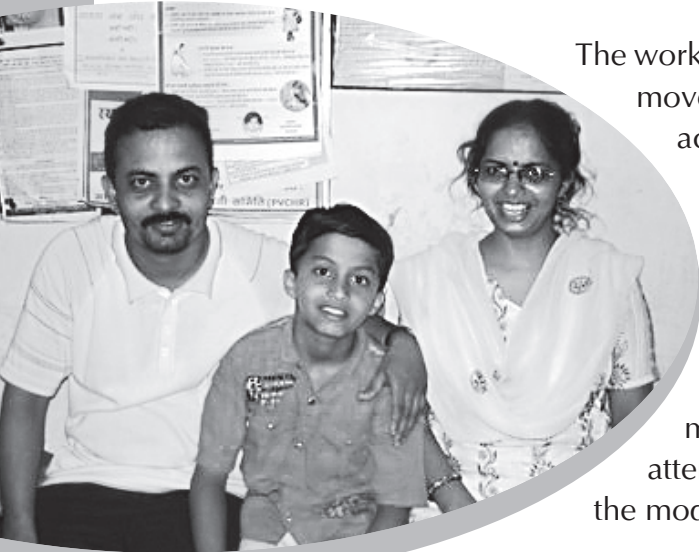


In the Footsteps of the Mahatma

DR LENIN RAGHUVANSHI



The work of Dr Lenin Raghuvanshi marks a shift in the Indian movement for human rights; he is one of a relatively few activists who insist that caste-based discrimination goes against democratic principles. In Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh – one of the most traditionalist, conservative and segregationist regions in India – Dr Raghuvanshi, with a few resources but plenty of confidence and determination, has managed, within a short time, to bring the problems of marginalised people to national and international attention. **Sant Vivek Das** and **Shabana Khan** bring you the modern Messiah of the ‘Harijan’.

“India’s hope for the future rests in the selfless services of activists who are informed, involved and idealistic,” stated Justice Sukumaran, retired Judge, High Courts of Kerala and Mumbai, about Dr Lenin Raghuvanshi, credited with changing the course of Dalit Politics in India and bringing into focus an innovative “people-centric” approach to reclaim “human dignity” in a caste-ridden Indian society. The gamut of his activities reflects his personal and ideological span, and provides credibility and a sense of completeness to the work he does. His care for details, meticulous planning, diligent patience, and sincere advocacy of the issue of the marginalised, has made millions of his supporters optimistic about a dignified future. Recognising his efforts, the International Commission for Dalit Rights (ICDR) has made him its Executive Member.

Dr Raghuvanshi’s views on caste, conflict and social change took

shape while he worked with bonded labourers. He noticed that not a single bonded child in the sari or carpet industries came from upper caste, even though some families were just as poor as the lower castes. He realised caste, not class, was at work, and started championing the rights of the lower-castes. Early experiences taught him confrontation was dangerous and not the most effective method. Increasingly, he recognised caste in all kinds of social conflict and envisioned a movement that could break the closed, feudal hierarchies of conservative slums and villages, by building up local institutions and supporting them with a high profile and active human rights network.

As a self taught Dalit ideologue, Dr Raghuvanshi understood from the beginning that villages in India are the cradles of exploitation, and that ‘caste’ needed to be tackled by both its horns. On the one hand, he created a democratised structure for the ‘voiceless’ to

enable them access to the constitutional guarantees of modern India, and on the other, his innovative advocacy forced the ‘state’ to sensitise its mechanisms to deliver social justice in a manner where justice is not only done, but perceived to be done. His work marks a shift in the Indian human rights movement, which has been reluctant to address injustices in the name of caste as a fundamental human rights issue. He is one of a handful of activists to declare that such discrimination goes against democratic principles by promoting inequality.

Winds of Change

“Unless the Indian society deals with the injustices of the caste system head-on, it will not attack social conflict at its root.” Translating these convictions into action, Dr Raghuvanshi has built local, national, and regional institutions that challenge caste. His People’s Vigilance Committee for Human Rights (PVCHR) draws in people from different walks of

life. Among its 50,000 members in five northern states, 3000 are former torture victims whom the Committee has helped. Their solidarity demonstrates how he is creatively building an inclusive social movement. Also participating are famous intellectuals whose integrity and credibility raise the coalition's public image. Its approach is two-fold: to have a strong grassroots organisation to work for the democratic rights of marginalised communities and second, to create the structure and dynamics to receive assistance from national and international institutions. Dr Raghuvanshi takes the 'policy to practice' approach in villages, where caste discrimination is acute, focusing on implementing policies laid down by law. The Committee campaigns on various issues concerning the dalit community -- schooling for children, fair wages, land titles, and basic rights. On the other hand, in his work with non-profits, activists, academics, and general supporters, Dr Raghuvanshi believes in the 'practice to policy' approach. His focus at this level is pushing society to acknowledge caste discrimination as a fundamental human rights issue. These strategies complement each other effectively. Groups in the network include the India

Centre for Human Rights and Law, Human Rights Lawyer's Network, People's Commission against Assault on Minorities, Sajhaa Sanskriti Manch, Samanvay, Childline, and the National Federation for Right to Education. In its legal work, PVCHR's successes include getting the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) award the highest compensation to a survivor of extreme torture by his upper-caste employer. The Commission also put 42 police officers behind bars for torturing dalits.

In 2004, to give voice to the marginalised, *Jan Mitra Gaon* or 'People-friendly village' was born. In this pilot project, Dr Raghuvanshi adopted three villages and a slum, with plans to reopen an elementary school, abolish forced labour, make education obligatory for girls and spread non-traditional education. There is no elementary education in the vast rural areas, and the PVCHR has opened educational centres for children in 45 villages. The village committees comprise at least 50% dalits, and seek to realise their greater political representation in village councils. The heads of the committee and council, a government representative, and a PVCHR employee serve as a conflict resolution group. "Thanks to the intervention of the PVCHR before international and national fora," says Raghuvanshi, "we've managed to put hunger on the agenda of government priorities."

Recognition, Accolades

With meagre resources, but rich with confidence and conviction, Dr Raghuvanshi, in a short period, has managed to amplify the voice of the

marginalised in national and international fora through "People's SAARC", rehabilitation and resettlement of weavers of Varanasi; Benaras Convention; UP Assembly Election Watch; prevention of torture; voice against hunger and many such activities. Recognition by the international community of his work is indeed the recognition for the millions whose hopes and aspirations rest on his slender shoulders. His Fair Play Campaign against child labour in the Indian Sporting Goods Industry forced the FIFA, ICC (International Cricket Council), World Federation of Sporting Goods Industry and *Reebok* to prohibit the use of child labour in producing their goods.

In 2001, Dr Raghuvanshi was awarded the Ashoka Fellowship for social entrepreneurship and changemaker from *Ashoka: Innovators for the Public*, based in Washington, DC. The Bunkar-Dastkar Adhikar Manch (Forum on rights of the weavers and artisans), established in 2004 with a membership of 3000 to give voice to their plight, has been able to make the Planning Commission of India commit Rs 1000 crores for their rehabilitation. Further, the UP Panchayat Act was amended to include a clause which directed each village panchayat to hold a fund of Rs 1000 to mitigate emergency hunger situation.

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