

Prafullachandra Natwarlal BHAGWATI (India)

Justice P.N. Bhagwati is one of the most distinguished jurists of India since the independence of that country. He presided over the Supreme Court of India as its Chief Justice until his retirement. Under his leadership the Indian Supreme Court has developed comprehensive human rights jurisprudence for India . He, through creative interpretation, expanded the reach and context of human rights embodied in the Constitution. He developed the strategy of Public Interest Litigation with a view to making human rights meaningful for the large masses of poor and disadvantaged people. This is a strategy, which has won admiration in many common law jurisdictions.

He is closely connected with a large number of NGOs, both in India and outside, and has been motivating and inspiring grassroots human rights and development NGOs. Justice Bhagwati is the Chairman of the South Asian Task Force on Judiciary. He is Vice-Chairman of El Taller, an International Human Rights Development Organization located in Tunis . He has organized a number of judicial colloquia in different parts of the Commonwealth on "Domestic Application of International Human Rights norms" for judges in the Commonwealth. He has also promoted and participated in numerous workshops of lawyers and judges on the subject of human rights organized by NGOs and was Chairman of the World Congress on Human Rights held in New Delhi in December 1990.

He has been a member of the Committee of Experts of the ILO for over 15 years. For over 6 years he was the Vice-Chairman of the United Nations Human Rights Committee, and he is now elected as the Chairman. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has taken him as Regional Adviser for the Asia Pacific Region. He has also carried out several missions for the United Nations Centre for Human Rights, the Commonwealth Secretariat, and the International Commission of Jurists. His services have been utilized by several countries, including Mongolia , Cambodia , Nepal , Ethiopia , and South Africa in framing their Constitutions and particularly the chapters on human rights. He was a member of the Goldstone Commission of inquiry in South Africa . He was also involved in finalizing the draft manual for training of judges in human rights prepared by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Justice Bhagwati has been particularly active in the area of women's human rights. He has been the moderator and the main resource person for at least three judicial workshops of women judges for domestic application of international human rights norms in the jurisprudence of women's human rights, one in Victoria Falls for African judges, the other in Hong Kong for Asia Pacific judges and the third in Guyana for Caribbean judges. He presided over the Peoples Tribunal for Violence against Women at the Vienna Human Rights congress. This Tribunal was organized by International Women NGOs.

He has been responsible for a considerable amount of work in the field of human rights and development among tribals and particularly tribal women in South and East India and has provided leadership to the NGO, AWARE, in making 6,000 villages self-reliant. Two large complexes in rural areas have been named after him. He is a household name amongst the poor and underprivileged sectors of Indian society.

Justice P.N. Bhagwati was responsible for making a large number of innovations with a view to providing access to justice to the poor and disadvantaged. He enlarged the doctrine of locus standi before the Supreme Court and the High Courts for vindicating the individual and collective rights of those who were denied access to justice on account of poverty or social or economic disability.

He at the same time worked successfully to build up an elaborate legal aid programme. He is widely regarded as the originator of India's legal aid programme, including setting up of legal aid camps in rural areas, working with NGOs, establishing legal aid clinics etc.

Numerous documentaries have been made on him and his work including one where he is one of six outstanding Indians on whose life the Indian TV has done a profile. He has been the most visible member of India's Judiciary since independence. His reputation and his impact, through his judicial and legal aid work, is so enormous that the public response has been quite phenomenal, e.g., a village where the tribal people benefited from his judgement, renamed the village after him calling it BHAGWATI PURAM.

He has championed the cause of workers and labourers. His thought provoking judgements on bonded and unorganized labour and child labour have resulted in various legislations and government schemes in improving their social and economic conditions. He is also involved in the programme of sustainable development and has been responsible for developing poverty jurisprudence in India .

His services have been availed of by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He is the Chairman of Eminent Persons Group for Study of questions relating to refugees. He is also Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Centre for Independence of Judges and Lawyers (CIJL) based in Geneva and as such he is associated with many of the activities of the International Commission of Jurists, Geneva .

He has also been a member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague for the last several years. He was also a member of the International Mediation Team with Henry Kissinger and Lord Carrington for mediation between Inkatha and ANC before the elections in South Africa .

He is presently Chairman of the Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the United Nations. He is also the Regional Adviser to the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the entire Asia and Pacific Region. He is also a Member of the International Advisory Council of the World Bank

for Legal and Judicial Reforms. He is also the Honorary Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He is Chancellor of the Hyderabad University .

He is also Chancellor of Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri Rashtriya Sanskrit Vidyapeeth.

He is also the Honorary Member of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York

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