**INFLUENCING CHANGE**

1. **A Letter to the Editor: the spark that ignited the “Abolition of Bonded Labour” in India.**

It was a sunny morning during the days of the National Emergency in 1975. S.R. Shankaran and his junior colleague S.P. Tucker, both IAS officers, were sitting under a tamarind tree sipping tea and munching chilli bajjis packed in newspaper outside a teashop at Bandi Thandrapadu village on the outskirts of Kurnool town in Andhra Pradesh. A letter to the editor caught the attention of SR Shankaran, known as a people’s officer. It was written by Bishop George Victor Saupin SJ of Daltonganj asking that the government should do something about the plight of the people who are bonded labourers living as slaves in this modern era. Tucker was surprised to see his senior officer carefully fold the oily paper and insert it into his shirt pocket. They had stopped on the roadside to get the pulse of the local people. Instead they had got wind of something horribly wrong in the supposedly free India.

S.R. Shankaran lost no time on this shocking discovery that he shared with his friend. He quickly returned to Mussorie where he was on a teaching assignment. With due permissions from the faculty at this premier institute that trains the nation’s administrators, he set out with a small research group to meet Bishop Saupin of Daltonganj. He got an appointment with the Bishop and presented him the oily paper. After the initial suspicion as to Sankaran being a secret service agent was cleared, the Bishop opened up and explained the terrible situation of bonded labour in his diocese. Shankaran was shocked to find the extent of bonded labour in so many hidden forms. This was slavery continuing in independent India. His research team had plenty of work to do and they set out doing research on the extent and types of bonded labour in the country. By November of the following year, the Parliament had passed *The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976*.

1. **Law is to Effect Justice: Students of Theology effect an amendment to the Law on Minor Minerals in Karnataka**

Everything is possible for those who choose to pursue justice. That is the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God. In June 1975, Br. Sebastian John, a third year student of theology, withdrew from his ministry at Chikka-Basavanapura village saying that 8 years of work there by the brothers had not borne fruit. He wanted to stay out to explore other ways of getting Justice. He immersed himself into the study of Liberation Theology, inviting others to join him in the study. The professors and other students were amused at his stance and the group was nicknamed “Liberation group.” Some members of the group, Job, George, John, and Andrew continued to work in the village determined to bring about the liberation of the people. The study bolstered the work. As the understanding of the dynamics of oppression grew, the determination to find a solution was also unabated. One day, Job wrote a letter to the editor with a pen name. That letter changed the history of the village. On November 5, 1975, during the infamous national emergency, two journalists and a photographer from the Indian Express and Kannada Prabha were at the college asking information. The next day the screaming headlines on the front page of the two newspapers along with the vivid photographs stirred the conscience of Bangalore and there was freedom at midday on 6th November 1975 for 40 bonded labour families of Chikka-Basavanapura.

People became free with the contractor and his henchmen put behind the bars. They became their own masters, organising their work as a registered Labour Contract Cooperative Society. Their undoing was their honesty. They kept proper books. The sales were recorded along with the payments received. Weekly payments were made according to the actual work done by individual member. Everything flourished. There was a smile on every face. The children were in neat uniforms and attending school. There was a crèche to care of the children of working mothers. Then one day disaster struck. A jeep of the Karnataka State Department of Minor Mineral stopped at the quarry. They looked at the books and issued a tax arrears memo for Rs. 22,000.00. They seized the tools of the workers and sped away leaving the people perplexed.

Vested elements work in tandem, the students had studied during their study circle on Liberation Theology. Efforts to convince the officials failed. The released bonded labourers were being penalised for their honesty. This was the only place in the over 200 granite stone quarries around Bangalore that had the problem. Neither the officials nor the politicians could provide an answer; nor did the social activists or the trade unionists. The society continued with the frequent threat from the mining department. One fine day in May 2017, the Chief Secretary of Karnataka came to visit the village. He met the people and assured them a fantastic financial package that included a crusher, quarry licence, house sites and houses, Share capital for the cooperative society according to the membership as well as a large capital deposit from the government. They also agreed to meet the tax amounts demanded by the mines department. President Ramaiah was annoyed. He demanded a change in law so that they would not be harassed in future. The people refused to take the package without the amendment in the mining law. The Chief Secretary expressed his helplessness with regard to the amendment, but they could come at anytime to claim the financial package. They have had to face the corrupt officials so long, and now with even the law against them the future looked bleak. But they were determined to find an answer.

The students of theology stood by the people. They were determined to get the law change. Liberation Theology and readings in Paulo Freire had got the students to look at the deeper causes and find solutions that touched the roots. They were lucky to face a good officer, Mr. K.M. Koti, the State SC/ST Welfare Commissioner. He was a gem of an officer who knew what need to be done. Under his guidance, in spite of disparaging remarks from the so called experts, the brothers worked on a strategy. They had friends among the officials, among the politicians, in the press, among activists and unionists. Why not bring them all together on the same platform? If that were not possible, why not make them all make the same demands?

And this is how the group went about. An article was written on the plight of the liberated bonded labourers. Deccan Chronicle journalists, Imran Quereshi and Sapru agreed to get it published. Mr. Venkatram a Socialist Trade Unionist friend contacted MLA Michael Fernandes and MLC M. Raghunath. They agreed to take up the matter on the day the article was published. In the meantime a summary of the demands were printed on a single page and given to the Chief Secretary, Special Secretary to the Chief Minister, the Industries Secretary, the Secretary for Cooperatives, the Finance Secretary and the Mining Secretary. Copies also went to the office of the Minister in charge, who happened to the Chief Minister, Devaraj Urs.

Then it all happened quicker than one can imagine. On 17th July Monday, Deccan Chronicle published the article on the plight of the so-called liberated quarry workers who now needed liberation from the current law that oppressed them. As the Assembly was engaged in some serious controversial discussions, the floor mangers changed the plan and decided to raise the issue in the Legislative Council. When Mr. M. Raghunath, then the Youth Congress President raised the issue in the presence of the Chief Minisher Devaraj Urs, the in-charge minister for Minor Mines and Minerals brandishing a copy of the Deccan Chronicle, the Chief Minister was at a loss for words. When asked for their specific demands, the MLC produced the same list of demands that had been circulated simultaneous in all the relevant offices. The Chief Minister promised a response on Wednesday, 19th July. And the response met all the demands, particularly the assurance of an amendment to the law exempting released bonded labourers and labour cooperative societies from the ambit of royalty and other taxes. The amendment was done and gazetted soon after. The people had won a victory and a lot more freedom.

1. **Amendments to AP Panchayat Raj Bill, 1994 at the instance of a federation of Landless Agricultural Labourers**

One of the major actions of the Rajiv Gandhi government was the Constitution 73rd Amendment Act 1992 which established the present Panchayat Raj system in India. Social Activists working in rural areas looked at this as an opportunity to mobilise the rural poor towards their empowerment. In Andhra Pradesh some of us were part of the Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Cooleela Samakhya (APVCS) and organised campaigns to take advantage of the new Panchayat Raj set up. We then realised that political parties were also planning to capture power at the village level too. This would impede our future work in the villages. Hence during the annual meeting held at Bhongir, now in the Present Telangana State, we decided to influence the draft Panchayat Raj Bill. We got an appointment with the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) entrusted with the review of the bill and made several proposals. We had the backing of the ruling party and our proposals came through in spite of strong resistance from some of the oppositions parties. One of the proposals that was accepted by the JPC and later became law in the united Andhra Pradesh was that elections to the village panchayat would be on a non-party basis. This law still stands and the work in the villages remain to some extent free of direct political control.