

The Witness of a Murderer **Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

The word 'witness' has been given several meanings in the Oxford Dictionary like 1) eyewitness, 2) person giving sworn testimony, 3) person attesting another's signature to a document. Witness as a verb means 1) be eyewitness of, 2) be witness to 2) serve as evidence or indication of, 4) give or be evidence, etc.

Witness has great importance in the investigation and trial or court cases. Court accepts eyewitness' account of a crime as evidence or proof of a case. If a witness testifies what he/she has seen in a court of law, the testimony is accepted as evidence of the case.

Here I would like to speak about such a witness who is a murderer. Now the murderer not only testifies to the innocence's of his victim but he also witnesses to values as well as to his faith!

I have written about the murderer's heinous crime in my newspaper column in March 1995. Under the title "Is our humanism dead and gone" I wrote the account of Sr. Rani Maria's daylight murder. "Some unknown assailants had brutally killed Sr. Rani Maria with more than 40 knife wounds during a bus journey at Kelda Ghati about 40 kilometers away from Indore."

Reaching at Indore after the incident on February 25, 1995, I came to know that Sr. Rani Maria was doing social services and welfare works among the tribal Bheel people in the villages at Udayanagar region of Madhya Pradesh. Sr. Rani Maria was a popular person in the villages of the region as a well-educated and very capable social worker.

Sr. Rani Maria ran for the tribal as well as other poor people such programmes like home industries, digging wells, saving schemes. She has been helping people to take advantage of government projects and programmes for getting water, seeds manure and bank loans, etc. The dedicated selfless services of Sr. Rani Maria antagonized those people who used to exploit the tribals and other poor people through money lending with exorbitant interest and other ways of overloading the helpless people. The exploiters saw Sr. Rani Maria as their enemy and decided to do away with her. They got a farmer Samandar Singh to execute their devilish plan of murdering Sr. Rani Maria while she took a bus to Indore on home-leave.

The investigating authorities arrested Samandar Singh. He was tried and convicted for life for the heinous crime.

According to Asia News reports, behind the prison walls Samandar Singh began plotting how he could take revenge against the man who pushed him to kill Sr. Rani Maria. While he was behind bars, his wife divorced him and his elder son died.

But what brought a big transformation in Samandar Singh was the visit of a nun. Sr. Selmi Paul, the murdered nun's own Sister, also a member of Clarist congregation. On a Rakshabandhan day, Sr. Selmi tied Rakhi on Samandar Singh's hand calling him a brother.

Later an elderly woman who came from Kerala to visit the mission land of her two daughters also paid a visit to Samandar in the jail. She was the mother of Sr. Rani Maria and Sr. Selmi and expressed her forgiveness and love for Samandar Singh.

Experiencing genuine love of people like Sr. Selmi and her mother, Samandar became a transformed man giving up his plans to take revenge against the man who pushed him to kill the nun.

Then, in jail Samandar Singh came to know that the forgiveness expressed by his victim's sister and mother was more than mere words. Sr. Selmi, her Clarist religious congregation and the Bishop Geroge Anathil of Indore were trying to get him released from the prison.

As the Asia News has reported, "when his release was slow in coming, a delegation went to the Governor of Madhya Pradesh to plead for his release."

The Governor was moved by the petition of the delegation please for mercy and clemency for the murderer of a Christian religious sister.

"Only you Christians can truly forgive. You are a great example. Go, I shall do all I can to get him released," said the Governor assuring the delegates his help in the matter.

Being released after eleven years in prison Samandar Singh considers the family of Sr. Rani Maria as his own family. Visiting often the tomb of Sr. Rani Maria Samandar once acknowledged, "I regularly visit her tomb, for me, it is like a sanctuary of peace and strength".

Now Samandar is a witness not only for Christian forgiveness but also of Christian missionaries. Asia News has quoted him saying, "I want everyone to know that Christians work to make India great. The missionaries give us hope through their service, which is to make us strong and independent people".

Samandar knows well that in India many people of the right wing party of Sangh Parivar hate Christians and instigate people to persecute them.

Voicing his personal experience of the past, Samandar Singh told Asia News:

"Before they drove me to kill, I heard so many hate-filled lies about the missionaries and Christians. They used to tell me that Christians converted people through tricks and that their work with the poor was only for show. Now, however, I can say without doubt that the missionaries do nothing but work and help the poor and the marginalized. They have no secret designs other than to serve God".

Personally speaking I have often heard such accusations against Christians and missionaries and read false propaganda of Sangh Parivar people blaming Christians and missionaries with all sorts of lies that they are proselytizing poor people with allurements. I hope that to all such people the witness of Samandar Singh is an eye opener and a convincing response. (contact the author: ciss@satyam.net.in)

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