

together

a national family magazine



CELEBRATIONS CREATE SOCIAL CAPITAL

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Together is a national family magazine. It is a monthly, published by the Franciscans (OFM) in India. It was started in 1935 in Karachi, now in Pakistan. It got its present name in 1966.

The magazine **Together** is a conversation platform. Nothing changes until our families change. It is an effort at making worlds meet by bringing down fearful, pretentious and defensive walls. **Together** is a journey, an ever-expansive journey—from me to us, from us to

all of us, and from all of us to all. Let us talk, let us cross borders. The more we converse and traverse, we discover even more paths to talk about and travel together. **Together** is an effort to uncover our shared humanity.

Your critical and relevant write-ups, that promote goodness, inclusivity and shared humanity, are welcome. Your articles must be mailed to editor@togethertmagazine.in before the 15th of every month.

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Festivals and Social Capital

Festivals are optimistic and happy occasions of pure outward-bound movements. The mood and noise around give an impression that every single soul is celebrating. However, the question is worth asking: do festivals discriminate?

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

Social capital is the bond of positive engagements and relationships among people in a group. It promotes trust and cooperation among persons in communities and also in a wider society. Portes A in his essay, Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology, clarifies that economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage.

In a society, examples of social capital is when someone opens a door for someone in need, returns a lost item to a stranger without a second thought, gives someone directions, loans something without a contract, and any such beneficial interaction between people, even if they don't know each other. It has been shown to be of great importance for societal well-being. Social capital, which is the internal social and cultural coherence of society, is important because it is an important source of power and influence that helps people to go ahead. Studies have found that levels of social capital are related to levels of academic performance, individual physical health. Greater levels of social capital correspond to lower crime rates in the community.

Festivals are sources of social capital. More inclusive a festival is, greater the level of social capital. Festivals provide space for bonding and bridging, which are articulations of social capital. Bonding refers to social capital created

within a group with shared interests and goals. Bridging, on the other hand, is the creation of social capital across groups. Festivals, being a time of sharing, caring, and giving, nurture social ties and participation.

Festivals play a key social role in all societies and cultures. Communities must be given the opportunity to celebrate. There is a coming together of synergy in celebrating festivals with cultural symbols, entertainment, and community gatherings in public spaces. It enhances the shared life of the community.

Political Economy and Caste Prejudices of Festivals

Festivals in India are colourful. October and November months have the maximum pan-India festivals. The country is in a celebration temper. Its individuality and uniqueness comes from its multiple cultural and religious facets and deep rooted belief in pluralism. India is home to every major religion and every way of life in the world. As Indians solidify their religious establishments and embraced other religions of the world, the inter-sectionality of the already stratified Indian society poses a serious challenge.

Festivals generate openings and opportunities, especially for small to medium businesses. Communities value festivals and special events because they not only enhance the community image but also provide activities and spending outlets for hosts and visitors. This festival season, starting from October has done the honors to boost up our pandemic hit economy. *Business*



Standard observes that during major festivals like Diwali, Navratri, Eid, etc, there is a significant rise in demand for various products and services. Businesses in India, particularly small businesses, have faced significant obstacles in these years due to the unprecedented outbreak of Covid-19. Thanks to multiple festivals in recent times, they have given hope for recovery for our struggling economy. Small businesses are critical to our society's economic and social fabric, and in celebrating our festivals we all play a part in their survival.

Political parties compete to usurp and use festivals as tools for political and social mobilization. From Shabrimala, down south, to Durga Puja in the North East are all examples. In recent times in Tamil Nadu, in the pretext of offering prayers in Murugan temple, the BJP leaders took on a Vel (symbol of Lord Muruga) yathra in an attempt to identify with the masses in Tamil Nadu.

Festivals have social and psychological objectives. They are cathartic. Festivals are creative spaces for multiple expressions and reflections. It is a process in which people, even from the lower classes and castes, could release pent-up frustrations and emotions. Thus we see through dances and violent movements people relive history and traditions during festivals. Some festivals are accompanied by rituals and customs, for example, Theyyam of north Kerala,

brings to life the great stories of heroes and spirits of their ancestors. Some festivals are part of a peoples' resistance against upper cast hegemony. Balmurli Natrajan in his research titled, *Cultural identity and beef festivals: toward a multiculturalism against caste*, establishes that Dalits have been at the forefront of organizing beef festivals as counter-hegemonic discourse.

Across religions, festivals have been discriminatory on various lines, especially on one's caste. One of the loud and well-participated festivals of India is the Ganesh festival. But it is sad to see that different castes have their own Ganesh pandals. I have read an interesting story about the origin of the immersion of the Ganesh idol in water. It was Tilak who started the practice of building open public pandals to keep the Ganesh idol, and people of all castes had access to it. On one such occasion a Dalit came forward to touch the idol, leading to a large hue and cry among the upper caste Hindus. They were unhappy about disturbing the purity and sanctity of the Hindu social norms. Thus the smart ones among them handled the conflict by introducing the ritual of immersing the idol in water at the end of the festival. Thus the idol, soiled by the touch of the lower castes, is purified.

Festivals of course are sources of social capital; but our festivals are yet to become nondiscriminatory sources of social capital irrespective of our castes, colour, and class.



Vibrant Hues of Festivals

DR SUSHEELA B

“A year has 365 days but India has 366.” Mark Twain may have said this in jest but he was not too wide off the mark as no other country can boast celebrating as many festivals as India does. Some festivals welcome the seasons of the year-the harvest, the rains while others celebrate religious occasions, the birthdays of divine beings, saints and Gurus (revered teachers), or the full moon or the advent of the New Year.

The concept of universal brotherhood encompasses all these festivals and the vibrant colours, warm hospitality and infectious buoyant spirit of the Indians attract people from all the over the world to take part in the Indian fairs and festivals.

Though most festivals have had religious origins, over the years they have acquired social and cultural significance. Every celebration center around the rituals of prayer, seeking

blessings, exchanging goodwill, decorating houses, wearing new clothes, music, dance and feasting. In a way these festivals seek to strike a balance between the temporal and the spiritual, between man's quest for salvation and his thirst for worldly pleasures. It is, therefore not surprising if days of fasting are often followed by nights of feasting.

Festivals are celebrated in all seasons in India. Spring covers all major festivals occurring during that period: Shivratri, Mahavir Jayanthi. In Summer & Monsoon, some of the festivals like Kanwar Mela, the Jagannath Rath Yatra, Teej are followed. Autumn is witness to the celebrations of Ganesh Chaturthi, Dussehra and Ramadan to name a few while Winter celebrates Diwali, Christmas, Haj and Sankranti. Most of the Hindu festivals adhere to the Lunar; and both full Moon (Purnima) and the new Moon are considered auspicious. The festivals of the

Muslim Community depend on the sighting of the new moon, which is why the dates of many of these festivals vary from year to year.

Spring Festivals

‘When winter comes, can spring be far behind?’, asked Shakespeare. Vasanth Panchami marks the beginning of Vasanth or Spring, when it is time for every bush of color and fragrance, vibrant as sparklers in festive display. The flower is a beautiful symbol of life and regeneration for it leads to seed and then another plant, bush or a tree. Hence, Vasant is propitiated as *Kusumakar* or *Rituraj*, the ‘King of Seasons’. This festival is celebrated by propitiating Goddess Saraswathi, the presiding deity of learning, aesthetics and creativity who symbolizes the constant flow of wisdom. She also represents the full blossoming the multi-hued, kindling the light of inspiration and hope. The Goddess is also called *kamalasana* or the ‘One who is seated on a Thousand Petalled Lotus’-each petal denoting quality. Saraswathi's *vaahan* or vehicles is the *hans* or *swan*. The swan has the ability to hold the mix of water and milk in its beak and spew out pure water from one side and milk from the other side. This is known as *neekshir vivek* or the water-milk wisdom in Indian philosophy. A wise person is one, who, like the swan, picks out pearls of wisdom from a vast spread of knowledge. The veena that Saraswathi holds in her hands has seven strings representing the body, food, humans, work, intelligence, religious and spiritual cultures.

Mahashivrathri or Shiva Jayanthi is a festival imbued with deep spiritual meaning. Today it is celebrated by devout Hindus as one of many festivals. Shiva symbolizes the universally worshipped form of God, the eternal light Shiva literally means one who is *kalyankari*, ‘the Benefactor of all souls. Mahashivrathri, therefore is the memorial of the divine incarnation and divine acts of the incorporeal God Shiva is the Supreme Father He who performs the triple role of creation, sustenance and destruction. This divine trinity is symbolized as Brahma, Vishnu and Shankar in Hindu theology. The supreme has been worshipped in the oval or egg-shaped form of the Shivalinga. The Linga Purana say

that the one who destroyed the world and re-establishes the same with Divine Power is called *Linga*. The Shiva temples throughout India-including at Amarnath, Somnath, Kashi Vishwanath and Ujjain's Mahakaleshwar and Nepal's Pashupathinath. He is depicted as linga, the elliptical representation in stone. Shiva's representation as linga is to show His incorporeal nature. He does not have any male or female human like-form like the deities. He is incorporeal point of light. The twelve renowned Shiva temples in India are also known as Jyotirlinga Maths, signifying His form of Light. Incorporeal Shiva is also known as Trimurti, the creator of the three deities-Brahma, Vishnu and Shankar. The three lines and a dot in the center signify the subtle form of God as a point of light and his three divine acts symbolize the triple characteristics of Trimurti: Trinetri-the one with the third eye of wisdom. Trikaladarshi-the one who sees the three aspects of time, and Trilok Nath-the Lord of the three worlds.

Colorful triumph of Good over Evil-Holi: falls almost a fortnight after Shivrathri which falls a day before amvasya, the darkest night of the month. Spiritually, it signifies light prevailing over darkness of the month. It is observed as the celebration of fertility, love and joy which can be culturally construed to be virtual New Year, in the spirit of Spring and in the colours and contours of godly gospels and devotions. Holi is associated with *Mal Utsav* (smearing of colours) and the Holika (Hiranyakashyap's sister and Prahalad's aunt) bonfire in which dry sticks and cow dung are put to fire and corn seeds burnt to the point of losing their power to germinate. The fire represents burning away of what is old and worn out. The festivities of Holi have a central message-let bygones be bygones, bury old hatchet and start anew in the spirit of Spring.

The festival assumes its true colors in Mathura and Vrindavan where it played in memory of Krishna's dalliance with Radha and other gopis of Gokul. People throng Krishna and Radha temples, throw colors at each other and on deities before which they sing, dance and pray. Holi is also observed as *Lath Maar*, Holi in Barsana (Radha's birthplace) where women of the village use bamboo sticks and brooms to

keep menfolk at bay! Although Holi is a Hindu festival, its spirit engulfs all communities and sections of society. Muslim king Humayun and Akbar patronized Holi celebrations during their rule. Even today, people of different faiths are invited to Holi Milan programs where they meet and greet each other, share sweets and jokes, recite poems and songs, play colours, games and dramas in an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood. Just as the colors of Holi provide relief from the hot sun, soothing irritated spirits, let the vibrancy and gaiety of the festival kindle your inner spirit to look forward to a new life free of old baggage and enmities. Start life on a clean, happy slate.

Navroz: Though celebrated first in Iran four thousand years ago, it came to be known as Navroz or New Day when it was pronounced thus by a band of people who belonged to the oldest religion in the world, Zoroastrianism. Navroz celebration originated with the mystic Persian king, Jamshyd-e-Navroz. Children listened to his wise and gracious 700-year rule of the supernatural luster which radiated from his crown and his legendary goblet which never ran dry. The festivities are celebrated with 7 'S'. They are *Sekeh* (coin), *Samanu* (Sweet wheat pudding), *sabzi* (sprouted green shoots of vegetables and herbs), *sonbol* (Hyscinth), *senjed* (a tiny dried fruit), *sib* (apple) and *serekh* (vinegar). Its significance is relevant even today when the world is in dire need of newness.

Ram Navami: The story of Ram appeals to everyone. The Ramayana is listened and read by thousands of people every day. Sage Valmiki, the Yoga Vasishta, was the first to narrate this story. Thanks to oral tradition, many versions were born. Ram is the symbol of sacrifice, a model of brotherhood, an ideal administrator, a warrior unparalleled. The term Ram Rajya stands for the most exalted concept of a welfare state. Ram was not only divine; he was invested with highest values of an enriched tradition. The brothers, Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan had totally unity among themselves. Even while playing in their childhood, each aspired for the victory of the other. Ram's birthday celebrations remind us of the ideals He stood for. Vasishta declared that Ram is the embodiment of

Dharma. Kalyug has become the age of kalaha or conflict. In such a scenario, The Ramayana throws light on how brothers and sisters should conduct themselves.

Summer & Monsoon Festivals

Prophet Muhammed, Last Messenger of Allah: The Holy prophet of Islam, Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa, peace be upon him, was born on the 12th day of the month Rabi ul' Awwal. His birthday is celebrated by the followers of Islam, worldwide, across continents and cultures. The Prophet's illustrious life provides for us lessons of highest order. The Holy Qur'an emphasizes this point for all Muslims when it titles the Prophet as Uswatul Hasaanah, the best or most ideal model for us to emulate. In these turbulent times, for Muslims particularly, it will do well to return to the basic roots of the teachings of the Holy Prophet. The high accolades paid to his personality by Allah through the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah or Islamic practices reminds us of his exalted personality. Thrice in a day, the adhan or call to prayer reminds Muslims that the Holy Prophet is the Messenger of Allah.

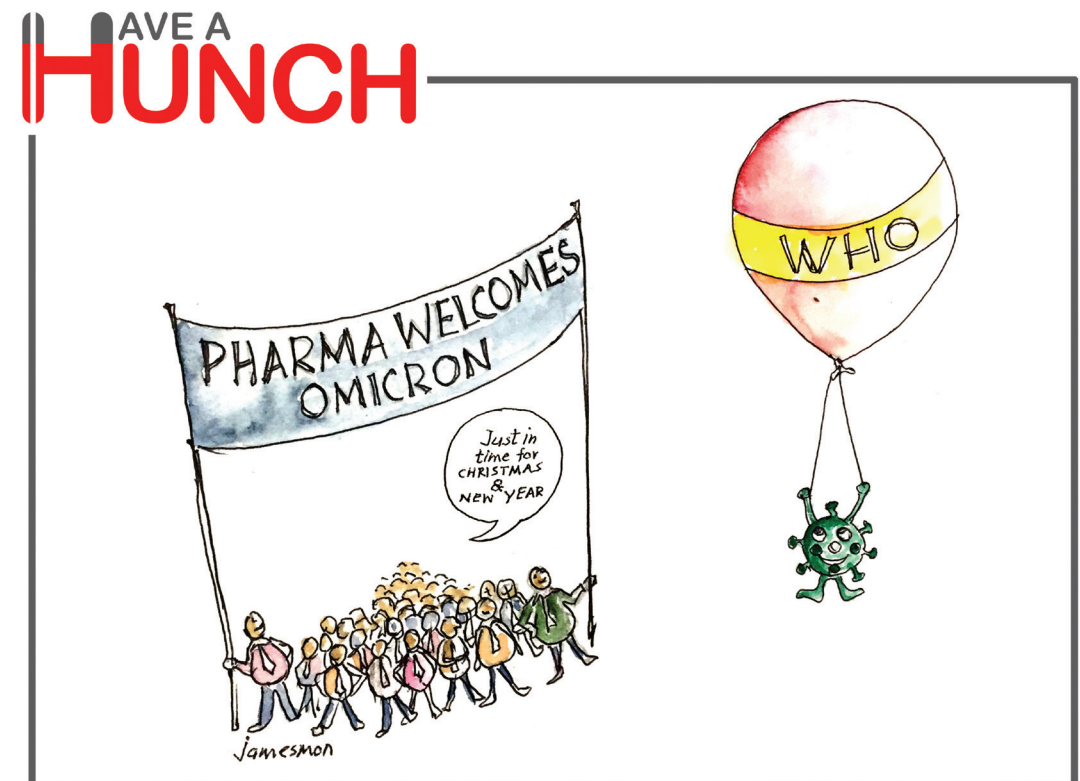
Muharram: Muslims begin their lunar calendar with the month of Muharram, one of the four months sanctified by Allah. The three are Dul-Qa'd, Dul-Hajj and Rajab. The specific mention of these four months, however, does not in any way undermine the importance of other months. The sighting of the moon of Muharram heralds the New Year of Muslims according to the tenements of Islam and the Shariat. The New Year reminds us of the martyrdom of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet.

The Durga Puja is also the harvest to remind us of earth's bounty. Devi is presented as a trussed-up bundle of the nine plants wrapped in a sari, suggestive of her proximity to Mother Earth. She is *Para Prakriti*, bountiful nature, nourishing us just as she is *Para Sakthi*, the embodiment of infinite energy. Inseparably connected with the physical world, she personifies the earth itself, sustaining life, and providing food for all and stands for cosmic stability. The *sakthi Pithas* are holy spots which are centers of pilgrimage where the various

parts of her body fell when being carried by an enraged Shiva who suffered humiliation at the hands of Daksha, Parvati's father.

Vijay Dashami is observed on the tenth day following Navaratri every year. The first three nights are devoted to Durga, the goddess of valor, the next three nights are for Saraswathi, fountainhead of knowledge. The three combine might, wealth and knowledge. In Assam, Bengal and Orissa it is celebrated as Kali Puja, highlighting woman power-symbolized by *Mahishasurmardini* – over beastly conduct. In northern states and some parts of Maharashtra, the festival is known as Dussehra celebrating the annihilation of Ravan by Ram. It is believed that on the eve of his final assault on Ravan, Ram performed the *Chamundi Homam* following which Goddess Chamundi divulged to him the way to kill Ravana. After doing this deed, Ram did not rush to Ayodhya immediately; he chose

to enter Ayodhya with his entourage on the auspicious Vijaya Dashami day. The day is also linked to Mahabharata. The Pandavas, after 12 years of exile, had to spend one year incognito. When they entered Virat Rajya, they left behind their weapons on a Shami tree concealing them among its branches and leaves. When they completed one year, they collected the weapons from the tree and after offering thanksgiving, commenced the war with the Kauravas on Vijaya Dashami. In Kerala, Tamil Nādu and Mysore, Navami is observed as Ayudha Puja Day when people exchange greetings by offering Shami leaves. It is indeed a matter of faith that even the army and police force lay down their weapons on this day and take them back after the ritual puja. A significant aspect of this practice is that Ayudha does not mean just weapons. It is applied in a wider sense to cover and include all tools that help on one's livelihood.



A Bond of Compassion Through Festivities

The wonderful old customs of celebration of festivals were far superior to the obscene displays of money that contemporary festivities have become.

DEVIKA M

It's hilarious just to hear the word festive. We joyfully celebrate it, bringing wonderful energy into our lives and surroundings. Is it true that the word "festive" solely refers to just a happy occasion?

I see the festive season as a great opportunity to honour our rich history, culture, and customs, as well as a lot more in terms of bringing families together and making pleasant memories. They're meant to be shared with loved ones to commemorate significant events and emotions in our lives. They are important in our social lives because they provide structure and connect us to our families and history.

In comparison to accepting a diversity of different cultures and their celebrations, the festive time not only enlightens our festivals. We become a part of it, whether we realize it or not. I'm occasionally struck by how capable we've grown in terms of sharing our culture and entering into cohesive actions. This has been my reflection since the days I was a student, whether in high school or later in college. How varied each of us was, and how accepting of their traditions we have gotten in the years following.

To put things in perspective, we normally look forward to the festive season, with its desire for sweets, attire, gifts, and an overall happy celebration. The reality may differ. I'd like to show my serious concern as I'm making this statement. Yes, we can all agree that the generation has changed over time. Bringing in the broader perspective of how the changes evolved, how were the festivals celebrated in the past years?

Festivals used to mean a holiday from school, a chance to eat, shop for new clothes and toys, and catch up with friends and family. Diwali is the time of year when our parents save money to acquire new stuff for the house. There was a certain purity associated with the way we celebrated all of those festivities back then. It was more inclusive, allowing even those with less financial resources to participate and enjoy the celebrations.

Through my Observation, the passage of time, the introduction of globalization, and a rising economy have all had an impact on the way we celebrate our festivals today. People nowadays have higher salaries and can afford to buy new clothes, toys, and other items throughout the year rather than waiting for festivals to do so. Festivals have evolved into a time to show off your wealth. Festivals have become increasingly self-centered and have drifted away from tradition. It's now more about instant satisfaction. The traditional style of celebrating festivals is steadily fading away. The little things that used to make us happy when we celebrated festivals no longer excite us. The focus has turned to money in recent years. Happiness equals money. So, to be happier, you'll need more money. You must work harder to earn more money. People today are more likely to work at festivals and focus on their careers rather than spend time with their families. This transition is unwanted because we will forget the rationale for all of these events at some point in the future. All of our traditional celebrations, such as Valentine's



Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and so on, would be commercially oriented.

The wonderful old customs of festivals were far superior to the obscene displays of money that contemporary festivities have become. They say that the only constant is change, but certain things are better left alone.

What Should We Invoke?

It is said that we should celebrate life rather than merely festivities. In a country like India, life is linked with festivals since there are so many of them, each of which reflects our culture and way of life. These festivities bring with them a wave of excitement and enthusiasm, breaking the monotony of daily life. Surprisingly, practically every major and minor event in India is marked by a celebration.

You'll never run out of reasons and seasons to celebrate, whether it's the entrance of spring, the harvesting of crops, or anything else. Experiencing the country's celebratory mood is equivalent to celebrating life, with a plethora of colours, music, dance, folk songs, cuisine, and friends packaged into one wholesome package that provides complete satisfaction. Having stated all of the foregoing, it does indeed give off a positive feeling to preserve culture and customs.

What Is the Most Spectacular Festival?

Diwali, also known as Deepavali, is without a doubt the most stunning holiday in the Indian subcontinent. Diwali, which takes place between mid-October and mid-November, is India's most important celebration. Autumn signals the start of this Hindu festival of lights, which is observed across the country. People decorate their homes with candles, clay lamps, and lights, ignite crackers and exchange gifts

and sweets with friends and family throughout the celebrations.

While conveying the gist of how Diwali is observed in other counterparts...

Jaipur must be at the top of the list. For starters, the decorations are fantastic. The entire city is illuminated by lights and lanterns of all colours and designs. A shopping festival is held, with the best-decorated market taking home the prize. Don't leave without trying some traditional Rajasthani sweets.

The Ghats of Varanasi's sacred city is illuminated by a thousand lights and diyas. Around this season in Varanasi, the street side vendors that sell cheap but delicious local food just become better.

Punjab has its unique allure that draws people from all walks of life. Locals have a compelling personality and a spirit of zeal that is difficult to discover elsewhere. Diwali celebrations in Punjab are as extravagant as they can be. Indeed, the majesty of the Golden Temple is illuminated by a thousand lights and diyas, which speak volumes about the people's confidence in this respected location.

Imagine how lovely the city looks during the festive season when its energy is contagious even on ordinary days.

A Bond of Connection

People compete with one another for wealth and fame, so there is a lot of animosity and prejudice in the world. They can meet and form a companionship and love bond throughout the festival. It would go a long way toward eradicating prejudices from prejudiced minds and improving the world.

Devika M is a Mental Health Blogger, Core Lead, Let Us Dream Organization, Bangalore.

Defeating the Pandemic Blues with Maa-Durga Pujo

The last two years had in a way opened people's eyes about what they considered close to them and this realisation was accompanied by a strong need to keep these things and people as close to them and safe as possible.

KONAUKANJOLI CHAKRAVARTY



Surviving the last two years has been no easy feat. The pandemic has filtered into every corner of our lives and ensured that nothing remains the same. In India, the virus did not spare our renowned festivities and for the first time, people all over the nation were forced to celebrate through screens. This strengthened the notion of a *new era*, one dominated by technology. These changes were not easy to adapt to—but the spirit remained strong and everyone overcame it to unite as far as they were allowed to. An instance of uniting

to celebrate was seen among the Bengalis of Bangalore as Durga Puja arrived both in 2020 and 2021.

As the date for Durga Puja neared, many cultural associations found themselves with a genuine question—whether going offline was safe enough or not. While a number of Bengali cultural associations in Bangalore concluded it was not safe and it would be better to go online, there were some who chose to go offline in a bio bubble and I was privileged enough to be able to physically visit and attend puja. However, as I entered the *pandal*, it was obvious that things were not the same. The absence of the normally overbearing and noisy *dhak* left the hall feeling hollow—as if there was a void which no one could fill. Yet, the people did not let that deter them. Dressed to the nines, they did their best to compensate with loud conversations and laughter. What the place lacked in sound, was made up for with the warmth the people radiated towards each other.

Over the course of the five days and four evenings, everyone's energy crescendoed as people readjusted to the new normal and skirted around the guidelines for quick mask-less selfies and photos. The *bhog* also felt unfamiliar as the association replaced the usual shared meals with boxed meals to take home in order to prevent unnecessary contact. This was a tragic change to adapt to as the highlight of puja; the food was compromised. The former endless variety of stalls was replaced by a small stall selling various items which were delicious

but in light of the restrictions lacked the usual thrill.

All was not lost yet. The idol of Durga Maa was truly breathtaking in her small form - the government had issued a mandate that the idol is not to be over four feet—and people could not stop themselves from fawning over the sheer talent of the artists. The decorations, too, were stunning and all the people attending could not help but admit that Maa truly ensured that all went well for us and her. In a way, everyone present saw it as respite from the challenge the year had been for every single individual in that room. Those in employment took this week as an opportunity to step back from the all-consuming work from home, stepping out in their best looks. Their joy knew no bounds as they came in contact with each other and shared their gains and losses—something they had not done in very long.

Puja also served as a saving grace for all those present. Prayers were rapidly murmured under people's breaths. The last two years had in a way opened people's eyes about what they considered close to them and this realisation was accompanied by a strong need to keep these things and people as close to them and safe as possible.

Aristotle's statement that "man is a social animal" was proven to be true as people actively sought out contact with each other—both physically and conversationally. Once the initial hours of puja passed, everyone gravitated towards each other and all fears of the virus were temporarily forgotten - assurance came with the knowledge that the person in front of them was spending their entire time in the same two spaces—the puja hall and their house. Conversations about all topics—clothes, food, work, families and the arrangements flowed in and out of my ears as I sat in a corner and observed everyone. Naturally, the children also gained back their energy and before any of us knew it, they were running around shrieking delightfully (temporarily delightful of course)—as if the pandemic had never happened.

It is important to note that the pandemic never stopped and the association remained alert about the same. Norms were maintained

and sanitization was conducted as regularly as possible. Cleaning aside, the people who entered were also checked and in 2021, people were encouraged to get vaccinated before they came in to ensure that all cautionary measures were taken. In fact, to a large extent, everyone tried to ensure that the person in front of them kept their masks on.

A large saviour in this situation was technology. Everyone in the association agreed on this as the speakers were used to substitute the *dhak*. The screen was also used to stream the cultural programme—a very important aspect of Durga Puja for us. 2021 was also made memorable by the constant downpour. Attendees joked that Maa wanted to test their commitment as they entered, half drenched but faces glowing. And there was no denying it, Maa had truly tested us but also returned some meaning to our otherwise bleak days. People saw her arrival as the sign of the evil being vanquished—and they found their hope being restored. Faith truly proved to be a powerful thing as we all prayed that just how Maa had returned without being stopped, normalcy of some sort would be restored sooner than later.

On a slightly different and more personal note, the pandemic also helped me come a little closer to truly embracing the spirit of puja. As someone who is part of the *probashi* (emigrant) group of Bengalis in North India, I have never had the honour of attending puja in West Bengal. The resulting diaspora often left me wondering whether I truly understand why I attend puja and more often than not, I was fueled by a desire to see an *actual* puja. However, as the possibility of our puja here being called became more real, I was filled with an anxiety of sorts. This is when I realised that the spirit of festivals does not come from your place of birth or origin. It is in you—somewhere in a small corner of your heart, which only thrums and comes alive once a year. The intention truly counts more than geography, and if your mind is in the right place, then, well you can switch on your laptop and look at a photo of Maa and her children and feel that you have been blessed—and nobody would question you.



Festivity of Humanity in the Era of Pandemic 2021

When we celebrate our cultural festivals, situations have made some live without any celebrations and amenities. They struggle to make ends meet, and some try to buy gifts for the family without making them sense the crisis.

ROSELINE FLORENCE GOMES

Festivals have been an integral part of my life. It marks the self-identity in our social world. For some, it is the seed to socialize, reconcile, indulge, and most importantly express one's culture. As a child, I have always been part of an inclusive culture that valued and treasured significant festivals. My father always guided us in understanding and celebrating diverse festive seasons with our community peers that marked a new collectivistic meaning in our lives.

As a teenager, I always looked forward to this festival called 'Holi' that symbolized the season of spring, love, and the beginning of new life. It epitomized the depletion of negativity and promoted the upliftment of a positive spirit. The colors shouted in union depicting the gesture of thanksgiving, happiness, and hope for a new season. I remember the days when we used to hide all the colours and shared each

one's hidden boxes with those who needed it the most.

'Rakhi' was another festival that I cherished the most with my cousins. This festivity reflected the sacred bond between siblings and defined feelings of brotherhood, love, and bonding. It signified the story in Mahabharata when Lord Krishna once injured himself and in return, Draupadi tied a cloth in his wrist that moved the Lord and he vowed to protect her from then onwards as a brother.

'Eid' was another festival that was celebrated in my family as my father had many comrades who taught us the value of prayers, charity, kindness, sacrifice, offerings, and most importantly the purpose of good deeds over bad.

While in school, all our brothers and sisters at home waited eagerly to celebrate the nine days festival of Durga Puja. Since we used to stay in Kolkata, it was the most awaited season

This pandemic should be taken as an opportunity to reflect on our deeds and restore all that is available to us; and that is humanity.

when the whole state welcomed the goddess with her children who were believed to visit her mother's house every year. The celebration of good versus evil was celebrated as it was known that it took Goddess Durga nine days to defeat the negative that further brought in cheer and camaraderie.

The last festival that was greatly believed and treasured by my family was Christmas signifying the birth of Jesus, belief in the word of God, feelings of secularism, love, faith, and hope. All these were important dimensions of my personality as it had taught me the essence of togetherness, brotherhood, and community. This is one teaching from my father that I will cherish and pass on to the coming generations.

Thus, as I reflect on these memories of festivities, I come across a time at present when we sometimes lose the meaning of festivals. The coming of festivals for a few of us are about dresses, family, extravagant meals and the list goes on. This pandemic has created unpredictable havoc in most of our lives. A few of us have lost our loved ones, some our jobs, some our most precious earnings, and some the confidence or identity. When few of us celebrate our cultural festivals, some sleep without any celebrations and amenities. As I observe my world daily, I visualize a few people struggling to make ends meet, some trying to buy for their families without making them sense the crisis. Teenagers and youth are waiting after their education for the opening up of a safe economy that recruits them with the limited skills that they own. All these instances make me go back to those festive spirits each time and rethink if I have contributed to others' lives by bringing up the same festive spirit. Each festival that I celebrate talks about good versus evil, love, sacrifice, and most importantly brotherhood. I ask myself if I have seen beyond the cultural walls, am I able to view my environment through the lens of people's helplessness, youngsters' uncertainties, and the roar of

silence. I realize that we all are so self-centered with our own needs and thoughts that we fail to open up our minds towards the needs of others. Every festival shouts out of 'humanity' and the power of the divine within us that makes us fight over evil. When we become selfish, it makes us less humane and more materialistic. Each time we blame, we brood, we make noise about our government, our fate, and our times. If only we open our eyes and think of solutions, it will make us become divergent thinkers and eminent contributors to the community.

This pandemic should be taken as an opportunity to reflect on our deeds and restore all that is available to us; and that is humanity. We were created to be humane first and if we are unable to see others like ourselves, we may not be able to interpret. The festival of Holi gave me the gift of communion that needs to be energized among our people. The celebration of Rakhi spoke about protection and bonding. It should motivate us to reinforce our associations with others irrespective of any differences. Durga Puja portrays the power of inner strength over weakness. Christmas that gave us the meaning of God's love should lead us in understanding the unconditional ways of service. All these will be meaningless if we are celebrating without reasoning. This pandemic has taught me the value of social relationships and the purpose of my existence. All that I took for granted I have now started to rethink within my conscience. All these festivals talk about a human's fight for good and overcoming the bad. They speak about love and brotherhood embedded in humanity that for me is the biggest festival as it has taught me life and guided me in seeing the bigger picture than the materialistic pleasures. I became more self-aware and inclined with my identity and gained confidence. It's time we reflect, rejuvenate, and most importantly educate ourselves and our social world, and then gradually we will be able to imbibe humanity in our surroundings.

Festivals Create Bridges and Opportunities

The celebration of festivals connects the past with the present. Being an ancient civilization, Hindu society has preserved and perpetuated large number of festivals.

DR VASUDHA VC

India's beauty lies in its colorful culture, enchanting history and variety of traditions which led to numerous celebrations. Fairs and festivals in India are celebrated as a part of life. Known as the land of 13 festivals in 12 months, the Indian festive calendar is the longest in the world. The colorful Indian culture is defined by several festivals celebrated in the country throughout the year. India is the land of different ethnicity and religious belief that gives rise to important festivals in the country.

In the dull and drab life of the village people, traditional forms of recreation are provided through folk arts, folk theatres, fairs and festivals. This is testified by the fact that, festivals are celebrated by village people as means and an opportunity for relaxation, meeting of relatives, having good food and wearing fine clothes. The drudgery of daily routine is broken by meeting and greeting relatives and friends and have good time. In many villages there are traditional singers or bards who entertain the people through folk songs, verses and folk tales. Sometimes the village might have a group of singers called "Chaupai Mandali" or "Duha Mandali" who compose verses and organize a competition of singing verses and songs. Every year the village observes a few days before "Diwali" as "Durga Puja" or "Nava Ratri" when the traditional cultural programmes are organized and folk dances like "Garba", "Ras", etc., are celebrated with gusto.

The celebration of festivals connects the past with the present. Being an ancient

civilization, Hindu society has preserved and perpetuated large number of festivals. Some festivals are great, having an all-India character. "Holi", "Diwali", "Sankranti", "Dussehra" are highly auspicious sacred and grand festivals, that are celebrated all over the country from north to south and east to West by different castes and communities. There are minor festivals which are celebrated locally in certain regions or states, or districts or even by a part of the community.

Many festivals have an immense religious significance and associated with widely held religious beliefs. Navratri is considered as one of the major religious festivals in India. The literal meaning of Navratri is 'nine nights', and hence, the festival is observed for a period of nine days. Throughout these days, Goddess Shakti (another form of Goddess Sati) is worshipped and the people keep fast to seek blessings of the deity.

Also known as Vijayadashami, Dussehra is celebrated the day after the conclusion of Navratri festival. The celebration of the festival goes back to the time of Ramayana. As per Hindu mythology, it is the day when Lord Rama defeated Ravana, and hence, the day celebrates the victory of good over evil. The key attraction of this popular religious festival is the enactment of scenes from the Hindu epic Ramayana which ends with burning the effigies of Ravana and his son Meghanath and brother Kumbhakarna.

Food is often offered to Gods or Brahmins or beggars or relatives and friends. One of the important features in many festivals is group singing by women. Some festivals are utilized

for strengthening group solidarity and family ties especially for married daughters who are given gifts and invited for dinners, etc.

Diwali is undoubtedly the most popular religious festival in India. Often referred to as the festival of lights, Diwali is all about spreading, peace, and happiness. The festival of Diwali marks the arrival of Lord Rama, Goddess Sita and Lakshman in Ayodhya after 14 years of exile. As per the beliefs, in order to welcome Lord Rama, the entire city of Ayodhya was lit up with thousands of earthen lamps. People decorate their homes with earthen lamps, candles, and lights. Exchanging gifts with friends and families is one of the key attractions of the festival. For children, this festival is special as they get to burn crackers on this day along with having various types of sweets.

Considered as the New Year of the North Indians, Makar Sankranti is celebrated the day after another Indian festival of Lohri and marks the end of winter and beginning of the harvest season. The festival is observed in almost all parts of the country with different names and rituals. Unlike other Hindu festivals, the date of Makar Sankranti is fixed and is set according to the solar cycle. On this auspicious occasion, people can be seen flying kites and making a savory dish like *Bajre ki Khichdi* and sweets like *Til ke Ladoo*.

Maha Shivaratri is the festival of Lord Shiva and is celebrated on the 14th day of the dark fortnight in the Hindu month of Phalgun (February – March). As per the beliefs, worshipping Lord Shiva on this day cleanses one from all the sins. Keeping a fast on the day of Maha Shivaratri believes to bring marital bliss for women.

Holi is not just a festival but a way to spread love and happiness. It marks the arrival of the spring season. Also, it signifies the victory of good over evil. The celebration begins on the eve of the festival. As a part of the celebration, huge bonfires are lit and people celebrate it by singing and dancing around it. The ritual of bonfire signifies the burning of demon – Kamasura. The real fun begins on the day of the festival when people put colours on each other.

Commemorating the birth of Lord Krishna, Janmashtami is yet another popular Hindu festival observed in the month of August. On this day, it is believed that Lord Krishna was born. Varieties of delicacies are offered to the deity in order to please him. Lord Krishna was born in Mathura and his childhood spent in Vrindavan; hence, both the places hold a special status of being must-visit places to celebrate Janmashtami. As a part of the celebration, people fast throughout the day and break it in the evening. Besides, visiting temples, praying, dancing, and singing bhajans are some other rituals of the festival.

An 11-day-long festival which is celebrated with all the devotion, Ganesh Chaturthi is one of the highly revered Hindu festivals observed in India. It marks the birth of Lord Ganesha – the son of Lord Shiva. The festival begins with the installation of idols of the deity in homes and special public platforms. For the next ten days, people worship the idol with all fervour and gaiety. On the eleventh day, the idol of the deity is immersed in the water in order to conclude the festivities.

The holding of fairs on certain days of the year is welcome to the village people, as it breaks the monotony of the village life and provides an opportunity for wearing good clothes and going out to river banks or temples to visit the fairs and exchanges their produce with those of other villages. These fairs have important place in the socio- economic life in the rural communities.

Despite being mainly religious events, these festivals and fairs have significant impact on cultural, social and economic aspects of the lives of people in rural and urban India. In addition to helping perpetuation of traditions, customs, rituals and religious practices and promoting cultural identity and social integration, these events have also significant implications for trade, industry and commerce at different levels of economy. For Urban masses it is just a celebration depending on their status to exhibit; but there are many economically backward sections make life out of it for their social existence.

Becoming a Child with the Child

“To see” and “make another see” the Most High God’s coming into the world with humility and poverty in a dwelling place of animals was important in a society of merchants where money mattered more than the gratuity of God.

JOY PRAKASH OFM

It was Saint Francis of Assisi who popularized the custom of Christmas cribs. So before we start with the setting up of our crib-sets this year, be it at home or in some parish or religious house, it is important to recall the background and origin of crib-making. We will try to understand the emotional reasons that went into building the first crib in the 13th century, by Saint Francis and the people of Greccio, Italy. Perhaps then, our crib-making may have some semblance to the spirit with which Saint Francis originated it.

Francis had a visual temperament. We are told in the biographies that he was not a deaf hearer of the Gospel, but whatever he heard in the Gospel he diligently committed to memory and then carried it out to the letter. The Gospel account that fired Francis’ imagination was this: “...the time came for her (Mary) to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Lk 2:7).

The Gospel account only speaks about a manger and nothing about the animals in it. Francis was a poet with an active imagination. He told his friend, a certain John, “I wish to do something that will recall to memory the little Child who was born in Bethlehem and set before our bodily eyes in some way the inconveniences of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, how, with an ox and ass standing by, he lay upon the hay where he had been placed” (1Cel 84). The circumstances of this



conversation had its roots at the beginning of his conversion, namely in his restless years when he sought to know God’s will regarding what he should do with his life.

To gain some clarity about his vocation, Francis went into a dilapidated church named San Damiano. When praying there, gazing at the Cross in San Damiano, Francis’ eyes must have rested on the inscription, “Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19). This leads us to the Gospel of John which alone uses ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ while the other gospels have only ‘Jesus King of the Jews’. What memories this brought to Francis – memories of the Lord’s life at Nazareth, poor, hidden, hard-working... Together with the name Nazareth, Francis recalled the many forms of debasement of the Son of God. Nazareth probably conjured up in

him the first century hymn, “...who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

Nazareth brought before him the image of the One who “came from the *royal throne* into the womb of the Virgin” (Adm 1, 16). It reminded Francis of Him who descended with Mary and Joseph “and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them” (Lk 2:51), who joined the sinners in the Jordan to be baptized by John (Lk 3:21); “And He was a poor man and a transient and lived on alms, He and the Blessed Virgin, and His disciples” (ER IX,5), becoming “obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8).

We know his manner of life after his conversion. Francis preferred living among the poor and the simple, among humble peasants and shepherds. It was therefore not surprising that in 1224, at the hermitage of Greccio where simplicity and humility reigned supreme, he decided to celebrate Christmas, asking a priest to celebrate mass outdoors, in front of a manger filled with hay and in the presence of an ox and an ass.

For his part, Francis preached with great sweetness about the birth of the “Infant of Bethlehem”. The first biographer, Thomas of Celano says, “...when he wished to call Christ Jesus, he would call him simply the *Child of Bethlehem*, aglow with overflowing love for him; and speaking the word *Bethlehem*, his voice was more like the bleating of a sheep. His mouth was filled more with sweet affection than with words. Besides, when he spoke the name *Child of Bethlehem* or *Jesus*, his tongue licked his lips, as if it were relishing and savouring with pleased palate the sweetness of the words” (1Cel. 8). He wished to make the discomforts which the child Jesus had encountered in the grotto that cold night visible to all, being without all that was needed for a new born baby.

The ox and the ass do not appear in the Gospel story, but rather in the apocryphal

gospels, which are the gospel accounts that the Church never acknowledged as having been written by the four evangelists. Francis considered the presence of these two animals essential due to their very symbolism.

According to the Fathers of the Church, such as Saint Augustine, the ox represents the Jews and the ass represents all those people outside Judaism and the hay represents the host of salvation. Francis saw in the ox and the ass Jews and Muslims who in time would know Christ, fulfilling the providential design of the Saviour.

This was the time of the Crusades. The Saint had been in Egypt for the fifth Crusade, which had ended in disaster both for him and for the Crusade itself in 1221. Himself an eyewitness to massacre and violence, the heart of Francis’ message was peace, peace as a social condition, especially peace as an interior condition.

Francis exhorted his companions, “Do not envy your neighbour, do not desire his goods, and do not overpower him, but listen to him with understanding and meekness of heart.” Francis followed Christ, who on the night of Christmas had come to bring peace: the Angels proclaimed in song: “Glory to God in the highest and peace on Earth to people of goodwill.”

The first biographer of Saint Francis says, “The Child Jesus had been forgotten in the hearts of many; but, by the working of His grace, He was brought to life again through His servant Saint Francis and stamped upon their fervent memory.”

“To see” and “make another see” the Most High God’s coming into the world with humility and poverty in a dwelling place of animals was important in a society of merchants where money mattered more than the gratuity of God; as it was a world of clerics who were desirous of honour and power more than anything else, what would the humility of God mean to them? At such a time of violence, crusades and holy wars, there was nothing they needed to see more urgently than the tenderness of God made manifest in the babe of Bethlehem, a challenge to every believer to let the child within manifest itself as a herald of the great King!

Mother – The Heart of Christmas

“What is Christmas? It is tenderness for the past, courage for the present, hope for the future.” – Agnes M. Pahro

LADISLAUS LOUIS D’SOUZA

It was late that evening when the phone rang. “Your mother seems extremely disoriented,” said the voice at the other end, adding, “Perhaps a visit from you might help – it’s difficult for me to say anything more than that,” before hanging up. Out rushed the son, who, revving up his car, made a dash for the Old Age Home [OAH]. Though visiting hours were long past, the Administrator allowed Alderin (All names changed for the sake of privacy) into the room of his mother, Christabelle, where he found her slouched in her chair, quite disenchanted. Perking up on hearing her only son call out, “Hey Mum!” she feebly asked, bursting into tears, “How come? Haven’t seen you in months!” “Been a bit busy, Mum! So sorry!” embracing her warmly.

It was a while before Alderin was able to calm her down before saying, “Now tell me, Mum - what can I do for you to make up for the lapse?” “Hmm..., well—I’m dying of heat - maybe you could just replace that ceiling fan! It squeaks and squawks, disturbing my sleep. In fact I think most of the fans in this place are like that. I feel so bad for the other inmates.” “Issue resolved, Mum!”

At ten the next morning, Alderin was at the OAH with a dozen new fans and an army of electricians who in a couple of hours, had all the fans in the facility replaced. “Well Mom! Howzzat for a change!?” Beaming from ear to ear Christabelle gave him a thumbs-up! “What else would you like me to do for you or for the Home, Mom?” “Hmm. . .how about a fridge stocked with variables—ha, ha, hah!! I’m joking, son. But honestly, there have been

times when I’ve gone to bed hungry because I’d had no appetite for what was being served and there was nothing in the small kitchen fridge for me to pick and eat.” “Done!” he said before zipping out again. It was nearing Tea time when Alderin was back, this time with two king-sized Refrigerators! By the time Christabelle and the rest of the inmates had trooped in for their cuppa, the fridges, both well stocked with stuff that he felt the old might like to dig into at will, were already functional, one in the refectory, the other in the kitchen!

Later, after tea, when mother and son settled down on the wonky sofa in her room, Christabelle got pretty emotional as Alderin asked, “Mum, why didn’t you tell me all along? You’ve been here five years but never once complained and so I wasn’t even aware of your difficulties...” “Well son, when did you last come anyway? I waited for you last month, certain that you’d come to wish me for Mother’s Day – but you didn’t! I looked for you last Sunday, hoping you’d accompany me to Dad’s graveside for Father’s Day – but no! All the inmates here had a son or daughter visiting and spending time with them – except poor me,” she trailed off, teary-eyed. Unable to contain his emotions, Alderin dug his face into his palms, muttering over and over again: ‘Sorry Mum! I’m Sorry! So sorry...!’ As their sobs softly receded, Mother sat upright and, cupping son’s face in her palms, said, “It’s not for my helplessness that I grieve, Alderin, but for how you will manage when your children have you and Sonal admitted here in your old age.” Alderin swooned as the lesson instantly sank in.

In time, Alderin’s frequent visits with family cheered old Mum up. In fact, in the months leading to Christmas that year, unbeknown to her, Alderin and his wife Sonal, had very graciously taken the OAH Management into confidence well in advance concerning their plans to take Christabelle back home at Christmas for good. Incidentally, Christabelle was a name coined by her own dear grandmother of happy memory amidst the excitement of her birth on Christmas Day, 25 December! And so it was that, unbeknown to her, the family was feverishly working on an extra-special Christmas present for her—making her designated room in their new, palatial house as comfortable as they could, complete with a decorative ceiling fan as well as air-conditioning, not to mention a decent-sized refrigerator stocked with the choicest delights, apart from curtains in her favourite *pista green*!

Come Christmas and the house looked scintillating! The couple’s 14-year old daughter, Meena and 10-year old son, Selwyn decorated the Tree and set up the Crib besides choosing the fairy-lights to illuminate the entire house and its front lawn. Visiting her two days before Christmas, Alderin asked, “Mum, what would you like as a Christmas present this year!” Smiling wistfully she replied, “What better present than the Christmas Night Mass at the Cathedral!” Recalling how she loved to sing in the Cathedral Choir, Alderin instantly replied, “Done! The Mass is at nine tomorrow night.” “You mean you’ll take me there?” “Of course, Mum! I’ll pick you up at seven for the long drive to the Cathedral! Is that okay?” “Sure Alderin!” said she, hugging him gratefully.

Conscious of how elegantly Christabelle always dressed, particularly on occasions like Christmas, Alderin and Sonal picked up for her one of the finest Christmas dresses they saw at Spencer’s. It was at 6 on Christmas Eve that the family marched into her room, holding aloft her Christmas dress to her utter delight—the start of a Christmas she’d never forget! The delight evident on the face of the lovely old lady was to be seen to be believed, what with the Cardinal-Archbishop recognizing her and stopping by her chair to bless her! Christmas Mass was followed



by a drive up the hill where the kids hurried out of the car to stand at the gate and sing their Nana a welcome song they had composed to the chiming of tiny Christmas bells!

“Wow! It’s like entering wonderland!” exclaimed Christabelle. “WELCOME THEN TO WONDERLAND, your home forever!” chirped Sonal. Mum, not quite trusting her ears, said, “We’re gonna be late to return to the Home, dears!” “Not at all!” They chorused together! Ascending the steps to the main entry of the house with her, the kids said, “Nana, we have a surprise for you! But you must close your eyes as we lead you in, okay?” “Okayeee!” Moments later, standing before her room, the kids said, “Now open your eyes!” And as she did so, Alderin and Sonal standing on either side of the door, together with the kids chorused: “Welcome to your new home on your birthday, Mama/Nana!” The final meltdown was the framed poster from her former house above the doorpost that said: What is home without a Mother!

The Potters' Village

SHOBICA D MAHINDRA

Amidst greenery, tucked away in a remote village surrounded by the Western Ghats is a beautiful village called Koppa, in Karnataka, with more than hundred families of over four generations passing on their skills, knowledge and passion of creating magic with clay.

The process of making pots may look soothing and satisfying; but it is a tedious process. This work, could be called as an art form, has been a part of their life and giving them a livelihood for many generations. Due to various hurdles, the younger generations choose various other career paths, and as a result, the skill and knowledge of this age-old art form is deteriorating. They believe there is no pride, respect, or money in this line of work.

People in cities pay exorbitant prices for ceramic pots, decorative items and cutlery. The potters of Koppa are totally oblivious to the tremendous opportunities in the market which they perhaps could tap on with the right orientation and support.

Pottery is still alive in cities. There is a mushrooming of studio pottery; and it has good market too. As we pass by the streets and look at the polished, studio-made potteries, we need to remember where it all began: the smoke-filled sweaty huts with the potter's wheel. The traditional potters look for government support and market partnership. It is important to bring the end users and the potters on to a platform where the painstakingly created pots are appreciated and monetized; which would in turn rekindle the true passion for this art form; and become a career choice with the young generation of the potters' village.

■ Lump of clay is placed centrally on the fast wheel and then moulded into a pot as the wheel turned. The clay pots are dried; and then baked in fire to make them strong.



The Ubuntu Way of Life

MONICA FERNANDES

Ubuntu is an African word meaning 'humanity to others'. It emphasizes a bond among all humanity. It encompasses the social, political and cultural life of the individual. It is Jesus' gospel of love "Love one another as I have loved you."

It is said that Nelson Mandela was influenced by the ubuntu philosophy. He believed that we are all united by the common thread of humanity. He won over people with gestures such as the introduction of his jailers as guests at his inauguration ceremony. He was indeed a great statesman and humanist.

There are cases galore where ubuntu is practiced, though those practicing it were unaware of this word. The Acts of the Apostles describes how early Christians stayed in a commune and shared everything in common. The Christians in Rome sent a large sum of money to their brethren in Corinth.

In India, the nuclear family is gradually replacing the large joint families. As with every social organization, the joint family had its drawbacks but at the same time, it provided a support system for the very young, the elderly and the sick. A child in a nuclear family, for instance, was left in the hands of a paid maid to take care of him while the parents went off to work whereas in a joint family, the child would have had doting grandparents to teach him and give him abundant love.

I once read this story where a bunch of kids were told that they should run a race and the one who came first would win all the sweets. To the surprise of the organizers, the kids joined hands and happily ran to the finish point in order to equally share the sweets.

Atmavishwas in Verna, Goa is a workshop for mentally challenged young adults. There are strong bonds within the group. There was one incident when the entire group was to sing on the stage. Who doesn't want to be in the limelight? To the chagrin of the teachers of Atmavishwas, the youngsters started backing out because one girl got cold feet and absented herself from the venue. A delegation with some of her friends was sent to her house to persuade her to join the group on stage. It was only after she arrived that the group happily trooped onto the stage.

A heartwarming event took place at the recent Tokyo Olympics. Both Mutaz Essa Barshim of Qatar and Gianmarco Tamberi despite three attempts, could not clear the 2.39 meter bar. In the true spirit of sportsmanship, instead of having a 'jump off', Mutaz suggested that he and Gianmarco could share the gold medal. The rest is history.

The camaraderie and fellowship shared among our valiant jawans guarding our borders braving the icy winds and the biting cold is truly inspirational. Caste, creed, social status – all these are forgotten. United we stand, divided we fall.

We could follow the ubuntu principle in numerous ways. Rayna and Sunita were classmates. While Rayna excelled in English,

she was weak in Maths. With Sunita it was just the reverse. Both the girls decided to study together. Rayna coached Sunita in English while Sunita helped Rayna to improve her Maths.

Sheila was part of a very tight group of girls from her school. Sheila's parents were going through a messy divorce. While her father paid for Sheila's school fees, he refused to provide them with food and would even raise his hand on them. Poor Sheila would land up at a friend's house in the evenings and say that she just wanted to taste the food whereas she was actually starving. Her friends had warned their parents to carry on the charade and pretend to believe Sheila. When Sheila claimed that her black eye was because she bumped into the fridge, they just told her to be more careful. Sheila's mother's family were a great support during the divorce proceedings. The story has a happy ending. After Sheila's parents divorced, her mother started working with the encouragement of her family. Today Sheila is a happy person.

The family is the building block of society and hence, the home is the ideal place for the ubuntu principle. The younger generation could help their parents in chores and teach them how to operate various apps. The family could pray, play games such as scrabble and watch TV programs together. The family meal on the dining table together is a good place to foster closer bonds between grandparents, parents and children.

Society could be likened to the human body. Each organ has a role to play. If there is a malfunction in one part of the body, say one has a massive headache, the entire body suffers. So too, it's not altruism but to our own self interest to co-operate with one another. This humanistic approach may appear idealistic in a world increasingly dominated by cut throat competition and individualism. But it is a way of life needed during these times.

I conclude with the words of a hymn which are so relevant today:

"The world stands in need of liberation, my Lord, it still has to learn to love."



Malaise in Modern Society

GERRY LOBO OFM

There is a deep malaise in society. We can send e-mail and faxes anywhere in the world; we have pagers and cellular telephones, and yet in our families and neighbourhoods we do not speak to each other. There is a kind of vacuum inside us,

and we attempt to fill it by eating, reading, talking, smoking... We absorb so much violence and insecurity every day, we are like time bombs ready to explode

Thich Nhat Hanh

The malaise is real to any conscientious and responsibly sensitive person. The Lakhimpur (UP) dastardly incident of mowing the striking farmers by a powerful political clout repeatedly voices aloud the human crime against bear human in the broad day light. The sacred human lives of struggling farmers annihilated within seconds does not speak well of a country which boasts of human dignity, freedom of speech or about glory of administering vaccine jabs to one billion within a short period – in all, about the “shining Bharat”! The unwarranted spill of blood, the excruciating agony of the families of the victims and the pangs of Mother Earth which silently absorbs the pain simply goes contrary to the religious and spiritual wisdom of the ancients from whose treasure house the country has its birth and has traversed the pilgrimage of the ages by. The worst and shameful aftermath of the killing of those innocent farmers is the eerie silence of those at the helm of the present political regime who gloat over their phoney and baseless achievements which in fact were wrought by hardworking and disciplined, service-minded and sacrificing citizens. By projecting one’s glorious success, the leaders of the nation silence their blunted or dead consciences and escape from the wrath of being punished.

The practice in the past few years of our ruling dispensation has been that of conveniently covering up under the carpet of glory its abominable blunders and its preposterous crimes committed against the common, voiceless and marginalized human beings of our nation. It is

silent about anything that concerns the anxieties and sorrows, loss and death of the poor human whose prominent desire is for a happy and contented life in the society with family and friends, strangers and neighbours. In the recent months it is our sensitive judiciary at the apex level challenged the stubborn and wallowing in government to remove its protective masks and observe squarely the distress of citizens, and without delay, remove the tears from their hearts by aiding them appropriately. In this context our Supreme Court, these days, is highly honoured for its relentless effort to mete out justice to the oppressed and voiceless citizens as it has clearly manifested in its recent verdict on Pegasus snoop gate scandal. It is clear on its mission of not remaining a “mute spectator” to the plight of innocent humans. A government of the people, on the other hand, remaining a spectator to the glaring scenes of pain, frustration and misery does not deserve honour. It must remind itself that it is a government of the people and for the people!

What is democracy for, or the grant Central Vista Project for, or the sacred national flag and the nation’s anthem for, if not to create harmony among diverse religions, languages, customs, traditions, cultures; if not for relieving the pain which humans bear unnecessarily on their earthly pilgrimage of a few hours, and if not for the foundational happiness and a contented living? What is all the vast and varied industry and its infrastructure for, or the grand organizations and expansive societies for, or the scientific inventions and technological advances for, if their

basic orientation is only towards monetary profit and not really for the continuation of Genesis Creation by God which is daily renewed over the face of the earth by which the human people and all other creatures find joy as the greatest fulfilment of life? What are the diverse types of educational institutions for, or the many architecturally and aesthetically artistic houses of worship for, or the many forums of intellectual, social, economic, political and religious discourses for, if not to build the soul culture or the spirit culture, and if not to feed the human heart with compassion, loving-kindness and a neighbourly shelter which could offer warmth, well-being and serenity?

The general impression one has today is that we have absorbed so much violence that we are “like time bombs ready to explode” (Thich Naht Hanh). Our political leaders often exhibit only a tense, angry and violent face. Their speeches often vomit venom of hatred and indifference. Their gestures express insult and enmity. Their dispositions appear to be rather arrogant or Hitlerian. Here one must proudly remember and uphold the serenity, composure and peace which were displayed on the face of our former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, at which the nation felt at ease in all his public appearances or encounters with people. Only what a heart contains, can the physical expressions bear externally. Peace within one’s heart will also be shown outwardly. Today one notices our bureaucrats, officials and those in high offices as violence absorbed persons, prideful and stern, stiff and stubborn, indifferent and without human feeling of affection. This is also visible on the faces of teachers, heads of religious or secular institutions or those in hierarchical positions. Let it be known that in a human world the leaders in different areas and situations simply cannot afford to carry a violent disposition both within and without. Leadership in any field can never be a dictatorial and tyrannical rule imposed on innocent and loving people on this earth.

Lakhimpur is not an isolated event. Our society, we must acknowledge, is saturated with

such atrocities and have become a daily affair which most often goes unnoticed both by the political class as well as the ordinary citizens. The ordinary citizen has no courage before the mighty powers to bring the crimes to the limelight for fear of being eliminated. Such is the atmosphere prevailing in our country today. Truth speaking is a crime itself and is a way toward exclusion and eventual death. Closing the shutters to truth seems to be safer indoors for easy warmth rather than being exposed to the scorching sun heat of terrible discomfort. Hence, Lakhimpur can continue its grasp of humanity till human life vanishes leaving the Mother Earth without her children! How then, can one explain the total indifference of the mainstream political persons involved in the nasty event remain so indifferent or silent about human lives threshed and buried?

The vacuum within human beings is so deep that even the elimination of a neighbour has become a virtue in our society, besides many other routes taken so easily to get rid of a brother or a sister. The blood of Abel still cries out loud, but who is there to hear it? Reflection on the self in order to check one’s attitudes deep rooted in the soul has been marred by the virtual world in a liquid-fluid world of ours. Superficiality and external appearance have become the bane of human life, thus injecting insensitivity, cruelty and a compassion-less heart into the fabric of existence. Perhaps the cancer of anger, violence and hatred residing in leaders and their subjects may be healed by one of the five precepts of Buddhism: reverence for life, generosity, responsible sexual behaviour, speaking and listening deeply, and integrating wholesome substances (Thich Naht Hanh). To address the malaise of our times, Thich Naht rephrases them. Here is one of them:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life (Living Buddha, Living Christ, p.91).

25 December

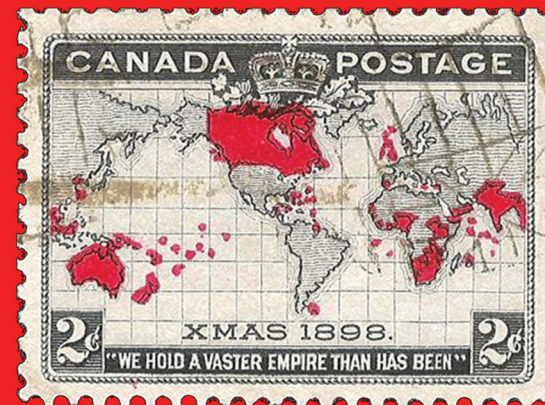
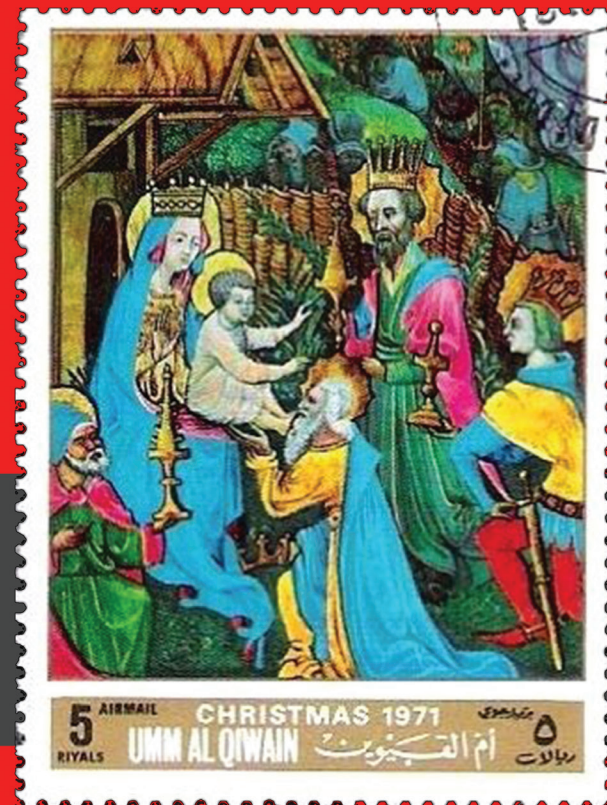
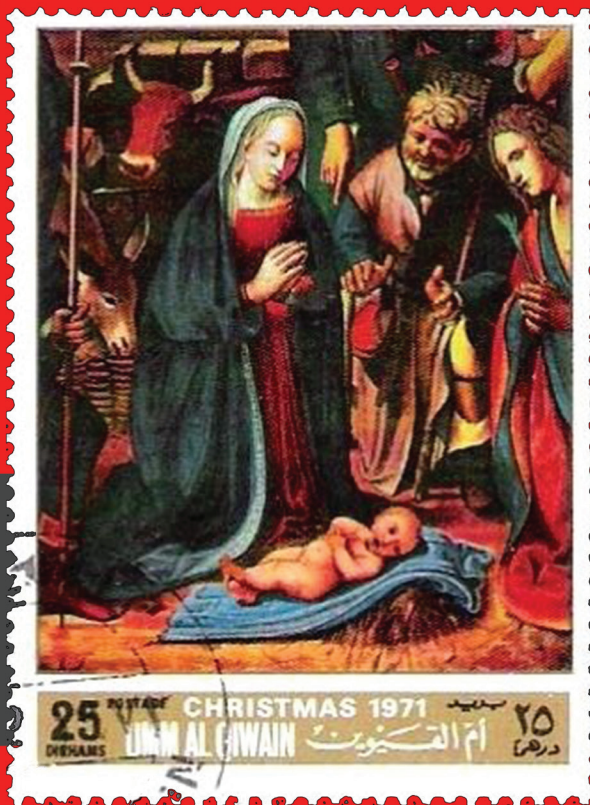
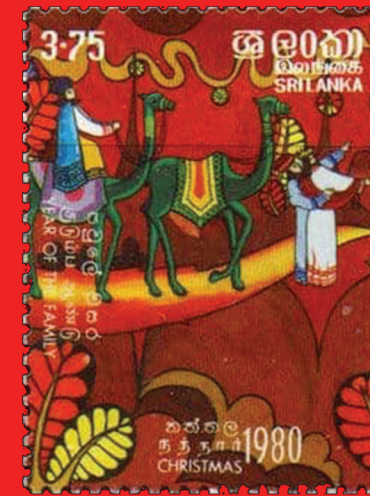
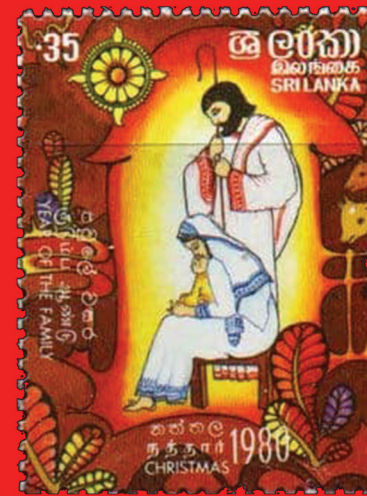
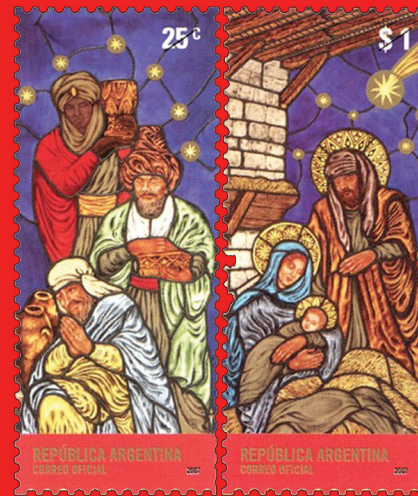
Christmas

Christmas is an annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, observed on December 25 as a religious and cultural celebration among billions of people around the world.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in accordance with messianic prophecies. When Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, the inn had no room and so they were offered a stable where the Christ Child was born, with angels proclaiming this news to shepherds who came to adore the Child.

Popular modern customs of the holiday include gift giving, Christmas music and caroling.

Tom John OFM



Caroling is based on the English custom of wassailing. St Francis of Assisi took this tradition and converted it to the modern form of going from house to house and singing Christmas songs.

What Does It Mean to Live a Healthy Life?

Lying helplessly on the bed in the emergency room with artificial life support, waiting for RTPCR results to confirm me Covid-19 positive, I wondered, “What does it mean to live a healthy life?”

ALWED EKKA

This question, fascinates me, and at the same time teases me about my understanding of what it actually means. Sometimes I think I understand what it means to live a healthy life, yet other times, I wonder, whether what I know makes any sense at all.

A Healthy Body, Mind and Spirit

To live a healthy life, first of all, we need to desire it. We have to nurture three important faculties: body, mind, and spirit. In order for both mind and spirit to function at its optimum level, the body must be healthy through regular exercise and good diets. Mind must be constantly renewed, educated and well-informed through continuous learning, and the spirit must be nourished daily through spiritual practices for fostering faith & love.

I confess, I was leading a healthy, normal, and natural life. I thought, a healthy life consists of doing a regular exercise like going to gym or having healthy diets, and abstaining from alcohol or smoking. And as naive as I could be, I religiously observed this strict discipline and maintained the healthy lifestyle ever.

I am a great fan of home made food, thus eating outside unhealthy food was limited. As a teetotaler, I never consumed alcohol or cigarettes in my life actively, for a simple reason, I don't like the smell. Somehow, I cannot stand it.

The Definition of a Healthy Life

Anyway, I thought, at least, I have no life-threatening habits. Of course, I was healthy, strong, muscular with six packs, and with perfect

weight, until I fell under the spell of corona in the second wave on May 5, 2021. I was rushed to Sakra hospital Bangalore in the ambulance, when the saturation level dropped below 80.

Lying helplessly on the bed in the emergency room with artificial life support, waiting for RTPCR results to confirm me Covid-19 positive, I wondered, “What does it mean to live a healthy life?”

The actual definition of a healthy life, suddenly changed, when the whole planet was under the attack by invisible enemy. I thought I was physically strong and healthy, notwithstanding, my healthy body succumbed to this deadly virus.

It attacked me pretty badly. It almost took my life away. I was on life support for more than three weeks on fifteen liters of artificial oxygen 24x7. My family called to bid their last goodbye, while I was in medical covid ICU for the second time. There was no hope for me to reclaim my life back since I had developed a serious lung infection on the right side. And the suffering was unbearable.

Hearing my thirteen-year-old son's voice on the phone, while lying on the bed in ICU, I couldn't control my tears. A nurse who was holding the phone to my ear, wiped my tears. Slowly, gathering my strength, I assured my son who had been crying for weeks, “Daddy will be all right. I love you.”

After hearing my son's voice, I noticed, a volcano like energy erupting inside, urging me not to give up the fight. I still don't understand, where did this reserve strength come from?

I remember, while working out in the gym, there's always a reserve strength dormant in the body, which is tapped at the time of lifting heavy weight. I quickly composed myself. And then, I became determined to get out of MICU as earliest as possible. My chest pain gradually subsided. I had strength to lie in a prone position, which literally increased my saturation level.

And finally, I had conquered the virus. I was shifted to the ward, and after a day or two, I was off the artificial oxygen. I was breathing the natural air once again for the first time. As a newly born baby, I didn't understand what it meant to breathe, but now I understand, what it means when the baby cries out loudly soon after the birth.

I got discharged from the hospital and after three months, I have completely regained my health. Now, I am normal, healthy, and strong though I had lost nearly 15 kilograms.

So What Constitutes a Healthy Life?

It's a tough question to crack. As I understand now, a healthy life does consist of aforementioned things. Had I not observed a healthy lifestyle, or desired a healthy body, mind and spirit, it wouldn't have been possible for me to recover from Covid-19.

Living a healthy life is a personal choice. When there is grit, determination and a strong will, there's a promise of healthy life. A healthy life means, even when you fall down, hurt or under the weather, you don't necessarily have to

give in. You have to unleash your fighting spirit. As long as illness, depression, failure, loss or death visit you time to time, so also the strength, determination and power tag along with it.

And, nothing can conquer a person with a purpose, who is leading a meaningful life. If you have healthy habits like daily walk, working out, eating healthy food, and nourishing mind & spirit, you will surely muster strength to overcome any life-threatening challenges.

For a Healthy, Long Life, Create & Contribute Something

I strongly believe, we enjoy a healthy life when we engage ourselves in some kind of creativity—art, music, writing, volunteering, helping, cooking or gardening. The art pieces or sketches that we create; the lyrics or the music one makes; the poem, essay, article, story or a book one writes, and the volunteer work we undertake, certainly contribute towards a healthy as well as a long life. Therefore, invest as little as 10-15 minutes in some kind of creative work regularly, and you will be surprised to find yourself healthy, happy as well as having a long life.

To sum up, never ever ignore three important areas of life—body, mind, and spirit. Maintain a healthy body through good exercise and diets; feed the mind with uplifting and empowering books, information or inspiring messages; and never forget to increase your faith and love that come from spiritual practices—meditation, daily prayer or visiting some holy places.



Rediscovering the Common Good

For centuries we have been content to patch up holes temporarily while in fact maintaining the institutional structures that created the holes to begin with.

RICHARD ROHR OFM

The call to love our neighbor is the foundation for reestablishing and reclaiming the common good, which has fallen into cultural and political, and even religious neglect, says Jim Wallis. I do not think it is overly dramatic to say that Western civilization appears to be in a state of spiritual emergency. For religion to be effective in linking us with the Something More, it must create a hopeful symbolic universe that both settles and liberates the human soul.

Where Justice and Charity Meet

We need to make the kind of society where it is easier for people to be good, said Peter Maurin. That is our difficulty today. We are surrounded by good, well-meaning folks who are swept along in a stream of shallow options. Not only is the good made increasingly difficult to do, it is even difficult to recognize. It seems that affluence takes away the clear awareness of what is life and what is death. I don't think the rich are any more or less sinful than the poor; they just have many more ways to call their sin virtue. There is a definite deadening of the awareness of true good and true evil.



I have found one fuzzy area that often needs clarification: We have confused justice and charity. Charity was traditionally considered the highest virtue, popularly thought of as a kind of magnanimous, voluntary giving of ourselves, preferably for selfless motives. As long as we rose to this level occasionally by donating food, gifts, or money at the holidays or in times of crisis, we could think of ourselves as charitable people operating at the highest level of virtue.

What has been lacking is the virtue of justice. The giving and caring spirit of charity both motivates and completes our sense of justice, but the virtue of charity cannot legitimately substitute for justice. Persons capable of doing justice are not justified in preferring to “do charity.” We have ignored the foundational obligation of justice in our works of charity! For centuries we have been content to patch up holes temporarily (making ourselves feel benevolent) while in fact maintaining the

institutional structures that created the holes (disempowering people on the margins). Now it has caught up with us in unrelenting poverty, massive income disparity, cultural alienation, and human and environmental abuse.

A Foundation for the Common Good

I believe the moral prerequisite for solving the deepest problems this country and the world now face is a commitment to an ancient idea whose time has urgently come: the common good. . .

Our life together can be better. Ours is a shallow and selfish age, and we are in need of conversion—from looking out just for ourselves to also looking out for one another. It's time to hear and heed a call to a different way of life, to reclaim a very old idea called the common good.

It is time to reclaim the neglected common good and to learn how faith might help, instead of hurt, in that important task. Our public life could be made better, even transformed or healed, if our religious traditions practiced what they preached in our personal lives; in our families' decisions; in our work and vocations; in the ministry of our churches, synagogues, and mosques; and in our collective witness. In all these ways we can put the faith community's influence at the service of this radical neighbor-love ethic that is both faithful to God and the common good.

The Global Common Good

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis urges to consider the long-term effects of our actions which impact the future well-being of the human species, all living things, and our planet itself; he says: The notion of the common good also extends to future generations. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received

and must share with others... Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.

Theologian Daniel Scheid offers a prayerful approach to this expansive way of thinking, what he calls the “cosmic common good”: The cosmic common good provides a larger moral perspective, but it also exhorts us to “sink our roots deeper” into our native place and to work for the good of our place on Earth. The cosmic common good enjoins us to adopt and intensify the many Earth-oriented personal daily choices and movements for structural change with which we are already familiar, for example reducing consumption and energy use, eating less or no meat, minimizing our dependence on automobiles...

May the larger perspective of the cosmic common good inspire us to live and to work for the good of all members of this vast and wondrous cosmos:

for the poor, the vulnerable, and all those imperiled;

for the contexts in which creatures flourish, and for the greater wholes of

which they are a part;

for the order in creatures, by which they glorify the Creator;

for the good that creatures provide to other creatures;

for the good of the order of creatures, by which the cosmos is sustained;

for the emergent universe and the communion of subjects;

for the solidarity that binds us to all creatures;

for the promotion of justice for all creatures; for the sacred that lies in the innermost being in all creatures;

for greater nonviolence and peace;

for the interdependence that shines like a jewel within all creatures;

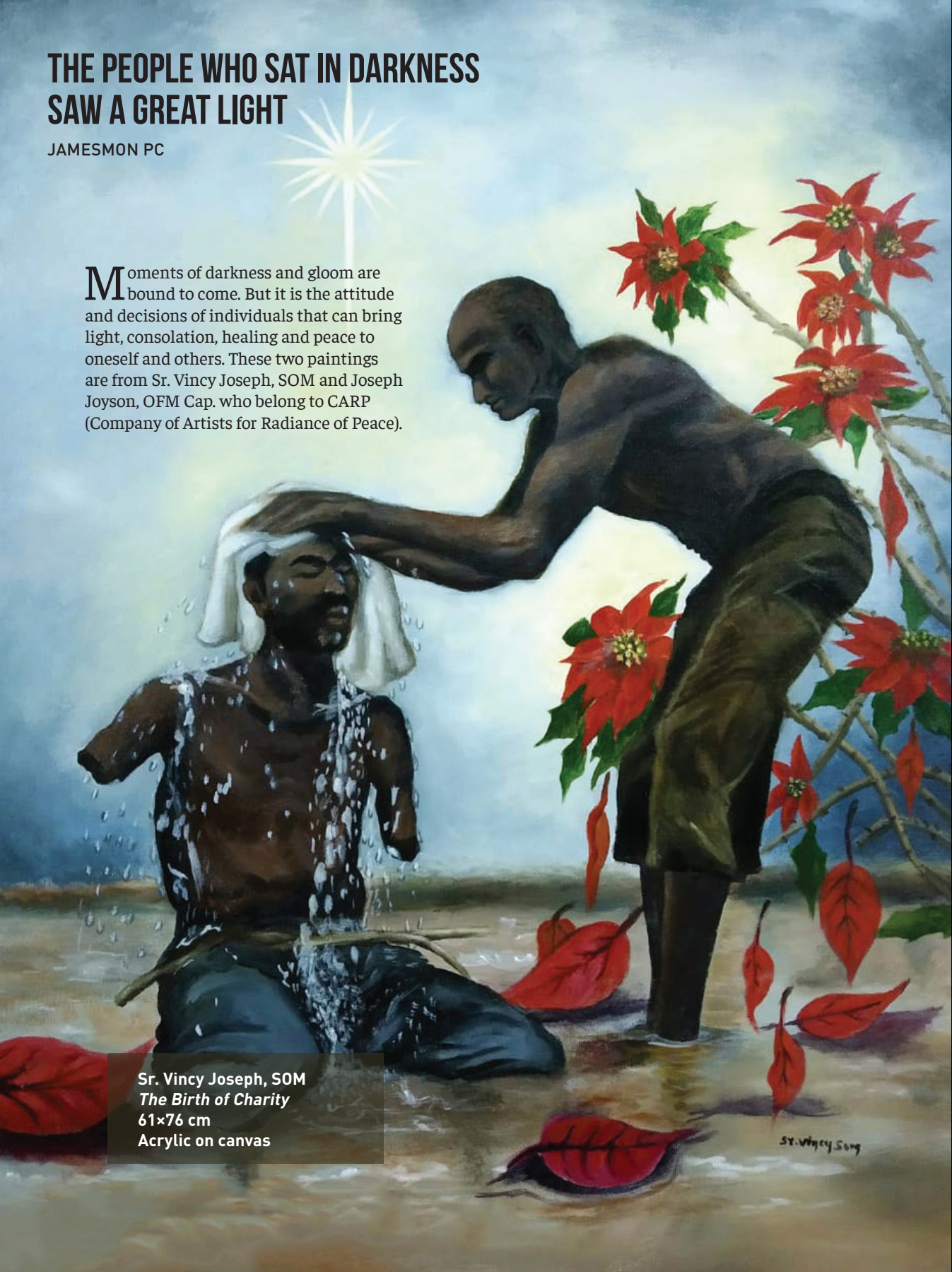
for all of our relations above, below, and around us;

and for the land and this plot of Earth by which creatures come to discover the cosmos at home.

THE PEOPLE WHO SAT IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT

JAMESMON PC

Moments of darkness and gloom are bound to come. But it is the attitude and decisions of individuals that can bring light, consolation, healing and peace to oneself and others. These two paintings are from Sr. Vincy Joseph, SOM and Joseph Joyson, OFM Cap. who belong to CARP (Company of Artists for Radiance of Peace).



Sr. Vincy Joseph, SOM
The Birth of Charity
61×76 cm
Acrylic on canvas

ART



Joseph Joyson, OFM Cap
The Birth of New Light
50×40 cm
Acrylic on canvas

Discovery of Jesus by Brother Charles

Charles tried to live the life of Jesus in Nazareth, which was unknown to all. Life of Jesus, not as “the prophet, the King of the Jews, the Son of God” but an ordinary person.

ALEX TUSCANO

Brother Charles has opened the great wealth of spirituality to me and that is the spirituality of Nazareth. I had taken it for granted and had accepted Jesus from the day he was baptized till his resurrection and ascension into heaven. But this was a period of just three years. He spent thirty years of his life hidden in Nazareth, ten times more than the public life of three years. This is not just an accident. It is a mystery equally important and a part of the redemptive life of Jesus. Jesus grew up in Nazareth and the people knew him before he ventured into the public life. “Is he not the son of Joseph, the carpenter and his mother Mary and his brothers and sisters living with us?” Jesus himself said “prophet is not recognized in his own country” (Luke 4:22). Jesus lived 30 years of his life among these people in Nazareth. Nothing much is written about this part of his life.

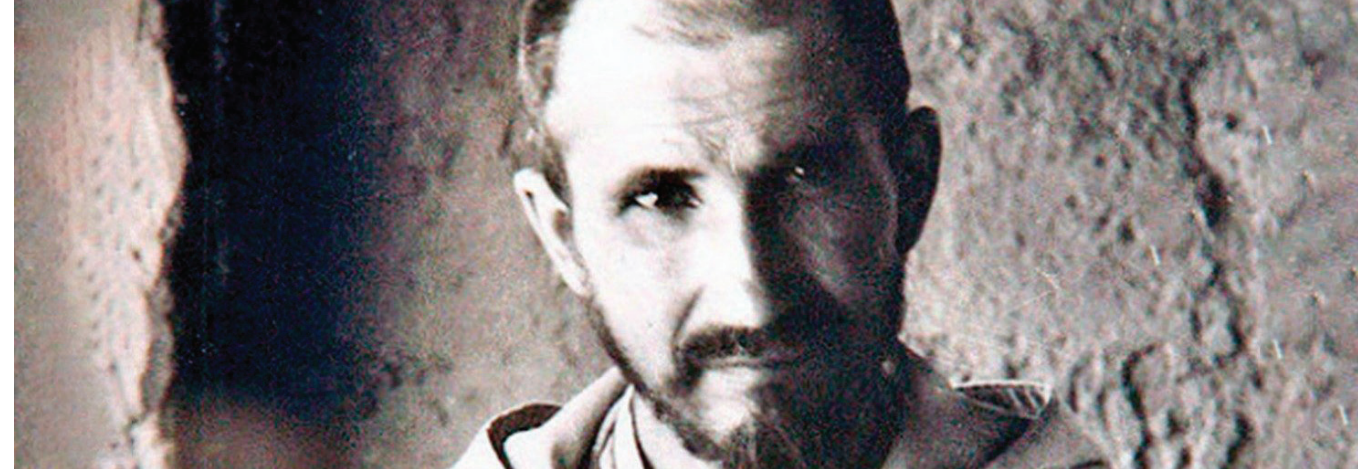
John the evangelist concludes his Gospel with these words: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain these books that would be written.” Whether John refers to the life ‘hidden in Nazareth or only the public life of Jesus is not specified. But he affirms that there would be much more to be written about the life of Jesus. And John indicates that what is written about Jesus is mere fraction of what should have been written.

What does this leave us to imagine? The basic mystery about the hidden life of Jesus is that we do not know what role he played till about the age of 30 years. Did he not observe what was happening in Judaea? One could imagine,

as a youth he should have responded to the unjust things taking place in the house of Israel. Finding of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41-50), at the age of 12 gives us a flavour of his awareness about the scriptures and his ability to have conversation with the priests and the Jewish leaders in the temple. We do not have a record of any miracle he performed or any controversy he might have created.

Though we have a very few references to Joseph and Mary in the gospels, we believe that Mary was born without original sin. Her mother, Anna and father, Joachim, were people with exceptional life of charity. Elizabeth, a cousin of Mary was chosen to give birth to John the Baptist who was filled with the Holy Spirit before his birth, speak volumes about the spiritual life of all these people. Jesus too was well-known to the people of Nazareth, as the son of Mary and Joseph, the carpenter. Though Jesus was like all common people undoubtedly, he radiated, in the ordinariness of His life, the spirituality of his being the Son of God.

Brother Charles tried to unfold this life of Jesus in Nazareth, hidden from the rest. He tried to live the life of Jesus in Nazareth, which was unknown to all. Life of Jesus, not as “the prophet, the King of the Jews, the Son of God” but an ordinary person. When Jesus was confronted by the Jews and demanded to say if he was the Son of God, the Messiah, Jesus replied “the work that I do in my father’s name proclaim who I am. (John 10:25-26). In this manner Jesus’s life in Nazareth revealed to his neighbours and in the surrounding villages that he was the Messiah, the king of the Jews.



Charles Eugène de Foucauld

Brother Charles was a military officer in Algeria. After he left the military service, he explored the geography of Morocco. He prepared a map which earned him one of the prestigious awards. He remained an explorer even after he left his past life. After his conversion he was exploring the hidden life of Jesus. In the process he had realized that Jesus had immense love for him. In spite of his wayward life Jesus had taken him as his closest friend. He in response, loved Jesus immensely. I dare to say that Jesus took him to the inner chamber of His life to reveal that His love for him. He learnt that Jesus’ love for the humanity began from the crib. He lived every minute of his life loving and redeeming.

Brother Charles was absorbed in the ordinariness of the life of Jesus, along with that of Mary, Joseph and their ancestors. They were the people with no influence in the corridors of wealth and political power. When Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death on the Cross, His carrying the cross to the mountain, these family members and their associates were helpless people who could only mourn and follow Jesus on His way of the cross.

Brother Charles reveals to us that Jesus’ way of the cross started with his birth in the manger in Bethlehem. If that is so this part of His life, about which nothing is written, can be understood with the spiritual eye of Brother Charles. He was able to join the dots between His birth and His resurrection. This is by no means an insignificant achievement of the spirituality of Brother Charles. It is equally important part of the mystery of redemption.

Whenever we think of, meditate on the Crucifixion of Jesus, we think of three nails that crucified Jesus to the cross. But there was a fourth nail on the cross. May be this nail was relatively small. But this was important nail which fixed a plaque on the cross of Jesus above his head. On that plaque it was written “Jesus of Nazareth the king of the Jews” (John 19: 19). The name Nazareth is very significant. It was not a well reputed place. No body spoke well of the place Nazareth. “When Philip found Nathanael, he said to him, “We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the Law, and the prophets as well: he is Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.” Nathaniel replied, “can anything good come from Nazareth.” (John 1:46-49)

The plaque which was nailed on the cross of Jesus, above his head revealed the truth of Jesus and his mission. It was on the cross Jesus glorified God His Father and the Father glorified Jesus. It is through the Cross Jesus became the King. And he was from Nazareth. This truth about the life of Jesus was hidden.

There were many followers of Jesus. A huge crowd brought Jesus seated on a donkey to Jerusalem. They took branches of palm trees shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel” (John 12:12-15). But on the final day of reckoning they left him. They were harbouring hopes beyond and contrary to what Jesus had come to fulfil. Since Jesus did not fulfil their aspiration of becoming a king and rescuing them from the Roman rulers, they turned against him crying out “crucify him” (John 19:6). “He came to



Myths and Reminiscences

A reflection on films by Don Palathara

UNNI VIJAYAN

At the age of fifteen, Don read 'St Augustine's Confessions', something that deeply affected him. Since then, the problem of evil is something that played with his mind. Don's childhood was spent in Idukki, one of the most beautiful parts of Kerala, the southern-most state of India. The hilly terrain, the harsh landscape brings a kind of gritty fatalism amongst its people. Most of his childhood, Don lived amongst his closely-knit extended family. His grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. His parents were well-respected teachers in the small town of Karunapuram, something which protected him as well as bound him down to social expectations. He was bared to an unrelenting social gaze. His childhood was seeped in religious fervor. Coming from a pious Catholic family, Don grew into an unquestioning teenager until he gave a serious thought to religion. Science, especially physics seemed to provide him the answers and he chose to pursue it further.

After school, Don left his village to study in a nearby town, Thodupuzha. He rented a room and lived alone for his undergraduate course. For his degree, he joined SB College in

Changanasherry, a much bigger town. It was during this time that Don speculated on his own religious beliefs and toyed with the idea of atheism as a more rational cosmic view. After completing his degree, Don decided to go out of the country to experience life but then to balance priorities, he chose to take up a post-graduation course in IT in Sydney. By then he had already decided to take up filmmaking as his pursuit of passion. To sustain himself, Don worked not only in the IT sector but also as a baker, taxi driver, photographer and security guard before he enrolled himself for a two-year filmmaking course in Sydney. During this time, he went through a contemplative phase over his ideology on filmmaking. In 2014, he chose to come back to make films in his own country.

The witness... *Shavam* was Don's foray into filmmaking. Earlier, he had done short films as part of his education but when he returned to India, he instinctively moved towards the independent film movement in Kerala to understand its underlying dynamics. The learning came in handy when he got down to making the film. Two old acquaintances came forward as producers and gave him a little cash and unlimited freedom to make his first film.

His own, yet His people did not receive Him; but to all those who did receive Him, who believed in His name, he gave power to become children of God." (John 1:11)

Nazareth for Brother Charles was almost like what Nathaniel had understood. Hidden in this understanding lies the spirituality of Nazareth. But like Nathaniel Brother Charles exclaimed, "Master you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49)

Though there is nothing written about the life Jesus in Nazareth the plaque on the cross above Jesus' head brought into the forefront the mystery of the hidden life of Jesus. The spirituality that Brother Charles understood was this spirituality: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" sitting on donkey going into Jerusalem to be rejected and crucified.

After the resurrection Jesus asked his apostles to go to Galilee as he was going there ahead of them. "Now go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there just as he told you." (Mark 16:7). After his resurrection Jesus did not meet his apostles in Jerusalem, a centre in Judaea, the seat of power, where he was rejected and crucified but in Galilee where Nazareth was located, his birth place and from where nothing good could come.

For Brother Charles this part of the life of

Jesus assumed great importance. His vocation was to unravel the hidden life of Jesus.

The life of Jesus in Nazareth, in final analysis is not hidden life. Yes, it was hidden from those powerful, from those who expected the Messiah to come with big bang and establish his kingdom with great army and drive away the Romans and make the Jews free from the Roman rule, and where he would appoint people as his ministers and emissaries.

What leaves this for us is to fathom this mystery of the life of Jesus, as significant as his death. If we accept Jesus totally it leaves us no chance but to search for him in the by lanes of Nazareth, under the trees, at the well and in the desert carrying out his duties with his foster father Joseph. We need to understand his life of obedience to his mother Mary. The great mysteries about Jesus are spoken in whispers. The plaque nailed to the cross above his head whispers it. We cannot divide Jesus into "the prophet" and as "a poor carpenter's son". The totality of Jesus Christ is put in a nutshell by St Paul in his letter to the Philippians chapter 2, verses. 5 to 11. "Christ Jesus, though being divine in nature, he did not claim equality with God, but emptied himself, taking on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness and in appearance found as a man. He humbled himself by being obedient to death, even death on the cross."



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Don decided to make his first film parsimoniously, with a DSLR and minimal lights. The final sound mixing was done in a small room.

In a way, the film is a homecoming for the filmmaker. A society that he had left sometime back and now seemed eccentric and distanced. A dead man's body is brought home for the burial. His wife, mother and son seemed not much in a shock as they adhered to the social convention of mourning. The film ambles around the house as the kith and kin perform the roles prescribed to them. A slight aberrance appears when a mournful young woman comes in, unwelcome. Amongst the mourners, nature is on its dutiful ways, the ants scrambling along a predestined path, the praying mantis, the spider spinning its web. The filmmaker sees the whole proceedings in a veil of sarcasm.

Somewhere in the beginning, a videographer appears who sets about his duty. He gives directions to people, he decides the settings, prunes the plants which come his way and moves closer to the mourners. He strives to capture the most poignant moments, the histrionics happening in the house, to raise his film to the dramatic table. But then there is another one, the spectator who also moves around, albeit nonchalant. The hand-held shots in the film resonates to the kinesics of the videographer. There are two films being made here and the filmmaker makes it clear that his ideology of filmmaking is far removed from that of the videographer who seeks drama in the mourners and expressionistic lenses. Don has even desisted from using music in the film.

The film only peeks into the happenings around the burial ritual while leaving the plot open ended. Where was the body brought from? Was the dead man separated from his wife? One can't fail to notice the nonchalance in



A still from *Vith* by Don Palathara

the mourning son. Was the dead man into an illegitimate relationship with the other woman? Was he living with her? The film makes no attempt to seek a plot but dutifully chronicles the rituals as it finally follows the procession to the burial ground.

The hostage... The most enduring image happens in the beginning of the film *Vith* as a bald man, faced away from the camera, prays to the religious icons placed in the bare wall while the spectator sits just behind him in prayer. The bald head reminds one of the Christian monks who shaved their heads to proclaim themselves as 'slaves of Christ'. The narrow crown of hair on the bald man strangely looks like the crown of thorns, placed on Christ's head, as he prays for the deceased. The single shot runs for an uncomfortable three minutes as the spectator becomes an unwilling hostage to the sonorous chant, invoking all the saints from the pantheon. Is it a foreboding of the young boy to be held hostage to his fate?

The film begins with a young boy, Jose who comes back home, leaving behind a job, a security, a promise of a better life which is how his father sees it. The father is a loner who lives in the past and survives on cow rearing. The son becomes an uncomfortable intrusion into his staid, agrestic life as the generation gap widens in this little village. The son stakes a claim to a life here but the father makes him unwelcome.

Don understands his milieu very well and is comfortable with them. His films meanders around the Catholic Christian families, sometimes skimming around it, sometimes delving into it. *Vith* has abundant Christian iconography, ecclesiastic and parsonical references in most of the scenes. The film doesn't allow you to forget the presence of a looming religion around you.

The film moves from one laconic scene to another, connected reluctantly through a mise-en-scène cut, a cut of convenience. Jose exchanging looks with a teen-aged girl remains buried under stratified wide shots. Even the brutal killing of the dog is denied its drama due. We see Jose looking at the dying dog off-screen with an expression which betrays nothing, allowing us to fill in the anguish, rage and helplessness.

In this film, Don makes us aware of time, every moment. The pace of the shot, the character's kinesis, the impending cut. The only time when the filmmaker breaks this wholeness of time is in the end when the boy walks to a cliff. In an unlikely move, Don has used jump cuts to jolt us out of this somnolent narrative. The son and the father wrestle with each other, amidst grunts, intercut between three different locations, further breaking the sense of realism. With this cinematic intervention, the filmmaker makes a conscious effort to express the internal conflict of Jose. A rare effort from Don.

Myths and reminiscences... Don grew up, hearing stories from his grandfather. Stories of struggles of the bucolic Christian community in the erstwhile central Travancore which now consists of Kottayam, Idukki, Alapuzha, Kollam and Pattanamthitta. Stories of daredevilry, land usurping and debauchery. But amidst all these dangles the fear of divine retribution. *1956, Central Travancore* is a complex film within a very simple plot.

A narrator begins to tell us a story of four men who go on a spiritual journey to a distant village where an actual crucifixion is heard to be enacted every year. They are sorely disappointed to see nothing of that happen and the disenchanted pilgrims break away from the solemn Christian procession to march

resolutely to a nearby arrack shop where they proceed to drown their miseries. This sets the filmmaker's implication on myths and its meanings. If we believe in a myth in its literal sense, we may be sorely disappointed but if we see its metaphor, it would be rewarding. As Veenapani Chawla, a noted theatre practitioner said, 'Myth is a seed to knowledge that has to be unpacked over time It tells and retells stories according to the time it is unpacked.'

Onan, disillusioned with the pilgrimage, sets out now to go on a hunting expedition with his wayward younger brother and a few others in an otherwise naive story that Don's grandfather told him with his own embellishments. An interesting scene ensues where the brothers meet an old man to borrow his gun. Instead, the old man regales them with stories of their ancestry before he hands over the gun, something he could have done in the first place. The filmmaker seems to plug in stories and myths of no consequence in every scene. Unless the viewer would want to open these packets.

Onan and his brother, Kora embark on a hunting expedition with a shooter and a couple of helpers. They plan to hunt a wild buffalo so that they can sell the meat and make enough money to go back to their families. Having set camp, the shooter sets out with the gun to hunt. The others make sanguine plans but then fate has its own plans. The shooter comes back, badly injured, as he tells them that a buffalo gored him and stomped the gun to pieces but he was lucky to have escaped. Onan and Kora go back to their struggles as hope and faith fail them as always.

While the film reflects on the nihilistic approach of the filmmaker, it is replete with myths and lore. The filmmaker turns back to his memories of the time spent listening to all those aggrandized stories from his grandfather. This story too would eventually become part of the lore but then the last shot of the gun hidden between the rocks belie the story and make it a myth, like all the others before it.

The filmmaker's communication with the viewer is not always straight. Sometimes the shots that represent what is being said is not

shown at that moment but later. The filmmaker doesn't follow the editing conventions but allows the characters to complete their conversation and then cut to the representative shot. In one instance, Kora thinks of his estranged wife and her plea to take her back home. This is shown through a shot of a play in which a similar conversation ensues that he is witnessing from the wings. His wishful thinking is represented through an imaginary letter being read by him to his wife.

The film captivates the viewer at different levels but then the film has a deep Christian ethos embedded in it. It beautifully portrays Onan, Kora and the others as pilgrims as they trudge along tediously, appearing at one point as triflings across the skyline, the gun slung over Onan's shoulder could be easily mistaken for the cross. Just as Onan didn't see the metaphor in the myth in the beginning, he seems to not see the hunting expedition as a pilgrimage and a spiritual quest. A quest that deems to have failed but that which continues in his torment and endurance.

Unreliable narrator... Don contends with 'the narrator' in his films. Shavam has a covert narrator who witnesses the proceedings from a distance while 1956, *Central Travancore* has an omniscient narrator who leads us through the maze of myths. In his latest film *Everything Is Cinema*, Don brings in an overt narrator, a homodiegetic one.

The film is about a filmmaker, Chris who is in Kolkata with his actress girlfriend to make a film on the city. But half way through the shoot, the lockdown takes place and Chris is stuck in an apartment with his girlfriend. The days together slowly brings out the inquisitive filmmaker who starts to stalk his girlfriend, slowly revealing the nasty side of his own. Rough, amateurish hand-held shots simulate the home video as we slowly wonder at the observations of the filmmaker that turn vicious, sexist and downright derogatory. The woman responds, rebels and finally walks out on this unrepentant misogynist. The film is a classic instance of an unreliable narrator.

Don's oeuvre spreads across four films but in them we can see reflections of his idea of cinema. Tarkovsky, Bergman and Antonioni were filmmakers which molded him during his days of learning but then other filmmakers came into his horizon. Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz, Šarūnas Bartas, Béla Tarr, Sokurov, Kiarostami. For Don, *mise en scène* starts with the choice of black and white over color. He feels that the perfection and control that he seeks would be difficult to achieve in color presently and so black and white becomes an obvious choice. He sets wide shots which unfold multiple layers of action and it is left to the viewer to seek in it. He rarely uses movements. In *Vitth* he uses only statics with the father but when the son comes in, there are some delicate movements in the shots. In 1956, *Central Travancore*, again he has used static shots with an occasional pan and a track-shot. His sense of editing could be traced to Tarkovsky who said that the long take brings in boredom after a point but then slowly that boredom gives way to curiosity and then the shot comes alive. In 1956, *Central Travancore*, Don has used long takes to this effect. In *Vitth*, he has resonated with the 'post 2000' Kiarostami who says that he doesn't mind the viewer going to sleep. Rather, he would be happy if he can supply them good slumber. For Don, the duration of the shot lasts till sleep set in. Slow cinema has found its space in Don's films. He sees this kind of filmmaking as an act of rebellion against the mainstream ideology of cinema being one of action and a flurry of events.

Don's films are highly insular. They only reflect the Catholic life in the alpine terrain in southern Kerala. One is struck by the abject disregard of the majoritarian Hindu community. But then he knows any reference to the majoritarian community would bring in the politics of the land hence he would remain resolutely personal in his films. For Don, his films are embodiment of his self-reflection, his religious dichotomy and his spiritual journey.

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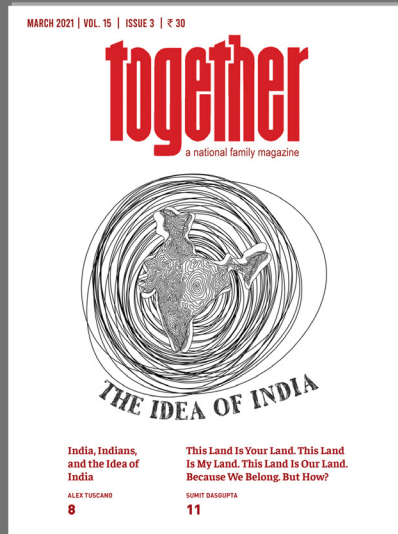
JOHN 17:21



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