

Man Shares Journey From Prison To Human Rights Lawyer

/EINPresswire.com/

From: National Public Radio (USA):

http://wamu.org/programs/metro_connection/13/05/03/sri_lankan_man_shares_journey_from_prison_to_human_rights_lawyer



These days, T. Kumar is the high-profile advocacy director at Amnesty International USA. Among other things, he is frequently asked to testify before Congress about human rights issues.

But back in the 1970s, Kumar was a 17-year-old in his native Sri Lanka, when one decision he made changed his life forever.

"Things became very bad for the Tamil minority," says Kumar.

In particular, the government had implemented new laws that made it more difficult for ethnic Tamils to be admitted to the university. Kumar and thousands of his classmates were ethnic Tamils themselves, so they decided to protest against the discriminatory rules.

Their demonstration took the form of peaceful protest, but the government wasn't pleased. They were under arrest and taken to prison, without being charged, or going on trial.

Help in prison

For a 17-year-old, who had never been away from his extended family, landing in jail could have been a harrowing experience. But surprisingly, in many ways, it wasn't.

"All of the students were treated like heroes in the prison when we walked in," remembers Kumar. "The guards were so happy. They were bringing us sweets from outside to help us. Everyone was very happy we were there. I was very well taken care of by the guards, because

they were also ethnic Tamils."

At the same time, the fact that Kumar had never really been away from his family, made the separation difficult.

"It's not easy to be in prison at any age, but being in prison when you are young is especially painful," says Kumar. "Most importantly, you're cut off from your immediate family. Prison is like a military camp."

The prison officials took away all of his valuables, and gave him a sheet to sleep on the floor.

In the midst of this grim prospect of soul-crushing prison life, the human rights group Amnesty International came to the rescue. Ultimately they adopted Kumar as a prisoner of conscience, which meant that he had never advocated or used violence. And then they committed a worldwide campaign for his release. So thousands of people around the world were demonstrating, writing letters, meeting with their legislators, and testifying.

A harder prison life

Thanks to Amnesty's efforts, Kumar was released from jail after six months. But after four or five months, he was arrested again due to his involvement in peaceful demonstrations. This time, however, his imprisonment was very different. The authorities made sure he was nowhere near his Tamil community.

"They never kept me in the Tamil areas where I am from, because they felt Tamil prison officials and prisoners could be sympathetic," he says. "So they took us down south, in a hostile environment. The guards and the prisoners all belonged to the majority community. The result was predictable. "We were abused. We were tortured, beaten up."

During his more than five-and-a-half years in jail, two events dramatically affected his outlook. One of them was a death in the family -- his mother's unexpected death.

"This really shook me, and within a week of my mother's death, they arrested me," he says. "This time when I went [to prison], I was so frustrated, that I focused exclusively on education."

Studying in prison

During this same period, Kumar also became religious, and he decided to study law while he was in jail.

He began sitting for exams, which required a large dose of self-discipline and determination in a prison cell. In addition, the nature of a prison poses its own challenges to studying.

"People get attacked," he says. "People get killed. It's difficult to concentrate, and you can't time it. You don't have a wristwatch." Kumar nevertheless found ways around some of the obstacles.

For example, outside one of the prisons, there was a clock tower, so to keep track of study time, Kumar learned to listen very carefully and count the number of strikes. With that gauge, he knew how to study until midnight. And he'd get support from some of the guards. He'd ask, "will you give me a heads up, if it is 5 a.m. or it's midnight, so I can go to bed, or wake up and study?" Other long-term prisoners helped him, too.

"They would show us certain stars," says Kumar. "They'd say, 'if you can see this star, that means the sun is going to come. That's the first star that comes up.' so we started learning about nature and how to live without a wristwatch."

And it worked. The experience offered him more encouragement to keep going. He continued studying and didn't stop, whether he was in long-term or short-term imprisonment. Ultimately, the majority of his studies were in the prison.

Fighting injustice

After he passed his exams and became a lawyer in Sri Lanka, he defended political prisoners. He could empathize with them.

"I understood exactly how to argue cases because I was inside," he says. "I could understand the torture, I could understand the arrest, I could understand the detention, and what's happening on the other side."

But eventually it became too dangerous for Kumar to remain in Sri Lanka. A large number of Tamils were killed. Ultimately he landed safely in the U.S. where he earned a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Despite his extraordinary life, he readily concedes that fighting injustice was never smooth.

"I am not saying everyday you are upbeat, believe me, it's not a big 'wow!' everyday. No. You are depressed. Every year there are anniversaries, and the first anniversary in prison is very depressing. If it's my birthday, or my mother's birthday, your father's... those things really hit you."

He says what kept him going during the time in prison was believing that what he was doing was right — fighting against injustice, he says.

http://wamu.org/programs/metro_connection/13/05/03/sri_lankan_man_shares_journey_from_prison_to_human_rights_lawyer

[Music: "Top of the World" by Acoustic Guitar Songs from Relaxing Music: Acoustic Guitar]

This press release can be viewed online at: <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/149307463>

EIN Presswire's priority is source transparency. We do not allow opaque clients, and our editors try to be careful about weeding out false and misleading content. As a user, if you see something we have missed, please do bring it to our attention. Your help is welcome. EIN Presswire, Everyone's Internet News Presswire™, tries to define some of the boundaries that are reasonable in today's world. Please see our Editorial Guidelines for more information.

© 1995-2023 Newsmatics Inc. All Right Reserved.