UNSUNG

This book is a tribute to ordinary Indian citizens who have

dedicated themselves to improving the lives of people
around them. Their inner resources - vision, will,

commitment, energy - compensate for lack of financial
resources. They operate in the shadows, away from the glare

and glitz of fame and fortune, to quietly fulfill their mission.
Not for self-aggrandizement, not for public adulation. Their
stories are inspirational. They teach us how we can beat all
odds if we harness and channel our inner resources. We can
do good, if we really care. And each one of us should at
least try, instead of blaming the system for all that is wrong.

Anita Pratap  Mahesh Bhat

Defending the

DEFENCELESS

George Pulikuthiyil
"My mission is to make justice administration a mass movement. Protection of human rights should be part of a people’s culture,” says Fr George, who steps in where nobody will.

For ten years, Gopi’s parents preserved his corpse in a tub of formalin in their thatched house in Kerala’s coastal town of Cheraman. They did this, not out of grief, but out of anger. They believed their 15 year-old son had been tortured to death in police custody. They vowed they would not cremate him until they got justice.

Three years into their vigil, justice arrived in the form of a Catholic priest cum lawyer, Fr George Pallikkilil. Read about this bizarre incident in a newspaper, headed straight to Cheraman and volunteered to file a court case for free. He recalls: “This was astonishing news. I couldn’t believe the anger of the parents watching over their son’s dead body every day.”

Evidently, local rivalry led to the police falsely accusing Gopi of stealing a transistor radio. Two days after he was picked up from home by local constables, Gopi was found dead with abdominal wounds. The police claimed he had attempted suicide by stabbing himself with a broken bottle. Fr George exposed the holes in this version and fought a tortuous court battle. He won in 1998. Gopi’s parents got Rs 3 lakh in compensation and they finally cremated their beloved son.

A counselling session at Limmerords. Attorneys here try to solve marital problems by counselling rather than the legal way.
The legal victory in this sensational case was a high point in the tumultuous life of Fr. George. Tired of the prospects of acquiring free higher education in a seminary, he left his remote village in Wau and settled in Juba. Thirsty to become a priest in 1976, he was 14 years old. In the seminary, reading about the martyrdoms of Christian missionaries who worked for the poor in China and South Africa, fired his imagination. Unconsciously, “not dangerously, die heroically” became his motto.

In 1986, he was ordained a priest and began working in the Chirono cultural centre in Juba. He soon realized that monastic life bored him. He felt isolated from human contact, distant from the everyday struggles of the ordinary people whom he vowed to serve. For him, priesthood meant reliving the life of Jesus Christ. Serving the poor appealed to him much more than being cloistered, learning to the tedious confessions of people who committed the same sins - lying, cheating, destroying. His work in the Centre sensitised him to the injustice that the poor had to cope with. Reminiscing George: “I was convinced that God was not confined to the chapel. He existed amongst the people, in their struggles, in their miseries. If out there I would find God.” And thus, the second motto in his life was born: “Defend the Defenceless.”

The best way to do that was to become a lawyer and fight for the rights of the oppressed. And so, Fr. George headed to Mombasa where he did a course in Law. Gop’s was the very first case he did. And it brought him enormous personal satisfaction. A string of cases followed. In 1989, a year after he first took on Gop’s case, Fr. George started Jammurethi, a legal aid and advice centre. Fr. George was a man of action who always put his word into practice. He worked in a group of drivers and on the streets. He also started a successful school in Juba. He retired from legal work after a number of years and was later reinstated.

But then, so did the complaints. Most of his court cases were against the rich – landowners for usurping the land of the poor, industrialists for arbitrarily dismissing workers or businesses for illegally converting agricultural land for commercial use. The soliciting of bribes became a threat to the “sacred interest” of politicians, landlords, grunts and factory owners, who across the world would use the Church through their donations, connections and goodwill.

Relations between Fr. George and the Church began to sour. Fr. George believed in Liberation Theology, a brand of priests activism that swept across the Catholic Church all over the world in the 1980s and 1990s. Priests were joining out of the confines of their churches and seminaries to fight for the rights of the poor. The Vatican frowned on them and the movement petered out. The ensuing relations culminated with Fr. George and the church parting ways at the turn of the century. From Fr. George, he became George.

He had to drop his profile, but he did not drop his calling or his faith. Says he: “Preaching is service, not a designation. Worship isn’t about fiddling with prayer beads or kneeling in church. Every act I do is a prayer. I believe in Gandhi’s philosophy that the best way to worship is to oppose evil. I don’t believe in religion anymore, but I believe in God. Not a God that is male, sire, creator of carrots or hostile to other religions. God is present everywhere, in everyone, in everything. God is love, mercy,钢装, compassion.”

And so his days busied with prayer. He plunged into work. Through Jammurethi, he fought for the rights of all sections of society, irrespective of caste, class and creed. He filed cases involving human rights abuses, gender injustice, caste discrimination, domestic violence, dowry cases and protecting the rights of HIV patents, handicapped persons and children. Recognizing his contribution, the Kerala government eventually appointed him chairman of the Child Welfare Committee for a three year term. The welfare of orphans and neglected, abandoned or abused children in Thrissur district became his responsibility.

Professor said, so did the complaints. Death threats, character assassination, allegations and accusations were heaped at him. But he...
George demonstrated the healing power of Justice. Janani Iyer’s Psycho-Legal Therapeutic Services, especially for victims of torture and organized violence, attracted international attention. Protecting the environment is another issue that is close to George’s heart. He has continuously sought to preserve the untold beauty of Kerala’s dense forests and verdant hills. Few know that it was he who first took investigations against Coca Cola’s factory in Pathanamthitta in Palakkad. Janani Iyer published a report that exposed how toxic slurry was being used as fertilizer, poisoning the land and underground water. Down to Earth, a Delhi-based environment magazine picked up the report and it was followed by a major expose by the BBC and other media and NGO organisations, eventually culminating in Kerala government banning the sale of Coca Cola.

In 2000, George scored another major victory when following his tireless efforts, Thiruvananthapuram declared India’s first litigation-free village. Teachers and students of Thiruvan’s Government Law College went around Thiruvananthapuram compiling all the disputes and court cases filed from the village. Thereafter a committee of eminent persons heard the cases and resolved them by mediating between the parties. Almost all the pending cases were settled. People found it cheaper, quicker and less troublesome to settle disputes this way, instead of taking the police-lavender court route. Says George: “This is how disputes were resolved in the olden days. It works because the whole community functions as a truth.”

Avoidance of litigation however does not translate into absence of crime. In 2004, George decided to take one more ambitious step – to make Ward no. of Thiruvananthapuram crime free. Says George: “This sounds utopian but I believe it’s possible because people are inherently good and want to lead a hassle-free life.” He points out that crime is usually the result of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, displacement, communal divisions, political polarization, lack of infrastructure, administrative corruption, diseases, social offences, drug abuse and mental illness. He adds: “Freedom from crime means freedom from fear and want. Justice, equality and Rule of Law are paramount. It involves fair and equitable development that ensures the welfare of all. Jesus called this society the Kingdom of God, Mahatma Gandhi called it Sangharsh, Plato and Marx called it the Welfare society and we in legal terms call it the Egalitarian society. Call it what you want, but the message is the same: peace and harmony cannot be achieved in society without justice and equality.”

George acknowledges that realizing his dream is easier said than done. Lack of funds to do noble work is the single biggest impediment. Another is the rampant dynasty within society. Echoing a popular sentiment, George notes: “There is always a group of people in society who won’t work themselves and what happens sometime, won’t allow others to work. So they keep raising obstacles and spreading venom.” This can be frustrating, even disheartening. But he says the one lesson he has learnt in life is: “Commitment makes the difference. If you say committed, nothing can pull you back from your goal.”