

FIGHTING SOCIAL EVIL – THE ADIVASI WAY
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Brewing illicit liquor, drinking and wife bashing by drunken husband are a few of the wide spread social evils among the Adivasis. In some interior village of South Gujarat one hears success stories of how the Adivasi women fought and successfully eradicated these evils from their midst.

These are also the success stories of the missionary activities especially of women missionaries of the Vedruna Carmelite Sisters of Charity (CCV) in South Gujarat.

I learnt about these success stories during a two day long train journey with my sister, Sr. Celine Paul, CCV who has just returned from Eritrea in North Africa where she administered and ran successfully a 25 bed hospital for nearly five years.

After a refresher programme of the International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP) at Harare in July 2002, I had the rare opportunity and privilege of visiting Sr. Celine in her work environment and witnessing her medical ministry at Halhal village in Eritrea and also seeing the appreciation she received not only from her patients and co-workers but also from the Church and government authorities in Eritrea.

“Why have you come back from such a fulfilling and rewarding medical ministry in one of the poorest countries of the world?” I asked my sister.

The parting and saying good-byes to my co-workers, church and Government authorities were very hard for me. It was like a part of me being left behind there,” my sister told me.

I can understand my sister because during the four years and seven months she worked in Eritrea, she had put her heart and soul in her ministry. She mastered the local Tigrigna language like a fish in the water and she put in good working condition a hospital with a lot of problems like inadequate finances, lack of trained personnel, in sufficient supply of medicines, etc.

Sr. Celine came back, as I talked to her I learned that because she loves the people of Gujarat, especially the Adivasi folk who are, to use a biblical expression, like sheep without a shepherd, Before going to Eritrea she had worked several years among them as a medical person and a missionary social worker and found fulfillment in her work and also received much appreciation. I had seen her driving mobile medical van and going alone to interior Adivasi villages.

“My gut-level feeling is that my ministry as a missionary and medical person is to work for and with the poor people”, my sister said expressing her choice and liking. In Eritrea as Administrator of Halhal village hospital she had to do a lot of paper work reducing and affecting her contact with patients and poor people to the minimum.

As a religious social worker and medical person Sr. Celine’s approach and policy toward sickness is “prevention is better than cure”. Implementing this policy among the Adivasi people in South Gujarat Sr. Celine and other religious sisters like her work assiduously to root out social

evils by organizing the Adivasi women-folk and building up good habits like bodily and environmental cleanliness, balance diets, regular monthly savings and above all developing leadership among women by regular monthly meetings and discussing family and social problems.

The Adivasi women organize themselves into Mahila Mandals (women's organizations) in every village or in a group of small villages. While Adivasi women organize and hold regular meetings the religious sisters may participate or may not participate in these meetings as observers and resource persons. But they do train the women leaders in every village imparting to them social consciousness and leadership qualities to face and overcome village problems like wife bashing by drunken husbands.

In one of the village meetings of the Mahila Mandal, the Adivasi women themselves realized that one of the main problems among them is wife-beatings by their drunken husbands.

The Adivasi women in their meetings worked out a strategy to overcome this evil. If any woman is beaten in a village, she would cry aloud to give a signal to the other women in the same village and all the women of Mahila Mandal in the same village would flock immediately to the house of the woman crying and put to shame the husband for beating his wife saying that "Fakt nabalaj abalane mare che" meaning only the weak/impotent (husband) beats a woman. When this scene is enacted in a few houses in a village the men folk get scared and stop beating their wives for good.

Similarly, while encouraging Adivasi women to have kitchen gardens and a variety of vegetables in their diets, the Mahila Mandal women group visit the huts of the Adivasi people in order to destroy pots distilling home-made drinks.

Sr. Celine has personal experiences of controlling contagious diseases among Adivasis living in the forests, reducing mortality rates among mothers and children at birth and above all conscientizing and empowering Adivasi village women for healthy living. I believe that her success in these areas among the Adivasi people in interior villages in South Gujarat as well as the love and the admiration of the poor Adivasi people have brought her back to work again among the Adivasi people have brought her back to work again among the Adivasi people, this time at Subir village in the forest area in Dangs District.