
focussing on human rights, conflict resolution and peace building. He wrote newspaper columns under different pen names, his most favourite being 'Sathya' or the 'Holder of the Truth.'

Dilemma

Actually, Kethesh began his *Sathya* column in 2002 in a significant political context. The newly elected United National Front government and the LTTE launched a joint peace initiative in early 2002. Brokered by the Norwegian government and supported by the global powers, the government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire agreement and began negotiations. There was an intense debate among Sri Lanka's civil society groups on the question of how to deal with the new peace initiative. Kethesh initially welcomed it, but soon became very critical of what he called the 'appeasement' of 'fascist LTTE' by the Norwegians, the international community, the Sri Lankan government and the 'peace lobby.'

Kethesh was not alone in this critical assessment of the 2002 peace process. In the sharply fragmented Sri Lankan Tamil polity, many intellectual and political groups shared his pessimism. The human rights group University Teachers of Human Rights (JFFNA) chronicled in consummate detail in their regular reports what they saw as the 'Tiger appeasement' and its consequences. It was also clear that sections of Sinhalese political class and the English press in Colombo made use of these sharp divisions in Tamil political society to advance the Sinhalese supremacist agenda.

Kethesh Loganathan is not the first or last person to have been slain by an assassin for political reasons arising from Sri Lanka's ethnic war.

When the war intensified in recent weeks, the political space also opened up for assassins to hit those who in military parlance are described as 'soft targets.' And there are many soft targets around, Tamil as well as Sinhalese. That also signifies the kind of barbarism that an ethnic war can repeatedly bring about to a society torn asunder by an intractable conflict. ■

ASSASSINATIONS AND COUNTER ASSASSINATIONS: REFLECTIONS ON THE KILLING OF KETHESH LOGANATHAN

N. Shanmugaratnam

As I stood looking at the bespectacled face of the slain Kethesh lying in a coffin at Jayaratne funeral parlour, I could not help wondering why he accepted a high-ranking position at the government's Peace Secretariat. What might have motivated this fiercely independent Tamil nationalist and an uncompromising advocate of human rights to join a highly politicised agency of the government? Did he think he could influence the government to move away from the majoritarian unitarist mindset and towards a genuine power sharing arrangement to solve the national question? Did he think he could engage President Rajapakse in a reasoned dialogue and convince him to abandon the JVP and JHU and their supremacist, militarist line? I was not sure if I was asking myself the right questions. But there was no question that the killing of Kethesh, an unarmed, unprotected dissident Tamil intellectual, must be condemned. After talking with several friends and acquaintances of Kethesh in Colombo, I

found that I was not alone in wondering what might have led to his decision to accept a political appointment. Nor am I alone in condemning his killing as a dastardly act.

However, one must go beyond condemning this particular murder and call for an end to political assassinations and massacres of innocent civilians in Lanka. Assassins had taken the lives of several Tamil politicians and activists. Many journalists have paid the ultimate price for reporting the truth, for knowing the identity of the perpetrators of extra judicial killings, or for taking the 'wrong' side. Nimalarajan, Sinna Bala, Nadesan, Rohana Kumara, Taraki (D.Sivaram), Relangi Selvarajah, Sampath Lakmal . . . this is not the beginning or the end of the list of the fallen journalists. Humanitarian workers have been massacred, Christian priests who provided shelter to the displaced have disappeared and it is feared that they might have been killed. The state's air force has been

bombing several areas in the North-East in the name of defending what the government calls sovereignty. But it has left scores of innocent citizens of the same state dead and many more displaced. Some statements from the Peace Secretariat in the days of the Mawil Aaru conflict and after made one wonder if they were emanating from a 'war secretariat'. How did Kethesh, the impassioned advocate of engagement and peaceful means, see his role in such an environment? I do not know the answer. Perhaps someone does.

The Tamil community has borne the brunt of politically motivated killings. It remains in the grip of a gun culture unleashed by rival parties. The gun was originally meant to serve the struggle for the liberation of the Tamils. But soon it took command of politics and has often been used to settle sectarian disputes by military means. I am not the first to say this, nor is this the first time I say it. Tamils need to reinvent the culture of intellectual pluralism and open political debate. And that culture needs to be regenerated by us from within our own society which I have no doubt is capable of absorbing transformative ideas and values from other societies. This must happen sooner than later to safeguard the justness of the cause of the Tamil people, to sustain the struggle politically, and to build a democratic society. It is widely recognised that the armed struggle has restored to the Lankan Tamils a great measure of dignity, while drawing the attention of the world to their legitimate grievances. However, internecine conflicts and the violent suppression of different ideas and perspectives on the national question and its resolution have done much harm to the Tamil cause and struggle. In the eyes of his killers Kethesh was a 'traitor' but

the world at large saw him as an intellectual with a different approach to the grievances of the Tamil people. Those who regarded him as a traitor should have taken the trouble to argue their case politically and show why his approach was wrong. What is the point in having so many Tamil and English websites, newspapers and magazines, TV channels and radio stations if we cannot use them for open exchange of views and for debates to develop an enlightened political culture in Tamil society?

My condemnation of the killing of Kethesh and my opposition to the gun culture that plagues the Tamil community cannot obviously be construed as an endorsement of government policy or the ways in which the government's Peace Secretariat conducts its affairs. The government talks of negotiations and peace without clearly stating its political stand on the national question. What emerges clearly from its practice is that it is pursuing a majoritarian supremacist agenda in the name of the sovereignty and sanctity of the unitary state. The problem with the state is that it is not just a unitary state but a communalised, desecularised, majoritarian unitary state. We cannot build a truly democratic Lankan society without restructuring the state to make it ethnically neutral (i.e. truly multiethnic) through an elaborate arrangement for autonomy and power sharing in a united Lanka. This should be the agenda of a government that is sincere and serious about achieving lasting peace in the country and to all its peoples. No government so far has had the political will to do this. The conflict cannot be transformed as long as this failure continues. Individual Tamil intellectuals like Kethesh could do very little to change this situation.

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