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G. Lavanam: Fighting for Independence as a Boy and Uplifting Tribals as a Man!



The late Mr Lavanam was honoured with the Jamnalal Bajaj Award in the category of 'Constructive Work'.

Mr Lavanam was a dynamic social activist. The son of Mrs Gora, who was an atheist and received Gandhiji's recognition and respect, he was born to Brahmin parentage but married Hemalata, a Dalit girl, at a time when untouchability was highly prevalent. He did not seek a bread-winning job and

accepted voluntary poverty along with his parents. Hemlata was also actively involved in the welfare of women and has established and managed schools for underprivileged girls.

In the year 2009, the late Mr Lavanam was honoured with the Jamnalal Bajaj Award in the category of 'Constructive Work'.

Mr Lavanam was interested in social work since he was 12. His earliest work was as a young volunteer in the Independence movement, when he acted as a courier, clandestinely passing messages to leaders.

Subsequently, he was in Mahatma Gandhiji's Ashram in Sevagram where he received basic training in Gandhian Philosophy of social work. He later worked with his father – who would conduct night classes in Dalit colonies and also organise social events where “untouchables” and upper caste people dined together. He imbibed the spirit of this kind of Gandhian activism from his father.

When Vinayak Narahari “Vinoba” Bhave undertook his Padayatra for *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan* in Andhra Pradesh and the tribal tracts of Koraput district in

Orissa, Mr Lavanam joined him and became the official interpreter for Vinobaji's speeches.

He was with Vinobaji, and later with Jayaprakash Narayan during the historic surrender of dacoits in Chambal Valley and elsewhere.

Mr Lavanam extended the legacy of Vinobaji and began his work with tribes termed "criminal" in Andhra Pradesh.

The Yerukala tribe was declared as a 'criminal tribe' by the British Government. They indulged in crimes ranging from petty pilfering to large-scale stealing and robbery. The residents of the area were under constant threat. Lavanam decided to approach the tribe and tried to change the status quo.

The reforms and rehabilitation were carried out in five stages. In the first stage, Mr Lavanam and his team took the tribals in confidence and began counselling. They were a total of about 350 families. This was a period of suspicion and stiff resistance.

The second stage was a period of gaining the confidence of the criminal tribals and organising linkages with concerned government departments.

Through persuasion of Mr Lavanam and his team, the tribes slowly surrendered to legal authorities.

He was also able to bring about an attitudinal change among them. At the same time, he made the Government take a positive approach.

In the third stage, the process of rehabilitation by the Government began through his efforts. This was also a period of backlash when about 30% of the reformed “criminals” reverted to the cobweb of crime. It was at this stage that Mr Lavanam registered an organisation named as “Samskar”.

The fourth stage dealt with the backlash while also working for women empowerment and children’s rights through developmental intervention. This was the period when an international agency HANU, an affiliate of the Norwegian Humanist Association, entered the scene. All this involved a process of consolidating the reform work and initiating development work. It was also a period of providing alternate sources of livelihood.

As regards alternative methods of livelihood, while it is possible to create and show socially and culturally acceptable avenues to earn money, it is

not easy to make these ex-criminals work hard since they are used to easy methods of making money. Yet Mr Lavanam and his associates were fairly successful.

Some of them agreed to work on daily wages in the fields. Samskar offered soft interest-free loans to open small shops, tea stalls, bicycle repair shops. Others went house-to-house vending cloth. The Government granted about 130 acres of land for cultivation. Vocational training courses in typewriting and mechanical repairs were also organised. A few have become truck drivers. Samskar regulated these activities. A survey revealed that the number of criminals was reduced to just 12.

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In the fifth stage, which is ongoing, the focus is on using education as a tool of social integration and working towards strengthening women empowerment.

This has apparently been unprecedented in South India post-independence. Initially, a big hurdle was opposition by the community which felt that undue importance was given to people branded criminals. Through continuous IEC activity, Mr Lavanam and his team could garner their co-operation and support.

Another example of Mr Lavanam's work in the social sector has been with the Joginis of Andhra Pradesh. They are either girls or young women from the Dalit Community in North Telangana. They are dedicated to the Goddess but later forced to become village sex workers. The centuries-old inhuman tradition made them lose their self-respect, sexuality, womanhood and motherhood.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh, after knowing their success in criminal tribe reforms, invited Mr Lavanam, his wife and Samskar to deal with this problem. An initial survey conducted by Samskar estimated the number of Joginis in Nizamabad district at around 2200 and in Medak district at around 400.

Mr Lavanam and his team shouldered the responsibility of reforming and bringing Joginis

into the mainstream in both the districts.

It was such a deep-rooted practice that it seemed to be an impossible task to be accomplished. But with the help and support from the Government, international donor agencies and local civil society, they succeeded in totally eradicating the Jogini tradition by the year 2000.

What is still more credible is that Mr Lavanam and his team were able to get the reformed Jogini women and girls married and leading normal lives.

In addition to these major social reforms, Mr Lavanam was involved in several other activities promoting social awareness. He and his teams attempted to dismantle many superstitions rampant in the community.

For example, in parts of Telangana, people believed that an evil spirit by the name Banamati often invaded homes, possessed individuals and caused havoc in their family life. It was a herculean task for Mr Lavanam and his associates to convince the people that there were no evil spirits and what they experienced was only a paranoia.

Mr Lavanam had always promoted inter-caste marriages. He worked at two levels – he made youngsters accept the idea and then intervened to save them from the wrath of the elders.

He was also an active Sarvodaya leader and a member of Sewagram Ashram Trust Board. He was closely associated with all the Gandhian Institutions and the Vinoba Bhave Ashram in Paunar. He was a member of Gandhi Smarak Nidhi Trust Board, the President of Servas International, India.

As a Sarvodaya leader, Mr Lavanam participated in several social and constructive programmes. In Palamu district of present Jharkhand, an industrial company was exploiting local Adivasis by purchasing Bauxite-rich land at very low rates.

Mr Lavanam succeeded in stopping this exploitation. The Maoists supported him in this task. At the same time, he was able to stop harassment of the villagers of a particular caste by the Maoists. More recently in Andhra Pradesh Mr Lavanam had been working hard to get the Maoists to the discussion table.

In his seventies, Mr. Lavanam was still active and ambitious to bring the Naxalites and other extremists into the mainstream and into the fold of non-violence.

Even after his demise Lavanam continues to be of help to the community. He donated his eyes and his body for educational purposes to a medical college in Vijaywada.

In recognition of Mr. Lavanam's contribution in the field of social reforms, he has been decorated with many national and international awards –

Awards and Honours

1944 – Garmavaram Taluq Congress Committee's Gold Medal for the youngest Satyagrahi of Quit India Movement in Andhra; 1966- Andhra Hindi Prachar Sangham for his work in propagating Hindi ; 1991- Atheists United, USA (Los Angeles)'s title of Atheist of The decade; 1991- International Ambedkar Society, London's honour for his contribution for removal of untouchability and creation of a casteless society; 1997-Andhra Pradesh Government's honour for his contribution in reforming and rehabilitating Joginis in Andhra

Pradesh and 2006-MB Gandhi Foundation, Nagpur's Mahatma Gandhi National Award for initiative in finding peaceful solution to Naxal problem among a dozen others.

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