

NEELAN - A FEMINIST SALUTE

Assassination too often targets the very best a society has produced, a person who has symbolized humanity at its finest, a person who had a vision of a better society, free of all the horrors of racism and religious and ethnic tension. The most notable examples that come to mind are the slayings of Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King; their lives inspired people all over the world, but the manner of their deaths still reverberates in the conscience of humankind. We kill our best.

In Sri Lanka where terror and assassinations have occurred so often, the killing of Neelan Tiruchelvam has jolted our conscience more than ever before. For he was much more than a member of parliament and political leader; he was a leader of civil society, an intellectual, a jurist of repute, a champion of human rights and the rights of minorities and above all an indefatigable worker for peace in Sri Lanka. Many of the tributes to him have highlighted his contributions and his great achievements in institution building and in promoting peace and democracy. *Cat's Eye* pays tribute to Dr. Neelan while recalling aspects of his contributions to gender equity - a point not noted in the other tributes.

While many distinguished men in Sri Lanka society theoretically accept gender equity, only a few are active and come out boldly to support women's struggles. Neelan was one of the few.

We recall his support in all the research programmes at the International Center for Ethnic Studies on women's issues including their current research on violence against women. We recall his sympathy for feminist legal theory and his backing for scholars working on these themes; we recall his support for individual feminist scholars, directing them to current books and articles and showing interest in their work. We recall his persistence in parliament raising the issue of Aung San Suu Kyi's detention and reminding local women's groups to lobby for her release. We recall his invitation to two Irish academics for discussions and public talks (on the Irish peace process), one of whom was from the Irish Women's Coalition for Peace.

Because of Neelan's encouragement and support, the ICES has run major programmes on Women and Governance in South Asia, Women and Religion in South Asia, doing seminal research and work in this area. The ICES along with the Law and Society Trust have been major arenas where feminist scholars have gathered to discuss their work. Recently, the Law and Society Trust put forward an initiative for an Equal Opportunity Commission which included gender equity as one of its main tenets. Not only have special research projects on gender been incorporated in the work of these institutions but Neelan insisted that all their major programmes contain a gender component. Among his closest friends were women who are leading feminists. When his death was announced, tributes came pouring in from all over the world and were included

in all the major feminist networks. He always listened to women's voices and incorporated many of their ideas in his work. He was particularly interested in the conceptual aspects of feminist theory and its contribution to scholarship in various fields. He was an avid reader of the *Cat's Eye* and made many references to its analysis in public. Once when he was left out of a woman's conference that interested him, he asked plaintively, "Why have I not been invited? I am also a feminist". Well Neelan, we are proud and honoured to have counted you as one of us. We will be inspired by your work and when peace comes to this land, we will help build some lasting monument in your name.

To many people in Sri Lanka, Neelan was known as only a politician, portrayed negatively by interested parties in the petty politics that govern Sri Lankan life. But he was much more than a politician. Neelan loved ideas, and he was an avid reader. People marvelled at the fact that despite his extraordinary commitments in terms of time, he had read the latest newspapers, journals, the Internet and books not only in the law but also other disciplines. He even had time for fiction. Those who worked with him recall fondly that he had ten ideas a day and that the institutions he built could only implement three or four. His boundless energy and his constant attention to the voices of young people made him an inspiration to many. He pushed their energies to the edge and made all of them feel that they could reform the world, all that was needed was will power and hard work. These young people were not only Sri Lankans of all ethnic communities, but also persons from all over the world. Their outpourings of grief were so clearly evident for those who manned the phones and e-mails at his respective institutions at the Tiruchelvam household. Neelan was the kindest of men. He would never say no and he would go to extreme lengths to help family, friends and even strangers. His limitless generosity combined with that of his wife, gave sustenance to scholars, activists and politicians.

One aspect of Dr. Tiruchelvam that is rarely mentioned was his love for art and architecture. He loved South Asian culture and art form. He would hold seminars in exotic places in South Asia purely to expose the intelligentsia to the architecture, the culture and artforms of the sub-continent. He was a frequent visitor to the Gal Vihara in Polonnaruwa which was one of his favourite sites and the poster of the Sakyamuni Buddha dominated his office. Whenever a visitor came to Sri Lanka he would take them to see the Gotami Vihara in Borella and at dusk he would take them to see the Buddha with the sapphire eyes in Dehiwala. He loved South Indian bronzes and had many of them in his home. He was also an admirer of Moghul miniatures. He tried when he could to go to the music festival in Madras every December. And one of his first acts for a visitor was to see the Dutch remains in the Fort and Pettah area. He was a believer in multiculturalism and he embodied that very ideal in his love for these ideals regardless of ethnic origin. Beauty and art

animated his life. Yes truth, beauty, he believed in Keats' legendary words.

Despite his love of other disciplines, the law was his first love. He was a brilliant lawyer and it is significant that his last public speech was in memoriam for another lawyer before the community of those interested in the law. His love of constitutional ideas was not a petty partisan exercise. He studied Constitutions as living embodiments of the moral firmaments of a society. He felt deeply about these issues and he wanted to structure a noble and just society. His interest in this subject had made him research far and wide and he was killed just weeks before he was to leave Sri Lanka to teach law and local government at Harvard University, his alma mater. *The Boston Globe* carried the reactions of grief stricken colleagues and

friends at Harvard, including the Dean of the Law School. His death reminds us of Regi Siriwardene's poem the *Roman Soldier*. While the ruthless Roman forces invaded Greece, Archimedes continued to draw his mathematical designs on the ground, seemingly oblivious to the horror that surrounded him. A Roman soldier, came over, looked at the design, could not understand its meaning so he just chopped off Archimedes' head.

And what of the perpetrators? When does impunity end? *Cat's Eye* has always been and continues to be for a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict, with or without third party mediation. However, such a settlement should not contain impunity for human rights violations and war crimes by either side.

Courtesy, *Cat's Eye* (Island)

A TRIBUTE FROM INDIA

We are deeply shocked at the assassination of Neelan Tiruchelvan by a suicide bomber reportedly of the LTTE and conducted in a manner characteristic of LTTE. We unreservedly condemn such cruel and senseless violence.

Neelan was a person of extraordinary talent, great intellectual refinement and unwavering political commitment for democracy, pluralism, secularism, justice and humanism. His was a voice of reason which compelled attention and inspired thousands of scholars, thinkers, activists and political leaders not just in Sri Lanka but all over South Asia.

We in India who had the privilege to know Neelan have always admired him for his outstanding work on conciliation, peace and political devolution in Sri Lanka, his fierce opposition to ethnocentric nationalism, chauvinism and militarism, his efforts at promoting South Asian solidarity and his great courage as well as immense personal charm.

Neelan was eliminated by forces of extreme intolerance because they cannot co-exist with democracy, reason and human values. His death only underscores the importance of fighting such forces in our entire region and of reaffirming our commitment to what Neelan stood for.

We send our deepest condolences to Sithie, their two sons and Neelan's countless friends and admirers.

Romila Thapar, Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Praful Bidwai, Veena Das, Ambrose Pinto, Abha Bhaiya, Miloon Kothari, Sayeeda Hamid, Maya Daruwala, Kuldip Nayyar, Seema Mustafa, Swami Agnivesh, Kamal Chenoy Mitra, Prabir Purkayastha, Imrana Qadeer, Dunu Roy, Chandrelekha, Sadanand Menon, Kalpana Kannabiran, Vasanth Kannabiran, K.G Kannabiran, Sudesh Vaid, Kumkum Sanghari, Smitha Kothari, Rajni Kothari, Ashis Nandy.