

Public Engagement: Shreen Abdul Saroor

Eulogy by Thomas Seibert



Dear Shreen Sahoor, Mrs Naseem Sahoor, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In recognition of her public engagement for peace and justice, the Threshold Foundation has the pleasure of honouring Shreen Abdul Sahoor with the Bremen Peace Award – a decision which personally pleases me greatly and for which I do not only say thank you in my own name. I do so in the name of many people here in Germany and many more people living in Sri Lanka. With this award, I do not simply want to honour the courage and tireless work carried out by Shreen Sahoor. I am also grateful because giving the Bremen Peace Award to a human rights activist woman from Sri Lanka is a wonderful opportunity to make public the fate of those people living in this country, especially the fate of those living in the north of the island and who speak Tamil. One of the bloodiest and most violent conflicts of our world took, and indeed is still taking place, in Sri Lanka, and this conflict took, and is still taking place, almost unseen by the public eye.

What do we know about Sri Lanka? We know the country under its colonial name Ceylon; we know it is an extremely cheap place to go on holiday, with its beautiful beaches and tropical

sun, its excellent food, healing and relaxing Ayurveda health breaks and extremely friendly people. It does not really occur to us that those places in Sri Lanka where holiday makers choose to go, are all in the south of the country, in that part of the country where Sinhala is spoken; one knows of the coastal and holiday resorts Galle and Hambantota, to the north of Colombo one has heard of Kandy, the former royal town and some perhaps know Anuradhapura in the north, the ninth largest city in the world 100 anno Domini, and the religious and political centre of Sri Lanka for 1000 years.

But what else do we know? Somehow we have heard that there was, or still is, a civil war in Sri Lanka, a war like the ones fought in Columbia and Somalia and in other places in the world. We know that we can do just as little against these wars as against those in Columbia, Somalia and anywhere else. This is true for every single one of us and therefore knowing and not-knowing do not pose a moral problem: there is a banality of evil we cannot change directly.



And yet... And yet today there is a general public and a global publicity which still offer many possibilities: Just this year, the year of the Arab Spring, we have seen the extent of these possibilities, we have seen how far these possibilities can lead, perhaps even tomorrow. Shreen Sahoo is one of these people who has set out to discover these possibilities and to put them to the test. She does this in her own name and in the name of the approximately 2 million people who are at the mercy of military rule, simply because have a Tamil name.

That we are here today talking about Sri Lanka, is also a direct result of Shreen's work. Let us remain for a moment with the war in Sri Lanka. This was a so-called "ethnic war", it was the war of the Sinhalese speaking Buddhist majority against the Tamil speaking and mostly Hindu minority. The war ended in spring 2009, at least this is how it seems today, and finished with a triumph for the Sinhalese-Buddhist government and the obliteration of the Tamil rebels, the "Tamil Tigers". The government in Colombo declared the war to be a "war against terrorism", regardless of the consequences, even for civilians. The European Union made matters worse in 2006, when they put the Tamil rebels on the list of the so-called

terrorist organizations. Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World) and medico international have publically protested against this decision; not out of sympathy with the Tamil Tigers, but because we fear that putting the rebels on the Terrorism List in Brussels would be seen in Colombo as an affirmation of "the war against terrorism". There were 40,000 victims alone in the last four months of the war in 2009; trapped on a narrow strip of land on the east coast, for weeks under military fire by the Sinhalese army from land, sea and from the air, prevented by the Tamil Tigers from escaping the encircled area.



Shreen Abdul Saroor, to talk finally about the award winner, has been chosen to receive the Peace Prize because she has spent years campaigning for reconciliation and democracy between the ethnic-religious groups in Sri Lanka and because she does so as a courageous, experienced and talented networker. Her own biography and family background are the reason she primarily works to bring people together. Shreen speaks Tamil, her family, however, does not follow the Hindu but Muslim faith. She was born in 1969 in Mannar, a town in the north-west of Sri Lanka, an area traditionally home to the Muslim Tamils; a minority within a minority. In 1990, the Tamil Tigers drove away 70,000 of these people, including Shreen's family. The family lost its homeland overnight and found a place to live in a refugee camp on the west coast, in Puttlam, a place also predominantly Muslim. Later the family moved to Colombo, where Shreen began to study, finishing in 1995. First of all, she worked for private companies, but ended her business career a short time later and, from 1998, worked for five years for a Canadian development organization on Sri Lanka. In the same year, she founded the Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF), today a complex network of women, active in over 100 communities in the area around Mannar. She is still engaged as honorary patron for this organization. Furthermore, she founded the Mannar Women for Human Rights and Democracy (MWHRD), a committee which campaigns for the clarification of, and end to, sexual violence in the north and east of Sri Lanka. What is more,

she also works on a voluntary basis for the NGO South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), which is active in the whole of South Asia, and also for the Sri Lankan Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD), which gives legal aid to victims of persecution and war. She has a paid position working for the Ashoka Innovators for the Public, an international foundation which gives grants to social activists.



I myself first met Shreen in December 2005. At that time she was taking part in a Fact Finding Mission initiated by medico international and Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World) which was inspecting the rebuilding process after the tsunami. We travelled through the north for two weeks, spoke to the staff of public authorities and aid organizations, with rebel representatives and everywhere with people who had been

driven away by marine earthquakes and war, who had lost their home country and many friends and relatives.

In the refugee camps, I immediately noticed Shreen's extraordinary talent when talking with other women, in encourage them to tell their story, to describe their experiences and name their requirements; the need for better housing conditions and improved care facilities, for adequate and respectful treatment by authorities and aid organizations, for clarification with regard to the fate of relatives and friends, for the need to return to their homes and for their rights to be recognized.

After working closely with Shreen now for many years, I know that this talent is at the heart of her work. She is able to carry out this dangerous and restless work due to a deep empathy with people who have become victims of injustice, and who fight against this fate, hidden in the fight for daily survival and wherever possible, in public.

It is this virtue which enables her, within the informal network of the Sri Lankan human rights activists, to fulfill the role of a mediator who, with a mixture of trust and obligation, brings together those most needed on-site: women of Hindu and Muslim faith, priests of Christian churches, activists of Tamil grassroots organizations, the staff of human rights organizations

working in Colombo, members of the small Sinhalese opposition, themselves persecuted, and last of all, representatives of international NGOs.

However: despite the indispensable and necessary role she took and still takes in such national and international negotiations, she did not and does not stop her activity at the grassroots level. As well as her special empathy for others, there are two other explicitly political reasons. The first is the experience of belonging to persecuted minority herself, or more correctly, a member of a minority within a minority. The second reason is because of her resolute feminism. To sum that up with regard to a personal experience last year: in March 2010 I took part in a meeting in Mannar, where the Mannar Women's Development Federation had brought together women of Hindu and Muslim faith: women from families who had been driven out of Mannar in 1990, and women from families who today live there, where in the past the others had lead their lives. Shreen lead a workshop to enable the women to rise and speak, especially in unfamiliar and for this reason, not easy conversations with one another. The women hung on her every word and then began, following Shreen's example, to talk themselves for themselves and others, as if suddenly set free.

It is therefore a natural consequence of her experiences as a feminist and a member of a minority, that Shreen today works primarily alongside those who have been most severely affected by the violence of exclusion, which is always an exclusion from the public eye. It is those women who have worked with the rebels, whether of their own free will or not, and who therefore occupy the lowest possible position within the Sri Lankan hierarchy of exclusion: defenseless against an occupation army whose violence is both military and masculine, and also often abandoned by their own family members: turned into non-persons who no-one wants as a sister, a daughter, a wife and who no-one recognizes as a person in their own right – even if it is only a way of avoiding being targeted by the occupation army themselves.



Honouring Shreen Abdul Sahoo with the Bremen Peace Award also means granting those women, with whom she works side by side, the very least we are able to grant them: publicity, and first and foremost, the chance to claim the rights which are denied them on a daily basis, and for which they must fight every day anew. We also know, starting from today, starting from now.