



PEOPLE'S WATCH SPEAKS UP TO RIGHT THE WRONG

JEYALAKSHMI RAMANUJAM @ Madurai

SPEAKING up when the world is willing to listen is quite easy. Not so when the world looks away.

But some people, like Henri Tiphagne, love to fall into the second category. He has, time and again, roared like a lion when everything was against his odds. He believed that only his voice could bring attention to the issues of the underprivileged—a true champion of human rights.

An advocate and ardent human rights activist, Henri is one of the founders and executive directors of People's Watch in Madurai. He is the first recipient of the eighth Human Rights Award by Amnesty International, Germany, from India. People's Watch has been working with unwavering dedication and commitment to fulfil its vision of promoting a society free from discrimination and injustice and creating socio-economic conditions for the realisation of human values and rights.

People's Watch has been tirelessly working to ensure human rights for the vulnerable, especially the accused or suspects who lost their lives in police encounters. It not only advocates issues but also provides protection to victims' family members. The organisation has many remarkable achievements; in 1996, it started professional monitoring of human rights violations and released the first annual report on such violations in the state. It introduced awareness of human rights in schools, intervened in the Mysore TADA (Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Prevention Act, 1987) cases on behalf of the 108 victims, and organised programmes to combat torture along with the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Hong Kong, and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), Geneva.

Henri has raised his voice against human rights violations wherever he found them. He shared his journey of three decades with TNIE. In the early 1980s, a human rights rally was staged in Madurai against custodial torture by the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL).

"I was studying law when I participated in the rally. Soon the police started attacking the participants and preventing their movement. I managed to escape from



Henri Tiphagne, founder of People's Watch, in discussion with organisation members | K K SUNDAR

there, with the thought of my arrears in mind, which I had to clear to complete my law degree. However, the incident created a spark in my mind, and slowly I started working for PUCL, which is where I got the courage and encouragement to fight for human rights. Subsequently, People's Watch was born," Henri said.

"Initially, People's Watch only monitored and hired advocates to ensure legal justice. However, it was not fruitful, so I started taking up the cases. A rape victim used to regularly visit my office. We had arranged legal support for her, but she was struggling with health issues. A doctor said that she needed psychological support. Then I realised the importance of safeguarding the victim in all ways, including creating a safe space, pro-

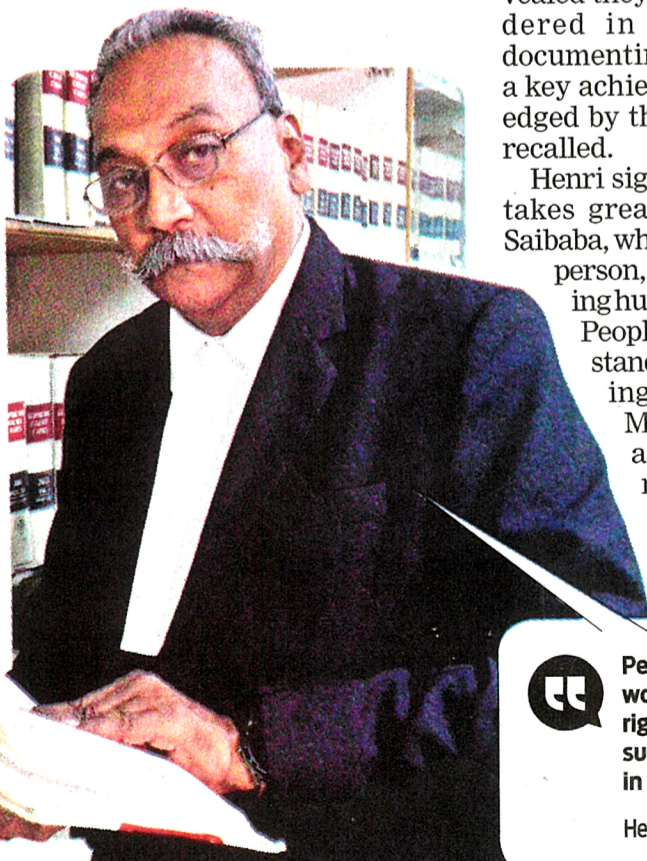
viding monetary support, caring for their family, and more," he recalled.

He further said that the rehabilitation centre for victims of domestic violence and torture was started in 2005. The centre rehabilitates survivors, providing academic skills and qualifications. Over 500 students have graduated in fields like law, teaching, social work, and nursing, reclaiming their right to education.

"There was an investigation by People's Watch in 2018 on the red sanders smuggling case, where several Tamil people were killed by the Andhra Pradesh Special Task Force. After receiving a postcard from a victim detailing police torture of Tamil labourers, we intervened. Many victims had bullet wounds and their legs were bound. Some were abducted from buses by unknown men. Our investigation revealed they were tortured and murdered in police custody, and documenting their statements was a key achievement. It was acknowledged by the court as well," Henri recalled.

Henri signed off by saying that he takes great inspiration from GN Saibaba, who, despite being a disabled person, never gave up on protecting human rights until his death. People like Henri inspire us to stand up against the wrongdoings around us. As Nelson Mandela put it, when people are denied their human rights, humanity itself is challenged.

(Edited by
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Henri Tiphagne