

## Shri Lavanam

### Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Constructive Work - 2009

Born: October 10, 1930

Shri Lavanam, in his late seventies, is a dynamic social activist. He is the son of Shri Gora the atheist, whom Gandhiji gave recognition and respect. Born to Brahmin parentage, he married Hemalata, a Dalit girl, at the time when untouchability was highly prevalent. He did not seek bread winning job, but accepted voluntary poverty along with his parents. Hemlataji was also actively involved in welfare of women. She had established and managed schools for the less fortunate girls.

Shri Lavanam was interested in social work since he was 12, under the guidance of his father. His earliest work was as a young volunteer in the independence movement, when he acted as a courier, clandestinely passing messages to the leaders. Subsequently he was in Gandhi's Ashram in Sevagram where he received basic training in the Gandhian Philosophy of social work. Later he worked with his father who would conduct night classes in Dalit colonies and also organize social events where untouchables and upper caste people dined together. He imbibed the spirit of this kind of Gandhian activism from his father.

When Vinobaji undertook Padayatra for Bhoodan and Gramdan in Andhra Pradesh and the tribal tracts of Koraput district in Orissa, Shri 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.

Shri Lavanam extended the legacy of Vinoba and began his work with criminal tribes settlements in Andhra Pradesh (Sitanagaram, Stewartpuram, Kawali, Kapparallathippa). The Yerukala tribe in Andhra Pradesh was declared as '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 try to reform them.

The reforms and rehabilitation were carried out in 5 stages. In the first stage, Shri Lavanam and his team took the tribals in confidence and began counseling. They were a total of about 350 families. This was a period of suspicion and stiff resistance by the criminals.

The second stage was the period of gaining the confidence of the criminals and organizing linkages with concerned government departments. Through persuasion of Shri Lavanam and his team, the criminals slowly surrendered to legal authorities. He was also able to bring about an attitudinal change among the tribals. At the same time, he made the Government take a positive approach.

In the third stage, process of rehabilitation by the Government began through the efforts of Shri Lavanam. 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 Shri Lavanam registered an organization named as "Samskar".

The fourth stage was of dealing with the backlash as also working for women empowerment and children's rights through development intervention. This was the period when an international agency HANU, an affiliate of 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 grabbing money. Yet Shri 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 had granted about 130 acres of land for cultivation. Vocational training courses in type-writing 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.

In the fifth stage which is on going, 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 who felt that undue importance was given to criminals. Through continuous IEC activity, Shri Lavanam and his team could garner their co-operation and support.

Joginis are either girls or young women from Dalit Community in North Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh. They are dedicated to the Goddess but later made to become village sluts. This centuries old inhuman tradition forced the Joginis to lose their self-respect, sexuality, womanhood and motherhood.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh, after knowing their success in criminal tribe reforms, invited Shri 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. Shri Lavanam and his team shouldered the responsibility of reforming and bringing Joginis to main stream in both the districts. It is 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 creditable is that Shri Lavanam and his team were able to get the reformed Jogini women and girls married and lead a normal family life. Those who are in the field of social reforms will understand how difficult it would have been for Shri Lavanam and his associates to make the man folk agree to such marriage proposals. Around a hundred such marriages have been performed and most of them have sustained. Shri Lavanam and his team deserve the highest praise for this achievement.

In addition to these major social reforms, Shri Lavanam is involved in several other activities promoting social awareness. He and his teams attempt to dismantle many superstition rampant in the community. For example, in parts of Telangana, people believed that an evil spirit by name Banamati often invaded homes, possessed individuals and caused havoc in their family life. It was a herculean task for Shri Lavanam and his associates to convince the people that there is nothing like evil spirits and what they experience is only a paranoia.

Shri Lavanam has always promoted intercaste marriages. For this, he works at two levels- he makes youngsters accept the idea and then intervenes to save them from the wrath of the elders.

Shri Lavanam is also an active Sarvodaya leader. He is a member of Sewagram Ashram Trust Board. He is closely associated with all the Gandhian Institutions and also Vinoba Bhave Ashram in Paunar. He is a member of Gandhi Smarak Nidhi Trust Board, the President of Servas International, India. As a Sarvodaya leader, Shri Lavanam participated in several social and constructive programmes. In Palamu district of present Jharkhand, an industrial company was exploiting local Adivasis by purchasing at very low rates the lands rich in Bauxite mines. Shri 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 in the same district by appealing to them. More recently in Andhra Pradesh Shri Lavanam has been

working hard to get the Maoists to the discussion table.

In his seventies, Shri Lavanam is still very active and has ambition to bring the Naxalites and other extremists into the mainstream and into the fold of non-violence.

In recognition of Shri Lavanam's sumptuous contribution in the field of social reforms, he has been decorated with many national and international awards -

### **Awards and Honours**

1944 - Gannavaram 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 Angles)'s title of Atheist of The decade; 1991- International Ambedkar Society, London's honor for his contribution for removal of untouchability and creation of a casteless society; 1997-Andhra Pradesh Government's honor 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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