
KETHESH LOGANATHAN

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Kethesh Loganathan

The on-going war has devoured many in Sri Lanka, including Kethesh Loganathan, a prominent intellectual activist. Deductive political logic suggests that the LTTE assassinated Kethesh, on political grounds. The LTTE saw him as a traitor, because, being a Tamil politico-intellectual activist he has been working for the Sri Lankan government for the past several months as a key functionary of its Peace Secretariat. Sinhalese nationalists linked to the government also saw him as a threat. The JVP newspaper described him a few times as an 'LTTE agent' who had infiltrated a key government entity. That is how extreme Sinhalese nationalists continue to see politically active Tamils, as 'LTTE agents.'

The assassination of Kethesh once again demonstrates some tragic dimensions of the politics in Sri Lanka's Tamil society. Its politics is dominated by extreme militarism. The LTTE practices militarism in its most extreme form. So do the anti-LTTE groups who are aligned with the Sri Lankan state. Sri Lankan state and the Tamil polity have been dealing with each other primarily by military means. If one were to be politically active in Sri Lankan Tamil society, one has to be in one of these mutually antagonistic camps. This is a tragic dilemma for mainstream as well as dissident Tamil activists.

Kethesh began his political life as a founder member of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) in the early 1980s. Led by Padmanabha, the EPRLF was the most Left-wing of all Tamil militant groups active in the armed struggle. The EPRLF tried to combine class struggle with the Tamil national struggle. Trained as an economist at the Georgetown University, Kethesh was one of the key theoretical figures in the EPRLF. He took part in Thimpu talks in 1984. I had the personal privilege of facilitating Kethesh's book *Sri Lanka, Lost Opportunities: Past Attempts at a Negotiated Settlement*, which carries a participant's account of the failed Thimpu talks.

Biographies

Kethesh's biography, like the life stories of many of my generation in Sri Lanka, has been closely intertwined with the complex trajectories of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. When the Indo-Lanka agreement was signed in July 1987, the EPRLF was in the forefront of accepting the Accord as the basis for a political settlement to the ethnic conflict. When the provincial councils were set up in Sri Lanka in 1988, the EPRLF led a coalition of ex-Tamil militant groups elected to run the new devolution administration. Kethesh did not take up any political office in the new provincial administration. But he continued as a key intellectual figure in the EPRLF, advising the new Chief Minister. Eventually, the EPRLF got into a great deal of trouble with the Sri Lankan state in 1990 when President Premadasa's regime established a tactical alliance with the LTTE in their common agenda to get rid of the Indian peace keeping forces. Backed by the Indians, but hated by the Premadasa administration, the EPRLF was pushed into a new war with the LTTE. Politically and militarily cornered and faced with the prospect of being decimated, the EPRLF leaders declared a UDI for Tamils only to seek asylum in India.

Degeneration

But Kethesh managed to stay back in Sri Lanka. He saw along with us how the Tamil national struggle got itself degenerated into war, war and war. Eventually, Kethesh left the EPRLF and active politics. He wanted to resume his professional life. He became a research consultant at Colombo University's Centre for Policy Research and Analysis. Kethesh wrote *The Lost Opportunities* while at CEPRA with immense passion and commitment. That book still remains the most valuable source of information and insights about Sri Lanka's past attempts at a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict.

For several years, Kethesh worked for Colombo's Centre for Policy Alternatives as its head of conflict and peace research division. In his CPA years, Kethesh remained very active in what we call Sri Lanka's civil society politics,

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