



Rakesh Sahai for Asiaweek

MAHESH CHANDRA MEHTA Conservationist Counsel

During one of his earliest environmental battles, New Delhi lawyer Mahesh Chandra Mehta presented a bottle of brackish water to an attorney representing five offending factories and asked him to drink the contents. The attorney refused. Mehta then turned to the panel of Supreme Court judges, waving the sample of dark, acid-laden liquid from a 40-meter-deep well in India's western desert state of Rajasthan. "This is the water thousands of villagers are drinking," Mehta told the bench. "Why can't he [the defense counsel] drink it?"

Evidently seeing the point the activist-lawyer was trying to make, the judges ordered the five factories closed.

Since that court victory a decade ago, Mehta has won some 40 cases of environmental litigation, earning the epithet "Mr. Clean." The shelves of his makeshift office in New Delhi are overflowing with trophies and citations, including the prestigious 1997 Ramon Magsaysay award for public service and the 1993 United Nations Environmental Program Global 500 award. In the midst of the prizes, however, a single plaque stands out. It captures the essence of Mehta's ecological activism - and, indeed, that of numerous others of his persuasion - with these words: "Clean environment starts with me."

Mehta's best-known crusade is his rescuing of the famous Taj Mahal from slow death in the early 1990s. Industrial air pollution from the city of Agra, where the Taj is located, was ruining the white marble of the 17th-century monument. In response to Mehta's petition, the Supreme Court ordered the closure of as many as 230 factories in Agra. Some 300 local industries were forced to install pollution-control equipment. Another of Mehta's petitions has helped reverse the colossal damage done on a daily basis to the Ganges, India's largest and holiest river; the municipalities of 250 filth-spewing towns near the river have now installed sewage plants.

Trying to clean up India's water and air has been an uphill battle for Mehta. The authorities, he says, are "lethargic" and offer little or no help to ecological activists. Partly as a result of government indifference - and not infrequent collusion with offenders - Mehta has been up against a powerful industrial mafia that he says is "running the country." His life has been in danger on several occasions. Once, when the Supreme Court was hearing one of his petitions against illegal quarrying, thugs showed up at his house. Mehta was threatened with dire consequences if he continued with his activism. But the lawyer was unstoppable. He went on to win a case that led to the relocation of 1,300 industrial units from the heart of the capital to the outskirts. Days later, while Mehta was delivering a lecture in a New Delhi auditorium, a group of ruffians accosted him. He was saved only by the timely intervention of the audience.

Beside being a fierce litigant, Mehta is an avid campaigner who regularly undertakes "green marches." Accompanied by his activist wife Radha and their 15-year-old daughter Tarini, he has covered more than 2,000 kilometers and supervised the planting of some 750,000 saplings. "More than court battles," says Mehta, "it is grassroots work that is more important." In a poor and populous country like India, he explains, people's participation is crucial for the success of an ecological campaign. That is how he plans to tackle two upcoming - and daunting - projects: cleaning up all the 14 major rivers of India and saving the Himalaya mountain range from what seems to be slow but sure environmental degradation.

By Ritu Sarin/New Delhi

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