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## **'A Dalit deserves no award, according to India'**

### **Advocate of 'untouchables' is not given the opportunity to receive the Human Rights Tulip Award**

INTERVIEW: Gert Jan Rohmensen

**He cannot attend the presentation himself because the Indian government refuses to give him a passport, but the Indian human rights defender Marimuthu Bharathan today gets the Human Rights Tulip.**

51-year-old Bharathan would have received this prestigious award from the Dutch government from Minister of Foreign Affairs Frans Timmermans. An amount of 100,000 Euro for projects is linked to the award.

Bharathan gets the prize because he is 'an indefatigable champion of the struggle for better living and working conditions of the Dalits in his country', according to the independent jury. The casteless Dalits, formerly called 'untouchables', are the lowest social class in India. They are severely discriminated by the higher castes, despite various laws that should improve their position.

Bharathan, a Dalit himself and director of the organization Human Rights Education and Protection Council, knows what he is talking about. After his nomination for the prize, three years ago, he received more and more resistance from the Indian authorities, Bharathan said by telephone from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where he lives and works.

"The Indian authorities did arrest me then and accused me of murder, but that accusation is false," says Bharathan. He was arrested when he stood up for the rights of the accused within the Dalit community after a murder. The case still drags on.

"The police refuses to give me permission to travel, so I do not have a passport," says the human rights activist. "But the real reason is that they think that a Dalit does not deserve the honor of a prize."

According to Bharathan, the Indian government put pressure on The Netherlands to refrain from awarding the Human Rights Tulip. "India says: how can the Netherlands give an award to someone who is suspected of murder? But I'm only accused and not convicted, and everyone knows that the accusation is fabricated. Moreover, there are many dignitaries in India that also are persecuted, but still travel around the world."

The activist committed inter alia to Dalits who are manual scavengers, for the rights of Dalit women and against the constant insults, discrimination and mistreatment against this section of the population.

Recently, there was a new accusation against Bharathan, when he organized a demonstration to get land for a cemetery for Dalits, who have no access to regular cemeteries. "The police is against the

Dalits and against their rights. My protests against the police and government make the authorities angry”, the activist said.

Controversy is not new to the Dutch Human Rights Tulip. The award is now given for the fifth time but last year too, the winner, Chinese activist Ni Yulan, was not able to collect the award. She was in prison, and her daughter was arrested in China at the airport.

Bharathan would have very much liked to get the award in person. "I am very grateful to The Netherlands for this award, and I find it very sad that I can not receive it myself up."

According to Bharathan the reason is that the Indian government wants as little attention as possible international attention for the cause of the Dalits. "Any international opportunity gives strength to the struggle for the rights of the Dalits. The ceremony would have been picked up by the Indian media, but unfortunately that will now be less."