

Those Who Protect the Poor Also Need Protection in Difficult Times

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The poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population living in remote villages frequently face injustice and sometimes even violence. Those responsible for this injustice and violence use their resources and influence to try to turn the scales of justice against the victims. In such circumstances the role of those social activists who sincerely try their best to help these victims, to make available legal help to them and to ensure that truth prevails and justice is done becomes very important.

However the powerful persons and forces try to hit back against these protectors in various ways, as they feel that as long as these persons or organizations remain active they will continue to oppose the arbitrary exercise of power by them. In such conditions, it is important for the administration to come to the timely help and rescue of these protectors. Such honest and sincere persons willing to work in difficult and adverse conditions in remote areas for bringing justice-based change in peaceful ways can also be of considerable help to the administration for improving the implementation of various pro-poor and welfare schemes.

An organization which has been playing such a protective role in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh is Vidya Dham Samiti (VDS) which has been the local partner for some prestigious social organizations over the years. They as well as several respected local teachers, lawyers, activists and hundreds of community members, particularly the poor and women, whom I have met in the course of my travels in the area as a journalist and development consultant, have spoken repeatedly in praise of the important protective role performed by VDS, its sister organization Chingari and particularly by the VDS coordinator **Raja Bhaiya**.



This fact has been recognized by several senior officials of the region, as well as by the National Human Rights Commission which came to Raja Bhaiya's help at a very difficult time. From earlier times I remember that the support of senior local officials was important for the success of the efforts initiated by the VDS to enable those landless dalits (for example in Bhanwarpur village) who had been given land pattas without getting possession, to actually occupy the land and cultivate it. The public hearing held by VDS and attended by the then Commissioner Sobran Singh Yadav was remembered by people for a long time for the on-the-spot decisions taken at that time which proved very helpful for the poorest people. At another public hearing in the presence of DM Mukesh Meshram and DIG R.P. Singh very helpful decisions were taken. A campaign against corruption could get considerable relief for adversely affected poor people thanks to the prompt hearing provided by former Commissioner V.S. Pandey. VDS along with Chingari has been working for the empowerment of women and among its efforts to draw attention to the problems of many women who have been victims of violence and injustice, a public hearing was very helpful particularly because of the highly supportive presence of the present Member of Parliament Krishna Patel. Her support for the cause of justice to these women was helpful and encouraging for VDS as well as for Chingari.

These are only a few examples of the several encouraging examples of working together of activists with helpful senior officials and elected representatives which ultimately benefits the poorest people in terms of resolving their many pending problems and issues. Unfortunately despite such efforts being made with a record of commitment to peaceful and constitutional methods for achieving justice, these efforts are being obstructed time and again by powerful forces. Raja Bhaiya has been most frequently exposed to such threats and conspiratorial actions by powerful persons to implicate him in false cases. In one such particularly difficult situation, it was only the prompt response of the National Human Rights Commission to help him which came to his rescue. It was hoped that after this initiative by the NHRC, such efforts to harass and threaten a leading social activist for justice with peace will stop but these are still continuing.

Some other activists too face similar problems. **Vijay Bahadur** is a former Pradhan of Harahamafi village who had done exemplary work in a very honest way for meeting the housing and other needs of villagers. He is known to reach many places where any injustice takes place and tries to arrange relief for the suffering people. He has exposed corruption

cases providing a lot of evidence. For all this he has been implicated in false cases and his pension after serving for nearly 25 years is not being paid, he complained with a lot of anguish. He says that his being a dalit has become a cause for denying justice and for misbehavior against him, instead of respecting his work. Vijay Bahadur has also been helping Chingari organization. A leading activist of Chingari Mobina Khatun known for her courageous stand on several issues of injustice to women has also faced harassment from time to time.

Apart from helping to take justice to the poor and women victims of violence, VDS and Chingari have also taken up several constructive works relating to education, health and social reform, and all of it benefits and is appreciated by thousands of villagers, particularly the poor. Hence if frequent and serious harassment of these activists is stopped, it will be helpful not just for these activists but what is more important is that if the protectors are protected then they will be able to carry out their protective role in these villages in a much better way.

Some years back this writer also functioned as a member in a team sent by the National Human Rights Commission to Bundelkhand along with a senior retired police official Sh. Chaman Lal who had joined the NHRC. This team also found several instances of exploitation and injustice which were being reduced effectively by the intervention by social activists. If such social activists are not helped and instead face constant harassment, then an important strength of democracy to reduce injustice in peaceful ways will be considerably reduced and harmed.

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