

# NEELAN THIRUCHELVAM: A TAMIL WHO DISSENTED

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I never agreed with Neelan Thiruchelvam all that very much. When I first met him in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was visiting Harvard and I was an undergraduate at MIT. I, it was rumored in the circles my mother moved in, had fallen in among bad friends, and had turned terrorist.

I remember asking Neelan a question at his presentation that day, and being disappointed with the answer; we didn't agree really on what constituted political struggle. But I remember to this day the keen open face, and slightly turned head; I remember being heard. And later, and many times over and over again, I remember his arm over my shoulder, his head bent, ear listening. Head nodding.

A few months later, I had taken a semester off from MIT and was working as an intern at the International Center for Ethnic Studies in Colombo. I worked there, then, and for more than 10 years after, on and off, for long periods and short, as I grew in intellectual maturity, and found my scholarly voice. And in all those years, Neelan would be around, listening intently, blue shirt a little rumpled, legs moving restlessly, asking quietly, "What do you think, Pradeep?"; He would arrive from somewhere, on his way somewhere else—all distances of thousands of miles—fresh as a cup of morning tea, with a book tucked under his arm for me to review, or an article relating to my work in his mind. Enabling was what he did best.

If I dissented, from a position he took, a direction he wanted to pursue, a project he wanted to start—and I would dissent with the passion of youth, often scornfully, or even angrily—Neelan would listen and he would hear me. And from that day in Cambridge, through many years in Colombo, until our last dinner together in the Sengor Airport in Dakar, Senegal, Neelan, simply, enabled the consolidation of my position, whatever it was.

For Neelan Thiruchelvam dissent and toleration, intellectual as well as political, were treasured practices. Not only were these practices crucial parts of his own self, but they were, more importantly, institutionalized in a myriad ways by him. Whether in the area of the vexed constitution of our republic, in the brutal arena of Tamil nationalist politics, or for me, most importantly, in that zone which might be called a postcolonial Sri Lankan intellectual tradition, Neelan made room, repeatedly, remarkably, and relentlessly to institutionalize broader and richer conversations.

This was very important work, for our intellectual tradition, has, it seems, been beleaguered for some time now. First, by the almost inevitable postcolonial tension between state-led socialism and capitalization, which led, of course, to hard times for some of our finest liberal intellectuals, both economically and politically, leading in turn to massive migrations to metropolitan centers—and then, in more recent years, the continuous, numbing, near apocalyptic violence that we have faced—has done little to catalyze our universities, our learned societies, and their organs of publication. Neelan stood together with a handful of others, who, while located outside those institutions, struggled with extraordinary tenacity to work with Sri Lankanist scholars both in the island and abroad, to preserve, enrich and enlarge that tradition. He laboured hard at this massive task, well, and productively. The fruits of his efforts are plain to the eye, and given this, Neelan Thiruchelvam earns the right to be called the greatest Sri Lankan liberal intellectual of his generation.

That is what he lived for; let us remember that he died in the face of fascism that kills those who dissent—however mutely, however respectfully, however gently. He died because dissent, of any kind, has become impossible for those who would count as Sri Lankan Tamils, because the very idea of dissent, has become intolerable to the LTTE. This we should be ashamed of. As Sri Lankans and as Tamils we should be ashamed, that one of us, an extraordinary person, a man who created unparalleled and unprecedented intellectual spaces in Lanka, South Asia and the Third World, died with his body broken into pieces, died like a dog on the highway, because he did not abdicate his right to dissent.

Why, you may ask, should I be ashamed? What have I done, but live a peaceful life? And I say you should be ashamed if you have never opposed the silencing of dissent, if you are a Sri Lankan Tamil who has never opposed the silencing of dissent. If you have not, and will not oppose the grinding, brutal, terrifying march of fascism.

I am not optimistic as I consider the long and difficult years that lie ahead. Many of us will die, many will suffer. And yet, of this I am certain: even if it were to take a thousand years for the fascist yoke to lift over the isle of Lanka, citizens of that promised land will remember Neelan Thiruchelvam's name, the day freedom dawns.