

UNSUNG

This book is a tribute to ordinary Indian citizens who have dedicated themselves to improving the lives of people around them. Their inner resources – vision, will, commitment, energy – compensate their lack of financial resources. They operate in the shadows, away from the glare and glitz of fame and fortune, to quietly fulfill their mission.

Not for self-glorification, not for public adulation. Their stories are inspirational. They teach us how we can beat all odds if we harness and channel our inner resources. We can do good, if we really care to. And each one of us should at least try, instead of blaming the system for all that is wrong.

Anita Pratap Mahesh Bhat

I had read about George Pulikuthiyil and Jananeethi in a magazine few years ago. Their work captured my imagination. When I wrote to him asking if he would agree to be featured in this book he replied - "I am wondering whether I deserve to be honoured as you propose in your project. Because I see many others who are much more heroic and epoch-making. I have done very little and I consider myself quite insignificant as compared to others." Considering self to be insignificant, a great quality, especially in today's world where people who have achieved nothing, think no end of themselves.

M B



George Pulikuthiyil can be contacted at:

Jananeethi, P.B.No.8,
Mannuthy P.O.
Thrissur 680651, Kerala.
Tel : +91-487-2373479 / 2373281
gpneethi@sancharnet.in
www.jananeethi.org

Defending the DEFENCELESS



George Pulikuthiyil

**"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.

For ten years, Gopi's parents preserved his corpse in a tub of formalin in their thatched house in Kerala's coastal town of Chertalla. They did this, not out of grief, but out of anger. They believed their 23 year old son had been tortured to death in police custody. They vowed they would not cremate him until they got justice.



Three years into their vigil, justice arrived in the form of a catholic priest cum lawyer. Fr.George Pulikuthiyil read about this bizarre incident in a newspaper, headed straight to Chertalla and volunteered to file a court case for free. He recalls: "This was astonishing news. I couldn't believe the agony of the parents watching over their son's dead body every day."

Evidently, local rivalry led to the police falsely accusing Gopi of stealing a transistor radio. Two days after he was picked up from home by local constables, Gopi was found dead with abdominal wounds. The police claimed he had attempted suicide by stabbing himself with a broken tube light. Fr.George exposed the holes in this version and fought a tortuous court battle. He won in 1998. Gopi's parents got Rs. Three lakhs in compensation and they finally cremated their beloved son.



A counselling session at Jananeethi. Attorneys here try to solve marital problems by counselling rather than the legal way.

The legal victory in this sensational case was a high point in the tumultuous life of Fr. George. Lured by the prospects of acquiring free higher education in a seminary, he left his remote village in Waynad to bustling Thrissur to become a priest in 1965. He was 12 years old. In the seminary, reading about the martyrdom of Christian missionaries who worked for the poor in China and South Africa, fired his imagination. Unconsciously, "live dangerously, die heroically" became his motto.

In 1981, he was ordained a priest and began working at the Chavara cultural centre in Ernakulam. He soon realized that monastic life bored him. He felt isolated from human condition, distanced from the every day struggles of the ordinary people whom he yearned to serve. For him, priesthood meant reliving the life of Jesus Christ. Serving the poor appealed to him much more than being cloistered, listening to the tedious confessions of people who committed the same sins – lying, cheating, disobeying. His work at the Centre sensitized him to the injustice that the poor had to cope with. Reminisces George: "I was convinced that God was not confined to the chapel. He existed amidst the people, in their struggles, in their miseries. Its out there I knew I would find God." And thus, the second motto in his life was born: "Defend the Defenceless."

The best way to do that was to become a lawyer and fight for the rights of the oppressed. And so, Fr. George headed to Mumbai where he did a course in Law. Gopi's was the very first case he did. And it brought him enormous personal satisfaction. A string of cases followed. In 1992, a year after he first took on Gopi's case, Fr. George started Jananeethi, an NGO, to provide justice to the poor. It offered free legal aid and even fought cases in court. Recalls Fr. George: "Cases began pouring in."

Twenty-six years old Shyma was a victim of abuse from her ex-husband. It was so unbearable that she walked into the sea with both her children. They died and she survived. She was arrested and slapped with several criminal cases. Jananeethi got her out on bail, provided psychiatric treatment, got her a job and fights for her in the court.



M S Joseph was a victim of petty village rivalry. Once three people of his village attacked him with intention to kill. In self-defence Joseph killed his attackers. He was sentenced to death. Jananeethi fought for him and reduced the punishment to life sentence, as the homicide was the result of self-defence. He served the jail term for 14 years and will soon be released.

But then, so did the complaints. Most of his court cases were against the rich – land-owners for usurping the land of the poor, industrialists for arbitrarily dismissing workers or businessmen for illegally converting agricultural land for commercial use. The litigating priest became a threat to the "vested interests" – politicians, landed gentry and factory owners, who across the world wield tremendous clout with the Church through their donations, connections and goodwill.

Relations between Fr. George and the Church began to sour. Fr. George believed in Liberation Theology, a brand of priestly activism that swept across the Catholic Church all over the world in the 1980s and 1990s. Priests were going out of the confines of their churches and seminaries to fight for the rights of the poor. The Vatican frowned on them and the movement petered out. The bruised relations culminated with Fr. George and the church parting ways at the turn of the century. From Fr. George, he became George.

He had to drop his prefix, but he did not drop his calling or his faith. Says he: "Priesthood is service, not a designation. Worship isn't about fiddling with prayer beads or kneeling in church. Every act I do is a prayer. I believe in Gandhi's philosophy that the best way to worship is to oppose evil. I don't believe in religion anymore, but I believe in God. Not a God that is male, stern, destroyer of enemies or hostile to other religions. God is present everywhere, in everyone, in everything. God is love, mercy, truth, compassion."

And so his days bustled with prayer. He plunged into work. Through Jananeethi, he fought for the rights of all sections of society, irrespective of caste, class and creed. He filed cases involving human rights abuses, gender injustice, caste discrimination, domestic violence, dowry cases and protecting the rights of HIV patients, handicapped persons and children. Recognizing his contribution, the Kerala government eventually appointed him chairman of the Child Welfare Committee for a three year term. The welfare of orphans and neglected, abandoned or abused children in Thrissur district became his responsibility.

Rewards came, but so did calumny. Death threats, character assassination, allegations and accusations were hurled at him. But he

George talks to a group of auto rickshaw drivers. Jananeethi provides legal support when need, imparts behaviour training and sensitises them socially and culturally.





lived through it all, keeping his sanity and his dignity intact. The late 1990s was especially bad. He recalls: "I woke up every day thinking, today may be my last day. Let me make the most of it. And at night, when I went to bed, I felt it was a miracle: I have lived another day." What kept him going through all these troubles was his passion to connect with the struggles of the poor, to contribute his bit to help them achieve their rights and live a life of dignity, and his conviction that above all, he must be honest to himself and to the needy people around him, in word and in deed.

George demonstrated the healing power of Justice. Jananeethi's Psycho-Legal Therapeutic Services, especially for victims of torture and organized violence, attracted international attention. Protecting the environment is another issue that is close to George's heart. He has continuously sought to preserve the unspoiled beauty of Kerala's dense forests and verdant hills. Few know that it was he who first took up investigations against Coca Cola's factory in Plachimada in Palakkad. Jananeethi published a report that exposed how toxic slurry was being used as fertilizer, poisoning the land and underground water. Down to Earth, a Delhi-based environment magazine picked up the report and it was followed by a major expose by the BBC and other media and NGO organizations, eventually culminating in Kerala government banning the sale of Coca Cola.

In 2000, George scored another major victory when following his tireless efforts, Thichur in Thrissur was declared India's first litigation-free village. Teachers and students of Thrissur's Government Law College went around Thichur compiling all the disputes and court cases filed from the village. Thereafter a committee of eminent persons heard the cases and resolved them by mediating between the parties. Almost all the pending 264 cases were settled. People found it cheaper, quicker and less troublesome to settle disputes this way, instead of taking the police-lawyer-court route. Says George: "This is how disputes were resolved in the olden days. It works because the whole community functions as a team."

Avoidance of litigation however does not translate into absence of crime. In 2004, George decided to take one more ambitious step - to make

Ward 12 of Thrissur crime-free. Says George: "This sounds Utopian but I believe it's possible because people are inherently good and want to lead a hassle-free life." He points out that crime is usually the result of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, displacement, communal divisions, political polarization, lack of infrastructure, administrative corruption, diseases, sexual offences, drug abuse and mental illness. He adds: "Freedom from crime means freedom from fear and want. Justice, equality and Rule of Law are paramount. It involves fair and equitable development that ensures the welfare of all. Jesus called this society the Kingdom of God, Mahatma Gandhi called it Ram Rajya, Plato and Marx called it the Welfare society and we in legal terms call it the Egalitarian society. Call it what you want, but the message is the same: peace and harmony cannot be achieved in society without justice and equality."



38 years old Sunil lives next to Jananeethi Institute near Thrissur. A dailywage worker, he is the only earning member of his family. Health complications due to alcoholism resulted in a gangrene on his leg. George helped save his leg from amputation by providing proper healthcare and tried to get him out of his drinking problem as well.

George acknowledges that realizing his dream is easier said than done. Lack of funds to do noble work is the single biggest impediment. Another is the rampant disunity within society. Echoing a popular sentiment, George notes: "There is always a group of people in society who won't work themselves and what is even worse, won't allow others to work. So they keep raising obstacles and spreading venom." This can be frustrating, even disheartening. But he says the one lesson he has learnt in life is: "Commitment makes the difference. If you stay committed, nothing can pull you back from your goal."



"It is easier to build a reputation for doing good than every act of mine is a prayer."