

# OUR FAITH AND OUR QUEST FOR JUSTICE

Paul Caspersz

In 1942, with three friends I joined the Jesuit novitiate in South India. In our Colombo high school the four of us had taken part in the movement of “Catholic Action”. Its aim even then was to make the practice of our Faith relevant to our non-Christian and secular society. So I naturally looked forward to continuing and intensifying this quest in India. It was then a huge united entity of what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Gandhi and Nehru were at the zenith of their struggle for independence. A friend wrote to me on the eve of our leaving Ceylon for India: “Remember you are going to live and love among the Indians”. I did indeed remember, and had high hopes, even as a novice, of being in some way a participatory witness of India’s striving to be free.

We were to be painfully disillusioned. We were in India, but for all that India was allowed to be for us, we may as well have been novices and juniors in Tokyo, London, New York or even on the moon. We were “formed” to a disembodied spirituality that was cut off from the concerns of the people: great poverty, the sufferings of the Dalits, the oppressive caste system, the overweening power of the *zamindars* (landowners), India’s art and culture and religiosity. The novitiate ran a soup kitchen from leftovers but it was not accompanied by social analysis as to why teenagers like the bright-eyed Veeran who coughed badly had to be in the soup kitchen queue. I remember Veeran and sometimes wonder whether he died early of TB. We had no access at all to newspapers or the radio.

In philosophy (1946-9), things began to change, but slowly. I was the first Lankan to be sent for theology in Naples. There the pace of change accelerated. We officially received only one Catholic daily newspaper, the dry-as-dust *Il*

*Quotidiano*, but on villa<sup>1</sup> and other days some of us managed to access *Il Mattino* and even *L'Unità*, the Communist daily. Some of my Italian co-students were vocal supporters of the *Democrazia Cristiana della Sinistra* (Christian Democracy of the Left). It was also in Naples that I learnt that Lercaro, the “Red Cardinal” of Bologna, lived in community with twelve *scugnizzi*.<sup>2</sup>

*“If God will grant me the grace,” I prayed, “I shall also one day live in community with the poor”.*

But not so soon. After theology in Italy and a Master’s degree in Social Sciences in England, I returned to Lanka in 1957 not, as I thought and had proposed to my Superiors, to begin a Jesuit Social Centre, but to be a schoolmaster in our high school in South Lanka. In 1970 the Jesuits were compelled by continuing financial shortfalls to hand over the school to the state. I retired from the post of Government School principal.

The Lercaro grace finally came in 1972 through our forward-looking Lankan Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, osb, who told me in late 1971: “I have heard that you are looking for a place where you can live with the people and engage in social research and action”. So, with him, on 11 February 1972 we boiled the traditional clay pot of milk and upon its overflowing on to the bright embers, we began *Satyodaya* (the Dawn of Truth).

That pot of milk presaged the future. It was the first great defining moment of my life after I left home to join the Jesuits. But on that morning, anxiety was writ large on some of our faces. Was there too little fire, or too little milk, or was the pot too deep? If it didn’t overflow, the omens would be bad. Finally, however, with much encouragement from the stoker, the milk boiled over the rim of the pot.

This was much like a prophecy of the next thirty three years: struggle, doubt, anxiety, pain of mind and heart – the injustices endured by the Tamil plantation people, the inter-ethnic country-wide conflict, the future of the relationship with foreign donor-partners – but also great joy and camaraderie in the *Satyodaya* inter-ethnic, inter-religious, inter-linguistic, inter-sex community. *Satyodaya* was an institution, but even more it was a vision, a lodestar and a hope. But we have few illusions. The task ahead will always be an uphill one. I desperately need the God of Justice to be with me on the climb.

On 11 February 1972 there was little thought of social action, but only, as the name *Satyodaya* indicates, of social research. But on 1 July 1972 came the first Law of Land Reform by which the British and locally owned

plantations were nationalized. The idea, my Marxist friends in the University and I thought, was a good one, socialist and anti-imperialist. Its implementation, however, almost from day one, was horribly racist. “The white man has gone. Now out you go too”, shrieked the thugs at the defenceless Tamil plantation workers.

Satyodaya read the signs of the times. I distinctly recall the day when I went with a Tamil university undergraduate one evening at dusk to interview the Tamil men and women who, driven out of the estates often with hardly a day’s notice, were roaming the streets of the big towns, searching for shelter and food. At the end of more than two hours of interviews, we met a Tamil worker about 35 years old who was very vocal. We decided that we would take him to a small teashop to talk with him. It was also a period of unprecedented food shortage in the country. As soon as the Muslim owner of the shop saw us, he said, “We don’t have food for you two but we can satisfy the Tamil man”. “How’s that?”, we asked. “We have only roti (a form of rough bread made out of flour) and some of the morning’s potato curry.” “That’s just what we want”, we replied. My undergraduate friend and I were hungry and thirsty, but we both noticed that the roti was stale and the potato curry rancid. Our Tamil guest ate his portion very fast and noticed that we were pushing our food away, sipping only the boiling hot black tea. “Why aren’t you eating?” he asked us. “We are not really hungry,” we told him, “we only wanted a cup of tea.” “Then may I take your portions to my wife and my three children who are in the *kovil* (Hindu temple) premises for the night? They haven’t had a morsel for the past two days”. We of course readily consented. I can still remember the almost religious fervour with which he silently folded the four ends of the banana leaf over the food to take it away to his family. From that day to this I am haunted by the picture of that man folding the leaf over what was to be for his wife and children a festive meal. There is no going back on the struggle for justice as long as the incident remains in my memory.

In 1974 Satyodaya gave birth to the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas (CSPA), a federation of organizations and groups that after the horrors of 1972 began to show concern for the Tamil plantation people. Came 1977 and its fearful all-island communal riots. Satyodaya entered the field to give what support it could to the Tamil victims. It helped 2663 Tamil estate families which lost everything, or nearly everything they possessed. In 1979 Satyodaya and CSPA led to the formation of the national Movement

---

OUR FAITH AND OUR QUEST FOR JUSTICE

---

for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE). Satyodaya changed from being a mainly socialist research centre to become equally an action centre for social justice.

In the course of its history Satyodaya sought to be sensitively responsive to the winds of change blowing around it in both religious and secular fields: the postwar emergence of the Third World, the youth unrest in Lanka, the dissatisfaction with the existing ways of life of the middle classes and the rich and the resulting hippy movement, the Second Vatican Council, the stirring calls to social justice of the World Council of Churches, the Jesuit General Congregation 32 and especially its path-breaking Decree 4, the powerful new understanding that the sum and scope of Jesuit spirituality was to seek to encounter God in all things. Satyodaya believed that the Divine had to be sought especially in God's favoured place of presence, which is in the poor, the disadvantaged, the marginalized.

*for followers of Jesus the  
Service of Faith finds its full  
and vibrant flowering  
in an impassioned commitment  
to inter-human justice.*

So, some of a Jesuit's best prayer should be in the market-place, in the hurly-burly of events which, in the modern world, succeed one another with amazing rapidity. Action against injustice and for justice in this world calls for an ideology that sets values and goals and prescribes modes of action. But ideology alone is not enough. For non-believers ideology has itself to be rooted in personal commitment to the release of the people from the structures of injustice and oppression and for believers in a living faith in the God of Justice who comes to us in Jesus. It has been my experience working with secular groups, even of non-believers, professed atheists and agnostics, that without this sincere and deep commitment, often expressed in the language of socialist humanism, action for justice weakens and one ultimately opts out. For followers of Jesus the Service of Faith finds its full and vibrant flowering in an impassioned commitment to inter-human justice. It is only when the contemplative relationship with the God of Goodness and Justice in faith is joined to transformative action for justice in inter-human relationships that

we become powerful agents of the realization of God's will to establish upon earth a community of justice, peace and love, as were the Prophets and Jesus of Nazareth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Villa is the one day of rest in the week enjoined on Jesuits by the community, a practice that has largely disappeared in the Society of Jesus but still continues in formation, especially in the Novitiate.

<sup>2</sup> Scugnizzi means "street children" a nickname that has connotations of both charming and dangerous. The scugnizzi usually worked for the mafia (Camorra) and were clever attractive delinquents.