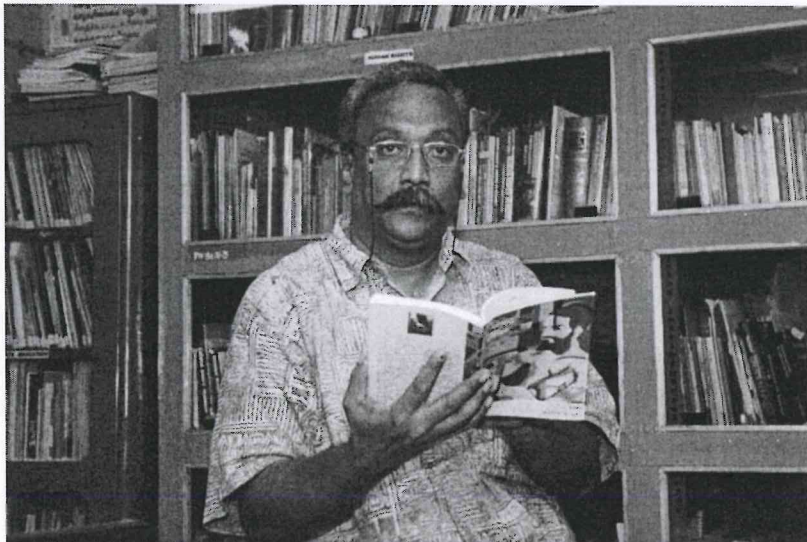


# THE HINDU

## Life & Style » Metroplus

### For the people

SOMA BASU



*The Hindu* CRUSADER: Henri Patrick Tiphagne, Founder and Executive Director, People's Watch. Photo: G.Moorthy  
*People's Watch founder Henri Patrick Tiphagne shares why he chose to fight for human rights*

He is a much loved and also a much hated man. Henri Patrick Tiphagne, after all, is a human rights campaigner. Courting trouble is his passion and profession, for which he has suffered his share of harassment and physical assaults.

"Unfair trials do bog us down. But we have our victories to keep us going. My duty is to work where we are needed most, and these are often the most unpopular issues," says Tiphagne, a lawyer and the founder-cum-executive director of People's Watch, a human rights NGO headquartered in Madurai.

In the face of threats and intimidation for 15 years now, for daring to challenge the State and trying to make it accountable to the people, Tiphagne remains focused on justice for the common man.

"The respect of human rights is essential to establish social peace and democracy in any society. Its absence only leads to violence and disorder," he explains.

Tiphagne is destiny's child. He was adopted right in the operation theatre by a young French doctor Yvette Tifine when his biological mother died during childbirth.

"My childhood was spent chasing my mother who would always be on the move in huge mobile clinics treating leprosy patients." Her dedication to the society rubbed off on him and was to shape Tiphagne's future.

"I was a naughty child and as a punishment, I was sent off to a boarding school in Pondicherry where I was exposed to a different India. I suddenly felt everything was artificial at home because we were not in a caste society. My mother adopted five others without ever bothering about anybody's background. Our life revolved around her. And out there, people asked your caste when you tried to help somebody."

As a student of St. Joseph's College in Trichy, Henri joined the All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF) and plunged into activities that largely involved organising people on issues that affect their daily lives. "For instance, I always wondered why people are so poor and why don't they reflect about it in terms of their own values and economy?" It was during such rounds that he found his soul mate, Cynthia, who was a student of Holy Cross College and an AICUF member, equally motivated to resist the wrongs happening all around.

The devastating Vedasandur floods of 1977 in Dindigul district was an eye-opener when the two joined a group of 300 students from Tamil Nadu to help in relief work. "Somebody in the affected villages told us not to clean or clear particular areas as they belonged to the Dalits. We were new to this kind of discrimination against disaster victims. Of course, it helped us to decide our options in life."

While organising people, Henri also experienced the difficulty in finding lawyers willing to take the cases of the poor. "I realised I needed to study law because it is very useful when you are working with people and their issues," he says.

When Tiphagne came to Madurai in 1980 to study law, he increasingly got drawn into protecting people from torture and violations. "Encouraged by the then PUCL president, V.M. Tarkunde, I started practising civil liberty on the streets of Madurai, fought against police atrocities, got beaten up and each incident left an indelible imprint in my mind."

The turning point in his career came in 1993 when he met activists from across the world during an international conference on human rights in Vienna. "I realised that just defending victims of human rights violation and simply moving on from one incident to another was not enough. It was equally important to monitor, record and analyse the violations to be able to counter the State, remind it of its responsibilities, hold it accountable for its faults and force it into action."

And so, People's Watch was set up in 1996. It was also the time when Tamil Nadu was witnessing caste clashes. People's Watch swung into action with a variety of activities — monitoring, fact-finding, legal intervention, campaigning and rehabilitation. "It was a great learning experience for us. No one ever bothers what the victim undergoes," laments Tiphagne. "Victims want nothing but response and justice. Apology is very important in acknowledging their wounds."

People's Watch also engaged itself with human rights education in schools way back in 1997 because Tiphagne believed in the ability of young people in making a difference. "now every child, even if poor, can avail of education. Under the Right to Education, every school is supposed to give education to every child. This is the advancement made following human rights awareness."

Tiphagne feels that if he has failed anyone, it's his two daughters. "They once told me you always talk about other people's rights, but what about ours? You are always busy."

Cynthia, his dotting wife, adds with a smile: "His work has conditioned his personality. People are so scared of him. But he falls so easily for anybody who suffers."

### **Henri's Highs**

*The lawyer of 28 years standing started as AICUF member. Became Secretary of PUCL Madurai, followed by general secretary of Tamil Nadu unit and went on to serve as its National Council member till 1990.*

*Was Asian Council member of International Movement for Catholic Students.*

*Has been president of Madurai YMCA*

*Is life member of environment and legal service organizations including Federation of Consumer Organisations, Tamil Nadu.EDCOT, CICO, EPIC*

*Is member of National Core group of NGOs of NHRC, Delhi; Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development; Amnesty International's Human Rights School Programme*

*Is on the Board of Legal Resources for Social Action, Bharatidasan University, Gandhigram Rural University, Centre for Promotion of Social Concerns, Tamil Nadu.*

*Was Director, National Project on Preventing Torture in India (2006-08)*

### **Activities of People's Watch**

*Established Sudhanthra, a rehabilitation center for torture victims and domestic violence*

*Conducts regular Intervention training programmes*

*Communicates issues of discrimination to international human rights organizations.*

*Runs the Dalit Human Rights Monitoring Project in 15 States. Formed the International Dalit Solidarity Network in 2000. It is a network of international human rights organizations, donor agencies, national networks, all working towards solidarity actions, advocacy and lobbying globally on the issue of caste discrimination*

*Worked extensively on custodial deaths, violence against women, child torture and communal riots.*

*Started the Institute of Human Rights Education with nine schools in the beginning. Today, it has grown into a full-fledged programme covering 4,000 schools in 16 States across the country with 5,000 teachers and 4,50,000 students.*

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