

(Discussion on 'Palmyra Fallen, University of Jaffna Library Auditorium 24th April 2015)

Friends and Rajan, this book is a monumental work with history, politics, law and several other things. I have restricted my discussion to two things. The first is about the outlook of the book. As a person who has lived in Jaffna during most of the period of conflict, the second thing I am concerned about is what went wrong in our struggle. I will start on the first.

At the outset I have two questions. The book has Rajani's name in the title. Palmyra Fallen: From Rajani to War's End. Her photograph is on the first page; then it reminds us that this is the 25th Anniversary of the Assassination of Rajani. It is not dedicated to Rajani but Rajani appears throughout the book in addition to some chapters that talk about her only.

The first question I had was: Is Rajani important enough to be given this much space in our recent history? The second question about the outlook is what is the use of so much data and case histories that come again and again in the book? Let me come to the first question? Is Rajan justified in giving this much importance to Rajani? I have known Rajani here in the University. I have seen her working in many spheres. I saw her murdered. I know something here and there about her contribution but I must admit that I started reading this book with a skeptical view: Does Rajani deserve this much space in our History?

Rajani fought for her people. Several other persons have done it. She gave her life. But we have several examples of heroic martyrs.

Rajani stood for human rights. Not many have done it. But there are people in our country who stood for these rights.

Rajani identified with the poor and unfortunate. On a smaller or a larger scale many people have done it.

She didn't seek popularity but worked with abused women not merely supporting them but helping them to stand on their own. Some others too did it.

Rajani wrote a book 'Broken Palmyra' in English. We may have not seen many such books in English here but several persons have written accounts of our struggle in Tamil.

So what makes Rajani special?

Rajani could have chosen to live abroad with her qualifications and contacts. But she didn't do it.

She was managing alone in war-torn Jaffna with her two children. She could have easily avoided public life. She did not.

She cared for her students, for the University and even for those who regarded her their enemy.

That was special.

But by reading Rajan's account I found the uniqueness in Rajani which was and is very rare not just in our society but anywhere.

Rajani felt the pain felt by other people. She was murdered every time when an innocent life was forcibly taken.

For all of us at that time when a person was killed, it was either a traitor, a martyr or an enemy. For Rajani it was a precious life. For us our life is precious, special and sacred. For Rajani everyone's life was precious, special and sacred. She had a universal love for humanity that moved her to identify fully with every person. In that sense, yes, she was unique; a rare species in our land.

There was another thing that was unique about Rajani. As Rajan points out, Rajani was possessed of an internationalist outlook, saw our struggle in the proper perspective, identified her place correctly and performed her duty without worrying about the consequences. That was unique in our society and I agree that she deserves a place in our history.

In my view, there is another person who is unique in a different way. He labours in silence. He reaches the affected people in all corners of this island. He carefully records their stories with words that can move mountains. Every incident that affects our people affects him. He is a friend who can always be trusted. His only vision is for a just society for us to live that will be progressive in every way. I am sure you know who it is. It is Rajan, the author of this book.

Rajan, you have created a monumental work with history (national and international), law (national and international), politics (national and international), Engineering, Philosophy, Mathematics, Economics and Literature. I can only marvel, admire and respect your labour.

The other question I had about the outlook of the book is: Is all this data important? What is the point in collecting information about the affected people?

Rajan answers this in page 176 through Rajani's voice:

"It is not our intention to compile statistics of killings to compare violators quantitatively. Rather, it is our aim to take a cross-section of individual killings, place them in their context along with the motivations of the killers and their qualitative nature. By doing so we portray the role of the society in mutilating the truth and perpetuating conditions where ideologically motivated killings remain an expression of the political culture. We thus express the moral bankruptcy of the killers and urge upon society the need to question itself."

There can be no better answer to my question. This applies to all political and military manoeuvres and other incidents that targeted the innocent citizens.

Before moving to my final question about what went wrong in our struggle, I think I have to answer a question raised by some of my colleagues. Their complaint is "Rajan is against Tamil

nationalism". This reminds me of the time when we faced a similar question. "Are you devoted to our national leader? If no, you are a traitor."

There is no point in worshiping a person or a slogan. We must think in the interests of the poor, of the ordinary, and of the marginalized and underprivileged.

In page 229, Rajan says that,

"The cities of the north are filled with people having missing eyes, limbs and relatives. ... The Government has succeeded in dispersing the human wreckage of its policy of zero civilian casualties. These people must beg or seek charity. Instead of supporting them, the state spends its money on victory and Buddhists monuments, as well as army camps. It has also privileged the military in land acquisitions, hindering the recovery of victims who are denied the use of their properties."

Rajan tells in page 158:

"Forced to humour the army and pro-government groups just to get on with life, many Tamils feel more convinced than ever before that they need a country and land to call their own."

One can find the answer if he or she reads the book.

A country or a land of ours is needed if it will alleviate the suffering of the people, if it will be a place where the future generations can live without fear of punishment for their language, religion or views. It is not needed for the mere purpose of catchy slogans.

Now I will come to my final question. What went wrong in our struggle? Does this book have an answer or a clue for it?

Rajan speaks about the Citizenship Act and the Franchise Act brought about by the first Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake and points out the deterioration of the rule of law and consensus politics from that time.

He also speaks of the failed leftists. In page 155 he tells us that during the time when the 1972 constitution was being prepared:

"Communist party leader and minister Mr. Pieter Keuneman had arranged for Tamil party members to meet government leaders engaged in the new constitution. They found Mrs. Bandaranaike receptive but not so Dr. Colvin R de Silva."

Then he informs us that:

"Finally Chelvanayagam announced that since the party's presence (in the Constitutional Assembly) served no purpose, they were quitting."

Similar incidents are repeated again and again in our history.

Then who is to be blamed?

I believe that in the Sri Lankan context where the Government and its machinery were bent on discriminating against the Tamils, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Tamil leaders. There is no point in pointing our fingers at the Sinhalese leaders on that account.

We can think of situations in three countries where people won their rights by non-violent action: India, South Africa and the Blacks of America. In all these three cases it was the leaders of the affected community, that is, Mahatma Gandhi for India, Nelson Mandela for South Africa and Martin Luther King for the blacks of America who led their people successfully to win their legitimate rights.

The leaders of the ruling interests or the purveyors of oppression never worked for the rights of the oppressed. The only exception that comes to my mind is Abraham Lincoln who abolished slavery and rescued the blacks of America from the worst misery they were subjected to.

So as a first step I look at the actions of the Tamil leaders. In my view the struggle of the Blacks of America has some common aspects with our struggle and I will quote from Martin Luther King where relevant.

Let's see what Martin Luther King has to say about leaders,

"A genuine leader is not a searcher for consensus, but a moulder of consensus."

The role played by Tamil leaders may be summarized in Rajani's observation that is given in page 160: "All minority parties were no more serious about politics than making promises and getting votes to bargain with the ruling Sinhalese." The main concern of our political leaders was to compare their standing with Sinhalese leaders and they failed to identify with the problems faced by the Tamils.

Martin Luther King says:

"We must work with determination to create a society, not where black men are superior and other men are inferior and vice versa, but a society in which all men will live together as brothers and respect the dignity and worth of human personality."

About the LTTE we see in page 2 that:

"LTTE was never able to achieve a broad humanitarian outlook that would invite others into the struggle for Tamil rights as human rights." And that was one of the major drawbacks in LTTE's outlook. Finally LTTE was able to deliver only a vacuum for all the sacrifices it imposed on its people.

Martin Luther King tells the white people of America:

"There is no separate white path to power and fulfillment, short of social disorder, that does not

share that power with the black aspirations for freedom and human dignity."

The Tamil elites were the people who could have told the same message to our Sinhalese brothers. What they did instead can be found in the following comment given in page 175:

"Leading lights of the Tamil society, both locally and abroad, did a terrible disservice to their people by loudly praising the Emperor's new clothes, and connived to destroy those who spoke the plain truth; that the Emperor was, in fact, naked. This class is adept at switching allegiances when convenient, with no sense of social responsibility."

We can see that our political leaders, militants and the elites did not live up to the expectations of Martin Luther King. But I am not discouraged. With their proud history, being a people who created their first literature two thousand years ago, that is the Sangam Literature, which was secular in spirit, I am sure that the Tamilpeople will one day rise to the demands of their time, not alone but with their Sinhala brothers standing beside them.

Then we will have the third sequel to the two books: Broken Palmyra and the Palmyra Fallen. That will be the Sprouting Palmyra (in Tamil ValarumVadalikal).

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