

Tragic demise of a dedicated journalist

"Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee"

— John Donne



By D.B.S. Jeyaraj

The death of any member of the journalistic fraternity is distressing. More so when a scribe is gunned down in broad daylight by 'unknown' assassins for the 'crime' of writing something that displeases people with pretensions of power.



The Tamil National media will miss the voice of Nellai Nades

The sadness is even more acute when the journalist was some-one known to you for more than 25 years and was immensely helpful as a source of accurate news and stimulating views.

Aiyathurai Nadesan was shot dead on May 31 at about 9:35 a.m. in Batticaloa. He was riding his motor cycle to work when the assailants shot him dead at point blank range on Boundary Road. Leaving his home on Lake Road, Batticaloa at 9:20 a.m. Nadesan had followed his usual practice of picking up his *Virakesari* copy from the boutique next to the *Virakesari* office on Central Road.

Nadesan, whose full time occupation was income tax assessor, was going along Boundary Road and nearing his Bar Road office when the assassins struck. Two men on a blue motor cycle — both wearing helmets — were the killers. At least four shots were fired at point blank range from a 9 mm. Two hit Nadesan's shoulder and chest. One struck his hand. The killers whizzed away. There were many witnesses but none have come forward to give evidence to the police.

Fear psychosis

Nadesan's bike knocked against a concrete lamp post and the rider was thrown off. He fell into a drain. The fall had resulted in his ribs getting fractured. He lay bleeding about 200 yards away from his workplace on Bar Road and died at the spot after a while.

The Bar Road-Boundary Road area is a very busy place in the morning. Many people saw Nadesan lying close to the drain for a long time. Yet no one came to his aid. Such is the state of fear in Batticaloa, that people are scared to express even most basic human tendencies at times like these.

It was left to a fellow journalist, Thurairatnam and the TELO Batticaloa Organiser Prasanna to go to the spot examine the body of the lifeless, Nadesan and alert the authorities. Batticaloa Magistrate M. Ajmeer went to the place at about 11. am and ordered that the body be taken to the hospital and handed over to the family after an inquest. This then was the sad tale of Nadesan's demise.

Though a resident of Batticaloa for nearly 20 years, Nadesan was not an easterner. His wife was from Batticaloa. Nadesan however had adopted Batticaloa as his native place and integrated himself with the region. He spotlighted the problems facing people aptly. He was easily one of the best Tamil media journalists in the country.

The 49 year old scribe hailed from Nelliaddy, Karaveddy in Jaffna. This was adjacent to my mother's village Thunnalai South, Karaveddy. Nadesan's father Aiyathurai was a cooperative inspector with an impeccable reputation for honesty and integrity. Nadesan's house was on Chettitharai lane between Nelliaddy Central College and the Vathiri road junction.

'Nellai Nades'

Conforming to the practice adopted by many artistes and writers of adding their village name as a prefix Nadesan too used the condensed version of Nelliaddy "Nellai" before his name. It was as "Nellai Nades" that he wrote articles, short stories and poems during his school and undergraduate days.

When I first met him in 1977 while working at the *Virakesari*, he was known as Nellai Nades. Nadesan used to drop in frequently then to meet the present *Virakesari* Editor S. Nadarajah who was also from Anaipanthy in Nelliaddy. Later as a journalist, he used the byline G. Nadesan. The 'G' denoted his wife Gowri.

Technically Nadesan was not a full time journalist. He was an income tax assessor. He was a part time journalist but in practical terms the part time was full time. He was the Batticaloa correspondent for the *Virakesari* and also for 'Shakthi' TV and Radio. He also worked for the London based International Broadcasting Corporation. Given the volume and scope of his journalism, one could safely say that he was far more productive than most full time journalists in the Tamil media.

After obtaining a degree in business administration, Nadesan became a teacher for a while. Later he joined the Inland Revenue Department as a clerk and subsequently became an assessor. He used to write articles as a free-lance contributor to the *Virakesari* under his pen name "Nellai Nades" He later became the *Virakesari's* Batticaloa correspondent. Nadesan married in Batticaloa and settled down there. The "Nellai" gave way to 'G' (Gowri). They have four children, two boys and two girls.

The news of a *Virakesari* Batticaloa correspondent being killed in the line of duty is of poignant impact. One of the happiest and challenging periods of life for me as a journalist on the *Virakesari* was when I worked as Batticaloa staff correspondent for three months in 1977. (June and Nov - Dec). The *Virakesari* then had a brilliant journalist, V.S. Kathirgamathamby as Batticaloa correspondent. I had to replace him twice on a temporary basis then.

Batticaloa correspondents

After Kathirgamathamby retired another close friend, Nithianandan became B'caloa correspondent of the *Virakesari*. Nithy, an ardent Tamil nationalist got too involved with the LTTE. During the time of the IPKF, Nithy was viciously stabbed by some members of the pro-IPKF group, the EPRLF. Then Indian envoy J.N. Dixit arranged for immediate air lifting of Nithy to Colombo for urgent medical treatment at the request of Nithy's journalist friends then.

After recovering Nithy worked in the Colombo *Virakesari* office. When the Indian army left he returned to Batticaloa and joined the Tigers as a full time member. He was later ambushed and killed by the army. Nadesan became acting and later permanent B'caloa correspondent after Nithy. Now he too has been killed.

Though the police are saying that they have no idea who Nadesan's killers were, the people of Batticaloa know fully well who they were. The accurate marksmanship in killing a speeding motorcyclist is reminiscent of the Thannamunai shooting some weeks ago when two LTTE intelligence operatives were shot dead.

It is an open secret in Batticaloa that the killing was carried out by members of renegade leader "Col" Karuna's faction known as "Batticaloa-Amparai Liberation Tigers." It is said that the assassin was none other than "Pillaiyan". Yes! The same Pillaiyan who the LTTE website TamilNet reported as having been killed in battle. Much of the propagandistic disinformation dished out by TamilNet on the Karuna crisis is being gradually exposed now.

Though a Tamil nationalist in the '70s and '80s, Nadesan was more of a leftist than an ethno - populist. When Tamil militancy grew, Nades was more aligned with the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) than the LTTE. Nades was closely associated with former EPRLF Northeastern Chief Minister Annamalai Varadarajaperumal.

Nades and Varathan were contemporaries at the Jaffna University and also taught together at a Nelliaddy tutor later. When the northeast provincial council was formed Nadesan got himself seconded from government service and got appointed as Varatharajaperumal's press officer. I think his official title was 'information officer.' Ironically Nades was also an unofficial censor then.

He discharged his duties efficiently. With the LTTE threatening the Tamil media on the one hand, it was a formidable task to project the northeast provincial council activities in a favourable light. Nades did so, often exerting 'pressure' on editors and management personnel. One editor told me how Nades would often utter veiled threats in order to get pro-EPRLF news published.

Took his chances

When the council was dissolved and the bulk of EPRLF including Perumal fled from Sri Lanka, Nades did not follow suit. He opted to take his chances with the LTTE rather than fleeing the country to India. Nades was arrested as a 'traitor' by the LTTE and detained in a bunker prison. He was subjected to physical and mental torture. Nadesan's stand was that he was only an employee of the northeast council, doing his duty. Finally, Nadesan's brother Sivanathan, a prosperous mill owner had to pay a hefty donation to secure his release.

The LTTE that detained Nadesan as a traitor may well have killed him in captivity like many others if not for the money being paid. Now the same LTTE is showering patriotic titles and organising condolence meetings and protest demonstrations. This reminds one of how the Tigers treated former Tamil United Liberation Front President Murugesu Sivasithamparam. In 1989 the LTTE tried to kill him as a 'traitor.' In 2002 when Sivasithamparam died he was honoured by the Tigers.

I have kept in touch with Nadesan on the phone for several years. He was a reliable source of information about events in the east. Though he espoused a strong Tamil nationalist line he was by no means a Tiger acolyte. Nevertheless he had to adopt a 'safe' course. Often he would tell me of happenings which he himself could never report in Sri Lanka. What he wrote in print and what he said on the phone were sometimes different. "We can't write the whole truth. At least you do something," he would say.

'Information officer'

This is a tremendous existential problem encountered by Tamil journalists in the northeast. Having worked as provincial correspondent for the *Virakesari* in Jaffna and Batticaloa, I know only too well the pressures on the outstation Journalist. In recent times the war situation has thrust an immense burden on these poor souls. Even the fragile peace has not brought any relief to these scribes in the northeast. One is fully aware of the difficulties faced by Batticaloa journalists like Nadesan, Uthayakumar and Thurairatnam in Batticaloa.

To strike a personal note, I have faced several problems at the hands of the LTTE in Canada. I have been assaulted, had my limbs broken; the newspaper I ran had to close down because the Tigers intimidated shop owners and advertisers. Threats over the telephone were a regular feature. Scurrilous leaflets are often distributed. Tiger media continue to portray me as a traitor and assassinate my character. Yet I am still able to criticise the LTTE whenever necessary because I do not live in northeast Sri Lanka.

The scribes living there have to face this LTTE pressure. There is pressure from the armed forces and even other non-Tiger Tamil groups. The biggest threat however is the LTTE and today almost all Tamil newspapers in Sri Lanka tow a pro-Tiger line. While Tamil nationalism is the staple sustenance of the Tamil media the LTTE factor has brought about a qualitative change. Against this backdrop one would hesitate to judge journalists in Nadesan's position without having walked in their shoes.

Unlike some 'bluff masters' plugging a Tiger line and peddling fantastic bits of propaganda to any buyer, ranging from intelligence agencies to the BBC, Nadesan has striven to present a correct picture of developments as far as possible. I have often listened to his reports in the pro-LTTE IBC radio. I also read his *Virakesari* Sunday column regularly.

The significant thing about the column is that he does not distort facts. He leaves out some 'problematic' facts, but never writes falsehoods. His comments too never go to the extent of unbridled LTTE sycophancy like some others, since he himself is a Tamil nationalist and much of what he wrote was from that perspective. This however does not make him a 'Tiger' as both the LTTE and Karuna faction are trying to portray him.

Compulsion not conviction

Since he was only a 'pro-Tiger' due to compulsion rather than conviction, he sometimes took on a strident 'Tigerish' line. This was the case with many journalists in his position. The bulk of Tamil National Alliance MPs pretending to be fierce Tiger loyalists are also in the same position.

Whatever his faults or deficiencies, there is no doubt that "Nellai" Nadesan was a fine journalist and clever craftsman. Most of his articles were well researched and had much facts and figures. I have at times relied on his articles to get data and statistics. Whatever his stance because of political compulsions Nadesan's death is a great loss to the Tamil community in general and the journalist fraternity in particular.

Why was Nadesan killed? The pro - Karuna website "Neruppu" which scooped the Nadesan killing described Nadesan as a "*Wannippulippa-thirigaiyaalar*" (journalist of the Wannai Tigers). Tarnishing a dead man's name to justify a dastardly killing is a typical Tiger trait. The Karuna faction is no doubt adhering to its roots in this matter. The brutal assassinations of perceived dissidents and critics by both the mainstream and rebel groups indicate that in the final analysis both are *paasisappulligal* (Fascist Tigers) and nothing else.

When actor-politician M.G. Ramachandran broke away from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1972 and formed the Anna - DMK there were many in Tamil Nadu including veteran statesman "Rajaji" C. Rajagopalacharya who thought that a refreshingly new political culture was emerging. But former Congress Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Kamaraj was more astute.

He decried both DMK and ADMK and observed in a memorable utterance — "*Irاندume ore kuttaiyile oorina mattaigal than*" (Both are husks soaked in the same puddle). Likewise the recent pattern of eastern killings indicate that both the mainstream LTTE and eastern faction are of the same ilk. The Karuna faction of the LTTE should be condemned for the killing of journalist, Aiyathurai Nadesan.

Sunday leader