

## PV Rajagopal: India's mass mobilizer

‘What happened to this country?’

It is clear that PV Rajagopal ponders this question daily. ‘India could have followed a development model which would now be a good example for African and Latin American countries, if not for the West. But instead, the government is exploiting the resources of the poor, creating some wealth for some people, and then saying India is becoming more powerful.’

Rajagopal is an activist who has spent his life questioning the inequality and injustice that has taken root in the cracks between ideals and implementation. Born in 1948, only a year after Indian Independence, Rajagopal's grassroots approach envisions a return to Gandhian values. His work seeks an alternative to increasing governmental centralization through the empowerment of India's powerless – the indigenous, the landless, and the very poor.

As a young man in Kerala, Rajagopal trained in a classical South Indian dance style known as Kathakali, a form of legendary storytelling. As he toured in performances across India, however, his enthusiasm waned. ‘I always saw middle class people sitting and enjoying Kathakali, and I suddenly thought, this is not helping poor people.’

This realization led him to give up dance, but Rajagopal's newfound idealism also inspired him, along with three colleagues, to bring nonviolent activism to Northern India's violence-ridden Chambal region, where gangs of bandits, known locally as dacoits, had long ruled the roost. ‘There had been years of looting and killing and kidnapping and robbery, and local development was impossible,’ Rajagopal explains. ‘We thought we should do something.’



The group knew that it would be a long, hard process. ‘We didn't go there thinking we would be able to win the dacoits over. We thought we would motivate young people not to become dacoits, and that way put an end to the violence. But slowly, relatives of the dacoits started talking to us. We began the ashram in 1970, and on 14 April 1972, 760 dacoits came to surrender. Many of them were in prison for 10, 20, even 25 years. In the meantime, it was our responsibility to take care of their families and educate their children.’

Skye Hohmann

Rajagopal realized that people had turned to lawlessness out of frustration with the injustices of the state. ‘As long as cultural and systemic violence continue, physical violence will emerge.’ As a result, traditional attempts to reduce violence were doomed from the start. ‘You're only treating the symptoms, not the disease.’

By the late 1970s, Rajagopal was determined to find a cure for the disease itself. ‘I finally saw that the way is to train large numbers of young people to go back to their villages and address the structural violence.’

From the beginning, Rajagopal's youth training groups had tangible effects. ‘In one village, the doctor was not coming to the hospital, he was selling the medicine on the black market. So they sat in front of the hospital and made the doctor accountable. In another place, the ration shop rice was being sold on the black market, and they created a system to control the shop. When people start acting, the small changes in their lives make a lot of difference for them, you know?’

There were also sometimes tragic failures. 'Many of my workers were beaten up, many went to prison, some of them got killed.' Aware of the strength in numbers, in 1990 Rajagopal founded the umbrella organization Ekta Parishad. 'It means solidarity forum,' he explains. 'So when one person is attacked, people all over the country will stand up in solidarity.'

Ekta Parishad, in conjunction with his youth training programmes, has enabled Rajagopal to stage larger and larger actions. 'My interest is to make the state accountable, and you can make the state accountable only by acting together.'

Believing small-scale land ownership to be instrumental in alleviating poverty, Ekta Parishad organized the 2007 Janadesh Walk for Land. Rajagopal led 25,000 of the landless poor on a 350-kilometre march from Gwalior to the capital Delhi to demand the land reforms promised at Independence. 'The government was forced to agree to all the demands that we made in that long march.'

Two years later, however, the state has been slow to act. 'When a government promises and doesn't deliver, you need to multiply your action. I know that the government is under tremendous pressure for land resources from the multinational companies, but no government should be left unaccountable to the poor people.' In October 2009, a 5,000 person sit-in reminded the Indian parliament of its promise. 'We gave an ultimatum to act in the next two years. Otherwise 100,000 people are going to walk to Delhi in 2012.'

Rajagopal is already preparing for this march, which will cover 6,000 kilometres over the course of a year. In the final month, 100,000 people will join the core group of 100 walkers. Rajagopal plans to walk the full distance, raising awareness and support through rallies and meetings along the way. He estimates that in total half a million people will be involved.

The significance of the march, however, is even larger. 'I don't think this is an action for India alone. This is a common trend across the globe: poverty is increasing while the powerful are making profit, people are forced to migrate to cities, and slums are becoming bigger and bigger.'

'For the success of every action in a country like India you need international solidarity. In a globalizing world this is very important. It is important for people to know that poverty is not karma. It can be fought, if you come together as a group.'

PV Rajagopal talked with Skye Hohmann