“IN SEARCH OF JUSTICE AND PEACE: CHALLENGES TO THE CHRISTIANS OF INDIA”.

-Fr. Cedric Prakash sj*

Dear Friends,

It is indeed a great honour for me to be here at this International Conference on “Seed of the Church: Telling the Story of Today’s Christian Martyrs” organized by the ‘Institute for Church Life’, of the University of Notre Dame.

At the outset, I wish to place on record my sincere gratitude to Dr. John Cavadini, Director, ‘Institute for Church Life’, his colleagues and all others concerned for inviting me and also for giving me the opportunity to bring to you a perspective from our reality in India.

The theme of the Conference is indeed a challenging one! It brings to the forefront the fact that all over the world, there is a systematic and widespread persecution of Christians and the even more serious reality that this has been consistently played down by Governments, media and even human rights organizations.

Having said this, I would like to invite you to India and as I do so, I would like to share with you some aspects of this reality as I attempt to focus this presentation on “In Search of Justice and Peace: Challenges to the Christians of India”.

**Introduction**

In 1964, when Pope Paul VI came to Bombay, India for the Eucharistic Congress, he very categorically stated that, “Yours is a land of ancient culture, the cradle of great religions, the home of a nation that has sought God with a relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence, and in hymns of fervent prayer. Rarely as this longing for God been expressed with words so full of the Spirit of Advent as in the words written in your Sacred books many centuries before Christ ‘from the unreal lead me to the real, from darkness lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality’”.

These words surely warmed the hearts of millions of Indians. In the wake of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI had already begun entering the doors which his predecessor Pope John XXIII so courageously opened. I was a little boy then, excited to be serving the Pope’s mass; but having been born and brought up in a multi-religious milieu, I realise how thrilled my Hindu and Muslim neighbours were at what the Pope said. Those memories are still happily etched in one’s memory.

Pope Paul VI was just stating a truism. Indian history goes back to the Indus Valley civilization which is dated more than 5000 years ago. Not far from where I live today, is a place called Lothal. There one can see the remnants of a very sophisticated urban culture that belonged to this civilisation.

Centuries later, our history tells us, that the Aryans invaded India and brought with them a way of life which today we call ‘Hinduism’. Then came the Mughals who had found a very favourable home in India and decided to settle down. With the advent of colonial rule, we had the French, the Dutch and finally the British who ruled over India for more than 300 years (1608 – 1947).

Christianity, is generally believed, arrived in India in 52 AD with St. Thomas, the Apostle. Historical evidence proves that there was a sizeable Christian population in the early centuries; however, one has to accept that numbers of Christians in India started growing with the arrival of the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century and with stalwart missionaries like Jesuit St. Francis Xavier, who brought the faith to many, in several parts of India.
It is also believed the Jews came to India about 2500 years ago and in the 10th century, a group of Zoroastrians (whom we call Parsis) made India their home because of the persecution they faced in Iran.

In India, we have three major Indic religions: Buddhism in the 6th century BC, Jainism that would have begun around 2000 years ago and Sikhism which was founded by Guru Nanak in 1469. While the first two religions are ‘a-theistic’ in nature, Sikhism which combines the most important essence from Hinduism and Islam is monotheistic. All these three religions are “Protestant religions” grown out of Hinduism.

Above all, over the centuries, fairly large sections of the tribal population of India have been animists; they have had their own Gods and ways of worship.

It is important to position India in this confluence of religions and to understand how, over the centuries, India has been both the cradle and the home of several important religions of the world.

But somehow, somewhere, something went seriously wrong......

The emergence of the Hindu Right-wing

In 1925, a right-wing Hindu revolutionary K.B. Hedgewar founded the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (National volunteer / patriotic organization). At that time, it had two clear goals: to assert one’s Hindu identity (obviously by putting in place the minorities: namely Muslims and Christians in India) and secondly, to oppose colonial rule. They did precious little about the latter....

Hedgewar was succeeded by M.S. Golwalkar, a rabid Hindu ideologue, whom a well known Hindu historian Ramchandra Guha regards as the ‘Guru of Hate’. Golwalkar’s thoughts are summarized in his book entitled “Bunch of Thoughts”. A key chapter of this book deals with the three main internal threats of India namely: (1) the Muslims (2) the Christians (3) the communists.

The third ideologue of right-wing Hinduism called V.D. Savarkar, openly advocated the cause of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) in India.

It is widely believed that as the RSS emerged as a force in India, they desperately tried to make of India a ‘Hindu Nation-State’, but their designs did not succeed because of visionary leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Sardar Patel and the others. In 1947, India finally became a free country and later in 1949, India gave herself a secular Constitution and among other Rights guaranteed to every Indian the freedom of religion.

The right-wing Hindu elements however did not remain silent. On January 30th, 1948, they were involved in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and since then, they have been playing an instrumental role in demonizing and attacking the minorities of the country, very specially the Christians.

The way Christians are targeted in India

The right-wing forces in the country are today known as the Sangh Parivar (the Organisation Family). They are fascists and fundamentalists. They consists of the RSS and its associated groups (including its political wing, the BJP). They have at the core of their ideology, the targeting of minorities and in particular the Christians.

The realization of this is through a variety of well orchestrated strategies meant to keep the Christians always on the defensive. These include:
to propagate hate
Propaganda has always been the mainstay of any fascist organization; to feed the common man with as many lies, myths, half-truths, etc. This art which was mastered by Jozef Gobbels in Hitler times relies heavily on the manipulation and distortion of facts. In India, the Sangh Parivar has mastered this. They have effectively used all available means of propaganda to demonise the Christians. Leaflets / handbills speak of the most hateful things. Very often, their attempt to tell a lie a thousand times is easily believed by common persons and it also pays the Sangh Parivar with political dividends.

to intimidate and harass
In India today, we have dozens of examples everyday of how Christians are intimidated and harassed, particularly in the BJP ruled States, like in Gujarat. Very often, this intimidation is direct but most often, they are very subtle and sophisticated; for example not giving permission to start a school, asking a thousand questions for a health facility, wanting to check baptism / marriage registers etc.

to attack and kill
In the last few years, we have had several instances of Christians being attacked in India and even being killed. Among those killed are some priests and religious sisters. In recent years, they have large scale attacks on Christians in the States of Gujarat, Orissa and Karnataka. In every one of these major attacks, there has been a direct connivance or involvement of the State Government. The violence of the right-wing forces has been manifested in rapes, looting arson and burnings – apart from mayhem and murder.

to divide and rule
A very important strategy is to divide and rule and they seem to be very effective in this. In several places in India, where the Christians are attacked, one is even able to find some Christians literally justifying or absolving the attacks. In the last Presidential election to India, the opposition candidate put up by the right-wing BJP and its allies, was a Catholic, Mr. P.A. Sangma. In the run-up to the elections, he has gone on record to say that “attacks on the Christians in India are very minimal and are an aberration!” Besides, of course, he absolved his political masters of any wrong doing in this.

to make the victims, the “perpetrators”
Christians are the victims of the vicious attacks by the right-wing Hindus. But what is surprising, be it in Karnataka, Orissa and Gujarat, immediately after the violent attacks, cases are filed in the police stations against the Christians. Till today, in Karnataka, there are several cases against Christian youth, who were on the Church premises when the local police and Hindu right-wing elements came in and attacked them.

to infiltrate and misuse Government, institutions and systems
Here one has to admit that these fascist forces are very meticulous in their planning. Over the years, they have very subtly and effectively infiltrated in the bureaucracy of the Government, the police, the judiciary and even the media. Here again, the harvest they reap is very rich. So when a Christian victim, attempts to seek for justice or for that matter wants to emphasize his / her plight, one realizes that one is on the losing end. The police complaint is not recorded properly, the media will highlight the case, the judiciary will not find enough evidence…..there is a total misuse and subversion of the democratic system here.

to tamper with the education system and particularly with the textbooks
What better way, would there be than in instilling prejudices and biases in formative minds? Gujarat is a classic case where today the textbooks are extremely warped and what the children are often taught in schools are attitudes and perceptions which go against the minorities. For eg. Some years ago, the whole presentation of the ‘Reformation’, was only negative about the Catholic Church, “the Pope lost his mind etc”
• to bring in anti-conversion laws
  Another very effective way is to create the “bogey of conversion”. This bogey has been raised consistently in the past years. Some States have brought in anti-conversion laws which we will deal with a little later in this presentation.

• to attack those Christians who take a stand for human rights and justice
  Human rights violations abound in India and today, the Church is actively involved in ensuring a more humane, just and peaceful society. So whenever someone takes a stand, particularly a priest or nun, one becomes extremely vulnerable as one is subject to all kinds of attack and calumny saying this is because of foreign funds, one is anti-national etc….Yours truly, is also a victim of this

The above are some of the more obvious strategies used by the right-wing Hindu elements in India. Over the years, they have stopped at nothing. Their one aim is to ensure the main-streaming of their hegemonic agenda of ‘one nation, one culture, one language’. They believe that India should be a ‘Hindu Nation State’ and anyone else, particularly Christians and Muslims should live there only on their terms. They are unable to accept a secular Constitution in the country.

➡️ The Shabri Kumbh mela in the Dangs Gujarat 2006: A case study
  We present here a case study of a right-wing Hindu event which took place in Gujarat in 2006. However, one cannot dismiss that event as a once-for-all because the ground reality remains very much the same, as people are kept divided and polarised in the name of religion:

“The fascist and fundamentalist forces of the Hindutva Brigade were at their venomous best again! For three days (from February 11th to 13th 2006), they spewed vitriol and hate against Christian Missionaries and their activities. From Narendra Modi to Morari Bapu to Togadia to lesser known icons of Hindutva, they tried to outdo each other in Christian bashing. In doing so, they proved just one point and their lie was nailed….that the Shabri Kumbh Mela that was held in Subir in the Dangs District of Gujarat had nothing to do with Hinduism, in the right sense of the word, but everything to do about creating communal discord. It had nothing to do with religion but everything to do about politics.

The people did come in droves. Huge numbers brought in by trucks and buses from the BJP-ruled states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. When journalists spoke to some of the so called “pilgrims”, many of them had no idea why they had come; in fact, most of them said that they were enjoying a good picnic! After all, it was the largesse of their respective Governments that provided them with everything from travel to food. The host, the Government of Gujarat spared no efforts in their year dedicated to the “Year of Tourism”. The mantra was clear….“if foreigners do not want to come to Gujarat, let’s import people, by hook or by crook from those States ruled by us!” For good measure, the Shabri Kumbh did have some representatives from the World Council of Ethnic Religions, but this strategy too, misfired, when one of the delegates who began his speech with “Allah-hu-Akbar” was shouted down and one of the organizers insisted that he say “Jai Sri Ram”.

The opening salvo was fired by none other than Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, who is doing everything in his power to make Gujarat a “Hindu” State. In a fiery outburst in his acerbic tongue, Modi lashed out against the Missionaries, warning them of severe repercussions if conversions continued. “It is my Constitutional duty to prevent conversions” he thundered, conveniently forgetting that he had abdicated his Constitutional responsibility when in 2002 hundreds of Muslims were slaughtered in the towns and villages of Gujarat; and that even today, in the State he administers, the minorities, dalits, adivasis and women are at the receiving end. His viciousness was easily lapped up by the vernacular media and one of them, the Sandesh, screamed banner headlines in its edition of Sunday 12th February that the Shabri Kumbh
will bring an end to conversions to Christianity. Not to be outdone by Modi, Morari Bapu, the Hindu ‘Kathakar’ of Gujarat, used the Bible and the Vatican in his tirade against the Christians. He even quoted “Scripture” saying that “according to the Gospel of St. Luke, Christ forbade conversions and that “it is hypocrisy not to follow what you preach!” A classic example of how Scripture can be turned and twisted to suit one’s ideology. Morari Bapu continued saying that “if the Vatican can send plane-loads to convert India, we definitely have to respond fittingly”. Togadia went a step further and warned the Christians that if they did not give up converting, they would go and do a Bharatiyakaran of the Vatican City.

Togadia, the International General Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, was predictable in his style, lashing out at Christians and other minorities, but then, in his scheme of things, he also felt that the Hindus and the Christians had to get together to counter Jehad and the likes of Osama Bin Laden. However, he went on to say, that before this grand alliance can materialize, the Vatican has to give up conversions in India, if not, the Vatican itself will be Hinduized.

The RSS Supremo, K. S. Sudarshan, boldly announced a new strategy to ensue that India dominated the world by the year 2011. The strategy named Bharatiyakaran, is to Indianize the seventeen crore Muslims and the three crore Christians who live in India. His message was amply clear “since we cannot throw the Muslims and Christians into the sea, we have to “Indianize” them”. However, when asked by the media, Sudarshan was unable to define what “being Indian” meant and whether to be Indian was also to be Hindu and if one has to be Hindu, to which rung of the caste hierarchy should one necessarily belong.

The Shabri Kumbh Mela was significant in the way the protagonists of the Sangh Parivar did their best to woo the tribals. They spelt out one issue loud and clear…..that the tribals would only be called vanvasis (forest dwellers) and not adivasis (original inhabitants of the land). Very cleverly, Sudarshan asserted “for vanvasis, we have to tell them that they are part of the extended Hindu family”.

In their overzealousness to present Hinduism to the adivasis, sadhu after sadhu criticized the caste-system and felt that it was a deviation that needed to be amended. They also made efforts to say that the status of women has to change in Hinduism because after all, in most tribal societies, there is a greater gender-equity. In unfolding the strategy for Bharatiyakaran, Sudarshan also exhorted the sadhus and the cadres of the Sangh “to work quietly, to communicate with the poor and the tribals in their tongue, live with them and help them with health and food!”

The three day mela also passed several resolutions, one of them is that the Centre should enact a law to prevent conversions specially in the tribals areas; on March 26th 2003, the Government of Gujarat unanimously passed the “Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act 2003”.

The Shabri Kumbh Mela is now over. The Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi profusely thanked the NGOs and Human Rights Activists for giving it the media coverage which it might not have otherwise got. The bare truth is, were it not for the NGOs, Human Rights Activists, and a whole movement of civil society, who challenged the sinister game-plan of this mela, the end result would definitely have been far more dangerous to Indian society.

The Shabri Kumbh Mela was not a debate on Christians or on conversions; neither was it a debate on Indian religions or secular forces. It was a defining moment for Indian society at large and whether fascist and fundamentalist forces would actually triumph. It was true that they managed to bring in their much flaunted numbers but as some tribals mentioned, “we just came here to have a good time!” It is true that they spewed venom and hate against Christianity but in doing so, they have only exposed their narrow, petty orientations. It is true they have decided to chalk out a strategy for change; hopefully, they will begin with themselves.
The three day programme had also thrown up several questions for which the likes of Modi and his cronies have to be held accountable. Among them are:

- can and should Governments indulge in such wasteful expenditure in the name of religion, when millions of adivasis do not have access to the basic amenities of life?
- what provisions are there in the law to reign in those who continue to make inflammatory speeches, very specially directed against minorities and other vulnerable groups?
- article 25 of the Constitutions guarantees every single citizen, the right to freedom of religion; as the Constitutional Head of a Government, is Modi able to guarantee that to every single citizen in the State of Gujarat?

In the run up to the Shabri Kumbh Mela, the organizers were caught on the back foot when confronted and went overboard in saying that the Shabri Kumbh Mela had nothing to do with Christianity or about reconversions. The irony of it was that they seemed to have had no other point on the agenda except Christianity and conversions. A huge banner summed up their agenda when it loudly proclaimed “Asia Khand mein Isaikaran ko koi shan nahi hai. Hindu dharm ke virodh mein jo koi karyarath honge ve sabh nasht honge (there is no place in the Asian Continent for Christianization. Whoever is involved in opposing the Hindu religion will be destroyed).”

The anti-conversion laws in India

In the context of the above case study, it is important for us to visit, some of the anti-conversion laws existent in India today.

On November 26th, 1949 free India gave to herself a new Constitution securing to all her citizens justice, liberty, equality and fraternity; and in Part III (Article 25) of the same Constitution, it gave to all her citizens the fundamental right to freely profess, practice and propagate one’s religion.

However, in India, this freedom of religion guarantee has come into much debate and even attack in recent years. Over the years, five Indian States have enacted anti-conversion laws which are erroneously referred to as ‘Freedom of Religion Laws’.

In 1967, the State of Orissa was the very first State in India to enact a legislation restricting religious conversions. The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act 1967 stipulates that no person shall “convert or attempt to convert either directly or otherwise any person from one religious state to another by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means.” The Orissa law soon became a model and also a precedent for other laws to follow; in 1968 the Madhya Pradesh Government enacted the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantrya Adhiniyam 1968. This was followed by anti-conversion laws in Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Gujarat (2003), Chhattisgarh (2003), Rajasthan (2006) and Himachal Pradesh (2006)

The Rajasthan Law was passed but was never given an assent by the Governor of the State – it is still in cold storage. In 2002, the Tamil Nadu Government enacted a law but subsequently repealed it in 2004 after a wave of civil society protests.

- why anti-conversion laws?
  What then are some of the key issues put forth by these anti-conversion laws? These are:

  - religious conversions are effective through “force”, “inducement” or “fraud”
  - these laws are necessary safeguards for the protection of “religious freedom”
  - when a person changes his or her religion for another, it creates a social disorder and thereby fomenting social unrest
- proselytising groups tried to lure the poor and illiterate to their fold through various baits
- Christianity and Islam are “alien” to Indian culture

The supporters of anti-conversion laws in India are mainly right-wing Hindu fundamentalists, the Sangh Parivar which include the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). These groups together with some others are collectively known in India as the Sangh Parivar. Their ideologies are highly fundamental and fascist. They draw its inspiration from extreme right-wing ideologues like Savarkar and Gowalkar who were hoping at one stage to establish a Hindu nation state in India.

However, when India got her freedom in 1947, the country pledged itself to become a secular democratic republic which was later amplified in its Constitution of 1949.

- **the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Law 2003**

Perhaps the most draconian anti-conversion law in India is the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Law 2003. It took full five years for this Act to become law after its rules were notified in 2008. The key points of this law are:

- it prohibits forcible conversion by allurement or fraudulent means. ‘Allurement’ is defined as “any gift or gratification either in cash or kind.” ‘Force’ is defined as “show of force or a threat of injury of any kind, including threat of divine displeasure or social ex-communication”. ‘Fraudulent means’ is defined as “misrepresentation of any other fraudulent contrivance”.
- it provides for punishment of those who seek to forcibly convert for a period up to three years imprisonment and a fine up to Rs.50,000. but if the person being forcibly converted is a “minor, a woman, or a person belonging to scheduled caste or scheduled tribe”, the punishment is for a term of up to four years imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1 lakh
- anyone seeking to convert someone from one religion to another, either by performing a ceremony as a religious priest, or takes part directly or indirectly in the ceremony, shall have to take prior permission from the district magistrate (a civil authority) through a prescribed format
- the person who is sought to be converted shall have to intimate the district magistrate about the ceremony within a prescribed period, to be laid down in the rules. In case of default, the converted shall face upto one year imprisonment or a fine of Rs.1,000 or both

In 2009, this law was challenged in the High Court of Gujarat by the Gujarat United Christian Forum for Human Rights and several other petitioners. The High Court at that time sent a notice to the Gujarat Government on the Constitutional validity of this Act but since then no hearing has taken place.

- **the Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Law 2006**

In an Act which was equally unconstitutional (but perhaps, less draconian) than the Gujarat one the Himachal Pradesh Government enacted the ‘Freedom of Religion Law’ in 2006 and the Rules to guide the implementation of this law in 2007. This law was challenged in 2010 by the Evangelical Fellowship of India and others.

In a judgment delivered on 30th August 2012, the Himachal Pradesh High Court struck down Section 4 and Rule 3 as being violative of Article 14 and ultravires the provisions of the Constitution of India.

Unfortunately, the High Court upheld most of the other provisions of the act and the pertaining rules saying that they are legal and valid and in keeping with 1997 judgment of the Supreme Court of India.
reasons against these anti-conversion laws

Those fighting against these anti-conversion laws provide a whole host of reasons as to why they are not only constitutionally invalid but should be done away with immediately.

Among them are:

- it goes against Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India, which gives one the right to preach, practice and propagate one’s religion
- they go against the laws and principles of secularism enshrined and guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.
- the broad and vague language used in these laws can give rise to various interpretations and easily lead to the discrimination of religious minorities by government officials, politicians and others
- these laws are motivated by right-wing Hindu fundamentalist groups that have their own agenda and would not like the religious minorities to enjoy the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution
- there are sufficient provisions in the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) which can deal with any act or fraud or coercion
- these laws are clearly violative of international laws including Article 18 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR) which encompasses the right to attend and to peacefully propagate one’s religious beliefs.

Some Comments on the anti-conversion laws:

In its Annual Report 2012, the US Commission of International Religious Freedom states, “Five Indian states have adopted “Freedom of Religion Act(s),” and several others are considering similar laws. While intended to reduce forced conversions and decrease communal violence, states with these laws have higher incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence against religious minorities, particularly Christians, than states that do not. USCIRF has repeatedly received reports that societal actors who harass and intimidate minority groups often cite these laws. The laws require governmental officials to assess the sincerity of conversions and fine or imprison anyone using force, fraud, or “inducements” to convert others. In some states, those intending to change their religion must give the government prior notice of any conversion from Hinduism, but not toward it. Proponents allege that financial, educational, and / or other service-based benefits take advantage of economically-marginalised individuals. Opponents, however, note the laws’ ill-defined terminology regarding inducements or coercive acts, leaving them open to abuse by biased officials, police, and societal actors. It should be noted that there are credible reports that some proselytizing groups use tactics that Hindus perceive as coercive or offensive.”

And earlier, addressing a public gathering at the Nehru Centre in London on 11th of June 2003, eminent Jurist and former Solicitor General of India, Mr. Soli Sorabjee stated, “The regrettable part about these laws is that whoever converts any person from one religion to another by performing any ceremony has to send an intimation to the District Magistrate about the fact of such conversion. This information has to be given in a form prescribed by the government. The Gujarat legislation goes one step further and provides that the person who is converted has also to send an intimation to the District Magistrate about the fact of such conversion. Failure to comply with these statutory provisions invites severe punishment of imprisonment and fine. These provisions are objectionable. They intrude on a person’s right to Privacy. One’s religious belief is essentially a private matter as is conversion from one’s religion to another. It is a result of deep seated inner convictions. The State laws have the effect of deterring genuine conversions and impairing the substance of religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution. These laws have further shaken the confidence of the minority communities and accentuated their sense of insecurity.”
These anti-conversion laws in India are today not only a subject of debate but conveniently used by those who harbour ill-will on the religious minorities of the country to constantly discriminate and attack both the intentions and the actions of these latter groups.

The reality becomes even more acrimonious in the run-up to elections very specially at the level of the States. Those who cherish and value the freedom that characterizes India in many diverse ways are unrelenting in their pursuit for justice.

Hopefully one day, a full bench of the Supreme Court of India will declare that every single citizen of the country is totally free to accept the religion of his or her choice; that a citizen has a right to believe in a God or in the non-existence of a God; that everyone has a right to grow in his or her belief and perhaps change that belief not once but perhaps several times, if needed, during one’s lifetime!

Until such a day dawns, the struggle to uphold the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Indian Constitution will continue!

**Conclusion**

Just about a year ago, in the early hours of 16th November, 2011 Sr. Valsa John was brutally murdered in Pachuwara village in Jharkhand State, India. She was a religious of the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary. Since 1995, she had made Pachuwara her home and committed herself to the cause of the tribals of the area. The tribals there were at the receiving end of a powerful mafia who mined coal there. For the last several years, she had been protesting (together with the tribals) of the way this coal mafia displaced them from what they once called their homes and exploited them in several other ways.

That her life was constantly under threat, was without a shadow of doubt. She constantly voiced this to her family, her close friends and even filed a complaint with the local police – about the harassment and threats she was subjected to. But nothing could stop her murder!

The martyrdom of Sr. Valsa is a challenge to the Church in India. The Church must accompany the subalterns in very tangible ways in their struggle for a more equitable, just and humane society. In doing so, the Church should demonstrate an unflinching courage to take on the powerful vested interests, even if it be at the cost of certain privileges it might be receiving from them. Jesus would have done exactly that!

At the conclusion of their 30th General Body Meeting of the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of India held in Bangalore (February 1st - 8th, 2012), the Bishops came out with a very powerful statement entitled “The Church’s Role for a Better India”.

“We sensed in our hearts our country’s yearning for a Better India. Our country has been noted for its deep spirituality, its saints and sages, its rich diversity of cultures and religions. People yearn for the ideal enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution of India of a Sovereign, Socialist Secular Democratic Republic which will secure for its citizens JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation. (#2) And further, “But the Church does not wish to rest on her laurels. She recommits herself to being a prophetic Church, taking a decisive stand in favour if the poor and marginalized. How does she as a prophetic Church plan to contribute towards a Better India?” (#8)

And just a little over three years ago, on June 29th, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI wrote his path-breaking Encyclical “Caritas in Veritate” (on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth). In this Encyclical, he asserts that, “Love – caritas – is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace. It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love
and Absolute Truth.” (# 1) Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI’s words, “the minimum measure” of it, an integral part of the love “in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18), to which Saint John exhorts us. On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the earthly city according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God’s love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world.” (# 6)

There is no doubt indeed, that inspite of many difficulties and hostilities, the Christians in India must continue relentlessly their search for justice and peace. As a Christian in India today, one inevitably has to face a double attack: first from those who are afraid that more and more of the country want to embrace Christ and his message and at the same time, from those who are opposed to India becoming a more humane, just and equitable society. But as disciples of Jesus, we are convinced that there is no going back……As in the words of a great contemporary Saint and martyr, Archbishop Oscar Romero:

“We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us…. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between 'master' builder and the worker. We are the workers, not the master builder; the ministers, not the messiah. We are prophets of a future that is not our own.”

(This Presentation was made at the International Conference, “Seed of the Church: Telling the Story of Today’s Christian Martyrs” held at the University of Notre Dame, November 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

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