

**The 40th Niwano Peace Prize awarded to
Mr. Rajagopal P. V. of India**

Reason for Selection

Dr. Flaminia Giovanelli

On behalf of the Niwano Peace Prize Committee I am honored to announce that the 40th Niwano Peace Prize will be awarded to Mr. Rajagopal P. V. of India in recognition of his extraordinary work in the service of Justice and Peace. His actions in favor of the poorest and most marginalized of his country, carried out through peaceful and nonviolent methods, and his struggle for the recognition of the equal human dignity and equal rights of every man and woman, irrespective of caste or gender, inspires great admiration. His particular accomplishments that garner the highest esteem include negotiating the surrender and facilitating the rehabilitation of gangs, the education of young people in the service of the poor, and, well aware that the primary needs of the poor are water, land, and forests, his commitment to care for the environment. Mr. Rajagopal's work for justice is also carried forward through dialogue with institutions with a view to counteracting the phenomenon of land grabbing, and obtaining, through appropriate land reform, the redistribution of land and the assignment of land ownership.

The means and meaning of spirituality are deeply rooted in all of Mr. Rajagopal's activities. Being a Gandhian in thinking and action, he strongly believes in a journey of social action that starts from an "inner transformation" and expands to the outer world. This spirituality is matched by Mr. Rajagopal's very remarkable organizational skills as evidenced by the transition from action carried out in small groups and self-help organizations to the creation of large movements such as *Ekta Parishad*, which has an active membership of 250,000 landless poor and is capable of mobilizing thousands of participants in national and international marches to call attention to the important problems of our time.

Mr. Rajagopal's biography and curriculum vitae is so rich that one can go over it only in outlines. The child of a Gandhian family, he was born on 6 June 1948 in Kerala State, South India. He uses only his first name in public to avoid being associated with the phenomenon of caste, which is a clear sign of his vision of human equality. He first obtained diploma in traditional art and music from a reputed organization in Kerala, and afterwards a diploma in Agricultural Engineering in a *Nai Talim* system of education, the Gandhian method of "education for life." As Mr. Rajagopal himself stated, "it was a long journey, in terms of trying to find what I really wanted to do."

What he wanted to do became clear at the beginning of the 1970s when he moved to the Chambal district of Madhya Pradesh. There he found endemic violence, the consequence of injustices and wrongs suffered by the population which had resulted in the growth of gangs ("*dacoits*"). Mr. Rajagopal along with other senior Gandhian leaders, became a peacemaker, obtaining the surrender and even the rehabilitation of the *dacoits*. This courageous initiative paved the way for another of great significance that developed during

the 1980s: the organization of regional and national youth training programs to promote the concept of non-violent action for social change.

Mr. Rajagopal's commitment to justice and peace in this 20-year period culminated in the establishment of *Ekta Parishad* (Unity Forum) as an umbrella mass-organization with the mission of non-violent activism for securing land and livelihood rights for marginalized communities. Thanks to *Ekta Parishad*, Mr. Rajagopal's social activism has taken on a greater national and international visibility through successful land rights marches with the participation of thousands of people. Overall, the movement with the collaboration of other groups, secured land rights for nearly 500,000 families, negotiated a "Forest Rights Act" in 2006-2007, organized highly attended marches in 2007 and 2012, and a new land reform policy was agreed to by the central government and the state governments of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The last and more visionary march through ten countries, from Delhi to the United Nations headquarters in Geneva (Switzerland), planned to last a whole year (October 2019 to October 2020), couldn't be completed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ekta Parishad* activists and volunteers, more than 2,000 in number, reacted to the challenge of COVID-19 by delivering home care and health interventions in many Indian rural regions to fight the pandemic.

Mr. Rajagopal's roots in Gandhian spirituality and philosophy made it natural for him to serve within institutions that maintain the Mahatma's memory by applying his principles. In 1972 he was Secretary of the Mahatma Gandhi Seva Ashram, in 2005 he was elected Vice-Chairman of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, and today he continues to be the Managing Trustee of the International Gandhian Initiative for Nonviolence and Peace (IGINP). Mr. Rajagopal's nonviolent social action has also led him to be a man of dialogue with institutions, holding official positions such as Enquiry Commissioner of the Supreme Court on Bonded Labour, and a member of the National Council for Land Reform. His goal is the creation of a ministry and budget for peace and nonviolence. "If you are spending so much money on war, the military, and police, why can't you spend some money on peace and nonviolence?" he asks.

The inter-religious essence of Mr. Rajagopal's activism is in bringing together the poor, united in nonviolent protest for their rights, without distinction of religion. The movement's protest demonstrations take place with the side-by-side participation of peasants of all religious beliefs.

The great movement originated by Mr. Rajagopal's efforts has for years transcended the borders of his great country, India, as evidenced, for example, by the influence of *Ekta Parishad* on other continents such as Europe, and the international resonance of the *Jai Jagat* campaign. The United Nations is also on Mr. Rajagopal's horizon. He would like to have this leading international body as an ally in his quest for what he calls "a nonviolent economy."

Finally, we think it is highly significant to award Mr. Rajagopal the 40th Niwano Peace Prize in 2022 in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic that highlighted a downside of our interconnected world and forced us to rethink globalization. His social activism, while addressing the most salient issues of the globalized world, utilizes a closeness to the land and the people, and recovers a place for ethics and justice in development. Mr. Rajagopal ultimately reclaims for the people a way of development that is sustainable and humane.