



'Call of the Conscience', Inauguration Speech Delivered by Manoranjan Selliah at Toronto

"Our entire community became trapped in the logic of war and militarization, and there was no goal other than the military goal and the strengthening of the LTTE, where the common man, woman and child simply became an instrument for war. The Tamil community has been made powerless in this way, also, by elements from within our community" says Manoranjan Selliah the chief organizer of the Human Rights art exhibition held in Toronto, August 23, 2008. .

(Speech delivered by Manoranjan Selliah, Chief organizer of the 'Call of the Conscience'-a human rights art exhibit on the conflict in Sri Lanka-held at Roy Thomson Hall in downtown Toronto, August 23, 2008.)

Dear friends,

Even as we welcome you to this important exhibition, I want to begin by remembering those civilians who are at this very moment suffering from a brutal war in Sri Lanka. So many have been displaced and are living in desperate conditions. Many have lost relatives and continue to live in uncertainty about their own lives as the war around them escalates. Many youth and children have been recruited, mostly by force, to be used as cannon fodder in a war that means little to their innocent lives.

And over the last year, many ordinary people have been disappeared, tortured, bombed and massacred by both sides of this senseless war. This exhibition is about such ordinary people and their suffering. It is also about ordinary people who did extraordinary work, who rose to the occasion to challenge the madness of war; who believed in the value of dissent, and often paid the supreme price of their lives.

My conscience, and we think your conscience, demands that we respond to the call to remember such people. And in mourning and honouring those whom we have lost, we hope that we can change the future for the next generation of young Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils who are waiting at the edge of war and precarious lives-lives of trouble and sorrow, yes, but also of hope.

I want to talk to you a little bit about my own life, my youth, and how I was influenced by ordinary people in a time of war. As a young person growing up in Kandy, I witnessed first-hand the violence against Tamils in the 1977 riots. I saw how the riots spread, with tensions developing even inside my own school between Sinhalese and Tamil students. I saw how Tamil houses and shops were looted and burned.

Our house and property were damaged, but our Sinhalese neighbours protected my entire family. In our history, 1977 was significant, as it was the first major communal riots after 1958 that my family remembered. After 19 years of political demands and challenges by the Tamil community, the ruling regime of Sri Lanka was able to incite such cruel violence, shaking the confidence of ordinary Tamils.

Then came the horrible riots of 1983. Again thousands of people were killed. We heard of even political prisoners who were massacred in prison. While again our Sinhalese friends protected many of us, like other Tamil youth I was very angry. I could not accept the response of the Sri Lankan state, as the police watched on and sometimes even participated in the violence that mercilessly attacked Tamils, while we were dependent on the goodwill of ordinary Sinhalese who helped us



and saved our lives. And that is when I, along with so many other Tamil youth from the South, went to the North to work towards what we all believed was the liberation of Tamil people. We went with much hope and a sense of duty to serve our people.

While the first couple of years of political work opened our minds and we learned so much about our community, very soon all that youthful enthusiasm was shut down. First, there was the killing of individuals labelled as "traitors". And then in 1984, the Anuradhapura massacre of over one hundred Sinhalese pilgrims. And then that horror of April 28 th 1986, when a pathological killing machine from within our own community was unleashed against our fellow youth, in the form of the LTTE massacre of the other militant group TELO.

This is when our broader community witnessed the brutality of Tamil militancy, as Tamil youth hunted down, murdered, tortured and burned alive other Tamil youth in the streets of

Jaffna. The bulk of those massacred here were Tamil youth who had come from other parts of the country to join TELO, while many of the youth from Jaffna were quietly spared. The violence that grew inside our community like a cancer with such incidents, also led to a culture of fear, which effectively silenced ordinary people.

October 1990 is an unforgettable month as the entire population of Northern Muslims were ethnically cleansed out of the North by the LTTE. From Jaffna town to the most remote village, ordinary Muslim people who had lived side by side were forced to leave with nothing, within two days. And the entire Tamil community stood silent in the face of orders from the LTTE. Unlike the Sinhalese neighbours who could protect us during the riots of 1977 and 1983, we could not even attempt to help our Muslim brothers and sisters, and those with a conscience in the Tamil community could only weep in silence.

It is this culture of fear and paralysis that my fellow activists Rajani Thiranagama, Kethesh Loganathan, Selvanithi Thiagarajah and Wimalasvaran resisted. But even more importantly, so many unknown students and ordinary men and women also resisted on behalf of their community and their own sense of justice. The brutal murder of such ordinary people who represent the conscience of our community should also be remembered.

Our entire community became trapped in the logic of war and militarization, and there was no goal other than the military goal and the strengthening of the LTTE, where the common man, woman and child simply became an instrument for war. The Tamil community has been made powerless in this way, also, by elements from within our community.

War and militarization has trapped our entire country, and it is ordinary Muslim, Sinhalese and Tamil people that are paying the price. It is the poor youth that are recruited to fight and die in the war, whether it is in the Sri Lankan armed forces or the LTTE. For those of us who have found the comfort and safety of life in Canada, we are given rational explanations for everything.

We are told to look rationally at the Anuradhapura massacre, the eviction of the Muslims, the recruitment of children or the disappearances and massacres by the State. And for each community is a rationalized explanation for violence against the other community. But we want to challenge this rationalization of irrationality. We want to ask you to listen to the call of the conscience. Can we with a clear conscience justify the recruitment of another mother's child, of the murder of another person's son, of the eviction of another family?

We want to appeal, especially, to the next generation of Tamils in Canada. Think of the opportunities you have and the safety that you live in. Don't you think the youth of your generation in Sri Lanka deserve an education, a livelihood, and the

possibility of peace? In listening to our conscience and remembering the loss of all those beautiful lives that could have been much more, we also have the responsibility to act. We have to stop this war and free our communities from militarization. We have to stop labelling and killing people as "traitors". We have to struggle for peace and justice. We have to change the country into one in which we can all live together, Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils.

Thank you.

