

Is Our Humanism Dead? Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

I had been to Indore in Madhya Pradesh in the last week of February 1995. On February 26 my attention was drawn to a news item covered by all newspapers that day. I extended my days in Indore to go deeper into the news item. I was shocked when I investigated the facts of the news. A question came to my mind: "Has our humanism dead and gone?"

The gist of the news was that on February 25 some unknown assailants had murdered Sr. Rani Maria in a bus at Kalda Ghati, about 40 kilometers from Indore. Sr. Rani Maria died on the spot with more than 40 wounds inflicted on her head and stomach with a knife.

Without much details the national papers like the TIMES OF INDIA covered the news on its front page.

My investigation revealed that Sr. Rani Maria was traveling in the morning at 10.30 am in Kapil Bus coming from Udayanagar to Indore with some 45 to 50 passengers. The unknown assailant attacked Sr. Rani Maria some 17 kilometers away from Kapil police choki. When the bus slowed down the assailant dragged her out of the bus catching on her hair and stabbing her on her head and stomach murdering her on the spot.

According to the information when Sr. Rani Maria was attacked, all the passengers ran away for fear. But when the bus driver drove the bus to the police station, all the passengers boarded the bus. The First Information Report (FIR) was filed in the police station. But the police did not take down the names and addresses of the passengers.

What shall we make out of it? Were all the passengers the supporters or accomplices of the crime? Among the 50 old passengers no one dared to save a woman from being murdered? Has none of those men ever promised to protect a woman by accepting the Rakhi - the auspicious thread of protection tied on their hand by their sisters or woman friends?

None of them have had any sympathy for the woman being dragged and stabbed? Have our hearts been hardened like stones? Have our sensibilities become blunt without any feeling? Has our humanism as Indians been dead and gone?

When I delved deep into the murder case of Sr. Rani Maria, I came to know that it was not an event happened on the spot but has been a systematically planned and executed crime by a hired murderer.

The victim Sr. Rani Maria was doing social works in Udayanagar and in the close by villages. She was a well known person as a professionally qualified social worker and an efficient and competent nun. Extending her services she had been organizing groups and associations like Seva Dal, Mahila Mandal. She was very successful in organizing people and getting them involved in their own developmental activities and projects.

Then, Sr. Rani Maria had also started literary programmes, small home industries and saving schemes. She also helped the poor people to get government helps and bank loans. More over, in collaboration with other NGOs she was conducting seminars and training programmes to create political awareness at Panchayath level among the poor tribal and Dalit people.

Though the money lenders and other self-seekers were against the literary training, the saving schemes, village awakening seminars of the tribals and other people, the nun continued her social work activities with patience and courage without ever deviating her path of service to the poor.

As a result the money lenders, shop keepers and others could not exploit the tribal and Dalit people as they used to do in the past. They saw an enemy in the efficient social worker Sr. Rani Maria. They decided to do away with her and planned a strategy to murder her...

As the Catholic Bishop George Anathil, SVD of Indore said there was also political reason for the murder of Sr. Rani Maria. In the Panchayath election of December 1994 the BJP of Kanad village and the Congress supporters of Semali village clashed. There were also a few Christians among Semali villagers.

After the clash the villagers of Semali came to Udayanagar to file a case. The Vice Sarpanch of Udayanagar Jivan Singh quarreled with those who came and was wounded. From the people involved in the quarrel some Christians came running and hid themselves in the sisters' convent at Udayanagar. Later the police arrested and took them into custody. Sr. Rani Maria and a priest of the mission institution there intervened and freed the Christians standing surety for them and they engaged a lawyer for the case.

The Vice Sarpanch of BJP and his accomplices were angry with those who helped the people in police custody and were plotting and looking for an opportunity for revenge.

That opportunity came to murderous plotters and their accomplices who came to know that Sr. Rani Maria was going to Kerala for home leave on February 25. So they cooked a plan to finish off Sr. Rani Maria. According to the sources, they plotted to kill Sr. Rani Maria on the way between Udayanagar and Indore.

The hired murderer Samandar Singh and his accomplices came to know that Sr. Rani Maria was going to travel in Kapil Bus service going to Indore via Udayanagar and they got into the bus. When Sr. Rani Maria entered the bus they helped her taking her bag and insisted that she sit in a back seat instead of going to occupy a front seat. They attacked her as the bus reached at the pre-planned spot.

In the life journey people come and go. But a few people become immortal because they occupy a place in the hearts of thousands of people. Sr. Rani Maria was such a person. The proof is her funeral service.

Sr. Rani Maria's body was brought to Indore and was placed in the red Church (Catholic Cathedral) for the veneration of people. When the body was taken for burial on 28 February to Udayanagar 102 kilometer away from Indore, more than 100 vehicles and thousands of people joined in her funeral procession. On the way from Indore to Udayanagar villagers put up innumerable banners of Sr. Rani Maria paying homage to her name.

When the procession reached Udayanagar about twelve thousand people from towns and villages irrespective of religion and caste, rich or poor welcomed her. They walked on foot for 3 kms to the mission Church. They paid homage to Sr. Rani Maria participating in the solemn burial service.

Speaking about the funeral procession Bishop George Anathil said that it was no ordinary procession but a pilgrimage and a victory procession. In life as well as in death she proclaimed

Jesus Christ. Like Jesus she brought the message of freedom to the poor and the oppressed and like Jesus she died in the hands of those who opposed her.

It is noteworthy that not only at Udayanagar and Madhya Pradesh but also the shock of her tragic end was felt in the whole nation especially among the tribal and the dalit people. They felt the vibration of fear. Yet they knew that the death of Sr. Rani Maria is not a failure but a step of awakening. They knew that all men and women of good will are with them irrespective of caste and creed, culture and language.

Sr. Rani Maria at the age of 41 has sacrificed her life so that the tribal and the Dalits, the poor and the oppressed people and the minorities can get their rights and justice.

Today there is inequality in the society. There is lack of equal opportunity for the people of different castes and creeds. Casteism, communalism, corruption and exploitation are playing havocs in the society. In such a situation Sr. Rani Maria has shed her blood for social and economic justice for the tribals and Dalits, the poor and the minorities and for their awakening.

Sr. Rani Maria in her death proclaims that humanism is not dead. There are certainly some anti-social elements in the society, especially in politics. But there are also people who promote humanism through advocating and proclaiming truth, justice and ethics on behalf of the tribal, the oppressed and the poor. (Contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in & www.vpaulsj.org)

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