

Interview Marimuthu Bharathan – Volkskrant 9-1-2013

Violence against women also a caste issue

Marimuthu Bharathan, defender of the rights of the untouchables in India, receives Human Rights Tulip Award 2012

From our reporter Ben van Raaij

Marimuthu Bharathan, defender of the rights of the Dalits (untouchables) in India, should have received today the Dutch Human Rights Tulip Award 2012 from Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Timmermans, an award for people who played an exceptional role in working for human rights.

51-year-old Bharathan gets the award of 100,000 Euros because he is a 'indefatigable advocate for better living and working conditions for the Dalits in his country'. He is director of the Human Rights Education and Protection Council in Tirunelveli, a city in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. His organization is devoted to organizing, training and legal support of Dalits.

Unfortunately, Bharathan cannot receive the award himself. The Indian government refused to renew his passport because he is a suspect in the murder case of caste Hindus by Dalits in 2009. Bharathan, who assisted the Dalits but denies any involvement in the murder, is at liberty awaiting the trial. Therefore the interview is by phone.

What are the main problems for the Dalits in India?

"The biggest problem is exactly that they are untouchable. Based on 3000 years old caste rules more than 200 million people today live as slaves. They have no land, no money, no rights, they are disadvantaged, abused, raped and murdered. The poorest 20 percent of the society consists for 90 percent of Dalits. But the political scene refuses to admit that."

You are a Dalit yourself?

"Yes, I belong to the Pallar, one of the three sub castes of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. From my earliest childhood I experienced the pain of untouchability. I was beaten up as a student because I walked on shoes in a quarter of the higher castes. And in 2009 furious caste Hindus wanted to kill me because I was supposed to have murdered one of them."

India is modernizing, becomes a world power. Does that bring no improvement in the situation of the Dalits?

"No, the economic growth and development mainly benefit the most ambitious capitalists. More and more Dalits lose their cattle and agricultural work and migrate to the cities. Only a very small number of educated Dalits manage to find a place in modern Indian society."

How do the authorities react on your work for the Dalits?

"They regard me as a great nuisance. They do not like people to claim their legitimate rights, especially when it comes to Dalits. When I was accused of the murder, they intentionally dragged me from one prison to the other during one month. I am constantly vilified and threatened."

How do you feel about the recent popular anger over the rape of student 'Amanat'?

"It is good that people are finally becoming aware of the problem of sexual violence. But if a Dalit girl is raped and murdered, the same people remain silent. Last year in Tamil Nadu alone, 772 rape cases in the courts were held up. Why? Because Dalits are not considered to be equals."

Would the uproar have been less if Amanat would have been a Dalit?

"Caste is a crucial factor in the violence against women in India. According to official figures, every 10 minutes a Dalit woman is raped. But one measures with two standards. The popular fury in this case originated from the fact that Amanat was a woman from a higher caste and the rape took place in the capital New Delhi."

What will you do with your award ?

"I would like to set up a training center where we will educate people who can help Dalits to demand their legitimate rights using peaceful and legal methods."