The 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership

Rajendra Singh

Even in the best of times, it is arid in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, India. Yet not so long ago, streams and rivers in Alwar's forest-covered foothills watered its villages and farms dependably and created there a generous if fragile human habitat. People lived prudently within this habitat, capturing precious monsoon rainwater in small earthen reservoirs called johads and revering the forest, from which they took sparingly.

The twentieth century opened Alwar to miners and loggers who decimated its forests and damaged its watershed. Its streams and rivers dried up, then its farms. Dangerous floods now accompanied the monsoon rains. Overwhelmed by these calamities, villagers abandoned their johads. As men shifted to the cities for work, women spirited frail crops from dry ground and walked several kilometers a day to find water. Thus was Alwar when RAJENDRA SINGH first arrived in 1985.

That was the year twenty-eight-year-old SINGH left his job in Jaipur and committed himself to rural development. With four companions from the small organization he led, Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS, Young India Association), he boarded a bus and traveled to a desolate village at the end of the line. Upon advice of a local sage, he began organizing villagers to repair and deepen old johads.

When the refurbished ponds filled high with water after the monsoon rains, villagers were joyous and SINGH realized that the derelict johads offered a key to restoring Alwar's degraded habitat. Once repaired, they not only stored precious rainwater but also replenished moisture in the soil and recharged village wells and streams. Moreover, villagers could make johads themselves using local skills and traditional technology.

As TBS went to work, SINGH recruited a small staff of social workers and hundreds of volunteers. Expanding village by village--to 750 villages today--he and his team helped people identify their water-harvesting needs and assisted them with projects, but only when the entire village committed itself and pledged to meet half the costs. Aside from johads, TBS helped villagers repair wells and other old structures and mobilized them to plant trees on the hillsides to prevent erosion and restore the watershed. SINGH coordinated all these activities to mesh with the villagers' traditional cycle of rituals. Meanwhile, with others, TBS waged a long and ultimately successful campaign to persuade India's Supreme Court to close hundreds of mines and quarries that were despoiling Sariska National Park.

Guided by Gandhi's teachings of local autonomy and self-reliance, SINGH has introduced community-led institutions to each village. The Gram Sabha manages water conservation structures and sets the rules for livestock grazing and forest use. The Mahila Mandal organizes the local women's savings and credit society. And the River Parliament, representing ninety villages, determines the allocation and price of water along the Arvari River.

Now, 4,500 working johads dot Alwar and ten adjacent districts. Fed by a protected watershed and the revitalizing impact of the village reservoirs, five once-dormant rivers now flow year round. Land under cultivation has grown by five times and farm incomes are rising. For work, men no longer need to leave home. And for water, these days women need walk no farther than the village well.

RAJENDRA SINGH is TBS's charismatic motivator. Villagers call him Bai Sahab, Elder Brother, and listen to his every word. People have become greedy, he tells them. They should learn again to be grateful to nature. That is why, he says, in Alwar, "the first thing we do in the morning is touch the earth with reverence."

In electing RAJENDRA SINGH to receive the 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, the board of trustees recognizes his leading Rajasthani villagers in the steps of their ancestors to rehabilitate their degraded habitat and bring its dormant rivers back to life.

An interesting interview of Rajendra is here :
http://www.sanctuaryasia.com/interviews/rajsingh.php

Palagummi Sainath

2007 Magsaysay Awardee for Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts

by Yvonne Chua

India's millions of rural poor has been journalist Palagummi Sainath's beat or regular assignment since 1993. And it's by choice.

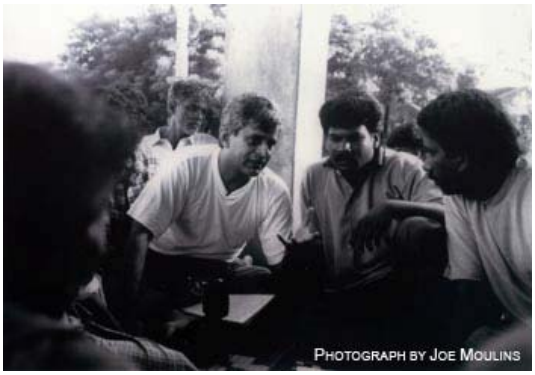
Unlike the legions of journalists dazzled by the economic reforms begun in this South Asian giant in the early nineties, Sainath suspected a dark side to "development, Indian style" and set out to prove it. This meant giving up a comfortable job at Blitz, a widely circulated Mumbai-based weekly where he was then deputy editor and a popular columnist, in exchange for a fellowship with the Times of India.

For the next two years, Sainath traveled the breadth and depth of India's 10 poorest districts, or what many consider a hardship post, and reported firsthand the hunger and poverty gripping rural India on an unknown scale since its independence in 1947, the consequence of disastrous development policies.

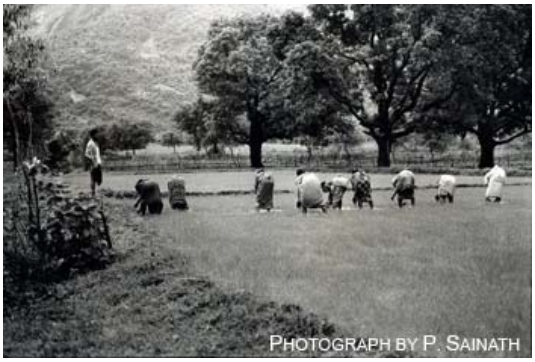
There was no turning back for Sainath. His reportage on rural India would subsequently set off reforms in policies and programs affecting the poor-farmers, tribal people, women and dalits or untouchables, among others. His bestseller, Everybody Loves a Good Drought, an anthology of 68 of the 84 reports he had filed as a Times of India fellow from 1993 to 1995, has become a journalism classic and required reading in universities in India, North America and Europe, along with his many other stories on poverty and development.

The recipient of scores of national and international awards, including New York's Harry Chapin Media Award, Amnesty International's Global Human Rights Journalism Prize and the European Commission's Lorenzo Natali Prize, Sainath has been chosen as this year's Ramon Magsaysay awardee for journalism, literature and creative communications arts. "His passionate commitment as a journalist to restore the rural poor to India's consciousness, moving the nation to action" has caught the attention of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, which gives out annually Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

Born in Chennai (formerly Madras) in 1957, the Jesuit-trained grandson of former Indian president Varahagiri Venkata Giri chose the life of a journalist after finishing a master's degree in history at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. "I would rather be a journalist in India than anywhere else in the world," he once said in an interview.



Through workshops that take place right in the villages, Sainath teaches young journalists to be agents of change.



Sainath awakens the rest of India to the plight of the rural poor through his traveling photo exhibition, "Visible Work, Invisible Women."

The rich legacy of Indian journalism explains Sainath's mindset. After all, Gandhi and other leaders in the struggle for India's independence had doubled as journalists and contributed to the "liberation of the human being." As Sainath puts it, "The Indian press is a child of the freedom struggle."

"Dissident journalism" in not only India but also the United States greatly influenced Sainath's philosophy of journalism. He firmly believes that "the best journalism has always come from dissidents."

For Sainath, Thomas Paine, the 18th-century pamphleteer who advocated independence for the American colonies and the rights of man, was the greatest dissident journalist. "He practiced the only journalism worth practicing: Journalism based on a commitment to ordinary people, to very high democratic ideals and to bettering the living conditions of people around him," he said.

Alas, by the time Sainath ventured into newspapering, Indian journalism prevailing in the early 20th century and Paine's brand of journalism had vanished. He discovered that the Indian media in the late 20th century was no longer "journalism for people (but) journalism for stakeholders."

Media ownership had shifted from family-owned businesses with a "sense of purpose" to conglomerates, even trusts, run by corporate CEOs who placed premium on revenue- rather than people-driven journalism.

The reportorial beats reflected the bias. There were political, ministry, business, fashion, entertainment, glamor, design and even "eating out" correspondents, but no single, full-time correspondent assigned to agriculture, housing, primary education, labor or the social sector. A poverty or rural affairs beat was unthinkable.

At a time that hunger-related mass migrations and deaths, including suicides among peasants, were on the rise, journalists were churning out "feel-good" stories catering to the growing middle class. Stories on weight-loss clinics, latest car models and beauty queens were crowding out serious journalism. Even elections coverage had morphed; its increasing emphasis on entertainment and personality was cutting into valuable space and air time for public discourse on pressing life-and-death issues.

Sainath wasn't-and isn't-one to hold back from saying what he deemed as the sorry state of Indian journalism. "The fundamental characteristic of our media is the growing disconnect between mass media and mass reality," he has repeatedly said.

Development journalism, too, turned out to be a source of disappointment for Sainath, having failed to live up to its much-vaunted promise to put development on the public agenda. The reason: Not only had development journalists failed to see through the government or official mantra, they had also unquestioningly accepted the lines fed them by nongovernmental organizations or NGOs, especially those the state and the corporate sector had co-opted.

On far too many occasions, journalists have been reduced to mere "stenographers," Sainath noted. He writes in his introduction to Everybody Loves a Good Drought: "Lack of skepticism makes for bad journalism and wearisome copy."

Sainath's trailblazing reporting on the rural poor would upset India's prevailing, if not faulty paradigm of journalism, and force journalists to reexamine themselves and their craft. His powerful, poignant narratives on India's invisible hunger for the Times of India, other publications and The Hindu, of which he has been the rural affairs editor since 2004, embody his conviction that journalism must focus on the processes and not events of poverty and, just as importantly, about people and their problems.

"In covering development, it calls for placing people and their needs at the center of the stories. Not any intermediaries, however saintly. It calls for better coverage of rural political process. Of political action and class conflict, not politicking," he said.

For example, the 68 accounts in Everybody Loves a Good Drought, nearly all told in about 800 words, supply anecdotal evidence that the crisis in India's agriculture was more the making of bad, even absurd policies, aggravated by endemic corruption, rather than of drought and other natural calamities. The stories range from the tragicomic and heartrending to the against-all-odds and uplifting.

Just some of the stories:

Government castrates all local bulls in a village so these would not mate with cows that were to be cross-bred to produce the "miracle cow." The experiment fails and the local bull becomes extinct in the village.

Villagers beyond medical care rely on the Biswas brothers, a pair of quack doctors who administer the cure-all saline drip or tetracycline injection for all diseases. Needless deaths are inevitable.

Members of a tribe lose their benefits after two state agencies misspell their tribe's name. A new tribe is created in the process, with nary a

member.

A tribal mother and her five children are caught in an angry monsoon one night in 1968 after they have been evicted from their land to give way to a fighter plane project. Nineteen years later, she and her brood are out again in the rain at night, this time with a grandchild in tow, having been evicted again from their land, this time for irrigation and power project.

Sainath's Everybody Loves a Good Drought offers stories of hope and courage as well by zeroing in on survival strategies of the poor. About 4,000 women in Tamil Nadu acquire leases to stone quarries through an anti-poverty program and contribute to their village economy. Thousands of women in the same district learn to cycle, in the process acquiring independence, freedom and mobility that help them boost family incomes.

It is not only through words but also through photographs that Sainath has captured the tales of India's rural folk, especially the women. "Visible Work, Invisible Women," his 70-piece black-and-white photo exhibition, has been mounted across India and overseas to trumpet the unrecognized contributions of poor women to the economy. He does the photography for his stories. "I could never find a photographer to accompany me to some of the places where I go," he said.

And travel a lot he continues to do to this day, spending between 270 and 300 days a year in India's rural interior to document what he calls "basic failures" in Indian society: land reform, social issues, caste, gender, regional development.

If there is one thing Sainath is equally firm about, it is his refusal to take corporate or government funds to finance his reporting. He would rather dip into his own pocket. Sainath recently told the online publication India Together that he intends to use the prize money that will come with the Magsaysay award to pursue two dream projects: an archive of rural India and a series on the last remaining freedom fighters of India.

It is likewise Sainath's dream to see more Indian journalists engage in the pro-people journalism he loves, and has initiated the process. The royalties from Everybody Loves a Good Drought have funded the Countermedia Prize of Excellence in Journalism that recognizes outstanding work in rural reporting. He has taught journalism at universities in India and overseas, as well as run journalism workshops directly in the villages where he hopes to inspire writers to become agents of change.

Will Indian journalism change for the better? Sainath is optimistic it will. In an interview after winning the Magsaysay award, he said: "We've got history on our side -- 180 years of it in this country. Twenty years of trivialization is a minor period in that larger history. We're blessed with good young journalists, and there's also a new phenomenon-of people from nonjournalistic backgrounds coming into media and bringing a completely different lens."

Arvind Kejriwal

The 2006 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership

The brazen corruption of the high and the mighty may grab headlines, but for ordinary people it is the ubiquity of everyday corruption that weighs heaviest. And that demoralizes. Arvind Kejriwal, founder of India's Parivartan, understands this, which is why his campaign for change begins with the small things.

As a tax officer with the Indian Revenue Service, Arvind Kejriwal became aware of the many powers that tax officials held over private citizens and how easily these powers could be abused. Indeed, at the tax department, one expected to

pay bribes as a matter of course. With a few kindred spirits, Kejriwal began to strategize about how to bring an end to this. In 2000, he founded Parivartan, meaning "change." Parivartan appealed to the tax commissioner to make the tax department more transparent and less capricious. When this failed, it filed Public Interest Litigation directing the department to implement a five-point transparency plan. Eventually, Parivartan held a nonviolent protest, or satyagraha, outside the chief commissioner's office. Threat of another protest with the press on hand convinced the tax chief to implement the reforms.

Meanwhile, on leave from his job, Kejriwal stationed himself with other Parivartan members outside the electricity department. There they exhorted visitors not to pay bribes and offered to facilitate their dealings with the department for free. Since then, Parivartan has settled 2,500 grievances with the electricity department on behalf of individuals. Some seven hundred more have benefited from the group's "Don't pay bribes!" campaign at the tax department.

Under the Delhi Right to Information Act of 2001, every citizen possesses the right to inspect government documents. Kejriwal put the new law to use in Sundernagari, a New Delhi slum where Parivartan was working among the poor. First, the group obtained official reports on all recent public-works projects in the area. Next, it led residents in a "social audit" of sixty-eight projects, stirring the community to action with neighborhood meetings and street plays. Then, in a large public hearing, the residents presented their findings and exposed misappropriations in sixty-four of the projects embezzlement to the tune of seven million rupees! Today, in Sundernagari, local committees monitor public-works projects block by block, and no project may begin until the details of the contract have been made public.

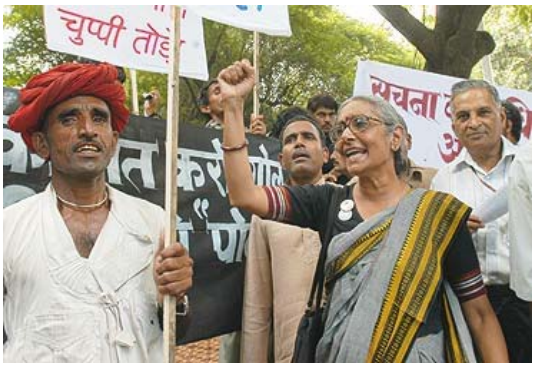
The Indian government provides subsidized rations of wheat and rice to poor people through neighborhood ration shops. Records acquired by Kejriwal for Sundernagari revealed high levels of theft in the system. In one area, over 90 percent of the grain ration was being skimmed off by shopkeepers in collusion with certain food department officials. When Parivartan investigated this, one of its team members was savagely attacked. In protest, more than five thousand residents of the community held a monthlong "rations fast." This and a mass rally riveted public attention, and foot-dragging officials finally moved to clean up the system.

Now in its seventh year, Parivartan has only ten full-time members. Although Kejriwal sometimes takes on larger issues such as the successful 2005 campaign challenging a water-privatization plan for New Delhi he has no plans to expand. He prefers to coordinate Parivartan's efforts with other like-minded NGOs across India.

Thirty-eight-year-old Kejriwal reminds Indians that the boons of collective action, such as the honest delivery of services, have already been paid for through taxes. Citizens are entitled to them. The spirit of his movement was aptly captured by the women of Sundernagari as they rallied to protest cheating in neighborhood ration shops: "We are not begging from anyone!" they chanted. "We are demanding our rights."

In electing Arvind Kejriwal to receive the 2006 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Emergent Leadership, the board of trustees recognizes his activating India's right-to-information movement at the grassroots, empowering New Delhi's poorest citizens to fight corruption by holding government answerable to the people.

Aruna Roy



The 2000 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership

We are familiar with corruption in high places. But what about corruption in low places? For example, how much of the development aid earmarked for Asia's rural poor every year actually reaches the poor? Huge sums are involved. In India, the government spends some $200 million annually for rural assistance in the state of Rajasthan alone. This is where ARUNA ROY and the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS, Organization for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants) have been helping poor villagers find out where the money goes. They do so by asserting the people's right to a single powerful weapon: information.

As a junior officer in India's prestigious Administrative Service, ARUNA ROY was exposed to her country's diverse, poverty-stricken village world. She learned that she could not easily penetrate it, or change its ways, as an elite official. After seven years, she resigned from the Service and in 1974 moved to Rajasthan. There she joined the Social Work and Research Center (SWRC), a voluntary agency led by her husband and engaged in village-level development projects on health, education, gender, and livelihood. Her experience at SWRC convinced her that poor people must be the agents of their own economic and social improvement and, moreover, that political action is fundamental to their success.

With this in mind, ROY and some fellow activists formed MKSS in 1990. Headquartered in the village of Devdungri, Rajasthan, their group accepted no external funds and spurned the trappings of prosperous NGOs. Living as the poor lived and eating as the poor ate, ROY and her comrades began assisting villagers to assert themselves against the local power structure.

Using traditional forms of protest such as hunger strikes and sit-ins, MKSS-led villagers insisted that local people hired for state projects be paid the legal minimum wage. They forced a land-grabbing feudal lord to return encroached-upon properties to the entitled poor. Most provocatively, they held open-air public hearings at which official records of state development projects were exposed to the scrutiny of the intended beneficiaries.

Shocking revelations followed: of toilets, schoolhouses, and health clinics recorded as paid for but never constructed; of improvements to wells, irrigation canals, and roads that remained noticeably unimproved; of famine and drought relief services never rendered; and of wages paid to workers who had been dead for years. Of the many development projects pursued by MKSS in Rajasthan, said one member, "not one has come out clean." Such revelations embarrassed culpable officials and led to apologies and investigations and even to the return of stolen funds.

Information was the key to every success: bills, vouchers, employment rolls. People have the right to audit their leaders, MKSS said. Thus, its campaign of public hearings also became a campaign for transparency in government. "Our money, our records," chanted villagers.

But officials were loathe to open their books. This prompted ROY and MKSS to launch a series of rallies culminating in a fifty-three-day protest in Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan, to compel the state to make its development-fund records public. The movement soon took on India-wide dimensions as the media and prominent intellectuals and political reformers joined in. As a result, right-to-information laws have now been passed in Rajasthan and three other states. A comprehensive national law is pending before the Government of India.

ROY and her colleagues practice the transparency they preach, accounting scrupulously for their own expenditures to rural neighbors. At fifty-four, ROY remains driven. If an issue or a situation disturbs her, she says, "I am not comfortable until I do something about it."

In electing ARUNA ROY to receive the 2000 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, the board of trustees recognizes her empowering Indian villagers to claim what is

rightfully theirs by upholding and exercising the people's right to information.

Jockin Arputham

The 2000 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Peace and International Understanding

Jockin Arputham was stunned after the phone call from Manila on July 20. It took him three hours to recover from the news. The lady on the other side had just told him that he had won the Ramon Magsaysay Award. "First I thought she was talking about someone else, because I have simplified my surname by substituting it with an A. Moreover, it is not the easiest of things to trace my number."

He later learnt that three magazines in Philippines, who were asked to find out about his work, could not even begin work because they did not know how to contact him. Not the easiest of tasks when you have to find a man who lives in a slum outside Mumbai and has his office opposite a row of pavement dwellers in the heart of a Muslim neighbourhood.

But the friendly president of the National Slum Dwellers Federation has no qualms about his humble status; in fact he is proud of it. And feels that whatever success he has had in improving the lot of the scores of poor around him, is because he has worked from within that system, being part of it. "I have had many chances of moving out of the slum but I haven't. I have lived here since I came to Mumbai from Bangalore in 1963 and do not see myself moving out."

For 25 years, this Tamilian from Bangalore has been working for the cause of slum and pavement dwellers. Taking up their issues and making them heard. In association with two other organisations -- the Mahila Milan and Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centre -- he has helped in the resettlement and rehabilitation of numerous slum-dwelling families. Working with the government and its agencies like the municipal corporation, his organisation has helped provide 5,000 homes last year and set a target of another 50,000 in the next two years.

"There is one vital thing that I have learnt from my experiences -- if you have to tackle poverty, you *have* to make the poor participate in your programmes. It is because this hasn't happened that the government's Slum Rehabilitation Authority has failed," says Jockin.

Revelling at his new-found recognition and politely thanking those calling to congratulate him over the phone, the Magsaysay Award winner does not lose sight of the many harsh truths faced by the poor in India. "Slum dwellers are treated like shit," he says with unabashed candour, "There is no place for them in society."

"I remember when I went to South Africa -- this was before the release of Nelson Mandela. The people were expecting a big change in their lives after his release. I told them -- 'Don't be fools like we in India were before Independence. We thought freedom would fill our streets with milk and honey - but today, 40 years on, our poor don't even have a proper meal to eat.'"

Sitting in an office he says he has 'encroached' upon in an old Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation office in Madanpura, central Mumbai, Jockin says his programme now covers 35 cities in India and 10 countries -- mostly in Africa and the Far East. It is a project where the government provides land, while the housing is either constructed by builders without giving them any margin or by individual families themselves. Accommodation can be bought at a subsidised rate -- for as less than Rs 20,000 by slum dwellers.

Jockin, however, gives most of the credit for the success of the programme to female members. And is extremely proud of them. "Women are the

only ones who can change their families," he says pointing to the few sitting around him in the office. "You just have to empower them to see the difference. It is because of their savings that these houses have become a reality for their families."

In many ways, they are Jockin's army. His army for change. In good humour he relates how he has used them for collective advantage. "I send them to government offices. These illiterate women -- who are looked down upon as *junglees (uncouth).* Brash with smelly bodies. The officials don't want them in their offices and can't wait to see the back of them. So the work that would take six months by men, just takes one month for them!"

But it is a work that has its disadvantages too. Government officials think of him as a painful 'bugger'. They know in terms of inducements, a cup of tea is all that'll come their way for Jockin's work. Moreover, not all slum dwellers share his enthusiasm for rehabilitation.

"See that man there," he points to a scruffy, old pavement dweller on the opposite side of the road. "He doesn't want to move out when this slum gets rehabilitated shortly. You know why? Because he owns three trucks which park here. He even has a flat which he has given out for rent. It suits him here. And even if we are successful in moving them, the moment they do so, these *chawlwallahs (shanties)* opposite will move in. Because some *kholis (rooms)* here belong to them and have been rented out."

Yet for now, there are other pressing issues. In two days time Jockin is leaving for Cambodia. A guest of the country's prime minister, he will share his expertise in the resettlement of the urban poor with organisations there.

Then at the end of August is the trip to Manila that all five Magsaysay winners make every year. He says he still has not made any preparations for the award ceremony. But is certain how he will use the US$ 50,000 award money. "The award is a recognition of the urban poor movement, it merits that the money be used for the same purpose."

His family, meanwhile, has taken the news quietly. Much in Jockin's style. With his elder daughter married in Bangalore, it was for the younger one to explain to her unlettered mother about the prestigious award. Without any success though. "She thinks I've got a promotion," says Jockin, "I will give Re 1 from the award money to her."

Mahesh Chander Mehta

The 1997 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service

In India, as elsewhere in Asia, laws to protect the environment have long been in place. Yet in India, as elsewhere, such laws are often honored in the breach, and flagrantly so. As a result, there is little to prevent the malignant discharges of the subcontinent's polluting industries, its sewers, and its trucks and cars from fouling the air and water and earth—with crippling consequences for India's crowded millions. India's environmental agencies do have teeth, says crusading public interest lawyer M. C. Mehta, "but they refuse to bite."

Mehta was drawn to environmental issues in 1984, when someone called his attention to the corrosive impact of air pollution upon India's architectural masterpiece, the Taj Mahal. He studied how effluents from nearby industries were eating into the soft marble of the shrine and filed a writ petition against the polluters with India's Supreme Court. For more than ten years he pursued the case, marshaling mountains of facts. In a series of staggered directives, the Court responded by banning coal-based industries in the Taj's immediate vicinity, by closing 230 other factories and requiring three hundred more to install pollution control devices, and by ordering the creation of a traffic bypass and a tree belt to insulate the unique monument.

Meanwhile, when a gas leak at a fertilizer factory in 1985 killed several people and made nearly five thousand others sick, Mehta won a landmark decision for damages. And when someone inadvertently ignited the Ganges with a lighted match that same year, he filed petitions that led to orders against five thousand polluting industries along the holy river. At his insistence, 250 towns and cities in the Ganges Basin have been required to install sewerage plants. Mehta vigilantly monitors compliance with all such orders.

In similar Mehta cases, the Supreme Court has ordered the Delhi Administration to relocate nine thousand dirty industries safely away from the crowded capital, to protect the city's one remaining forest from illegal encroachments, and to build sixteen new sewerage treatment plants. Other Mehta campaigns have resulted in the compulsory introduction of lead-free gasoline in India's four largest cities and the prohibition of commercial prawn farms within five hundred meters of the national coastline. In a 1991 ruling, moreover, the Court compelled India's radio and television stations and movie theaters to disseminate environmental messages daily.

These victories have required years of singleminded exertion. By working eighteen hours a day, Mehta manages with a tiny staff and the fervent support of his wife and daughter. He work from a cramped office at home and subsidizes environmental cases with fees from his private practice. He faces constant harassment and even threats to his life.

Mehta's marathon effort is making legal history. In forty landmark judgments, the Indian Supreme Court has put the stamp of its authority upon his assertion that the "right to life," as guaranteed in India's constitution, includes the right to a clean and healthy environment. Furthermore, it has ruled that violators of this right are absolutely liable for the harm they cause. Indian courts may therefore grant compensation to victims of environmental abuse with the certain understanding that "the polluter pays."

Fifty-year-old Mehta keeps his organizational affiliations to a minimum and is known as something of a lone crusader. Still, he devotes several weeks each year to Green Marches, during which he works with grassroots organizations around the country. The movement for a clean habitat must be a people's movement, he says. "The future lies in the hands of a vigilant public."

In electing Mahesh Chander Mehta to receive the 1997 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service, the board of trustees recognizes his claiming for India's present and future citizens their constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment.

Tirunellai N. Seshan

The 1996 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Government Service

Will democracy prevail in modern Asia? Many of the region's power holders doubt it, insisting that their countries are too young, too poor, too diverse to open the political process to citizens with a free voice and a free vote. Democracy of the free voice and the free vote, they say, sows discord, stymies economic growth, and violates hallowed traditions of consensus. But Indians feel differently. In their nation of 900 million souls, Asia's most diverse democracy reigns. In India, voters—590 million of them in a recent national election—decide who will govern and who will not.

Yet, says Tirunellai Narayanaiyer Seshan, India's democracy has grave flaws. It is, he says,

government of some people, for some people, by some people. Its sacred ritual, the election; has been sullied by vote buying, fraud, thuggery, and partisan appeals to caste and creed. All this was the norm, at least until 1990, when T. N. Seshan was named India's Chief Election Commissioner.

Seshan, born in 1933 and educated at Madras Christian College and, later, Harvard University, rose brightly through India's elite Indian Administrative Service. He held several senior posts, including cabinet secretary under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, before assuming responsibility for conducting India's myriad state and national elections.

Seshan's initial analysis of his country's electoral system revealed 150 specific abuses. When India's politicians proved reluctant to legislate reforms, he launched a crusade of his own. Interpreting the constitutional mandate of the Election Commission as broadly as possible and stretching its legal powers to their maximum possible limits, Seshan set about cleansing the Augean stables of Indian democracy—one election after another.

He dispatched Central Police Forces to suppress local goons end prevent theft of ballot boxes. He insisted that all polling stations be accessible and private. He took stern measures to prevent vote buying. He banned ostentatious campaign displays and noisy rallies and required candidates to clean up walls and buildings defaced with their slogans. He enforced spending limits and required contestants to submit full accounts of their expenses for scrutiny by independent government inspectors. He exposed politicians who made illicit use of public resources for electioneering and prohibited election-eve bonanzas for government workers. He banned the sale of liquor and seized unlicensed firearms at election time. He prohibited election propaganda based on religion. He urged that every voter be required to possess a special election identification card. And all the while, he conducted a spirited campaign to educate Indian citizens about their rights and responsibilities as voters.

In asserting the authority and independence of the Election Commission, Seshan locked horns with India's Supreme Court and has feuded bitterly with the country's politicians, leading to more than one attempt to impeach him. His critics call him arrogant and abrasive. But others see him as the iron man of Indian democracy, who has cowed the high and mighty and restored credibility to the electoral system. Because of him, they say, Indian elections are cleaner and safer today and more truly reflect the will of the people. As a consequence, more Indians are voting.

Deeply religious, sixty-three-year-old Seshan lives modestly with his wife, Jayalakshmi. He engages in few diversions but broods incessantly about the fate of India. Elections, in his view, constitute only one element of modern Indian life that needs "cleaning up." His thoughts about India's regeneration are complex but the essential element, he says, must be absolute tolerance.

In electing T. N. Seshan to receive the 1996 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Government Service, the board of trustees recognizes his resolute actions to bring order, fairness, and integrity to elections in India, the world's largest democracy.