



Jananeethi in Thrissur is a ten year old friend to many.

George Pulikuthiyil leads a staff of 14 and 40 volunteers, to deliver a range of free services.

Working out of an elegant old rented building in Kerala's Thrissur, Jananeethi is an organisation that is difficult to categorise. Started just over a decade ago by George Pulikuthiyil, it battles for human rights, aids dispute resolutions, cares for the despairing, propagates awareness of law and preaches social harmony. "God is more palpably present in a court of justice than in a monastery," believes 50 year old George. Strange notion for a man who is in fact an ordained --though now non-functioning-- Catholic priest. He lists himself formally as a Human Rights Lawyer. He is in reality a battler against all injustices.

A priest becomes a lawyer:

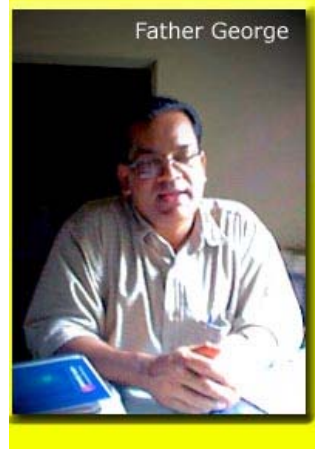
George was born in Manandawadi in the hilly Wayanad district of Kerala. He left for Thrissur at the age of 13 to pursue his studies. He was drawn to the church and decided to become a priest. He studied theology, philosophy and economics. In 1981, aged 31 he was ordained. His first assignment was with Chavara Cultural Centre in Kochi [-then Cochin]. The three years there made him look beyond the walls of his calling. He was struck by the stories he heard from judges and lawyers practicing in the Ernakulam High Court. Stories of how long cases lasted before decision, how people pauperised themselves fighting litigation, how innocent many of them were of their rights, how frequently this innocence cost them their cases... The world out there seemed to need his ministering more. Father George Pulikuthiyil was an agonised man.

Transferring back to Thrissur in 1984, he started Viswa Darshana, funded by the church. It was to be a rights group. Soon it developed a leftist flavour. And worse, --for an aghast church-- it spoke in an irreverent, secular voice. Father George wrapped it up and left for Mumbai.

The re-education and re-making of George Pulikuthiyil had begun. He acquired degrees in Literature, Journalism and most satisfyingly, Law. By 1990 he was back, enrolled at the Ernakulam High Court, taking briefs free of cost. Before long, he saw the need for a parallel --and, faster-- track for settling disputes. And so began Jananeethi, 1991.



Part of the team



Father George

'Justice to the People':

Jananeethi began as a legal aid centre but has allowed itself to be moulded by the needs of the people who approached it for various sorts of help. Today it is many things. In the last three years, for example 10,000 people have approached it. Last year alone it was presented with 220 disputes, out of which it settled 137 out of court. A majority of these relate to domestic discords, followed by property and debt wrangles.

One of the exciting achievements of Jananeethi was in creating the first litigation free village in the whole of India. It began like this: In early 2000, Fr.George had addressed a seminar of several village officials on the evils of litigation and the need to resolve disputes locally. In a few days, Ms.Saudamini led a small delegation from her village of Thissur [not, 'Thrissur'] in Varavoor panchayat inviting Advocate George to come over to Thissur and demonstrate his solutions. Adv. George and Adv.Jasmine Joseph visited the talented village. Peopled by craftsmen with ancient, masterly skills, Thissur a predominantly Hindu village, had been a steady contributor to Kerala's cultural life. Yet, the villagers were a querulous lot! There were disputes in every street. 40 law students from Thrissur town volunteered to survey and list the problems. So began eager --if cautious-- knocks on over 500 doors to listen and understand the disputes. In the end, the students had compiled a list of 264 dead-locks to be resolved. Not surprisingly, two-thirds of them was against the administration itself. There were also 17 cases filed in the various courts of law. A 'court' or Lok Adalat was set up in the village school. Law students and other volunteers began extensive discussions with the various parties to develop meeting points. George coordinated with the judiciary, police, authorities and banks who were parties to the disputes, to depute their representatives. Three benches were set up, each headed by a retired judge, a senior lawyer and a social worker. A team of three law students was assigned to assist each bench.

Jananeethi led by Fr./Adv. George had done the groundwork well. In mere three days --May 2, 3 and 4, 2000-- the three benches found enough time to hear all disputes in detail and arrive at settlements. A mere 11 cases were left for the newly set up village Harmony Committee to dispose of later. The villagers were agog with excitement. Hundreds stood around to gawk. On May 7, the whole village was dressed up to celebrate. Thissur's renowned pipers and drummers led a slow parade through the decorated streets and naturally enough a lunch fest followed. After all Thissur had just become India's first litigation free village.

What happened thereafter, you might ask? Well, the Harmony Committee is in working order. Since the 3-day fair ended, it has been able to dispose off 84 petitions. Villagers approach it first before they dash off to the police or the courts. No one has consulted a lawyer either, in the last year. Nor have they bothered Adv.George. He is busy anyway with enough things.

Maithri:

There is no chapel or crosses or religious images at Jananeethi, though Fr.George lives in a room upstairs. There is a sombre outhouse at the back though, reached by an anonymous, ever-open lane from the main road. The outhouse is Maithri. Often people reach it softly, facelessly. Many of them are women, who have decided to consider this option. Some years ago they would have thought suicide

their only option. They have heard that they will receive understanding and assistance here.

Behind the much touted family system in India lurk many injustices, mostly against women. Women are battered by dowry demands, alcoholic husbands, mindless cruelty, lack of freedom, sexual abuse... it's a long list. Close to 3000 women kill themselves every year in Kerala and Jananeethi has researched to find that ten times that number consider it.

In the last year over 1200 people have sought Maithri, 30% of them women. Some write, some call and some slip quietly down the lane in person. With changing times people's problems seem to be changing too. Men facing bankruptcies, students daunted by exams, disappointed lovers, people with off-beat sexual preferences... for all these, suicide is an active option.

Maithri listens patiently and is totally non-judgmental. It often arranges a short-stay home and gets down to finding a solution. George narrates a story: "She was so young. A widow whose only inheritance from her husband was the HIV virus. The family began a campaign to drive her away. She was not even allowed to the water pipe. They blamed her for her husband's death. So she came here to see if there was anything left in life.

"I took the staff into confidence and they agreed to go along with my suggestion. So we hired her as a receptionist and trained her. After a year I advertised in the papers for a groom who is HIV positive. Along came a young man and we all got together and got them married. They are a very happy couple today and keep in touch."

He is a calm man undisturbed by the fact that the church has cut him adrift. Jananeethi needs Rs.70,000 a month for its operations. It has 14 staffers, 7 of them lawyers. They raise money by doing consultancies, sponsored projects, publishing books and from donations. All their services are free.

Who is he, this man? Father George? Advocate George? How do you brand him? Without doubt, --like the best in the country-- he is a fine Indian, who keeps his religion to himself and gives of himself to all people. He is a part of the unknown army that cares for India. And that is India's true security.

A few days after the above article appeared, George Pulikuthiyil wrote: "Jananeethi is the result of joint efforts and dedicated services by many people. It's not my work alone. There are many people like Professor K.G.Sankara Pillai, late Justice T.Chandrasekhara Menon, late P.P.Ummar Koya, Dr.Francis Xavier, Advocate Jasmine Joseph and others who have contributed substantially to the growth of Jananeethi. I would have been happier if it was presented as a joint initiative of like-minded human rights activists."

Jananeethi

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