

# *Brief Biographical Notes*

# J Paul Baskar



Mr. Paul Baskar was born on the 9th of June 1959 at Nadupatty village in Trichy district of Tamil Nadu state in India, where his father and mother were teachers in a government school. He had two sisters and three brothers. The family owned a piece of land and a tiled house in their native village in Dindigul district, but were living in a rented single bedroom house in Nadupatty. They belonged to a Catholic-converted most backward class family which was not a practising religious family except for annual visits to a Church of Dindigul, during Christmas and Easter.

His father, Joseph, was popularly known as Periya Vathiar (Great Teacher) who motivated poor and dalit children to go to school and campaigned for ensuring equal treatment for them. He encouraged universal education and did all he could to eliminate caste distinctions. He educated his children in reputed English speaking boarding schools and colleges in the nearby cities, though economically their family belonged to the lower middleclass and quality education came at a cost. He used to pawn his wife's ornaments often to pay the fees of his children.

His father's zest for educating the children of the marginalised segments of the community was shared by his wife, Teresa, the mother of Paul Baskar. She used to prepare meals at home and feed the Dalit children to encourage them to go to school. Poor Dalit children used to flock to their house for help. Though the upper caste Hindus did not like this, they did not air their objection, as the Periya Vathiar was respected by all in the village.

Paul Baskar studied up to his 8th standard in the same school where his parents were teaching. He stood first in the class in all subjects. He was awarded a government scholarship for higher studies as he ranked first in the district, in a government examination for 8th standard students. The scholarship, which was for three years, was enough to take care of his fees, accommodation and other expenses in a popular Jesuit school in Tiruchirapalli city, named St. Joseph's College High School, which was held in high esteem by everyone. There were students from the other districts of Tamil Nadu, from other states of India and from neighbouring countries like Srilanka and Malaysia.

His close contact with students of various places and social backgrounds during his High School education widened and deepened his understanding of the children all over the world, especially in the South East Asian developing nations. Interacting with persons of various socio economic strata at the stage of crucial character formation in his life explains the ease with which he interacts with national and international level individuals and institutions during his present-day activities as the head of a global level NGO.

Passing out from school with flying colours, he joined the prestigious Loyola College of Chennai, run by the Jesuits. During his studies he found himself closely attracted to a pro-left student movement called All India Catholic University Federation and later on to a more revolutionary student organisation. The small but committed ultra-left revolutionary group was running a study circle to discuss imperialism, feudalism, colonisation, social changes, social justice, economic justice, labour rights, human rights and democracy. Human rights became a special concern. His interest in reading and writing exposed him to a good number of books on various social issues. He used to write essays, articles and poems in a student magazine under various pseudo names and pen names. He participated in a student fact finding mission to a place where there was violence between Dalit and caste Hindus. He visited slums everyday for a few months to teach the young children the basic arithmetic and alphabet.

He frequently visited industrial worker colonies near Chennai city which brought him into contact with case histories of poverty, exploitation, injustice and other social issues. He understood the close link between poverty and social evils. He worked on a tank de-silting programme in a suburb in Chennai city. He went with a group of college students on a mission of flood relief operations in a place near his native village in Dindigul district, called Vedasandur. Interestingly, this was to be his area of operations, several years later, for his projects to eradicate child labour from spinning mills. This sort of activities prepared him for his future mission of collective community-based initiatives for sustainable agriculture development and land-soil conservation measures .

His flair and proficiency in writing and translation brought him into contact with left-oriented literature which he read and translated into Tamil. During this phase he came into contact with several social and political leaders and discussed with them the solutions to the social problems connected with child labour, migrant labour sustainable agriculture, industrial pollution, etc. It was this rare combination of a community conscious family background, left oriented higher educational life, collective action and interaction with like minded individuals and movements, exposure to treasuries of knowledge in the books he read and translated and his practical involvement in contemporary social issues that formed the social worker in him.

While still a student, he took active part in all the activities of the national human rights organization 'People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) which was actively engaged in action against bonded labour, police atrocities against the landless agricultural labourers and peasants, child labour in match and firework units and other related issues.

After graduation he went on to acquire postgraduate degrees M.Phil., M.Ed. and M.A in education and sociology and a Diploma in Labour Law. During his postgraduate studies, he continued his active involvement in liberation of child labourers, fighting for the rights of the migrant workers, campaigning for environmental protection and lobbying for sustainable development.

He began his professional life as a teacher and married Ms. Mercy Baskar who was interested in social welfare activities and they had one son and one daughter. But he could not settle down to a comfortable family life as the sight of child labourers and bonded labourers all around him cried out for help. He was always scheming and planning ways to help the exploited child labourers and suffering migrant labourers in India and abroad. It was during this period that he entered the arena of direct action and involvement in major social issues.

In 1984, he founded the Peace Trust to liberate the child workers, help the migrant workers, rehabilitate the Tsunami victims etc.. Outstanding legal luminaries like Justice P.N. Bhagavathi, Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer, Shri Kailash Satyarthi and Supreme Court Green Advocate C.M. Metha, who are also great human rights activists, inspired and supported him. The rehabilitative measures of Peace Trust for liberated child labourers include non formal education programmes and Peace Industrial School. Peace Trust has been monitoring, advocating and campaigning for elimination of child labour.

In 1988, the honourable Justice Krishna Iyer released, at Dindigul, his book 'Great Political Trials' which was the first of his erudite endeavours in publication. Several more books and research papers were published by him on the uplift of the downtrodden segments of the society. He also established an internet radio and a community FM radio to highlight the problems of the child labourers, migrant labourers and such other vulnerable segments and the benefits of eco development, eco farming, women empowerment and health awareness.

In September 1993, Peace Trust, in association with Child Workers in Asia (CWA) organised, at Madurai, a seminar on Advocacy and Social Mobilisation. Child Rights Activists from all over South India participated in the seminar. In June 1994 Peace Trust organised a massive Cycle Rally demanding safe drinking water for the villages around Dindigul badly affected by the tannery effluents and other industrial pollution. The Cycle Rally was led by Mr. Paul Baskar through all the affected villages, receiving their warm welcome, support and memoranda on this and other civic issues.

Peace Trust has organised Self Help Groups in the project villages, among the women folk, and enlightened them on social issues, especially child labour problems. Health and hygiene programmes have been implemented in the project villages, targeting child labourers and students of formal mainstream academic institutions. Peace Trust has been instrumental in liberating child labourers from hazardous occupations like tanneries and spinning mills, rehabilitating them through informal education or re-enrolment in formal education institutions, providing the senior children with vocational skills training programmes and referring them for skilled jobs as the last stage of their total rehabilitation. The Peace Trust has also associated with like minded Non-Governmental Organizations to release the bonded labourers of the states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, etc.

Several national and international awards, honours and recognitions have been conferred on Paul Baskar during the period of his active social service. He received Best Writer Award from the Tamil Nadu Government in 1989. In 1994 he received the FIAN Human Rights Award, from the Food First Information and Action Network, an international economics and human rights organisation based at Germany. In 1995 he received the Friends of the United Nations Award and in 2000 the Body Shop Human Rights Award. In 2004 he received the Honorary World Children's Prize which is internationally acclaimed as the highest in the field of child rights interventions.

As his stature as a pivotal person in solving national issues grew, he has been entrusted with key positions in several important bodies in the field of social welfare activities. He was the South India Coordinator of the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude whose activities span several countries in the South Asian regions. He is the member of the South Asia Task Force on Bonded Child Labour promoted by The Child Workers in Asia (CWA). He is also the National Coordinator of India for the 'Global March against Child Labour' which is the largest movement against enslavement and exploitation of children. Later he was nominated to government organisations like a member in Tamil Nadu Coastal Zone Management Authority and Peace Trust is a Regional Resource Agency for the Ministry of Environment and Forests. Peace Trust is a national focal point for CARAM Asia, a regional network on migration and health.

He has been the representative of Indian Child Labour NGOs and environmental organizations in a number of international forums and symposia like:

- El Taller, a global network meet of NGOs, in Santiago, Chile, in 1991
- Regional Consultation, Child Workers in Asia, Bangkok, Thailand in 1992, 1995 and 1998
- 'Earth Summit' organized by United Nations, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as an accredited NGO of UNCED in 1992
- World Social Summit organised by United Nations, Copenhagen, Denmark, as an accredited NGO in 1995
- Conference on Global Labour and Environment Solidarity, Pisa, Italy, in 1995
- 'World Congress against Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Children', at Stockholm, Sweden, in 1996
- Internship with NGO Working Group on Asian Development Bank, Manila, Philippines, in 1997
- Participated actively in various NGO World Bank consultations including a dialogue with the World Bank President in New Delhi, in 1996
- Global March against Child Labour and ILO Conference on Child Labour at Geneva in 1998 and 1999
- ILO Regional Meet, Phuket, Thailand in September, 1999, advocating and lobbying for the cause of both internal and international migrants, both children and adults
- Sustainable Development Seminar at Florence, Italy, in October, 1999
- New ILO Convention, NGO follow up Planning Session by the Anti-slavery International, London, in November, 1999
- NGO Representative at the Asian Development Bank's Board of Governors Meet at Chiang-Mai, Thailand, in May, 2000

- In connection with the reception of the prestigious Body Shop Human Rights Award, for his total commitment to the eradication of child labour and for uniting all groups in the society without class, caste or religious bias for this purpose, he visited London and Geneva in June, 2000
- Realizing that improvement of land fertility and environment equilibrium would increase adult farm labour and income from it, reducing child labour in the process, he stressed the importance of environment development during his visit to Italy in the year 2000 and while he attended the International Conference on Fresh Water in Bonn in Germany, in the year 2001
- In February, 2002, as Chairman of Peace Trust, he had organized the International Ground Water Conference in which over 1000 scientists from India and abroad had participated
- In August - September, 2002, he participated in the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in South Africa
- Besides, he undertook several personal visits to state level Human Rights and Child Rights Groups, Sustainable Development NGOs and Trade Unions in Thailand, Philippines, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Chile, Brazil, Italy, Germany and Sweden
- He has visited Malaysia, Singapore and Middle East Asian countries to protect the rights of Indian migrant workers

Presently, Paul Baskar is the editor of online news letters, 'Voice of Labour' and 'Migrant Labour'. He also edits the printed magazines 'From the South', a monthly update on labour and environment conditions of industries, 'Puthiya Kalvi' a Tamil environment monthly and 'Kadal Kadantha Tozhilali', a magazine on migrant labour problems, besides a bi-monthly update on environment.

His noted work on great political trials concerning the greatest patriots of India, 'Pugalmikka Visaranigal' in Tamil, was awarded the Best Book Award of Tamil Nadu Government and is presently a prescribed text book for B.Com. students of Manonmaniam Sundaranar University of Tamil Nadu. He has also written 'Chutru Choolal Vazhakkugal', a reference book on judgements on environment, and 'Kuzhanthai Thozhilalar' (Child Labourers) giving an exhaustive picture of child labour in India, both in Tamil. He also translated into Tamil Myran Wyner's 'Child Labour in India', originally published by Oxford University Press.

He does not like to be the run of the mill person treading ordinary walks of an average comfortable life. He is a path-breaker, with the will and resolution to overcome any obstacle or pressure in achieving his goals. His personal objective is to grow through sheer toil, based on his commitment to the larger issues like the emancipation of the child labourers and their productive rehabilitation, the recognition by all of the labour rights, especially of the migrant labourers and the achievement of an eco-friendly and sustainable world order where human rights and grassroots democracy would be unquestionably enshrined.

He is committed to his long-term goals which include:

- Close association with significant national and international NGOs and events
- Intervention for the sake of the child labourer in law making bodies like the Parliament and Assembly through friendly leaders of political parties
- Dialogues with World Bank, ADB and such other world financial bodies for the welfare of the bonded, child and migrant labourers
- To influence the change of course for the better of the WTO in response to campaigns of significant pressure groups and people's movements
- To participate and move resolutions to change the lives of the child labourers in the South East Asian regions in policy making bodies like the ILO

- To create entrepreneurship and through it to raise the economic status of millions of young persons in the developing countries

He envisages a future role as a national level promoter of labour rights, health rights and environmental protection and an international level spokesperson on child labour and migrant labour.

Mr. Paul Baskar was inspired by the biographies of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, who defied an Empire with the weapons of Truth and Non-violence, Nelson Mandela, who suffered long years of privation and deprivation and won against the colossus of apartheid, and Periyar, the Father of Dravidian Renaissance, who believed in perseverance against all odds. As these great men have inspired Paul Baskar, he is becoming an inspiration to millions of exploited labourers and marginalised women of the downtrodden segments of the society.

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