



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Krishnammal and Sankaralingam Jagannathan / LAFTI (India)

(2008)



"...for two long lifetimes of work dedicated to realising in practice the Gandhian vision of social justice and sustainable human development, for which they have been referred to as 'India's soul'."

Krishnammal Jagannathan

Krishnammal Jagannathan and Sankaralingam Jagannathan are two lifelong activists for social justice, and for sustainable human development, working with those who are at the lowest rung of the social ladder. They have carried the Gandhian legacy into the 21st century, never ceasing to serve the needs of Dalits, landless and those threatened by the greed of landlords and multinational corporations.

Early lives (1930-1950)

Krishnammal Jagannathan was born to a landless Dalit family in 1926. Despite her family's poverty, she obtained university level education and was soon committed to the Gandhian Sarvodaya Movement, through which she met her husband, Sankaralingam Jagannathan (born in 1912), also a noted Gandhian.

Sankaralingam Jagannathan came from a rich family but gave up his college studies in 1930 in response to Gandhi's call for non-cooperation and disobedience. He joined the Quit India Movement in 1942 and spent three and a half years in jail before India gained its independence in 1947. During this time he already had considerable impact as campaigner on behalf of the poor.

Sankaralingam and Krishnammal married in 1950, having decided only to marry in independent India.

Redistributing land to the landless

Sankaralingam Jagannathan and Krishnammal Jagannathan decided early in their life that one of the key requirements for building a Gandhian society is empowering the rural poor by redistribution of land to the landless.

From 1950 to 1952 Sankaralingam Jagannathan was with Vinoba Bhave (the spiritual teacher of Gandhi) in Northern India on his Bhoodan (land-gift) Padayatra (pilgrimage on foot), the march appealing to landlords to give one sixth of their land to the landless, while Krishnammal completed her teacher-training course in Madras. He then returned to Tamil Nadu to start the Bhoodan movement, and until 1968 the two worked for land redistribution through Vinoba Bhave's Gramdan movement (Village Gift, the next phase of the land-gift movement), and through Satyagraha

(non-violent resistance). For this work, Sankaralingam Jagannathan was imprisoned many times. Between 1953 and 1967, the couple played an active role in the Bhoodhan movement spearheaded by Vinoba Bhave, through which about 4 million acres of land were distributed to thousands of landless poor across several Indian states.

Much land given over under these campaigns was infertile. To make it productive Sankaralingam Jagannathan started in 1968 the Association of Sarva Seva Farmers (ASSEFA) of which he was Chairman until 1993, and which has become one of the best known, and most effective, Indian non-governmental development institutions, whose work spreads over a number of states. ASSEFA's essential enduring technique, rooted in Gandhian philosophy and based on deep commitment, applies to all Sankaralingam Jagannathan's and Krishnammal Jagannathan's work: to confront a practical problem with a down-to-earth approach of planning and action. The participants in this work share amongst themselves the fruit of the labour and show to others in a practical way that the improbable is not impossible.

After a particularly horrific incident in 1968, the brutal burning of 42 landless women and children following a wage-dispute, the couple started to work in Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu to concentrate on land reform issues.

The birth of LAFTI

In 1981, the couple founded LAFTI, Land for the Tillers' Freedom. LAFTI's purpose was to bring the landlords and landless poor to the negotiating table, obtain loans to enable the landless to buy land at reasonable price and then to help them work it cooperatively, so that the loans could be repaid.

Progress was initially slow: banks were unwilling to lend and the stamp duty on the registration of small lots was exorbitant. But Krishnammal Jagannathan managed to overcome the political and bureaucratic hurdles. By 2007 LAFTI had transferred 13,000 acres since it began work to about 13,000 families through social action and through a land-purchase program.

LAFTI now has a seven member Executive Committee, of which Krishnammal Jagannathan is the first secretary, a general body with 20 people from the villages, and about 40 staff.

LAFTI's other activities and outreach programmes

Although a prime focus, land-redistribution is by no means the only concern of LAFTI. It also runs village industries, like mat-weaving, rope-making, carpentry, masonry, fishery, etc. and gives training to Dalit boys and girls. To bridge the digital divide, LAFTI organizes computer training for underprivileged, particularly Dalit girls. It also organises Gram Sabhas (village committees) in 100 villages in East Thanjavur district, with a team of 30 dedicated men and women, who are now actively engaged in implementing the LAFTI programme.

LAFTI's economic activities are substantial: Brick kilns have been constructed and many houses built, and fish farming established on a significant scale. LAFTI was also very constructively involved in the famine relief programmes in 1987 and the reconstruction programme after the tsunami in the Nagapattinam coastal area.

Before LAFTI came in, the land-site on which the landless labourers lived did not belong to them and they were often evicted by landlords or government in the name of development. Due to LAFTI's efforts, the government has enacted a bill by which the land-site on which a labourer's thatched hut is located is legally allocated to the family. The 'people-participatory-environmental-friendly' house-building project, in which one adult member of the family contributes labour, is currently benefiting about 5000 families.

Protecting the coastal ecosystem and struggling against prawn farms

Since 1992 Sankaralingam Jagannathan and Krishnammal Jagannathan have addressed another major land challenge to the poor of the region: the establishment of prawn farms along the coast. The problem is not because of the local landlords but big industrialists from capital cities like Madras,

Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Hyderabad, occupying large areas of land (500-1000 acres) for aquaculture in coastal areas, which not only throws the landless labour out of employment but also converts fertile and cultivable land to salty desert after seven or eight years when the prawn companies move on. It also results in the seepage of seawater into the groundwater in the neighbourhood, so that people are deprived of their drinking water resources. The result is that even more small farmers sell their meagre land-holdings to multinational prawn companies and move to the cities, filling urban slums.

To address this human and ecological tragedy Sankaralingam Jagannathan organised the whole of LAFTI's village movement to raise awareness among the people to oppose the prawn farms. Since 1993, villagers have offered Satyagraha (non-violent resistance), through rallies, fasts, and demonstrations in protest of establishing the prawn farms. They have been beaten up by hired goons, their houses have been burnt, and LAFTI workers have been imprisoned, because of false accusations of looting and arson. Undeterred by this, Sankaralingam Jagannathan filed a 'public interest petition' in the Indian Supreme Court, which in turn asked NEERI (National Environmental Engineering Institute of India) to investigate the matter. NEERI's investigation report highlighted the environmental cost of the prawn farms to the nation and recommended all prawn farms within 500 meters of the coast to be banned.

In December 1996, the Supreme Court issued a ruling against intensive shrimp farming in cultivable lands within 500 meters of the coastal area. But because of the prawn farmers' local political influence, the Supreme Court judgement was not implemented on the ground. The legal battle around the prawn farms is still not resolved and the Jagannathans continue their struggle to establish non-exploitative, eco-friendly communities in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu.

Further achievements and honours

In their lives, Sankaralingam Jagannathan and Krishnammal Jagannathan, either independently or together, have established a total of seven non-governmental institutions for the poor. Besides this, Krishnammal Jagannathan has also played an active role in wider public life: she has been a Senate member of the Gandhigram Trust and University and of Madurai University; a member of a number of local and state social welfare committees; and a member of the National Committee on Education, the Land Reform Committee and the Planning Committee.

These activities have gained for the Jagannathans a high profile in India and they have won many prestigious Awards: the Swami Pranavananda Peace Award (1987); the Jamnalal Bajaj Award (1988) and Padma Shri in 1989. In 1996 the couple received the Bhagavan Mahaveer Award "for propagating non-violence." In 1999 Krishnammal was awarded a Summit Foundation Award (Switzerland), and in 2008 an 'Opus Prize' given by the University of Seattle.

Quotation

"Vinoba Bhave, by whom my husband and I were inspired said 'Jai Jegath' (Long Live the World) and he was convinced this is possible by awakening of 'Sthree-shakthi' (women-power). I sincerely believe that the social, economic and spiritual crisis we are facing today in the world can be overcome through universal sisterhood and science and spirituality coming together for the good of the entire humanity!"

Krishnammal Jagannathan