

Interview

Ekta Parishad

Rajagopal PV set up Ekta Parishad in India twenty-five years ago. It began by advocating for land, forest and water rights for poor rural communities and is now a significant nonviolent movement for change in India. Steve Whiting, of Quaker Peace & Social Witness, talked to Rajagopal about his vision, Ekta Parishad and nonviolent action.

What is the background to Ekta Parishad?

Ekta Parishad means 'unity'. When we began we recognised many concerns. One was that young people felt they were in a situation they could not change. We helped by organising training and continue to help young people to believe that poverty is manmade – so we can change it. They also get a bit of knowledge and understanding of laws and institutions that are around them.

One part of the training is to enable people to help themselves. It can be about a minimum wage, the rights of tribal people or land rights. That knowledge of laws and of institutions brings a new confidence. It is a confidence that makes them believe they can change their lives. If they go back to their village they take this confidence with them.

You looked, at a local level, at issues such as health provision, poverty, land rights. What was your thinking?

The basic principle is that without the organising ability at the bottom nothing is going to change. So, slowly, from one village it became thousands of villages.

When we had a critical number of people Ekta Parishad organised marches. These involved thousands of people, such as the walk to Delhi [the Janadesh campaign in 2007] to ask for policy change. This was policy change in relation to land and housing. Rather than having an organisation based in London or New York, there was a very organic growth from the bottom up. I always believe that this is what we learn from

nature. When the roots are strong the plant can grow. Ekta Parishad got recognition for its style and way of working.

You start from the bottom, at a village level, with people who feel powerless. They are given confidence, but often go back into a hostile environment. What is the next stage of training?

One interesting area is to help young people to understand that violence is not just about killing or attacking. This notion of indirect violence, systemic violence or structural violence is missing in society.

Poverty, injustice and marginalisation – these are all forms of violence. Violence cannot be fought by violence. Fire cannot be put down by fire: fire needs water. We see this in the world. If there is a small fire – in Syria or Iraq or Afghanistan – then America and others will put it down with a greater fire and they have messed it up. Here people are taught that fire cannot be put down by fire – fire needs water and water is not violence. So, you have to develop this capacity to act nonviolently – not to get provoked. Violence is basically an external power and nonviolence is internal power. What is important is your power inside. Nonviolence is a way of life: how you behave, how you talk, how you consume, how you produce. Moving from nonviolence as a technique to nonviolence as a way of life takes a long time, many years.

Anger is a good emotion. You get so much energy when you are angry, but if this energy is not positively used it can be destructive. This energy called anger is anger out of unemployment, anger out of poverty. When I see 25,000 people marching to Delhi, basically,



Photo: Ekta Parishad.



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Photo: Irish Carr.

Clockwise from top: Rajagopal speaking at the beginning of Janadesh 2007, a 350km walk from Gwalior to Delhi by 25,000 people, India; Rajagopal on a visit to Friends House; women walking to Delhi as part of Janadesh 2007.

I am handling 25,000 kilograms of anger! Everyone is angry because they have lost their land. They have been beaten and abused and their land grabbed by somebody else. While people are dancing and singing there is an amount of anxiety and anger. Initially, I had the capacity to handle 500 kilograms of anger. How do you increase your capacity to 25,000? When you walk in front of 25,000 people you know that the people who are behind you, with you, will manage it.

In India, on land and water rights issues, there is also a violent response. What has been the impact of the nonviolent and violent movements on each other? How is it that one group of young people can be persuaded and others not?

Small actions have limitations. Larger actions are also important. Training one person is important. Imagine training 20,000 young people! If we fail there are others waiting in the wings. There is a fantastic energy in the young in all countries; but the anger and frustration

experienced by the young is a market for violent groups. There is a mismatch between nonviolence and violence in the world. We have people who are prepared to work for companies that are violent.

In a world where institutions are behaving in a violent way then only movements protesting nonviolently can change this. I think building from the bottom up a movement of people who behave nonviolently is the solution. We must transform institutions into nonviolent institutions. When people solve problems through a nonviolent process others get attracted. If that village can solve problems nonviolently – then why can we not do it? Slowly, it goes from village to village. That is where we were expanding.

You consistently challenge ‘conventional’ thinking. Why?

Take development. What do we mean by development? Can it be only about an external reality: the material. What about the internal? How can you speak about

development as roads and airports and buildings without human beings developing at the same time? Young people need to see this. People are insensitive. They are dark, hollow inside. At the same time we pretend that we live in a developed world. We demystify some of those ideas. We also took the word modernity. What is modern – the laptop, the mobile phone? Is that modernity? Is there a thing called ‘modern behaviour’? If you are behaving in a primitive way using force all the time – then that is a primitive way of dealing with issues. If you are dealing in a primitive way and you pretend to be modern because you have a mobile phone and a different kind of laptop – is that really modernity?

Gandhi said civilisation is all about finding a harmony between what you think, what you say and what you do. The harmony between these three makes you most modern – most civilised. Using nonviolent methods you are trying to introduce a new kind of relationship between people and people – and people and nature. People may be economically very poor but they are socially, culturally and spiritually rich.

Slowly, I developed this concept of the ‘four pillars’: the power of the poor and their capacity to change; the power of young people and their capacity and energy to change; the understanding that alone in one village you cannot change – you need other villages too, and globally, also, you need the support of others; and the power of nonviolence. It was a kind of personal growth – changing myself as well as others. In a globalising world – where migration is increasing – this is going to create a lot of conflict – conflict around water – conflict around resources – conflict around land – conflict around minerals. Globalisation is going to create huge levels of conflict and this conflict is going to be the market for people who are producing arms. In that kind of situation social movements have a lot of responsibility. But what is happening is that governments are trying to restrict the space of social movements. They do not want any voice of dissent.

In recent years we have seen empires, oppressive regimes, fall essentially because of nonviolent people power. Do we have a basis for nonviolence, not just in India, but also in the world more than we did twenty years ago?

We have seen many sporadic movements emerging in recent years. Occupy was one. The movements were based on the philosophy of nonviolence. But we couldn’t sustain that energy. On one side I may paint a negative picture. But on the other there is great possibility. But this possibility cannot be taken unless there are enough people to take the opportunity – to act upon it. The challenge is – do we really have enough people to take the opportunity? I don’t think the political leaders are going to do it.

How can we support each other in these endeavours?

Every year I take four to five weeks to travel. I go around talking about two worldviews. One where you think that technology and the market will solve all the problems and the other the Gandhian way of looking – from the bottom up – more ethics and justice. We all know it is a difficult task. In spite of that the global enthusiasm for change is very inspiring.

It was with the support of British Quakers that we started the idea of building a South Asian process. The idea was to train 100 people in every district – 900 districts – and that was a beautiful dream. I do not want to drop that dream.

Quakers have a special place. You hosted Gandhi. You have a lot in common with organisations like Ekta Parishad. This is a time for us to hold hands in building a global movement for peace and nonviolence. I hope this is a time for everyone to come together and act together.

What sustains you in your work?

I don’t want to see people suffering poverty. It is unacceptable. At the same time I see rich people suffering from spiritual poverty – despite having wealth and material comforts. Poverty of any kind is not acceptable. I am not just working with poor people. I also work with the middle class and the higher ups. I want to help people get out of poverty. I also went to a Gandhian school. Making your own clothes and footwear was important. Religious prayer was important. I was brought up in an atmosphere like this. These values were important in my life. I also stayed in Gandhi’s ashram for two years. That gave me a deeper understanding of Gandhi and Gandhi’s values.

Initially, I had the push from my family and Gandhi but then, later, I had the pull from global institutions and friends beyond India. I was also associated with the Quakers and their work in India. You continue to inspire me in a big way. I think the deep relationship with the Gandhi movement and the movement of Quakers is something very interesting to my mind. Now I am sixty-eight. How much can one do? I am still motivated to continue and, at the same time, to see young people taking it up and moving ahead and making a better world.

Rajagopal founded Ekta Parishad, a people’s movement dedicated to the principles of nonviolent action, in 1991.

Steve works with Quaker Peace & Social Witness’ Turning the Tide and Peacemaker programmes.