

Visit to Eraiyur on 07.04.2008 (Monday)

by

(Rev. Fr. Bosco, SJ, Rev. Fr. Joe Xavier SJ, and Rev. Fr. Cosmon)

The purpose of this letter is to share with you some of our thoughts and reflections after having spent a day at Eraiyur. At the outset we would like to mention that our intention was to express solidarity with the affected people in the recent caste conflict and the visit was more at a personal level.

We entered Eraiyur on 7th April, almost after a month the untoward incident had taken place. As soon as we reached we paid a visit to the two families who were still grieving the loss of Mr. Mahimai and Mr. Periyamayagam. At Mahimai's house we met his younger brother, mother and grand mother. Mr. Mahimai, the eldest son was the sole bread winner of the family. We spoke to the two orphaned children of Mr. Periyamayagam, who lost their mother a few years ago, and their aged grand parents. We offered our condolences and prayers.

Then we proceeded to Dalit settlements. Guided by the women we visited all the damaged houses, in both old and new settlements, irrespective of the quantum of damage. We spoke to large number of women and children. Their faces wore a shattered look and were gloomy. During our conversation the women told us that on 9th March when the caste people attacked the houses, men ran away for safety and protection and in many houses it was only the women and children who remained inside and were eyewitnesses of the vandalism. A few women told us, "While we cried with folded hands to spare us nothing could stop the caste people. When we think of that day it is still a nightmare for us, particularly for our children."

We were shocked to see the extensive damage done to the homes especially those with the concrete and tiled roofs and destruction to the properties such as vessels T.V., grinder, motor and bore well, fan, switchboard, books, note books, clothes, cycles, motor bikes, ration cards, land documents etc. In some houses the steel bureaus were opened with crowbar and valuables such as money and jewels were stolen. The new church where the Hunger strike (Dharana) was taking place was also attacked statues were broken, the loud speakers and the *shamiana* were destroyed.

These were the words of children, youth women and men.

- It is a miracle that we are all alive. Our prayers are heard and God has saved all of us. Even the little ones who were caught in between the crowd managed to escape and flee the area. Only a few men were assaulted.
- While our faith in Jesus is strong we fail to see God's presence in the Church. We suspect that some local priests were behind caste people both in planning and execution.

- The attack is planned. The boy who accompanied us came to show a house which was ransacked nearly 2 furlongs away. The houses of teachers, dalit leaders, committee leaders of Sahayamadha Church (new church in the settlement of Dalits) were targeted and ransacked thoroughly.
- We have lost all our earning of the last 25 years. Economically we are pushed behind by 25 years. Some people have left the house and they are scared to come back.
- The worst affected are our children. Many of them still do not sleep at night. All on a sudden they get up and say stones are falling on our house.
- Our own teachers entered my house and destroyed my books and note books. How can I go to the same school again?
- We are treated badly in our schools. Even students call us by caste names and everyone laughs at us.
- A nine year old boy was beaten up by a teacher with an iron rod and became unconscious and spent a night sleeping on a hay-stock and return to his house the following morning when he became conscious. He is being treated and counseled in a children's home at Villupuram.
- With great difficulty the students have gone through the X and XII examinations. Though some children refused to write the exams due to stress, because of the request of the parents they have managed to go through the exam.
- Some of the students who are pursuing their studies by staying in hostel in the neighbouring towns refuse to come back to the village fearing further attacks.
- For the past one month our world has been within the settlement. We are surrounded by the caste people and we are not able to go out.
- We are a minority, just 380 Christian families. They are a majority with 1800 families. Though our cause is just we cannot confront them.
- The Church, Prelate, priests and religious nuns of our village are all with the caste people, except a few. Though three priests and a few nuns are living next to us none of them have visited us so far. The Bishop visited us two days ago, without any prior information and hardly visited the damaged houses.
- Just before Maundy Thursday, the Archbishop in the presence of priests belonging to both groups announced a five point programme basically reiterating equal treatment of Dalits in accessing common roads and use of one funeral cart. After this on Holy Saturday when we Dalits took out a funeral procession the police escorted us. All along the way the caste people, including women went to their terrace showed chapels and brooms. After the funeral mass the Church was 'washed up' and the funeral cart was broken and the Church was closed. The caste people say that the Archbishop has not consulted them on five point programme so we will not obey the Church leaders.
- Every day over 80 police men and women are placed in different sensitive pockets. On various occasions the caste people have told some individuals, 'How long will the police give you protection? Once the police leave the village we will teach you a lesson'.
- For the first time we understand social boycotting. We are denied of access to provisional and grocery shops. We are told that any shop owner gives provisions to us will be fined with Rs 5,000/- Left without a choice with a help of some

- concerned people, we have asked our own people to start petty shops and provisional stores.
- The milk societies which are functioning in the caste people are refused to take our milk and when our women were going there to supply milk the caste women used filthy words and abused us. The government officials have helped us to start a separate milk society unit.
 - Obviously we have lost our coolie work. (Many of them have been earning their livelihood by working in the fields of caste people). We are deprived of our livelihood.
 - After the RDO has ordered that public roads are meant for every one we are denied access to our own lands. We have no way except to walk through the lands of the caste people to reach our lands. We have been threatened and warned not to enter their lands. In a few days the paddy will be ready for harvesting. Who will help us to harvest?
 - Though the government and Church made some attempts to bring peace at the ground level the situation has not changed.
 - It is the caste people who closed the Church though latter the Archbishop said that it was on his order the Church was closed. We hear that the caste people are pressurizing the Church officials to open the Church because number of marriages is fixed during May and a Vanniyar deacon is to be ordained to priesthood. We would appreciate if the Church officials open the Church after proper dialogue and reconciliation.
 - The government officials have understood our problems; individuals and human rights organizations stand by us. The Church is yet to respond. Till today no priest from the parish or religious nuns visited us.
 - Even after a month our future is bleak. We are scared to go out of the settlement. Should we live in this village or leave this place?

We visited the interim parish priest and briefed him about our visit. He shared with us his plans to start again religious practices. When we explained to him the remarks of the Dalits regarding the Church and particularly the caste mindedness of the local priests, nuns and teachers in the school he said the observations of the Dalits could be true because these comments were made by many including government officials. We shared our concern to the parish priest that the Church has a responsibility in abolishing all forms of practices of untouchability and caste discrimination to make the religious services truly reflecting Christian faith.

Our Reflections and Suggestions

1. We were touched by the deep faith of the Dalits. The Dalits strongly believe that it is their faith in God which saved all of them and they are grateful to God.
2. Practices of Untouchability and Christianity cannot coexist. It is painful to hear that the priest-principal and some of the teachers took active part in the violence perpetrated. The parish school needs a drastic change and reformation.

- Appropriate actions are to be taken against the priest and teachers who were involved in caste violence overtly and covertly.
3. Childhood is the right time to learn Christian and moral values. The school authorities need to create conducive atmosphere in the school so that all children can learn without any discrimination. Safety and security is to be provided for the school going children along with assistance for their educational development.
 4. Trauma care and counseling is to be organized for women and children. The Dalits long for accompaniment by the Church. Will the Church respond generously?
 5. Peace and reconciliation process have to go in hand with social justice. As the economic base of the Dalits is shattered, a substantial economic help is needed to boost up their morale. The diocese has to initiate livelihood programmes at the earliest. To rebuild mutual trust and confidence, the priests and nuns should visit every affected family and take time to listen to the people. The Church authorities should own up the responsibility to what has happened and as a sign of conversion they must say sorry to the Dalits.
 6. Eraiyr incident is an indication of deep rooted caste mindedness and religions was used to exploit the Dalits. So the peace process must be broad based, beyond religion. It would be ideal if individuals and groups who have stood by the Dalits and all men and women of good will of the area are included in the process.
 7. The orphaned children of Mr. Periyannayagam have to be supported for education and a job for the younger brother of Mahimai will be of great help to the family.
 8. The five point programme announced by the Archbishop of Pondicherry is to be implemented immediately and a monitoring committee is to be set up comprising of both parties.
 9. Eraiyr is not an isolated story. There are still parishes in Tamil Nadu where practices of discrimination and exclusion exist. We appreciate the efforts of the Tamil Nadu Bishop's Council and the CBCI which has issued a pastoral letter recently asking each diocese to make a survey to find out parishes in which practices of Untouchability exist. Learning from this painful incident the Church must take steps to abolish all sorts of discrimination and exclusion and caste practices within the Church.
 10. We also positively recommend civil society groups, peace and justice forums and other socially committed groups to visit Eraiyr and accompany the affected in some way or the other.