

COURTING HARMONY

A village in Kerala becomes litigation free

For the obscure Thichoor village of 520 households, scuffles and raging fights over property disputes used to be an everyday affair. A year ago there were 264 court cases from the village in Thrissur district, Kerala. Today it has the distinction of being the only Indian village that is litigation-free.

Extricating such villagers from the web of cases was the dream of Father George Pulikuthiyil, a Catholic priest and lawyer, who articulated it last November at a meeting of the State Legal Services Authority which is committed to imparting speedy justice. His dream of creating a litigation-free society struck a chord in P.K. Saudamini, a former member of the Varavur panchayat, who suggested that he try it out in Varavur.

After a series of consultations, they realised that making the whole panchayat litigation-free was a superhuman task. Thus, they narrowed the scope to Thichoor in the panchayat, and Fr Pulikuthiyil pledged the full support of Jananeethi, an NGO under his command.

At a meeting of government officers, legal professionals, panchayat members and the villagers at Thichoor on February 28 an executive committee was formed for the project, with Saudamini as general convener.

The committee's brief was to prepare the village for Lok Adalats to settle the cases. "Our aim was to change the mindset of the disputing parties so that they would themselves seek an amicable closure of cases at the Lok Adalats," said Fr Pulikuthiyil.

With this in mind, the Jananeethi volunteers, including lawyers and students from the Thrissur Law College, called on the litigants and held a series of counselling sessions with them. "In most cases it was ego which stood in the way of settlement. The real issues were small or negligible," said lawyer Jasmine Joseph.

Of the 264 cases in the village, 200 were civil cases and the remaining were



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Selfless spirit: Among the activists who worked tirelessly for a litigation-free Thichoor was P.K. Saudamini.

petty criminal cases. Most of the civil cases were over property and during a three-day Adalat in the first week of May, all but 11 cases were settled.

"I am happy that my case has ended in an amicable manner, otherwise it could have gone on for years causing immense damage to all concerned," said Col. P.V. Narayanan, who had a long-standing land dispute with his

neighbour Johny. Another ex-litigant, businessman P.K. Hamza, had inherited a property dispute from his father, and so had the opposing party. "After many years of litigation, a court verdict was in the offing and it could have meant considerable damage to either of us," he said. "Yet we have settled the case and are friends these days."

To ensure that Thichoor remains litigation-free, the villagers have formed a five-member harmony committee, headed by businessman N.P. Satheesan. "Once a month the committee will hear disputes," said Satheesan. "And if we cannot settle a dispute on our own, we will refer it to Jananeethi. If they can't settle it, then it will be allowed to become court litigation."

Now Saudamini has a prayer on her lips: that the people treasure Thichoor's new-found claim to fame and stay out of court.



Photo/R.S. Iyer

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