

# NEELAN: A PERSON OF THE HUMANITY

Lawrence Surendra

I felt that something that could and should never happen had happened. From the time I got the news of Neelan's killing, I started reading Tagore, a collection in English called, "I won't let you go". Among the many occasions, Neelan and I have had the time to spend together, in Hong Kong, the US, Canada, Nepal, Sri Lanka in the past two decades ( I met him first in Hong Kong in 1982 or 1983) and on one such occasion, we got to talk about Tagore and I know that he was knowledgeable as always and had a faiblesse for Tagore's writings. In the kind of times we live in South Asia, I have often reached for Tagore and it was to Tagore again I reached to find some way of coming to terms with Neelan's cruel assassination. He was such a full human being, it is difficult to box him in this or that description that each person who knew a facet of him would mistakenly try to. It will be surprising that many of my interactions with him, was not only on issues of ethnicity but very interestingly, after Bhopal, on the issues of technology and technological hazards and the human rights dimensions of victimisation by the unbridled use of technology, without any consideration for worth of the human being. One could go on. I am trying partly to come through my depression and write these lines. Yes, a World Citizen. I took happiness in the fact that long time back, when I was struggling to set up ARENA, in the early 1980s and was enthused and encouraged by the support of friends like Neelan, I used to then write a regular column for a Bangalore based English daily, called *Deccan Herald*. I used a Chinese pen name for my columns, the translation of which was World Citizen.

We are in a Gramscian sense a generation that is caught in the interregnum, an interregnum that is so suffocating, stifling and anti-human. We cannot lose hope. That is what Neelan and his life and sacrifice demands us to do. We must keep faith and link ever closer and see the struggle through for achieving really just and humane societies in the societies we live in South Asia.

The last time I met Neelan, was when he was in Madras, for the first of the millenium lectures that ICES and *The Hindu* are organizing. We had a fairly long conversation about many things and the series of the lectures to come and the speakers he had in mind. Both of us were concerned that we should reach a larger audience and I had mentioned about a research foundation, called The Asia and Pacific Societies (TAPAS) Research Foundation. He was very eager to work closely. We wanted to work out collobarative work from the year 2000 onwards. We were to meet again in Colombo or in Madras to discuss further. I had told him that I would come to Colombo towards the end of the year and we could have discussions in detail. That was not to be. Yet, we hope that we will be able to do some work in Neelan's memory.

We must forge on with hope, with faith for Neelan, to ensure that ultimately our societies will be peopled with the persons of the

humanity and nobility like Neelan. This is a struggle more dear than nation, race and primitive tribalism.

One of the odder and usually unremarked aspects of the Sri Lankan conflict has been the quality of academic documentation and analysis it has generated. Writers on places as far afield as Rwanda, Cyprus, or the Balkans, frequently cite one or other of the many studies of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka for comparative illumination. A remarkable amount of this work has been carried out under the auspices of the International Center for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, where Neelan Tiruchelvam presided in his own mercurial way for so many years.

The ICES offices, in a side-street in one of the swankiest districts of Colombo, have been home to several generations of young Sri Lankan intellectuals - writers, researchers, human rights activists - while also providing a space for visitors from every corner of the world. Side by side, you might find a huddle of people making last-minute arrangements for a Festival of South Asian documentary film, an American PhD student borrowing the office computer to email her supervisors, someone else working over interview transcripts from a research project on domestic violence, and another group of young researchers working out their plans for a workshop on postcolonial theory. In recent years, Neelan's increasingly high political profile introduced a new element to this mix, with bodyguards and security checks somehow increasing the sense of ICES as an intellectual oasis, surrounded by the constant threat of violence and unreason. From his base at ICES, Neelan was especially good at fostering two kinds of dialogue.

One was with other intellectuals and activists in the region, so that ICES and its work became as well-known in Delhi or Bangkok, as it was in Chicago or Princeton. The other was between academic researchers and other, more practically engaged, parties. I last saw him in late 1997 at a workshop on reconciliation and reconstruction in Sri Lanka, which he had co-organized at Harvard University. This brought together an extraordinary mixture of diplomats, NGO workers, academics from all disciplines, at least one senior dissident from the Sri Lankan armed forces, and a few politicians like Neelan. His keynote speech on this occasion combined a forensic analysis of the many barriers to peace and accommodation in Sri Lanka, with a characteristically sober assessment of the few glimmers of political hope that could be discerned at that particular moment. The audience was spellbound. Neelan Tiruchelvam's life and work touched many people in many countries. These people - friends and colleagues - will ensure that the combination of intellectual rigour and political hope, equally present in his work as a lawyer, a politician and an academic, will not die with him.