

Justice for All Means Peace for All  
Fr Varghese Paul, S.J.

In the literary world, Victor Hugo is a well known French novelist. His outstanding novel 'Les Miserables' has been translated into Gujarati with the title, "Daridra Narayan". More than one Gujarati edition of the novel has been published. In his novel Hugo has described the social and economic problems of his time in France. The novel was first published about a century and half year ago in 1862.

Inspired by the continuing popularity of 'Les Miserables', two dramatists of France, Alan Buble and Claude Shonburg wrote a musical drama based on the novel. The musical drama was an extraordinary success. The success, prompted its two authors to create a musical drama of the same novel in English also.

The 'Les Miserables' musical drama had a tremendous success not only in the European Continent but also in America. It reached New York from London in 1987 and won the 'Tony Award' of that year for the best musical drama. It has been presented on the stage in America before full-house audiences for many years.

The main hero of 'Les Miserables' is Jean Valjean. He was sentenced to five years in jail with hard labour on a navy boat. He was charged with stealing a loaf of bread to feed some hungry children. But, Jean has to stay in the jail for a total of 19 years for the crime of attempting to escape from jail.

After his release from jail Jean Valjean meets a Bishop by chance. In spite of stealing in the Bishop's House, Jean Valjean begins a new life with the name of 'Madeleine'. He is inspired by the bishop's advice to walk on the path of truth giving up stealing and hate and crimes. All the incidents after Jean's release from jail to his death are described in the 'Les Miserables' musical drama.

Madeleine started a small business in a small city. With his new inventions in the business, he made quick progress and became rich. With the passage of time, he became not only the owner of a big factory and an industrialist, but he also became the mayor of his city.

Madeleine led a life of happiness and prosperity. Meanwhile he came to know that the authorities had arrested a person believing him to be 'Jean Valjean' for stealing some money from a poor child years ago and that his case was going on in the court.

Jean Valjean got very upset on hearing of this heartbreaking news. He experienced a great turmoil as he thought that an innocent person was going to jail under his own name. Then, Jean Valjean asks himself, "Who am I?", "How can I send that innocent person to jail? How can I behave as if I do not care for that innocent man?"

With a storm in his heart Jean Valjean asks himself: 'Wearing my mask, an innocent person is

going to be punished instead of me! Who am I?' Jean Valjean's mental agony is voiced beautifully in music:

'Can I hide myself  
for ever from myself?  
How can I pretend  
as I am not that which I was previously?

Can I tell lies?  
How can I look at others?  
How can I look at myself?

Jean Valjean spends an entire night in mental agony in the 'Les Miserables' novel. He has many reasons to continue his identity as 'Mayor Madeleine' as he is doing good to a lot of people. But he feels restless thinking that an innocent man will be punished for no fault of his own!

Early in the morning Jean Valjean rushes to the court. And Mayor Madeleine declares himself to be true Jean Valjean and gives irrefutable evidence in the court begging that the punishment for his offence be awarded to him and to spare that innocent person in custody.

Every one needs other people. When I need another person, I can meet him without any hesitation if I am well disposed towards him. I have also no difficulty to talk with him face to face. But on the other hand, if I have a sinister motive in meeting him then I will not be able to be at ease to talk to him face to face. If there is any deceit in me, any untruth in me, then I am afraid that the other person looking into my eyes with his piercing eyes will pass through my heart. I feel uneasy by his piercing look.

That is why, criminals mostly hid themselves from the gaze of the public. They are not able to deal openly with other people. Thousands of people died in Gujarat due to the Godhra rail tragedy and in the post-Godhra massacres. Lakhs of people have been injured in the pogrom against the Muslim minority. The loss of houses and business establishments of Muslims has been estimated at crores of rupees.

Even though the people involved in all these atrocities and crimes have not been punished, even though the criminals are moving around freely in society, even though there are attempts to sweep these atrocities and genocides under the carpet under the pretext of maintaining the good name and fame of Gujarat, even though most of these criminal cases are dismissed for lack of evidence, two things are very clear. One, there is a certain person or persons behind every atrocity like rape, murder and riot, and that those persons are conscious of their criminal deeds. Second, those people who have suffered due to these atrocities and crimes should be given proper compensation to bring peace and communal harmony back to Gujarat. Peace is not possible in any society without justice. Justice demands punishment of criminals and compensation for the victims. Without justice for all, there is no peace for all.

Let me give an example. A well known social worker, Prof. J. S. Bandukwala, in a public meeting at Vadodara on June 12, 2004 narrated about his own experiences of the Gujarat communal riots in his city. He said that an innocent child was snatched from its mother and its head was smashed on

the ground killing it in front of its mother! This is an unbelievable crime. But this same incident is in the charge-sheet of the C.B.I. in the Bilkis Rasul Case. Bilkis' daughter Saleha, aged three and a half years, was snatched from her mother's hands and was killed by thrashing her head on the ground by an accused!

In the dance of death a pregnant woman's womb was cut open with a sword and the unborn child was thrown into a fire! Mr Bandukwala narrated also other gruesome crimes against the Muslims in the pogrom like trishuls being thrust forcibly into the vagina of Muslim women while the perpetrators of the crime including women looked on and laughed!

I think, except for some hard core criminals, most of the perpetrators of these crimes are not accustomed to such criminal atrocities. So, they will be experiencing mental tortures and will be going through untold agony, like the main character of 'Les Miserables' Jean Valjean. Therefore they will be prepared to accept the punishment for their crimes in a conducive atmosphere and also assist in taking steps to give justice to the suffering victims of their crime.

The criminals and their victims will never be at peace by hiding or pretending that these devilish crimes of Gujarat did not happen, so that the fame and dignity of Gujarat is saved! Harmony and peace is impossible without justice.

There is only one way to save the dignity of Gujarat's five hundred lakhs of people. That way is shown to us by Jean Valjean of 'Les Miserables'. It is the confession and repentance for one's crime and adequate compensation for the victims. True repentance, is a readiness to accept punishment for one's crime along with a willingness to compensate the victims..

When all the perpetrators of crimes are justly punished and their victims get justice, there will be forgiveness, peace and harmony between all the communities in Gujarat. Justice for all means peace for all.