

A Legal Eagle On Mission



A former catholic priest takes up the law to protect the poor and marginalised

Back in 1988, a young boy named Gopi was brutally killed in custody by the Alappuzha police. His heart-broken parents brought the body home and preserved it in formalin in a tub and started a vigil for the person who would deliver them justice. In 1992, they found the man. His name was Fr George Pulikuthiyil, and he came to helm an outfit called Jananeethi (Justice to the People). Fr George took the case to court, fought it for six years and finally won.

"My mission is to make justice administration a mass movement. Protection of human rights should be part of a people's culture," says Fr George, who steps in where nobody will.

In 1998, exactly a decade after his death, Gopi's parents finally cremated their son's body; satisfied that justice had been done.

Fr George began as a Catholic priest in Thrissur, a small town in Kerala. It did not take long for the padre to become disillusioned with religion. He quit the church but continues

to be called 'Father'. Arming himself with a law degree from Mumbai, he started practice in the Kerala High Court. Every evening, with the help of a retired judge he ran a durbar that dispensed free legal service and arbitration advice to the poor. Soon word spread and the hopeless and exploited started to queue up for justice. The unit grew into Jananeethi which is

today a legal and human rights organisation with lawyers and field workers on its team, 24 legal helplines and the moral support of people like retired Justices T. Chandrasekar Menon and V.R. Krishna Iyer, litterateur K.G. Sankara Pillai and Gandhian P.P. Ummar Koya.

"My mission is to make justice administration a mass movement. Protection of human rights should be part of a people's culture," says Fr George. Soon Jananeethi had started two short-stay homes for battered women and a suicide helpline. And then it began to take on public interest litigation for environmental issues as well, initiating PILs against sand quarrying from rivers, or agricultural land being used for non-agricultural purposes. It was one of the first organisations to take up the Coca Cola issue at Plachimada, when it sent in a team to test the sludge and found it contaminated. In Kozhikode, it took up a case where 120 acres of agricultural land had been grabbed for commercial construction. "We step in when nobody else can or will file a case," he says.

In 2000, through Jananeethi's efforts, Thichur ward in Thrissur became litigation-free. The Kerala government declared this a model ward and asked that it be replicated across the state. Jananeethi is taking the idea further. Last month Mullakkara ward was declared not just litigation-free but 100 per cent legally literate as well. The team visits each home to spread the word about legal and human rights, discusses issues like dowry and domestic violence and holds legal literacy classes. Funding is a hand-to-mouth affair with some donations or annual project grants from human rights organisations coming in at the last minute to pull Jananeethi out each year.

It's not just the church, he's made an enemy of powerful politicians and businessmen who would love to see him go. Threatening calls and letters are old hat to him. "Every morning I tell myself this is the last morning of my life," he says. Living in a room off the Jananeethi office, you can see him dashing off letters, trying to scratch up the funds to keep the unit going, or taking up another lost cause. The last time we met, he had just rescued an HIV positive girl disowned by her husband and family. He gave her a job at his office as telephone operator, and even found her a husband. All part of a day's work.

Contact Jananeethi at TB Road, Mission Quarters, Thrissur—680 001, Kerala. Tel: 0487-2427338, 2444473. e-mail: jananeethi@asianetindia.com. website: www.jananeethi.org

—Vaishna Roy