

SEEKING RELEVANCE

Godfrey D'Lima

Biostory

I began life in a village of Mumbai City where piety and impiety were hardly distinctive, and where Catholic society willfully suffered cultural alienation in order to assert identity. I belong to the native (“tribal”) East Indian Community of Mumbai whose century-old wooden houses, unsustainable to their residents, are heritage sites in a now bloated City. My schooling was with the Jesuits of St. Xavier’s, Dhobi Talao, where, thanks to the government grant, the rich and poor of diverse communities studied alongside each other. I specially loved the school’s lofty building and tower; and its natural history section with thousands of unfortunate birds and beasts. Association with Jesuits through childhood and youth brought opportunities to question self, the universe and God. I disliked school conformism but was too timid to rebel, being dependent financially on the system for survival. I graduated in commerce from a government college where humane values were experienced no less than in my Christian milieu. My attraction to Jesus Christ grew over years of family orientations, parish liturgy and Church association, experiments with ideologies, small efforts to teach poorer learners, prayer and scripture reading.

Life in the Society

My decision to join the Jesuits came from an inspiration to follow Jesus. As a layperson I thought it would be more difficult to do that singly, on my own. With organizational support I might make it. I found the vow of poverty most relevant in the Indian context, where forms of chastity are the general expectation and obedience has been liberatively interpreted. Poverty has helped towards gaining

some solidarity with the world around. My family had to live economically if not frugally, while religious life offered a higher standard of living; thus through poverty I could preserve my family roots and link with masses of deprived peoples. I did not want long years of free board, lodge and tuition in religious life. To serve India's poor the minimum of academic study was enough. Higher education endangers one's service of the poor since it buckles under to the Society's commitments to elitist ministries. That is why I decided against so-called higher education. My pedagogy of self-development would be through personal observations, reading, reflecting, communicating, and concretely involving myself in service to the poor right through formation.

In philosophy I tried to set up a study and play hour for a slum some distance away from De Nobili College. And in De Nobili itself I worked at a tutorial school for poor neighbours. During Theology a group of us lived in a rather shabby chawl under tough conditions. Finding the general run of subjects superfluous, some of us opted to focus on core subjects, forfeiting the degree. One thing I learned—that I was not the type that could do without the Society or Church to maintain my idealism. At the same time, I couldn't risk being totally dependent on the system to nurture my commitment.

I found GC 32 frighteningly challenging. I wanted my spirituality to measure up to its radical demands. Associating with Jesuits who were trying to make GC 32 a reality helped me persevere. I loved the field of education and often relished the thought of teaching in our English Medium schools in Mumbai City. But then I received clarity and the courage to write to the Provincial that my option would be for rural India. And if I could be involved in educating the rural poor my idealism would in some way be fulfilled. All my readings on the state of education for the masses confirmed my choice of working for the rural poor.

Confrontation Versus Service

During my Jesuit formation I struggled with my inability to engage in confrontational action for justice or rights. I could see the rationale of direct action for justice. The closest I got to such action was joining a protest march with great trepidation in a tribal area of Thane District. I even managed to visit an ex-Jesuit activist in jail. But that was the end of my "career" as a

classical social activist. I realized that if I had to do anything useful for the poor it would be some limited service that would never claim— except in a faith vision - to change social structures. Later, I had one more experience of accompanying a march of the renowned activist Ms Medha Patkar. My timidity about social protest wouldn't allow for more action on that score. Also, in the Talasari Mission, I witnessed the brutal beatings of two Diocesan priests by a leftist outfit with hardly any protest from the local tribals whom we claimed we were serving. I faced the absurdity of the Jesuit Mission being in conflict with others championing the same cause. These complexities of mission service and social involvement needed the development of skillful strategies for meaningful commitment.

Concrete Involvement

Thus began my involvement with tribal education as my specific field of insertion in the social apostolate. I was quite resigned to the fact that I would never be considered a classical activist since my field of primary and nonformal education would hardly change structures. Nor would I fit in with the major thrust of formal education, which the Society has solidly supported and structured. I began with supervision of tribal schools in the Talasari Mission. It soon became apparent that the Mission was struggling to emerge from the Christian-patronising era into a more universal or catholic commitment to the people. I found myself facing the tension between so-called religious services as against human 'upbuilding' service. I observed that while religious services had restricted participation, the secular services attracted more people. I found the reflections of my formation years helpful in accepting that the secular and the sacred are interwoven. And that secular humanistic values invite a greater convergence of positive human agencies than religious alignments.

Yet the tension between mission options and my own perspectives did not end with my involvement in rural education. While some felt that education is nothing more than conscientisation, I saw that raising awareness did not always bring relief to the people conscientised. And if relief is indefinitely postponed, social movements cannot be sustained. Hence some concrete educational advantage must be made accessible to learners. Literacy and numeracy are seen as desirables even if in practice many of the poor hardly achieved barely functional literacy in some of the programmes I have

worked at. Some said, 'If the achievement is so limited of what use is the programme?' But when I visited the tribal communities who had agreed with us to host the learning centres, I heard them say this: 'At least our children go to a running school where your teacher comes, and they try to learn, and some of our children have indeed learnt!' I got the poor parents to pay a small fee in cash or kind. The villagers gave us a hut for us to run the programme. They bought learning tools. Later, with help from fellow Jesuits and the Sisters, we began savings and credit societies and micro-watersheds. We initiated organic farming experiments.

At each stage of programme development there was much discussion with tribals, both individually and collectively. Much observation, reading, reflecting and, I daresay, theologizing and prayer.

Avoiding Conflict

There was a time I thought the Society, the Church and the World would, in short-term eschatology, converge on human issues. Today, I do not expect such convergence to take place. If it does happen I shall be grateful. If it does not, I shall not be disappointed. For the Paschal Mystery is for me an example of salvation already here and not yet realized. I am less and less inclined to invest in conflict. Earlier I would have entered Province assemblies with great zeal to argue out convergent action for the poor. But now, in the divergent associations we find ourselves in (and this is not totally disadvantageous to the cause of the poor because there may be only slightly more convergence on *elitist* agendas), I think it more purposeful to use the considerable help Jesuits and others offer than enter debates as to the meaning of the magis for our times.

*Much observation,
reading, reflecting
and, I daresay,
theologizing
and prayer*

I have tried to keep far from the policy decision mechanisms of the Society (a move, I guess, that has been reciprocated !) and to do my job as best as I can, rather than engage in acrimonious debate as to which apostolates must be retained at the cutting edge of our option for faith and justice. I have found that conflict often saps one's creativity and commitment. I have found my way of coming to terms with what I do not agree. And if I

have had spells of bitterness I also have had moments of great gratitude for such support as the Society and the Church offer to vocations like mine that that leave familiar turf and venture into areas I would have never dared to think of working in.

Spiritual Vision

Whether my vision can be called Ignatian, or Christian-Catholic, or Humanistic, is not the core issue. But that my vision relates to God's Goodness and His Saving Action, reaching out to the most bereft of the human family is important for me today. I grant that to figure out such a theological expression would necessarily imply consulting every single source of divine communication. If Ignatius could have conceived of human reality and theological development as it is today I would have no hesitation in saying that I seek to share his vision just as it is. When it comes to perspectives that have still to be furthered and deepened, I reflect and pray and act that the pedagogy of God's praxis may find me an earnest learner.

I have come to value the contributions of a wide spectrum of persons and institutions that complement what I singly cannot achieve. Professed ideologies and spiritualities are always to be evaluated by their practical manifestations, just as my own vision often *collapses under* the weight of its own contradictions, for example, the use of expensive facilities which the poor can hardly afford.

It surprised, amused and pleased me when I was referred to as a social activist in a seminar context. For years I have been content with the identity of a small-scale experimenter with possible educational alternatives for poor tribal learners. When I fall physically sick or into psychological lows, I prepare myself for the ignominy of being called a burnt out case. But support has not yet failed. It seems Providential that there are always persons who stand by with all the help needed to strengthen one's energies and commitment. I think my spirituality takes shape in such solidarity. And solidarity with the Paschal Mystery no less.