

Murder in Trincomalee and the Tamil predicament

by **Rajan**

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The murder in Trincomalee town of veteran Tamil leader **Arunachalam Thangathurai**, a lady school principal, **Rajeswari Thanabalasingam**, along with several others either killed or injured, shows once more that the killers did not have the slightest concern for the Tamil people. The killing which shattered any sense of complacency in Trincomalee town, would, appropriately enough, bring about an abhorrence of violence, a profound feeling of grief and loss, and an irreparable sense of the drift among Tamils everywhere. But sadly, in the present legacy of politics conducted by insinuation, assassination and character destruction in which the Tamils are trapped, it may be another non-event, another signpost in the community's long and self-inflicted death-march.

When the LTTE murdered **Amirthalingam** and **Yogeswaran** in 1989, a significant number of Tamil expatriates who were associating with the group stopped their association. Some months later the sense of loss was largely forgotten. Having listened to so many rationalisations they decided either that death was somehow deserved, or that the boys had now realised their 'mistake'. But there was in fact no 'mistake'.

Some years ago, a conversation with the late **N.Sabaratnam** turned on the subject of political killings in Jaffna that had taken a large toll by 1986. He pointed out that there was widespread grief when **Alfred Duraiappah** was murdered in 1975, and his funeral had occasioned about the largest public turnout the city had ever witnessed. **Mr.Sabaratnam** then observed that we had been too complacent about the political drift that came to terms with what the murder represented. **Mr.Sabaratnam** was a natural leader in the community, who followed a distinguished career as principal of Jaffna Hindu College with several years as editorial writer of the daily 'Ealanadu'. His editorials were sober and well-received. His press was blown up in January 1988 following an editorial plea for the implementation of the Indo-Lanka Accord, and against getting into opportunistic talks with the government of the day, It was another indication that no independent discussion by Tamils about their own future would be tolerated.

The meaning of the drift

What was not clear in 1975 ought to have become clear as the years went by. It was a struggle by an ideology that could realise power only by pushing to an extremity the insecurity of the Tamils. It is this insecurity that could provide the human bombs and the destructive power to brutalise the 'enemy', and drive them to further acts of repression and mindless violence, thus providing the setting for the legitimacy of the ideology and its acquisition of power. Such politics obviously needs the total suppression of the free thought and free expression, for it could never satisfy ordinary human longings for stability, freedom and dignity.

Responses

Tamils with some freedom to act were faced with two possible responses. One was to confront the ideology of death, for which the price was very heavy. The tragic story of dissent within the Tamil community, with hundreds of instances of exemplary heroism, remains unwritten. The other was to either escape or adopt an escapist frame of mind - to live with an

emigrant mentality, distancing oneself from responsibility for the land and its people. This also meant cutting adrift an essential part of one's humanity, leading to a degradation of the intellect and taking on board a good deal of hypocrisy. To give an example of the escapist mentality, many Tamils who have had the good fortune to establish themselves in urban centres like Colombo or Trincomalee town, away from the war-zone, credit the LTTE for their relative security. They feel that in these places they are left largely untroubled by the Sinhalese and the armed forces to walk with their heads held high, because of the LTTE fighting in the field.

This also means performing the amazing mental contortion of interpreting the Central Bank and the train bomb blasts in Colombo last year, as done to enhance the security and dignity of Tamils in that city. It also means failing to take responsibility for, or even to understand, the tragedy of rural Tamil youth coerced by circumstances into turning themselves into suicide bombers - indeed they are often told that the Tamils in Colombo must be taught a lesson! It seldom occurs to them to give credit to the good moral sense among a large section of the Sinhalese for their security, amidst calculated provocations to let loose the bestial.

Again many Tamils who get away from the situation in this country to better educational and career opportunities for their children, feel comfortable about supporting an ideology that systematically seeks to deny Tamil children here, even that little which a poor country could afford. Anyone who works to improve the quality of life for Tamils, particularly in the rural areas, is challenging the ideology of war and destruction - for the latter requires these Tamils to be kept alienated and insecure. Thus anyone who tries to give them better schools, hospitals, transport and challenges violations by the security forces, becomes a traitor to this cause. Little wonder then that those trying to make government assisted reconstruction and rehabilitation meaningful had been threatened.

Trincomalee District of which Mr. Thangathurai was a member of parliament, is a microcosm of the larger drama being played within the Tamil community. There is Trincomalee town, largely secure, with good schools and infrastructure, a sizeable middle-class and where real estate is booming. Also very visible there is a sub-urban proletariat of refugees from the war, living in camps and critically dependent on government rations, neglected children with little hope, and families literally going to pieces. They are a segment of the population from Trincomalee's abandoned Tamil villages, now scattered all the way from Mullaitivu to Madhu and South India.

Thangathurai, the mature statesman

Thangathurai clearly saw that if Tamils are to have a future in this country as a people with a culture and identity of their own, their rural life must be revived, rehabilitated and reinvigorated. He saw that the plight of the refugee population was becoming increasingly hopeless by the day and was determined to carry through the rehabilitation of the district with special emphasis on the villages. He felt that the government was adequately co-operative in this respect, but found the LTTE's stand to be unreasonable. Thangathurai knew that the larger long term questions are going to be decided by the strength of the Tamil community on the ground, and not in urban seminar rooms and negotiating fora. The initial thrust of his effort was to provide every village with a decent school, a hospital, with basic infrastructure such as roads and water, thus creating conditions for a return of the refugees. He was encouraged by the results in the Thampalakamam area.

There were charges that he was neglecting the town area. This he felt to be grossly unfair and often found townsfolk too complacent and insensitive to the depth of the Tamil problem and the plight of the rural villages.

Thangathurai firmly believed that the future well-being of the Tamils in the East depended on good will and co-operation between the Tamil, Muslim and the Sinhalese communities. He counted the late M.L.A.Majeed, SLFP MP for Kinniya as a close friend. Majeed's murder by the LTTE in 1988 had left Thangathurai crestfallen. What contributed to his success as an MP in pushing through rehabilitation was his non-confrontational style and an ability to maintain excellent personal relations with parliamentary colleagues.

In his outlook Thangathurai remained a very rural man. Thus conversation with him often proved an enlightening experience. He judged officials by their sympathy and sincerity towards ordinary rural folk. He had a fulsome word of praise for Sinhalese officials who worked energetically for the upliftment of disadvantaged Tamil villages such as Ichchilampattai. At the same time he was extremely critical of Tamil officials who found excuses for their inaction by blaming the government, while failing to use the powers at their disposal towards helping people. Something he felt proud of having done as District Development Council Chairman in 1981, was to have constructed an access road for a long neglected Sinhalese village in Gomarankadawela.

Thangathurai & the Militant Dilemma

To discern what made him tick, we also need to understand the militant side of his early political life. Thangathurai hailed from the very old Tamil village of Killiveddy, deep in the rural hinterland of Muttur(Cottiar) Division, along the bank of Allai tank. His father was a rural registrar. He was in the Irrigation Department before he took to politics as a member of the Federal Party and qualified as a lawyer. His area became embroiled in communal tensions following the introduction of the Allai scheme in the 1950s and the settlement of Sinhalese. But communalism had no place in his heart. Thangathurai had a deep appreciation of the Sinhalese farmer who toiled for his living as did the Tamil farmer. Relations with the Sinhalese at Dehiwatte, especially, had been close. They came into Killiveddy to buy produce such as curd, and also to his father to register family events. It is also significant that following the Army's Kumarapuram massacre of February 1996, crucial information about its execution and the complicity of the colonel-in-charge was supplied to him by Sinhalese from Dehiwatte.

In his early political life, it was natural for Thangathurai to become active in the Federal Party that was raising concern about state sponsored colonisation. This phenomenon was making the local population increasingly insecure. His own village of Killiveddy was a focal point. In the 70s Thangathurai and Yogeswaran acquired a reputation for being the young militants in the Federal Party. With a view to counter demographic manipulation by the State, Thangathurai's own family, particularly he and his younger brother Kumarathurai, became involved in establishing settlements of Tamils to secure border areas. They went through difficult times in the area with Thangathurai facing arrest during the 70s.

The worst came after the July 1983 violence. In January 1984 Kumarathurai was arrested in a general tightening of state repression. He was taken to Boosa and tortured, though no charges were made. But Thangathurai remained in Trincomalee. May 1985 was a period of heightened tension in the area with attacks and counter-attacks of a communal nature by the Sri Lankan

forces and the Tamil militant groups. On the night of 30.5.85 a police party entered Killveddy south bank and abducted 36 Tamil civilians, including women, who were killed and burnt. The following morning, the army came to the main village and shot dead mostly 8 elderly persons who had not already fled. The incident received world-wide publicity after Thangathurai spoke about it to the correspondent of the London Times in Trincomalee. (During the same period about 18 Sinhalese civilians in Dehiwatte were killed in Tamil militant attacks.) At this point Thangathurai was forced to flee the country to India when National Security Minister, Mr.Athulathmudali, ordered his arrest for `spreading false rumours'. Kumarathurai was released in 1986 only to find that his village had ceased to exist. He sought refuge in Denmark.

Despite such experiences Thangathurai was led to question the nationalism of the Federal Party articulated by the Jaffna middle class, which laid emphasis on `rights' first as legally defined. Its MPs were enjoined to boycott ministerial visits, and the Party was shy of exercising ministerial power even when supporting a government in parliament. This was fine for the North, but in the plural environment in the East, it meant the Tamil community becoming progressively backward, bitter and neglected, while others received state patronage. As an MP in the 70s, he told the Party that it was meaningless for him to be an MP if he refused to do business with ministers. He once told me jokingly, those in Jaffna can understand `rights', but not roads, tanks, channels and bridges.

Furthermore, he had lived with Sinhalese, knew them as human beings, and a large number of Sinhalese were among his constituents. Even out of office, I have witnessed his former Sinhalese constituents from Kantalai seek out his services. He also knew that a purist Tamil nationalism was not calculated to win friends. He related a moving experience where he was approached by migrant fisher-folk from Negombo. They told him, "Sir, our mother tongue is Tamil , but the Roman Catholic Church deprived us of worship in Tamil and forced our children to receive their education in Sinhalese. Now, your people and your officials too reject us. Please give our children places in your schools."

Thangathurai was thus never driven to the position that one cannot live with the Sinhalese. This sentiment dominated the North, where people saw mainly the Sinhalese police and the Sinhalese army. Thangathurai saw the cracks and the humanity behind what Northerners beheld as the monolith of the Sri Lankan state.

Moreover, the South itself had its own share of troubles, a harrowing militancy and the mood among the Sinhalese towards the ethnic question was also changing. The State was clearly not immovable. With all this experience behind him and considering the plight of the Eastern Tamils, Thangathurai decided that what was relevant today was not militant rhetoric in politics echoed from Colombo, but reconstruction and rehabilitation of the refugees. To this end he gave himself single-mindedly. His style remained that of simplicity and Spartan dedication.

I have attempted to sketch those qualities which made Thangathurai unique among Tamil leaders today, and who in his own way tried to deflect the march of death.

Our Responsibility

A brand of politics that sees a need to assassinate men like Thangathurai, as it did silence those like N.Sabaratham, is also one that refused to learn from experience. Most of those so

destroyed or silenced are men and women whom we had much to learn from, so that the community would remain alive and healthy. Such politics could only countenance blank or perverted minds. Should we not at least now express our outrage for our own sake?

I have deliberately written in a pessimistic vein. But these are urgent questions to which answers need to be found.