

Our Jesuit Faith Today: An Indian Perspective

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A faith that defends as well as empowers the poor and dalits,
A faith that combats injustice and inequality
But a faith that seeks reconciliation, not retaliation or revenge!

Introduction

The biggest irony about India is that it is, on the one hand, the cradle and home to great religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) and many sacred scriptures (the Upanishads, the Vedas and the Puranas, the Gita and the Adi Granth), home to many sacred rivers and numberless temples and pilgrim centres, home also to newer gurus and newer *matas* (literally mothers, used to signify women who are spiritual leaders). On the other hand, it is also, at the same time, the land of untold inequalities and injustices, of superstitious beliefs and ungodly practices, of the so-called pure people and the impure 'untouchables;' on this holy land are carried out the most noble as well as the most evil deeds, the kindest as well as the deadliest deeds, invoking the names of Gods and Goddesses; both bandits and dacoits, pundits and priests frequent temples and holy places to worship and offer pujas and sacrifices to the deities with equal piety and devotion. This is what baffles every one about India, whether an Indian or an outsider, a tourist or a researcher, a missionary or a filmmaker.

Such a context of ironies and complexities, of extraordinary faiths and religiosities, is where we, the Jesuits, are missioned to work for, and promote, justice, reconciliation, peace and love of the Kingdom of God preached by Jesus. In this article I venture to share what justice means to millions of people in India, and would like to suggest some ways and means that I see as essential in carrying out and carrying forward our well defined mission - i.e. the 'service of faith and promotion of justice' in the multi religious and multi cultural milieus of India or South Asia.

Inequality and Injustice Inherent in the Social-Caste System

In India the question of justice and equal rights/opportunities is not an occasional issue that crops up from time to time, here and there. Rather, it is, for millions of dalits, tribals, and the so-called backward caste people across India, an every day, daunting struggle to go through, a shameful and humiliating experience to suffer silently, and even, many times, a matter of doing or dying. This is what life is all about for as many as 20 per cent of

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India's population – the dalits, tribals, other backward castes. For these unfortunate people justice remains an ever elusive, empty promise and injustice their daily plight. This is because the Indian caste system denies justice, dignity and human rights from cradle to grave to the dalits or the 'untouchables.' For those who know the hard truth about the Indian social-religious-political context, the real (rural) India is through and through caste-ridden, with the people caught up in a vicious, multi layered caste maze.

History tells us that systems of slavery and slave trade have had their success stories in the past. Apartheid too had its days of gains and glories, but when the time came for them to go, slavery and apartheid just went. They both are now pages in history. Indian casteism, by contrast, refuses to depart and continues to claim newer and newer victims day after day, month after month, without the slightest sign that it is on its way out. In this it is very unlike slavery and apartheid.

God of Justice: Where are you?

Even a cursory study reveals the following truth about India:

- 1 crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes
- 27 atrocities against Dalits every day
- 13 Dalits are murdered every week
- 5 Dalit's homes or possessions are burnt every week
- 6 Dalits are kidnapped or abducted every week
- 3 Dalit women are raped every day

A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story: "Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers"; "7 year dalit girl burnt to death in front of her mother for walking through an upper caste street"; "Dalit tortured by cops for three days"; "Dalit 'witch' paraded naked in Bihar"; "Dalit killed in lock-up at Kurnool"; "7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash"; "Five Dalits lynched in Haryana"; "Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked"; "Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits."

These are but newspaper headlines to run through and forget about for most people. These are, again, a few more cases to register or more often ignore for the custodians of law and order. But for the 250 million dalits, tribals and poor people, these are their daily Calvary stories.

Prime Minister Sri Manmohan Singh himself described "untouchability" as a "blot on humanity", adding, "even after 60 years of constitutional and legal protection and state support, there is still social discrimination against Dalits in many parts of our country."

"Dalits are not allowed to drink from the same wells, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same

cups in tea stalls," said Smita Narula, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, and author of *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables."* Human Rights Watch is a worldwide activist organization based in New York.

An Unjust Social (caste) System: Its Victims and Its Victors

It happened in 1970 in my own village, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. I was in class V then. It was a summer morning in the month of May. I had gone home for vacation from St. Joseph's Home for Boys, a Catholic boarding, situated in the premises of St. Aloysius Church at Dharapuram town, 6 km away from our typically Hindu village. It was roughly 7 in the morning. I was having breakfast at home. Just then I heard some loud and very quick foot steps running down the street and saw many people, including children running with much excitement, all in one direction towards some particular house or spot. I could sense some thing terrible or untoward had happened.

I leapt out of the house at once, leaving my breakfast half finished. I had no time even to tell my mother where I was rushing! The next moment I was part of the excited, anger-charged village crowd gathering at one of the village wells exclusively reserved for the use of the caste Hindus. A terrible but daring crime had been committed in the early hours of that summer morning by an elderly untouchable dalit woman. She had dared to draw water from the well reserved only for the high caste Hindus and forbidden to all the untouchable sub-castes in the village. The untouchables could use the water from that well, provided some one of the caste Hindus drew the water with his or her own pail and, holding that bucket sufficiently high for it not to touch that of the dalits, poured it into the pots of the untouchables.

The crowd was furious and all too eager and ready to join hands in punishing the woman for this unpardonable crime. Some shouted, 'Tie her up with the same rope she used to draw the water'. Some others said, 'Put a garland of torn slippers around her neck and parade her around the village on a donkey.' Some others raised their voice, 'How daring she has become to commit such an act.' Still others commented, 'No such thing has ever happened in our village.' Still some others worried saying, 'we cannot drink of this well unless it is completely emptied and a purification ritual performed by the village pandit (ironically my own uncle was the village priest). The old wretch has polluted our well.'

Though only 9 years of age, I was happy over what that courageous woman had done that morning and felt sorry for what was going to happen to her. I was too young to say anything. I must have been silently praying for that old woman.

Soon the angry and aggressive voices fell silent and calm. Some sensible people arrived at the well and the mood and tide began to change. Some educated person warned the crowd, 'She is a Christian now - a Protestant convert. Tomorrow is Sunday and some Christians will come here to pray in her house.' Another man added, 'The law would not stand as a mute witness and watch if we do any harm to this woman.' The crowd began to come to its senses, realising that the law was on the side of this untouchable woman who had challenged one of centuries old unjust caste practices of the village life.

His Is The Model, Message and Mission For Justice

It is the message as well as the mission Jesus gives every follower of his to be an agent for establishing the Kingdom of God here on earth. Jesus called the twelve apostles, many more disciples who opted to follow Jesus in his new and radical way of living, and even the ordinary people who flocked to hear him narrate stories and parables through which he taught them, turning them into active and effective agents of the Kingdom of God *vis a vis* other earthly kingdoms.

This mission to establish God's Kingdom in our midst is upon the shoulder of every Christian today, as it is our firm belief that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Heb 13/8). Hence the mission of Jesus is ever beckoning and urging us:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the free those who are oppressed (Lk 5).

George Soares-Prabhu describes in a candid way the dynamic process in which the Kingdom of God enters and takes root in human society:

When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in mans' trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings freedom inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. ...It summons us to a ceaseless struggle against the demonic structures of unfreedom (psychological and sociological) erected by mammon; and to a ceaseless creativity that will produce in every age new blueprints for a society ever more consonant with the Gospel vision of man.²

Michaelraj Lourdu Ratinam of Madurai Province in his inspiring sharing about being part of an insertion community among the dalits - the broken people - in the state of Tamil Nadu, South India, has this simple liberative-pedagogy to share with the readers in the article, 'Taking Sides with the Poor. An Experience of Insertion Communities in Madurai Province':

²George Soares-Prabhu, 'The Kingdom of God: Jesus' Vision of a New Society,' D. S. Amalorpavadass (ed), *The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society*, Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981, pp. 600 ff.

I feel that promotion of justice starts from taking sides with the poor as Jesus did. Taking sides to me means a close friendship with the poor. Such a friendship is realized only in our availability to the poor. We have our own schedules and timetables. The poor may need us at any moment because their troubles shoot from anywhere and at any time. This availability is very essential to creating the relationships, friendships and confidence so crucial for a meaningful ministry.³

Our Mission for Others is Our Mission With Others Today

That 'Jesuits are men for others and with others' may have seemed too simple, slogan-like a definition when Fr. Kolvenbach, former General of the Society of Jesus, used it to define the identity and the mission of the Jesuits in the multi-religious and globalised world of today. But a close and careful look at this statement tells us that it is the most simple and, at the same time, very insightful definition of our Jesuit identity and mission for our times. It crystallizes for us what our mission is and how our mission needs to be carried out especially in today's multi-cultural and religious world. Our mission therefore has to be necessarily planned and carried out in collaboration with people of other faiths and ideologies, since justice, reconciliation and peace are a common cause for all to come together for.

Reflecting on what the Jesuit Mission Today should be in an Indian and Asian context, Fr. M. Amaladoss states:

Our task in India will focus on our service for the liberation of Dalits, Tribals, women and nature. Being a small minority (just 2.3 per cent), we Christians cannot bring about any social transformation unless we collaborate with people of good will of all religions and ideologies. As a matter of fact, our contemporary experience is one of inter-religious conflict. Religious fundamentalism and communalism are vitiating relations between people and leading to violence. For this reason, even before promoting justice, we will have to engage in conflict resolution and reconciliation.⁴

Where Faiths Can Meet, Not Part

One positive, constructive step towards promoting among all religious communities a collaborative approach to combat the many unjust social systems and practices rampant across communities in the multi-religious, pluri-cultural Indian context could be to cull out and highlight before the followers of all faiths those scriptural texts and verses found in all religious scriptures. For these sacred verses universally and without bias affirm and uphold human dignity and rights of all persons. In the Indian context in particular, we find enshrined in the various sacred scriptures the Golden Rule

³Michaelraj Lourdu Ratinam, 'Taking Sides with the Poor. An Experience of Insertion Communities in Madurai Province', *Promotio Iustitiae* 100 (2008/3), pp 102 ff.

⁴Amaladoss Michael, 'Faith and Justice in a Postmodern World,' *Promotio Iustitiae* 100 (2008/3), pp 34 ff.

of the Gospel, - "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:13) -, which can serve as a critique as well as a solid edifice on which justice, reconciliation and peace could be established.

Indian Religious Scriptures and Human Dignity

Here below are injunctions from other religious scriptures:

Hinduism: *"This is the sum of Dharma [duty]: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you."* Mahabharata, 5:1517.

Islam: *"None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."* Number 13 of Imam "Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadiths.

Sufism: *"The basis of Sufism is consideration of the hearts and feelings of others. If you haven't the will to gladden someone's heart, then at least beware lest you hurt someone's heart, for on our path, no sin exists but this."* Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, Master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order.

Janism: *"In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self."* Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara
"A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated." Sutrakritanga 1.11.33

Buddhism: *"A state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?"* Samyutta Nikaya v. 353
"Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Udana-Varga 5:18

Sikhism: *"Don't create enmity with anyone as God is within everyone."* Guru Arjan Devji 259.

Conclusion

In conclusion it must be stated that the strongest, most systematic antidote to all injustices sanctioned and perpetrated by the caste system has come in the form of the Constitution of India, adopted on November 26, 1949. India's Constitution guarantees the right of all its citizens to justice, liberty, equality, and dignity. It has been a long and arduous journey from ancient caste distinctions based on Hindu philosophy and religious traditions to the constitutional pledge of a democratic government with equality, dignity, and justice for all human beings.

It is a fact, though ironical, that the law of the land or the Constitution has succeeded in guaranteeing and ensuring justice and equality to thousands of its citizens as well as many marginalized groups where the glorified religions

have miserably failed. The fact that India, as a democratic, republic, socialist and secular nation, has seen in her 60 years of existence two of her dalit sons rise to the two top offices in the country, K.R.Narayan as President of India and K.G. Balakrishnan as Chief Justice of India, makes us all hopeful that a truly and fully just and egalitarian society will come about in our midst.⁵

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⁵Katju Markandey, "Looking back on the Caste System," in *The Hindu*, January 8, 2010.