

RIGOBERTA MENCHU: NOBEL PEACE PRIZE FOR 1992

Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan woman, member of the Quiche Indian community and tireless crusader for the rights of the indigenous people of her country, has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1992.

Her parents and a younger brother were brutally killed in three separate incidents during the early 1980's, when the military government of Guatemala launched repressive assaults against the indigenous population of this Central American country.

The people of the Mayan tribes of Guatemala constitute almost sixty per cent of the country's population, but have been systematically decimated through years of attack and repression. Many Guatemalans have fled abroad, and Rigoberta Menchu herself has lived in exile for many years. Through her life experience, and through her commitment to the struggle for social justice and democratic rights for her people, Rigoberta Menchu has come to symbolize the coming together of several strands of popular struggle.

Rigoberta Menchu's experience of racism and of the oppression and exploitation of peasants by landlords led her to an understanding of the many facets of the struggle for social justice in a situation such as hers. Coming from an impoverished peasant community, her childhood was a difficult one, but also one full of experiences of the many different ways in which the absentee landlords of Guatemala milked the peasants dry, and robbed them of their land. Her parents were involved in the formation of the United Peasant Committee (C.U.C.) in 1977.

Having worked on the land, and as a domestic servant in the home of a rich landlord for years during her childhood, Rigoberta, through her involvement in the CUC became a community organiser and a spokesperson for her people. She taught herself Spanish, the language of the colonisers of Guatemala, in order to communicate with the outside world, as well as with other indigenous communities in Guatemala, who were divided on the basis of ethnicity and language.

Working within a context in which the ancient Mayan beliefs in the sanctity of the land and of natural resources have mingled and merged with Catholicism, (the religion of the majority of the Guatemalan people), Rigoberta Menchu has become a symbol of the struggle of oppressed communities all over the world for social justice, blending a commitment to democracy and human rights with a concern for the environment and for the specific oppression of women in every aspect of society and the community.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize for 1992 to Rigoberta Menchu can be viewed as a public acknowledgement by the international community, not only of the stature and achievement of Rigoberta as an individual woman, but also of the on-going struggle for democracy and human rights in Guatemala. In the same way, the award vindicates the struggles of many others like her, in other countries and other communities throughout the world.

Sunila Abeysekera

EDITORS' NOTE

Some readers of *Pravada* have asked us why we have been re-producing material already published elsewhere. We have done so, because we feel it important that the journal also acts as a link between its readers and intellectual movements outside Sri Lanka, particularly as quality journals and books published abroad are relatively inaccessible to Sri Lankan readers. However, readers may have noticed that we have been, and are, extremely selective and discriminating in our choice of material for re-production in *Pravada*.