



Living Lives of Gandhian Activism

On August 28th, a forum on the book, *The Color of Freedom*, will be held at the Institute. The book authored by Laura Coppo, an Italian activist, offers a portrait of two Gandhian freedom fighters and their dedicated work for social justice in their native India, primarily in Tamil Nadu. S. Jagannathan, age 96, and his wife Krishnammal Jagannathan, age 83, have spent their lives applying principles of non-violence and satyagraha to the challenge of bringing opportunity and equality into the lives of the poor and powerless. Through their fearless leadership in confronting sources of injustice and exclusion, the Jagannathans have experienced freedom from colonial rule and even freedom from the pressures of traditional family expectations.

After traveling with these activists and listening to their personal account of how they became so motivated to put their Gandhian vision into practice, the storyteller describes their unique commitment in this way:

“Somewhere along the line, both Amma and Appa attached themselves to the rather unusual notion that, having cast off all semblances of slavishness, they could be the authors of their own lives . . . They think nothing of moving to a village hundreds of miles from home, where they have never been and where they know no one, because they have read in the newspaper that people have been killed, and they truly believe they can make a difference.

They will transplant themselves thousands of miles away to another state, where their own native language isn't even spoken, and spend seven months literally in pigsties, and living on boiled potato leaves, in order to impede keepers of temples from treating people unfairly. They walk freely

Concord House

1407 Chapala Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 966-3961

out of police vans to which they have been confined, and lie down in front of trucks and bulldozers . . . They go to prison and there demand the right to wash their clothes, and make it possible for everyone else to do so as well. They make new bank rules for bankers, adopt and take it upon themselves to feed, clothe, house, and educate several hundred children at a time, and find laws and their application where no one thought there were any.”

The work of the Jagannathans has grown over the decades from an effort to develop a vision of the newly independent Indian state into a response to globalization and its destructive impact on local and sustainable economic development. Multinational corporations and self-interested local elites have allied against the peoples’ wellbeing in coastal communities. Through public interest litigation before the Indian Supreme Court, and a successful ruling, S. Jaganathan has been letting the world know what has happened in South India, as similarly experienced in the Philippines, Ecuador, Thailand, and Indonesia. In recent decades the younger generation of landholding families of South India have moved to the West, allowing multinational corporations to enter and set up operations in Tamil Nadu. This corporate shrimp farming has invaded coastal farmland and brought devastating degrees of environmental destruction. The Jaganathans have been leading challengers to this darker face of the global forces of capitalism. They have been the spokespeople for the very poor, the “untouchable” class, and for the many displaced workers migrating across several bordering states. They are upholding the basic democratic rights of common community members to put an end to slash and burn destruction of coastal agricultural land, water and the local economy itself.

Another thrust to the work of these activists, particularly Krishnammal Jaganathan’s, is the work of liberating and empowering women. Many may be familiar with Gandhi’s statement that he hoped to be reborn as a woman in the Chandala (outcast) class. This comment has served as a global call to the socially progressive to support projects that empower women. Accordingly, several of the key concerns of the post-independence, Constructive Movement in India have been the uplift of women, the end of untouchability, the protection of children, and the promotion of village development, including village industry. The success and influence of these efforts was recognized by the awarding in 2008 of the Right Livelihood Award (a global, alternative Nobel Peace Prize) to Krishnammal Jaganathan in recognition of her over thirty years of community work. Paradoxically, the Jaganathans, who own virtually nothing, have been the instigators of bringing a standard of living higher than any known by their South Indian neighbors for many, many decades. Krishnammal began her effort hoping to bring each person “enough rice to eat and a home that doesn’t leak”. Far more has been achieved.

To promote her goals, she co-founded the NGO, LAFTI, Land for the Tillers’

Concord House

1407 Chapala Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 966-3961

Freedom. The organization is characteristic of contemporary global NGOs in that it operates through a hybrid volunteerism with its Italian founder donors, administrative organization offered by women in San Diego, CA, and support in supplying domestic animals for livelihood made possible by enthusiastic donations of goats from England. LAFTI began in the early 80's, but only after decades, hundreds of marches, protests, fasts and imprisonments did it attain a steady flow of support for poor but able women. Krishnammal describes her goal in this way: "The aim of my life is to make sure that they have that minimum necessary to have a dignified life, so that they can raise their heads and think about God, too."

The Color of Freedom is full of fascinating and inspiring stories about how these two dedicated activists made a difference for the sake of thousands of individuals while also keeping alive a creatively effective Gandhian vision of human empowerment and social justice in India, a major force among contemporary democracies. The book and the forum call attention to two significant although less visible pioneers of an emerging world culture.

Jenny Sheffield Bisheff
IWC Member, August 2010