

## **Murder in Galle through the eyes of children**

*Basil Fernando*

Four pairs of eyes belonging to four siblings, the eldest of whom was fifteen, were fixed upon a scene happening on the morning of July 22 at Beligahahandiya in Galle, Sri Lanka. That scene will remain fixed in their minds for the rest of their lives, overpowering anything seen before then, or in the future.

They were on their way to school with their father, who had stopped the car at a junction to buy their breakfast. As he was returning with the food, two gunmen wearing motorcycle helmets appeared behind him and instantly started shooting. As the first gunshot was heard, the eldest one tried to open the car door and get out. He heard the last words of his father, “Epa, epa,” (don’t, don’t). Then there were more shots and their father fell down. The gunmen came closer and shot him again, then disappeared on a motorcycle.

The name of the man shot down was Deshabandu Dushyntha Seneviratne. Forty-years-old, he was the opposition leader of the Galle Municipal Council. He was a member of the United National Party and the chief ministerial candidate for the forthcoming elections of the southern provincial council. He was running in opposition to the ruling party candidates.

For the rest of their lives, Deshabandu’s children will ask themselves who killed their father and why. The family has already announced that he had no personal enemies and was in fact a very popular person, liked by everyone. In all fairytales and stories that teach morals, an enemy always has some kind of resentment or cause to extremely dislike the person who is targeted. Often, it is the villain who gets killed and the killer is a hero, standing for some higher principle. Thus, besides the personal loss, there will be a moral issue that will haunt these children: who is the hero, their father or his killers? Or perhaps they will wonder whether such considerations are altogether irrelevant.

All that is known about the dead politician is that he was popular, judging by the number of votes he had received every time he contested the elections to the Galle Municipal Council. His friends also say that he was a good orator and was therefore capable of drawing more attention to his party. His popularity was also indicated by the large number of people who gathered outside Karapitiya hospital when news of the shooting spread. Therefore, it is not far from the truth to speculate that as a candidate, he would have drawn more votes at the coming provincial council elections for his party.

Can that be a just cause for a killing? Civic education will deny this. On the contrary, Deshabandu’s children will be taught that participation and contesting of elections are basic rights of any citizen. If they were to doubt this, it would be impossible for them to honestly participate in political life within their country.

The children saw two gunmen wearing helmets kill their father, but will they ever know who these two persons were? Judging by the experience of recent times, it is highly unlikely that they will ever be identified. To put the minds of these children to rest, adults may explain that some unidentified gunmen are hired by others to do such jobs. The four siblings will thus learn early about contract killings, and they will forever wonder about the mysterious persons who plotted the killing.

The children would have heard about police investigations, courts and judges. They may have images of men in khaki uniforms in their minds. Several such officers might have taken their statements regarding what they saw that morning. They will perhaps be called to give statements at the inquest inquiry by the magistrate.

As the days go by, and the mysteries behind their father's death remain unresolved, the children will naturally wonder about the role of these men in uniform, and even that of the courts. When these officers and courts cannot reveal to them who killed their father and why, their future faith in these institutions will be hampered.

The children will soon realize that they are part of a very large group of Sri Lankans who will never know why their parents were killed or who was responsible. They will also learn that, by and large, their fellow citizens have little curiosity about these tragedies. In this way, the children will be learning the unwritten and unspoken rules operating within their motherland.

Among these rules are: Killing for hire is a job for many people nowadays; hired killers are supported through a secret process hardly anyone can penetrate; attempting to penetrate that process may carry the risk of death; it is no longer a state obligation to investigate crimes competently, promptly and efficiently; in fact, the state does everything possible to disorient and destabilize the criminal investigating agencies; the prosecutors--the Attorney General's Department—will use 'absence of evidence' to justify their failure to prosecute the crime; the judiciary will also prove to be impotent in dealing with the situation; being a member of an opposition political party is an offense, even if it is not an offense under the penal code that carries a death sentence; except for their immediate family, nobody is sad or worried about the murder of their loved one.

Four pairs of eyes of four young children are destined not to have any real explanation offered to them regarding what they saw by either the state or society. While these children are told over and over again to love their "marthrubhumi," or motherland, in that motherland there is no longer any guarantee of justice.

-----  
This article was originally published on 30 July 2009 for a column entitled Burning Points at [http://www.upiasia.com/Human\\_Rights/](http://www.upiasia.com/Human_Rights/).