

## **The Father of Dalit Literature No More** **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

“Father Varghese, I have read in the newspapers yesterday that Mr. Joseph Macwan has been admitted to the Kidney Hospital in Nadiad with the failure of both his kidneys. Father, I would like to give my kidney to him. You please help me. What do I have to do and where do I go to give my kidney?” A student of our Correspondence Course on Jesus Christ, from Kudol a village in Banaskantha, Mr. Rajeshbhai Modhpatel was on the line.

While appreciating the generosity of Rajeshbhai to give his kidney to a great writer whom both he and I admired, I gave him the sad news that Joseph Macwan was no more. He died in the Kidney Hospital while undergoing dialysis and I paid him homage and attended his funeral in Anand, late evening on the previous day, March 28, 2010.

Though Joseph was a fearless fighter the end came very fast. His doctors in Anand found that both his kidneys had failed and he was sent to the Kidney Hospital in Nadiad on March 26. Newspapers, Radio and television channels carried the news that a well known writer and National Sahitya Academy Award winner Mr. Joseph Macwan was admitted to the Kidney Hospital in Nadiad with the failure of both his kidneys.

Joseph had phoned me in the third week of February enquiring if I had finished the article which I was writing about him at the request of his friends who were preparing a book as part of his Platinum Jubilee on October 9, 2010. On the phone Joseph told me that he was very sick and he earnestly requested me to pray for him.

Earlier on January 2, I had written to him giving him the first three paragraphs of my article on him and requesting him for an appointment in connection with the article I was writing. He showed great enthusiasm in what I had written and he profusely congratulated me as never before for my introductory paragraphs which I quote here.

“Joseph Macwan has become today a familiar name in every household”, wrote Gulabdas Broker some years back about Joseph Macwan who has been honoured with many awards and gold medals. As Mr. Broker further pointed out, “the unique contribution of Joseph Macwan to Gujarati literature is that he made the men and women of the oppressed class of people throbbing with life through his writings, which no other literary writer has done before him.”

“Joseph does not believe in art for art’s sake. But he believes in creating literature with a purpose. He maintains strongly that the Christian Missionaries have put the foundation of redemptive awakening of the oppressed people (Dalits) in the caste-ridden society in Gujarat. Joseph has greatly appreciated the educational, medical, social and welfare services of the Christian Missionaries in his writings. So here I try to portray such redemptive services of the Missionaries to the oppressed people through the writings of Joseph Macwan.

“The English poet Milton wrote a song about ‘the hungry sheep look up and are not fed.’ But in famines and droughts the Dalits looked up to the Christian Missionaries and in the time of great need the Missionaries did all in their power to rescue the people from the jaws of death. The

Missionaries saved thousands of people suffering hunger, malnutrition and lack of medical care. Joseph has written about these welfare services of the Missionaries.”

I knew that Joseph cherished our friendship and that he had great regard and appreciation for my writings as I valued his friendship and esteemed his writings. He not only wrote the preface of my first book “Jivan Patolama Dharmani Bhaat” and he also released the book at a function in Gujarat Sahitya Parishad Hall on March 15, 1990. Later he also wrote prefaces to my two more books at his initiative without my asking for them! He also introduced me to his publishers, R. R. Sheth & Co. Mumbai-Ahmedabad.

I usually write an article in a week or two. But my article on Joseph took several weeks as I got engrossed in reading the enormous material written by Joseph and written about him. Towards the end of February I called Mr. Hareeshbhai Makwana who had written to me, asking him for an extension of a week for submitting my article. I told him that my article was almost ready and that I was going to meet Joseph in Anand in a day or two. Mr. Makwana told me that Joseph was in Mehsana in a Vishwagram programme and so, he asked me to go to Anand only after 10-12 days.

Meanwhile the extended deadline for submission of my article on Joseph was getting over and so I finalized and submitted my 2500 words-long article on March 13 without meeting him. The article “Redemptive Services of Christian Missionaries to Dalits through the Writings of Joseph Macwan” is hopefully very different from such articles on him by many other well known writers.

“Vyathana Vitak” is the first book, which brought Joseph name and fame as a literary writer in Gujarati. The book contains pen portraits of Dalit people in their real life situations. The book has been translated into English and 11 other Indian languages through National Book Trust, New Delhi. The book fetched Joseph the C.A.S. Award for Pen Portraits.

But the most known book of Joseph is “Aangaliat”, a novel which got the National Sahitya Academi Award 1989 for the best book of the year. The book has been translated into English entitled “Stepchild” by Dr. Rita Kothari and is published by Oxford University Press.

Joseph himself as a proud Dalit has first hand experiences of the oppressed people. So as in “Vyathana Vitak” and “Aangaliat” as well as in many of his literary writings Joseph has voiced the groaning and the agonies of the Dalit people in their real life situation. The language, the style and the content of his writings are such that they grip the imagination of the readers and keep them spellbound. It is no wonder then that the readers and fans of Joseph come from all strata of the human society. Joseph has had a wide fan club as he used to write a number of newspaper columns in Gujarat and Mumbai and contribute articles to a number of periodicals.

Joseph has also been so eloquent and convincing a speaker that even his detractors would like to listen to him. He used to be invited by people in the fields of literature, education, social action and even in religion to speak to them. He was a speaker on Forgiveness in Christianity in a ‘Pariushan’ meeting of Jains at Mumbai. His admirers cut across all castes and creeds, rich and poor alike.

Joseph excelled also as a Dalit activist. He was at the forefront when Dalits were attacked and two Dalits were killed at Golana. He was a leader of the team defending and helping the Dalits to fight for their rights. Similarly Joseph has worked for communal harmony and peace when there were communal riots like the anti-reservation riots of 1981 and 1985 and the post Godhra riots and pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002.

As a Dalit activist and a born leader Joseph has been a member and officer-bearer of many government and non-government bodies and organizations. In the literary field Joseph has been a member of the Executive Body of Gujarat Sahitya Parishad (1985-2000) and of Gujarat Sahitya Academy (1997-2000). He was also the elected President of Gujarati Dalit Sahitya Academy and of Gujarat Christian Press Council (GCPC).

Joseph has also played significant roles in national and international bodies. He represented Gujarat in the All India Christian Leaders' Convention at Bangalore in 1978 on "Plight of Christians of Schedule Caste Origin". He attended "World Conference Against Racism" at Durban in South Africa in 2001 and the World Congress of International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Bangkok in 2004.

The local and national mass media have often taken note of Joseph's contribution in the literary fields. When Joseph received the Darshak Foundation Award as reported in SAR News on August 30, 1998 the editor of "Naya Marg" a fortnightly, Mr. Indukumar Jani said that "Voicing the suffering, the agony and the cry of Dalit people in Gujarati literature Mr. Macwan has given an awareness of the identity and the personality of the Dalit people".

Joseph's masterpiece novel "Aangaliat" was serialized in 23 episodes by National television network. A well known sociologist Dr. Lancy Lobo, SJ wrote a scholarly article about the novel in New Quest 69 magazine saying that "The novel "Aangaliat" is of considerable interest to the sociologist or social anthropologist for a number of reasons, such as depiction of rural sociology, form and content of social protest, details of ethnography, and the manner of observation of social reality."

'Deepika' a Malayalam daily with several editions in Kerala, South India carried a half page interview article of Joseph Macwan with his coloured photo on the front page of Sunday supplement on October 15, 2000. The love for Joseph and his popularity have been abundantly manifested by thousands of people who attended his funeral service on March 28 at St. Xavier's Catholic Church, Anand and the condolences meeting at St. Xavier's School, Anand on April 2.

A famous literateur Mr. Yashwant Mehta who attended both the functions said that it was unprecedented that thousands of people gather to do homage to a writer. "I have never witnessed such a large gathering paying homage to any writer in Gujarat," Mr. Mehta said.

At death as in life Joseph has proved that he was a man of the masses. Years back a Gujarati writer Yashvant Shukla wrote about him saying that, "The advent of Joseph Macwan in the literary world of Gujarat is really phenomenal." In a memorial meeting at Ahmedabad on April 6 speaker after speaker described Joseph as "a fearless writer", "a Maharashi" (a great sage), "a

fighter of Dalit causes”, “a refuge of the oppressed people”, ‘an outstanding literateur”, “the creator of Dalit Age”, and “the Lord of prose” etc.

Chandravadan, the eldest son of Joseph Macwan said that today many people call his father ‘Bapu’ (meaning beloved dad). “I do not remember but it was I who called him for the first time Bapu”, Chandravadan, a Deputy Secretary in the Gujarat Government said.

Indeed Joseph has been a father figure for innumerable people including this writer. He has been my guide, mentor, philosopher and friend.

At the death of Joseph I wrote a news report for Bangalore-base Church news service SAR News. Many people thanked me for the report. Here I quote one e-mail letter Mr. Victor Macwan, New Jersey, USA. “Joseph Saheb was my ‘Guru’ (teacher). Teaching me Hindi in High School for 4 years, and also he was my ‘Guru’ in writing field. Of course, he was a very good writer. But over and above he was a great and brave man of Gujarati Christi Samaj. He had never feared by anybody. I have learnt a lot from him. Too many people are writing in our samaj. But no one such like him. Its a great lost to our samaj”. (Contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in) & [www.vpaulsj.org](http://www.vpaulsj.org))

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(Last Changed : 16-04-2010)

(Next Change : 01-05-2010)

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