardly since the ink had dried, Muslims were massacred in the East and evicted from Jaffna by the LTTE. Today LTTE domination is even more far reaching. Her writings also challenged the South, its narrow Sinhalese nationalism and its inability to move on a political solution to the North-East. The Southern polity never showed much respect for the democratic aspirations of the Tamils. The attitude of its elite has been based on mental paralysis, taking at every crisis what appeared to be the short cut demanding the least from them, however damaging to the North-East. This has involved a cycle of war and violence with contempt for the well being of Tamils, and when this led them into a *cul de sac*, the appeasement of the LTTE.

We give below an extract from her Last Thoughts (The Broken Palmyra II 9):

"We have now been living under the long shadow of the gun for more than a decade and a half, holding hope against hope for the survival of our children who are dominated by violence from all directions without a purpose or meaning. But, on the other hand, we also note the glazed faces of people accepting it all with a sense of resignation. Under these circumstances, to be objective or analytical seems to be a major effort, like trying to do something physical in the midst of a debilitating illness. Whenever we write we are dogged by this reality, fearing our losing the thread of sanity and the community submerging without resistance into this slime of terror and violence....."

"Thus after a decade of national liberation struggle and a ruthless striving for leadership that caused enormous loss of life and the denudation of the people's moral strength, the Tigers seem to be at a dead end. Their pursuance of a supremacist struggle at the cost of the very concept of liberation and their moulding of the spirit of their cadre on a fanatical dedication to the Leader and the Movement, was to be their undoing, as it is within all such narrow nationalist, fascist movements. Thus we as a people are also having a countdown. We can wait years. For a people, history does not change overnight....."

"The militancy did little to remove the discomfort felt by Eastern Province Tamils against the Jaffna dominated politics. Some of the abler and politically sensitive leaders of the L.T.T.E. from the Eastern Province had faced difficult times with the hierarchy. In trying to force a Tamil identity on the Muslims of the North-East, the Tamils are flying in the face of their own historical experience at the hands of the Sinhalese dominated state. The Tigers, while enjoying a spell of unchallenged power, can

hardly be unaware of these factors. Their attitudes to the recruitment of children reflect a sense of despondency. In the early days of the militancy, when mature recruits came in large numbers, the ideals of freedom were much talked about. The reasons talked about today have a fatalistic ring. When parents approach L.T.T.E. leaders to ask for their children who had left home and "volunteered," they are frequently reminded by the leaders that they too are missed by their parents. Little is said about any great cause.

It is hardly surprising that the propaganda thrust of the struggle must hinge around the two words "Traitor" and "Martyr." Indeed, the hundreds who ultimately made sacrifices for the same cause and were killed abjectly as traitors, speak not just for the enormous wasted potential, but also for the widespread frustration and anger that lie simmering below the surface. With room for democratic activity largely non-existent, it is easy to underestimate grossly this anger and the resulting insecurity for Tiger aspirations. This is reflected in the increasing obsession with "traitors.".....

"What has won widespread admiration is the destructive aspect of the Tigers. Their methods ensured that no one else was allowed to do anything, good or bad. Lacking the ability to face up to the Tigers, all other parties were driven by their weaknesses to show themselves in such a bad light, that the Tigers were welcomed back with widespread relief and their legitimacy was enhanced. However, recent events in the East have shown that, when challenged, the Tigers too could behave towards civilians in harsh military fashion. Many consciously acknowledge a negative reason for accepting the Tigers - that without them, they would be fighting once more. Again, one must not lose sight of the fact that the remarkable success of the Tigers and their fatal weaknesses are reflections of Jaffna society itself.

Apart from the failure of the society to take a stand or question the massive destruction of life and energies through internal developments, yet another factor most vividly reflects its fatal politics and its destructive value system. It is its failure even to see what is being done to its own children who are being cajoled and cornered into carrying arms, with no idea of what they are doing. All armed parties are guilty in this respect. It is hardly the case that people are unaware of what is going on. The earlier conscription for the T.N.A. was well known. The prevalence of armed sentries so small that their presence is known only through gun barrels peeping over walls, is much talked about in Jaffna. National newspapers too have presented photographs of baby faces carrying AK 47s as though they were pop guns.

But the leading sections of society, whether religious authorities, professional associations or associations of teachers, do not appear to acknowledge that there is a problem. There is, rather, much glib talk of the "Boys" delivering the goods. Some go so far as to justify the children being "guided and used" in view of the manpower shortage resulting from the older boys shying away from involvement. They would argue that these young persons have to be sacrificed to protect the "gains" of the struggle in which so much has already been lost. There is no questioning the kind of society we have been creating through this struggle. It is hardly surprising that many visiting outsiders have been astounded by these attitudes. This insensitivity and moral degradation is seen to go much deeper, when one looks at the politics that is articulated by the Tamil elite. Anyone who stands out and projects a qualitative difference, is isolated and destroyed. The weapons used may include slander, the misuse of institutional power and more indirectly, even murder.

What we have today is a weak society tending towards fascist regimentation. It has produced so-called traitors in dizzying proportions and little that is creative. To hide its mediocrity and the poverty of human qualities in its leadership, it needs to strengthen patronage and stifle intellectual development. This is reflected in its politics. There is a cost to the propaganda edifice that is being erected in Tamil Nadu, incorporating the Tamil militant struggle in Ceylon and the militarism of the Chola empire (from the 10th to the 13th centuries A.D.) so as to project a Dravidian racial mystique. This cost must eventually be borne by misused children and paid for in the blood of hapless victims.

It reads disturbingly fresh after 17 years.

We hope that the film *No More Tears Sister* stands as a testimony to the lives of people who have sacrificed their lives by challenging their own past and standing up for truth within the Tamil community. The film is a reminder that peace cannot be built through the legitimisation of those organisations that condemn independent, socially motivated activists as traitors. We ourselves continue with our reporting of violations of human rights which Rajani inspired us as academics to consider our duty and obligation rather than a choice.