
“The cow does not give milk to him who sits on its back; it gives milk to him who squats (humbly) at its feet” - Basavanna.

A very relevant message to those involved with the poor and marginalised. They live in the informal economy and have survived in situations where high risk and market forces prevail. If the poor have survived they must be good managers. They have strengths; interveners need to build on these strengths. To do this they need to sit with them at their level and in situations where they are comfortable, to listen to them, to empathise with them. This will support the poor to craft their own strategies to overcome obstacles to growth which will be sustainable. Pre-conceived solutions and strategies imposed by ‘experts’ from on top will fail as soon as the interveners withdraw.

THE MEANDERINGS OF A DISTURBED INDIAN



Aloysius Prakash Fernandez



Blessings from Shri Veerendra Heggade, Dharmadhikari of Sri Kshetra Dharamsthala. Dr. Heggade is the head of a religious institution that draws millions of Devotees; he is a leader in the field of education and social service. Dharmasthala stands as a place of religious tolerance and as a Kalpavruksha for those who come in need. Sri D.V. Sadananda Gowda C.M. looks on benevolently.



“It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth; this defiles a man.” - Jesus Christ

This message is especially relevant today when those who profess to be “pure vegetarians” are spouting hatred of others who do not share their beliefs and practices. In the past, one saw Boards on Hotels - “Vegetarian” and “Non-Vegetarian”. This was acceptable. Today the word “Pure” is increasingly prefixed to the word “Vegetarian”. Does this not introduce a moral dimension into food? I have never seen a Hotel marked “Pure Non-Vegetarian”. Is Non-vegetarian then, by its very nature, morally impure? This trend fosters differences between communities and strengthens tensions which could lead to marginalisation of those who follow non-vegetarian practices. These tensions will in turn encourage social conflict leading to insecurity and declining investment in some areas where conflict is continuously simmering just below the surface.

THE MEANDERINGS OF A DISTURBED INDIAN

**Aloysius Prakash Fernandez
Padmashree Awardee 2000**

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● *Foreword*

I began writing this narrative in 2016, while I was under treatment for Hodgkin's Lymphoma, which was discovered in an advanced stage; I ended it in late 2018. Events that occurred thereafter do not find a place. This is my story. It covers the various stages of my life as I wrestled with new insights arising from my studies and ab-normal experiences. They challenged the ecosystem of my beliefs and practices crafted by tradition and religion within which I lived till I was in my early thirties. At every stage however, the decisions were entirely mine. It is also the story of my family and how the members coped with these changes as well as of the response of institutions in the Catholic Church of which I was a member as well as of 'secular' institutions in which I worked.

In hindsight I find that my life was unusual; I have deviated from the trodden path where faith and tradition dominate. It may encourage those who have the desire to go their own way. I continue to believe in a Supreme Being and to respect religions for the social roles they play; but I do not allow blind faith to rule my life. In this process I have hurt the sensibilities of some of my family. I am sorry for this. I also describe, with evidence, a few experiences when I worked in Church organisations which, I perceived, were not fair to me; these influenced my life or career choices. Those involved will have their reasons; I encourage them to write their own story.

My experiences raised many questions. I make no apologies for my answers. They are not a justification for the decisions I made during my career. They are explanations of my efforts to narrow the gap between my set of beliefs and practices crafted by religion and family tradition on one hand and the insights I gained from my experiences and studies on the other. Readers may not be satisfied with these explanations. I accept their opinions, while pointing out that each of us tends to approach an issue loaded with baggage we have accumulated from our background; this baggage includes

our family tradition, our religious beliefs our professional education and the culture of the organisation we work in for a living. This, however, is diversity at its best, I respect it. Life would be rather dull without it. My studies and abnormal experiences helped me to shed this baggage to a large extent.

In religious matters, very few of us, Catholics, have had the opportunity to go beyond the set of belief and practices which we imbibed from family and tradition and learnt from the catechism and bible stories we were exposed to as children. Organised religions have played several supportive social roles in our lives and we have been happy to remain unquestioning adherents. The insights I gained from the Vatican Council and from the History and Anthropology of Religions have generally not enriched our knowledge about organised religions to which we adhere.

Why did I write this narrative? There are many reasons. In Chapter 1, I explain that this effort helped to pull myself together after my internal cohesion was disrupted by two shocks - our son's sudden passing away and my cancer. Many colleagues, including priests, often ask me how I reconcile my lasting respect for organised religions (including the Catholic Church) even though I have marginalised them in my life. I explain, in Chapter 2, that religions play important social roles in people's lives and have to be respected. On the other hand, those who can find their own mission in life should be free to do so - to write their own bible as it were - without the constraining dictates of obedience and uniformity, supported by sanctions imposed by organised religions for what they label as deviant behavior.

There is greater space to opt for this personal path today, than there was when I started my journey in the 1970s. Having narrowed the gap between my set of beliefs that tradition and religion provided me and the beliefs arising from my studies and experience, I was able, by 1977, to choose my life's mission - to support the aspirations and initiatives of over one million rural poor irrespective of religion. I have gratefully acknowledged in this narrative that I was able to pursue my own mission thanks to the support I received from colleagues in the organisations in which I worked, from champions in Central and State Governments who recognised civil society institutions and who took to scale innovations which they crafted. I am also grateful to donor organisations both from India and abroad who

were committed to provide a sustainable livelihood base for the poor. I also recognize with gratitude the support from a dedicated team of colleagues in Myrada and from my family which allowed me the space to pursue my mission

Some Chapters in this narrative record events as they occurred and are easy reading. Some of these events, however, may disturb those who support tradition and authority; but their veracity can be checked without much effort. Chapter 2, which deals with the social roles that religions play in our lives, requires the reader to suspend faith. This is difficult for most people. But unless this effort is made, this Chapter, in particular, will generate more heat than light. It also requires reasonable knowledge of the history and anthropology of religions to which many have not been exposed.

The title of this narrative - "The Meanderings of a Disturbed Indian" - may leave readers a little puzzled. Readers will notice that it meanders; but I would like to point out that there is a pattern; it does not meander aimlessly; like water, it follows a contour. There were periods in my life during which my internal cohesion was disturbed because my existing system of beliefs and practices did not correspond with my experiences in the field. There were also comparatively longer periods where I have enjoyed internal cohesion and 'harmony', as my choice of a new career brought my set of beliefs and my life choices in sync. It was a creative process towards which both periods contributed. During the periods of 'harmony', my set of beliefs and practices jelled with my career choices; the gap, if any, was minimal; it was not caused by conflict between the two, but when my aspirations outran what reality could support.

Why then did I keep the word "disturbed" in the title? Perhaps because the "disturbed" periods were the crucibles that were critical to trigger the process of change. Ivan Illich's concept of "de-schooling" serves as an analogy. It refers to the need to off load the baggage of beliefs and practices which originate from traditional methods of education in order to provide children space to develop their potential. This off loading, in my experience, was triggered by disruptive life experiences which challenged the normal; they were disturbing; but they were required to trigger the process that off loaded the baggage of beliefs and practices nurtured by religion and family tradition in order to see and respect the diversity of reality.

There is no doubt that an element of luck played a role in achieving my life's mission. My career choices and the major innovations in development and finance where the rural poor were able to take the lead through their own informal institutions, took place in the late 1970s, 1980s and early 90s. During this period the role of the voluntary sector (civil society) was given prominence by Government and enshrined in National Five-Year Plans. As a result, it provided space for supportive officials in Government to partner with civil society institutions and to take to scale innovations which emerged in a local area. I have given these Champions due recognition in my book "50 Years of Learning" as well as in several papers in the series entitled Rural Management Systems (RMS), all available on Myrada's website; but they deserve much more. They promoted appropriate policies in Government which provided space for Myrada and other Voluntary Organisations to innovate and for institutions of the poor to grow on their own terms. This open culture of co-operation and respect for alternate strategies and civil society institutions attracted qualified and committed staff, from leading formal Institutions of learning, who helped to professionalise the 'passionate' voluntary sector.

I must gratefully acknowledge the support from Ms Chandra Singh, Myrada's Chief Finance Officer for coming to my rescue whenever I was challenged by problems with software and for formatting this text. She also preserved this text till I was able to dig out the photographs; many were not with me. It also took a long time to collect and select those to be included. I am also thankful to Mr Shesha A, Administrative Assistant, for keeping safely all the background material and to Ranjani K. Murthy for contributing towards the printing of this narrative. Finally, my thanks to Ms Smita Ramanathan; she went through the draft of this narrative to point out any content which may not make much sense to people who are not Catholics.

Aloysius Prakash Fernandez
December 20, 2018



PART 1:
**QUESTIONS - AND A SEARCH FOR ANSWERS THROUGH
THE SOCIAL ROLES THAT RELIGIONS PLAY, THE
INFLUENCE OF THE VATICAN COUNCIL AND MY STUDIES.**

CHAPTER 1

Two experiences that led to several questions and a search for answers.

Two friends visited me in January 2016 to share my grief after our son Ashish's sudden death from a heart attack in Canada at the age of 47, and to help me cope with the shock when I discovered that I had Hodgkins Lymphoma in an advanced stage. Together, these two painful experiences weighed me and the family down and disrupted my internal cohesion, because I could not find reasons that explained why they happened. My two friends soon realised from our discussion, that, for me to pull myself together again, I needed to understand the reasons why I got cancer and why Ashish passed away so young.

The news of my cancer came as a shock. I was not under any physical or emotional stress. In fact, I was filled with a sense of achievement, having fulfilled my personal mission of raising one million rural poor above the poverty line. I had led a reasonably well-disciplined and organised life and did nothing in excess. My friends offered the traditional religious explanation, that I was being punished for the sins I had committed, or for opting to live in my comfort zone when I could have done more for the people. There was also the need to be reconciled or to find closure to Ashish's passing away so young, leaving behind his wife and two children, one in university and the other in school. Ashish's untimely death at the age of 47, when he had worked hard to achieve his position, was difficult to accept and further disturbed my internal cohesion. His mother suffered much more; she is finding her own way to heal.

The impact of these two shocks in 2015-16 was highly disruptive, because there was no tangible or verifiable reason in one case, while it was untimely in the other. They deeply disturbed my inner cohesion. This cohesion had helped me to choose new life experiences in order to reduce

the gap between my set of beliefs, which kept evolving and what I was engaged with in life, my career choices. These concepts and insights that ultimately resulted in changes in my life or career choices were derived from my exposure to the documents of the Vatican Council during my studies in Pune and my studies in Anthropology of Religion in Louvain (Belgium); but they remained dormant until they were triggered by extreme events in which I was involved. Some of these events, like the Bangladesh Refugee operation of 1971, were disruptive, because the insights I gained did not support my set of beliefs which were the products of religion and tradition; on the contrary, they challenged them. This challenge and others that followed, required me to search for a change in my career choices, to reduce the gap between my beliefs and what I was engaged with and to give me space to pursue my own mission in life. This search which lasted six years was disturbing. My internal cohesion grew after 1977-78 when I left the church and opted to support the poor to become self-reliant and chart their own path to progress. Thereafter my life was in sync with my set of beliefs. Between 1978 and 2015, I wrote my own bible incorporating my set of beliefs and practices. I documented this process in a series of papers which reflected on 'The Myrada Experience'. But after these two events in 2015-16, I began to feel that an external force –like fate – had taken over; the cohesion in my life which supported me and kept me focused, was falling apart.

I searched for some activity that would help, both to purge me of this feeling of disintegration and loss of control and, hopefully, in the process, to help me to pull myself together again – like a catharsis. Retreat into solitude in a quiet place to find answers that gave meaning to life, did not appeal to me after my experience in the Seminary in Pune. Physical activity and travel were excluded, as I was under treatment for Hodgkin's. Could writing, especially about the experiences of my life, help to heal? I decided to give it a try. I started by attempting to respond to the questions that emerged during my discussion with my friends, but discovered that I could not isolate my responses from the journey of my life; they were an integral part of it. Hence my attempt to answer the questions raised by these two painful events led to further questions related to my life's journey. I soon found that recalling my past, asking why I had taken several major steps

leading to new life experiences, which then questioned my existing set of beliefs and also contributed to building new ones; it helped to pull myself together. This process enabled me to take control again, to re-establish my inner cohesion.

Delving into my past also helped me to find a silver thread running through my life, which knitted together what seemed like disruptive career choices. This silver thread was the underlying desire to do something for the poor and suffering. It was ingrained by my grandparents in the 1940s who supported several poor children, including one who became a Priest.¹

Later in the early 1960s, during my studies in Pune, I volunteered to help those in Pune City whose houses and belongings were washed away when the Panshet dam burst in 1961 and to search for the human remains of passengers who died in the Alitalia crash in 1962. In the brief experience I had as a Priest in two Parishes in Bangalore in the mid and late 1960s, I started the Workers Movement to enable industrial workers to break the hold of politicians on their Unions and to negotiate with employers on their own terms. I also organised what was perhaps the first health survey of a slum in Bangalore with the help of nurses from Victoria Hospital. This silver thread helped to reinforce my belief that there was some semblance of order in my life which was guided by a mission that became more visible and pronounced as my life progressed; this realisation gave me the confidence that my internal cohesion could be restored again.

There was little time and opportunity for similar work while I was Secretary to the Archbishop of Bangalore for four years, but I always responded to calls for assistance. Later, however, as Deputy Director of Caritas and National Secretary of the Bishops Commission for Justice and Peace, I was able to pick up this thread, as I had ample opportunities to pursue policies which supported the poor. Subsequently, I was engaged as Tutor in Development Studies in Selly Oak Colleges and thereafter in the Canadian International Development Agency and finally with Myrada.

¹ I would like to emphasise that I have the greatest respect for my maternal grandparents and grandaunt who brought me up in the best way possible according to their norms which were based on religion and tradition. They sacrificed a great deal to ensure that I had the best that our family could afford; gratitude alone is inadequate to recognise their role.

These experiences in the development sector re-enforced the values which my grandparents had instilled in me. They also helped to give my life and words credibility, since they kept the gap between my beliefs (and messages) and my life/career choices as small as possible. Delving into the past and writing my experiences helped me to realise that there was method in my life, what to others may have seemed like madness.

But I realised that I cannot respond adequately to the reasons for suffering given by my friends, who were traditional Catholics, without explaining the social roles of religion. Religion plays important social roles throughout our lives by giving answers to questions regarding suffering and death and by providing comfort and closure. It played an important role in my early life. Hence Chapter 2 is dedicated to the social roles that religions play. The influence of the Vatican Council (1962-65) on the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church and in my own life also played a major role in challenging my set of beliefs and practices which were rooted in religion and tradition.² I have recorded the impact of the Council on my life in Chapter 3. These two chapters provide the broader context of my answers to questions raised regarding suffering and death; it also explains why I made choices in life like joining the Priesthood, leaving the Church and the Priesthood and why I moved from funding and teaching roles in the development sector to positions closer to the field.

Thereafter in Chapters 4 to 12, I have run through my life's journey and attempted to answer questions I posed in Chapter 1; hopefully my answers throw some light on the reasons for my career choices. I had to rely on memory to analyse these experiences since I had no discipline to keep a daily diary, though I did refer to articles I had written over the years. But in a way this removed the clutter, since only those experiences and events that affected my life deeply or challenged existing beliefs remained in my

² This Council was convoked by Pope John XIII; it opened the windows of the Church to allow in changes in society, updated the liturgy, gave a larger role to lay people, introduced the concept of religious freedom and started a genuine dialogue with other religions. Many priests and nuns left the organised Church and formed their own religious groups, because they believed that the reforms were too liberal. But the underlying discomfort with the demand for unquestionable obedience and allegiance to traditional set of beliefs and practices became more explicit; it also resulted in many priests and nuns leaving the Church altogether.

memory; time filtered out the others which did not play a significant part in shaping my set of beliefs and life/career choices.

I will identify these life experiences briefly here and elaborate on them later according to the order in which they emerged in my life. In each case, I will try to explain why I decided to leave one life experience and opt for a new one. Some changes disrupted my early life, like my decision to leave the Church and the Priesthood. Others, in later years, caused stress to my wife Dipika, like my decision to leave my position in the Canadian International Development Agency in New Delhi and move to an NGO, Myrada, in Bangalore which was struggling to survive due to lack of funds and a vision for the future.

My journey through life shows that tradition and religion did play a major role in the decisions I took to join the Priesthood and remain in the Church till the age of 35-36. The desire to hold a position of power in the Church also contributed to my dedication and hard work in the Church's administrative structure, in which I was absorbed for ten years first in Bangalore and then in Delhi. I assumed, perhaps naively, that from a position of authority, I could nudge the Church's organisation to be more responsive to 'reality'. But after my experience with the Bangladesh Refugees in 1971 (when I was 32 years), tradition and religion began to play a decreasing role in my life. Religious rituals gradually ceased to have meaning, between 1971 and 1977/78 when I left the Church and the priesthood; other events and experiences in which the poor were involved took their place. My belief that the Church's organisation would respond to change, after the urging of the Vatican Council, was also severely undermined. The official Church organisation was more geared to maintaining the status quo and protecting its assets than triggering change and facing opposition from vested interests both within and without.

The period from 1971 to 1977, was particularly disturbing; my internal cohesion was under stress as I wrestled with my traditional set of beliefs in the light of new insights gained from ab-normal experiences in situations impacted by wars, cyclones and droughts. These experiences challenged my existing set of beliefs and made me hold reality before the mirror of unquestioning faith and restrictive tradition. I had to take career decisions which reduced the gap between my beliefs and my life choices. Public (Catholic) opinion, largely confined to Bangalore which was critical of my

decision to leave the Priesthood, did not prevent my decision to return to Bangalore in 1982 to get immersed in development work closer to the field. I knew that I would be socially marginalised, but was prepared to face this challenge as it was based on my beliefs; it was my personal decision with which my wife Dipika dutifully (if reluctantly) went along.

My two friends did trigger this process of digging into my past and reflecting on it. In an effort to respond to their questions, I decided to take this process further on my own, first to provide the broader context within which my answers are positioned, which I do in Chapters 2 and 3. In later Chapters, I try to answer the following questions related to my life's choices, some of which, especially the question - why I left the Priesthood - have been posed to me by acquaintances over the years:

- i. Why did I become a Catholic Priest attached to the Bangalore Archdiocese? I was born in 1939, started studying for the priesthood in 1954 and was ordained a priest in 1963. I worked in Bangalore Archdiocese between 1963 and 1969; it is a geographical unit comprising a few Districts of the State.
- ii. Why did I willingly respond to the order to move on deputation to a national organisation called Caritas India in 1971 whose head office is located in the National Secretariat of the Catholic Bishops Conference in New Delhi? Caritas is the official institution of the Catholic Church which manages development programs all over the country.
- iii. Why did I leave Caritas in 1976? A day after I left, I was offered a consultancy by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in Delhi for six months. I then proceeded to the UK in 1977 to take up a post as Tutor in Development Studies in the Selly Oak Colleges affiliated to the Birmingham University. Why did I return to India after one year in 1978 to re-join CIDA.
- iv. Why did I leave the Church in 1976 and the priesthood in 1977-78? I left the Church organisation when I withdrew from Caritas in 1976 and opted to stay on my own. Leaving the Priesthood came as a later and perhaps logical consequence.

- v. Why did I leave the Teaching post in the Selly Oak Colleges in 1978 and return to India to re-join CIDA in New Delhi where I worked for 4 years.
- vi. Why did I leave CIDA and join Myrada in Bangalore in 1982?
- vii. Why did I leave Myrada and join the World Bank in Washington in 1995?
- viii. Why did I leave the World Bank and return to Myrada in 1996.

Note : I handed over responsibilities as Executive Director of Myrada in 2009, but continue as the Member Secretary of the Board. I accepted the offer from Nabard to be the Chairman and professional adviser of Nabard Financial Service Ltd (NABFINS) in 2009 for six years.

Some of these decisions to change my career choices were disruptive, as I said, while others were not. My decision, for example, to join the Priesthood was not disruptive. It flowed harmoniously from the ecosystem built by religion and family tradition in which I was brought up. Those which were disruptive were triggered off by new experiences. I realised later that even when a new set of beliefs takes root intellectually, one needs to experience a new existential ecosystem in which this set of beliefs dominate in practice, before one can fully understand them. In my life, the major experience which exposed me to a new ecosystem that was disruptive was my involvement in the Bangladesh Refugee Program during 1971. This experience was a major disruption which triggered a change in my set of beliefs and gave birth to my life's mission to work with the rural poor. I realised that remaining in the Church's ecosystem would only increase the gap between what I believed in and what I was allowed to do. My internal cohesion would decrease, resulting in psychological and emotional stress. This in turn led me to leave the Church's organisation and then the priesthood in 1976-7. Briefly I had to close the gap between my new set of beliefs and my life experience in the Church especially in its development outreach, if I wanted to regain my internal cohesion, to remain sane.

My decision to leave in 1982, the relative security of a career in the donor organisation - CIDA, New Delhi, and to enter the development field in Bangalore as the Director of Myrada, an NGO which was in dire

straits, was not disruptive for me. In fact, it took my desire to work with the poor a step further in the right direction, namely closer to the field. But this decision was disruptive for my wife Dipika. She would now have to cope with financial insecurity and a fall in income. While in Delhi she was a consultant to a Dutch buyer of designer clothes; she feared that her shift to Bangalore would distance her from her suppliers who were mainly around Delhi. She was from Gorakhpur (U.P) and most of her relatives lived in the North; she was not well accepted by my parents who lived in Bangalore, even though she made every effort to bridge the gap. She felt that she would be lost in Bangalore.³

The move to Bangalore was also a challenge to ascertain whether I was willing to practice what I had been recommending as a donor and tutor. Was I willing to sit on the other side of the table and to experience in a very limited way the uncertainty and insecurity of the rural poor? With the cultural and experiential baggage I had accumulated, was I able to empathise, in some tiny way, with the stress which the poor experienced as a result of unequal power relations as well as unexpected droughts, floods, pests and market volatilities?

As I said earlier there was one silver thread that ran through my life experiences; this was my desire to work with the poor. My experiences in Caritas, as a Tutor in the UK, my work with CIDA and then in Myrada covering over 40 years, focused on the rural poor, to support their efforts to come out of poverty and stay there. My decisions to leave the UK and return to CIDA based in Delhi and later my move to Myrada, Bangalore, in 1982 were all due to this internal drive. One can also add my decision to return to Myrada from my assignment in the World Bank in Washington in 1995-6. When I joined Myrada in 1982, I started with a target of supporting one million poor to rise above the poverty line and to stay there, as my mission in life.⁴ This decision was the major force that strengthened my internal cohesion; it gave a focus and a purpose to my life. This cohesion, however, was disrupted once again by my experience of cancer and by my son Ashish's sudden demise in 2015.

³ To make her protest visible, she cut her long hair, since I had often in jest told her that I married her because of it.

⁴ This target was overshoot when I stepped down as Executive Director of Myrada in 2009.

I wish each of these questions posted above could be answered separately, each in a well-defined chapter and supported by figures. It would have pleased the hearts of many of my friends who have been trained to dissect a living being so that it can be identified, quantified and finally converted into numbers and equations. Unfortunately, life does not unfold this way. Years ago, I spent several days in a village with an economist friend. His complaint at the end was: "Your village is too messy". Life is messy. Planners love to dissect a farmer into parts according to his/her needs like health, drinking water, roads and various livelihood activities and to provide a response to each. But the reality is that the whole farmer's family is engaged in its survival and the activities of all the members are shared and overlap; they support each other, they cannot be separated into boxes. The story of my life is similar. Reflecting back, I realised that the seeds of decisions to change my career choices, were sown much before they actually happened. Similarly, their impact extended far beyond the date given for their ending.

After 1971, while I still remained as a member of the Church for six years, I found it increasingly difficult to accept that my decisions which resulted from new life experiences were part of "God's plan", which I was conditioned to believe by religion and tradition earlier in my life. I began to make my own choices to change my life's experiences in sync with my changing set of beliefs; I began to write my own "bible" or "Idea of life". I devoted myself to build the "Idea of India" which was inspired by centuries of Indian history, practised by leaders like the Mahatma and enshrined in the Constitution of India.

In this narrative, I will describe my life from childhood up to the year 1982 when I joined Myrada. I have already dwelt in my book entitled "50 Years of Learning" on my experience in Myrada between 1982 and 2009. In that book I gave importance to Myrada's mission to build poor people's institutions; these are part of the network of civil society institutions which is one of the three rivers that nourish the idea of India, the other two being the Government and the Private sector. However, like the mythical Saraswati, this pillar seems to have disappeared underground after it was given a ceremonial bow in the preamble of the Constitution.... "We the People".

Before I attempt to explain why I moved from one life experience to another, I decided to dwell on my understanding of the social roles of religion and the impact of the Vatican Council, since both played an important role in my decisions to change my life experiences. The social role that religions play in our lives is the highest binding factor that links people to organised religion. The reforms initiated by the Vatican Council had an impact on many of the Jesuit Professors with whom I worked closely during my studies in the 1960s in the Papal Athenaeum in Pune; these teachings which I found reflected the life of Christ, affected me too. Unfortunately, the conservatives in the Vatican (Rome) struck back during the late 1980s and 90s and the windows that the Council opened were gradually closed. The proof of this is that the 50th anniversary of the Council was celebrated as a "Year of Faith"; the teachings of the Council were deliberately set aside.



Someone asked the Master why he seemed so wary of religion.

Wasn't religion the finest thing humanity possessed?

The Master's reply was enigmatic "The best and the worst - that's what you get from religion."

"Why the worst?"

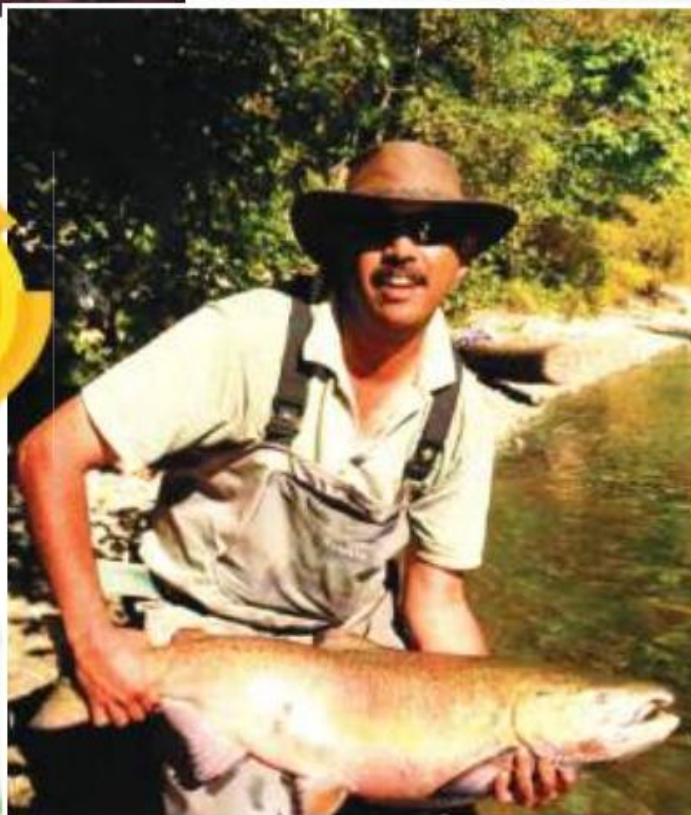
"Because people mostly pick up enough religion to hate but not enough to love."

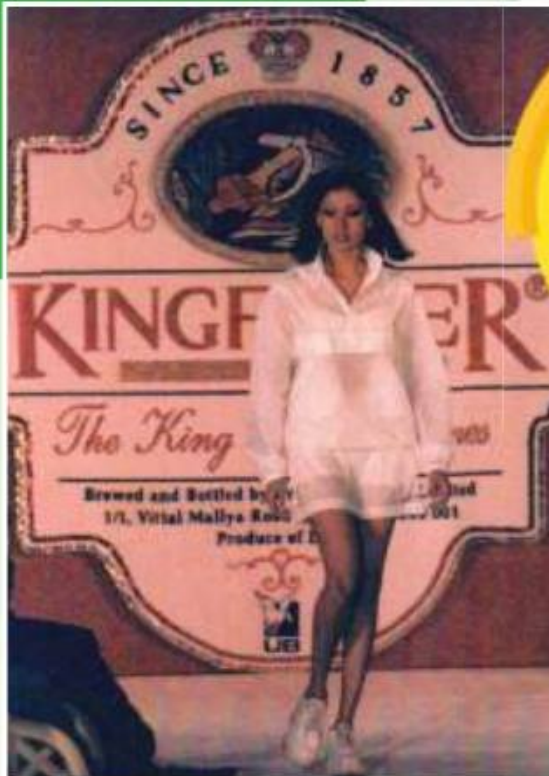
Anthony deMello. One Minute Nonsense.



I was not the only one asking questions. Dipti too was asking questions in 2016; she was also supporting the family to cope

Ashish our dedicated outdoor son





Niharika who
carved her own
career in the
media.

Grateful
for all the
blessings



CHAPTER 2

The Social Roles which Religion plays in our lives.

There is a popular saying that each of us writes her/his own Bible. What this phrase really means is that "each one of us lives by her/his set of values, beliefs and practices". Many, however, accept what religion, tradition and family have handed down to them till the end of their lives. I respect these roles. In such cases, religion plays important social roles throughout their lives. Others may begin within this traditional ecosystem, but move on to change their set of beliefs and practices. I fall in this category. This narrative describes, with many limitations, how I moved on from an early life dominated by religion and tradition where religion played social roles, to one where I could live by a new set of beliefs and practices and marginalise the social roles of organised religion. I made my position clear, when I put up a board in my office which read: "Religion is injurious to health. Trust me. Sd/ God."

When I use the word religion here, I refer to organised religion. I focus only on the social roles that they play. This is why I request readers to suspend faith when they read this Chapter. I am also not venturing into metaphysical positions or debates of philosophers. The social roles that religion plays are important for us to survive from day to day, as I will explain below. In fact, it is significant that although each religion has its own sets of beliefs and social practices, all of them play similar social roles.

But before I go further, let me state that I am not an atheist or an agnostic, I do not deny the existence of God as atheists do. I differ from the Freethinkers¹ of the 17th Century who claimed that there is insufficient evidence to prove that there is a God; they professed that they will doubt the existence of God until they have scientific proof that one exists. I believe that a God or rather

¹ Freethinkers rejected accepted positions especially those concerning religious beliefs and tradition; they formed their own opinions independent of Church and tradition.

a Supreme Being exists who is the source of rationality in this universe, until science can prove otherwise. This belief gives meaning to my life, as it makes me feel part of an order which prevails in the universe. I would be disoriented if randomness ruled my life and the universe. My belief in a rational Supreme Being fulfils my need to feel secure and comfortable and not a tiny speck tossed around by random forces. This is why my claim that 'religion is injurious to health -Trust me' written on the board in my office is signed by "God". The organised religious institutions which have emerged around this belief in God are constructed by men (not women). History records that they have been a major driver of conflict throughout the centuries; hence my claim that they are injurious to health.

Many expect science to answer all questions related to the origin of and order in the universe and to provide solutions to life's problems. True, as physical science progressed, many answers, hitherto provided by religion have been provided by science. The social roles of religions have declined, and many believe they will disappear. Organised religions built around the need to believe in a Supreme being; they named it Brahma, Yehova, Jesus, Allah, and laid the basis for exclusion, especially if they claimed to be the ONLY path to paradise. Each religion has created a set of beliefs and practices largely in response to people's social and personal needs. They provide the social needs of security and identity in a religious community which accepts the same set of beliefs and practices; they promise rewards and justify punishments after death which a personal sense of justice demands; they respond to the personal needs for comfort and closure.

These reasons for accepting organised religion do not appeal to me; my belief in a Supreme Being is not based on them. I have built lasting social relationships with people belonging to different religions and castes/communities, but who share certain common values and practices. I respect this diversity as they do. The core belief of the Abrahamic religions that each one is the ONLY path to salvation, has no place in my set of beliefs. Active propagation of Catholicism, therefore, has no place in my life's mission. Millions of Hindus who help fellow humans in distress, irrespective of their religion and who devote their lives to make this world a better place, surely qualify for paradise. They subscribe to traditional mainline Hinduism which has space for diverse sets of beliefs and which has nurtured this

space for millennia. Hindutva however, a product about a century old, is fast absorbing features of the ONLY, hitherto typical of the Abrahamic religions.

There is another position which can be described as one stream of Philosophical Cosmology; it understands the Universe as a unified whole. The Greek Philosopher Pythagoras first used the word "kosmos" (order) to explain order in the Universe. This appeals to me, because, as I wrote in earlier paragraphs, I need a Universe which is predictable and orderly; it gives meaning to my life. I feel secure in this ecosystem; I cannot reconcile myself to being a speck which is tossed about randomly. My belief in a Supreme Rational Being is based on this need.

The more I studied the history of organised religions, the greater was my conviction that they are entirely man-made – and I stress the word man. Religious institutions and the priestly class shape their Gods, largely in response to social and personal needs of people who require their lives and livelihoods to be protected and who need rewards, comfort and closure to give meaning to their lives. And since most of these needs are common to all, the social roles all religions play in response to these needs, are also similar. In many cases, the religious institution raises these social roles and practices to the level of sacred rules given by their founder which are essential to their faith even though these practices evolved over time due to existential reasons. This is why it is often said that if the founders of religions were to return to the world today, they would not recognise the religious organisations that have been built in their name.

It is, therefore, important to dwell on the social roles that religions play, since they are important; organised religions, however, tend to give these roles a value far beyond what they deserve. They are presented as teachings of the religious founders, as enshrined in their respective Holy Books, or as part of core religious beliefs and practices, when history shows that they are not. Their origin is the social role that religion plays to justify the need to prohibit practices which, in the past, were considered to be causes of disease or to protect resources which were critical to ensure food for people to survive. Religion played this social role effectively by imposing sanctions for dysfunctional social behaviour which did not conform to the norms society set and by rewarding those who complied, both in this life and the next.

What are these social roles I am referring to? Though I have written that 'Religion is injurious to health, this is one side of the picture, which reflects the negative role that religions have played (and continue to play) in triggering and justifying differences and conflicts. There are, however, many positive roles which organised religions play. For example, visits to the shrines of particular deities and performance of religious rituals are the source of hope for those searching for a cure when established medical systems do not work. Shrines of all religions draw people who believe that the deity will cure ailments. The shrine of Infant Jesus (Bala Jesu) in Viveknagar, Bangalore, has hundreds of tiny silver reproductions of various parts of the body which suppliants prayed to be healed. Religions record and celebrate important events in life like birth, coming of age, marriage and death. All religions have ceremonies to ask the Gods and Goddesses to bless these events and to legitimise them in society. Organised Religions provide identity, especially among religious minorities (Gurudwaras and Mosques are examples), and even among various Hindu Castes (the Muttas or Institutes/Monasteries are examples). They provide community support when people need money, food, care and physical protection. People have recourse to religious ceremonies for consolation and closure after death; they provide a chain of religious ceremonies for a group or community to share grief, and grief shared is grief halved. These are major social roles which most people require from religion throughout their lives. Finally, the social roles also extend to the next life. Abrahamic religions promise rewards for the "good" in paradise where all will meet again or punishments for the "bad". The Karmic Religions offer several lives or opportunities to accumulate merit, before the soul merges with the Supreme Being.

Religions play an important social role in the practices of food. History tells us that many of the social norms, related to what to eat and what not, were due to beliefs that some foods were the causes or carriers of disease and had to be avoided. Blood of slaughtered animals, for example, had to be drained out, as it was believed that it carried disease. The best way to ensure this, was to subject the practice to a religious dictum which gradually became part of the set of religious beliefs of some Abrahamic religions. A comparison between the food practices of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims, who have lived in the same area for centuries, shows that there are many practices in food which are similar, though their religious

systems differ. The origin of these practices must have been from outside the religious sphere. An analysis of history indicates that these beliefs and practices, developed into “dos and donts” over time and have taken a prime place in strengthening religious identity; many are considered a part of core religious beliefs; yet their origins were very existential.

Religions also protect natural resources which were crucial for people's survival. The Karmic religions have many examples. Forests were declared to be “sacred groves”, rivers were holy; both sustained lives and livelihoods. Animals which were needed for agricultural operations particularly to preserve the health of the soil were also declared sacred by religious dictum. Religion was the most effective system to legitimise social practices and to apply sanctions for failure to comply. These social practices were supported by the rulers who in turn required religion to justify/legitimise their position of power.

Imposition by religious dictat of clothes required to cover the female form, have been a tradition in most religions, partly because women were looked upon as the cause of temptation (which is often the trigger of conflict and crime), and partly to protect themselves from lustful advances in a society where women played a subordinate role and were, therefore, powerless to withstand the advances of men. Such societies have changed especially in open and liberal democracies, but the practices have been retained as essential signs of religious and community identity.

The important role that religion played is also reflected in the different approaches of colonial powers to non-Christians in the colonies. Why was the impact of colonialisation by England and Portugal on religious and social practices different in the colonised countries? While the Portuguese imposed conversion, adoption of Portuguese customs and practices and destroyed Hindu places of worship, the British East India Company considered interference in religious affairs an obstacle to trade as it created social tension.² The role that religion played in the mother countries had a major influence on their attitudes to non-Christian religions in the colonies. In Portugal religion still played the dominant role in society and

² It may be useful to recall the centuries old Papal Mandate entitled the Doctrine of Discovery which allowed (and justified) Western Catholic nations especially Portugal and Spain to colonise and spread Christianity in the world.

governance and hence colonised territories had to adopt the colonisers' faith. In England it was industry and trade that provided the major push towards colonisation. The East India Company was against any efforts by missionaries to challenge Hindu social practices because they disturbed trade. It was only when India came under the Crown that Missionaries were given a freer hand, but there was no visible force applied to convert; preferential treatment for jobs however was given to Anglo Indians and Indian Christians in certain sectors.

I do not want to get bogged down with controversy, but these insights, do throw light on why my ancestors, who hailed from parts of India which the Portuguese occupied, became Catholics. They also throw light on the non-religious sources which were the main causes of several "dos and donts" related to food, social practices and attitudes to other religions which were imposed on Catholic converts. Many of these 'dos and donts' were justified by religion - in this case, Catholicism - which claimed to be the only true path to salvation; they were supported by the Portuguese Government in power since religion justified its colonialism and also because a large Christian community provided a safety net. This is part of the important social roles that religions played in the past and continue to play today.

The social role of religion as a basis for identity is growing stronger and more visible as leaders of caste/community groups make every effort to mobilise voters on this base; this initiative is supported by religious leaders. Leaders of Catholic and Christian Churches play this role in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, parts of the West Coast and some tribal areas in Jharkhand and the North East. Islam and its leaders play this role all over the country. Similarly, Seers of various Mutts and Mandirs are openly throwing their weight behind politicians of their caste or community.

Religion also plays social roles which are negative. Traditional Hinduism justifies social practices like "untouchability" which introduces a degrading moral dimension in human relationships. History is replete with wars and sufferings imposed by the followers of one religion on others because of the claim of some religions to have the monopoly of Truth and of the ONLY true God. To say that organised religions caused suffering would not be an understatement. The Abrahamic religions (especially Christianity and Islam) led the way for conquest and conversion, each claiming to be the

ONLY way. The Jews added the claim that God gave them the promised land. Other Gods however disagree. Hindutva which stresses uniformity, claims to be the saviour of traditional mainline Hinduism which embraces diversity and which is perceived to be under threat from the Abrahamic religions. Hindutva also claims superiority (at least priority) for Hindus, offers social uniformity and a better life in this world. Hindutva has reacted to the claim of Abrahamic religions to be the ONLY way; it projects its own claim to be the Vishwaguru (world teacher) and to provide a cultural identity which makes only a Hindu the rightful heir to Akhanda Bharat. As a result, Hindutva is also being infected with the virus of the ONLY, like Islam and Christianity.

These claims to be the ONLY, to be superior or the first are negative social roles of religion; they are disruptive; they tend to polarise on the basis of religion and to justify attempts from the majority religious group to downgrade religious and social minorities and to relegate them to second-class status as citizens. We have seen the result of this in recent times in several Islamic countries. The Pakistani soldiers who surrendered after the 1971 Bangladesh war, firmly believed that the Bengalis were second class Muslims as their culture was dominated by songs and practices of Bengali Hindus. In the past, Europe's history of migration of religious minorities to the United States due to the dominance of the Catholic religion, which ostracised adherents of other sets of beliefs, is a prime example of the negative social role that religion can play. I, therefore, am wary of organised religions, especially those infected with the virus of the ONLY.

Religion, however, is not going away. As organised religion captures greater space in people's lives, its power to play both positive and negative social roles described above increases exponentially.³ It is, therefore, no surprise that a survey in 2018-19 carried out by the Lokniti research program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies showed that 31% of Hindu respondents say that they are 'very' religious, while 60% are 'somewhat' religious. Only 5% said that they were not religious at all. Around half of the Hindu respondents said that they had participated in

³ New Centres are sprouting with a religious flavour but not attached to any organised religion; they help to cope with stress arising from the demands of modern life and work. The Art of Living Centre in Bangalore with branches all over the world is one example. The new centres do not promote beliefs or practices that foster exclusion.

religious gatherings during the recall period. There was only a marginal difference between respondents of the upper and the scheduled castes (51% vs 47%), and between urban and rural respondents (47% vs 50%). Given this depth of influence, it is not difficult to use religion to mobilise people and even to weaponise it. This opens the door to claiming priority and imposing uniformity in every sector of life. The only other feature which permeates social life so deeply is caste which, unlike religion, fosters diversity. The above-mentioned study also shows that Secularism, as understood in Europe (as a separation between religion and state) has little mobilising force today in this country.

The overall picture therefore is clear. We are a society in which religion plays (and has played) major social roles. Other countries have similar experiences. State imposed atheistic ideologies which tried by force to eradicate religion from people's lives, have failed. The rapid growth of informal community-based religious groups inspired by Christian beliefs in China during the past 10 - 15 years is an example. The growth of this set of beliefs is threatening the dominant ideological position of the communist party and its supreme leader. Smart politicians in liberal democracies are realising that they can no longer strike a chord with the electorate if they keep a distance from religious practices and beliefs, most of which support traditional behaviour. Many of the older generation of leaders did keep their distance from organised religion, because they associated religion with backwardness and superstition, while they wanted the country to move forward. Aspiring young leaders have realised that they have to be genuinely religious, that people need to see that religion is part of their daily lives. This raises the level of mutual trust. This in turn strengthens the role of religion in social and public life, expands it into the political sphere and opens the doors to a greater role for religion in governance.

In this context, it is useful to ask whether the word "secular" in the Constitution of India is relevant when all social indicators point towards an increasing role for religion in the public space. How does the word "secular" relate to this society? The Mahatma himself said: "My politics is derived from my religion. Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means". But he also said: "If we want to cultivate a true spirit of democracy, we cannot afford to be intolerant.

Intolerance betrays the lack of faith in one's cause." The challenge therefore is to respect religion, and to remove the beliefs in organised religions which cause exclusion in social life (like untouchability) and belief in the ONLY, which gives preference in life after death only to its adherents.

The existential answer to this conundrum is found in traditional mainline Hinduism which the Mahatma lived and which respected different sets of beliefs. He had space for all and respected all religions. Groups persecuted for their religious beliefs in other countries like the Parsees and Jews found shelter in India. It is often said that the only civilisation in which the Jewish people felt safe was the Hindu one. Traditional Hindu society, therefore, does not need the word 'secular' to make place for other religions. It has space for different sets of beliefs. In Europe, Roman Catholicism with its belief in being the ONLY true faith had no place for other religions; hence secularists had to fight for over two centuries to separate religion from the State which supported this claim of the Church.

Let me return to the discussion with my two friends and place it in the context of the social roles of religion. What social role did religion play in my life to help me cope with the impact of these two events, namely my coming down with cancer and Ashish's untimely death? The brief answer was that it was minimal, if any. The discussion started with the question: Why did I get Hodgkins Lymphoma? The answer from medical science is that no one really knows. In such cases, we know from history that people turn to religion for an answer, and religious leaders have responded as part of religion's social role. The Catholic Clergy in Europe attributed the plague in the 15th and 16th centuries to God's wrath; it was punishment for the wicked ways of mankind and failure to abide by God's laws. They urged people to pray, do penance, and, of course, to pay. The tenor of the response has not changed. One of my friends said: "You are suffering for the bad deeds you did in this life or in the past"; the other said "Oh no! You are suffering because there were many more good deeds you could have done but did not have the courage to do because of your selfishness; you prefer to remain in your comfort zone." Both implied a degree of guilt followed by punishment; both are based on religious beliefs. These two friends left me with these statements and I decided to take it further on my own.

I found that Abrahamic religions play an effective social role by identifying guilt as a reason for suffering; it at least gives a reason. Guilt is due to personal “sins” as well as to original sin (the act of disobedience by Adam and Eve), as Christians believe. This explanation helps to justify suffering in the mind of the sufferer, but faith is required. Religion, especially Catholicism, ensures that a person feels guilty throughout his or her life. The cross with the suffering Christ is found prominently placed in all Catholic Churches, reminding us that Christ suffered for our sins and we too have to suffer as he did. Sermons in Churches remind us constantly of punishment for sins in this and the next life and the need to ask forgiveness from God who is a judge. Abrahamic religions provide instruments to obtain God’s forgiveness - like a pilgrimage to a sacred place, or confession to a priest. Karmic religions provide for cleansing of the residue resulting from actions that went against one’s dharma, (the cosmic law underlying right behaviour and the social order); they do not consider God as a judge; the Supreme Being is more of a mentor and guide.

But religion did not play this social role in my life, because I had no sense of guilt due to which I deserved punishment through cancer. My decision to leave the Church and the priesthood was disruptive both to me and to my parents but for different reasons; guilt did not enter the equation. For my parents, who were good Catholics, it was painful because it resulted in the Catholic community passing negative comments and keeping a distance from me, like passive ostracisation. My parents also regretted that the expectations of leaders in the Church, that I would rise in the Church’s administrative structure, were belied. To me this reaction was marginal and I was aware that as soon as I succeeded in life, the Catholics who once marginalised me would all come forward to claim acquaintance.⁴ The experience of leaving the Church and the priesthood was disruptive for me since it entailed a major change in my life experience, but I had no sense of guilt. And unless there is a sense of guilt, religion does not enter the equation to provide a reason for suffering and an opportunity to repent. I do not believe in original sin committed by Adam and Eve and do not share their guilt. Most historians agree that it was a story (imbedded in a sermon) to explain suffering. I could not place my finger on any deed I had done bad

⁴ In fact, this happened after I was awarded the Padmashree and the Caritas Millennium award.

enough to merit this punishment. So, there was no sense of guilt to explain the reason for cancer.

But did religion at least help me to cope with the stress caused by my suffering? Once again, it did not. Apart from the psychological and mental stress caused by cancer, the after effect of every one of the 15 chemotherapy sessions I went through was physically stressful. Loss of appetite and extreme restlessness which made it difficult for me to remain in one place demanded much from the family. It was my family, friends from all religions and the poor with whom I had worked in Myrada who helped me to cope. My family, especially my wife Dipika, bore the main burden; the eldest daughter Dipti moved in to help full time; it was a 24/7 operation. Friends from whom I had not heard for many years, called and visited to provide support. The flood of messages from Myrada staff as well as from people in Myrada's projects was overwhelming; they came from all religions and castes. Requests from members of Self-Help Groups and Sex Worker's Groups (organised by Myrada to prevent their exploitation and to provide alternative livelihoods) to visit me in person were many - some from as far away as Gulbarga. I had to insist that the Doctors advised that there should be no visitors as I was weak and vulnerable; but yet some came; it kept me going. Food was sent in abundance which I could not enjoy, so it was re-distributed, adding to the experience of sharing and support; it was these social circles of people around me, not religion, which helped me to cope with the stress resulting from cancer and the treatment that followed.

My cancer, in a way, was a blessing in disguise; it brought out the best in people and helped me to realise my many weaknesses. During my illness I came in contact with several people who suffered from cancer, many of them had lived far more abstemious lives than I did. So as a last resort I found some comfort in asking not "why me", but rather "why not me"; after all I did not enjoy any privilege to be excluded from cancer. Not a satisfactory answer, I agree, and one which did not provide closure, but it is the only one at present.

But my friends comment that I was suffering because I could have done more to help people, but did not, struck a chord. Yes, I had to balance between my responsibilities to the family and the call to pursue my life's mission. I could not achieve a balance during the early years (mid and late

1980s). Myrada took up all my time. My family comprised my wife Dipika and three children, two of them Dipti and Ashish came into this world before Dipika was widowed, the third, Niharika, was ours. We loved and looked after all three equally. But it was a challenge which Dipika faced alone. I did spend time with Ashish and Niharika while we lived in New Delhi, while Dipti spent most of the time with her grandparents in Gorakhpur where she went to school; she joined us during holidays. But after we moved to Bangalore in 1982, Myrada left me with little time or energy to devote to the family till the late 1990s.⁵

Then in the early 1990s financial demands from the family increased. I had to earn some extra income. What Myrada could provide me was enough, but did not allow that little extra that a family needs, as it expands its activities and pursues new avenues of interests. Fortunately, my passion for being involved in development work turned out to be a profession, for which I was equipped both by my studies and by my experience. IFAD, the World Bank and UNDP offered me short consultancies. This enabled me to earn some extra income which kept the family happy. They also provided me with the opportunity to integrate innovations that emerged in Myrada into programs supported by these organisations in Myanmar, Timor Leste, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, several countries in Africa and states in India. On several occasions Myrada staff accompanied me.

I also realised that I had to step in to broaden the circle of our acquaintances which I had inadvertently restricted to those involved in the development sector in which my family was not too interested. I had to include others who shared their interests. To open a new avenue, I accepted the offer to join the Rotary Club of Bangalore Cantonment in the mid-1980s. This Club had members from all over the country, many from the north with whom Dipika could relate; Niharika also found a new circle of friends. This association with the Rotary helped the family forge new relationships which went deep and have lasted till today. My association with the Rotary Club, as well as the time I devoted to consultancies, did subtract from the

⁵ To illustrate now divorced I was from family affairs; Dipika likes to recall the experience when she asked me to pick up Niharika from school one day as she had to come home early. I had no idea in which class she was and thinking that classes were over, shouted her name from the quadrangle; but classes were still in progress. I went through a rather embarrassing ten minutes with the principal who fortunately was an old friend.

energy and time I could have devoted to the poor in Myrada's projects. From this aspect, my friend's accusation that I could have done more, did carry some weight. But this did not create a sense of guilt in me, because there were other 'mitigating' aspects which also have to be taken into consideration; let me explain.

Just before moving to Bangalore from Delhi, I spent a few days along with others who shared similar aspirations in the Paunar Ashram of Shri Vinobha Bhawe. At the end of our short retreat, we took the following resolutions and shared them with Vinobhaji who blessed them: i. We will not involve or recruit any family members in our organisations; ii. We will ensure that our families are reasonably well looked after, as they may have to bear the consequences of our career choices in the development sector where remuneration is low; this may require us to ask our respective Boards for permission to undertake consultancies for short periods; iii. Our take-home cash component of our salaries would not exceed three times our driver's salary. I observed these resolutions throughout my position as Executive Director of Myrada for 28 years; when I retired in 2010, my take-home salary was Rs. 25,250/-.

It was during this retreat in Paunar that I took on the mission to raise one million poor people above the poverty line in a sustainable manner. This target was achieved with the help of a dedicated team in Myrada. These three resolutions together with my decision to return to India from the UK in 1987 and later from the World Bank to Myrada in 1996, since my successor decided to resign after a year in office, assured me that I had done my best, given the circumstances. I had no sense of guilt, for not having done more.

Why did Ashish who lived in Vancouver, Canada, pass away so early at the age of 47 when his children were still studying and just when he was doing so well in life? In this case, there were verifiable reasons which carried sufficient weight; therefore, it was not necessary to have recourse to the social role of religion to find answers. He was not guilty in any way; he did not do anything in excess and had no bad habits; he had no oversized ambitions which lead to overdrive and tensions, neither did his wife or family put any demands on him. All he wanted, he once told me, was a family well settled, his children provided with the best education he could afford and a loving and contented atmosphere at home.

But in his position, work kept him fully engaged, travelling all over Canada and America. There surely was work stress. He did have health issues; he had a herniated disk in his lower back which was causing him severe pain for several months. The public health system in Canada could not attend to him in time and in a more holistic manner. He finally had recourse to the private system, but that was not holistic enough to provide him with adequate information on the overall status of his health; it focused on the immediate problem related to his back for which he had approached the Doctors. Subsequent investigations showed that he had narrowing of his major arteries. Had he been adequately warned, it could have been attended to in time. He passed away suddenly while on work in the Province of Alberta from a massive heart failure in the hotel. Had he come to India for treatment, he would have been attended to immediately and in a more holistic manner; timely action would have been taken to address the problem with his arteries. He was planning to come to India for treatment, but he was not able to take leave till the end of the year, before which he passed away. But though life did not give him all the breaks that it gave me, he took ample care to provide for his family; his insurance policies almost covered the cost of his home and he had planned support for his children's education.

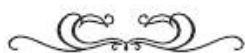
Whether I have one life only or go through several is not a matter that demands my attention; hence there is no place for the social role of religion which rewards or punishes or for a God who is a judge. The proponents of both scenarios offer no evidence that paradise exists or that we are reborn; they base their positions on faith and on philosophies that try to throw light on various issues in order to give meaning to our lives. The arguments they offer that a Supreme Being exists, however, do strengthen my belief in such a being which is responsible in some way for the orderly behaviour of various components of this universe. Perhaps in another age and in another period in the future, there may be adequate evidence to challenge this position. But for now, I accept it, as it helps to explain the rational order around me. I hesitate to pin a picture on this supreme being. Religions have pinned a picture on this Being in order to relate with the general public – usually a male in the Abrahamic religions and both male and female in Hinduism.

One final comment to end this Chapter. In the three Abrahamic traditions, God is clearly presented as a judge who rewards or punishes us according to certain norms which he (and the institution which claims propriety over him) impose on adherents. We have one life and at the end of it, God judges our actions and rewards or punishes us. In the Karmic religions, I do not find God portrayed as a judge. In Hinduism, we have many "lives"; we have many opportunities to progress towards perfection. Each of us accumulates credits or debits which we carry over into our next life, where we reduce the debts and increase the credits (or vice versa) till we reach the perfect state which is interpreted differently in various philosophical traditions.

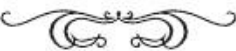
The role of God or the Supreme Being in the Karmic religions resembles that of a benevolent overseer, who helps us to reduce our debts and increase our credits through acts of generosity or obedience to certain social and religious practices. God is a mentor and guide rather than a judge. Personally, I do not believe that God governs by fear, by rewards and punishments. I am more in sync with the Karmic tradition. My friend's explanation that my suffering was in a way punishment for some bad deeds I committed in the past, did not convince me, because I no longer believed that God is a judge. It is the religious organisation that delivers judgement. God to me is a helping hand, a guide and a mentor.

I am drawn by the teaching of the Buddha who said: *"Rather than ask which is right and which is wrong, we need to ask what is the wisest and most compassionate thing to do"*. Rabia al-Basri the Sufi mystic of the 8th century, born in Basra, Iraq, said *"I love God but do not hate Satan... my love of God has so possessed me that no place remains for loving or hating anyone."* The demand to love only God and hate Satan, had no place in this set of values and beliefs. Mahatma Gandhi said, *"I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever-changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change, a Living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and re-creates."*





*Do not praise your own faith so exclusively,
That you disbelieve all others;
If you do this, you will miss much good.
Nay, you will fail to recognise the real truth of the matter.
God the omnipotent and omniscient,
Cannot be confined to any one creed.
Everybody praises what he knows,
His God is his own creature.
And in praising it, he praises himself;
Consequently he blames the belief of others,
Which he would not, if he were just;
For his dislike is based on ignorance.
Ibn Arabi (12th Century)*



With Acharya
Vinoba Bhave
in Paunar
Ashram



"History shows that flourishing civilisations degenerated and scientific innovation was choked when religions based on the claim of being the ONLY, were given a central role in society and governance. Though people in India have been deeply religious, yet the country progressed and acquired a scientific outlook because there was always a place for a new set of beliefs and practices in traditional mainline Hinduism. With the emergence and growing hold of Hindutva, however, this space has decreased; religion is beginning to play a central and defining role. For India to emerge as a major power reason has to triumph over dogma and science over superstition." (Extract from an article by the author of this narrative).

CHAPTER 3

The Vatican Council (1963-1965) sowed the seeds of a new set of beliefs which germinated later in abnormal situations; they led to new career/life changes

I dwelt on the social role of religion in Chapter 2. The insights described there were the result of my studies in the Anthropology of Religion in the University of Louvain, Belgium, in the early 1970s. I will now explain in Chapter 3 how the Second Vatican Council sowed the seeds of a new set of beliefs and practices during my studies in Pune in the early 1960s, much before I studied in Louvain.¹ These seeds nurtured the theoretical framework which helped me later, in Belgium, to identify the social roles that religions play in our lives. This framework provided the basis to question the set of beliefs and practices crafted by religion and tradition through which I had viewed reality during my early years. Hence Chapters 2 and 3 are closely related. This Chapter describes the broader context which will help to answer Question 4 which I posed in Chapter 1- *why I left the Church and the Priesthood*.

In hindsight, I realised that (ironically) my studies in philosophy and theology in the Papal/Pontifical Athenaeum, Pune, in the 1960s, had sowed the seeds of a theoretical framework of new beliefs and practices; this happened because my studies were influenced by the documents that emerged in preparation for the Vatican Council. These studies contained insights which were drawn from the Gospels and the life of Christ, but which had been suffocated by the weight of conservative tradition which dominated the Church's organisation that suppressed any questioning; it

¹ Some priests and lay people believed that the council's teachings were too liberal, others became disillusioned that its teachings were marginalised by the conservative group; I shared this feeling. Thousands of priests and nuns belonging to both groups disassociated themselves from the Church.

closed the windows to change which reality was demanding. This Council, which was a watershed in the Church's more recent history, opened several windows which let in fresh insights into theological institutions. hitherto confined to small groups of theologians mainly in Europe and South America. Some members of these small groups played a role in drafting the Council's documents. Those years had faint echoes of the Enlightenment and Renaissance.

The Council's documents influenced the teachings in several centres of learning during the 1960s; the Pontifical Athenaeum in Pune, Maharashtra, of which I am an alumnus, was one. It was staffed by Jesuit professors from several countries; some of them supported the fresh insights brought in by the Council. Students in Pune were selected from all over India. We were encouraged to question and perhaps, even to anticipate the possibility of change in some of the Church's teachings. Small groups, comprising the brightest students, began to question several accepted interpretations of history which were based on a Christian view of the world and even to look for alternatives which were rooted in Indian history and philosophical traditions. However, these insights which I gained, remained locked in or frozen between 1964 and 1968 when I was posted in the Archbishops House; it was the administrative core and the power centre which conformed to tradition. It took the experience with the refugees in 1971 to unlock them.

The culture that pervaded the Papal Athenaeum encouraged the students to focus on the messages of Jesus who challenged traditional practices which were exclusive and which vested power in small groups of religious, social and political leaders. It also encouraged students to study the writings of social reformers who were not Catholics. One of the experiences of social reform which attracted me, was the body of writings (Vachanas) by the 12th Century philosopher, social reformer and statesman, Basavanna, a Brahmin by birth, from Karnataka, the state to which I belonged. He fought against the caste system and ritual practices and advocated the equality of all human beings; he invited outcastes or "untouchables" to eat with him. His saying that 'a cow does not give milk to him who sits on his back but one who squats at her feet', is both simple and powerful; it is also very apt; it fits in with my experience that it is necessary to listen empathise and live with the poor at their level to win their trust and to understand their behaviour

and choices. These studies opened my mind to recognise in 1971, during my experience with the Bangladesh refugees, the good deeds of Hindu families living in the border villages; they welcomed the refugees who were mostly Muslim and shared what little they had with them; surely, these Hindu families too deserved a place in 'paradise'.

Both Jesus Christ and Basavanna were persecuted for their beliefs and practices which challenged the existing socio-religious-political order. Christ protested against the domination of the Roman empire. As a Jew, he would have considered the Samaritans as outcastes, if not untouchables. Yet he protested against this practice. He asked a Samaritan woman for water to drink, much to her amazement. He fought against the primacy to rituals, imposed by the Pharisees, the Jewish priests. When they brought a woman caught in adultery and asked him to keep the law of Moses which required that she be stoned, he challenged them: 'Let him who has no sin cast the first stone'. But his repartee, when the Pharisees insisted on people following religious prohibitions of certain foods was perhaps the most telling and is relevant today. He told them that what goes into a man's mouth does not make him impure; what comes out of it, is what defiles a man. A very relevant message to those who give great importance not to eat foods that they consider defiling, but are ready to spew hate and divide people. It was these actions and messages from Christ's life, highlighted in the studies which emerged in preparation for the Vatican Council which inspired me during my studies in Pune, not his gory death on the cross which is the focal point in most churches;² these powerful actions attracted young priests infused with the spirit of the Vatican Council to opt for change.

As a result, many, of us students began to question some of the official positions taken by the Church which we felt did not reflect what was happening in the Catholic community in India. One issue which was hotly debated in the late 60s and 70s was that of family planning. The Church's teaching was that family planning, using artificial means, was against God's and nature's laws; natural law prescribed that the objective of the sexual act

² Subsequently, I read extensively in Indian History which gave me insights into the richness of our tradition which has been neglected; what is put in its place is the history of the last three or four centuries when the colonial powers played a major disruptive role; much of it also has been written through their eyes. My world view kept expanding and strengthening my evolving beliefs.

was to procreate. While this position was propagated by the official church and its media in India, in most of the countries in Europe, including the Catholic ones like France and Italy, artificial family planning had long since been practised by the people; the official Church quietly looked away. Why then was the Church so insistent about imposing its position in India? To increase the number of its members?

As I wrote earlier, the seeds planted during my studies in Pune remained dormant because up to 1971 I was involved largely in administrative positions in the Archbishop's office where I dealt with files and accounts. In my position, I seldom interacted with lay Catholics, and the few with whom I did interact were the elite. I had no contact with the poor. I had no interaction with people of other faiths and did not realise the power and influence exercised by other religious and caste communities which played major roles in public life, far greater than the Church did. The file, the typewriter and the phone were my companions.

But the brief posting for a few months in St Joseph's parish in 1968-9, after my stay in the Archbishop's House (before I proceeded to the UK for studies) helped to keep me in touch with reality. The culture of questioning I had imbibed in Pune came to the surface. This experience was not disruptive (as was the experience with the Bangladesh refugees in 1971), but it led me to question the official position forbidding artificial family planning. This was the first public expression of the insights and culture which I had acquired in Pune. This is how it happened.

The whole sale market where goods were exchanged, lies on one side of St. Joseph's Church; a slum is located on the other. The men from the slum carried the head loads in the market and were paid about Rs 8-10 per day. Their families living in the slum were large - five to six children. They looked malnourished and unhealthy. On my request, some Catholic nurses from Victoria Hospital tested them and found that many had Tuberculosis (TB). They also said that the children were born with TB primaries. I did not quite understand what this meant medically, but it was enough for me to announce publicly that they should practice family planning (especially the use of condoms), which the Church strongly opposed in India. I did not think that God wanted children to be born who were unhealthy. The seeds of this questioning and the courage to call out the difference between

what was actually happening in Europe, where artificial family planning was the norm, and the teaching of the Church in India, were sown by the Vatican Council; it opened the windows to questions related to Church laws, especially those which imposed burdens on the poor.

And then in 1971, the experience of working in the Bangladesh Refugee camps brought me in close touch with a completely new world of poor people who had suffered every form of atrocity. They were dehumanised, their right to live had been stripped from them by an occupying army which used every strategy to reduce their numbers significantly so that the number of their votes were reduced. They fled to India. My involvement with the refugees in the camps changed my life. My bottled-up learnings and insights that I acquired during my studies in Pune were released. My subsequent experiences of living in the drought-hit areas of Beed District in Maharashtra and Ramnad in Tamil Nadu in 1973-74 also contributed to this release, but it was the Bangladesh refugee experience that was disruptive; I have described it in detail in Chapter 7. These experiences brought out the differences between my set of beliefs and practices and what was actually happening on the ground. Vatican 2 gave me these insights and the courage to express them as well as to seek a solution to close the gap.

As a Priest I was required to keep at a distance from 'worldly' affairs; in practice this meant that I had to confine my interests to the affairs of the church and promote and protect its interests. Disasters, however, affected a large ecosystem, within which the Church usually had a very minor presence. The people affected, adhered to several religious traditions; the majority, by far, being Hindu. The work during and immediately after disasters required that volunteers, including Priests and religious figures, had to be immersed in this ecosystem which was characterised by diversity. This experience was challenging and even disruptive, depending on the scale of impact. It was particularly 'disturbing' for those who tried to reconcile their set of beliefs and practices originating from a traditional religious upbringing with the actual situation of people, especially the poor and those affected by these ab-normal situations. Reconciling this dichotomy was not a challenge in normal situations; it was very disturbing in situations which were ab-normal.

I was one of those who was 'disturbed'. The experience of 1971 together with my involvement in other disasters, held up reality in ab-normal situations to entrenched and traditional beliefs and practices. Tradition and faith had hitherto protected my set of beliefs from the changing world of reality which the official church considered to be "secular" and a major threat to its ecosystem. Several Pope's have identified secularism as the major threat to Catholicism in Europe; they assumed that acknowledgement of reality would contaminate the religious ecosystem and weaken its official institutions. New streams of theology, like those which originated in South American countries, challenged this isolation.³ They brought reality into the rarefied atmosphere of theological classrooms; they also had an influence of the teachings of the Vatican Council. I discovered, from my experiences of war and disasters, that the 'secular' also contained the 'sacred'; one had to shed the garbage accumulated over the years to 'see' the sacred. One could practice several values that religious leaders promoted, like supporting the rights for the poor, without being affiliated with any official religious organisation. I also discovered that being immersed in the reality of the changing world was to live a more holistic and creative life, with far more opportunities to fulfil my life's mission of working with the poor and marginalised.

I realised, that if I had to respond fully to reality as I now saw it, I had to change my set of beliefs. I had to move from tolerance of other sets of beliefs to respect, and from respect to empathy with the poor and those who suffered from disasters. Empathy went beyond tolerance and even respect for these groups; it led me to share their beliefs and practices.⁴ This process was disruptive; it challenged the set of beliefs based on religion and tradition which had guided me since childhood; a new set of beliefs and

³ The new streams of theology, some emanating from South America like the Theology of Liberation led by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez O.P defined the poor as people who are invisible and had no rights; this shift from a charity to a rights approach in poverty alleviation strategies had a significant impact on the understanding of 'secularism'. Another stream under the broad name of Ecumenism opened the windows to promote respect for other religions; this went beyond tolerance, which was the official position of the Church.

⁴ An attitude of tolerance considers other religions as inferior and even 'evil'; they are tolerated until such time as they can be contained and even suppressed with the help of political power. Respect accepts other religions. Empathy goes beyond respect to shared beliefs and practices.

practices emerged. The transition was not easy, as I was firmly entrenched in the official organisation of the Church which was driven by its own organisational priorities.

After the disruptive experience of 1971, the seeds sown by the Vatican Council's teaching in the 1960s started sprouting; they took on more visible forms like questioning the Church's teaching on family planning and even the fundamental belief on which the Catholic religion is based, namely, its belief that it is the *ONLY* path to God/salvation/paradise. I wrestled with these differences between my set of beliefs and the teachings of the Church between 1972 and 1976. I tried to relate them to my life as a priest holding a reasonably high position in the Church's organisation. In this position I could not express these differences publicly.

Unable to reconcile these differences with my position in the organised church, I left the Church's organisation (which to me was Caritas India) in 1976 and then the Priesthood in 1977, in that order. Having lost my faith in the Church's teaching and organisational priorities, leaving the Priesthood was a logical consequence, as a Priest represents the Church's beliefs and is obliged to promote its teaching. After leaving the priesthood, I was no longer bound by the Church's requirements of a priest namely celibacy, obedience and fidelity to its teachings.

Many lay Catholics do not quite grasp my position, as they continue with practices which the Church forbids, yet take part in religious ceremonies and receive holy communion and are today considered good Catholics. For example, a lay Catholic who practices artificial family planning, which is contrary to the Church's teaching, still continues to receive the sacraments and to take part in religious ceremonies. A Priest however would not be able to promote or publicly support artificial family planning; he would be reprimanded if he did. A lay person may also believe that non-Catholics will attain salvation; but a Priest cannot be true to his calling if he believes this; he would be reprimanded if he preaches it. After 1971 I did not believe that my religion possessed the key to heaven. Therefore, to remain a Priest would require a high degree of faith which could insulate my beliefs from reality. But the reality of an abnormal situation was too strong for faith to overcome, especially if there were seeds that questioned traditional beliefs. I could not live with this dichotomy. My internal cohesion was 'disturbed'.

I, however, did not take any initiative to explain this to Catholics who attributed my leaving the Priesthood to my subsequent marriage. My career choices were guided by the beliefs and practices as they changed due to my involvement in several ab-normal life experiences; this helped to reduce the gap between my career choices and my set of beliefs and practices and to strengthen my internal cohesion.

A brief explanation of the Catholic Church's official position towards other religions is in place here. The belief that it is the ONLY path to salvation is a basic tenet from which the Church's claim to have the right to propagate its beliefs, is based. Before the Vatican Council, the public position of some theologians changed from rejection of other religions, to one of tolerance. This change was triggered by the Renaissance and Enlightenment, accompanied by the development of science and medicine. This change was also an effort to adjust to changing power relations; the Christian colonial powers (especially Spain, Portugal and France) could no longer impose their own set of beliefs on others, and had to 'tolerate' them in order to protect their commercial interests.

When the Second Vatican Council started, tolerance of other religions defined the approach of most theologians; the conservative core however held that non-Christian religions were "false" or even 'evil'. Respect for adherents of other religions, which went further than tolerance, was restricted to small groups in forward-thinking theological institutes; but it did find a way into debates and meetings which were held during the Vatican Council. As a result, the Vatican Council opened the door to an approach of respect for other religions. Though not accepted in formal or official Church institutions, this position of respect for other religions paved the way for a few theologians specially of major Religious Societies to enter into a dialogue with other religions after the Vatican Council. Several Professors in Pune accepted this change from tolerance to respect. They believed that Dialogue which dominated the approach to other Christian denominations in the context of 'tolerance' is empty posturing by one party, as it is based on the position that the result would be the acceptance of Papal authority by other Christian groups. They held that it is only respect for one another that can underpin genuine dialogue and carry it forward; but this position would require changes from both sides, not only from one.

Respect for other religions, however, set off alarm bells in official Church circles, since it opened the door to a position which accepted that other religions could also be paths to “salvation”. Respect for other religions, expectedly, was severely opposed by the inner circle of the Catholic institution – the Curia together with the Clergy; as a result, it never made progress. Yet the lay people seemed ahead of the Clergy. I interviewed several Catholics in the early 1990s. All of them said that they believed that people outside the Catholic Church could also be saved; in fact, many were emphatic about this. However, they did not express their opinion openly as they were not asked for it! In general, most lay Christians in India have little interest in or concern for matters of theology or even of governance in Christian Churches; Kerala, perhaps, is an exception. The social role that religion plays in important events in their lives like birth, marriage and death and the benefits that the Church’s educational and medical institutions provide are far more important in their daily lives than questioning some remote theological issue which places them in an adversarial position with the Church organisation.

In the late 70s, the empire struck back. The windows opened by the Vatican Council were gradually closed over the following 20 years. Respect for other religions returned to tolerance at best. The more traditional practices which were changed after the Council were re-established. Let me give three examples. Interfaith marriages (mainly Hindu-Christian), for example, were integrated into official liturgical ceremonies, like the Mass, for several years after the Vatican Council; this was a sign of ‘respect’. But this was changed; the marriage ceremony was kept apart from the official Mass. Such marriages could no longer be held during the official liturgy, the Mass, as was the practice in several Dioceses, after the Vatican Council. They were now to be held before the Mass started. The Mass was an official liturgical ceremony; inter-faith marriages were ‘tolerated’ if the non-Catholic party did not agree to convert or the Catholic party did not ask for it. Hence the marriage rites had to be separated from the Mass and performed before the Mass started, not as part of it, as is the marriage ceremony between two Catholics. In many Churches after the marriage ceremony (during which the couple were placed near the altar), the inter faith couple had to join the community once the mass started. They no longer were given a special

place in front of the altar in two decorated pews/seats during the Mass as given to a Catholic couple.

The second example is that of the position of Caritas Institutions in the Church's organisational ecosystem. Caritas is registered as a Society in most countries with a Catholic population. It is the official relief and development organisation of the Catholic Church. I worked for Caritas India, as Deputy Director, for five years in the early 70s. Internationally, Caritas flourished after the Vatican Council; it professionalised its staff; lay men and women with experience and qualifications were brought into higher management positions. Each country's Caritas was free to decide when and where to respond to disasters. Caritas Internationalis, the head headquarters in Rome played only a co-ordinating role. In the field, Caritas worked closely with local governments in the disaster areas irrespective of their ideology or religion. The Caritas network kept a certain distance from the official Church.

This situation began to change in the late 70s and gathered steam thereafter. Laymen and women in senior positions of Caritas were marginalised, permission to respond to disasters had to be obtained from the official Church administration in Rome and of course other considerations also influenced this decision, not only the disaster; senior Caritas positions in each country had to be cleared by Rome. The green shoots nurtured by the Vatican Council were trampled upon.

In this context, I wonder how many Catholics realised the implications of the change in the response to the greeting: "The Lord be with You" offered by the Priest during Mass. The response after the Vatican Council was: "And with YOU also", signifying that the Church was concerned about the entire person, both body and soul. This response was changed to: "And with your Spirit", in the 1990s or thereabouts; this signified that it was the soul/spirit which was the major concern of the Church; Caritas which looked after the 'body' was downgraded.

I left the priesthood and the Church in 1976-77 just as the windows started closing. I realised that it would be healthier psychologically to find my own path, write my own Bible, as it were, rather than to struggle to

reconcile my new set of beliefs with the official teachings of the Church. As Co-Editor of the official magazine of Caritas India called *Seva Vani* and Secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference (additional positions I held while I was Deputy Director of Caritas India), I could see a divergence growing between what I stood for and the position of the official Church. The effort to cope with this internal conflict was destroying my inner cohesion. I have seen other priests in a similar situation; by the time they left, they were shattered and unable to cope with the demands of a regular life in society. Many of them later remarked that I was able to achieve what I have done, because I left before I deteriorated into a similar situation. In hindsight, I would agree.

I did not criticise the Church because I realised that it plays several important social roles in the lives of Catholics. I left respecting the Church for the work many of its institutions are doing for the poor and challenged, but I could not accept its teachings. I realised that it would be healthier psychologically to find my own path. This parting, I guess, was achieved with some degree of mutual respect. I say this with some confidence, because Caritas India awarded me with the Caritas Millennium Award in 2000, twenty-five years after I left the priesthood. This award was given to me in a ceremony attended by several Bishops. Some years later I was selected to be on a panel of three that interviewed several candidates (all priests) for the post of Director of Caritas India.



Pope John XIII who was responsible for convoking the Vatican Council had to face opposition from officials of the Curia (secretariat) as they apprehended that it would open the windows for change. It is reported that when a Vatican official told the Pope that it would be "absolutely impossible" to open the Council by 1963 he replied: "Fine, we'll open it in 1962 ". These officials also told him prior to the Council that all the papers had been prepared by them; hence (implying) no further debate was required. The Pope responded that the Holy Spirit would guide the Bishops in Council and therefore all the papers prepared would be open to discussion and reviewed/changed based on consensus.



PART -2

**A HISTORY OF MY CAREER/LIFE CHANGES AND THEIR
CONTEXT; THEY CHANGED IN ORDER TO BE MORE IN
SYNC WITH MY EVOLVING SETS OF BELIEFS. (THIS PART
MAY HELP TO ANSWER THE EIGHT QUESTIONS I POSED IN
CHAPTER 1.**

CHAPTER 4

A brief history of my early years which set the stage for my entry into the Priesthood. (*My response to question 1 posed in Chapter 1.*)

PART 1 traces the process that planted the seeds for change in my set of religious beliefs. I explained in Chapter 1, how the questions raised by my friends and a search for answers led me to dig deeper into my life which was dominated by religion and tradition. In Chapter 2, I described the social roles that organised religions play. In Chapter 3, I explained the insights I gained during my studies in Philosophy and Theology in Pune and how the Vatican Council opened the windows for fresh thinking to enter traditional religious Institutions. I also described how this 'opening up' gave students the confidence to bring reality into the equation and to question traditional religious beliefs and practices imposed by the Church which were not in sync with what was happening on the ground. I also described how these insights were seeds that sprouted during my involvement with ab-normal situations. Had I not been involved in such situations, these seeds, perhaps, would have withered and died.

Those who read these Chapters will have mixed reactions. This is not surprising. They are bound to be mixed, since each one will view my interpretation of events through his/her own set of beliefs and practices. It is not easy to suspend "faith" while reading Chapter 2; but it is required. The social role that religion plays in each one's lives, influences the tenor of one's reactions to this request to suspend faith. I make no apologies for the decisions I took to change my career choices or for my explanation as to why I made these decisions. Having explained the beliefs which guided my life, I am now in a position to respond to the questions I raised in Chapter 1. The first was: "Why did I become a Catholic priest attached to the Bangalore Archdiocese?" A description of the ecosystem within which I grew up in my early years may help to answer this question.

I was born in 1939 in a Goan Catholic family with a long tradition of giving one son or daughter to the Church. My maternal Grandfather had migrated to Burma (Myanmar) around 1905 or so after his studies in Goa and Pune. In Burma, he was employed in Burmah Oil, a British Company. He had two sons and a daughter, my mother Mary Ann. One of his two sons named Aloysius drowned in the Irrawaddy River while on a picnic. The other son, Frank Lobo, settled in Da Costa Layout, Bangalore after he retired; he has three sons, Mario, Anthony and Linus. By the 1930s, my maternal grandfather owned a large property in Syriam, Burma; he built two houses; one he gave to my mother, on her marriage. In his large property he planted a grove of cashew trees (I guess from seeds he brought from Goa); they still existed when I visited in 2000. I was told that he distilled feni for home consumption. This brief history will largely cover my association with my mother's family, since I had very little contact with my father's parents after they returned from Burma also as refugees and settled in Aldona, Goa. I did visit them occasionally between 1942 and 1945/6 when I lived in Goa with my maternal Grandparents in Paliem, near Ucasaim.

Unfortunately, the second world war which led to the invasion of Burma by the Japanese turned the families of my mother and father into refugees. They had to leave everything behind in 1941 and return to Goa. They managed to catch the last ship to Calcutta in 1941, thanks to my father's efforts, from where they proceeded to Goa. My father had to stay back in Syriam to demolish the oil refinery where he worked, so that it would not fall into the hands of the invading Japanese. He and others from the Company were evacuated separately. They were later absorbed by the Anglo Persian Oil Company, a subsidiary of Burmah Oil and were posted in Abadan, Iran.

My maternal grandfather's ancestral property was located in the village of Paliem next to Ucasaim, about 6 km from Mapusa. My grandfather was the eldest of four brothers. One was employed by the British Government in Uganda, one worked in Bombay and the youngest lived on the ancestral property. We also had the traditional right to live in the ancestral homestead. I was told that my grandfather and the family, during their stay in Burma, visited the ancestral home in Paliem, Goa, regularly for family events and the village feast. The men also came to collect their "Jonn" or Zonn (Jonos

in Portuguese).¹ Surrounding the house were several acres of orchards and upland paddy for consumption and, further away in the valley where water was more plentiful, paddy for the market was grown during the monsoons and vegetables in winter.

My father's parents also had to leave Burma when the war broke out; they settled in their ancestral village Aldona, in Goa, where they passed away. My father had two brothers and a sister. His youngest brother named Joseph became a Priest in Burma. He stayed back in Burma during the Japanese occupation and was imprisoned for several months. When he was released, he was a shadow of himself, and was sent to stay with us after we moved to Robertsonpet, KGF, in 1945/6, to recoup his health. Against everyone's advice, he returned to Burma and took Burmese citizenship. From my father's family, two became Priests (including me) and one a nun. My Father's family outpaced my mother's in contributing its members to the Church.

My father was also employed in Burmah Oil Company, in Syriam, Burma, after graduating from the company's in-house technical training institute. He played a major role in the demolition of the Oil Installations of the Refinery in Syriam, Burma, to prevent them from falling into the hands of the invading Japanese, for which he was awarded. He remembers vividly that during this operation, Japanese paratroopers landed in the premises of the Oil Refinery and were summarily shot; he kept a piece of a parachute of one of them for years.

From Burma, my father was transferred to the Anglo Persian Oil company in Persia (Iran) and was posted in Abadan (Ibadan). My mother also left to join my father in Abadan, fully confident that I would be very well looked after by her parents and her mother's spinster sister. From Abadan, my father took up a position in the early 1950s with Assam Oil Company which was owned by Burmah Oil Company; he was posted in Digboi at the northernmost tip of Assam where the oil refinery was located. My brother, Raymond, was born there.

¹ This is a dividend which Gaonkars/Zonkars get from the Comunidade to which they belong. The original inhabitants of the village (Gaonkars) own the public land by way of shares which is rented out for cultivation and habitation. The dividends are distributed to the Gaonkars male successors.

I spent about 4-5 years in Goa in Paliem, Ucassaim and started schooling in Bastora. Eunice who later married George Da Costa, the owner of Da Costa Layout and Square, lived close to us and often accompanied me to school. We shared the quiet village life but without all the amenities and social life that my grandfather was accustomed to in Syriam, Burma. My Grandfather also had no respect for the Portuguese and believed that as long as they were in Goa, it had no future. He decided to move out and made a visit to Belgaum where many Goans had settled in those days. During his visit, he happened to meet with a friend, also a refugee from Burma, who had settled in Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) about 120 km from Bangalore) who told him that it was a booming place. My grandfather used to joke that what finally made him decide to move to KGF was his friend's information that 12 eggs cost one anna.

We moved to KGF and rented an apartment in the Sigamony building in Robertsonpet which was then a small town about 5 to 6 kms from the gold mining area. A few years later my grandfather purchased a single house on the 5th cross Road. I do not recall much about my grandfather; but I do remember that he smoked cigars, which he said were from Madurai. When his friends asked him why he loved cigars he replied: 'Because I am told that women roll them on their thighs'! He was also a good money manager. He once told me after he gave me some pocket money that he would first save a part of his income and only then spend the remaining; he advised me to do the same. I have respected this advice all my life. He went daily to Church for the early Mass; I heard he often woke up the Priest in charge. He passed away in Robertsonpet. My grandmother passed away soon after him. Both are buried in the cemetery in KGF, which partly explains my nostalgia for the place.

Robertsonpet was the shopping and business centre which catered to the families who worked in the mines and to the other residents of the locality. These included families involved in retail business, trade, moneylending and several retired families, mainly Anglo Indians and Tamilians who had held posts in the mines; some of them had started small businesses.

The employees in the mines were accommodated during their working life in the mining area. Europeans were accommodated in large independent bungalows; Anglo Indians in both smaller bungalows and row houses

while the workers were housed in huts which had considerable space around them as a homestead. I mention the large homestead because I was very happy to see recent developments in these homesteads. After years of hardship following the closure of the mines, the mining families have found employment in and around Bangalore. With money flowing in, and after the Government gave them ownership of their homestead, they have built pucca homes and extended them in the homestead. Many travel daily by train to Bangalore. Most of the Anglo-Indian families have migrated to other countries where they have excelled in sports; most of them nurture their ties with India and visit often.

I, however, did not forget the hardships and risks that the underground workers (all from Tamilnadu) had to face. This was a major reason why as Executive Director of Myrada, I took the lead in setting up a project to resettle miners who opted to shift to agriculture on dry lands which the Mining authorities allocated. Myrada's project based in Kamasamadram close to KGF was the result. Unfortunately, because the management of the mines withdrew, after the first village was established, the project had to change its target group; it expanded to cover hundreds of villages; the target group is now the rural poor.²

The leading English medium school in the area was located in the mining area of Oorgaum. It catered to the Europeans and Anglo Indians from the mining community. We stayed in Robertsonpet which was about 6 kms from the school. The only other family in Robertsonpet with whom my grandparents and grandaunt related in the first few years, because they were Konkani speaking, were the Saldhanas. Dr. Saldhana was a dentist and had a clinic in Robertsonpet. His son Linus and I were the first "Indians" to be admitted into the mining school in Oorgaum. The principal of the school was a British lady called Miss Parkinson who wore a long grey coat. She too lived in Robertsonpet and commuted to the school every day in a custom-built tonga (horse-driven cart) designed in such a way that she

² This first village which we called Srinivasanagara in remembrance of a Forest officer Srinivas who was killed by a member of the gang of the brigand Veerapan, is today an example of successful development of waste land. It is a green oasis, an example of people's efforts and a strategy that promoted 'self-help'. We selected it for the official visit of the Queen of the Netherlands who expressed a desire to visit a watershed program and micro finance.

could sit facing the rear with a footrest well placed. My grandparents and Dr. Saldhana soon persuaded her to take Linus and me to school in her tonga. We sat facing the front. The other passengers were her two pet dogs. She was a firm but caring principal and I enjoyed school life.

When Miss Parkinson retired, the new principal – Mr. Jonas who used the cane more often than necessary - organised a school bus from a company which was also based in Robertsonpet. This bus picked up students from Robertsonpet first and then made two other trips to pick up students from the mines. In the evening, the mining students were dropped off first. This gave those students from Robertsonpet ample time before and after school for games on the school campus. My grandparents found this a waste of time. Meanwhile, they had arranged for me to study music and to play the violin. The music teacher-one Mr. DaCosta- visited our house twice a week. Daily practice was in order. Music together with homework required time which the bus schedule did not allow. My grandparents decided to buy me a cycle so that I could leave later to school and return earlier. But there were no cycle shops in Robertsonpet. Dr. Saldhana decided to take me to Bangalore to purchase one. We bought it from a shop at the corner of a road parallel to Commercial Street which I think still functions. Thereafter I cycled to school and back and had ample time for homework and music lessons.

Tamil was taught in school as a second language. This helped me later as a Priest since the two parishes to which I was posted for brief periods, were largely Tamil speaking. Other optional subjects included bookkeeping; the famous textbook of Batliboi was used, which I opted for. This turned out to be useful in my later avocations especially as Secretary to the Archbishop of Bangalore and in the Bangla Desh Refugee operation.

Being the youngest in the class and shorter than the other boys, I was often subjected to bouts of bullying. So, my grandparents decided to send me to a gymnasium to learn martial arts. This was in the early 50s. This experience gave me some confidence to stand up when I was bullied; I used my training only on one occasion when I got the better of a lad taller than myself. I patted myself on the back. Later I discovered that he was recognised to be a “sissy” by all others; it surely deflated my ego.

In 1953 I completed Std 9, the final year in school, and was set to appear for the Senior Cambridge Exam. The exam was held in a large hall in Bishop Cotton's School Bangalore. The school in KGF, where I studied, had an understanding with St. Joseph's European High school (now Boys High school) in Bangalore which also prepared students for the Senior Cambridge. I'm not sure, but we were probably registered for the exam as students of St Joseph's. We had to come to Bangalore a month or two before the exam and stay as boarders in St Joseph's. We marched daily during the exam from St Joseph's to the examination hall in Bishop Cotton's. The invigilators walked up and down the examination hall from time to time. It surprised me that their shoes made a noise, which could be heard from some distance, when I expected them to creep on you unawares. Some years later I met one of them in Canada and mentioned this to him. He surprised me by saying that they were not expected to creep on a student writing an examination unawares. The noise from their shoes was deliberate; it was intended to indicate their approach. Those were different days.

During these years, while I was in school, my maternal grandmother and her spinster sister (my grand aunt) played a major role in my life. My grandaunt woke me up in the morning, took me to church, when it was my turn to be a server at Mass, walked every day to the school in the afternoon with my lunch and supervised my studies. After I finished my Senior Cambridge in 1953, she accompanied me by train all the way to Digboi (at the northernmost part of Assam) where the Oil refinery was located, to visit my parents; this journey took almost a week. The part between Calcutta and Digboi was particularly difficult. We had to change trains several times and even walk long distances to change from one train to the other. We returned by air; an experience which was perhaps more harrowing. We were given blankets as the plane climbed and there were a few goats in the rear.

My mother spent most of the years between 1947 and 1953 with my father in Abadan (Ibadan), Persia; she came to Robertsonpet periodically to be with me for a few months. She was a good pianist, had an excellent singing voice, assisted in all events organised in the area especially by the local community and Parish Church. She was a good organiser, gave attention to detail - all in all, my model. As my wife Dipika said: "Had she half the opportunities available today, she would have been high up the corporate ladder."

I remember one event organised by the Parish Church in Robertsonpet where there were a number of stalls with food, competitive games, lucky dips and above all the popular lucky arrow. This was a large round table marked with numbers on which prizes were placed. There was an arrow at the centre which was spun around. The winner was the one who had placed his or her ticket on the number where the arrow stopped. One of the prizes was a cricket bat which caught my eye. My mother jokingly told me that it was placed in box no. 13 which was, in popular belief, an unlucky number and so the chances of the arrow stopping there were slim, but “go ahead” she said, “have a try”. I promptly cast my ticket on no. 13. The arrow did not oblige. After a few rounds, I tried number 13 again. The arrow agonisingly crept closer and closer, but from a distance, it looked like it had stopped on the line dividing 12 and 13. The Referee judged that it was 13. I got my bat. I later told my mother what I had done and added that the arrow had stopped on the line between 12 and 13 but that a gust of breeze had pushed it to 13! My mother had a laugh and above all was appreciative. This was the first time that I challenged popular beliefs; but it was not to be the last.³

Given this situation, I spent very little time with my mother between the ages of 7 and 14. Though my grandparents and grandaunt overwhelmed me with their love and care, I did miss my mother. I cannot deny that her absence left a void. I have one poignant memory of her departure which still lingers. After her visits to KGF, on her return to Persia, we always accompanied her by train to Bangarapet (then Bowringpet) from where she took the train to Madras (Chennai). One of the lasting images in my memory is of our return from Bowringpet, when both trains rolled out of Bowringpet station together; they ran parallel for about 1-2 kms and then gradually drew apart as the Madras train curved away at a higher speed with my mother in it, wrenching her way. It took me a long time to pull myself together. After all, to share an anonymous quote “Of all relations you make in your life, the relation with your mother is always nine months more”.

³ In western christian culture Number 13 is considered unlucky because there were thirteen people present at the Last Supper before Christ was arrested and taken away by the authorities to be crucified. In Hindu Shastra, number 13 is considered lucky because it means Trayodashi -the 13th day of the Lunar fortnight. It belongs to Lord Shiva and is believed to bestow long life, peace and good fortune.

As I said earlier, I was brought up to conform to the beliefs and practices of a conservative Catholic family. Tradition and religion ruled my life which revolved around home, music (violin) and the Parish church; school life was the only outlier. It was also the family tradition, bordering on an obligation, to add to the number of the clergy in every generation. Several uncles and granduncles were priests; there were also several religious nuns. I was brought up to believe that the priesthood was the highest calling towards which I should aspire.

I joined the course in Bangalore in preparation for the Priesthood in 1954 and was selected to go to Pune for Philosophy and Theology in 1956. My father retired around 1960 and purchased a property of 4-5 acres in Whitefield with a sprawling bungalow where my parents and brother lived. My grandaunt came to live with my parents.⁴ Whitefield in the 1960s had few facilities; public transport was minimal. One had to drive to Bangalore to purchase essential requirements and for other services like medical care. My brother Raymond had to commute daily to Bangalore to attend College.

I completed the L.Ph in Philosophy and also my Theological studies in Pune and returned to Bangalore in 1963; I was posted for a few months in the Sacred Heart's Parish and then transferred to the Archbishop's House, the administrative centre of the Archdiocese, where I remained for about five years. I purchased a Royal Enfield bike and visited my parents whenever possible. The journey on motor bike from the Archbishops house on Miller's Road to Whitefield used to take about 20 minutes; today it takes about ninety.

The year 1965/66, during her stay in Whitefield, was a watershed in my mother's life. I was at this time posted as Secretary to the Archbishop of Bangalore. She discovered a lump in the breast, fortunately, in time; after surgery, biopsy indicated that it was malignant. Thanks to one of the Sisters of St. Martha's Hospital who had been my mother's teacher in the Good Shepherd Convent in Burma, she was given proper care and even taken to Vellore for radiation which left her very weak. She was a fighter and went

⁴ Whitefield was established in the late 1880s; it was a settlement of about 4000 acres donated by the Maharaja of Mysuru Chamaraja Wodeyar to Eurasians and Anglo Indians who opted to settle down and be involved in agriculture as a livelihood; it was named after D.S. White, founder of the European and Anglo-Indian Association.

through it all without a complaint. But it was clear to me that she could no longer bear the strain of managing a bungalow in Whitefield. Regular trips to Bangalore to collect provisions together with shortage of water made life difficult for her, even though we had a car. I persuaded my father to shift to Bangalore; it would also be closer to my brother's College. We identified a plot of land in Da Costa square still owned by George DaCosta; it was opposite the plot on which my uncle, (Mother's brother) had built a house after his retirement; in fact, I had helped him to identify this plot. I ensured that the house was built rapidly; my parents, brother, and grandaunt shifted to Bangalore.

Apart from my first 2 years in Burma as a child, I must have spent less than six months with my father till I visited Digboi, Assam, at the age of 14 after my Senior Cambridge. Once again from the ages of 14 to 24, I was separated since I was studying in Pune while he was in Assam. My father retired from the Assam Oil Company in the mid 1950s. He was given an extension for five years and deputed to Oil India, a public sector enterprise owned by the Government of India. He found the culture and working ethic quite different and did not remember his experience in Oil India favourably. After his stint with Oil India, he returned to Bangalore and settled in Whitefield as I mentioned earlier.

During my interaction with my father, he loved to recall his past, especially his days in Burma. He was a good football player and cricketer in his younger days and moved to Tennis and swimming as he progressed in age and to indoor games like billiards and bridge, which he played till he was 90 years. After shifting to Bangalore, he had his "Bridge Brigade" which met at the Deccan Gymkhana and in the houses of the players in rotation. I could tell from my interaction with him that he was an open and honest person. Corruption and inefficiency had no place in his life which made him a misfit in Oil India. He lived an active life in Bangalore and personally maintained all his financial and banking matters till he was 100 years old. His handwriting was steady and clear and he was never bedridden till he passed away at the age of 105. He attributed his long life mainly to his deafness!

In religious matters, he has extremely conservative. He was therefore happy that I joined the priesthood and proud that I was the Secretary of

the Archbishop. But he also reacted sharply to my decision to leave the priesthood, which he took as a personal affront as well as an insult to the family. 'How' he asked, "can I face the criticism from my Catholic friends"? Apart from what he perceived as an insult to the family, I also had the feeling that he thought that my being in the priesthood would give him some insurance or a few extra marks when he went before the Almighty for judgement. However, he did not really need any insurance; I know he passed the test with flying colours on his own merits.

My second decision which he could not accept was to marry Dipika in 1977; she was a divorcee with two children (Dipti and Ashish); she was subsequently widowed after a few years. That she was not from Goa added to his discomfiture. After we came to Bangalore, we were married by the Archbishop of Bangalore, Ignatius Pinto, according to catholic rites; he made sure that Dipika received all the Sacraments required to make her a "good" Catholic according to Canon Law. My father's reaction against my two decisions, I surmised from my subsequent interactions with him, was also related to ownership of the family property. This opinion was strengthened, when it was clear that I treated Dipti and Ashish on equal terms with Niharika, my biological child, in every matter. However, my father did give me a sum of Rs 4 lakhs in the early 1990s (which was part of the sale proceeds of a property he owned in Mira Mar, Goa) towards purchase of a plot of land in Domlur Layout Bangalore. After his demise, several shares in which I was a nominee were transferred to me. On our part, my wife Dipika decided that whatever I received from my parents would go only to our daughter Niharika; while what we earned would be divided equally among the three children.

As any parent would, my father was present when I was honoured by well-wishers (after receiving the Padmashree in 2000) on the grounds of Infant Jesus Church, Bangalore. The then Governor of Karnataka Smt. Ramadevi was the Chief Guest and Archbishop Ignatius Pinto graced the occasion. My father was also present at the function where Caritas India recognised my work by selecting me to receive the Caritas Millennium award. But what finally made my father realise that, perhaps, I had not wasted my life, was when he was treated to coffee and cake and given extra attention by the Manager of the Corporation Bank Branch in DaCosta

Layout, where he had an account. Puzzled, he asked for the reason and was informed that I was a Director of the Bank!

One story, which my father often told, merits recording here; it was about his long association with the milkman. He insisted that the cow should be brought daily to be milked before him. The milkman became his confidant. My father once complained to him that his doctor had asked him to reduce the number of eggs, he had for breakfast, from two to one. He found it difficult to comply. The milkman solved his problem by supplying him with eggs that had two yokes. He could truthfully tell the Doctor that he had obeyed.

My mother was more complex than my father. She was open to some of the changes she saw taking place in the Church. My leaving the priesthood did not affect her as badly as it did my father; she was much more concerned about keeping the family property within the immediate family. She read the newspapers daily till her eyesight failed and surprised me with her analysis of the events taking place in the country. She had a sharp mind and an excellent memory and was concerned about the poor.⁵ She had a small family, just two sons and an immediate family of her brother and his three sons and their families who lived opposite her home. With her organising skills, she could have done much more to keep this small family together. My parents lived till a ripe old age and met their medical and household expenses, they managed their resources well and did not need any financial support from their sons.

My brother Raymond was eleven years younger. He lived for a few years in Assam where I met him for the first time when I visited after my senior Cambridge examination in 1953; he was about 3 years of age at that time. He moved to K.G.F. for his studies and then to St. Joseph's High School Bangalore where he was a boarder. He graduated from St Joseph's Commerce College and is an alumnus of XLRI Jamshedpur. He joined the Karnataka State Financial Corporation from where he took early retirement to start his own business. He constructed the first floor on my parents' home where he lived. My parents arranged his marriage with Lorraine who lived

⁵ On one of my visits in the early 1990s, I told her that I was promoting goat breeding in Myrada; I described the goat as a poor person's cow. On my next visit she gave me a cheque for Rs 10,000/- to buy some goat kids for a poor family.

in Bombay. They were married in 1978. It was during a period when the relations between my family and me were at their nadir, since I had just left the priesthood. It was perhaps better for all concerned that I was away in the UK in 1978 tutoring in the Selly Oak Colleges. My brother and I did not have the opportunity to live together and develop a close relationship. After I started preparing for the priesthood in 1954, we did not meet for several years. In fact, we never lived together in the same home except for those few months when I visited Digboi, Assam, and I do not recall any correspondence between us.

Our family was closely linked to Burma and my parents often spoke of life in Syriam with nostalgia. I had the opportunity to visit Myanmar between 1997 and 2001 on three occasions under contract with UNDP. These visits gave me a peek into life in Syriam. I visited my Uncle Joseph, the Priest (my father's brother), who had retired and lived in a home for elderly people managed by the religious Sisters in Rangoon (Yangon). He kept himself busy as their Chaplain. I was happy to see that he was well looked after by the sisters and visited by a number of local people with whom he had worked in the past. I was privileged to assist him to have a cataract operation.

The wife of one of the UNDP staff posted in Yangon was Burmese; she turned out to be from Syriam where my grandparents' home was located. She was happy to see me and volunteered to take me to visit my grandfather's property. Her parents had several stories to tell about my grandparents and recalled their relationship with affection. They showed me the house in which my parents stayed. It was built by my mother's father and located in the same large compound as his home. A Government official was staying in it when I visited; he showed me the ownership documents which were in my mother's name and assured me that if she returned, she could have the house back! This may not be official policy but he was kind enough to express his personal wish. My grandfather's house, a much larger one, was still unoccupied; it remained as it was when we left Burma in 1941.

My Burmese friend told me that my grandparents (mothers' parents) sent food daily to my mother's house after she married, as my mother did not know how to cook. One day my father's mother informed them that she would be visiting. My father burnt wood in the stoves to show that his

wife had used them!! My Burmese friend then took me to see a Buddhist monk famous for reading horoscopes. He scrutinised my palms. He told me that in the next few years I would be recognised for the work I am doing - that was the happy part, but that I would also have a major family problem. Both came true. I was awarded the Padmashree in 2000 by the Vajpayee Government as well as the Caritas Millennium award without any lobbying. In 2001, Niharika, our daughter, met with a severe accident and was extremely fortunate to survive, thanks to a team of doctors led by Dr. Hemant Kalyan, to whom I will forever be grateful.

The above narrative describes my life as a young person; it was different from the lives of the young people around me. They grew up with their parents and usually in large families. As a single child brought up by my grandparents, with all the care at their command, I did feel "different"; large families was the norm in Robertsonpet. Having lunch together in the school hall, where several brothers and sisters would share their meal made me uncomfortable; I had my lunch box all to myself. Attending functions where children had their parents with them and I did not, did leave me with a sense of having to stand alone. Did this have any effect on the decisions I took in my later life? I am not a psychoanalyst to delve into this area. But, in hindsight, I realise that my early years where religion and family tradition played a major role, did guide me towards the priesthood; I was, in a way born to the priesthood, to conform to tradition. But my separation from my parents had the opposite effect; it planted the seeds of an intuition that I do not need the support of my parents to survive. It also meant that I did not require the approval of the family (or by extension of the Catholic community) in everything I did in later life. I could write my own Bible when the time came.





My parents in
Abadan, Persia
(1947)



With my mother in
K.G.F. (late 1940s)



An altar boy
in St. Teresa's
Church
Robertsonpet.
K.G. F.



The violinist
(early 1950s)

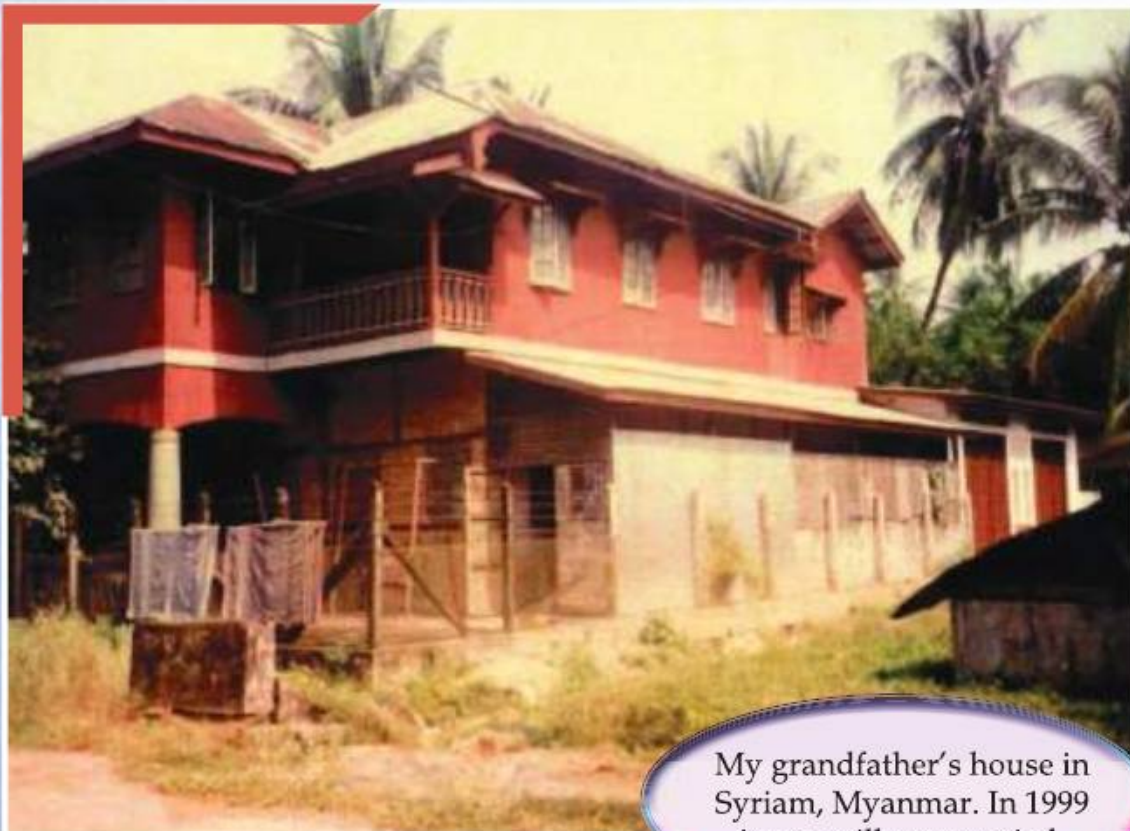


The family in
Digboi, Assam
(1953)



Tennis in
Digboi (1953)





My grandfather's house in Syriam, Myanmar. In 1999 it was still unoccupied.



My parent's house in Syriam (1999) It was occupied by a Govt. officer



The Church in Syriam. My grandfather started to build it; was extended later.



With a village
community in
Myanmar 2000



CHAPTER 5

My studies and preparation for the priesthood in Bangalore and Pune 1954-1963

My grandparents thought that the highest vocation was to join the Church. There were priests and nuns in our families for generations. I too decided that this would be my life's choice. At the age of 15, I enrolled in St. Mary's Minor Seminary in Bangalore for a short period. It was a testing ground before one took the step to start philosophy and theology which were required to qualify as a Priest. I was attached to the Archdiocese of Bangalore and belonged to a group called the Diocesan Priests. We learned Latin, local languages and scripture. In the minor seminary we were exposed to life in the Church and our superiors had a chance to assess our suitability for the priesthood. This institution was located on a large campus on Residency Road in Bangalore, where a five-star Hotel now stands.

We had a good hockey team and often competed with school teams, particularly with St. Germain's school. The most interesting feature of our matches with St. Germain's however was not the match itself. Fr. Patrick Aranjo was the Rector of St Mary's Minor Seminary, while his brother Fr Stanley Aranjo was the Principal of St. Germain's. The competition between the two, as they urged their teams forward, often drew more attention than the match. They contributed greatly to the growth of educational institutions in the Archdiocese.

After this preparatory period in Bangalore, one or two students were selected from each Diocese to continue studies in Philosophy and Theology at the Pontifical/Papal Athenaeum in Pune managed by the Jesuits.¹ The remaining students went to St. Peter's Seminary in Bangalore managed by

¹ This Athenaeum is a school of Philosophy, Theology, Canon Law and other associated subjects; it is established/approved by the Vatican; it comprised several institutions in Pune with the Papal Seminary in the lead.

the Paris Foreign Mission, which had its base in Pondicherry. I happened to be selected from Bangalore and moved to the Papal Seminary, Pune in 1955. The Papal Seminary was earlier based in Kandy Sri Lanka; it was shifted to Pune around 1950. Many of the Bishops in India appointed during the 1950s, 60s and 70s were alumni from this institution.

The Jesuits already had a major Seminary in Pune for their own students from several countries; it was called De Nobili College. The Papal Seminary was established next to it. It was managed and staffed by Jesuit priests from different nationalities to provide the best training for Diocesan Priests from India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. It was authorised to award degrees in Philosophy and Theology. When I joined Pune in 1955 there were still students from Pakistan and Sri Lanka, but only in the final years; new students from these countries had stopped coming for a few years.

The facilities for training future Priests provided by Papal Athenaeum attracted many Religious Societies like the Fransalians, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the Syro Malabar Carmelites, and others. They opened their institutions (Colleges) in the vicinity which housed their own students. The Lecture Halls, airy and terraced, as well as a well-stocked Library, were owned by the Papal Seminary. Students from all institutions attended classes together. Studying in this environment put one in touch with the students from several other Religious Societies which had opened houses on the Campus. This exposure not only gave us a broader vision but also laid the basis for future collaboration, since several of these students rose to fill senior positions in their respective institutions.

The Pune complex had all the features of a University. The Licentiate in Philosophy was conferred after a three-year course; it was recognised by several universities in India and abroad as the equivalent of a Bachelor's degree. I acquired a Licentiate in Philosophy (*magna cum laude*) in three years and a degree in Theology in four. I used it for admission directly to the MA course in the University of Karnataka, Dharwad, as well as for admission to the University of Louvain in Belgium which recognised this degree.

My stay in Pune was enjoyable and challenging. I did not feel cut off from society. As students, we led a full life involved with studies, prayer,

meditation, sports, picnics, dramatics and visits to the city of Pune for several engagements with local communities. The annual 15-day holiday in Belgaum where the students managed the program (and the budget) was a memorable event in our lives. Our day in the seminary started with an hour of meditation followed by Mass and breakfast. Lectures began around 9 a.m. and continued till 1 p.m. The afternoons were also filled with seminars and lectures till 4 p.m. after which we spent a couple of hours on the field, playing various games and looking after the plants on the campus. This was followed by a period of study and spiritual reading till dinner at 8 pm.

There were spiritual advisers and counsellors available. We were introduced to various forms of meditation, but always based on a reading from scripture which helped us to accept what we experienced as part of God's plan. Faith played a major role in this acceptance. I continued this practice of meditation as a Priest, though after 1971 (the Bangladesh Refugee experience), its content changed. I began to focus more on analysing my daily experiences and tried to reconcile them with my set of beliefs based on religion and tradition. After 1971 the disconnect between my experiences and the set of beliefs gradually increased, I was disturbed; this disconnect grew, till I decided to leave the church and subsequently the priesthood.

The Seminary also provided us with the framework for a lifestyle which would support our priestly life. A major feature of this was celibacy. To build a foundation for celibacy, the Seminary fostered detachment on a major scale. Detachment from what was known as "worldly pleasures"; but more correctly it was a detachment from the broader world outside, encompassing not just worldly pleasures but also emerging social and political trends and opportunities. The Radio and Newspapers were not allowed. The Church considered the world as 'secular'² and took steps to ensure that we were insulated from it. My life in the seminary was a continuation, so to say, of my life with my grandparents, where religion and family tradition prevailed. This detachment was fostered by a practice that did not permit us to visit our families for the first four years.

² Secularism has been identified as the major threat to Catholicism in Europe since the 1880s. A secular world was an ecosystem which undermined faith and religious practices and more importantly the hierarchical structure of the Church.

This does not mean that we were a bunch of misfits. We had time for games every day. Football, Hockey, tennis, volleyball and basketball were popular; cricket was played occasionally. There were competitive matches between colleges on the campus as well as with outside institutions. We also had matches between teams comprising students from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and European countries. We were allowed to organise "cycle picnics" to historic places and picnic spots around Pune.

Two incidents will help to illustrate that deviations, within limits, found a place in our lives. A group of us, all cricket enthusiasts, longed to hear the radio commentary on the Test matches. One of us, who had some training in electronics, rigged up a make-shift transistor set around which we gathered in his room (which was against the rules) to listen to the commentary. Of course, it could not remain a secret for long. When the Rector (Father Cyril Pereira s.j.) came to know, he just urged us not to neglect our studies. I noticed the quiet smile on his face, when he saw our makeshift transistor which seemed to say: "I appreciate your innovation, but do not push it."

Another student, much older than most of us, a Frenchman studying to be a Jesuit priest in De Nobili College, who had experienced the disruptions caused by World War 2, was the much sought-after mechanic on the campus. His room was full of spare parts and tools; books did not figure on his list of priorities. One day the Rector walked in, surveyed this situation, and asked him: "you will be graduating shortly; what am I to do with you; there isn't a book on your table? He replied, "Fr. Rector, you could make me a Rector somewhere". He also manufactured spare keys for all the bicycles in the College which were under the control of the Procurator. The Procurator was often puzzled to see his rack of keys undisturbed; but there were no cycles in the stands! The objective of narrating these two incidents (and there were heaps of others) is to show that the seminary was not a place of frustrated individuals (as one visitor thought) but a happy, healthy one. It had its limitations of course, but it was geared to train willing youth for a life of prayer, detachment, celibacy and obedience and if you were a religious, for the vow of poverty, which I did not take being a Diocesan priest.

I enjoyed my stay in Pune. Since I was already trained in western music by Mr. Da Costa during my days in K.G.F. and played the violin,

I was appointed the Choir Master for several years. We had a reasonably good choir usually in four male voices. When we joined with the Choir of De Nobili College which had students from several countries, we were in demand for concerts in Pune. Besides the violin, I also learnt to play the guitar, piano accordion and banjo, which my parents gifted me.

The courses in Philosophy and Theology were intense. Philosophy was based on the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas; but the Athenaeum also promoted the study of other schools of philosophy including those which originated in India. Shankaracharya's philosophy was popular with Professors who specialised in Indian Philosophy. I, however, was more attracted to Ramanujacharya's philosophy and actions, perhaps because he was more in sync with the common person. The course in Philosophy taught us to reason logically, to plan our discourses in an orderly manner and to question what was commonly accepted. The four years in Theology, on the contrary, required us to "suspend reason"; theology was grounded on faith. But after the course in philosophy, I found that many of the arguments put forward in Theology to prove some of the teachings of the Church were weak; they did not have the same logical framework that philosophy exposed us to; many of the theological concepts were also grounded in the past and sought to protect tradition.

Then came a surprise which jolted this traditional ecosystem. In the early 1960s, a hundred years after the First Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council (Vatican 2); it lasted from 1962 to 1965. Preparatory studies by theologians who brought in insights and placed greater stress on transformative teachings in the Gospels and in the life of Christ were in the public domain from 1961; we read these studies with enthusiasm. The objective of the Vatican 2, as stated by the Pope, was to discuss and decide/agree on doctrinal issues. This was a surprise, since many thought that with the dogma of infallibility of the Pope, pronounced in 1870 (at the first Vatican Council), no more Councils which involved all the bishops in the world to decide on doctrinal matters were needed. The first Vatican Council listed rationalism, secularism, liberalism, materialism, pantheism and modernism as major threats to Catholicism. The Second Vatican Council opened the windows of the Church to the secular world, introduced the vernacular language in official ceremonies and started a

dialogue with other religions. The result was that Vatican 2 brought some fresh ideas into teaching institutions in the Church. It was reported that when the Bishops assembled for the Vatican Council, the Pope told them that the Curia (the secretariat) had already prepared all the papers. But, he added, since the Council was open to inspiration from the Holy Spirit, they were free to cast them aside and come up with their own. This they did.

This decision of the Pope triggered a burst of theological debate in Rome and in Catholic institutions all over the world, with leading theologians finally finding a window to bring in new thinking into the system. Vatican 2 allowed enlightened Catholics to venture out of the ecosystem to which they had been accustomed. It opened the way for respect of non-Christian faiths, previously considered to be evil, at best tolerated. There was now a call, not just to tolerate other faiths but also to respect them. It also opened the door for regional languages to take the place of Latin in Church services. This was respect for diversity and was similar to what Ramanujacharya promoted when he led the initiative to conduct ceremonies in the local language instead of Sanskrit. Briefly, Vatican 2 highlighted the Church's willingness to acknowledge and relate with emerging society, to look at change as a positive development and to respond to questions from within, as indicators of possible change and not as threats. I was one of those who found these developments stimulating; to me they were the green shots of a Renaissance within the Church.

Some of the Jesuit Professors from the Papal Seminary and De Nobili College were influenced by these winds of change. We as students, suddenly discovered that we could debate some teachings which were hitherto accepted without question. We realised (perhaps prematurely and even naively) that change may be possible even in relation to beliefs which were officially held by the Church to be unchangeable since they were based on natural (God's) law. During the Vatican Council, this debate came out in the open. Several years later when conservative Popes were elected, the Church took a U-turn and clamped down on what it considered dangerous to its institutions. One of our professors in Pune, a Spanish Jesuit, was forbidden to teach by Rome.

During this period of 8 years, while I was in Pune, I was allowed to return to Bangalore only once, as this was the rule. I did not meet my parents on this occasion as they were still in Assam. I left Pune, after completing my studies, and returned to Bangalore in 1963. Fortunately, after my return in 1963, I was able to spend more time with my parents, who, by then, had settled in Whitefield, on the outskirts of Bangalore.



"The best brains of the nation may be found on the last benches of the classroom." –APJ Abdul Kalam





Papal Seminary Cricket Team, Valerian D'Souza (sitting, centre) became Bishop of Pune. There are 3 Sri Lankans



Rehearsing
the march
past



The Football Team



A picnic. Two future Bishops.
Alan deLastic (standing centre) of Kolkata and Patrick
Nair (sitting extreme right) of Meerut

CHAPTER 6

My first 5 years (1963 to 1968) as a Priest in Bangalore Archdiocese. Why I willingly left Bangalore on deputation to Caritas India . (*My response to question 2 posed in Chapter 1.*)

I was ordained a priest in 1963 in Pune and returned to Bangalore Archdiocese to which I belonged. My first posting was to the Sacred Heart's Parish on Richmond Road, where the Parish priest was Monsignor D'Souza. He was of Goan origin and about 80 years of age in 1963. His voice was powerful enough to reach every corner of the Church; he did not require a loudspeaker. People came to him for advice, consolation and often for treatment as he had been dispensing Ayurvedic medicines for many years. He brewed many of these medicines himself; the one for jaundice was the most popular. He was a highly respected Priest in the local community. The circle adjacent to the Church is named after him. His Assistant Fr Paul Kinatukara managed all Parish affairs and was responsible for purchasing the plot on which Infant Jesus Church stands. I was posted as second assistant and spent time with the youth and young industrial workers in MICO, ITI and other industries which grew into the Workers movement, which I will describe later.

Mgr. D'Souza took me under his wing when he realised that I had no idea of life in a parish which consisted largely of poor families. He shared his life experiences with me every morning at breakfast where I joined him. His experiences gave me some insight into the past history of the Archdiocese of Bangalore. He also taught me several lessons, one of which, however, did not turn out the way he planned; it deserves to be recorded because it shows his concern to mentor younger priests; besides it was unique.

I had the habit of leaving the door of my room open. It was on the first floor next to his room. He noticed this and warned me that this was tempting for people who lived from day to day. But he also noticed that there was no improvement. One day when he found the door open, he asked the Mali (gardener) to remove one box from my room. The Mali duly complied. Unfortunately, this was not a box which I used regularly. It was a mass kit from abroad which my parents had given me; it was meant to be carried along when a Priest was travelling in remote areas; it contained all the items required for celebrating Mass. But in my present posting, I did not need it. A week passed, and another, and I did not complain about the missing box. Mgr. D'Souza began getting worried and shared his concern with several older friends and Fr Paul about: "these young priests who did not know when their possessions are missing". Finally, Fr Paul, who could see that Msgr D'Souza could take it no longer, told me what had happened; he was concerned that Msgr D'Souza may fall ill, if I did not show him that I had learned my lesson. I tried to put on an act that I had missed my box. Mgr. looked relieved and ordered the Mali to return it!

After a brief stint of 6 months in the Sacred Heart's Parish, I was appointed Secretary to the new Bishop D. S. Lourdasamy who hailed from the Tamil community of Pondicherry; he was appointed as Auxiliary Bishop of Bangalore a few months earlier. He had a Doctorate in Canon Law. The first Archbishop of Bangalore Thomas Pothacamury was from Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Prior to becoming a Bishop, Thomas Pothacamury had pastoral experience as a Parish Priest in Madras and was the Editor of an official Catholic weekly, the New Leader. He was a good administrator, jovial by nature and got along well with the Tamil, Kannada and Konkani Priests and with all the Christian Communities in Bangalore. He however made it clear that Bangalore was in Karnataka; therefore, the Kannada Priests should be encouraged and trained to take over higher administrative positions, especially that of the Bishop of Bangalore. With this objective, he promoted vocations from the villages and sent these candidates for higher studies. One of them, Fr I. Anthappa, from Harobale village, went to Rome for a Doctorate and was later appointed as the Chancellor of the Archdiocese. In this capacity, he was posted in the Archbishop's House on Miller's Road where he gained experience of how the Diocese functioned. Did Thomas Pothacamury have Anthappa in mind as a potential Bishop of Bangalore? Many say: "Yes". Having worked and lived with Anthappa for

four years, I can vouch for his abilities to lead the Diocese. Unfortunately, he was overlooked in favour of another Tamilian Archbishop (Arockiaswamy) brought to Bangalore from Tamilnadu who succeeded Lourdusamy.

By 1962-63 Archbishop Thomas Pothacamury was ailing and needed constant assistance. He suffered from arteriosclerosis and had to be hospitalised in St Philomena's. I used to visit him regularly since the hospital is located next to the Sacred Heart's Church where I was posted. He had followed my progress in Pune and expressed the wish that I should go for higher studies in Rome. He expected much from me, but given his serious medical position, he had little say in the administration of the Diocese. Bishop D.S.Lourdusamy, was appointed to support him. He was more comfortable in an office and in the corridors of power of the Church than when interacting with people. He was later promoted as Archbishop of Bangalore. During my tenure of four years as Secretary to D.S. Lourdusamy, I learnt a great deal about the administrative structure of the Church.

Archbishop D.S. Lourdusamy was intelligent and extremely hardworking. He closed his office after midnight; administrative work and church affairs dominated his life. He was one of the most meticulous people I have worked with. He was always well prepared for any meeting; all his papers and files were in place and updated and his table was a picture of orderliness. He worked towards making Bangalore Archdiocese self-reliant in terms of finance, an objective I shared. He spoke Italian, German and French apart from English and Tamil (his mother tongue-) and gradually picked up a little Kannada. He was a quintessence church official- ambitious and completely loyal to the Church even when he did not agree privately to some of its positions.

I learnt how the core of the Church's organisation functions, what drives it. I understood how its bureaucracy works and gained experience in editing the official magazine and in management of accounts. My basic training in bookkeeping during my school days helped, since I had to take on some responsibilities for a short period after the sudden demise in December 1963 of the Procurator who maintained the accounts.

The Archbishop's long hours at work did not impress me, as I thought much of it could be done by others. But what rubbed off on me, was his

ambition to rise within the Church; this was a dominant motivating factor in his life. He was appointed to several Committees set up by the Pope and hence had to attend meetings in Rome regularly. Around 1969-1970 he was transferred to Rome and appointed Cardinal. He headed De Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples) where Latin was the liturgical language. This Congregation managed all the Dioceses practising the Latin Rite. He was later appointed Prefect of the Congregation for Oriental Churches. It was set up to assist the development and protect the rights of these churches which were in full communion with Rome, but practised different liturgical rites in oriental languages, not in Latin. This Congregation managed (among others) the Syrian Churches in Kerala. In India there was a tension between these two Congregations as the Oriental Churches wanted to establish Dioceses all over India especially in areas where people from the Syrian Churches had settled; the Latin Dioceses were not happy about this overlapping jurisdiction.

I learnt from several sources that Cardinal Lourdusamy lobbied to extend to these Oriental Churches, the privilege of double jurisdiction all over India. This meant that they could establish their own Diocese (administrative unit) with a Bishop, anywhere in the country. This double jurisdiction till then was restricted largely to Kerala. This did cause disruptions in the Church's organisation in India, but won him the gratitude of the Oriental Churches. I have no issue with this. What disturbed me was that, when he was Archbishop of Bangalore, he strongly opposed any step towards double jurisdiction which would have allowed the Oriental Churches to establish their own Dioceses within Bangalore Archdiocese's territorial boundaries. Why did he make a U-turn as they say?¹ Unfortunately, he suffered a serious breakdown while in Rome, which subsequently marginalised him from the corridors of power.

Archbishop Lourdusamy had the support of the French Society of Priests called the Paris Foreign Mission, which had its base in Pondicherry where he served as a Priest; he was also an alumnus of St. Peter's Seminary in Bangalore, which the Society managed. In the 19th and 20th centuries, this

¹ There are about 23 Oriental Churches in full communion with the Pope in Rome; the Syro Malabar Catholics numbering about 5 million with their base in Kerala is one; they claim to be founded by St. Thomas, one of the 12 Apostles of Jesus Christ; their liturgical language is Syriac.

Society was given the responsibility of spreading the faith in the present Tamil Nadu and parts of present Karnataka. Its members, mainly French, established several small Catholic communities and built churches in this geographical area. The Society handed over this territory and assets in stages to smaller Dioceses which were established over the years. Bangalore was one such. But the Society still managed in the 1960s, St Peter's Seminary based in Bangalore where students for the priesthood were trained for some of the Southern States. St Peter's was therefore an important Centre. The Society, because, of its history and its base in France, had significant influence in the corridors of power in Rome.

Archbishop Lourdusamy would have been remembered for his efforts to make the Archdiocese self-reliant; but he had one major bias which cast a shadow over the good work that he did. He showed a strong bias in favour of priests from his Tamil community; this bias polarised the clergy. Bangalore at that time had priests from several communities: Mangaloreans, Goans, Malayalees, Tamilians, and Kannadigas. The Archbishop's bias towards his community- namely the Tamil Priests, caused disruptions within this diversity which had been nourished by his predecessor Thomas Pothacamury; it sowed the seeds of discord especially between the Kannada group and the Tamilians; this tension grew over the years and continues to be strong today.

In the process, I too was marginalised. He sent two young students (Michael and Rosario) from his Tamil community to Rome for studies in preparation for the Priesthood, even though they were not outstanding students. To his disappointment, they decided not to become priests and left, while studying in Rome. My strong claims for higher studies as a Priest who had worked closely with him were not recognised. This did leave me with a sense of injustice. This experience, coupled with the information in the next paragraph, were the main reasons why I decided to accept willingly any offer to move out of Bangalore Archdiocese, and not to return, if I could manage it.

I was shocked by the Archbishop's bias against Goans when I heard the following incident which was told to me by the Priest concerned. He was from a Goan family, and had lived in Bangalore and KGF from childhood; he decided to join the Priesthood and was pursuing his studies in St Peter's

Seminary in Bangalore as a Diocesan Priest attached to Bangalore. On one occasion he returned to the Seminary a little late after the holiday season and was told by the Rector, a French Priest, to report to the Archbishop before he could be taken in. The Archbishop, who reprimanded him, also told him that there was no place for Goan priests in Bangalore and asked him to leave. Fortunately, one dedicated priest Fr. D'Mello (later Bishop of Karwar) a Mangalorean, informed him about the great contribution of the priests from Goa in the early years of the Archdiocese. Only then did the Archbishop allow him to continue. He was subsequently ordained and served the Archdiocese till he passed away in 2015. His name is Fr. Salima. This incident I have related was told to me by him personally. Several senior Goan priests from well-established families who had served the Bangalore Archdiocese for many years, left in the 70s and returned to Goa.

The perception that the Archbishop had a strong bias towards his Tamil community was strengthened when he ensured that his successor (Arokiaswamy) would also be a Tamilian; he was transferred to Bangalore from a Tamilnadu Diocese. This was a surprise for many local Kannada priests, since there were priests from the local Kannada Catholics who were qualified and capable of becoming Bishops.

The seeds sown in the late 60s by the decisions of Archbishop D.S. Lourdasamy, produced a harvest of accusations and counter-accusations over several years. They emerged with full force over the murder of the Rector of St. Peter's Seminary in April 2013. The circumstances surrounding the recent death (March 16, 2016) of Fr. Chasara (a.k.a. Selvaraj), one of the leaders of the Kannada group of Priests, who edited a Kannada periodical that strongly supported the Kannada group's views, provided evidence of these tensions.

Fr. Chasara willed that after his death, the Archbishop should not say the customary Mass over his dead body in the Sacred Heart Church to which the Priests Cemetery is attached. The Archbishop (who anointed him before his death while he was in hospital) decided to hold the customary Mass and service in the Sacred Heart Church at 8 a.m. However, the Kannada group held another mass over the dead body of the Priest in St Joseph's Church, Briand Square at 10.00 am. The Archbishop was not invited. There were even two obituaries in the newspaper on the same page. One from the Archdiocese and the other from the Kannada group. I am not concerned

here about who was right and who was wrong. My objective is to describe the unhealthy situation that prevails among the Priests of Bangalore Archdiocese.

On my part, I can thank God that I did not return to Bangalore to spend my life as a priest in the midst of these developments. I did not have the slightest suspicion when I left Bangalore in the late 60s that the situation would be so bad; to claim so, would be wisdom with the benefit of hindsight. However, I still love the Bangalore Archdiocese and am sad to see the present situation especially among the priests. The laity, however, seems unconcerned, especially in the Parishes of the Cantonment. Just after the demise of Fr. Chasara on March 16, 2016, I asked several of them for their opinion. Not one of them had heard of what had transpired or were even concerned about the happenings, even though one TV channel did devote time to it.

After my posting as Secretary to the Archbishop, I spent about six months as assistant to Fr Paul D'Souza in St Joseph's Parish, Briand Square, before I left for the U.K. This was another Parish largely of poor families. Fr Paul D'Souza was abstemious; he lived a simple life. The existing Church was too small and was crumbling. His major endeavour was to construct a new Church. But the income from a poor Parish was all he had to rely on, and it came in small coins, not in the high-value notes of today. He collected coins of 10 paise in bags. The Church in Briand Square that is seen today, as one passes over the flyover, on the road to Mysore, is the result of these tiny collections from poor people. This is perhaps the only Church in Bangalore that was constructed largely with local resources in the 1960s.

Fr. Paul welcomed all the Priests from the villages who came to Bangalore by bus and alighted close to the Church. I joined him in this welcome, but perhaps overdid it, by inviting them to join us for a simple lunch. My parents had given me a Vespa scooter and so I was mobile enough to cope with unexpected arrivals by dashing to a nearby hotel to purchase food items. But given the low stipends we received, extra food was a strain on the amount Fr Paul and I had allotted for our food. One day he called me to his room and very anxiously and carefully told me that he had a problem. I was taken aback, wondering what I had done. He then mentioned our budgetary limits, which could not cope with the increasing

number of invitees for lunch. I breathed a sigh of relief and assured him that any extra expenses would be met by some friend and that we could go ahead and invite the priests arriving from outstations for lunch.

I had decided to leave the Archdiocese of Bangalore for reasons which I have described earlier. As a first step to leave Bangalore I opted to go to the UK for studies in late 1968. To my surprise when I arrived at the Bangalore airport (which was a small building in the late 1960s) I found two buses with poor people from St Joseph's parish who had come to see me off! My parents paid for my travel and costs in the U.K. till I secured a scholarship. I spent over a year in Oxford where I focused on what was known as development studies which included, trade and economics. I attended lectures in various colleges, had weekly sessions with Tutors and took part in regular evening meetings in smoke-filled rooms. What really made these meetings instructive was the blend of students and professors with industrialists and businessmen. Several aspects including the state of economy and Government's approach and policy towards newly independent countries - especially in Africa - were discussed. The hot topic in those days was "stagflation" if I recall correctly. These evening sessions I found to be most useful. I made full use of the library and other facilities offered by the University, attending lectures on topics related to development and interacting with groups of students who shared my interests.

I was about to go further in Oxford, when Cardinal Valerian Gracias of Mumbai who was the President of the Catholic Bishops Conference, asked me to return and to proceed to Calcutta to help in managing the Bangladesh refugee program of Caritas India in 1971. Cardinal Gracias knew me well since he visited Bangalore often in connection with the planning for St. John's Medical College and for other meetings, which, given my position in Bangalore, required that I played a role in organising. The urgency of my appointment was due to the ruthless suppression of the people of East Pakistan by the Pakistan army, which resulted in millions of people fleeing East Pakistan for India, and the generous contributions of Caritas organisations in Europe to help these people. Caritas India needed staff to manage the relief program. I flew down to Bombay and met Cardinal

Gracias who sent me directly to Calcutta where Caritas had opened an office – and there my life changed.

During my stint as Secretary to the Archbishop, my involvement with people in a meaningful way took place when the Archbishop was away in Rome for extended periods. During these periods I became involved with the Young Christian Workers Movement which had started in the Sacred Heart Parish where I was posted briefly. Mr Joe Bastian, from MICO, was the main motivator. Workers were formed into small groups comprising both Christians and Non-Christians. The name was changed to Young Workers Movement. The members kept daily records of what they observed in the factory. They met weekly to analyse their observations and to come up with strategies to solve problems on the shop floor; the methodology adopted was SEE-JUDGE-ACT-REVIEW. It helped Management as well as brought forward the interests of the workers since their Union was captured by politicians whose agenda was often not in sync with what the workers wanted. I am mentioning this experience here because when the Self Help Groups emerged in Myrada I was able to relate with them due to this experience with the Young Workers Movement.



*"Look at the sky
We are not alone
The whole universe is friendly to us
and conspires only to give the best
to those who dream and work."*

*"You were born with wings.
Don't crawl.
Learn to use them to fly and fly."*

-APJ Abdul Kalam



Welcome by St. Teresa's Parish - 1963 - Left to right:
Fr. Sequeira, Msgr. Celestine, Fr. J. Fernandez (my
uncle) & Fr. Felix Pinto



Last respects to Archbishop Thomas Pothacamury



With members of the Workers Movement

CHAPTER 7

My experience with the Bangladesh refugee Program in 1971/72- a disruptive and creative experience.

(My response to questions 3 and 4 posed in Chapter 1)

I have explained in Chapter 2 how my studies in the Anthropology of Religion in Louvain opened my eyes to the existential origin of many religious beliefs and practices, now considered sacrosanct. In Chapter 3, I explained how my studies in Pune influenced by the new insights, that the Vatican Council brought into teaching institutions, had given me confidence to question traditional beliefs. But these learnings and insights remained dormant. I will now share my experience in the Refugee Program which provided the ecosystem required for these dormant seeds to sprout. Since this experience played such an important role in challenging the set of beliefs and practices with which I had grown up and which sustained me as a Priest, I thought it would be useful to describe it in greater detail. I have repeated the content of several paragraphs of this description of my experience with the refugees in my earlier book "50 years of Learning" and entitled it "My De-Schooling", which it really was; it helped me to unload the baggage I had accumulated, comprising sets of beliefs and practices based on religion, family tradition and education.

The Church provides space for its Priests to devote some time to care for the poor as part of their larger pastoral role. This is the practice in "normal" situations where the poor are accepted as part of life; the poor will always be there, said Jesus Christ. In a "normal" situation, no facet of life or behaviour of a Priest is challenged; everything works according to prescribed norms or customs; everything is "under control". If on occasions someone disturbs the "normal", by deviant behaviour, the discipline of religious systems addresses the situation, sometimes by applying sanctions or usually a call to conform to the practices of religious life.

But in ab-normal situations, especially where might is right, the normal is not just disturbed but turned upside down; in wars, it is torn open. The occupation of East Pakistan by the Pakistan Army for nine months was war against their own people; it witnessed deviant behaviour at the lowest human level; torture, rapes, indiscriminate killings of unarmed people were perpetrated and also justified. All these features characterised the Pakistan army's occupation of East Pakistan for about nine months in 1971. As a result, millions fled to take refuge in India mainly to West Bengal and Tripura. Diseases were rampant. Women and children were badly affected. Hundreds of children died; babies were stillborn with many weighing less than 1 kg. Older people could hardly stand; many collapsed before us of starvation and exhaustion.

I could not believe that human beings could be the cause of so much suffering. This was not poverty; it was poverty plus dehumanisation -- something abnormal. One had to see and feel it, to even get an inkling of its depth and dimensions. What angered us was that this suffering was caused by human beings who shared the same nationality and religion - Islam. The contrast between the inhumanity of the Pakistan occupiers who considered the Bengali Muslims as second-class Muslims, and the empathy and support shown to the Muslim refugees in India by Hindus was a stark lesson between the negative social role that organised religion can play and the humaneness which all people share.

In such ab-normal situations, care for the poor could not be constrained by a timetable; we were immersed in this sea of suffering. Immediate responses to suffering and death ruled our lives. Religious rituals took second place. The result of this immersion, into what the Church would call a secular world, was that the carefully constructed ecosystem in which I had been brought up and in which I was confined began to crumble. A new set of beliefs emerged. I could no longer, for example, reconcile myself to the traditional religious belief that only Catholics were destined for paradise. Surely these poor refugees who had suffered and yet supported one another and the Indian (Hindu) families who were poor, but who gave Muslims food and shelter for weeks, would find a place in paradise!

I was exposed to the impact of this ab-normal situation through my experiences of living with and listening to the refugees in India who had

suffered this ordeal. One Indian Government official estimated the number of refugees to be between 7 to 8 million. They had an impact on the entire area. Their stories showed that differences of Caste/status and creed were submerged; they no longer counted as they do in normal times. Muslims took refuge in Hindu homes and vice versa; the middle classes merged with the poor. All Bengalis were in this together. They shared a common culture. The citizens of East Pakistan were also aware of being economically marginalised by the West; this also united them. And into this abnormal situation, I plunged; I had to find out-of-the-box solutions to respond immediately in order to keep people alive. As my contact with the refugees grew closer, they shared the stories of their suffering and resilience, of the support they received from all those around them irrespective of class or creed; we also got drawn into their aspiration for a free motherland.

As I lived through this experience, reality began to demand greater attention. My beliefs and practices based on tradition and religion (in which faith played a major role) were challenged. They were not in sync with what I was experiencing around me. I did try to meditate on religious writings to block out the rush of new experiences, but they could not be kept on the margin; the stories of the refugees became the content of my meditation. It could not reconcile myself to the sheer injustice of the oppressive and brutal occupation of East Pakistan and even more to the justification given by the Pakistan army that the East Pakistan Bengalis were not genuine Muslims because their culture and social practices were infected by Bengali tradition which was Hindu; their love for Tagore's songs and poems was given as an example.

Religion did play a negative role in the events of 1971. It was used to motivate the West Pakistanis and to justify their atrocities and it did this effectively. It lowered my respect for organised religion, especially those which claimed to be the ONLY true way to paradise. History has many examples of Abrahamic religions inflicting inhuman cruelty justified by religion? Such examples continue with fringe groups in other sets of beliefs like Buddhism and Hindutva; these groups are increasingly claiming to have priority (or first-class status) based on culture and religion in countries where their adherents are in the majority.

Like Caritas India, the Catholic Church in several countries has its own national Caritas. They form a network of institutions that has the ability and experience to respond to disaster situations within a short time. In 1971, the international media played an important role in mobilising donations from the public to support the Caritas program and in proving to the world that the refugee problem did indeed exist. This was important since one major country, the United States of America, played it down, because it affected its own agenda to open a path to China, in pursuance of which, Pakistan was closely associated.

The response to this major disaster from all the national Caritas offices was quick, generous and well organised. Large donations as well as materials like food, medicines, clothes especially warm clothes for children, blankets, disinfectants, tarpaulins and vehicles, were mobilised both from abroad and within India which poured into the Caritas office in Calcutta. Several countries also sent teams of health workers and volunteers who spent a few months in the camps. Caritas organisations of Germany and Switzerland took the lead in supporting the refugee operations. One example of the efficiency of the Caritas organisations was the following. We needed warm children's clothes urgently as winter was approaching. Caritas Switzerland approached the media requesting various Cantons to make three sizes of clothes within three weeks and to deliver the finished product at designated collection points. Eight hundred thousand pieces of high-quality warm children's clothes were delivered in Calcutta by late October. Our efforts to purchase warm clothes in India resulted in less than a hundred thousand pieces.

This generous response from the world challenged us in Caritas India to organise a major program. The Office in Calcutta had to indent for materials in time, purchase materials available within India, clear the goods which arrived at the airport, manage storage, set up a delivery system, report on utilisation and maintain records of assets and accounts. Communication with the international Caritas network was a major hurdle, till ITC Calcutta generously offered us the use of its telex facilities. The management centres in the field (the field offices) near the refugee camps, fell in place without much effort, thanks to local Catholic Dioceses along the border which responded quickly and generously; they rapidly deputed priests and nuns,

mobilised lay volunteers and allocated space. These local teams were the real frontline soldiers who manned the critical posts dealing directly with the refugees. The Calcutta office of Caritas India coordinated with Government and the Red Cross. Regular meetings were held, many called by the then Governor of West Bengal (Mr. Dias); he was also the Chairman of the State Red Cross Society with which Caritas worked closely. It was estimated by outsiders that the Caritas operation in the Refugee camps saved the lives of a least one million people.

The delivery system especially was the problem – the last mile always is. The roads were washed away due to unusual heavy rains; what was left was a mess of slush which increased significantly due to the heavy traffic carrying materials to the refugee camps. This caused major delays in transmitting supplies as lorries broke down along the way. Personnel to manage the delivery system and to strengthen the field offices were required. They came - Priests and nuns, students from Catholic colleges and seminaries and Doctors and nurses from Catholic hospitals were the first to respond. Volunteers were assigned to accompany each truck as it carried materials to the field; it was a good experience for newcomers; it taught them to cope with the demands of the program. Two German Doctors Vomstein and Aschoff who had lived in India for several years joined our team to sort out the loads of medicines we received from Germany and Switzerland. As the news spread dozens of volunteers from non-Catholic institutions and even from Private Companies like IBM joined the operations. Dr. Ted Fernandes in his early 70s, a friend and family Doctor from Bangalore, turned up unexpectedly one day and said ‘I have come to work with the refugees’. I had to persuade him to return home after three months. Unfortunately, I could not trace his photograph. I was lucky with another volunteer, Rev Fr Solomon from Bangalore Archdiocese. Over 1000 volunteers responded, many for periods of one to two months on rotation. They lived in the camps with the refugees and attended to all emergencies.

The refugees were largely Muslim. The local people in West Bengal, mainly Hindus, bore the shock of the early waves and managed to cope, as millions streamed in. They opened their doors, allowed the refugees to set up camps in vacant spaces, provided them with food for a few days and in some cases for weeks. These local village people were the real heroes.

They did not have much, but they shared what they had and taught us all a lesson. Had they not responded promptly the number of deaths would have been much higher. There was no discrimination based on religion. If the refugees survived, the local people deserve the credit since the refugees were starved and emaciated after long treks.

Like the locals, we in Caritas India never asked the refugees for their religion, much less if they were Catholics. To us, they were all refugees. This is where I had my first confrontation with some of the local Catholic Bishops mainly from the tribal areas of Bihar whose Dioceses extended to cover some districts in West Bengal along the border where the refugees were concentrated. They held that Caritas was set up to support the Catholics in India and not the refugees who were from East Pakistan. We made it clear that these funds were raised and donated for refugees, irrespective of religion. Fr La Ferla s.j., who managed the largest Caritas relief program around Dinajpur told his Bishop clearly that other funds were available to support development and livelihood programs for Catholics. The President of the Catholic Bishops Conference Cardinal Gracias supported the stand of Caritas and Fr La Ferla.

Information moved much slower in those days. Private TV channels had not taken off. Those in Europe had a better grasp of the refugee situation, thanks to their media. With the absence of visuals and personal interviews, people in India had no idea of the sufferings that the refugees had undergone in East Pakistan and during the trek to India. One had to be moving and interacting with them to understand, in some limited way, the horror and pain that they had experienced, due to atrocities inflicted by humans who were citizens of the same nation and adherents to the same religion.

This experience challenged several of the beliefs in which I was grounded as a Priest. I was trained to be detached from "worldly" events. In a normal situation, one could work with the poor without being completely immersed with their suffering and insecurity as they struggled to survive in the real world; there was always the option to return to normal life, protected by the religious institution. A religious person - Priest, Brother or Nun - could remain secure and in minimum comfort provided by the Church's institution. But this crisis was ab-normal, it was overwhelming and

demanded our total attention. I became more emotionally and spiritually involved with the insecure and harsh lives of the refugees than with the comforting rituals and practices of the traditional religious ecosystem.

How could I be detached from the suffering of people I had come to support with the objective of providing whatever little was possible to keep them alive and healthy till they returned to their homes? Could I remain detached any longer from their suffering and live in the cocoon of my own beliefs? I was in a situation of life and death. There were no half measures, no fixed office timings, no long meetings. One had to adapt to rapidly changing situations. One had to give everything. I found it difficult to give them one hundred percent and still remain detached. Their sufferings and death were enough to undermine my detachment. But it went further. Some of the men gradually began to share their desire to have an independent country and were prepared to give their lives for it. They referred to it as Bangladesh, not East Pakistan. This increasing possibility of the birth of new country which they owned was gripping and perhaps a heady intoxicant which added to our motivation, increased our admiration for them and ended with our emotional attachment to their cause; I could no longer remain detached.¹

I had been trained to consider myself to be God's chosen one. I had been taught to believe that I had been empowered to bestow God's forgiveness on others for sins they had committed – a mobile Ganga as it were. What sins had these refugees committed to suffer so much, except to vote for the wrong person according to their oppressors from West Pakistan? But I found strength and "power" in several of the refugees I interacted with. I was not the only one. One of my staff was photographed consoling an old refugee woman and holding her hands. He brought the photograph to me saying that it was not he who was giving her consolation but that he felt her strength flowing into him, strength derived from all the suffering and pain she had gone through. I preserved this photograph and my wife, Dipika, painted it in 1991. The painting which has pride of place in our hall, captures his interpretation and reminds me of the experiences I went through in 1971.

¹ We published a monthly report of our work in the refugee camps. It had the map of the area where the refugees were concentrated. In my overenthusiasm, the September issue in 1971 carried the name Bangladesh instead of East Pakistan long before it was internationally accepted. I had to apologise.

I had been taught that Catholicism was the ONLY path to salvation and therefore conversion to Catholicism was the only way to be saved. Here I found thousands of local Hindu families who were poor, yet willing to share what they had with their fellow human beings who happened to be Muslim. Surely, they too would find a place in paradise! When I discussed these doubts with my colleagues, I discovered that they too shared some of them. But no one was willing to express them aloud. Their faith was stronger than mine, but it clouded their perception of reality.

In this process, I became more human. I opened the door of my emotional storeroom which I had locked as a Priest especially during the four years at the Archbishop's House. During these four years, I interacted with the Bishops who controlled the power structure of the Church; they were formal, diplomatic, well looked after and accustomed to be obeyed; emotions had little place and so I bottled them up. I hardly interacted with people. But here in the refugee camps, I was exposed, not just to people but to those who had undergone suffering. I then realised that I was a person who grew emotionally by interacting with people, not with files and not within the power structure of the Church. I had taken the vow of celibacy which separated me from the world. I was now learning to listen and empathise; the refugees were my teachers. I shared their life whenever I was able to get away from my responsibility of managing volunteers, finance, and organising logistics. I grew more 'mature' during my interaction with the refugees in 8-9 months than from my four years of work at the Archbishop's house.

My experience with the Refugees removed all desire and ambition to move upwards in the corridors of power in the Church. The influence of Vatican 2 had given me the hope that change in the church was possible, it was just a matter of time. I had thought that with a position of authority in the Church, I would be in a more strategic position to support this change. But the experience of people suffering and dehumanised, undermined this ambition, however well-meaning its objective was. Subsequent developments in the Church, after the conservatives managed to take back control under successive Popes, closed the windows that Vatican 2 had opened. The Church made a U-Turn. Significantly the 50th anniversary of the Vatican Council was declared officially as a "Year of Faith". There

was no effort to renew the spirit and insights of the Council. In fact, every effort was made by Rome to delete the memory of the Council from the Catholic consciousness. Had I remained in the Church, I would have been disillusioned and frustrated.

It was during 1971 that I met Mother Teresa. She was revered in Calcutta at that time. I went to her repeatedly to help me cross bureaucratic barriers, especially at the airports where we had to cope with issues concerning the variety and quantity of goods coming in from abroad. My requests to her were responded to willingly and with alacrity. I was a different person in her presence. She radiated a power whose source could only have been her total and absolute commitment to God and to the destitute and dying poor. Meeting her and several sisters from all over the world who had joined her, I realised how stifling were the years I had spent in church administration between 1964 and 1969.

I revered Mother Teresa; I must however admit that I did not quite agree with her on some of her staunch catholic positions. She was against “artificial” family planning and was a proponent of what was then known as the natural family planning method supported by the Catholic Church. This position was based on “natural law” according to the teaching of the Church. But Catholic families in European countries had practised artificial family planning for many years; it was the norm. I already described earlier (in Chapter 6) the stand I took in St Joseph’s Parish, Bangalore, against this position of the Church which imposed severe hardships on the poor. She also firmly believed that one had to be baptised according to Catholic rites to attain salvation or “to be with Jesus”.

The most difficult sector of Caritas operations in the refugee camps were the hospital wards which were large tents. They needed to be cleaned regularly. The flies during the day and the mosquitoes at night were torture to the patients and staff, who had volunteered from several hospitals and NGOs. The volunteers provided the basic medical care and nutrition required to bring the patients back to normal life. But the work of cleaning the beds and the wards was a major one and required a high level of commitment, empathy, and tenacity to do on a regular basis.

Mother Teresa was requested to place her sisters in these hospital wards in a large camp hospital located in Salt Lake, between the airport and Calcutta city, which in 1971 was a vacant layout. Their responsibility was to keep the wards clean and console the patients; she agreed. They did an excellent job. The wards suddenly became a place where visitors could be taken. While the Caritas volunteers provided the medical and nutritional support, Mother Teresa's sisters provided the love and the basic hygiene required. Many patients survived which was our objective, but some could not make it.

One day I asked a sister of Mother Teresa's congregation whether she liked this work in the refugee camps. She replied that she was very happy because she was really ministering to the destitute and dying which was Jesus' teaching. Further, she added her happiness increases because she is helping to "send souls to Jesus". This puzzled me for a while. Sometime later I was told by the volunteer nurses that the objective of Mother Teresa's sisters was to make life easier for these patients, especially those who were dying so that they could spend their last days in comfort. Though many recovered thanks to the medical care provided, some passed away; but just before they passed away, they were baptised by the sisters or to quote the sister - "sent to Jesus", which, in her belief, was the best place for their souls to be after death; Baptism sent them there. However, to avoid any misunderstanding of this statement, I must add that I have never heard of any report that Mother Teresa tried to convert people. Her message was love. Her target of love was the destitute and the dying and she loved them so much that she and her sisters did her best for them in their last days and believed that the best for them in the next life was to send them into the arms of Jesus; that was her reason for baptising the dying and, I repeat, only the dying during their final moments.

While I was working with the Canadian International Development Agency in the late 1970s, a TV producer/anchor from Canada requested me to arrange for a visit with Mother Teresa. She readily agreed to meet us at 6 am. As we left, she held my hands and said: "You must come back to us". By then I had married and told her I had responsibilities to look after my wife and children. Her response was: "God will look after them". I could not agree with her.

Photographers had taken hundreds of pictures of the refugees. Most of these photographs, some of which I still preserve, depict suffering, deprivation, hunger, helplessness and fear, worse than what is caused by natural disasters. But there were also pictures of refugees that inspired hope and there were stories of their determination to survive and to progress. Why could not these people one day reflect the image of the Risen Christ who was radiant, powerful and alive? Could they also not become a picture of health, power and life. They showed that they had this potential. All they needed to rise again was perhaps a helping hand to take the first step. I thought, at that time, that I could do this alone; but I later realised that one needs an appropriate institution, a committed team of people who shared one's values, mission and a strategy to provide this helping hand to many in a sustainable manner. This was my motivation to make the choice later to leave the Canadian International Development Agency and take up the challenge in Myrada to support one million poor rural people to rise above the poverty line in a sustainable manner.

I have devoted extra space to this experience with the Bangladesh Refugees because, more than any other experience, this one affected my life deeply. In reality, the journey away from my past began not with my decision to leave the Priesthood; it started as a result of my experiences which not only questioned the set of beliefs in which I was nurtured, but also gave birth to another set of beliefs which were not in sync with the Church's teachings. My decision to leave the priesthood in 1976/77 resulted from the crumbling of the ecosystem of faith and tradition that sustained me till 1971. There were also other more marginal factors that played a role, which I will describe as this narrative progresses.

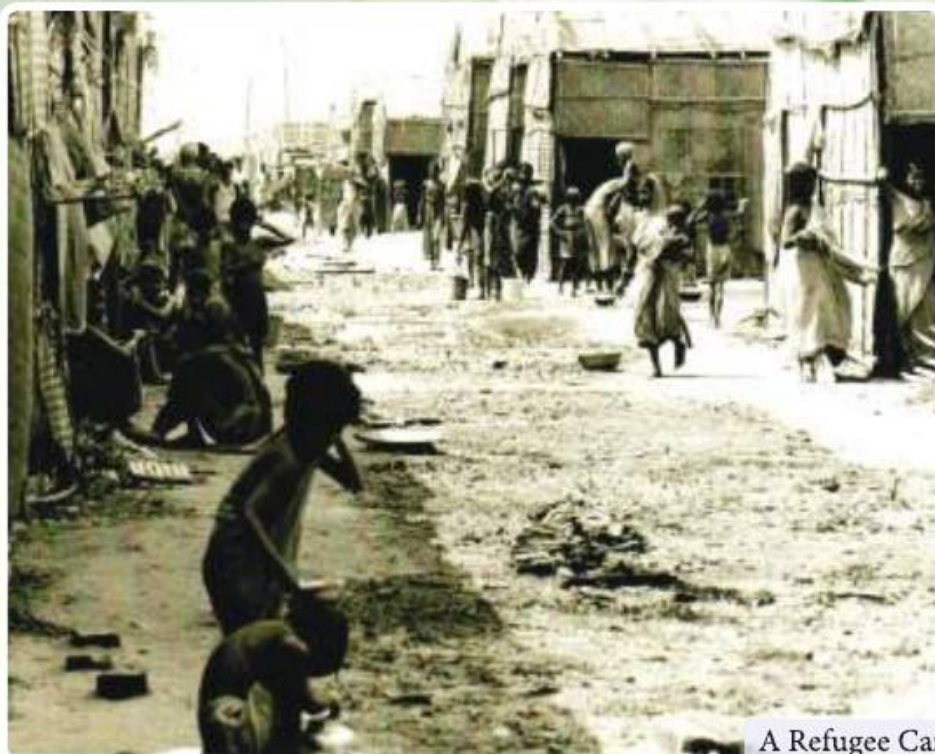




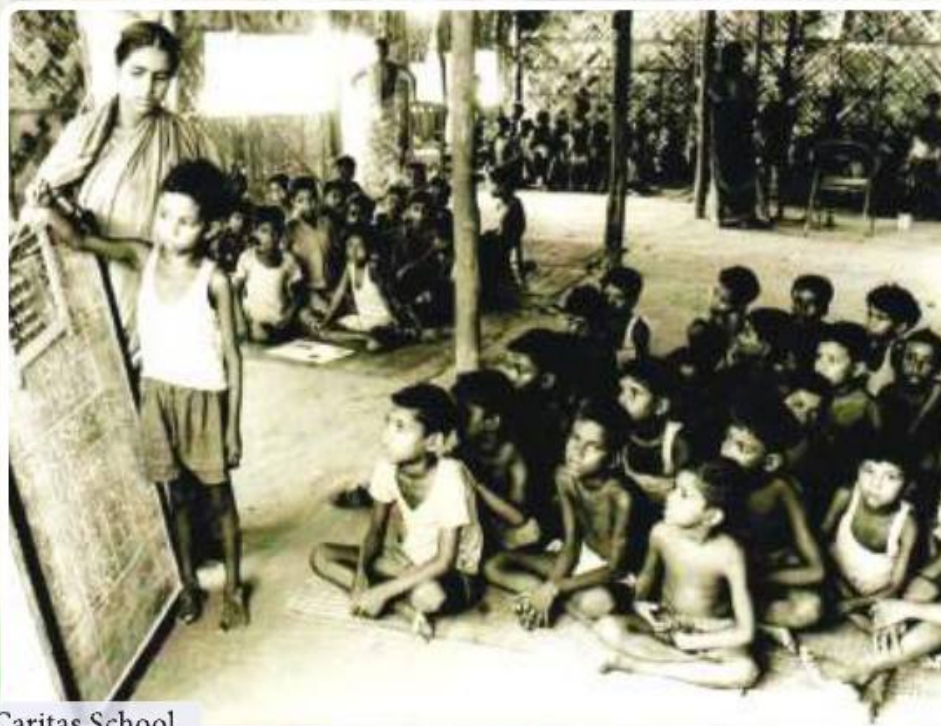
*"Dare to be free,
Dare to go as far as
Your thought leads you
And dare to carry that out
In your life"*

Swami Vivekananda





A Refugee Camp



A Caritas School

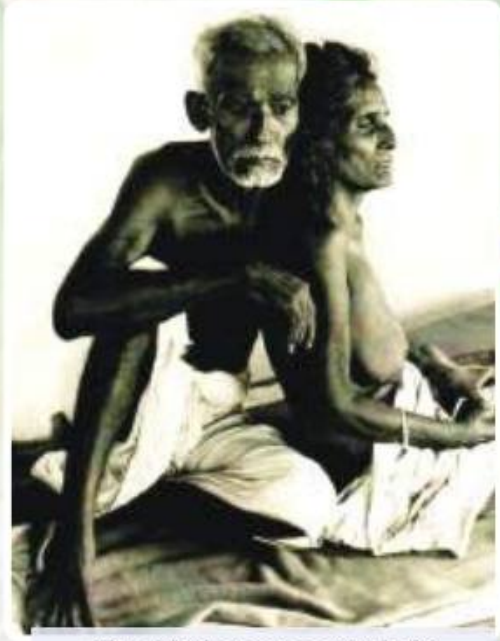
A typical refugee family



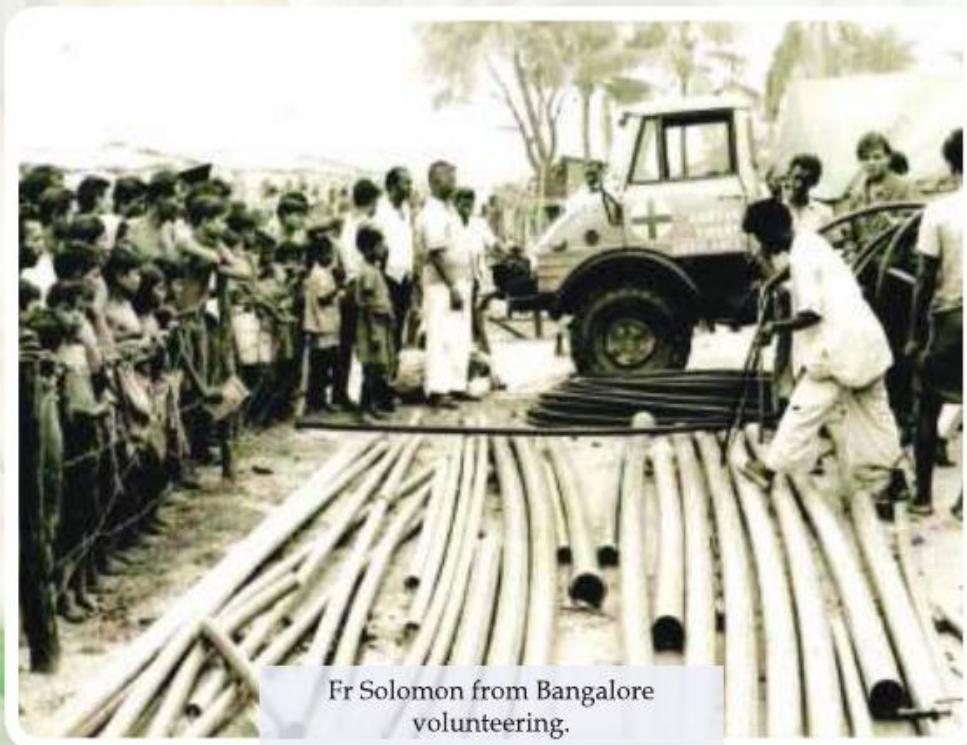
Nutrition Program for children



A Caritas Field Hospital



The elderly were particularly vulnerable



Fr Solomon from Bangalore volunteering.



With the Governor (Dias)
President of Red Cross
Society



The Caritas Team in
Calcutta



With Fr LaFeria s.j.; he
managed the largest
number of refugees

CHAPTER 8

Five years as Deputy Director of Caritas (1972-1976)

Why I left Caritas and the Priesthood.

(My answer to questions 3 and 4 posed in Chapter 1.)

After my experience of nine months in Calcutta during the refugee operation, I was posted at the Caritas India Headquarters in New Delhi where I spent about five years as Deputy Director.¹ In this position, I travelled around the country, conducting training programs and strengthening the Caritas organisation in each Diocese. During this period, I was also involved in two major droughts in central Maharashtra and in Ramnad District of Tamil Nadu. The Caritas network initiated major relief and rehabilitation programs in these areas with the support of volunteers. I opted to live for several weeks in these areas. We took up water conservation measures, like building of small weirs (Central Maharashtra), de-silting tanks and deepening open wells (Ramnad Dt. Tamil Nadu), and large nutrition and health programs in both states. The happiest days of my life in Caritas were spent in the field. During this period, I took leave and proceeded to the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium for a year's course in topics related to the Anthropology of Religion. This course gave me insights into the social roles that religions played throughout history in response to existential situations. Some of these roles were gradually raised by organised religions to the level of sacred beliefs and practices.

I was on the Editorial Board of the Caritas bulletin called *Seva Vani*; this gave me an opportunity to project the broader approach of Vatican 2. It carried many of my articles which reflected the Vatican Council's teachings and which were considered to be left of Centre; it was not very popular with the more conservative section. I was also holding additional responsibility

¹ Caritas India is part of the Church's organisation which provides funds and volunteers for development programs. It specialises in post disaster relief and rehabilitation.

as the Secretary of the Committee for Justice and Peace which was one of the several Committees officially set up by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India. One of the initiatives I played a role in launching, was an Operations Manual to guide the Church's institutions in the management of lay staff like teachers and support staff in Churches and schools, which, in my experience in Bangalore, left much to be desired.

The experience I gained from travelling and living in various parts, increased my knowledge of the country exponentially; I was amazed at its diversity. My articles in *Seva Vani* were reflections on these experiences; they attempted to place them in the context of the teachings of Vatican 2. I also realised that most of our projects in the villages focused on farm and allied activities. To acquaint myself with these activities, I spent considerable time studying agriculture. I also realised that an organisation devoted to development, even if is part of the Church, needs to have staff with professional skills required to understand and support its programs; commitment to the poor was necessary but not enough.

I believed that development work required a professional approach. As a first step to achieve this, a dedicated institution had to be established in each Diocese, which was staffed both by Priests and lay people with qualifications in relevant subjects, who were capable of promoting and managing development activities with a focus on supporting the poor and marginalised. I suggested that this institution could be a registered society. I considered this a visible expression of the mission of the church propagated by the Vatican Council. Till this Council, the Church's mission to support the poor was largely understood to be a subsidiary part of the main mission to "save souls". The Vatican Council extended in an explicit manner the mission of the Church to the "whole person"- body and soul; this holistic approach gave the mission of Caritas a more prominent place in the Church's administrative structure. I believed that in the development ecosystem, managed by the Church, professionalism had to be woven into passion to achieve sustainable impact in development initiatives. This approach called for including all the poor members in a community from different castes and creeds but who were involved in similar livelihood activities and united by relations of affinity. There was no question of focusing only on Catholics and excluding others. This was my position which met with objections from

officials in the church.

This focus on professionalising Voluntary work was also given priority in the 7th Plan of the Government of India (1985 -1990); it was already promoted since the late 1970s by a large number of NGOs and was a subject of discussion in official meetings and seminars. To quote from the Seventh Plan document: "there is inadequate recognition of their (NGO) role in accelerating the process of social and economic development.... therefore, during the Seventh Plan serious efforts will be made to involve Voluntary Agencies in various developmental programs the accent in the Seventh Plan will be to professionalise volunteerism, to introduce professional competence (delinked from degrees) and management expertise....", (pgs 68 and 69). I hoped that the professionalisation of development initiatives would include investment in equipping the poor to manage their affairs and the willingness to hand over 'power' to them to act according to their pace and priorities.

A few staff in Caritas promoted decentralisation in organisational management and in development initiatives; they lobbied to involve the Dioceses much more in policy and decision making; they also promoted strategies that enabled people to take ownership of development initiatives so that they influenced strategy and sustained the impact. I believed that this was the appropriate approach in a vast country with a variety of issues and livelihoods. As Deputy Director, I supported these few staff. But in hindsight, I realise that we went overboard - too much, too fast; besides, we did not have the experience required to nurture change.

The majority of the staff supported by the Executive Director opted to work with a standardised traditional approach which was controlled by Caritas and where the Church organisation, not the people involved, would be in charge of all development initiatives. It was comfortable with people's participation, but on its own terms. Both groups shared a passion for supporting the poor, but both were lacking in the professionalism required to manage change in conflicting situations. If only passion and professionalism had grown in synergy, Caritas would have emerged as a trendsetter. Unfortunately, this did not happen; it led to internal conflict between these two groups. This difference in approach and the fact that I,

as Deputy Director, backed a few who went against the Executive Director's approach aggravated the situation; trust broke down and various forms of harassment entered the organisation. This was the immediate cause of my leaving Caritas and my room in the Secretariat building near Gol da Khana in Delhi, which housed the staff of various institutions of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI).

My exit from Caritas was understood by some as my leaving the priesthood. But this is not strictly correct, as I had left only the Church's organisation which was Caritas (to which I was deputed). I was still a Priest affiliated to the Bangalore Archdiocese. But I had no intention of returning to Bangalore, because, as I wrote in Chapter 6, I had felt marginalised due to the prevailing bias in favour of one linguistic group of priests. I was left with one option - to formally apply for 'laicisation' or to leave the priesthood; it took this step through the Archbishop of Bangalore.²

There was a new Archbishop in Bangalore by name Arockiaswamy, a Tamilian who succeeded Lourdusamy. When he received my application for laicisation, his only remark was that the Church had spent money on my education. This was the usual practice with most students for the Archdiocese, many of whom came from poorer families. I informed him that my family had donated funds to cover my education in the seminary and paid for my studies abroad; after this explanation, he had no objection to my applying for laicisation.

Though my exit from Caritas was painful for me, I must salute Caritas India for its magnanimity. In 2000 Caritas instituted an award called the Caritas Millennium Award. This was 25 years after I had left Caritas. The list of finalists, I later learned, was short and I was included. I was not aware about these developments till the time I received a call that I had been selected. I received a warm reception in Caritas. The award ceremony was held in Bangalore, at a Training Centre in Da Costa Square; it was presided by the then Governor of Karnataka Smt. Rama Devi and graced by the Archbishop of Bangalore, Ignatius Pinto.³ On my part, after I left

² Laicisation is an administrative process required to leave the priesthood formally.

³ In 2000 I was awarded the Padma Shree by the Vajpayee Government. My well-wishers organised a public reception on the grounds of Infant Jesus Church which was honoured by Governor Smt. Rama Devi, Archbishop Ignatius Pinto and a large gathering of workers with whom I had been associated.

Caritas, I continued to support it; I never criticised it. Once again Caritas showed its openness by inviting me around 2009 to be on the committee which interviewed about 10 candidates, all Priests, for the position of the Executive Director of Caritas India.

I carried away a few insights from my experience in Caritas which were fuzzy at that time; they took a few years to crystallise into strategies and action; this happened while I was in Myrada. It will, however, be useful to share these seminal insights here. One of these insights related to the importance of a decentralised decision-making structure in the development sector to cope with the diversity in this country. This was not a new insight in the development sector. But my insight went further. My experience in the Church gave me a sense of the importance of institutions. I realised that the development process had not only to be decentralised; it also had to involve poor people as stakeholders and leaders in all development initiatives; in order to achieve this they had to organise their own institutions with their own vision and mission. Later in Myrada we involved people as stakeholders from the very beginning; as a result, appropriate people's institutions emerged which promoted strategies for their growth. I also realised that institutions at higher levels were a double-edged sword; while they provided a reliable structure for oversight and continuity, they could also stifle innovation and impose uniformity, if controlled by those who held power in society or in religious institutions; unfortunately, this was often the case.

My experience in the Church's organisation and an analysis of the power structure in society, made me realise that power in the social, religious and political systems, is not handed over willingly by those who have it, to those who do not; the latter have to take it away. This is why the institutions that emerged and which we in Myrada supported as a basis to mitigate poverty, comprised only the poor. However, the poor cannot 'take away' power as individuals; they need to develop their own institutions and network them in order to take power away. These institutions provide the basis for alternate solutions or strategies that bypass the existing system created by traditional power structures which dominate the Church and society. The Self-Help groups are an example of an alternate structure; their members, apart from deciding how to manage savings and credit to augment and

sustain their livelihoods, are confident enough to lobby in local traditional institutions like the Panchayats to increase their access to resources, jobs and entitlements. The institutions of the poor need to be in control of the process which results in their acquisition of power.

This process takes time and is not linear. These institutions of the poor increase their influence in traditional institutions, and their access to local resources at their own pace; they tend to opt for an incremental approach rather than a confrontational one, in order to avoid tension; after all, the poor have to continue to live in the village. Hence, they often take two steps forward and one back. Any pressure from interveners like NGOs to direct or hasten this process leads to tension and a breakdown of trust in the village. Institutions in the Church, like Caritas, devoted to development also cannot be ruled by those holding power in the Church's organisation; they need the space to decide on their mission, the strategy, the agenda and to progress at their own pace, in order to nurture their institutions.

The importance of investing in building institutions for the poor was an insight that I carried forward. It is reflected in Myrada's brief mission statement: "To build poor people's institutions". I discovered that poor people had strengths. I often said: "if the poor have survived in a situation of scarce resources, diversity and uncertainty, they must have strengths". Interveners must build on these strengths. To focus on their needs, as development theories did in the past, makes them constantly dependent on others to solve their problems. Religions play a social role in responding to people's needs, (not strengths) as I explained in Chapter 2; as a result, the Church's organisation is easily able to extend its control over the social and economic spheres of the lives of Catholics. One of the major strengths of the poor, I discovered while in Myrada, is the traditional relation of affinity (mutual trust and support) that exists among small groups irrespective of caste or creed. Another is the habit of saving especially among women. If interveners want to promote self-help, they need to build in these strengths; they need to create space for people's institutions and their networks to devise the most appropriate strategy to ensure that poor people have a major say in every stage of the development intervention. Rural People, especially the poor cannot be empowered by a top-down strategy.

Later in Myrada when we worked out the implications of this approach, we discovered that poor people's institutions, given the freedom, made significant changes even in the strategy that had been crafted by donors and well-intentioned Government officers. Examples are the Self-Help groups (in which each member selected and managed livelihood activities of her choice), Soukhya Groups of Sex workers (which broadened the intervention strategy devised by donors in the HIV-AIDS program) and Devadasi groups (which changed the strategy devised by Government for their rehabilitation and crafted another one). These examples proved that interveners could no longer go to people with a project whose objective, strategy and timeline for implementation were designed by outsiders or experts. These people's institutions brought people into the centre of the development process.

I did try to bring people into the centre of development when I was in Caritas, which I believed would help to incorporate the rich diversity of traditional solutions into development strategy. I did this through my articles in *Seva Vani* and during the Seminars I conducted throughout the country.⁴ But this effort went contrary to the Church's centralised structure which operated through procedures that were uniform or standardised. This culture also permeated its development structure and initiatives. I realised that local Diocesan Caritas institutions were still institutions of the Church and shared its organisational culture. Their approach was highly centralised and uniform in doctrine, practices and norms. Power in religious organisations, like the Catholic Church, is rooted in faith and is in the hands of the hierarchy; the very concept of "handing over" is considered a threat. It was only in Myrada, an institution free from a religious agenda and political party affiliations, that I learnt that power can be taken away by the poor who have the strengths to find and nurture alternate institutions.

I also learnt while in Caritas that transformational change in the poverty alleviation sector is built on relations of trust; relations of trust however are based on respect for the poor. The poor are suspicious of the underlying intentions/agenda of interveners. The desire to feather one's nest is not the only agenda to be avoided in order to build trust; others are more important in the development sector like the agenda to convert to one's religion, to

⁴ Several of these Seminars were conducted with the expert help of Fr Henry Volken s.j. the founder of the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore.

win support for one's political party or ideology and even the desire to do good - but on the donor's terms. None of these reasons respect people who have their own beliefs and practices, and respect is the basis of trust. Unless there are relations of trust based on respect, all initiatives to build people's institutions which can take the lead in the development process will be undermined.

Another learning from my experiences in Caritas was that while time matters to all stakeholders, it matters differently to interveners and to the poor. My experience will explain how this insight was acquired. We received a request from a Diocese on the coast of Tamil Nadu to assist the fishermen who were all Catholics. I found that they used catamarans. I had visited a similar project near Mangalore where all the fishing boats were mechanised. I suggested that they mechanise their catamarans too; it would enable them to fish over a much larger area. I spent an hour with the fishermen and then rushed off for a meeting with the Bishop who could not be kept waiting. The outboard motors were provided and installed. I visited the fishermen a few months later, expecting to see a prosperous group with rising incomes. What I saw was a shocker. I found the fishermen lounging near a large hut which I discovered was a "toddy" shop.; they informed me that they were now able to catch in one day all the fish they could sell in two or three days; so, they need not go out to sea daily. On enquiry I was informed that they had no facility to store the fish and had to sell their larger catch immediately (often at lower rates than what they got when they sold daily). Some of them then said that they knew this would happen, but did not mention it when I visited, since they thought I would be offended; besides I had told them that I did not have much time since I was in a hurry to meet the Bishop who is an important person for them. On reflection I realised that the image I projected to them was a combination of spiritual and temporal power; I was a Priest with money and no time! Perhaps if the group had included some non-Catholics, they may have brought up these issues.

By the mid-1970s I did not find the Church's ecosystem supportive of my set of beliefs and practices in the spheres of religion and development; remaining within it, was causing me increasing stress. I was 'disturbed', to use the word in the title of this narrative; but this word does not do justice to the extent of the disruption in my internal cohesion.

I had to take a decision which would close the gap between my set of beliefs and my experiences in life. I decided to leave the Church and the priesthood, in that order. I was not one who sought counselling from a senior Priest, as many did, when they had doubts. I grew up without the support of my parents and I was conditioned to live the same way. I decided to devote my life to support, without any agenda, the aspirations and initiatives of the poor, from all religions, to encourage them to stand on their own feet, to build on their strengths. I would write my own Bible. In hindsight I realised that I had taken a timely decision before the absence of internal cohesion left me permanently scarred. Many other Priests struggled with their doubts for years, relying on Counsellors to help them; many of those who finally left, were too disoriented to cope with the challenges that life outside the Church threw up.

I reiterate that my new set of beliefs does not imply a lack of respect for other sets of beliefs; neither does it belittle the importance of the social roles that organised religions play. Religious festivals celebrate the seasons and mark important events of birth, marriage and death; organised religion provides identity, rewards, comfort and closure. However, one can still subscribe to values which religions foster like respect for parents/elders, care for the sick and poor and support for the rights of all people without adhering to any organised religion.

I may have marginalised religion, but I still believe that there is a Supreme rational Being. I am not an atheist or an agnostic. Because I am human, I need to see and touch; hence I relate with this Being through its various avatars, without having to accept that there is only one avatar and that others have to be rejected. I do not believe that there is ONLY one way to salvation or paradise. I am happy to humbly request Infant Jesus (Bala Jesu) to give me his childlike qualities, Lord Ganesha to remove the blocks both within me and without, Shree Kere Muneshwara Swamy, whose mandir is close to my home, to protect the family and friends dispersed all over the world and Our Lady of good Health in Shivajinagar to bestow good health on all. As I grow older and am unable to do much for the family, I graduate towards these avatars praying for their blessings and support.

But I must admit, that I have tried, but am unable to provide a conclusive answer to the question - why I continue to believe in a Supreme

rational Being. True this Being does explain the order in the Universe which gives my life meaning, as I wrote earlier. But others may not consider this a convincing explanation. Philosophy refers to this Being as Infinite or limitless. The history of philosophy gives us many examples of philosophers who endeavoured to chart the way for our finite beings to be immersed finally in this Supreme Infinite Being. Adi Shankaracharya selected jnana (knowledge) as the way, Ramanujacharya opted for Bhakti (devotion). But I have no desire to become a mystic or a bhakt in this life. I have found my own way to gravitate towards the Supreme Being. This 'way' is my mission to raise one million poor people above the poverty line in a sustainable manner supported by a set of beliefs and strategies which emerged from people. I am content to achieve my mission in life and to ensure that my social and family obligations are met.

After this life, my deeds will decide where I go. I have no desire to discuss whether my finite 'being' will rest in peace (RIP) after this(one) life as the Abrahamic religions believe or Travel in Peace (TIP) through several lives as traditional mainline Hinduism teaches until it merges with the Supreme Infinite Being. This may appear too simplistic, but I am also no philosopher or religious teacher. I believe that the Supreme Being also provides the ontological framework⁵ that is the basis for 'oneness' and mutual respect among all people, as each of us is a spark of it. This is a 'oneness' which organised religions have divided, often violently. It is this belief that inspired me to come up with my life's mission -- to raise one million poor people irrespective of creed above the poverty line.

I will end this description of the time I spent in Caritas with a brief reference to people whose timely assistance helped me to survive the first few months after I left Caritas and had to live in the real and 'secular' world. I will always remain grateful to them. Several Indian families left Burma in the early 70s. My Uncle who was a priest in Burma gave some of them my address. One Tamil family (Michael and Teresa) came to Delhi and contacted me. They managed to get a job as house staff of an embassy official. They were also provided with quarters in the embassy compound which was a great advantage. I used to visit Michael and Teresa and have a meal with them. Just about that time Janakpuri, on the outskirts of Delhi, was being

⁵ Premises derived from sources other than observation of the world.

developed and we were informed that there were some plots which were reserved for refugees. Michael applied and was allotted a plot. With their small savings and financial support from their generous employer, Michael built a small but well-planned house. This house played a role in my life after I left Caritas. I rented it from them when it was ready, though they refused to accept any money from me. For a month or so, before the house was ready, I was invited by a very generous couple, the Sobtis, to live in the barsati, a room with attached bathroom on the top of their home; I shared their evening meal.

Jagadish Verma, a Hindu boy, came from an extremely poor background in Delhi; he came along with the Caritas staff to Calcutta where I met him. Hardly literate, he had all the skills required for survival. He could drive, repair vehicles, look after volunteers, sort out problems with water and electricity, help with the post and make trips to the Bank; above all he was scrupulously honest. He became my man Friday in Calcutta. Back in Delhi, he was given a job in Caritas as a driver. But what was exceptional about him was that when he was not driving, he was ready to take up any odd job around the office. He was soon speaking and writing English. He too played an important role in my life after I left Caritas. He opted to stay with me in Janakpuri; he taught me to cook and how to manage other requirements – like booking for cooking gas! I would give him a lift on my scooter on my way to the office. Thanks to a plan that was introduced in Caritas for the lower category of employees, he was able to invest in a flat. His children are educated and doing well. He decided to name his daughter Niharika after my child.

I must set the stage for the next period of my life described in the following Chapters. The struggle to reconcile my set of beliefs with that of the Church's teachings and institutional culture had given place to my decision to go my own way, to write my own Bible. There was a pervading sense of peace in my life, and I was ready to fulfil my life's mission. I have tried to answer Question 4: Why did I leave the Church and the Priesthood (which I posed in Chapter 1) in Chapters 3, 7, and 8. But my first concern was to find employment to sustain myself and in time a family. Fortunately, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) gave me this opportunity.



CHAPTER 9

A brief stint of six months with the Canadian International Development Agency 1976-77.

A day after I left the Caritas Office in 1976, I received a message from the Caritas receptionist that a call had come for me from Mr. Roderick (Rod) Haney of the Canadian High Commission. I called back and he asked whether I would take up a study of the Canadian NGO program which would last about 6 months. The Canadian Government was involved since it augmented the money raised by Canadian NGOs and wanted to know the way forward. I did not know how this contact originated, till I began to write this Chapter in March 2016, forty years later. Fortunately, I had remained in contact with several Canadians, including Rod, who had made outstanding contributions in the development field. In reply to my question about the origin of this contact, Rod Haney replied on March 28, 2016, as follows:

"My recollection of how we met is easy, ...my predecessor, was Andre Gingras; ...he had made contact with you, likely in 1975, and likely in the very difficult time following your work with Caritas in Bangladesh...and he advised me strongly to get in touch with you in order to bolster our NGO program administration, and the rest, as they say, is history. Those few short months you were with us at the CHC were more than sufficient to tell us all about the high quality of the person we had working for CIDA NGO programming in India.and you turned these talents eventually to promote several major NGO programs receiving Canadian support, fortunately for them and their clients, now over many years...I should love to read your memoirs, like many not only in India but around the world!

I have been privileged to witness the outstanding and truly innovative contribution you and Myrada have made to countless poor in such a widespread region of your absolutely fascinating country...and the resoluteness with which you

dealt with the trials of your mission with Myrada, unequivocally now is brought to bear in your dealing with cancer". (R.H.)

Rod Haney gave me the first opportunity outside the Church to work in the development sector which now dominated my life. It is the first job which is important. Once given this chance, much depends on one's own strengths to go further. But Rod refuses to accept that he played a major role in this assignment. He did. I later learned that the Executive Director of Caritas had written to the Canadian High Commissioner accusing me of indiscipline and insubordination. Rod was asked to deal with this. It would have been convenient for him, as a Diplomat, to drop the plan to recruit me. Why rock the boat? But Rod was different. He decided to meet those concerned and to get to the root of the problem. He finally decided that I would be taken on.

I discovered a world of helpful, caring people in the Canadian High Commission. At the end of my first day of work, I was walking down the stairs when the receptionist, Mrs. Dolly Sobti, whom I had met over lunch, asked me where I was staying. It struck me that I had no place to stay. I could not continue to be obliged to Michael and Teresa in whose home I had stayed for a night. Seeing the blank look on my face she said: "We have a barsati which is vacant; you are welcome to stay there". A barsati is a bedroom and attached bathroom which many Delhi houses had in the 70s. I accepted. It was a tidy room with an attached toilet and air cooler. Later in the evening, Raj, her husband invited me to share their dinner, till I could find an alternative arrangement. God bless Dolly and Raj Sobti. I stayed with them for over a month. I began looking for a place to stay. That is where the house of Michael and Teresa in Janakpuri came into my life. But what would I do alone in the house? This is where Jagadish Verma with whom I had worked closely in the Bangladesh program and later in Caritas came in; he offered to stay with me.

I became aware during my six months assignment with CIDA, that there was general agreement between CIDA and the Canadian NGOs that someone working full-time in India was required to coordinate and take forward development initiatives. The voluntary ecosystem had changed both in Canada and India and new forms of partnership were required.

However, there were questions related to who would bear the cost of this person, where would the person be based, under whose supervision would he/she function and several other bureaucratic concerns.

These questions were not easy to resolve. Since this was the first NGO consultant post envisioned in CIDA, it was not easy to institutionalise. CIDA was willing to pay, provided I was based in the High Commission. CIDA later agreed to route the funds through the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) which represented the Voluntary Organisations. However, the CCIC felt that it should not function only as a channel for funds; it should have a say in managing the person employed in India. This would not be easy for CCIC to do, if I was working out of the High Commission in Delhi as CIDA envisioned. CCIC wanted a separate office to be established. Finally, senior officers in CIDA decided to leave CCIC out of the loop and pay me directly. By the time a post of Consultant was institutionalised and it was agreed that I would be posted in the High Commission and paid by CIDA, my contract with CIDA had expired. I had to find another job. I found it in the UK, as Tutor in Selly Oak Colleges, thanks to a Jesuit friend who had studied with me in Pune; I had not even approached him and did not get a chance to say "thank you" till much later.

The support I received from the staff of the High Commission both Canadians and Indians was refreshing. I also cannot forget officers in Ottawa, Canada like Mr. Lewis Perinbam who was the Vice President of Special Programs at CIDA. He was well known to support innovative ideas in the field of development. Then there was Mr. Romeo Maione, the Director of the NGO Division in Ottawa, whose booming voice and positive approach was a great support. They played a pivotal role in persuading the Canadian Government to formalise government support for both Canadian and International NGOs engaged in development. Mr. David Holdsworth and Mr. Rod Haney who were based in Delhi during this period were open to new ideas and supportive of institutional innovations in the development field. I also realised that many of the Canadian staff of CIDA in Ottawa had spent time overseas, many through student and other programs which were funded by CIDA. They empathised with people who had experience in the field and respected their insights. It was this supporting culture which impressed me and made my decision to return from the UK after a year to

CIDA in Delhi easier. Frankly, it was a refreshing experience and quite the opposite of what I had experienced in Caritas during the last few months of my assignment there.

My life during those six months with CIDA was personally peaceful, but called for quick adjustments and learning. I had put all the problems with the Church behind me, but I had to adjust to life in the world, to decide what I wanted to do in future and where to do it; there was also the question about remaining single or getting married. During these six months, I had a sense of taking control of my life. I made my decision to leave the Church and the Priesthood. This helped me to get a clearer picture of what I wanted to do in future and how to go about it. What emerged was that I would devote my life to enable the poor and marginalised to access their basic needs and to be self-reliant and confident to stand up for themselves – in a way, to follow what I was trying to do. But the major question I had to answer was where would I carry out this personal mission? The answer was clear. It had to be in India. Any further decision I took, therefore, especially regarding a job and entry into a relationship that led to marriage had to keep this major condition into account.

I applied for laicization (release from priestly obligations) through Archbishop Arockiasamy of Bangalore in late 1976. I did not hear from him, but I later learned that he was not known for promptness in replying. I presumed that he had taken necessary steps to forward my application to the appropriate authorities in Rome. It was ultimately Priest friends in Mumbai (Msgr. Eustace D'Lima) and in Rome who pushed my request through.

After I left Caritas and the news spread, I received a few proposals for marriage from Indian families who had settled abroad. I was also friendly with a young Canadian who worked for CIDA out of Ottawa. But in every case, marriage would require me to leave India. In fact, this was the path that many who had left the priesthood followed, as they and their families could not face the gossip and criticism in India that surrounded such cases. As far as I was concerned, however, I knew what I wanted to do. I decided to remain in India and later to return to the South of India if and when the opportunity arose.

I knew my wife Dipika before I left Caritas but neither of us had any intention of marriage. Our relationship grew, while I was in CIDA, thanks once again to Rod Haney. Dipika was the Joint Secretary of the All-India Women's Cricket Association and was selected to accompany the West Indian women's cricket team on their visit to India. The team's Manager, Monica Taylor, was a good friend of Rod Haney, who was earlier posted in the West Indies; this brought us all together. It was during my short contract with CIDA in 1976-77 that I decided to marry Dipika who is a native of Gorakhpur in U.P. We were married according to Arya Samaj rites with the help of Indian friends in the Canadian High Commission and later registered our marriage. Dipika joined me in the UK in 1978. We were expecting our child (Niharika) while we were in the UK, when I received a letter from Mr. David Holdsworth posted at the Canadian High Commission in Delhi with whom I had worked during my six months stint. He offered me a post in CIDA since all the issues related to this post had been sorted out.

On my way to the Delhi airport heading to join Selly Oak Colleges in the U.K, I was accompanied by a former colleague from Caritas. His name was T.K.Mathew; he was the Caritas Program officer for Kerala. He was visiting Delhi at that time. I had seen an advertisement in the papers from the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) inviting people to invest in self-financing flats being constructed. I asked Mathew to book a flat for me, which he did. Imagine my surprise when about a year after I returned to Delhi, I received intimation that I had been allotted a three-bedroom flat with car and scooter garages in Munirka which is adjacent to Vasant Vihar. It cost me about Rs 2 lakhs. My decision to book a flat in Delhi was ample evidence of my desire to return to the country.

The stint with CIDA for six months was short, but it was perhaps the most important period in my life. Thanks to my peaceful frame of mind and the supportive ecosystem within CIDA, I was able to take decisions which guided by future. I realised that there was another world outside the Church, where there were spaces for new ideas and new initiatives – comparable to the ecosystem that start-ups require. Voluntary Organisations

were encouraged by the Government of India and by the States. This supporting ecosystem was later enshrined in documents of the 6th and 7th Five-year Plans. These Plans contained adequate evidence that Voluntary Organisations had an important role in the process of development as partners with Government.¹



¹ Please refer to my paper: "NGOs and Government in Collaboration for Development" - presented at the Golden Jubilee Seminar organised by the Indian Institute of Public Administration Karnataka; dated March 23, 2004, available on Myrada's website in Rural Management Series Paper 39.



With Rod in Ottawa



Dipika welcoming the West Indies Women's Cricket Team



Dipika introducing the Indian Womens Cricket Team.
Shanta Rangaswamy greeting the Chief Guest.



Our marriage according to Arya Samaj rites

CHAPTER 10

A year as Tutor with the Selly Oak Colleges in the UK (1977-78). Why I returned to India.

(My response to question 5 posed in Chapter 1.)

I received an offer of a post as Tutor in the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham when my six months contract with CIDA was about to get over. The history of these colleges in Selly Oak is not well known and I thought it would be useful to dwell on it briefly, especially on the role that one of them, namely Woodbrooke, played in mobilising British public opinion in favour of freedom for India.

The Selly Oak Colleges comprised five institutions which functioned as a federation in the 70s. It was associated with the University of Birmingham. The campus was a green spacious 80-acre site in the southwest of Birmingham. This complex of small colleges was constructed with the vision and generosity of the Cadbury family. One of the colleges (Westhill) and some of the courses that were taught like Teachers training and Development Studies, were integrated with the University of Birmingham around 2001.

Woodbrooke College was founded in 1903 by George Cadbury; he was a member of the Society of Friends, popularly called the Quakers.¹ It had a library which was well stocked with the writings of the Mahatma as well as by others about the role Gandhiji played in South Africa against apartheid and in the liberation movement in India. I used this library extensively to learn as much as I could of the life and experiences of the Mahatma. He related with the Quakers because they did not proselytise and valued religious diversity; two beliefs to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. Going

¹ Quakerism emerged in UK in 17th century. They were known as Quakers because the founders were mocked for “trembling in the way of the Lord”.

through the records at Woodbrooke, I realised that the role that the Quakers played in our freedom movement was quite significant.

One example was that of Mr. Horace Alexander. He visited India on behalf of Woodbrooke during 1927-28 and became convinced of the need for independence. He met Mahatma Gandhiji in 1928 and later acted as intermediary between Gandhiji and Lord Irwin, the Viceroy of India; it is accepted that this led to Gandhiji's participation in the Second Round Table Conference on the future of India in 1931. Gandhiji described Horace Alexander as "British in nationality but Indian in heart". He was awarded the Padma Bushan in 1984.

Though Quakerism came to India in the mid-seventeenth century, it did not spread in India. Was it because when they assemble to pray, they pray in silence -- listening. I cannot imagine community worship in India without someone preaching or without music and singing. Noise preferably through loudspeakers is an important part of our community prayer gatherings.

Though they were few in number in India, some prominent Quakers are remembered till today. Samuel Stokes based in Himachal ran schools, planted apples and was jailed during the non-cooperation movement. Marjorie Sykes taught at Shantiniketan and later ran a girl's school in the Nilgiris, Tamilnadu. More recently, the architect, Laurie Baker, came to India in 1945, met Mahatma Gandhi and was influenced by him. He designed houses, schools, community buildings, and what is well known, the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram. All his designs are low-cost and environment friendly structures with an emphasis on austerity and simplicity. I had the opportunity of visiting the Centre for Development Studies while I was involved in plans for reconstruction after the Latur earthquake as part of a World Bank team and later again while in Myrada where during 20 years we constructed over 20,000 houses.

I was appointed as a Tutor in Development Studies at the College of the Ascension, one of the five located in Selly Oak. The Head of the Department was Mr. Lawrence Taylor who had worked for several years in Africa and had many experiences of development initiatives, some of which failed, while many succeeded. But all of them provided material for learning. The individual colleges provided accommodation; but, more than that,

they were learning communities with their own tutors mentoring students from different nationalities. Lectures on subjects of current interest were delivered centrally.

Life on the Selly Oak campus was quite a change from the bustle of Delhi; it was peaceful, serene, with a great deal of community support. Regular family outings of staff were held. It was only after Dipika joined me in 1978 that I participated. I shared hostel facilities as a bachelor but was provided with family accommodation after Dipika arrived. I spent most of my time preparing for lectures and conducting tutorials. Facilities for sports were adequate. I, of course, played cricket and learnt to play squash, an indoor game which one could plan for, given the unpredictable outdoor weather in the UK. The village pub was frequented especially by the students. I often joined them. It was a place for exchanging news from different countries and views on various topics, for breathing in cigarette smoke (a typical feature of a pub) and for trying one's hand at darts.

I was happy at Selly Oak, but the call to return to India remained as strong as ever. Initially, for a few months, it was muted due to the new experience of Tutorship, but it surfaced stronger thereafter. The campus, as I said, was peaceful and serene but it was also unreal. The problems I had faced in India seemed far away, even from a different planet. I also realised that in order to deliver relevant and effective messages in development one had to go through the experience. I had the experience of managing disasters and funds for development projects in Caritas, but I had no experience of actually implementing long term development initiatives close to the field. Given my penchant to reflect on experiences rather than communicate theories from textbooks, I was uncomfortable, especially when I heard Lawrence reflect on his own field experiences. I also realised that as I progressed in my thinking, it became more and more detached from reality since there was no opportunity for a reality check. Something had to be done, if I as to remain true to myself.

Dipika was expecting our child when I received a letter from Mr. David Holdsworth of the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi offering me a post as a full-time consultant on a long-term basis. I was eager to return to India because I saw this offer as the first step to being fully involved with development in my country. Dipika took no time to decide that she wanted

her child to be born in India. One Dr. Jenny Williams an alumnus of St. John's Medical College met us at Selly Oak and advised Dipika to meet Dr. Irene Kuttar who had a clinic named St.Luke's somewhere in Delhi. She assured Dipika that Dr. Kuttar was the best Doctor she knew to help her with the problems she may have during delivery.

Many friends urged us to extend our contract with the Selly Oak Colleges for a year, so that our child would be born in the UK and get UK citizenship. I consulted my wife who said clearly that she preferred to return to India. I too decided to return, since I did not want to miss this offer from the Canadian High Commission which, to my mind, took me one step closer to fulfilling my mission in India.

We landed in Delhi in late 1978. The High Commission had already booked a house for us in Vasant Vihar (A 15/22). We went straight to the house. It was a spacious two-bedroom unit, with a car garage and a large garden. The driveway was long enough for cricket and the backyard eminently suitable for growing vegetables, which we did. When we arrived, the house was empty except for a telephone which, in those days, was a gift from the gods. Imagine our surprise when we passed St Luke's Clinic hardly 200 yards away from our house in Vasant Vihar. Niharika was born there.



On Selly Oak
campus.



Dipika in the
Palace gardens





With Lawrence
Taylor's family



With
students
posing next
to someone's
luxury car

CHAPTER 11

Four years with the Canadian International Development Agency in Delhi (1978 to 1982).

Why I left CIDA and joined Myrada. (My response to question 6 posed in Chapter 1)

On my return from the UK, I spent about four years in Delhi as a full-time Consultant to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). It was a happy and creative period of my life. I have described it in detail in my last book “50 Years of Learning”. I will describe briefly only two major programs which took off during this period with which I was privileged to be associated; they take pride of place in my memory. The first was the South Asia Partnership and the second the Country Focus Program. These two were “game changers”. Further, both played an important role in Myrada’s history after I moved to Myrada in 1982; hence their relevance.

The South Asia Partnership (SAP). To bring out the relevance and timeliness of SAP, a brief description of the ecosystem of voluntary initiatives in India and Canada during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s would be helpful. These three decades and perhaps even up to the mid-1990s could be described as the glorious period of voluntary initiatives both in India and Canada. The Governments of India and Canada had a firm commitment to promote people’s participation in development initiatives, as they thought it would encourage people’s ownership of the process and build relations between people of both countries. They also realised that NGOs were the most suited to mobilise and institutionalise the participation of people especially of the poor; therefore, they needed to be supported.

The Canadian Government supported several development programs in India. The bilateral program between the Canadian and Indian Governments was well grounded after India’s independence. Canada contributed

substantially to the Colombo Plan, the Cooperative movement, the nuclear program for peace, India's milk revolution (AMUL) and to dryland farming initiatives through the Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture (CRIDA); this was a bilateral program which was launched in 1970 and closed in 1987.

The Canadian Government was also supportive of programs that boosted the voluntary sector. Opportunities for training and funds for programs were provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). CIDA's NGO policy was clear. It emphasised that the NGO program was primarily intended to foster partnerships between the people of Canada and India.

In the NGO sector, traditional faith-based NGOs, like those established by the Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites dominated the field. They partnered with their affiliated religious bodies in India. CIDA expected them to be broader based. There were many others like Foster Parents Plan Canada which were not faith-based, but did not directly implement programs overseas; they did not partner with Indian NGOs. Instead, they forwarded all their collections in Canada (which included private donations as well as grants from CIDA) to their Head Offices in the U.S.A., which then managed programs overseas. This did not exactly fit into CIDA's vision of the role of Canadian NGOs which was to foster a partnership between the people of Canada and India; this required Canadian NGOs to be involved directly with NGOs overseas. There was also a number of new NGOs emerging in Canada involved with the environment, participatory strategies, women's empowerment, civil society, etc. Unlike the traditional faith-based NGOs, these NGOs did not have contacts with reliable NGOs in India. CIDA was searching for an institutional mechanism to address these issues.

India too has a long history of voluntary work. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, voluntary action during the freedom movement became constructive work in communities where problems of untouchability, illiteracy and poverty were addressed. The 6th Five Year Plan (1980-85) has six paragraphs under the title "people's participation". The Plan sought to strengthen people's involvement in the management of their economic development through Cooperatives. But the Plan document acknowledged

that “these are creatures of the Government”. It went on to add: “What is of equal importance is the promotion of purely non-governmental organisations formal or informal in nature which could motivate and mobilise people in specific or general developmental tasks”. The 7th Plan deals more extensively (two and a half pages) with the “Involvement of Voluntary Agencies”. The document concludes “The accent...will be to professionalise volunteerism, to introduce professional competence...and management expertise” (pgs 68 & 69). This is a clear call to foster Voluntary Institutions which were credible, transparent and staffed by qualified and committed people. A code of conduct was proposed.

This call to professionalise the voluntary sector was anticipated by a group of alumni from the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. They started an NGO called PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) in 1982. The founders were Deep Joshi and Vijay Mahajan. I was honoured to be invited by them to be the first Chairman. Deep continued to work in PRADAN till his retirement. Vijay went on to launch new institutions in the financial sector. Their contribution and that of PRADAN staff to the Voluntary sector is remarkable and lasting. Alongside hundreds of young people who had volunteered to work in disasters like the droughts in Bihar (1960s), Maharashtra (1973-4) Tamil Nadu (1973-74) and cyclones in Odisha (1971-2), Andhra (1977) and Tamil Nadu (1977) opted to join the Voluntary sector. It was clear to the staff in CIDA that the burgeoning of the voluntary sector in India had to be factored into future plans, if the voluntary sector in Canada was to move ahead.

Briefly, there were four issues in the emerging NGO ecosystem which staff of CIDA raised in meetings; they had to be pulled together and addressed in an organised and sustained manner; these are listed below:

- CIDA’s objective was to bring together the people of Canada and India. The transfer of funds raised by Canadian NGOs to their headquarters in the USA, which then established partnerships with NGOs overseas did not foster this objective.
- A significant number of new non-faith-based NGOs in Canada had emerged; they had no traditional partners and were unable on their own to identify reliable NGOs in India which shared their objectives.

- There was a growing understanding of the need to broaden faith-based NGO partnerships; this objective was shared both by many faith-based NGOs as well as by CIDA. How could CIDA nudge them in this direction?
- There was a burgeoning of new non-faith NGOs in India; how could Canadian NGOs reach out to them?

There was also growing pressure in Europe and Canada to involve NGOs in the decision-making process related to allocation of resources and in the adoption of appropriate development strategies -briefly an initiative to share power. CIDA agreed that this was a step towards a more healthy and fruitful partnership. This pressure had a major impact on the design of the structure of the SAP institutional structure.

The first note, on what eventually took shape as SAP, originated during a field visit of the Director of CIDA-NGO, Mr. Romeo Maione in 1979-80; he was accompanied by a senior officer from the Government of British Columbia. I accompanied them on the field visits and arranged meetings with a number of NGOs which had emerged over the past 15 years. They were amazed at the growth of the NGO sector in India and its diversity. After their interaction they agreed to come out with a concept note which would address the following:

- Expand the relationship between Canadian NGOs and Indian NGOs outside their traditional partners.
- Support new NGOs both in Canada and India who needed a helping hand to take off and to establish partnerships.
- Encourage Canadian NGOs with headquarters in the USA to take up programs by themselves and to relate directly with partners in other countries; if necessary, assist them to register as separate societies in Canada.

The note was enlarged and discussed by CIDA-NGO Division and NGOs and in a broader circle within CIDA. Concept notes are not difficult to write. Fleshing them out into an institutional structure and then getting traditional institutions to accept, promote and fund this structure and to hand over some of their power to it is more difficult. Consensus emerged that CIDA would have to incentivise the older and faith-based Canadian

NGOs to accept this broader approach. What finally emerged in 1982 was the following:

It was decided to include a number of countries in this initiative. Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan besides India were included; hence the name South Asia Partnership (SAP) was appropriate. Each country involved would have a National Council composed of people involved in voluntary initiatives. The members of this Council (who would be drawn from large NGOs) would not be allowed to support any proposal from their own organization through SAP. They were also required to provide technical or managerial services, if required, for which CIDA would provide funds.

Each National Council would be supported by field officers to appraise projects and submit them to the Council which would recommend, reject, or defer them as required. The decision on whether or not to support a project would rest with the National Council of the country where the project originates. An International Executive Committee (headed by an International Director) would be set up consisting of one member drawn from each National Council and from Canadian NGOs who join the partnership. The Canadian NGOs on this Committee would select the projects which they wished to support. CIDA would provide a grant which would be far larger than what it provided in the traditional NGO program. SAP would be driven by an institutional framework which would provide some degree of stability and scope for planning, rather than by personal or sporadic contacts.

The objectives of SAP went beyond establishing funding links between Canadian and South Asian NGOs. It also promoted visits and sharing of experiences between NGOs in their own countries and with NGOs from other countries which were members of SAP. It gave priority to assist small and emerging NGOs both in Canada and India.

Within six years, 17 NGOs in Canada had established funding relations with over 300 small NGOs in South Asia; prior to this there were about 150 partners in South Asia and the growth was sluggish over several years. This was a major achievement and proved that SAP had responded to emerging trends. The strategy was to support a program through SAP for two years, with a possible repeat for a further two. During these four

years, the Canadian NGOs were expected to relate more closely with their counterparts and to decide whether the initial contact could develop into a long-term partnership.

The first SAP International Director was Mr. Richard Harmston. In 1982 I moved from CIDA to Myrada. The first secretariat of SAP in India was housed in Myrada and the first program officer of SAP for South India was Ms. Vidya Ramachandran, a colleague from Myrada. With SAP expanding both within and beyond India, I was not able to keep in touch with later developments. Besides I was too involved in building Myrada to devote much time to SAP after 1983. But SAP grew exponentially; it adapted to the requirements of each country. SAP's progress can be attributed in large part to consistent support it received from the Canadian International Development Agency.

SAP helped Myrada to think beyond its own narrow boundaries. It opened Myrada to the rich variety of experiences in the Voluntary sector both in India and in the surrounding countries. It fostered staff visits and exchanges between Myrada and NGOs in the network. Myrada staff who were recruited between 1983 and 1990, mostly from the rural areas, benefited from these exchanges.

The second program was called the Country Focus Program (CFP), which took shape in 1979-80 before SAP was grounded; it endeavored to:

- Give priority to and focus resources on areas which India had identified as its priorities;
- Leverage Indian government's resources which were allocated to promote and implement these priorities;
- Involve multiple stakeholders (namely the Government, Voluntary Agencies both in Canada and India, and people's institutions with traditional roots) in planning and implementing development programs;
- Nudge Canadian NGOs to work together so that they could allocate larger resources to these priority areas in a more coordinated and efficient manner;
- Include in CIDA NGO Division's portfolio (which till then was restricted to small loans to NGOs) a new category of larger loans; the funds would

be drawn from the Bi-lateral program which was also promoting the priorities identified by the Indian Government.

As far as I know, the CFP, unlike SAP, was implemented only in India. Three Country focus programs emerged during my stint with CIDA; they were managed by CIDA NGO Division: i) Alternative Energy sources—in this case, Biogas; ii) Development of drylands which were marginal, and iii) Social and Agroforestry. It was agreed that CIDA would provide funds in each case to a Canadian NGO who would in turn partner a major Indian NGO which had expertise in the sector and capacity to select and support NGOs throughout the country with management and technical skills if required. A brief description of these three CFPs follows. The focus here is to highlight new and innovative approaches in which I played a small part while in CIDA and from which Myrada benefitted.

Alternative Energy sources - Biogas: The Government of India had given this sector priority and had decided in the 70s to promote Biogas plants mainly for household use. This was not a new idea since the Gandhians had promoted biogas for several years. But with Government's push, it was stepped up in the late 1970s & 80s. A large majority of village households had farm animals. The Government decided to promote the use of waste to generate biogas and to use the slurry as manure. Better management of waste, it was expected, would improve sanitation and health. Both the Congress and the Janata Governments allocated significant resources to promote Biogas for domestic use. Subsidies were provided by the Government and the Banks came forward to provide loans. The CIDA-sponsored Country Focus Program leveraged these resources; it also provided funds for training masons, invested in improving existing models, and developing new and more efficient ones.

Two NGOs were involved as partners: The Canadian NGO was the Canadian Hunger Foundation and the Indian NGO was Action for Food Production (AFPRO). AFPRO in turn partnered with several NGOs all over India which implemented the program. Myrada was one of them. Overall coordination, training and monitoring was the responsibility of AFPRO. It resulted in thousands of biogas plants and was evaluated as a success.

Development of drylands especially Bhoodan Lands: The Indian Government realized that increase in acreage of land under irrigation from

river sources had limitations. Besides the marginal and poorer farmers owned largely drylands with no potential for flow irrigation. Investment, therefore, had to be made in drylands to increase their productivity through dryland farming technologies. The Canadian Government had accepted this strategy and had supported the Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture through a Bilateral program which was launched in 1970 and closed in 1987.

NGOs in both countries also realised the necessity to invest in drylands as a major strategy for poverty alleviation. With the support from the two Governments, the NGO initiatives found adequate space to enter this sector. This program fitted well into the country-focus strategy. Inter Pares a Canadian NGO and the Association of Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA), an Indian NGO based in Tamil Nadu, were the two partners in this Country Focus program.

ASSEFA was set up to develop degraded Bhoodan lands and to settle allottees on them. ASSEFA drew inspiration from two legendary Indian leaders: Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave. Vinobha launched the Bhoodan movement in Andhra Pradesh in 1951 as a strategy to persuade large landlords to gift land to the landless. Thousands of acres were gifted. But these donated lands were largely sub-marginal; hence they remained barren, as the allottees did not have the resources to develop them. This is where ASSEFA came in. In 1967 Giovanni Ermiglia a retired professor of philosophy from Italy and a Gandhian devotee arrived in India. With the strong support of S. Jaganathan a Gandhian leader who was involved with the landless, they took up a program to develop Bhoodan lands in Tamil Nadu which grew into ASSEFA.

Several Canadian NGOs like Inter Pares, Canadian Catholic Organisation for Development and Peace, Tibetan Refugee Aid Society, and CANSAVE came together to partner with ASSEFA under the Country Focus program model. This enabled the Canadian NGOs to access larger resources from CIDA and to co-ordinate their initiatives. A consortium of donors emerged which met yearly to assess ASSEFA's progress and plans. CIDA's objective of bringing together several NGO initiatives to focus on the priorities of the country was therefore achieved; it avoided overlap, helped ASSEFA to plan in advance and cut down on donor management costs.

But major challenges emerged with ASSEFA's growth and expansion. The first was the lack of trained and professional staff in agriculture, civil engineering, education, animal husbandry, project management and accounts. In the initial stages when the program was small and largely restricted to Tamil Nadu, Gandhian volunteers (also called Sarvodaya field workers) had managed these activities. But the demands of a major program spread over several States required more permanent and qualified staff, with higher salaries including all benefits required under various legislations. Donor provision in each project for this up-graded support was not adequate.

This is where CIDA-NGO division played a critical role; it provided a major grant to ASSEFA delinked from any particular project for a period of five years. This grant broke new ground. It did not support any particular project, but enabled ASSEFA to hire and retain professional staff in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, and soil conservation as well as teachers for its network of schools. This grant came under a new category entitled 'Institutional Support' which was a breakthrough concept in those days. I must admit that provision of grants for 'Institutional Support' of NGOs was an innovation which I strongly supported.

This Institutional Support grant however had one limitation. It ended in five years. How could the NGO manage to pay salaries after that? I decide to launch a major initiative after joining Myrada to convince donors that the allocation for salaries and administration in each project budget should be adequate to cover the cost of the staff engaged in the project as well as to contribute towards the costs of the Head Office. The Head Office had several responsibilities like ensuring compliance with government and audit regulations, financial management, staff development, fundraising, dealing with legal matters, etc. The NGOs from Europe and Canada were the first to accept this proposal. Some like Plan International based in the USA found it difficult to go along, but eventually did.

I also proposed to the Myrada Board that a Corpus Fund be created; only the interest of this fund would be used and that too for purposes approved and enshrined in a policy which governed the Corpus Fund. Donors would be requested to contribute directly towards the Corpus Fund and to specify that their grants were meant to build a corpus, the interest of

which can be used by the NGO only for its institutional requirements like training new staff, upgrading skills, recruiting specialists, providing staff salaries during the gap between two projects, hiring staff in response to requests by Government to enter new areas before donors were identified and to involve people in testing strategies before funds from donors were accepted. The rules of the Myrada Corpus Fund were passed by the Board of Myrada. Initial Contributions to the Corpus Fund of Myrada came from CIDA NGO Division and the Ford Foundation. Myrada staff, who were selected to provide support to programs in India and abroad funded by national and international donors, contributed a part of their consultancy fees to this corpus fund.

This strategy had a major impact on the financial stability of Myrada. It also enabled Myrada to take time to choose whether it would accept a project offered by a donor, as it was under no pressure to accept because of lack of funds for staff. The insights I gained from my involvement with this program of ASSEFA to develop drylands helped me conceptualise the watershed strategy which Myrada launched in 1985 in Gulbarga; it was called PIDOW (Participative Integrated Development of Watersheds).

The third program supported under the Country Focus model was the Social and Agro (Farm) Forestry program in Andhra Pradesh. A survey conducted by the Ministry of Environment, GOI, showed that between 1952 and 1973 nearly four million hectares of forest land was lost due to encroachment, submergence due to dams and re-settlement. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 promoted three objectives i) Protection and rejuvenation of forest lands; ii) re-greening of deforested and wastelands including private lands lying fallow, especially in drought-prone areas and iii) planting of trees which met the subsistence needs of the poor and those who depended on forest products for their livelihoods; trees providing fuel, fodder, fruits, fiber and raw materials were to be promoted. Apart from programs launched in reserved and protected forest areas which do not concern us here, several programs broadly divided between Social Forestry (with the participation of people and their institutions) and Agro/Farm forestry (on private lands) were launched. These programs were largely funded by the World Bank. CIDA decided in the early 80s to support a

Social and Agro/Farm Forestry Program in Andhra Pradesh under a Bilateral Agreement.

A study by CIDA staff in the late 1970s of ongoing forestry projects showed that Agro/Farm Forestry was the most successful component. Large number of farmers put all or part of their lands under trees for which there was a commercial demand. Social forestry, on the other hand, was successful in patches; it included plantations both on degraded forest and revenue lands and on village commons. The study showed that plantations on Government owned lands along roads, canals and railway tracks were broadly successful; Haryana was a good example. On the other hand, rehabilitation of degraded lands (under Forest or Revenue Depts) and commons surrounding villages, was largely a failure. Pilot projects allocating forest lands to tribals and landless who were given full rights to the use of land and produce were not implemented in all states. They were implemented with a degree of success in West Bengal and Gujarat.

The conclusions of the study indicated that for Social Forestry to succeed, especially on common lands, it required the collaboration or participation of Government Depts as well as of several non-Government stakeholders like NGOs and people's institutions like the Panchayati Raj, Forestry groups, Self-help Groups, etc. The Bilateral (Govt. to Govt.) program of CIDA in Andhra Pradesh endeavored to promote the objectives of the Forest Conservation act of 1980, especially the Social Forestry component. In order to implement this component, the program had to include several non-Government stakeholders in the design and implementation of the program. The design also had to include funding for these institutions. Funds were to be allocated in the Bilateral Agreement both for the programs of the Forest Department as well as for the programs of NGOs which would identify, train and finance these institutions of people. However, since it was a Bilateral Program the funds for the NGOs had to be routed through the Forest Department. This created a hurdle.

On one hand, the Forest Department informed CIDA that it could not transfer funds to NGOs. On the other, some NGOs in Andhra had widely criticized the Forest Department for its anti-people approach and its unwillingness to involve other stakeholders in its forestry programs; they were reluctant to receive funds from it.

CIDA finally decided to separate the two projects. The Bilateral project would provide funds directly to the Forest Department (through regular Government channels) while the funds for the NGOs would be routed using the Country Focus model, namely to a Canadian NGO which would transfer the funds to a partner Indian NGO. This NGO would in turn transfer the funds to the smaller NGOs and people's organisations involved in the program. A Country Focus Program was agreed to along these lines in 1982. A few months later I left CIDA NGO Division and joined Myrada. I applied to be the Indian NGO Partner, to which CIDA agreed. The Canadian counterpart selected was Hope International Development Agency (HIDA). The support from this program helped Myrada to survive financially during a very critical period and to enter the field of dryland development; it graduated into a holistic strategy of participatory watershed management.

Before signing the agreement with HIDA, however, I proposed one change in the Country Focus Program model. Instead of transferring funds from HIDA to Myrada for onward transfer to the smaller and local NGOs involved (as was done in the Biogas program), I proposed that HIDA transfers the funds directly to each NGO. To my mind, this would help to build a direct relationship between the Indian NGO and the Canadian one, which was the overall objective of the Canadian NGO Program. I was warned that this would reduce the level of control that Myrada could exert over the NGOs. In reply I said that control would be exercised through building trust and mutual respect, by close interaction and by providing timely professional support to solve the problems of NGOs. Control of finance was not exactly a weapon of control in my armory. In any case, if matters did not proceed as expected, Myrada could always advise HIDA to cut back or cut off the fund supply. CIDA agreed to this proposal since its objective was to build relationships with Indian NGOs and to support them to become professional and self-reliant. HIDA also envisioned a direct funding relationship with each NGO as a base for expanding partnerships.

The Pilot Project: From 1984 till 1988 Myrada supported a network of 12 NGOs involved in Social and Agro Forestry in Andhra Pradesh. This was called the Pilot project. Interestingly, during this period the South Asia Partnership also began to function with its secretariat for South India

housed in Myrada. This brought several other Canadian NGOs in direct contact with NGOs in Andhra Pradesh and helped to build the skills and infrastructure of these Organisations. Most of them were added to the Forestry network when it expanded after 1988.

The number of NGOs joining the social/agro forestry program grew and with it the range of diversity in terms of strengths, weaknesses and plans for the future. In Oct 1987-8 an evaluation report recommended that HIDA strengthen its involvement by placing one of its staff in India to: i) assist Myrada in coordinating and supporting the program; ii) establish links between the Country Focus program and the program of the Forestry Department of Andhra which was also supported by CIDA Bilateral Program and iii) improve the communication and reporting from India to HIDA's Headquarters in Vancouver. It also recommended that the project could move into Phase 1.

Phase 1 of the Country Focus Program ran from 1989 to 1994. A HIDA representative was placed in Bangalore and worked out of the Myrada office. During Phase 1 the program partnered with 24 NGOs and 789 Self Help Groups. During Phase 2, which covered the period from 1994 till 1999, the same number of villages were covered as in Phase 1, but the number of Self-Help Groups almost doubled as people's participation became a more institutionalized feature. Interaction with the Forestry Department also picked up with the local officers participating in Participatory Rural Appraisal exercises to plan and implement various components of the program. The Forest Department also provided training to people in grafting skills and in maintenance of nurseries. The sustainability of the livelihood base was also given importance through an integrated strategy of watershed development with the participation of people's institutions.

During my stint with CIDA NGO Division, we had several visitors from Canada. A copy of a letter written in 1980 by the Minister of Culture of the Province of Alberta who visited India was shared with me. I am reproducing it here primarily because it differs from the letter the Executive Director of Caritas wrote to the High Commissioner of Canada when I was offered a job in 1976. If I may be allowed to recall, this letter accused me of indiscipline and insubordination. I referred to this letter earlier but without comment. However, after proceeding with my life story (which I

started in February 2016) it struck me that I was more 'in-disciplined' than I realised when I was in Caritas. I was young, lobbied for change too fast in a traditional structure that moved slowly and rather abrupt in my dealings, especially with those who did not come forward to support change. Here is the letter from the Minister of Culture.

403/427-4928

Office of the Minister of CULTURE

402 Legislative Building,

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

T5K 286

December 18, 1980

Mr. Marcel Masse, President

Canada International Development Agency

200 Promenade du Protage

Hull, Quebec

K1A 0G4

Dear Mr. Masse:

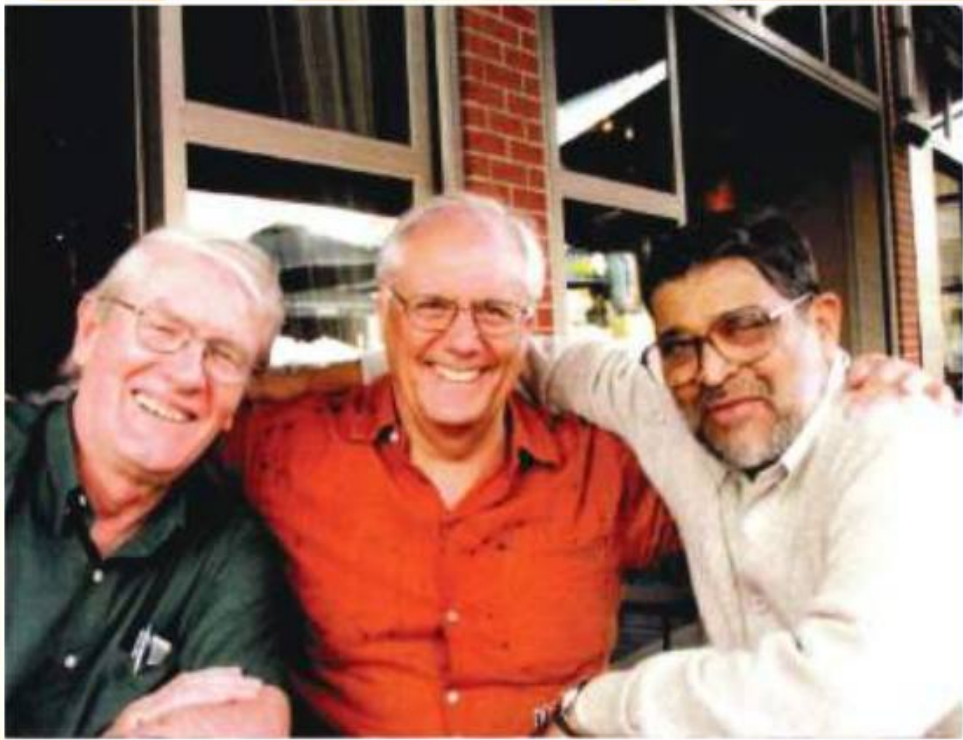
I have recently completed a three-week trip through Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, Nepal and India in which, for the most part, excluding Japan, I was visiting International Aid projects, funded jointly by non-governmental organizations in Alberta, the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada.

In India, our itinerary was arranged by CIDA representative, Mr. Aloysius Fernandez. I was so impressed by Mr. Fernandez's abilities, his sincerity and his deep understanding of development that I felt that I should write to you, as so often one does not hear positive comments. I think Canada is very fortunate to have such a fine person working on our behalf in India. He certainly can do nothing but give Canada, CIDA and our involvement in International Aid, a good name.

Yours sincerely,

Mary J. LeMessurier





With Richard-first Director of South Asia Partnership



With Romeo Maione in Tamil Nadu



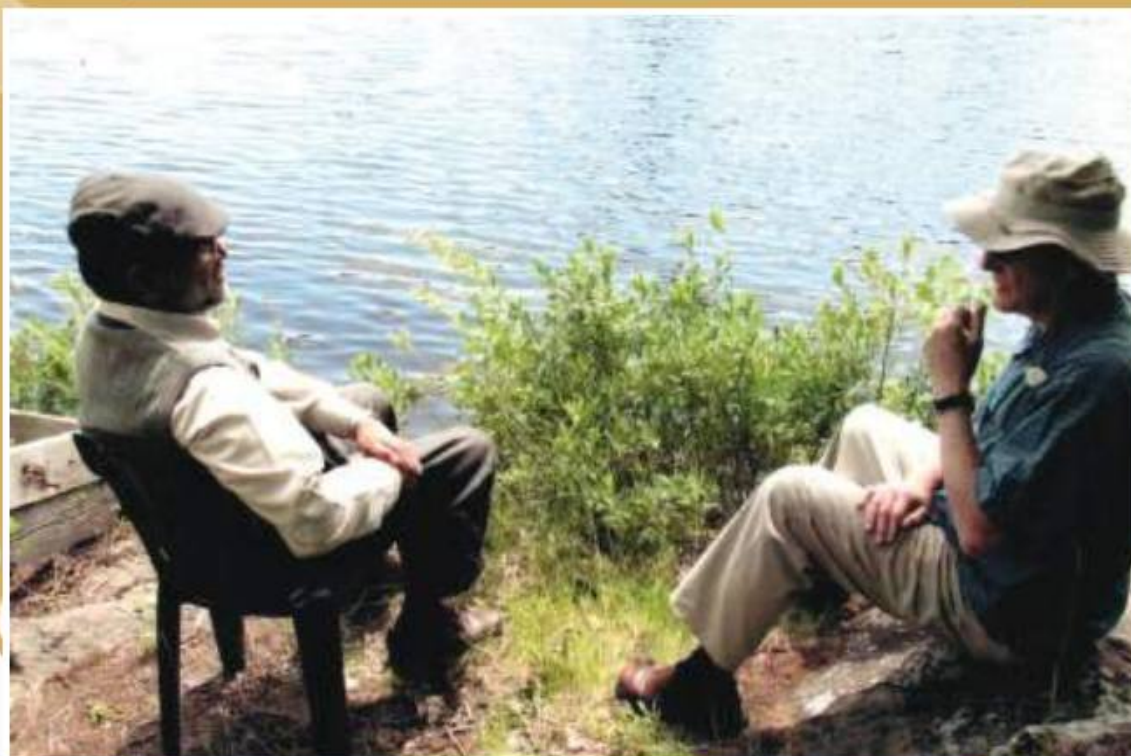
With ASSEFA (Bill Davinson ED Myrada, Centre, Jagganathan Gandhian to his left



CIDA Officers at SRFS Function - Chief Minister S.M. Krishna and Mrs Rohini Nilekani also seen



With President of CIDA Ms. Margaret Biggs in Ottawa



With Rod in Canada. "He leads me beside still waters" (Ps. 23)



CHAPTER 12

Our family life in Delhi and Bangalore up to 2018. *(My response to questions 7 & 8 posed in Chapter 1)*

In earlier Chapters I narrated my story; they also focus on my parents and grandparents who played an important role in my earlier life. But my story is not complete without a chapter on the roles that my wife Dipika and her family members played in what was, perhaps, the most constructive part of my life. I had put the period of 'disturbance' behind me by 1977. Thereafter, without the support of Dipika and her family, I would not have been able to devote my time and attention to pursue my mission to raise one million rural poor above the poverty line. While we lived in Delhi from 1978 to 1982, both Dipika and I were employed. I with CIDA and she as the country representative of a Dutch Garment Company called Scorpi Fashion. A gifted artist and a geography teacher (M.A, B.Ed.), she was known for her creative designs and her ability to build a network of small garment manufacturing companies in the country. She had to travel both in India and abroad. Her income helped us to build up savings which would enable us to cope with any decision I took to pursue my career in rural development, which in those days did not offer good salaries.

Dipika's parents lived in village Basharatpur, on the outskirts of Gorakhpur, U.P., in a large homestead of three acres covered with fruit trees; they were surrounded by relatives and kept an open house. Her mother qualified as a teacher from Kinnade College, Lahore. Before her marriage she taught in St. Thomas School, Shimla. The St. Thomas School in Delhi was started by her in the veranda of a building in Connaught Circus. After her marriage, she settled in Basharatpur. She was employed as a teacher in St Mary's Convent, Gorakhpur, run by the Apostolic Carmel Sisters whose headquarters is in Mangalore. She was Vice Principal of St. Mary's for many years. While in Gorakhpur she played several roles in the

Panchayati institutions. She moved to Delhi, when we returned from the UK to manage our home and to care for the youngest child, Niharika, as Dipika was travelling often.

During our stay in Delhi, she played an important role in helping us to settle in. She was an excellent chef, adept at getting the children to do their homework (she was a mathematics teacher) and a caring and selfless person. No problem was insurmountable for her. She overcame them all with grit and a smile. I am accustomed to travel light and to pick up food on the way. She was just the opposite. For our travel by train from Delhi to Gorakhpur or vice versa; she would ensure that there was adequate bedding, a "surai" for drinking water while on the train and different types of food for three days, covering our journey and a day after we reached.

Dipika's father, who was in the Railways settled in Basharatpur, his ancestral village, where he had constructed a house. Throughout his career, he was involved in the independence movement. He raised funds for freedom fighters like Suraj Nath Pandey and Ram Prasad Bismil, both from U.P. He was an active Trade unionist and was elected as Secretary of the Oudh Trihut Railways Trade Union. He took Indian history as a special subject when graduating from Ewing Christian College Allahabad. A keen sportsman, he won the Tennis Championship. He was the captain of the Oudh Trihut Railways Football Team. After retirement he served the people of his area as President of the Panchayat for many years; it was said that no poor person came to him for help and went away empty handed. He moved to Delhi to stay with us and later accompanied us to Bangalore. After his wife passed away, he decided to stay with his son Ranjit and his wife Rita in Jamshedpur. As was the custom of many men from Gorakhpur, he carried a gun when he slept outdoors during summer and whenever he travelled by train. This was noticed by people in Vasant Vihar, Delhi. Our house in Vasant Vihar was often referred to as 'Gorakhpur House' by the vegetable vendors, many of whom were from U.P. Houses next door were burgled; ours remained safe.

My wife's brother Ranjit (Ranu) was an XLRI alumnus and employed with Tatas in Jamshedpur. He retired as Director of Personnel (Mines and Collieries) of Tata Iron and Steel Company. He was a happy, adventurous person and one of the best people I knew in handling people, especially in

times of tension. We exchanged visits regularly. His wife Rita (nee Ratna) and their two children Roopa and Ruchi live in Delhi after Ranjit passed away in June 2012. Rita has several brothers, one of whom Arun Ratna and his wife Kusum became close family friends; they were a great support to us in the early days in Delhi.

Our three children (Dipti, Ashish and Niharika) grew up together. Dipti was 12 years older than Niharika and promptly 'adopted' her. We used to joke that Dipti was her mother and Dipika her grandmother. Dipti protected Niharika from any discipline which we had to administer from time to time. Niharika, of course, would always stand by her 'didi' Dipti. With Ashish who was two years younger than Dipti, the relations were what one commonly observes between growing siblings. They would fight between themselves but stand together against everyone else. Being older, Dipti initially got the better of Ashish till he grew taller.

One example of the bond between Dipti and Niharika still remains in my memory. Both Dipika and I were working at that time in Delhi. I came home first to discover a pregnant silence and sensed that something was not quite in order. On questioning, I discovered that Dipti and Ashish had a scuffle and Ashish was getting the better of his sister. This was when Niharika, a little over three years, picked up an old pair of scissors and flung it at him. It hit him on the upper arm exactly with the pointed end and left a bleeding gash. The two sisters escorted him to a doctor friend who lived close by in Vasant Vihar and then cleaned the floor which had a lot of blood. Ashish carries the scar and showed it to Niharika's husband Sunil after they were married!

Anticipating that my work in the voluntary sector would not provide financial support after I retired, we had to save more than the accepted norm. This entailed reducing holidays and non-essential expenditure. We had to make investments in a balanced portfolio which would minimise our risks and provide us with support in the future. With our earnings we were able to pay for a three-bedroom Delhi Development Authority (DDA) flat in Munirka, New Delhi, which I had booked before leaving for the UK; it was allotted to us shortly after we returned. We also purchased a small farm on the borders of UP and Delhi in the Dadri revenue circle where we had a small cottage, a large pond for rearing fish and a biogas plant. We

spent many happy and eventful weekends with friends on this farm. When we moved to Bangalore, we decided to sell these properties.

With the proceeds of these sales, we were able to invest in small properties in and around Bangalore at low rates which prevailed in the 1980s. One of the properties was a 4 acre farm on Hennur road which was a piece of dryland when we purchased it for Rs 50,000 in 1981. We installed in 1983-4 a low-cost drip irrigation system manufactured locally by a friend who had a plastic factory; we grew a variety of fruit trees. We built a small cottage on this farm with doors and windows from old homes which were being pulled down in Bangalore. I also decided to try my hand in planting groundnuts (a cash crop which was popular with many dryland farmers in Myrada's projects) and in rearing a few sheep and poultry birds; this hands-on experience taught me a great deal. We had to sell the farm in Bangalore in 1995 when I decided to leave Myrada and join the World Bank in Washington. We also invested in a two bed room flat in Richmond Town, in a plot in Domlur Layout and in another plot in Rainbow Drive on Sarjapur Road. On both plots houses were gradually built.

We moved to Bangalore from Delhi in late 1982. The first five years in Bangalore were challenging for all of us. Dipika continued to work with Scorpi Fashion for 2 to 3 years. I was fully involved with Myrada, building up its financial resources, recruiting staff, infusing a new mission, meeting people in the villages and responding to new development challenges in different parts of Karnataka, Andhra and Tamil Nadu. I was on call 24/7. Dipika's mother managed our home till she passed away in 1985 on a visit to Gorakhpur.

By the late 1980s, I had to make choices. The financial support that the family required was rising, due to the increasing range of school and extra-curricular activities; I had to find ways to supplement my income. The new challenges that Myrada faced and the constant need to raise funds took up most of my time and energy, leaving little quality time for the family. Many professional managers speak of the need to maintain a work-life balance. In these early years, I did not find any way of keeping this balance. Myrada came first; the responsibility of managing the family was borne by my wife Dipika and her mother. Today many friends who knew my family in those

early days, recount the experiences they had and add that I was never on the scene!

I realised that there is no such thing as work-life balance for a person with limited resources. One has to choose and to cope with the consequences as best as one can. An extended family is a major support in the strategy to cope, and I was fortunate to have one. But there are still demands from family members, especially to devote quality time for them, which one cannot meet adequately. One has to live with this situation. My visit with Vinoba Bhave before I joined Myrada helped to cope. His advice was that the family should be provided with certain basic facilities so that we would be free to devote ourselves fully to our work. Accordingly, I requested Myrada to provide me with a house and a car with a driver which could be used by the family. Fortunately, the goddesses blessed all of us with good health.

I had informed the Myrada Board that once Myrada was stabilised, I should be given the facility of accepting consultancies which came my way from the World Bank, IFAD, UNDP and other international institutions. After 1990, I did accept a few consultancies in India and abroad, which helped to meet the increasing requirements of a growing family. These consultancies also enabled me to replicate successful strategies that had emerged in Myrada and to open opportunities for other Myrada staff to undertake consultancies in these programs. All of us contributed to the Myrada Corpus Fund from our earnings. These consultancies improved our family income. But as a family, we were still cocooned in the development circle in which I was comfortable; but neither Dipika or the children were able to build relationships in this circle; they had to break out.

Dipika required support to settle down in Bangalore. Brought up and educated in Uttar Pradesh, she expected to be a complete misfit in Bangalore. Her relatives were all in the north; she knew that my parents who lived in Bangalore were not supportive. She reluctantly went along with my decision to leave the Canadian High Commission in Delhi and move to Bangalore to take over a voluntary organisation where risk and instability were high. In fact, the Chairman of Myrada the distinguished Shri V. Nanjappa (ICS Rtd.), who lived close to us in Vasant Vihar in Delhi, told us clearly that Myrada had run out of steam (he included ideas and funds). It was formed

to resettle Tibetan refugees and now that the program is over, was hard pressed for funds. This was a challenge I was made aware of and which I accepted; Dipika found this unsettling. She had to find friends who could be supportive.

In the late 1980s, an opportunity arose to build new relationships to broaden the support base of the family. I was invited to join the Rotary Club of Bangalore Cantonment in 1988; it was a mid-size club of Rotarians, who took their commitment to Rotary seriously. My initial visits to the Club events showed that the members were from all parts of India; they meshed well, had excellent fellowship, especially during committee meetings at members' homes, and were committed to helping those who needed their support. We decided to join. On my part, the reason was that I was getting too involved with development issues and people in this sector and felt the need to open out. Dipika agreed to join because she found that she could relate with a wide group of people many of whom came from Hindi-speaking areas. These relationships have lasted till today. I had to leave the Rotary Club, of which I was the President twice, since I found driving in the late evenings for meetings difficult, with Bangalore's increasing and chaotic traffic. But I was honoured to be made an Honorary Rotarian, which dispenses me from having to observe certain obligations, but keeps the door open for participation in Rotary meetings, programs and social gatherings.

Looking back, I find that by the early 1990s, Dipika had settled down in Bangalore; she started painting again and took part in the events of the Rotary with gusto. She excelled in water and oil painting and produced several works including one (in 1991-2) from a photograph which was taken in 1971 of the Bangladesh refugees. I have given pride of place to this painting because of its attention to detail and vivid expression; it also brings back memories of an event which changed my life. She also learned Tanjavur art. One of her creations in this form is that of the Infant Jesus and the other of Lord Ganesha. Dipika made it clear that her home was open to all her children and close relatives. No matter what problems they faced or mistakes they made, the children were always welcome, no explanations were required. She made every effort to keep the family together.

In my defence, I must say that as the years passed, I found time to come home by 5-6 pm and on several occasions took the family for outings to

an open-air theatre where we had dinner while we watched a movie. The Catholic Club was popular with the children; it was and remains a family club, where the children were comfortable and we can keep an eye on them. In nine out of ten visits to the Club, the family accompanied me. By the time we became members of Bangalore Club, the children had left home. As the grandchildren came along the Catholic Club once again became popular with the family.

By the mid 1990s Myrada had grown; this created problems which we had not foreseen. As a result of Myrada's mission to build and empower poor people's institutions, the vested interests (which were affected adversely when these institutions opened spaces hitherto under their control), contrived to use politicians to harass Myrada and me personally whom they held responsible. A few staff of Myrada with political ambitions supported them. Their threats took the shape of filing false cases against me, daily phone calls threatening my wife with dire consequences and physical attacks on Myrada's office. These occurred in the mid 1990s.

Two incidents were greatly disturbing for my family though the impact on Myrada was well controlled by the support of the Self Help Groups in all the projects. One incident was in Sira (Karnataka) and the other in Madakasira (Andhra Pradesh). Both incidents were led by the Project Officers (Shantaram in Sira and Satish Kumar in Madakasira) and a small group of supporters. Both of them had political ambitions, to which I strongly objected. The objective of their attempt was to become independent in order to give them freedom to pursue their political ambitions. Unfortunately for them both failed to achieve their political objectives. But in the process, they caused considerable distress to me and my family. It was these incidents which prompted me to move to be World Bank in Washington in 1995. These are the only two project areas from which Myrada withdrew completely.

By the mid 1990s, Myrada had built up a wide base of people's institutions including 16,000 SHGs in its projects; they reacted to this harassment. The originators of these threats were traced back to senior politicians who were wrongly informed (or so they confessed to me later, with an apology) by their supporters. The SHGs neutralised the abuse of power by these politicians. My salute to Dipika and the family for standing up to these threats from cowards who hid behind people they paid to protest

and who were behind the anonymous telephone calls at night, most of them under the influence of liquor. Yet I should have anticipated these threats, as I had sufficient knowledge of events elsewhere where leaders of voluntary organisations were attacked and even killed when their intervention was perceived to challenge the local vested interests. What saved Myrada and me was the strong base of people's institutions which played a major role in terminating these threats.

Senior Congress politicians from Kalambela and Chitradurga who supported Shantaram's initiative to organise several lorry loads of people from Sira to attack Myrada's office and to proceed to my home, also lobbied with the Central Government, which at that time was led by the Congress, to send a team of auditors to investigate Myrada. We welcomed them and provided all support. Their findings were objective; they were not swayed by any political bias, resulting in an "all clear" sign from the Centre. The local Police also realised that the cases filed against me for beating a Harijan and a "hit and run" accusation were false, because I was far away from the places when the F.I.R. recorded that these instances had occurred. A consoling feature however was that except for two politicians who were obliged to support vested interests in their constituencies against Myrada, the majority of them together with the administration both at the State and the Centre knew of our work and supported us.

However, it was this unsettling experience that promoted me to take up a position in the World Bank in Washington in the mid-1990s. Dipika argued that as long as I was happy in Myrada she was willing to manage within our limited resources; but since the situation was stressful, why not opt for a more remunerative post? I moved to the World Bank in Washington. My successor in Myrada, Col. Ashok, however, informed me after a year that he would like to leave. Once again, I had to choose- Stay in the World Bank or return. With the consent of the Myrada Board I returned to Myrada in 1996 and continued as Executive Director for the next fifteen years. During this period, I was awarded the Padmashree in 2000 when Shri Vajpayee was PM and the Caritas Millenium Award in the same year. Dipika, Dipti, and Niharika accompanied me when I received the Padma award in the Ashoka Hall; it was a moving experience.

By 2001 our three children were married. Dipti, the eldest married Harry D'Souza; she lives about a kilometre away from us. She is there to support us when we are unwell or need extra help. She has two children; the elder one, Sandip, was a boarder for five years in Montfort school, Yercaud T.N.; he is now in the Merchant Navy. He is a member of the Wildlife Association of South India and is any avid angler. He is a regular visitor to the fishing camp in Shivasamudram and goes on long treks looking for the masheer. The younger one, Namrata did her B. Com. in St. Joseph's, worked for a few years in Goldman Sachs and is presently employed in Janalakshmi Financial Services. They live close to us and drop in regularly.

Ashish the second child married Sucheta (Bunty) Rao from Mangalore; they are Canadian citizens. They have a lovely home in Vancouver. They have two children. Chirag the eldest is in Fraser University and Disha, who is in High School. Ashish was also an angler and enjoyed camping. He was working for TEREX when he passed away suddenly in early 2016. His family is slowly pulling itself together and has been able to cope, thanks to benefits from insurance and the foresight of Ashish who created an education fund, as well as with Bunty taking up a job.

Our youngest child Niharika is married to Sunil Machiah, from Coorg. They live in Papua New Guinea and have two children. The elder named Aaryan is a boarder in Toowoomba, Australia, not far from Brisbane; the younger one Anika (born in 2011) is the darling of the family, whose members demand daily photographs of her antics. Sunil is the son of Shri B.C. Ponappa (who is the eldest of 14 siblings) and Sundari who has two brothers. Sunil, therefore, has a large family of uncles, aunties and cousins; his sister Shanti lives with her parents.

After it was discovered in 2015 that I had Hodgkin's, I began to reflect on the previous 30 years in Myrada. I realised how much more of my time and attention I was able to give the people I worked with in the villages, because my family did not demand my presence. Till then my fierce independence prevented me from acknowledging this. My wife and her mother had supported me all these years, but I did not have the humility or insight to consider this support as my dependence on them. I took it for granted. Dipika had followed me every time I changed my career choices. Her most difficult shift was from Delhi to Bangalore. Throughout my involvement

in development, Dipika never asked anything more from me other than to inform her about my whereabouts and to come home and spend some time with her. Initially, she would wait till I came home to join me for dinner. It took me a while to persuade her not to follow this good Indian custom.

During my treatment for Hodgkin's (2015-16) which included fifteen chemo therapy sessions with gaps of two weeks between each, I had to depend almost entirely on my family, mainly my wife and eldest daughter Dipti who moved in to help full time. They took over and managed my daily life, an experience I never had before. They stood by, assisting me night and day. Dipika and Dipti took on several responsibilities, like arranging appointments with doctors, accompanying me during my many visits to the hospitals, ensuring adequate supply of medicines and giving them to me at the correct time, maintaining records of doctors' reports and accounts, responding to my shifting appetites, keeping the family informed about daily events, managing visitors, and more than anything else, coping with my moods which swung widely. This sense of dependence was new to me and I took some time to adjust to it. During this period of my illness, Sandip, Dipti's son enrolled for courses in the Eurotech Maritime Academy in Cochin. He also played a supporting role. All he required was a long weekend to catch a night bus to reach Bangalore.

I am, what one could call, a people's person. I need to meet, exchange ideas and experiences and to communicate regularly. Friends from afar, from whom I had not heard for 20 years, called to provide their support and prayers for my recovery. I began to wonder whether my illness was a blessing in disguise. Without it, I would not have got in touch with them, although memories of our work and relationships still remained strong. My friends living in Bangalore and staff from Myrada's head office and projects played an important role during my illness. They visited whenever it was mutually convenient; their visits were the tonic I needed; they brought various foods which they thought would help to get me back on my feet as soon as possible. I cannot express my gratitude adequately.

To add to the stress on my wife and daughter, our son Ashish passed away in Canada of a heart attack on January 26, 2016, during my treatment for Hodgkin's. None of us could go to Vancouver. Malti, Dipika's cousin who lives in California rushed to Vancouver to represent us. The flood of

phone calls and messages was heavy. It was a difficult period for the family, especially for my wife; at the time of writing, we are still trying to cope with this loss. Ashish could not come to Bangalore though he tried his best after he heard of my illness. He had taken up a new post with TEREX and could not get long leave so soon. He planned to come later in 2016.

After 2005, my concern to find a successor in Myrada increased; I was fortunate to find Arvind Risbud who took premature retirement from the IAS in 2009 and joined as Executive Director of Myrada.¹ This reduced the time and travel that I had devoted to Myrada and relieved me of the strain of managing over 500 staff and the demands of a large NGO. Just then Nabard offered me the position of Chairman of Nabard Financial Services Ltd. (NABFINS) which had emerged in its new avatar. I was the first Chairman for about years with the additional responsibility of being the Professional Adviser, for which I was paid. To my good fortune as Chairman of NABFINS, a Government institution, I was also entitled to health insurance; this helped me considerably during my treatment for cancer. NABFINS is indebted to C.P. Mohan, the first CEO who dared to support innovations which built a strong foundation.

I was also requested by the Board to continue as Member Secretary of Myrada and was given an office in 'Myrada House', Domlur Layout, which was purchased with the help of a loan from Syndicate Bank in 1985/6. I was allowed to stay in the flat in Richmond Town which we constructed between 1994-96 on a plot donated by Mrs Bush who left India after Independence. Hence the apartment is named BUSHCROFT in gratitude. Myrada was given four flats by the builder in this apartment of eleven flats. We were not able to get possession of this property even after a protracted legal battle, because the house on it was occupied by a tenant. The builder however solved this problem. I am grateful to the Board of Myrada for this support, but will move out when I cannot contribute anything more to the organisation, or when Myrada decides that I should leave.

I go to the Myrada office every day for 3 to 4 hours and assist in programs when required. As Member Secretary of Myrada, I do have responsibilities

¹ I first met him when he was the Registrar of Bangalore University and when I was a Member of the University Syndicate.

to report to the Board and to organise its meetings. I continue to be the Chairman of Sanghamithra, the not-for-profit Microfinance Institution which I founded in 1995. It extends loans for livelihoods to the SHGs promoted by Myrada as well as to SHGs promoted by other organisations. My book "50 Years of Learning" and several articles have brought requests for discussions and seminars which keep my mind active.

The Chairman Shri M.S.Meenakshisundaram has been on Myrada's Board since 1986, when he held the post of Secretary, Rural Development in the Government of Karnataka. He comes to Myrada's Head Office almost daily. We have ample opportunities for discussion together with the Executive Director, Shri Arvind Risbud, on matters relating to Myrada as well as to the wider area of Government and the Private Sector which have an impact on the country's growth, on the rural poor, and on social stability; this helps to place Myrada's interventions where they strategically matter. Arvind has carried Myrada to new heights. Our grants from the private sector under CSR have increased significantly, thanks to his efforts and the reputation for success and transparency in Myrada's ecosystem. I am grateful to the Chairman, Executive Director and members of the Board for giving me space to be involved.

I still, however, play an active role in Sanghamithra Rural Financial Services (SRFS). I founded Sanghamithra in 1995 as a Not-for-profit Micro Finance Institution, a Section 25 Company which later became Section 8; it was perhaps the first in the country. It was started to provide credit directly to SHGs especially in remote rural areas where the Banks did not or could not promote the SHG-Bank Linkage program. When the Banks were able to provide adequate credit, Sanghamithra withdrew. (Please see my book "Sangamithra, a MFI with a Difference").

After 2010, however, I have become increasingly uncomfortable with the micro finance ecosystem which has expanded exponentially; it has become more rigid and unable to customise to the diversity of livelihood activities in the informal sector where it largely operates. Further, in many cases, it has adopted the features of the private sector where profit is maximized; making a reasonable profit which is accepted as a norm has morphed into profiteering. Interest rates are surging making investment

by tiny entrepreneurs unviable² Salaries of top executives are comparable to the private sector. Priority in the NBFC-MFI sector is given to reduce the risk and increase profits of the Micro finance institutions, largely through technology. Hardly any investment is made in reducing the risks of the borrowers even though the size of the loans has increased, thereby increasing the risk even to the lenders. One way to reduce risk of borrowers is to provide adequate support services to clients after they take a large loan. SRFS works in partnership with Community Managed Resource Centers (CMRCs) which are federations of SHGs, with NGOs, staff on Myrada's projects and the Myrada Krishi Vigyan Kendra; these partners provide some of these support services; but much more has to be done. SRFS is exploring ways to provide larger loans of Rs 2 lacs and above at reduced interest rates, together with support services (which SRFS will fund under its CSR program), after the loan is provided; this will enable the client to use it efficiently with reduced risk. A pilot research project in collaboration with Harvard University, USA to elicit insights into these issues is being finalised.

I started writing this narrative in 2016 and finished in 2018. I had more time for the family after my term in NABFINS ended, but the family does not need it, as the children have married and left home. I guess this is one of the ironies of life. Dipika is involved as a member of several women's groups; some members share their skills; others organise social events and help one another in sickness or when any need arises; all interact on WhatsApp. Unable to travel to the projects frequently, the cell phone and WhatsApp groups keep me abreast of daily events on Myrada's projects.

I am happy to be with people who have, in their own way, spent time and resources to trigger change which makes the lives of the poor a little better, the environment a little healthier and with those who promote a quality of governance that builds people's trust in an ethical, liberal democratic process; these people come from all religions and castes. I am comfortable to be with those who endeavour to build relations of trust among groups and do not 'other' anyone. Forgive me, but I am not comfortable with those

² Under the SHG Bank Linkage program, Banks extended a bulk loan directly to SHGs at an interest rate of about 11%. The NBFC-MFIs which have become major players in the micro credit sector borrow from Banks and on-lend to clients; they levy interest rates ranging from 22% to 28 %.

who endeavour to save souls, who claim stridently that their set of beliefs is the ONLY path to paradise, who claim to be chosen by the gods to perform religious ceremonies or take pride in being 'pure' in food habits and find others untouchable. I am impatient with those who believe that the sole objective of life is to 'have a good time'. I am not concerned whether I will rest in peace after this life or travel through others. I am grateful to the Supreme being for giving me the opportunity to accomplish what I selected as my mission in life and to my colleagues, friends and family who supported me to fulfil it. The rising sun generates energy and is worshipped; the setting sun descends unnoticed below the horizon. I have had a full life, written my own bible. When the time comes, I pray that I may descend quietly below the horizon.

Autumn Leaf

*I asked the leaf if it was frightened
Because it was autumn and the other
Leaves were falling.
The leaf answered: "NO. During the
Whole spring and summer I was Completely alive,
I worked hard to help
Nourish the tree, and now
Much of me is in the tree.
I am not limited by this form"
I am also the whole tree.
When I go back to the soil
I will continue to nourish the tree.
So don't worry at all.
As I leave the branch and float to the ground,
I will wave to the tree and tell her,
I will see you again very soon.
That day a wind came blowing and
A while later I saw the leaf leave the branch
And float down to the soil dancing joyfully, because
As it floated it saw itself already there in the tree.
I was so happy, I bowed my head;
Knowing that I had a lot to learn.*

Thich Nhat Han

Dipika's
parents.



Dipika's extended Family



Ranjit (Dipika's
brother) and
Rita



With my
brother
Raymond

Dipti's family



Ashish's family



Niharika's family





Sandip then



Sandip now



Namrata then



Namrata now; off to work



Chirag then



Chirag now - the nerd



Disha then - first steps



Disha now



Aaryan then



Aaryan - at home on the course



Anika then



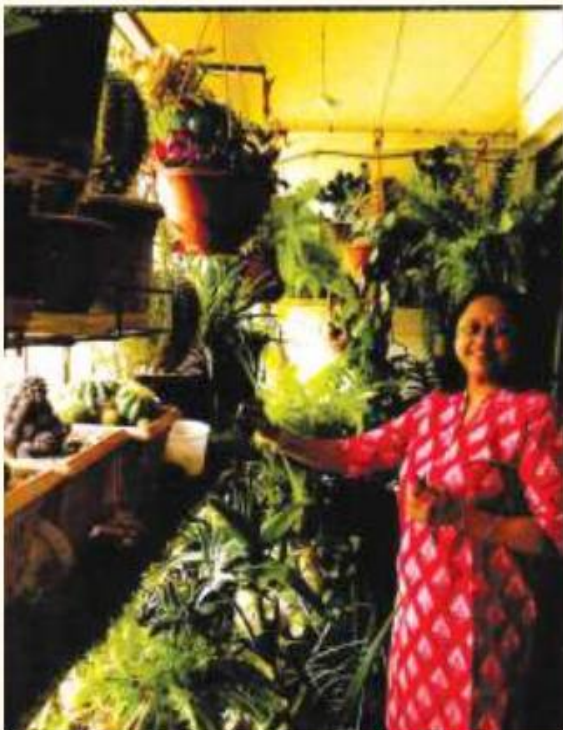
Anika now with her pets



All six grandchildren



Dipti and Ashish then



Dipti with her garden of
140 potted plants





Niharika then



and now - confirmed Coorg



Dipika in front of her ancestral home

Sunil with his father (Bharat), mother (Sundari) and paternal Grandmother who was blessed with fourteen children



Mrs. Indira Gandhi with Dipika and cricket administrators.

Padmashree Award 2000



Caritas
Millenium
Award 2000



My
favourite
PM and
Actor



Our farm
house in
Bangalore





With Self
Help Group
in Indonesia

Ssri Nijalingappa,
former CM
thanks MYRADA
for its work in
Chitradurga Dist.





Blessings from Shri Veerendra Heggade, Dharmadhikari of Sri Kshetra Dharamsthala. Dr. Heggade is the head of a religious institution that draws millions of Devotees; he is a leader in the field of education and social service. Dharmasthala stands as a place of religious tolerance and as a Kalpavruksha for those who come in need. Sri D.V. Sadananda Gowda C.M. looks on benevolently.



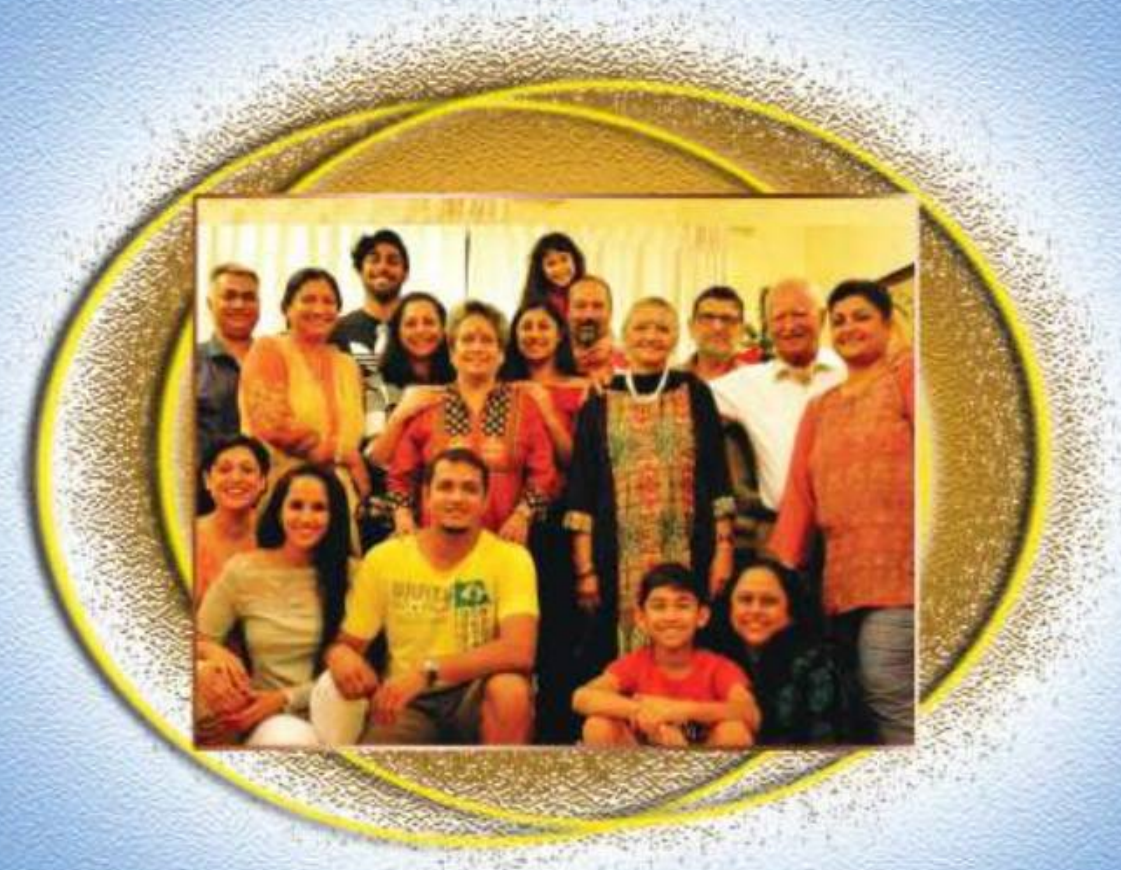
“It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth; this defiles a man.” - Jesus Christ

This message is especially relevant today when those who profess to be “pure vegetarians” are spouting hatred of others who do not share their beliefs and practices. In the past, one saw Boards on Hotels - “Vegetarian” and “Non-Vegetarian”. This was acceptable. Today the word “Pure” is increasingly prefixed to the word “Vegetarian”. Does this not introduce a moral dimension into food? I have never seen a Hotel marked “Pure Non-Vegetarian”. Is Non-vegetarian then, by its very nature, morally impure? This trend fosters differences between communities and strengthens tensions which could lead to marginalisation of those who follow non-vegetarian practices. These tensions will in turn encourage social conflict leading to insecurity and declining investment in some areas where conflict is continuously simmering just below the surface.

“The cow does not give milk to him who sits on its back; it gives milk to him who squats (humbly) at its feet” - Basavanna.

A very relevant message to those involved with the poor and marginalised. They live in the informal economy and have survived in situations where high risk and market forces prevail. If the poor have survived they must be good managers. They have strengths; interveners need to build on these strengths. To do this they need to sit with them at their level and in situations where they are comfortable, to listen to them, to empathise with them. This will support the poor to craft their own strategies to overcome obstacles to growth which will be sustainable. Pre-conceived solutions and strategies imposed by ‘experts’ from on top will fail as soon as the interveners withdraw.

THE MEANDERINGS OF A DISTURBED INDIAN



Aloysius Prakash Fernandez