

First, I would like to thank the Chair, Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, for a little — I would say — over-the-top introduction. It is quite flattering to hear. Thank you very much, nevertheless, for your graciousness.

I must first say it is a great honor to be here, to deliver this oration. I thank the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust for having invited me a second time; I came once before to perform. It is indeed an honor to be in the presence of all of you and to share with you my thoughts on the subject.

I am a person from the world of art; a person from the world of sound. So the only way I view myself and the universe around us is through that window. Everything I say — in fact everything I sing — comes from the experience that art has offered me. It doesn't come from political astuteness, historical knowledge or sociological insight. So my endeavor to engage with society has come primarily from the arts. Let me begin right there. Art and democracy are two very interesting creations. Both come from a willed action of the human mind. I know people who will argue that art already exists in nature. But I would ask: who decided that it was art? It was the human being, wasn't it? Art happened when human beings consciously wanted to create something. Art is a willed action.

The question is why? Why did we need art? It doesn't matter whether a person was poor or rich; it doesn't matter which section of society a person belonged to. From time immemorial, every section of society has engaged with art. Art does something very interesting to all of us. It is not just about self-expression. We have constricted the idea of art to mere self-expression. It is ability of art to connect everyone — every individual, the artist, receiver, viewer, listener, singer — to an experience not situated within their own self-identity that makes it a living imperative. Every experience or reaction we have in life is situated primarily in our own identity, of who and where we are. But occasionally, we are removed from these identities and just feel or live in an experience: whether it is a painting, a film, a song, a play or something you saw on a wall. We have an experience that can be both transformative and collective. It's with people; with others. Nevertheless, to presume that the very existence of art in society means that a society is somehow more sensitive is a fallacy. Artists are human beings; so if you want art to be transformative, it needs to be questioned, challenged, and scrutinized. The artist needs to be engaged in it and needs the listener to also engage.

Democracy is not very different. It is a beautiful idea that came from our mind - a possibility where everybody engages in a discourse; where there is equity in the discourse; where there is equality in the way we share ideas; where it is not matter who we are, but we don't always see it in the real. It is the experience of the collective that matters. The essence of democracy is its ability to give you a chance to engage with people without being stuffed with yourself. So, in many ways, art and democracy are similar.

Again, like art, democracy doesn't ensure anything. It is just the idea of a beautiful wonderful possibility, an abstract concept. We can write reams about it but, in reality, it doesn't seem to happen. In reality, art also does not happen too often. Art and democracy

are trapped within the belief that their very existence is a forward movement. No, it is certainly not. Therefore, the transformative nature of art and democracy — and ironically the absence of transformation even when they seem to be functioning — are similar.

When we celebrate democracy, we should always remember that we can't celebrate it in comparison to places where it doesn't exist. Sometimes, even in India, we have a habit of doing this. In a recent comment, a leading Indian politician implied that the fact that we have democracy makes us better than other countries in the neighborhood. I don't think that's the right way to look at democracy. The question should be: what is the nature of democracy in your own land and what are we doing with it? You have to challenge it on an everyday basis just like an artist challenges art. Therefore to compare ourselves in such a fashion destroys the idea of art as much as it does the idea of democracy. Sometimes unknowingly both in art and democracy the beautiful happens, without us even being aware.

But what do we do? We do not learn from the beautiful occurrence. Instead, we parade this rarity as an everyday reality. We don't learn from that moment when something special happens. We do not capture the spirit of how we share ideas, cultures, tunes, dance in the way we live. Unfortunately, we use it to further segregate ourselves. The experience of art also hides its nuts and bolts, the process and the toughness that is its interior. That needs to be worked at for art to actually happen. If art is to be transformative, the artist needs to wake up. For democracy to make a difference, the members of society need to engage, work, struggle, fight and keep it in a constant state of movement.

And here we come to the idea of the liberal. Many here too — may feel that everything that I have described is the idea of the liberal. We may even be patting ourselves on the back. I don't know whether we are in an echo chamber today. Some here may be saying this is exactly what the liberal does. The liberal is always epitomizing this spirit, this essence, this idea of being for the other. What is T.M Krishna talking about? I am also wondering because I consider myself a liberal. But are we seriously that? I think I would personally like to admit that as a liberal I do sit on a high horse — on a very judgmental horse — and hence remain blind to the illiberal within myself or the liberal within someone I have labeled as conservative. And in times like now, it's easier to begin a conversation by pointing fingers. It is more important to wonder about where we are as liberals and why this idea of democracy and culture, is not something that we live by every day. We live in deeply disturbing times; whether it is in the United States of America, Sri Lanka, India, Myanmar, Europe, we the liberals feel threatened and that threat is absolutely real. Therefore, it is important for us to reflect upon being liberal in order to fight the various forms of bigotry that surround us. Unless we are able to discover the true liberal within, there is no way we can fight bigotry. Socio-political movements are cyclical, but we cannot keep saying the 'other' is wrong without reflecting upon why we are here? Why are we in a position where the liberal vision is being challenged?

I will talk first of India. I am sure all of you are reading media reports coming out of India. If we look at the past 70 years of independence and what has happened in the country

for us to be in the position that we are in today, we are forced to ask certain questions. What were the liberals doing for 60-65 years? What were we up to? What conversations were we having? Who were we listening to? Who were we talking to and, most importantly, what did we miss? During the initial years of Indian democracy, many who were part of the independence struggle carried forward the euphoria of that movement. Then came the biggest jolt to our democracy: the Emergency. In the years after the Emergency, we had a government which called itself centrist but was authoritarian, dictatorial.

But none of us then thought of the government in this fashion. Many celebrated it and just went on with life. We floated along, and many more governments came and went. We forgot that we, the liberals, had not engaged with these issues with honesty and courage. We took things for granted, believing that they would iron themselves out. I am not saying voices were not raised. That would be completely wrong. Voices were raised constantly, but the issues were not taken seriously — as challenges to our democracy. Never did we think that our democracy is actually in danger. We let things happen and today we are at a point of wondering if we have the strength to fight.

Sri Lanka is a very different country in that sense. You have had a very different history. You struggled with an ethnic conflict that everybody witnessed and experienced. India hasn't experienced something like that, in such a scale. But let me just say this, democratic India has not done right thing by its Dalits. It has not done the right thing for its Muslims. We cannot ignore the struggles of the Kashmiris and we cannot ignore all that has happened and is happening in Assam, Manipur or tribal India. Therefore, though we have very different histories, as an Indian, I cannot turn a blind eye to these realities. Whether it is Sri Lanka or India, one of the serious issues is the fact that many of our unfair practices are a result of electoral appeasement, forced submission or even worse. Many initiatives that were seen as positive came from condescension and not with the sense of sharing, or a belief in equity. Often, we hear the word negotiation. We rarely speak of conversations. How often have we, as members of civil society, actually conversed? And with whom? Here too we have to think very hard, because our conversations are limited by our perspectives and what we believe in. Therefore, our conversations rarely expand.

In this context, fear is another important word. Whether it is the majority or minority community of a country, it is fear that governs both sides: either of being oppressed or of losing control. So, fear and oppression are something everybody feels, whether or not we agree with the reason for the feeling. Irrespective of which side of the table we are seated, fear dominates negotiations. Unless we are able to recognize fear as the unspoken predetermining factor in our conversations, we will not be able to move forward in this conversation on democracy and we will not be able to address the divisions that keep us apart.

You cannot enable conversations through music or dance even if you put them in five different public spaces. Unless you address the inherent unevenness in that conversation, unless you address the inherent fear within people belonging to all sides, there is no way

we can move ahead. The receiver, the musician and members of civil society only internalize that portion that provides them identity comfort. The rest will be a favour, drenched again in condescension or discarded due to inbuilt anger and fear.

Let me give you a personal anecdote. Dr. Radhika was very kind to talk about the aesthetic work conceived and presented by musicians from a transgender community and myself. This community is called the Jogappas, and they live in the border areas of Karnataka and Maharashtra. Through a friend we began what you could call a musical conversations. It has been one of the most enriching experiences of my life. It challenged my notions of sexuality. To intellectualize the idea of sexuality is different from sharing space and art with those who are sexually distinct from me. And this 'me' has been normalized as the ideal by civil society.

It works for the liberal mindset to say that you believe in multiple sexualities, doesn't it? But when you are actually engaging with people of different sexualities, internal ugliness and judgments surface. It was an important point in my life because until then I had seen trans-genders only at traffic signals, and they scared me.

So we began this conversation, a musical one. The Jogappas have an incredible tradition of devotional music. I am not going into details on how and what we performed. But, however much we curated the musical conversation completely aware of the unevenness of our respective positions in society, yet the imbalance remained. I was still that person with the power. The audience would not come if only the Jogappas are performing; they come to hear T.M Krishna and the Jogappas. How do we deal with this? Am I, in some way through this musical conversation, further emphasizing the disparity? How do I smudge these hierarchies? Unless I am able to come face to face with these complexities in acute awareness and try and make our art offer an experience that makes people think of these gray areas, this conversation means nothing.

In society there are many who are situated in the 'in-between' on religion, culture, aesthetics and belonging. But we liberals have allowed them to move further away and occupy an extreme hardline conservative position. This didn't happen by itself; we allowed it to happen. And here we must speak about the middle class. This is one group that the liberal intelligentsia has rarely addressed, rarely bothered about, rarely considered important. We have not listened to them and, even when we did, we were judgmental because we did not believe they were liberal enough. We presumed that their conservatism makes it impossible for them to comprehend the liberal discourse. Therefore, we suppressed their thoughts and now we see that exploding on our faces. We therefore need to take responsibility for what is going on. Those who addressed these multiple communities were and are being marginalized and, in some cases, even eliminated from the discourse because they were trying to build this essential bridge. The question that I am primarily asking of all of us is - how much baggage do we carry on our shoulders? When we speak about being liberal, we cannot forget that we are also carrying conditioned baggage that stains the liberal.

I live in an India where today there is an emphasis on a possible Hindu rashtra; a monolithic Hindu country. The idea of the republic is definitely under threat. There are frequent distortions of our history. Some may seem humorous but they are not; they are deliberate aberrations that are being concocted. We forget that it is in the textbooks that the most dangerous mind games begin. Our textbooks are changing and instilling violent, disturbing and divisive ideas in young minds.

Ugly neo-nationalism has raised its head in India, the minorities are being targeted and we live in a time when people video the thrashing of a person of Islamic faith and upload it on social media with impunity. This speaks volumes of where we are culturally. Of course generalizations are problematic, but these are not isolated incidents. We see them occurring in different parts of India. Muslims and Dalits are being directly targeted and that should concern us. In my own state of Tamil Nadu, voices are being suppressed. Whether it is a battle against big multi-national companies or political heavyweights, every genuine protester demanding fairness and fundamental rights is branded as anti-national. Anti-national is the buzz word today. You raise a question and you are instantly branded as an anti-national.

For Sri Lanka, the war ended in 2009. Soon after, we the outsiders witnessed chest thumping and trumpeting of this victory. Here I must speak to you about how my engagement with Sri Lanka happened. I came to sing in 2010 for the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust. I do not remember the theme; but I remember that, when Sithie invited me, she wanted me to sing on bringing communities and people together: Tamils and Sinhals. I remember I sang a Sinhala song for the first time in my musical carrier. After that concert, she said "I think you should travel to the Northern Province." I said I would be glad to do that. It so happened that the then-Indian High Commissioner Mr. Ashok Kantha was present. He asked, "Are you serious?" and I said "Yes I am very serious"

In 2011, I was the first musician from India in 37 years to travel and perform in Yazhpanam and the Northern Provinces. In all my travels as a musician I think that was the most important journey. Travelling to Yazhpanam, Killinochchi, Vavuniya and a detour to Mullaithivu, speaking to so many people, visiting the music college in Yazhpanam was all learning, so much learning. This affected me deeply and influenced and redrafted my thoughts on art. I still vividly remember one student — or a teacher, I don't recollect — at Ramanathan School in Yazhpanam explaining to me how when the sirens went off, they would run into the shelters only to come back after 45 minutes to continue their dance classes from where they had left it. This made me wonder about art and what it means to people. What does it offer? Yes, it is an identity marker but there is something more, not just expression but a way of experiencing life. After that journey, for two years, we conducted a festival in Yazhpanam called "Svanubhava" We brought artists from India, who performed for over five thousand people. It was quite amazing. All this emphasized the idea that culture is far more than identity; it is an experience and that experience in itself can be transformative.

Where is Sri Lanka today? What change was expected? Or, in other words, how was change viewed? Victory was confirmed. What then happened to the people or is

happening? The ones who suffered through all this, and everyone else who was surrounded by suffering. The emotional complexity of this issue blurs identity and everything else. So, whom do we remember? When we call some people heroes, who are they? If there was a victory, who won? And if there was no victory then what happened and where are we now? I wonder if Sri Lanka is a little ahead of India socio-politically. As a political being the country wanted change, the change came and the government changed. But what were the reasons for the change? Did the change come from a need to have larger conversations? Did the change come from a need to address the fact that remembrance is far more complex? Did the change come from a realization of the unevenness that existed and an understanding that you need engage in a way that is self-transformative? I wonder whether four years from now Indians will be in a position where they too need to think seriously in similar terms.

Divisions in both our societies — whether India or Sri Lanka — are based on caste, gender, linguistic and ethnic differences that are stratified and entrenched. So, when we talk about change, when we talk about Governments moving, we cannot discuss any forward movement in our society unless we constantly address these unevenness.

Here comes the other word, the word that we love to discuss: corruption. But have we reduced corruption to a number? Our societies recognize corruption in its financial form. Of course, that is something we need to tackle, but far greater and far more dangerous is ethical corruption. And the lack of any discussion on ethical corruption is the reason why we are never able to address the struggles of the minorities. Majoritarianism wins, politicians win. They accuse each other of financial corruption and that is a reason for change, an electoral shift. But every other existing form of corruption — undercover, unseen and unspoken — is forgotten. Financial corruption is the end product of every other corrupt practice and hence, when we move from one government to another, one administration to another, and one set of leaders to another, nothing actually changes. Patronage, nepotism, dictatorial structure, hierarchical authority... remain just the same irrespective of who is in government. Unfortunately, constructionally, we, India and Sri Lanka, are feudal societies.

Therefore within our democratic structure, feudalism is entrenched. The person who doesn't have the power believes that is how it is, will be and should be. The person who is in a position of power enforces the same and enjoys the status quo. Therefore, we may talk about getting rid of corruption but unless we engage with the deeper malaise in our society, nothing changes.

Where does this kind of feudalism come from? Where does this kind of nepotism come from? All nepotism and patronage are hidden in deeper social divisions of ethnicity, language, gender, religion and caste. Therefore we have to fight both systems: the overt and the covert, the system and the social organization. But democracy is hard, tiresome, and difficult because human beings are not designed for democracy. We are primarily pattern recognizers. We survived because of pattern recognition. We recognized patterns in the sky, day and night, the sun and moon. Gender, beginning with the male and female, was probably our first social pattern recognition. Everything else — religion, ethnicity,

linguistic differences, colour, race – are all patterns that were solidified, added, and each one works against the spirit of democracy.

Democracy challenges this fundamental nature of the human being. The moment you have the power to recognize patterns, you also have the power to decide the nature and status of these patterns. Which means controlling and keeping people and the world under our control, as per our designs. This is why democracy has become so important. Democracy constantly challenges these designs. And this is hard work. Every one of us has to work on an everyday basis and allow democracy to challenge it.

Being a musician, I am somehow convinced that the best way people can change is not by understanding what is being said but by feeling what is being said. I have met very few people who have changed because they understood an idea. Most have changed because they have felt something in their heart, something moved them. An idea has to be felt. So, whether it is art, or democracy, we have to feel it. Whether it is Sri Lanka or whether it is India, if we want conversations and address the inherent inequalities in the idea of negotiation we have to feel. We have to cry, laugh and that is not easy. All of us after all come with baggage.

In this context I have to share with you something very interesting. I have spoken to many liberals and we are all in near complete agreement on politics, society, gender, caste or ethnic conflict. But when we come to the subject of aesthetics something changes. Aesthetics and beauty — and the undulations that exists within these perceptions — go unnoticed. One closer look at the liberal, especially the urban type who belongs to the majority cultural framework who may have experienced or worked with the aesthetics of the marginalized, reveals something. Intellectually and socially, they speak about marginalized art and the need for equality and then... a 'but' appears. A line will slip out "aesthetically you know, somehow that is not the same as this. I know it's beautiful, but it is not as evolved or sophisticated as, you know, the form that I love - Carnatic music, Hindustani music." And I would wonder where does this comes from? It comes from the inability of even the liberal to de-baggage himself or herself to experience something beyond their habituation. Unless you are free from that you really cannot experience something that is beyond your own circle.

When for the first time I watched Kuthu (people call it Therukuthu or Kattaikuthu) — politically and socially the engagement made sense but there was no true connection. That was because I was already judging it. I was sitting on my aesthetic high horse, listening, viewing and evaluating. It took me so much time to re-engage with the art form. Then one day at 2 am, when I was watching young students perform a Kuthu, something profound happened. For half an hour I suddenly realized that it was not a different culture; it was just culture. The point I am making is that the liberals also suffer from this inability. We all suffer from this cultural and aesthetic snootiness. Something we should think about. The word that comes to my mind in this context is one that is rarely used in the world of art but often used in society; empathy. What does it really mean? A friend of mine explained it as "to identify oneself in a flight to solidarity."

It is a merging, a becoming. But do we merge? Do we become? We engage but we do not become; do not merge. Unless you are able to merge, is a conversation actually happening? There are only negotiations in which we are the powerful. We are the people who have the power to dictate. While we often talk about empathy, it is very difficult. Empathy is very hard and I think that is where conversations should begin - to be moved sans self-involvement — and I spoke about this right in the beginning, that there are times you can be moved without the self and that democracy too can move you in this manner. That is empathy. But it cannot be an accident, it cannot happen by mistake. It has to happen because we live in a society that allows us to question ourselves, and it is from this experience that the idea of dharma/Dhamma which the Buddha spoke about so beautifully emerges.

Again, Dharma is not an accident. It is a thought, but it comes from the experience of empathy. For some Dharma may be a code, an order, a kind of adherence, even a dictum. But actually, it is just the opposite; it is about being free of all of this; free of control. An act of acute consciousness which is a result of empathy. When you feel empathy and when you believe that is the way you have to build societies, dharma happens. We don't have to construct a Dharma. We don't have to control Dharma. We don't have to organize it and give it rules. It happens, and it is from this dharma that the liberal hopefully emerges. This is the Dharma we must seek.

I would like to take out the “isms” Not liberalism but the liberal. All “isms” are problematic. Because ‘isms’ become an order, liberalist, the person within liberal-ism is also a hardliner. Once you create a crusty institution, all is lost. Liberalism has an opposite in conservatism. But the liberal does not have an opposite. The liberal is a spirit, a possibility; it does not achieve a target or have a set goal. It is a state. The state of being a liberal is within; it's within ourselves, a constant battle and a struggle. It does not exist in the future; it happens now, right here in a critically conscious, questioning, introspective mind. We presume somehow that we already have it and, therefore when we engage in a liberal discourse, we point fingers at the outside - those whom we presume do not have this quality. It is always about what is missing in the non-liberal discourse, but a lot of that is also missing in the liberal discourse.

The liberal has a home everywhere and can exist in every sub division, in every religious order, in every social spectrum. And this liberal is inward looking. It is the inward-looking liberal who will make sure our society is ethically uncorrupt. It is the inward-looking liberal who will make sure that any conversation that happens between people in uneven places is truly a conversation. It is the inward-looking liberal who will ensure basic social orders change to alter political constructions. The liberal traditionally is seen as accepting and respecting, but I think true liberals are also extremely vigilant about their own ideas and faith. When we remain that way, we will probably more often point fingers at ourselves.

But let me not make the cardinal mistake of implying that this belongs to the so-called urban educated intellectual class. I found in my travels that the idea of the liberal, the free soul, is far more awake in everyday people, especially those from marginalized communities, than those who belong to what is unfortunately known as high society. It is

there that you witness true sharing, the liberal spirit and the ability to move with people emotionally, to feel for people, to realize that every construction is born from judgment.

We often speak of the past and about diverse communities who lived in togetherness. I think we should talk about the fact all those communities were liberal communities. The liberal lived within them; but we have appropriated the liberal to just a post-modern era. This core is close to music: listening. There is so much difference between hearing and listening. We all hear but rarely listen. I will give an example from my music classroom. I was singing a phrase and I asked a student to repeat it. She did not get it the first time and failed on the second attempt too. This went on and on; for fifteen, twenty repetitions, she was unable to repeat the phrase exactly as I had sung it. I was frustrated and in class at times a very angry version of myself appears. And then it struck me that the problem was very simple. Every time I began singing, the student was already singing in her head. So, the question was: who was she listening to?

As soon as I start singing, her mind begins mapping the phrase, gives her a prospective trajectory and hence she was listening to her own voice, her mind. She was not listening to my voice. She was hearing her own voice. I was not even present. So, I said, 'Stop. Now shut your brain for just two minutes and actually listen to me.' Within two attempts, she had rendered the phrase.

How many times are our conversations exactly like this? Are we listening to the other person or just hearing our own mind, our own voice, our own words? Listening is beautiful, but we do not. A liberal is one who truly listens. We are here today celebrating a person who listened - Neelan Tiruchelvam. The fluidity in his life came from this ability to listen to all voices. I think it also included the hidden one within himself. That was probably in fact much more important.

There are so many hidden voices within all of us. We hide them, bury them, place them in the inner reaches of our mind until one day it explodes and we do not know what to do. I think it is this ability to listen within and around that allowed Neelan Tiruchelvam to straddle so many worlds; constitution, activism, the abstract, the very specific, the larger canvas, the ideation, local, national, international, all at the same time. Listening entails engaging in so many different ways - on the ground, conceptually and culturally. These are divisions that we have created and breaking down these limitations and boxes is the liberal. The state of the liberal is when this kind of profoundness actually materializes. So when we speak about Sri Lanka and its own struggles post the ethnic conflict, and when we speak of India and its struggles with religious bigotry, casteism, we need many Neelan Tiruchelvam-s who listen. Therefore, the liberal world needs to learn to listen and the more we listen, the more we will have people participating in that collective listening - and that is collective contestation in listening. Listening is not necessarily always pleasurable. Only when we listen can we de-baggage ourselves of all that we carry over generations.

I think there are people across the world, in this country, in India, students, people within the system, NGOs, not to forget the press, who are all pushing and prodding towards this possibility. But if we want the liberal not to be confined to these individuals, and become

transformative, if we want change in government, if we want change in the way we address issues of reconciliation, and if we want to combat religious bigotry, we need this spirit to be set free. We have to set it free within ourselves and it will also need to be set free within people in whom we do not see it. It doesn't matter what belief system they come from; it doesn't matter what colour they are. Nothing matters. We set the liberal free from its binds and allow it to fly, no border can limit its flight. Until then we are still seeking the liberal. The question is, are we willing to put ourselves through that task of freeing the liberal or are we going to constrict the liberal within a construction. The challenge for the liberal is not only coming from the outside, it is as much from within.

I am going to end with a song. I had sung this song at the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust in 2010. This song can be interpreted, like any song, in so many different ways. It is literally about the borders we create between people, communities, religions, gender and everything else. But it is also about the liberal spirit being free, unbound. It cannot be controlled by impediments, but the onus is on us as individuals to let it go. This song speaks of a borderless world.

Meaning

Rivers flow from one country to another, from one land to another, has the land ever stolen the river? Has anybody arrested the wind for having travelled across the fence that divides countries? Have borders ever been able to stop the rain that first came down on the villages in the higher reaches and then to the village below? Do we cut the roots of trees that grow at the borders for having taken drinking water from across the border? Why do we believe that we own everything? We have to realise that everything is common.

(Original poem written by Tara Bharati in Tamil)

This song epitomizes the spirit of the liberal to be able to swim, fly, and float and go beyond every segregation.

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts. I believe that this is a conversation in art, about art, and beyond art. Where does the liberal go and where does the liberal find herself or himself?

Thank you very much.