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Malathy and Parukutty had not spoken to each other for years, though the sisters lived barely a stone's throw from each other in Thichur village, Thrissur district, central Kerala. The two married sisters had a dispute over land bequeathed by their father.

The sisters were on the verge of hiring separate lawyers to fight for their slice of parental real estate when Jananeethi (People's Initiative), a social service organisation, stepped in. It changed the lives of Malathy and Parukutty. It also transformed the entire Thichur village.

Thichur, once wracked by innumerable court cases, is today probably India's first and only litigation free village. So much so that the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, on coming to hear about this village, asked Jananeethi activists to help model similar programmes across the country's rural areas so that litigation among the people might at least decrease if not disappear.

"We thank Jananeethi for helping us unite," says Malathy, whose feud with sister Parukutty is now resolved.

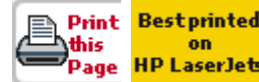
"We realized that our quarrel was not indeed over this piece of property but over our individual unwillingness to look after our ageing mother," Parukutty laments.

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Families like Malathy and Parukutty have been united, foes have become friends and lawyers have become jobless in Thichur, thanks to the innovative legal scheme that Jananeethi, headed by Catholic priest Father George Pulikuthiyil, has been implementing in the last couple of years.

Father Pulikuthiyil, a practising lawyer, says he is happy to see the village that was once mired in a plethora of court cases transformed. "Earlier, raging fights and scuffles used to be an everyday affair here. Now it is a peaceful village. People have realized that they can live in harmony if they do not have legal cases to fight on," the priest points out.

The people in Thichur, an obscure village some 130 kilometres north of Kochi, are generally poor. P K Saudamini, a local politician who joined hands with the priest to launch the litigation-free campaign, says the village has some 520 households.

"But legal fights over properties used to be a daily affair in our village. There are families that went into economic ruins because they hired expensive lawyers to fight property cases. Now people have stopped going after lawyers and spending their time and money in courts cases," she says.

When Father Pulikuthiyil confronted Malathy and Parukutty about the futility of hiring lawyers, he says they were initially hesitant. But the priest says that the idea of launching a legal campaign to end litigation in the village came to him that day.

"I knew homes where brothers and sisters lived together but never spoke with each other because of property disputes. I knew fathers and sons fighting over worthless lands. I wanted to change the social system because here, the court cases came up due to poverty," explains the priest.

The landholdings in Thichur are small. Most men are engaged in agricultural labour. The womenfolk earn their living from agricultural work or working as domestic maids with the rich families in the neighbouring villages. The men spend a considerable part of their income on alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. In fact, in most of these families, the poor illiterate women are the breadwinners who look after themselves and their children.

Father Pulikuthiyil and a team of law students who assisted him identified that legal cases in Thichur had a bearing on their poverty. "A large number of complaints were related to the colonies being denied water, electricity, sanitation facilities, etc. The court cases were also related to the payment of dowry, money lending and property disputes," said the priest.

At the end of their survey, the priest found that the 520 Thichur families in the village were fighting 264 court cases that included criminal and civil cases, family disputes, and litigation against various government offices like the Kerala State Electricity Board and the state Water Authority.

Soon, Father Pulikuthiyil met with government officers, legal professionals, and the local politicians and people and convinced them of his litigation-free village idea. He set up a Harmony Committee that consisted of legal experts and social activists to listen to various cases.

Says Jasmin Joseph, a lawyer and one of the committee members, "Our effort was to change the mindset of the people that fighting their cases in courts is a waste of their time, energy and money." The committee members met every week in a clove-cigarette warehouse to use patience and pressure on the litigants.

"Our argument to the local villagers was that they should give up court cases and settle them in the committee. When we investigated deep into some cases, we were wonder-stuck that people were fighting with each other even because of envy," she points out.

The committee then fixed dates for the public hearing of various cases. In three days, the peacemakers led by Joseph settled 17 of the 264 disputes.

A typical case was of V Ayyappan, who had filed a criminal court case against four neighbours who beat up his son during a brawl in a local liquor shop. Ayyappan demanded Rs 50,000 in damages from his neighbours. But the Harmony Committee settled it for Rs 11,500 to cover the medical costs of Ayyappan's son. The assailants also rendered an apology to Ayyappan.

"I am relieved that I settled the case out of the court. If I had fought the case further, I would have lost that much more money in litigation for many years," Ayyappan says now.

In May 2000, the Kerala government officially declared Thichur India's first litigation free village. Since then the Harmony Committee has been meeting every Friday in Thichur to ensure that no fresh legal cases go to courts.

K P Krishnan, whose land dispute with neighbour N P Kesavan ended amicably through the committee in July, says he is happy that the case was settled. "We were not talking with each other for long because of this land dispute. Now we are friends once again," says Krishnan.

Thichur's Harmony Committee has now become famous. Father Pulikuthiyil says he is getting requests from across India asking him to initiate similar litigation-free campaigns. Already, the Kerala

government's Legal Services Authority and the federal law ministry have requested Jananeethi to explain how the legal campaign could be activated across the country.

In a country, where litigation is a nightmare because of the millions of pending cases, Thichur shows a way out.

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Image: Rahil Shaikh

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