

An anniversary and the problem of truth. (1999, September 19). *The Island*.

An anniversary and the problem of truth

"Who killed Rajini? The answer to this question is not as important as the answer to the query: Why did she have to die?"

With these words, carried in a widely publicized press release, the Women and Media Collective launched their commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the death of Dr. Rajini Thiranagama which falls on the 21st of this month.

The above question, however, betrays the moral confusion that has characterized the response of many of the Colombo based non-governmental groups that have chosen to interest themselves in this country's internal conflict. In fact, critics of "foreign-funded NGOs" with "hidden agendas" would probably treat this as a deliberate glossing-over of a killing widely attributed to the LTTE. However, we will give its authors the benefit of the doubt and call it moral confusion instead.

We will however seek to demonstrate that the answer to the question of who killed Rajini Thiranagama is every bit as important as the reason why she was killed.

According to the statement issued by the Women and Media Collective, Dr. Thiranagama was killed for what she stood for. This they define as "her forthrightness and determination to bring about the dawn of an era of justice and equality in which the Tamil people could be guaranteed equal treatment as citizens of this country within a democratic framework that respected the freedom of opinion."

It must then follow that the person or persons who killed her were opposed to these objectives. If society does not seek to identify and deal with the perpetrators of such a crime, it will leave them free to strike at all others who aspire to the same objectives.

In fact, this is precisely what has happened in the decade since Rajini Thiranagama died. Sarojini Yogeswaran, Pon Sivapalan, Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam and a host of other Tamil citizens have been murdered due to the failure of this country to effectively neutralize the forces that refuse to allow freedom of opinion and democratic politics within the Tamil community.

However, having said that Thiranagama was killed because of what she stood for, the Women and Media Collective then contradict themselves (or seek to discourage further analysis) with the pathetic statement: "It seemed so senseless". In fact the killing made perfectly good sense to its perpetrators, what is senseless, or worse that senseless, is the pusillanimous attitude that is being encouraged by W & MC. Such an attitude is reinforced by the

phrase: "Why did she have to die?" There is an implicit message going out to any future 'Rajinis' that death is the natural and inevitable consequence of such a course of conduct.

All this contrasts sharply with the stated aims and aspirations of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) of which Thiranagama was a founder member, and to which she belonged at the time of her death. Unlike the Colombo-based Women and Media Collective, the UTHR(J) was founded in the heart of the conflict zone and its members witnessed the activities of the Sri Lankan Army, the Indian Army and the armed Tamil groups who successively controlled Jaffna during the 1980s.

The aims of the UTHR(J) as stated in their periodic commentaries, is as follows: "To challenge the external and internal terror engulfing the Tamil community as a whole through making the perpetrators accountable, and to create space for humanizing the social and political spheres relating to the life of our community."

Thus, for them, the way to challenge terror

1989, there was no doubt that her death was caused by internal terror.

UTHR(J) conducted their own investigations, and another of their founder members, Rajan Hoole, published a detailed account of the killing in an article written to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the death on September 21st, 1997. It was prophetically titled "A murder and the problem of truth".

"With the help of students and sympathizers, we were within three days in possession of a fairly clear picture of how the murder had been executed She left the house [after lunch] for the last session of the Anatomy viva voce examinations Later two unknown men entered the medical faculty, spoke to a student prominently associated with the LTTE, and one of them was led past the room with a glass pane where Rajini was examining students. The assassin had waited at the entrance to a lane leading north, on the opposite side of the road connecting the faculty and Rajini's house. According to testimony from the students, an employee of the University identified with the LTTE signalled the assassin or an



Dr. Rajini Thiranagama

death, or life imprisonment, or some lesser penalty, or even, in exceptional cases, pardoned. But no society says that killers should be shielded by saying that their identity is unimportant.

Even where there has been an internal conflict and the need of the hour is seen to be reconciliation, as under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, offenders must be identified and guilt acknowledged before pardon is given. Moreover, such an arrangement must apply to all sides in a conflict.

Yet paradoxically, the very persons who shun from naming the LTTE are quick to demand justice if there is any allegation of an unlawful killing by the Sri Lankan Army or Police. Reports of organizations such as Amnesty International (in apparent contradiction to its name) have insisted through the years that the Government of Sri Lanka must hold accountable any of its armed servicemen who commit unlawful killings, irrespective of the circumstances. Local human rights groups support such a stand.

However the law must be equal unto all, and murders committed by other groups must not then be glossed over. Let us end with a quotation from an Indian newspaper [The Hindu] following the death of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam:

"It is time for the Sri Lankan Tamil people and political groups outside the sinister shadow of the fascist LTTE to come to terms with the cold reality that until the LTTE is subdued and put beyond the pale of any negotiating process, the struggle to build democracy in Sri Lanka will be held hostage by the group of murderous delinquents hiding out in the jungles of the North-East."

Legal Watch

by Nayana

is by making the perpetrators of terror accountable, their identities cannot be dismissed as unimportant or even as "less important".

It is now acknowledged history that in the early 1980s the then Sri Lankan government sought to suppress Tamil political aspirations by force which resulted in many deaths and acts of destruction. Rajini Thiranagama who was then a post-graduate student in Britain, worked for the LTTE who were seen by many Tamils as the only force capable of standing up to State terror. However, by the mid-1980s, when the LTTE had shown their true colours by the ruthless elimination of several hundred members of other Tamil groups, she returned to Jaffna and tried to try to wean the youth of the peninsula away from the destructive cycle of violence that had engulfed their community.

Thiranagama's death occurred just after President Premadasa had announced that he was terminating the mandate of the Indian Peace Keeping Force which at that time was engaged in fighting the Tigers. To those who knew Rajini personally, and knew Jaffna in

accomplish from the faculty as Rajini cycled home at about 6 p.m. upon the conclusion of her examinations. After Rajini passed the lane the assassin followed her from behind, fired into her head causing her to fall down. He alighted from his bicycle, fired into her head again, and made his getaway down the same lane."

Conflicting evidence was given as to the identity of the actual assassin, but it would seem that few people at the scene had any doubt that the LTTE was behind the killing. The EPRLF publicly named the organization.

Groups such as the Women and Media Collective may take the view that without a judicial conviction, they will not name the killers, but are they justified in saying that the identity of the perpetrators is unimportant? In all civilized societies (not to be confused with the newly fashionable "civil society") it is an accepted principle that the perpetrators of any murder should be sought out and made accountable. Depending on the circumstances, and the society, they may be punished with