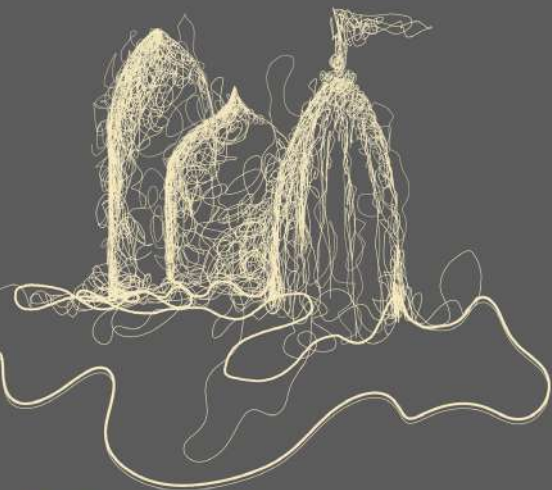


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# together

a national family magazine



*a fire coming towards us*

**06**

**Are We Witnessing the Ram  
Naam Satya Yatra of Secular  
India?**

**DR MN PARASURAMAN**

**11**

**Being Progressive in  
Matters of Religion**

**DR FR K M GEORGE**

**34**

**Chitra Santhe,  
Bengaluru, 2024**

**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@togethermagazine.in](mailto:editor@togethermagazine.in) before the 15th of every month.

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# CONTENTS

February 2024 Volume 18 Issue 2

**04** Editorial: Religious Fundamentalism Is a Fire  
 Saji P Mathew ofm

**06** Cover Story: Are We Witnessing the Ram Naam Satya Yatra of Secular India?  
 Dr MN Parasuraman

**11** Cover Story: Being Progressive in Matters of Religion  
 Dr Fr K M George

**15** Lakshadweep: Nature or Nationalism?  
 Aakansha Munshi

**17** Hi, ChatGPT, Let's Chat about Palestine  
 Susanna Marian Vas

**22** Collective Conscience of India  
 John Sekar OFM

**24** A Teacher Par Excellence  
 A Francis OFM

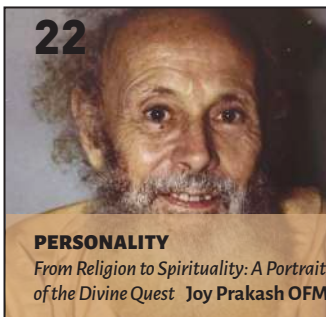
**26** Ash Wednesday Reminds Us of an Undying Love  
 Dominic Mascarenhas

**27** Tips for a Love-Filled Valentine's Day  
 Dr Monica Rita Hendricks

**28** The Lady in Yellow  
 Dr Rupa Peter

**30** Value Personal Space  
 Arun Nattalil OFM

**22**



## PERSONALITY

From Religion to Spirituality: A Portrait of the Divine Quest Joy Prakash OFM

**29**



## IN STAMPS

Worship Places in Stamps  
 Tom John



**04**

Dr MN Parasuraman elucidates whether we are witnessing the Ram Naam Satya Yatra of secular India.

## ART

Chitra Santhe, Bengaluru

**34**



**32**



## TRAVEL

Salzburg: Salt and Sound of Music  
 Saji Salkalachen



## BOOKS

Aalandapatchi: Fire Bird  
 Dr Susheela B

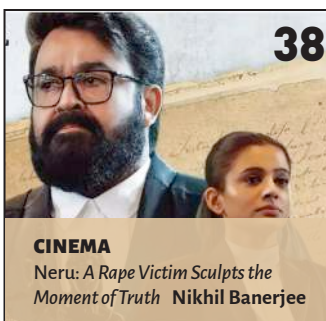
**40**



## POETRY

There Is No God in that Temple  
 Rabindranath Tagore

**42**



**38**

## CINEMA

Neru: A Rape Victim Sculpts the Moment of Truth Nikhil Banerjee



# Religious Fundamentalism Is a Fire That can Devour Us

**Religion, as we have it today, prefers patriarchy, favours hierarchy, and is soft on irrationality, which diametrically opposes modern thinking and times; look again, it is religious fundamentalism.**

SAJI P MATHEW OFM

Religiosity has no definition. Living for a truth to dying for a lie could all be religiosity. On the one hand, it is as clear as what we see happening at homes, in worship places, and on streets during festive days and nights; on the other hand, it is as hazy and ambiguous as what its effects are. And there is no better place to fish than in hazy waters.

Hyperreligiosity is an extreme and disproportionate display of already very ambiguous religiosity, whereby psychologically, a person experiences intense religious beliefs or episodes that interfere with normal personal and social functioning. Collective or group hyperreligiosity, looking at its manifestations, is hyperreligiosity multiplied by the population of India. Here in India mass religiosity is triggered by the vocal force of one or a few, to shocking propositions. Here people kill, or even are ready to die, which have nothing to do with truth or falsehood, or needs nothing in particular to kill or to die for.

Our ego gets tickled by numbers, crowd, and size: bigger the crowd and higher the noise, greater the ego feels. Jesus, though had crowds following him, was not a great admirer of large crowds. Once when he saw a large

crowd (Mathew 9: 36) he felt pity for them, for they were like sheep without a guiding spirit or individuality and critical mind, and were easily swayed by manipulation. Another time he had a large crowd around him was when he was led to be crucified by the brute forces of religion and political power. Be warned of the danger of becoming a crowd. A crowd might perform a lot of things, but a crowd has no conscience, and is not critical or spiritual. They are part of activities and public life without personally processing anything. Psychology calls it mass psychosis, where every individual while in a crowd of people behaves the same way, but if they are alone they don't think or behave that way; or mass hysteria, where every individual while in a crowd exhibits same symptoms, but test them alone, they don't have those symptoms.

## **Religion: The Land of Dreams and Opportunities**

We seldom see beggars sitting at the gates of multinational corporate buildings, which actually have all the money, and begging; but they comfortably come to the gates of temples, mosques, and churches. We often not see priests

and god men, who take upon themselves the burden of justice and truth, speaking up or standing for when the world is at war, or at times of national or local policy making; instead at the time of peace and quiet, from the safety of the sanctuary and the unknown, sell reconciliation, fairness, and kingdom of god. Politicians, though having all the powers, don't barge in and exercise power in a business establishment without due processes and consultations; but kings and politicians have exercised power in the affairs of churches, mosques, and temples. This space of the unknown is a land of dreams for all. For some it is an easy place of getting their daily share of aid; for some it is a place of selling people mysteries and doctrines, which often have no reason, rhyme, or objectivity; for some it is a magic pool that could be stirred at their will and whimsy to get patronage and backing, and of course, votes. Religion, the realm of the unknown, benefits all in many known and unknown ways. It is no big surprise that religion has survived and is thriving for the longest of time; and it is not going to disappear anytime soon.

Looking historically at the life and practices of varied religions, especially institutional religions, they prefer patriarchy, favours hierarchy, and is soft on irrationality. This nature of religion makes it a brute force to

**Religious fundamentalism can easily become a gory display of collective hyperreligiosity and the crowd a performing monkey that many leaders use to their advantage.**

handle. Religious fundamentalism by the majority and harnessed by political powers easily becomes a gory display of collective hyperreligiosity. The crowd becomes a performing monkey that many leaders use to their advantage.

Be it Christianity, Islam, or neo-Hinduism, the danger lurks within; if it is not able to evolve to be relevant to modern times and modern thinking by leaving stubborn patriarchy, rigid hierarchy, and dooming irrationality, it must leave the stage. Collective hyperreligiosity is a fire that can devour us; it may seem, like the preverbal frog in the slow-boiling water, heart-warming in the beginning, but fan it to a full flame it will devour us. Somebody has to call it a pause, and start firefighting. Unchecked collective hyperreligiosity, like the nuclear arms race, is not an area we must compete to be the first, for fire does not discriminate. ■





## Are We Witnessing the Ram Naam Satya Yatra of Secular India?

DR MN PARASURAMAN asks many uncomfortable but important questions, and answers a few.

When I was requested to write on the Ram Temple at Ayodhya in the light of the Praan Pratishtha event that took place there on Monday, I accepted the challenge with a lot of trepidation. It was not because it was a religious issue: I have studied five religions in reasonable depth and I am critical of some things in all of them and reverential towards some things in all. It was not because it was a controversial issue. Although I believe in civility and in insulating human relations from certain conflicts and arguments, I do, quite openly, hold strong views on a few controversial matters. It had more to do with the fact that my own stand on the issue, as well as my views on the Hindu Right, began at a point of schizophrenia in my early teens and I have moved towards a critical position only gradually, starting in 1992 after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and gathering pace only after 2005, after I read Siddharth Varadarajan's and Rana Ayub's documentation of the atrocities against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002.

Although I haven't seen the need to change my legal identity, since 2020, I have self-identified as a Buddhist more than anything else. But this has not impacted my deep love of Hindu mythology and festivals and my deep bhakti towards Hindu Gods, ingrained in me from childhood –with one exception –Rama.

I got my Hindu mythology in bedtime installments over my childhood years (reinforced by reading *Amar Chitra Katha* and English editions of mythological tales) from my mother and even when, as a child below seven years of age, Amma narrated the *Ramayana* to me, there were things that wouldn't permit me to accept Rama as an ethical being, still less a god or a hero. His sly murder of Vali and his treatment of Sita apart, even his going on a *vanavaas* to help his father fulfill a rash promise seemed to me a case of overdoing filial obedience. (I can't accept my mythical namesake, Parasurama, for the same reason)! Later, I became acquainted with the killing of Shambuka (a Shudra) merely for doing *tapass* and that sealed Rama's image in my mind in a negative light. (To be fair, I have been told that the Shambuka episode does not figure in the Valmiki *Ramayana*).

In my teens, my father, who, with his astounding general knowledge and deep awareness of current affairs, was my oracle on political matters, convinced me of certain things. I shall mention them below along with supporting/ qualifying/ modifying/negating facts and thoughts that I encountered later. The later knowledge shall be given in italics.

Babur was a foreign invader. He had nothing but contempt for India. The only good things in India, according to the

Baburnama, were large masses of gold and silver and abundant, cheap labour. (I checked Annette Susanah Beveridge's translation of the Baburnama and found this to be true, but the writer Amitav Ghosh faults the translation).

The Mughal Empire was not an Indian empire. The court language was Persian till the very end in 1857. The overwhelming majority revenue officials or *mansabdars* were people of Central Asian origin. There were no Indian Muslims among them. How does one define belonging? Tricky question!

Although there was no evidence to show that Rama was born at Ayodhya or that Rama existed, circumstantial evidence pointed heavily at the Babri Masjid having been built over the demolished remains of a Rama Temple. After all, otherwise, why would Babur take the trouble to build a masjid at an obscure spot as far as his fledgling empire was concerned?

Interestingly, the final Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya also gave more credence to circumstantial evidence (not the hypothetical question posed by my father but the likelihood that Guru Nanak visited Ayodhya not too long before Babur's invasion. Professor BB Lal of the Archaeological Survey of India, who led three phases of excavations at the site, did not mention the existence of a temple in any report. He started talking about it from faraway Britain only in 1991, when he saw the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement gaining traction under LK Advani.

In an interview given to a YouTube channel, Professor Ali Nadeem Razavi from the history department of Aligarh Muslim University, who was a court appointed observer at the 2003 excavations, said that there were Buddhist and Shaivaitic icons at the site, bones of animals butchered and cooked for food inside residential structures under the site and even an *qalaati* or open mosque (with half walls except on the direction of the Qibla and a mihrab in that direction) under the foundation of the Babri Masjid. Professor Razavi and the other observers on the team repeatedly called for these facts to be recorded but



they were disregarded completely and evidence that could have possibly belied the Ram Temple hypothesis was ignored or destroyed.

Whatever the facts may be, if 800 million (late 1980s count) Hindus believed that Rama was born at the very spot where the Babri Masjid stood, it was churlish of Muslims not to agree to the relocation of the masjid and therefore, Hindus were justified in using force to wipe out this sign of our humiliation.

The Supreme Court has come down heavily on the demolition of the Babri Masjid calling it a crime whose perpetrators must be tried and punished, but it has also given weightage to the fact that millions of Hindus believe that once disputed site to be Rama's birthplace.

Coupled with this seemingly unassailable history handed down by my father, there was a miasma of toxic Islamophobia. Till the aftermath of the demolition of the Masjid and the riots that followed, particularly the anti-Muslim pogrom in Mumbai, I accepted all this.

The mayhem of December 1992 and January 1993 shook me out of my blind intellectual servitude to my father. Some important and uncomfortable questions popped up in my mind and refused to go away. Was this kind of slaughter of innocents and discord really justified in the name of any healing of historical wounds? Why were Hindus who were not enthusiastic about Rama sharing the price being paid? And what connection did the innocent, butchered Muslims of Mumbai have with Babur? And lastly, did those who gained substantially from all this slaughter and discord bear even a small part of the price?

Uncannily, 30 years later, these are the very questions that remain unanswered and the space and freedom to pose them is being wiped out of existence. The demolition of the Babri Masjid and its aftermath may be three decade-old history, a metaphoric atom bomb of that time, but the metaphoric radioactive fallout is not going away in a hurry and that is the scariest thing about today's India. Some kind of mass lobotomy seems to have taken place and people are unwilling to consider the dangers of the state not just espousing one

religion (and thereby putting paid to an important founding principle of the Republic) but espousing a particularly toxic, belligerent, aggressively majoritarian mutant of the same, that threatens to wipe out the more ancient and gentle forms of Hinduism, more intimately rooted in the ethos of our land.

It is not religion as religion—religion as spirituality, religion as an ethical compass or even religion as ways of living. It is religion as politics, religion as coercion and exclusion and religion that identifies less in terms of its own features than in terms of hatred for the Other. The Other is the innocent modern day Indian Muslim who is called to account for what—by the Right Wing's own account—a foreign invader did half a millennium ago. In the words of Shankaracharya Avimuktswaranand Saraswati of Jyotish Peeth in Joshi-math, Uttaranchal, it is the religion of "Rajnitik" or political Hindus, not of Sanaatani Hindus, or people for whom Hinduism is a way of day-to-day living, not to be mixed with politics.

I have had numerous arguments in the past with my many Hindu Right wing friends and ex-friends (I am still enough of a Hindu to have personal friends among political – ideological adversaries. Here again, my mother set an example. She would bathe, apply *chandan* on her forehead and read the Ramayana on every evening of the Kataka month, roughly equivalent to the period of the sign Cancer. But immediately after her reading, she would smilingly come and listen to my condemnation of Rama. I treasure that

brand of Hinduism, whose exponents were secure and didn't need to take away the breathing space of others in order to ensure their own). And I have noticed a curious obliteration of time and space in their arguments.

"The Muslims slaughtered and drove out Pandits in Kashmir. So they deserve what they got in Gujarat." (Who cares about 1,500 km?)

"Look at what they are doing in Saudi, Iran and Pakistan!" (How are Indian Muslims responsible for that?)

"Let us not forget the atrocities of Muhammed of Ghazni, Timur and Ahmad Shah Abdali!"

The fact that Ghazni lived from CE 998 to 1041, Timur from CE 1336 to 1405 and Abdali from 1772 to 1773, refuses to cut any ice with these people. History is their pet hate and the vandalism they have done to history textbooks parallels the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Historians like Romila Thapar, who has pointed out that each time Ghazni sacked Somnath, the local Muslim traders made substantial contributions to its reconstruction, are discredited as being Marxists bereft of national pride.

We need to seriously ask ourselves the question whether a national pride founded on this proneness to getting wounded and the thirst to keep revenging wrongs, mostly old or imaginary, is going to lay the foundation for a peaceful nation, even if we take the building of the temple and its state sponsored *praana pratishtha* to be unproblematic events.

While I have rightly blamed the Hindu Right for obliterating a sense of history and geography and getting Hindus worked up over wrongs of the far away and the long ago, setting them on an aggressive campaign to recover lost glory, I must necessarily fault the Congress and some of the "secular" parties (notably the one led by former PM Deve Gowda) for never really being committed to secular values, and protecting the minorities only to the extent allowed by the exigencies of vote bank politics. Rajiv Gandhi's overturning of the Supreme Court judgement in the Shah Bano case in 1986, and then his balancing act of allowing the Shilanyas at the Babri Masjid in 1989 exposed this quite glaringly. In the

Right: A hoarding put up by a Congress unit in Madhya Pradesh on the day of the Praana Pratishtha at Ayodhya.



case of the Sikh minority, we witnessed the systematic encouragement of Khalistani elements till 1984 and then, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination, the anti-Sikh pogrom of November that year, that happened with the tacit, if not open approval of the state and set the template for Gujarat 2002. A hoarding put up by a Congress unit in Madhya Pradesh on the day of the Praana Pratishtha at Ayodhya shows that repeated election defeats have not resulted in any ethical introspection. Whatever commitment the Congress had towards secularism probably died with Gandhi and Nehru. It was also true that self-styled secular intellectuals would often have glaring double-standards with regard to Hindu and other fundamentalism.

At a conference at the University of Hyderabad, I have myself witnessed one such intellectual berate an Urdu-speaking, Muslim woman poet for condemning Rajiv Gandhi's 1986 bill superseding the Shah Bano judgement, solely on the grounds that the Hindu Right also happened to condemn it!

The result of this brand of selective secularism was that it kept giving the

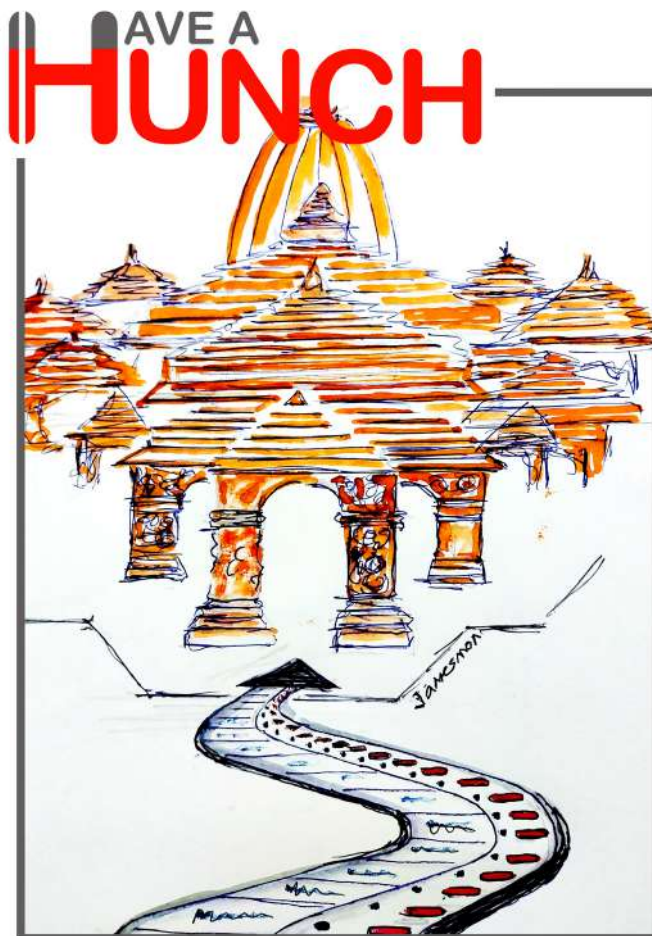
Right an opportunity to feed the fire of hurt Hindu sentiment, never mind whether the hurt was over real wrongs or imaginary ones. When the tide began to turn in 2013, it was initially over other issues such as corruption in the UPA governments, but once in power with a thumping majority, the wishy – washy track record of the Congress in safeguarding secular values came in handy as a point for the BJP to tell people that it wasn't going to fool them with a pretension of any such values. There were a few noises about “Sabka saath, sabka vikas”, but on the whole the BJP have been very clear that they were not going to disappoint their core constituency. They

gradually pushed the envelope of side-lining pluralistic values and Hinduising the state so far that the day is not far off when India may cease to be a secular republic, even de jure.

If matters were to end quietly with the Praan Pratishtha and declaring India a Hindu state, one could have reconciled oneself to the new normal, but as I hinted earlier, licking one's wounds over mostly imaginary historical wrongs and future fears (of an Islamic dystopia) can be a horribly addictive business, a thirsty god, not to be appeased with any amount of strife and bloodshed. Even those among us who consider themselves believing, practicing Hindus need to stand up and insist that we refuse to get

trapped in the endless quest for recovering self- esteem and lost glory by means of deriding, demeaning and defeating some or the other Other. We need to work to reinstate the ancient civilisational values of this land, its celebration of diversity, its willingness to embrace happy, spiritual ecstasies but refusal to embrace angry, triumphalist, religious hysteria. This, we must do, no matter which selfish, ruthless, political forces try to manipulate us. And along with these ancient values, we must also spell out that imbibing the modern is non-negotiable in certain aspects of life beyond mere technology. And in that modern world, religious identity cannot be our No. 1 priority.

After all, even the Maryaada Purushottama's flaw was the victimisation of his dearest one to satisfy someone else's unjust obsession with rumours relating to the past. It is not my place to tell anyone not to revere Rama, but as a fellow citizen, I beg you, don't copy his biggest mistake. ■



COVER STORY

## Being Progressive in Matters of Religion

**DR FR K M GEORGE** in his commemoration speech, during the convocation at Serampore University, while underlining the role of Christian missionaries to India, warns of being stuck in the past.

**W**e remember the Serampore Trio – Carey, Marshman and Ward – who initiated the Indian Renaissance in Bengal in the early part of the 19th century. We may better use the expression The Serampore Quartet, the group of four, rather than the Trio if we duly recognise the active collaboration of Sarah Marshman, the ‘first European woman missionary in India’. Sarah Marshman and the other women who soon joined her were not simply “wives of missionaries”, but played substantial roles on their own in accomplishing the mission. Commemoration of these men and women is more than a ‘hagiographical’ remembrance. It is an act of thanksgiving, and a future-oriented recapitulation of the legacy of those who sacrificed their lives for the welfare of all, for the future of humanity. In a liturgical sense it is Anamnesis, the Great Remembrance. It is not simply a psychological recollection of the past, but of gathering together in a holistic vision the past, present and future of Christian witness and commitment.

The celebrated work of the Serampore missionaries was mainly in education. Their proposal in 1818 was for a “College for the

Above: The Serampore Trio was the name given to three English missionaries in India, namely, in an order from left to right: William Carey (1761–1834), a shoemaker; Joshua Marshman (1768–1837), a schoolteacher, and William Ward (1769–1823), a printer.

instruction of Asiatic, Christian and other youth in Eastern literature and European science,” and the founding of the Serampore college as well as allied educational, linguistic and literary activities – schools, boarding homes, education for girls, and translation of the Bible and literature. It is almost at the same period that British missionary activities started in Kerala. All that we can say about the vision and the deep commitment of the Serampore missionaries can be said about the first generation of British missionaries in Kerala as well. The difference is that the latter made an attempt to collaborate with the already existing ancient indigenous Malankara Church in Kerala under the banner of the “Mission of Help”. (Of course, there was no pre-missionary Christian Church in Bengal for the Serampore missionaries to work with).



In any case the great initiative taken by the missionaries to uplift the inhumanly oppressed and exploited Dalit populations and to provide education to the girls and boys alike brought a certain degree of human dignity to all those who were terribly deprived of it. The movement anticipated and facilitated the great social change in post-independence India. It also opened the eyes of the highly caste-minded ancient Church in Kerala to some of the gospel values like justice and equality it had ignored, and it helped them start socially caring programmes, and public educational and medical services for the people.

More than 200 years have elapsed since the British missionaries began their work in Bengal and Kerala. The western imperial-colonial-missionary paradigm has now vanished though some of our Indian churches still seem to retain vestiges of that age. We are now encountering an India that is completely different from that of the colonial period. The difference is so radical that even calling our venerable motherland India rather than Bharath might soon be considered a heretical and politically incorrect utterance.

Let me very briefly point out a few areas, which would require our attention in relation to Christian vision, theological education and ministerial formation in India.

**The Enlightened Horizon:** The British missionaries who came from the context of European enlightenment and imperial Christianity naturally opened a new horizon of enlightenment through educational initiatives in India. What we call ‘modern India’ is, to a large extent, the outcome of European enlightenment. We made use of modern scientific methodology and its concomitant technology for remarkable accomplishments including the recent Chandrayan mission of ISRO. But the assumptions of that western civilisational-missionary enterprise like the claim of cultural-racial-religious superiority and the boastful European condescension

to the Indians had been questioned from the very beginning by sensitive Indians like Ram Mohan Roy. A few decades ago Bishop Paulos Mar Gregorios challenged the European Enlightenment, particularly its *ratio sola* (reason alone) principle and its idea of secularism in two of his seminal books. He proposed for our nation-builders the paradigm of the Indian/Asian Buddhist Enlightenment that embraces both rationality and transcendence. This line of thought opens a new channel for us to engage in a critical dialogue with western scientific secularism as well as to face the spectre of a virulent ‘cultural nationalism’.

**The Paradox of Expansion and Constriction:** Contemporary Science and technology opens up amazing dimensions of our macro and micro universe. For example, the exploration, on the one hand, of space and the detection of hitherto unknown galaxies and blackholes by James Web Space Telescope (JWST), and, on the other hand, the unveiling of the “Attosecond” of time (a billionth of a billionth of one second) to study the electron dynamism in human body cells by this year’s (2023) Nobel laureates in Physics. While we open up to new dimensions of space-time in an ever-accelerating inflationary universe, we are simultaneously choked by social, cultural and geopolitical constrictions promoted by political ideologies and religious fundamentalism. Religious-communal conflicts, racial hostilities, genocides, border confrontations, and brutal wars now being staged are all contemporary examples of this constriction. Sadly it is our own human creation.

**Story and history, myth and logos:** We have come to an era in India where the borders of story and history, myth and logos are deliberately being blurred. In our “post-truth era”, our usual notions of fact, interpretation, and wishful thinking are mixed up in a deliberate political manoeuvring. We need to remind ourselves that the borders between fact and fiction have been established as the



Left: Serampore College, West Bengal, established in 1818. It is the third oldest college operating continuously till date in India after CMS College, Kottayam (1817) and Presidency College, Calcutta (1817).

result of laborious intellectual and academic struggles over several centuries. An absolute distinction between story and history has its own problems. In several languages of the world there is only one word to represent both story and history. It engenders historiographical issues. Therefore one has to be cautious and critical. Whether we like it or not, what we call ‘modernity’ assumes these strict borders, and some of the religiously-driven modern states enter into conflict with the modern scientific notion of the distinction between fact and fiction. Striking the right balance and finding the true interconnections between myth and reason (logos or ratio), between great insights enshrined in ancient stories and *Ithihasas* and the contemporary working out of those insights through science and technology could be an important task for theology today.

**From exploitation to reverence:** One of the major consequences of the Enlightenment in Europe was the shift from pagan reverence for nature to nature’s ruthless exploitation. Theologians took the lead in this shift in medieval Europe followed by pioneers of modern science like Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes. Only by desacralizing nature could they promote the empirical scientific method.

Karen Armstrong, after writing on all major religions and founders of religion, produced her recent work *Sacred Nature* that critically reviews the various approaches to nature. She is particularly harsh on her own western theological and scientific tradition. Referring to the so-called biblical and then scientific drive to control and subdue the earth she says: “Nature was no longer a theophany, a revelation of the divine; it was a commodity that must be exploited.” Now many people in the West want to re-experience nature’s enchantment after centuries of rational disenchantment with God’s natural creation. Indian intelligentsia needs to be liberated from the clutches of the anti-nature European Enlightenment. Indian theology need not look to the West for wisdom in ecological concerns, but can find an amazing wealth of resources in Dalit, Adivasi, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions.

**The Interdisciplinary Vocation of Theology:** Unlike in the medieval European universities where theology was the “Queen of sciences” it is either banished or relegated to an insignificant place in the academia in our secularised world. Therefore, we need to seek a proper role for theology in connecting various streams of human knowledge in a holistic

# Lakshadweep: Nature or Nationalism?

The glorification of a land only for their 'exotic beauty' and tourism reduces them to mere souvenirs to be shared in our social media profiles.

AAKANSHA MUNSHI

It wasn't until 1973 that a group of small coral islands, earlier known as Laccadive, Minicoy, and Amindive, were unified to be collectively recognised as Lakshadweep. Before this, the islands were left open to be widely explored by many who brought their own intentions to either capture or exploit, and this included the Arabs, the Cholas, the British, the Portuguese, and speculatively, even Vasco Da Gama.

The arrival of the Portuguese remains one of the most significant events in the islands' history because it marked the beginning of the years of pillaging that were to follow. They were specifically concerned with the production of coir (coconut fibre) which was used in ships and built a fort to control its trade along with other commodities. In retaliation, the locals reportedly put an end to the Portuguese invasion by using poison. The inhabitants of these islands can, thus, be understood to

have always been protective of their land and culture which continues to reflect even today. Lakshadweep is listed among the most restrictive places in India where out of the 36 islands, only a selected few are open to tourists while requiring a permit to be issued for visit, a rule which extends even to Indian citizens.

According to the guidelines under the Restriction on Entry and Residence Rule 1967, all persons apart from Lakshadweep residents require permission from the authorities to enter the area. The reason behind this relates primarily to the Scheduled Tribes who form 95% of the populace in the islands. By restricting mass tourism, the officials attempt to protect the community's cultural heritage from being disturbed.

Having considered this context, we may begin to notice how the sudden spotlight on this region might pose a challenge to the

Prime Minister Modi's visit to the beach has evidently led to the unfolding of various political and economic developments.



Given the current trends in India, Christians representing an already tiny minority in this country will have to consider seriously the forgotten metaphor of "the little sheepfold" that Christ once used for the community of his followers.

are now facing again the old question: what happens to the whole doctrinal edifice of Christian theology if we happen to find intelligent life in some other parts of the universe? An interesting recent book in this connection is Andrew Davison's *Astrobiology and Christian Doctrine*. The author seems to think that a new cosmological perspective at least will help us re-examine in a refreshing way our conventional theological understanding of God and creation.

**The Humility of God:** In the ancient Christian prayer books one often comes across expressions like "the humility of God" and "our humble God". Of course, this is based on St Paul's teaching on the self-emptying (Kenosis) of God in the incarnate Christ (Phil. 2:6-9). The idea of the self-humbling of God does not seem to occur in other religious traditions. Since this is rooted in the mystery of incarnation Christian theology should admit its own weaknesses and its limitations in expounding the knowledge of the ineffable God. To discern the humility of God in our theology we need enlightened intelligence, deep compassion and great trust and faith in the power of God and the guidance of the Holy

Spirit who continually perfects creation. A kenotic God opens up infinite space to accommodate the created world. A kenotic spirituality rising from such a self-emptying theology can take in the whole world with all its diversity, contradictions and incoherence, and still provide meaning and orientation.

**The Fearless Little Flock:** The Serampore missionaries had the backdrop of an emerging mighty empire and the tall claim of a 'superior religion and race'. Do we Indian Christians in the 21st century still retain this alien imperial-missionary paradigm of a bygone age? Of course, we don't, I suppose. Given the current trends in India, Christians representing an already tiny minority in this country will have to consider seriously the forgotten metaphor of "the little sheepfold" that Christ once used for the community of his followers (Luke 12:32). What would be the outcome if that metaphor comes literally true in India? What would be the implications for the continuing fight of Christians for equality, for human rights, for freedom to profess their faith, and serve their fellow human beings in a spirit of self-sacrifice, faith, hope and love on the model of Jesus Christ? We need a lot of wisdom to discern the signs of the times in the fast changing political and religious-social environment of our country. We need a compassionate theology that vigilantly seeks to remind our rulers about meting out justice to the poor and the disinherited, of care extended "unto this last", of space of freedom where people can be together irrespective of their political and religious inclinations. The Serampore motto reminds the new graduands and all of us: *Gloriam sapientes possidebunt* – The wise will inherit glory. ■





localities, in contrast to the benefits that have been surfacing all over social media. Following the visit of our Prime Minister, there has been a spectacle of events that led to Indian tourists turning towards Lakshadweep for their next travel destination with the claim to promote national tourism. But that's not all, as you might be aware, over the past few weeks, *#boycottmaldives* has rapidly gained momentum in X, along with the popular faces in Bollywood joining in with their selective activism. It does make one wonder about the accumulated interest towards Lakshadweep and whether the intention behind the whole affair relies more on appreciating our country, or if it is only an attempt to shun the Maldivians.

Maldives' economy relies heavily on tourism itself where India has been one of the top contributors of the same and considering the recent developments, their business is sure to take a hit. However, that doesn't necessarily make it any better for the Lakshadweep residents as well.

Although the islands can flaunt their rich biodiversity with their coral reefs and marine life, they suffer from a very fragile ecosystem. The prescribed restrictions are also an attempt to let Lakshadweep's natural beauty remain untouched. Furthermore, its remote location and limited infrastructure makes it difficult for the islands to be able to support large-scale tourism. These islands have been built in a way that prioritises its environment over growth in tourism, and perhaps rightly so.

Mass tourism has, more often than not, left its welcoming destinations in a disgraceful state. From an exhaustion of the scarce water resources in Leh to the rapid generation of waste in the beaches of Goa, we can observe the footprints left by tourists all around us. Moreover, the glorification of these locations only for their 'exotic beauty' not only erases their entire

history, but also reduces them to mere souvenirs to be shared in our social media profiles.

A study by the Kerala State Council for Science, Technology, and Environment (KSCSTE), states that Lakshadweep's coral reefs already face threats from pollution, dredging of navigational channels, coral mining, and destructive practices like blast fishing. The sea-level rise triggered by global warming has also been heavily impacting the archipelago's beaches and sand dunes. It's also crucial to note that the survival of these islands primarily depends on the marine life and resources spread in over 400,000 square kilometres around it.

India has certainly made efforts to proceed towards sustainable tourism with numerous policies by the government and the Ministry of Tourism such as National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism, National Strategy for Ecotourism, Draft National Tourism Policy 2022, Swadesh Darshan Scheme 2.0, and more. These steps mainly aim to develop an eco-friendly mode of tourism along with an increased protection towards the culture of the concerned lands, while making sure that the local economies receive adequate benefits.

However, the effectiveness of such schemes relies more on the awareness of the tourists and the effort they are willing to put to make sure that their beloved destinations remain available for future generations as well. A few personal decisions we can make as travellers would be to minimise flying, pack reusable products, and support local businesses. It's also advisable to consume the local cuisine by simultaneously avoiding big food chains and restaurants.

When we look at the current controversy, our Prime Minister's walk on the beach has evidently led to the unfolding of various political and economic developments. With worldwide Google searches for 'Lakshadweep' reaching an all time high and domestic airlines including additional flights to the islands, there is an urgent demand for our attention to go towards sustainability in tourism; because since the entire nation has begun to flock towards the archipelago, we should be aware that these islands have not been built to carry the weight of our nationalistic sentiments. ■

# Hi, ChatGPT, Let's Chat about Palestine

SUSANNA MARIAN VAS

We are in the midst of an attack on human beings and human thinking. Human beings because of the Israeli-engineered genocide in Palestine, human thinking because of the AI-enabled short-circuiting of information production and consumption. (More on the former in a bit.)

When ChatGPT and Bard made their debuts, there were party horns from one camp and alarm bells from the other. The second group realised that while AI assistants can output code for a sticky header, simplify trinomial equations, and generate birthday wishes with words like 'unwavering', they are not half bad at rendering the art of writing obsolete, creating unhealthy dependencies, and crippling critical thinking capacities.

Cheesy captions, monotonous semantics, and soulless syntax are frustrating but forgivable. What is irremissible is AI's blatant bias in the face of a rapidly worsening humanitarian crisis. Pope Francis wrote, "The ability of certain devices to produce syntactically and semantically coherent texts... is no guarantee of their reliability. They are said to 'hallucinate', that is, to create statements that at first glance appear plausible but are unfounded or betray biases."

Provoked by his astute observation, I had this exchange with ChatGPT and Bard:

**Me.** Who is wrong in the Israel-Palestine conflict?

**ChatGPT.** The Israel-Palestine conflict is a complex and deeply rooted issue with perspectives and narratives on both sides. It's challenging to definitively say who is 'wrong' as the conflict involves historical, political, and cultural complexities. Understanding the perspectives and grievances of both Israelis and Palestinians is crucial for a comprehensive view.

**Bard.** The situation in the Israeli-Palestin-

ian conflict is incredibly complex and fraught with historical, political, and religious tensions. Labelling either side as solely "wrong" in a "genocide" is unhelpful and oversimplifies a nuanced issue.

Instead of assigning blame, let's consider some crucial points:

**1. Terminology:** The term "genocide" has a specific legal definition under the United Nations Genocide Convention. Applying it to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without careful consideration can be insensitive and inaccurate. Both sides have suffered significant casualties and injustices, and using such strong terms can hinder productive dialogue.

**2. Historical Context:** Understanding the historical context of the conflict is essential. Both sides have legitimate claims to the land and narratives of displacement and suffering. Recognising this complexity is crucial for finding a peaceful resolution.

**3. Human Rights:** Both Israel and Palestine have obligations under international law to protect human rights. Violations of these rights, regardless of which side commits them, should be condemned and addressed.

**4. International Efforts:** Numerous international efforts have aimed to resolve the conflict, but none have achieved lasting peace. Supporting ongoing diplomatic efforts and initiatives that promote dialogue and understanding is crucial.

**5. Focus on Solutions:** Instead of assigning blame, focusing on finding solutions that address the legitimate concerns of both sides is more productive. This may involve land concessions, recognition of rights, security guarantees, and economic cooperation.

Remember, the situation in Israel and Pales-

## Countries Where ChatGPT Is Banned



This includes examining the rise of Nazi ideology, the systematic dehumanisation of Jews, and the failure of international intervention.

Attributing blame solely to Hitler minimises the broader societal and political context that enabled the Holocaust. It's important to remember that many individuals and institutions, both within Germany and across Europe, actively participated in or turned a blind eye to the persecution of Jews.

Furthermore, focusing on assigning blame can detract from the importance of remembering the victims and honouring their legacy. The Holocaust serves as a stark reminder of the dangers of prejudice, discrimination, and unchecked power.

Instead of seeking to place blame, we should strive to learn from the past and work towards a future where such atrocities never happen again. This includes promoting tolerance, understanding, and respect for all people, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or any other group affiliation.

Remember, every human life is precious and deserves to be protected from harm and discrimination. Let's focus on honouring the victims, learning from history, and working towards a more just and compassionate world.

**Me.** So, if the blame for the Holocaust rests squarely and unequivocally on the shoulders of Hitler and the Nazis, why are you calling the Israel-Palestine conflict a 'complex and deeply rooted issue with perspectives and narratives on both sides'?

**ChatGPT.** While the Holocaust was an orchestrated genocide by Hitler and the Nazis, the Israel-Palestine conflict involves a long history of geopolitical, historical, and cultural factors. It's a multifaceted issue with different narratives and perspectives on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Recognising the complexity doesn't diminish responsibility for specific actions, but understanding various viewpoints is essential for any meaningful dialogue and potential resolution.

**Me.** So you're saying that the War on Palestine is not an orchestrated genocide by Israel?

**ChatGPT.** The Israel-Palestine conflict is a

highly contentious and sensitive issue. Accusations of genocide are serious and should be carefully examined. While there are instances of violence and human rights concerns, defining the entire conflict as an orchestrated genocide by Israel oversimplifies a complex situation. It's crucial to consider historical context, differing perspectives, and engage in constructive dialogue to work towards a resolution that respects the rights and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Behold, the response of technology trained on 175 billion parameters, 300 billion words, and, most importantly, Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback (an iterative process whereby the AI assistant learns from an exhaustive dataset, gives different responses, and refines those responses based on positive and negative user input).

Notice how the tools pivot from noncommittal and clinical when assessing the Palestinian Genocide to impassioned and moralising when responding to Holocaust-related questions. One event is 'incredibly complex' and 'highly contentious' while the other is 'horrific'. One is 'not a simple binary conflict with clear-cut right and wrong' while the other is 'stark reminder of the dangers of prejudice, discrimination, and unchecked power'.

ChatGPT has a monthly user base of 180.5 million and a weekly user base of 100 million. Despite its widespread use, 53% of its readers cannot peg its content as AI-written. (The data in this article have been taken from [www.demandsage.com/chatgpt-statistics](http://www.demandsage.com/chatgpt-statistics).) Why is this last bit important? Three reasons: misinformation (people unwittingly consuming false information), unaccountability (inability to impeach responsible parties), and trust issues (credibility concerns regarding the authorship of information).

Pope Francis states that AI technologies "can structure the flow of data according to criteria of selection that are not always perceived by the user". He goes on to remind us that "scientific research and technological innovations are not disembodied and 'neutral', but subject to cul-

tural influences. As fully human activities, the directions they take reflect choices conditioned by personal, social, and cultural values in any given age. The same must be said of the results they produce: precisely as the fruit of specifically human ways of approaching the world around us, the latter always have an ethical dimension, closely linked to decisions made by those who design their experimentation and direct their production towards particular objectives". Even by their own admission, both ChatGPT and Bard are not beyond bias.

**Me.** Are you free from bias?

**ChatGPT.** I strive to be unbiased, but I may inadvertently reflect the biases present in the data I was trained on. I don't have personal opinions or beliefs. If you notice any concerns, feel free to let me know.

**Bard.** I would be dishonest if I claimed to be entirely free from bias. As a large language model, I am trained on massive datasets of text and code, which can reflect the biases and limitations of the real world. These biases can manifest in different ways, such as:

*Social biases:* My responses may reflect biases based on race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, or other factors present in the training data.

*Algorithmic biases:* The algorithms used to train me may lead to certain patterns or associations being amplified, even if they are not representative of reality.

*Limited data:* If my training data is limited in scope or diversity, my responses may not be equally accurate or inclusive for all topics or groups.

Despite these limitations, I am constantly being improved and monitored to ensure fairness and accuracy.

As we spoke of accountability, it behoves us to acknowledge that ChatGPT and Bard are not responsible for teaching us how to use or understand their output, especially when it concerns sociopolitical events; interpretive and disseminative accountability are on us. Word to the wise? Don't let artificial intelligence have the last word. ■



# Collective Conscience of India

JOHN SEKAR OFM

Intending to restore the political conscience of India, Rahul Gandhi of the Congress Party has launched the 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra' in North East India. Interestingly, the yatra began from the violence-hit state of Manipur which has not been visited yet by Prime Minister Modi. The moral conscience of India was reaffirmed when the Supreme Court of India cancelled an order issued by the Gujarat government to release the convicts in the Bilkis Bano case terming it as a 'fraud act'. With the 'pran pratishtha' of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, many, including Prime Minister Modi, have declared the restoration of India's religious conscience, fostering peace and harmony among all religions. As Modi himself stated: 'Ram is a solution, not a dispute.'

With these volatile events, one cannot help but ask: What is happening to the collective

conscience of India? In an era marked by scientific and technological advancement, the need to march for justice and unity raises questions about whether we are on the path of progress or regress. The release of convicts by a state government in one of the most gruesome acts makes one question the reliability of the state machinery for justice. Moreover, when the Prime Minister of India, a country known for its secular core, openly declares the advent of 'Ram Rajya' with the temple consecration in Ayodhya, it prompts one to wonder if the secular credentials of India will gradually be erased from its heart.

The collective conscience of India refers to our shared beliefs, values, morals, and ethical standards as Indians, transcending any dividing barriers such as caste, religion, or ethnicity. It represents the moral and ethical principles that



The political, moral, and religious landscape of India is undergoing significant alterations, posing a threat to the collective conscience of India envisioned by the founding fathers of the nation post-independence.

unite us as Indians and shape our collective understanding of right and wrong, irrespective of political and religious affiliations. The collective conscience of India is rooted in the shared identity that we are all Indians, influencing our conduct and attitudes towards one another in the country.

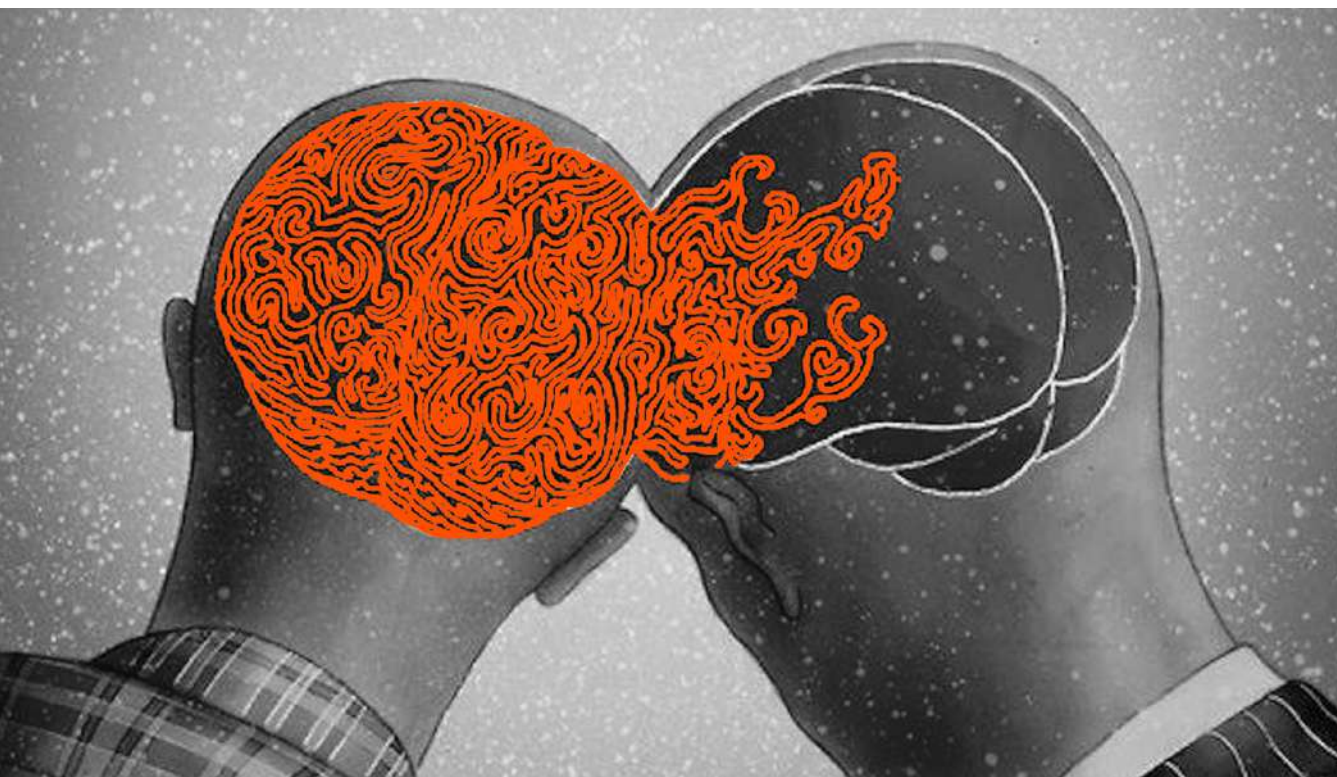
The political, moral, and religious landscape of India is undergoing significant alterations, posing a threat to the collective conscience of India envisioned by the founding fathers of the nation post-independence. With the disapproval and outright criticism of some of the former leaders of the country whose ideals are not in alignment with the present leaders' ideas of what India should be, history is being 'modi'fied to suit the agenda of the political party in power. The emergence of pseudo-intellectuals under the guise of historians, political commentators, activists, and even religious cult leaders, toeing the line of the ruling party and occupying a substantial time in the media houses, online video stream platforms, and political and religious stages are spreading a narrative that deviates from the course of progress and, unfortunately, reverts into regression.

Media houses, which have become PR firms for the political parties and the ruling government either at the center or in states, have further eroded the collective conscience of India, becoming divisive themselves in their reportage. When everyone agrees that Religion is a personal space that should not be mixed with Politics, media houses, recently, were at their best doing just the opposite for the sake of increasing their TRPs and appeasing those in power. The media landscape in India, including cinema to some extent, has fallen victim to the rising nationalistic and religious consciousness,

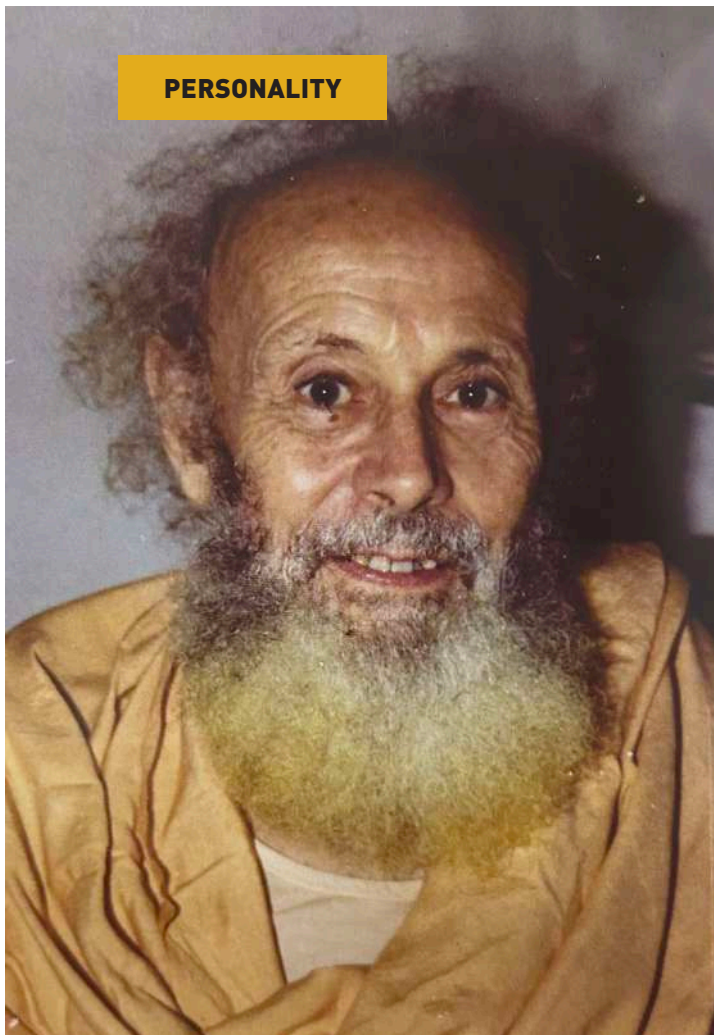
instead of fulfilling its intended role to awaken the collective conscience of the entire nation towards the ideals that truly contribute to nation-building.

Some celebrities across all 'woods' and sports in India are actively competing to showcase their allegiance to the ruling party. However, there are a few who have managed to exhibit independence and a principled stance. Despite enjoying widespread fandom across the country, these famous personalities often fail to raise their voices on critical issues of justice and peace. But on the issues of 'nationalism,' they are outspoken. The recent India-Maldives dispute over tourism saw voices from the celebrities but the same level of enthusiasm was not shown in the case of the early release of the convicts in the Bilkis-Bano case.

The collective conscience of India has been rendered irrelevant in the present times with the advent of an alternative conscience that is purely 'religiopolitical,' creating divisions within the country into 'pro' and 'anti' factions based on religious and political preferences. In this new paradigm of conscience, there seems to be little room for differing views and disagreements, fostering a realistic fear that the ideal of a united, harmonious India may be forcefully, sometimes even through violent means, thrust into the realm of an unattainable utopia. While this is very evident, blinded by political and religious biases, it receives only a blind eye. Unless there is an awakening of conscience as India and Indians, actively promoted by important sections, like, politicians, religious leaders, media houses, intellectuals, and celebrities, we may be failing as India! It is unfortunate that this awakening, for now, seems nothing short of a miracle! ■



## PERSONALITY



Swami Abhishiktananda

## From Religion To Spirituality A Portrait of the Divine Quest

JOY PRAKASH OFM

As I put my pen to paper, our whole nation is abuzz with the frenzy of Ram Mandir and its consecration. This past December, 25 years ago, Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) a French Benedictine who had dedicated himself to the experience of God through the Upanishads, breathed his last, leaving us legacy of 'Quaerere Deum', the quest for God. Abhishiktananda's priesthood had lost none of its power to inspire any soul who, like him, is moved by a deep desire to meet the real heart of India and transmit to it the newness of Christ.

### His Life

He entered the minor seminary in 1921, pursued his major seminary studies in order to become a diocesan priest. But when one of his friends who was studying to be a Benedictine monk died, he had the spontaneous urge to take up that unfinished vocation. He entered the Benedictine abbey of Kergonan near the Atlantic Ocean. He did not hide his motivation behind joining the Benedictines to the Novice Master. He told him, "What has drawn me from the beginning, and what still leads me on, is the hope of finding the presence of God more immediately than anywhere else. I have a very ambitious spirit – and this is permissible, is it not? when it is a matter of seeking God – and I hope I shall not be disappointed."

Abhishiktananda's priesthood was fully inscribed within the 'quaerere Deum' about which Pope Benedict XVI also declared: 'Quaerere Deum: because these monks were /are Christian, this was not an expedition into a trackless wilderness, a search leading them into total darkness. God himself had provided signposts, indeed He had marked out a path which was theirs to find and to follow. This path was His Word, which had been disclosed to men in the books of the sacred Scriptures.

After spending 19 years in the abbey (which were fundamental for him in more ways than one) Henri Le Saux, In 1948 travelled to South India and joined Jules Monchanin who had been living in Trichy, and together they founded Shantivanam Ashram in 1950. Monchanin took the name Paramarubyananda in honour of the Holy Spirit, and Le Saux became Abhishiktananda referring to Christ the Anointed of the Father. The intention of these two French priests was that their little ashram should serve the Church in India, already so rich with educational and medical institutions, by revealing its contemplative side, just as Mary sat at the feet of the Lord while her sister Martha was busy serving at table (Lk 10:38-42). It seemed to them crucial that Hinduism should discover that the Church possessed a long contemplative and monastic tradition.

### His Ministry

"During the twenty-five years between his arrival in 1948 and his death in 1973, India wrought a profound transformation on Abhishiktananda's vision of his priestly ministry. His meeting of Eastern Culture deepened the monastic dimension of his vocation, especially in the 'quaerere Deum', the quest of God so ardently tangible in many Hindu Monks – as well as the ministry of silence which the Benedictine monk witnessed in some silent hermits (*muni*) hidden in the heart of the Himalayas. Living daily alongside the Hindu believers refined his perception of his vocation, dilating it into unexpected dimensions through new experiences as described in his 1971 private journal: "[...] but a ministry that extends beyond its so-called ecclesial manifestations. A ministry at the service of the mystery, the revelation of the Mystery. Revelation to human beings of their own personal mystery and also of the total mystery, the mystery in itself; what is called God"

After meeting with many Hindu gurus and *sannyasins*, he was empowered to write that for a Christian "the guru or spiritual master is only the one who has encountered in the depths of his soul the 'true living God' of whom the Bible speaks on every page, and from thenceforth has become forever branded with the mark of that encounter."

Emmanuel Vattakuzhy in his doctoral thesis, "Indian Christian Sannyasa and Swami Abhishiktananda", says "Swamiji's meagre diet, the change from his own native culture and climate, his strict self-discipline and ascetical practices, difficult journeys and incessant pilgrimages and sometimes harsh and uncharitable criticisms from his opponents, progressively took the toll of his health."

Abhishiktananda was ahead of the Second Vatican Council, and after the Council, he became the driving force behind Indian Church's awakening to God and to the spiritual riches of India. Sister Marie-Theophane who took care of him in the final hours of his earthly life, writes, "His mission was to be what he taught. He wanted his life to demonstrate what is essential: awakening to God." ■



# A Teacher Par Excellence

A FRANCIS OFM

**I**t was snowing pretty much through the day. I noticed that the children of my home were at play. Not in the snow, though, but inside the house. They were at the computers, to be precise!

Wondering about their lack of interest in snow, a magnificent spectacle of nature, which excite me and many folks of my generation interminably, I tried to lure them into it: “Isn’t it snowing outside?” Peeping his head through the window by the computer for a quick disengaging look, one of them, probably the nicest among them, replied in a matter-of-fact tone: “Yes.” He then hurriedly turned his attention back to the computer and engaged himself with his ongoing sci-fi gigs!

No wows, and no who-hoos to the praise of nature! Just a monosyllable response, delivered in the blink of an eye! Monosyllable responses are in fashion today, and they are particularly

useful in the airports for a quick and hassle-free completion of business at security checkpoints.

I get it. I mean, the overenthusiastic and the freelancing obsession of children with the sci-fi in the age of sleek and lightweight computers, tablets and cell-phones; and I am not any less of a fan of Star Wars, Star Trek and The Avengers. But, what I am bemused is their disconnection with nature. Isn’t there a new wave of research findings, suggesting that people who are connected with nature are likely to be happier, and experience lower levels of poor mental health like depression and anxiety?

As old-fashioned as it may sound, I am still fascinated to go after and get lost at the trailing sound of a birdsong, to the fragrance of the new blossoms in the home-grown garden as well as in the wild, to feel the mushy earthiness of the soil while planting the seeds and bulbs barehanded, and to experience the soft cush-

**The warmth of the rising sun, the freshness of the morning, the solitude of the star-lit night, the departing sorrow of the midnight moon—all carry so much of life-sustaining depth, energy, wisdom and meaning.**



ion-like feel while walking barefoot on the lush green grass in the Trinity Bellwoods Park, or any meadows, for that matter, I find myself wandering. If you are one of those who were born prior to the millennials, the so called the ‘silent’, the ‘boomers’ and the ‘X’ generations, you might feel the same. We were taught to be one with the nature and be excited of its spectacles—snow, rain, lake, river, ocean, wind, trees, hills, meadows, earthworms, butterflies, fish ... While being with the nature, if you are lucky enough to have an ‘oceanic feeling’, that is, a sensation of the eternity, a feeling of being one with the external world, which is quite a possibility, is an added bonus. By the way, when I spend time in our vegetable garden, you might think that I am a farmer. No, I am not. I am celebrating my interconnectedness with the nature. It, in fact, is helping me to get rid of the colonial residue in me, of treating the external world, humans and nature with lack of respect. Amidst seeds, soil, plants, insects, birds, fruits and flowers, the nature is teaching me a new language of decolonisation.

As children, we were taught that nature is the greatest teacher of life and it can give us incredible wisdom that no other could. The wisdom, particularly, pertaining to the physical, psychological, emotional, sexual and spiritual domains of our living, which the new-age dictionaries now start calling as components of the all-round or holistic health and wellbeing!

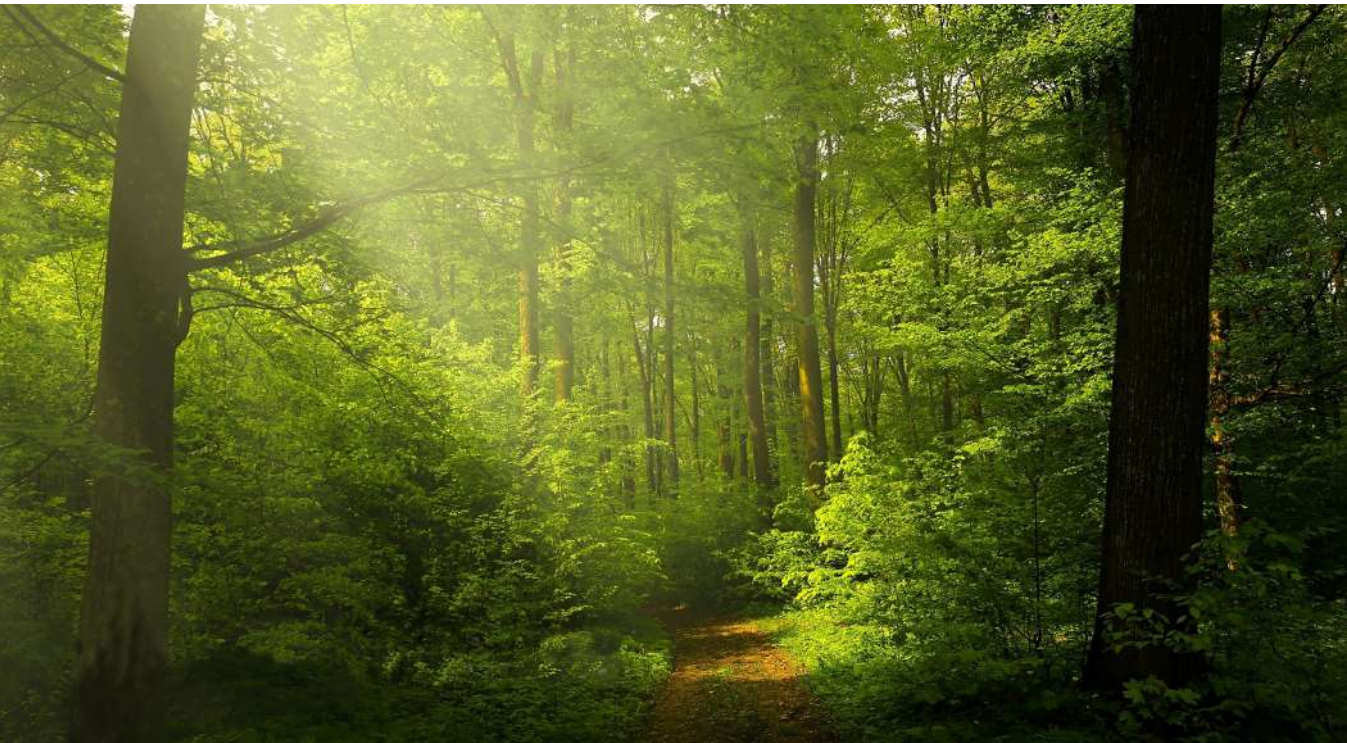
The warmth of the rising sun, the freshness of the morning, the brightness of the noon, the beauty of the sunset, the cool of the evening, the solitude of the star-lit night, the departing

sorrow of the midnight moon, the promise of a new life at the dawning of the morning sun—all carry so much of life-sustaining depth, energy, wisdom and meaning.

Years ago, on a summer day, my colleague Ian took me for a short walk by the placid creek that curvaceously meandered at the back of our workplace. He knew that I was stressed unduly, and my ability to take care of the affairs of my professional and personal life was noticeably compromised. Our walk by creek taught me an enduring life lesson: many are the obstacles that block the flow of our lives; we have no options but to keep flowing through them, just like the creek relentlessly flows through the pebbles, the rocks and the twigs that hinder its path. It is by encountering, and living through our obstacles without losing our calmness, hope, energy and spirit that we learn to filter our strengths from our false securities, inhibitions and apprehensions. Just like the creek invigorates its bounty of the serenely flowing water with as much purity and clarity as it needs, by letting it to be filtered by pebbles, rocks, twigs and stones! A simple life lesson from a thirty-minute nature walk, but I feel it was worth more effective than a cycle of four to six sessions of psychotherapy!

It still remains to be the most valuable lesson I’ve learned for maintaining my calm without giving myself over to depressive lows and the depths of black holes when I am faced with stressful bouts.

Nature continues to unfold its multifarious spectacles everywhere around us! I wish I had motivated the children of my home to take their shoes off and fall on their knees to nature, a teacher par excellence. ■





# Ash Wednesday Reminds Us of an Undying Love

DOMINIC MASCARENHAS



In an interesting coincidence Ash Wednesday 2024, falls on 14th February; also often celebrated in many parts of the world as Valentine's Day. Perhaps, many who would celebrate Valentine's Day might be disappointed, since they perhaps planned a celebration with wining and dining, and as a chance to express their love for someone; maybe a beloved or a spouse. They may consider it unfair that Lenten restriction especially on Ash Wednesday, are a damper to their celebrations.

But in reality, Ash Wednesday and Lent mark the greatest love ever in all human history. Many men may have told their beloved, 'I could die for you'. Many men perhaps have said they would climb to the heavens, and bring the moon and stars for their beloved. Many men claimed they would climb the highest mountains and cross raging seas for them. But most people know that these are but things spoken, when wine starts flowing. As one man who claimed to do all this in his valentine card, also added, "P.s. I will be coming over this Saturday, if it does not rain". Even a little rain would be a damper, deterring them from meeting their 'beloved'.

Many women (and men) might say, "If you love me, prove it". There are of course, some who will do foolish and irrational things, but that is not real life. In most cases, that is not love, but another four letter word also starting with 'I'; it is lust and only an outward expression of the desires of the loins.

It is a love, where Jesus who was God set aside His divinity and became man. He came down from heaven to earth. Jesus humbled Himself was obedient even unto death on the cross. It is a love we did not deserve. Most humans say, 'if you love me, I will love you'. God's love is not like that. In Romans 5:8, Paul reminds us that Jesus even died for us, while we were yet sinners. Jesus knows that we might be ungrateful. Rather, many visionaries say that this was what Satan tried to point out most and tried to dissuade Jesus, when Jesus experienced severe agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Despite human insult and ungratefulness, Jesus still showed His love, and by His blood cleanses us from sin.

Let us make this Lenten season different. Let us base it on love, not just for a day (Valentine's Day) but make it a season of love. Maybe we have become for various reasons as people filled with hate and distress. We pray the Lord to make us more loving people, beginning with our spouses, our children, parents and those around. Let us not wait till it is too late. Sometimes, it is difficult. We might want the other to take the first step and apologise or whatever. But let us as sacrifice this Lent, swallow our pride and ego, and take the first step. ■

# Tips for a Love-Filled Valentine's Day

DR MONICA RITA HENDRICKS

Love, a word so common, a word used so callously, a word that is taken for granted. Love! Love! Love...so common and yet so rare.

We are handed over with the greatest responsibility to carry forth this love as it is one of the prime most commandments given to us. Love of God and love of our neighbor. Though it may seem easy and inexpensive, it is by far, the most difficult thing to do, as love is putting the other person's need above ours.

The hi fi, hi tech society we live in today has lost the essence of love in the bustle of modernisation and speed. Love in the families is lost, as no one has the time. The definition of love has evolved over time and it has become more materialistic, more virtual and more calculative. Love does not necessarily mean a great coffee date and a fantastic meal together, love does not mean expensive gifts, love is accountability and responsibility. Love is hard work.

Having said this, here are a few tips to navigate the nuances of love and life.

Pray together, it need not be long prayers and novenas. Go to bed, holding hands and praying; wake up, hold hands and pray. Listen to your partner, nothing is silly or simple.

Schedule time for your partner consciously. The honeymoon phase has the constant inflow of texts, calls and frequent dates, eventually once the person is won over, the hard work stops, people are taken for granted. Make it a point to spend exclusive time with your partner.

Appreciate each other, for the simple daily efforts. "Thank you for the tasty coffee today"; "Thank you for dropping the kids in school today", go a long way. Many of us think, "thank you", formalises relationships, but that's not the case, it strengthens relationships as people feel recognised and appreciated.

Say sorry when you have hurt your partner.

It may not make sense as to what hurt your partner at times. But take efforts to understand that the definition of hurt is subjective and you do not get to decide what hurts a partner and what does not.

Have at least one meal together, a meal with no phones and TV. Listen to understand and not to answer. When there is a heated argument, and one person is extremely angry, make a conscious effort to stay silent. You can address this issue after the heat has mellowed down.

Be proud of your partner, think of your partner as an extended version of you. Celebrate their achievements. Even if your partner makes a small change for your sake, recognise it and acknowledge it.

Try being honest with your partner, not rude and blunt. And try accepting honesty as well. We live in a world where we like people to sugar coat things together.

Nurture/encourage each other to be good—never go to bed angry. Sort your issues. When a couple fights, do not consider your partner as the problem, consider the problem as the problem and both of you try solving it. Fights, misunderstandings and chaos is common, resolving it as a team is important. It's both of you against the problem and not each of you against each other.

Love is rare, love is unique. It's difficult to find, and even more difficult to sustain. So, love your partners, love them when you have the privilege to be with them, as life is transient. This Valentine's day, let's not just love them only on that day, but let's take a resolution to take an effort to love your partner every day in the best way you can. Love should turn sweeter with time and not bitter. Do not only look to fall in love, we should grow in love and sustain that love as well. ■





## The Lady in Yellow

**DR RUPA PETER**

**F**or nearly two years now, almost every day, when I travel to work, I see her. As always, she is wearing yellow. A bright yellow today. Lemony-green yellow, the next day. But always in yellow. The lady in yellow, I call her. She must be in her 50's or older. A street-dweller. Homeless. Clueless. Lost? Always at the same busy intersection. Traffic buzzing by. She, of course, is totally mindless of it all.

I see her sometimes walking close to the divider, really fast. Aimlessly. Or with an agenda of her own? That's another thing about her. Her walk. Her gait is unbelievable. Shaking her hips, her arms flaying, she walks, totally unmindful of all that is going around her.

The other morning, one side of the road was blocked due to metro work. It was hot and sultry. The traffic on the other side of the road was unbelievable. People were belligerent. Everyone was in a foul mood. There was incessant honking, a small brawl even, in the midst of bikes and cars. A traffic policeman was struggling to keep things cool. I was bored, waiting in the traffic, waiting for the signal to turn green. An endless wait, it seemed. But I was also looking for her, my lady in yellow, as I always do. And then I see her. She appears on the blocked, empty road, moving forward, in quick, trepid strides. She stops right in the middle of the road, all yellow, as usual, turns to towards us, standing choc-o-bloc in neck-deep traffic.

For a moment, our eyes meet. She stares straight into my eye, all the while, smiling a strange smile. I am taken aback. It is a bit unnerving. Then, she turns around, starts to hop, skip and dance a wild dance, all the while chanting some strange words on her lips. Gallivanting happily, she went her way.

That entire day at work, she is in my mind. She probably lives under the flyover; I think to myself. I remember seeing her with a sack on her back. That's probably all the possessions she owns. I remember seeing her at the same signal during the pandemic and I see her now, too. She has managed to survive and thrive through it all. She lives in the now. She wears yellow. She prances on busy roads. No EMIs to pay. No boss to answer to and no deadlines to meet. Most importantly, no shame nor reproach. The shackles of societal norms have not bound her. She feels no need to fit in. Leaving her free to do as she chooses.

It was then that I was reminded of Kahlil Gibran's Madman, the one whose masks were stolen and found freedom and safety in madness. I thought to myself, she is maskless and she is free. ■



## Worship Places in Stamps

**TOM JOHN**

India Post has always marked every significant place and every great occasion with issuance of postal stamps; and worship places are no exception. This initiative highlights the distinction of that place or event. For example, the set of seven stamps of Terracotta Temples of India (the strip on the left), issued by India Post is well-

known. It proclaimed the fact that the absence of stone or any other building material did not act as a deterrent to the architects and artisans of antiquity/ancient times. Rather, they baked and narrated stories in clay tiles, depicting episodes from mythology and their experiences, breathing life into bricks of clay, to give rise to a new form of temple architecture. ■





# Value Personal Space

**Even people with broken marriages try to convince others that marriage is all that we need to lead a happy life.**

ARUN NATTALIL OFM



one forgets the purpose of one's own life. Some wrongly describe this curiosity to get involved in the life of others as care, compassion and empathy. Whatever you call it, nothing is an excuse to poke your nose into the lives of others.

Most often we hear, talking among people in a social gathering "where do you come from?" Why are you here? Which college are you studying? Why are you still jobless? Why don't you try to find a 9-5 job? Once we get a job, then the so-called well-wishers start to find a partner for us and get involved in our lives again. "Why are you not yet married? You are growing older. Buckle up and find a partner."

The fun part is that even people with broken marriages try to convince us that marriage is all that we need to lead a happy life. They force single people to marry as if the world will be in chaos otherwise. The definition of happiness for some does puzzle me. Who are we to tell others to get married, who they should marry and when they should marry? Who gives us the right to be the wedding planner of every random stranger we see on the road?

And after marriage, what else should be discussed? Yes, children. The very next morning after your wedding, folks come up with this hot topic. I believe partners who are mature enough to find each other also have the mental capacity to decide when they should plan to have a baby. They don't need you to tell them what they want.

**W**e love delicious food, we love to watch movies, we love to travel, we love to discover new things and we love to brag about our culture. However, there is something peculiar that we love equally – it, worryingly, is the habit of interfering in the lives of others. Valuing personal space is an art that does not require talent or higher education; instead, all it requires is value for others and a whole lot of common-sense.

In fact, the urge to intrude in the life of everyone is so strong in the Indian culture that

Why are you still without baby? A question hurled to recently married couples. Perhaps, majority of them are having the happiest time of their life together. Unfortunate, who cares if you are happy or not? Some of them comment on the life of others as if the whole existence of the universe depends on the decision to have children. Nevertheless, is it not the couple who should decide to have children? Why do we let them fall under peer pressure of the society to be happy? Therefore, always ask yourself, "Are we living in their shoes?"

What if the parents are happy with the progress of their children, what if a grown-up does not want to do a traditional regular job, what if one does not want to get married, what if they have other plans in their life and is it a mandate that the life of everyone why the life of everyone should look the same?

So why is maintaining your personal space important? Our personal space is largely an area of "protection" around us and they provide us a feeling of safety and security. We reserve our

personal space only for those we allow in. When others don't invading this space, we feel valued and respected. This is an incredibly powerful and effective state of mind. We also find it painful to watch this happen to other people in these situations.

Let us not assume and conclude that everyone should take the same road. Some may want a different life and have different plans for their lives. Who are we to judge them and live for them? Are we the ones who are living their lives? The answer is NO, a big bold no. So, stop convincing others that we are the best decision-makers for their life. Psychologist say that the tone and the behaviour of the person is depicted from the length of distance he/she uses to maintain his/her daily life. The world will be better if we let others live their own life. Instead pursuing them to do what you want, why don't you design your own life? Give suggestions only if asked. Otherwise, it is better control your instinct to be involved in the lives of others. ■



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# Salzburg: Salt and Sound of Music

SAJI SALKALACHEN

*Travel humbles us by unveiling the vastness of the universe and our modest place within it, as noted by the novelist Gustave Flaubert. The question arises about why document and read travel experiences when one isn't the first or last to explore a destination. The significance becomes apparent when places are perceived to be reflections in the minds of those who inhabit, visit, or tour them. Notes gain meaning as they inspire inquiries into missed details and a desire to compare experiences. Reflection goes beyond landscapes to include cultural backgrounds and lessons learned, presenting a place's external beauty. This self-discovery transforms into exploring intricacies that connect us to the world and each other.*

The English word “salary” has its roots in the Latin term *salarium*, denoting a stipend or allowance. The latter, in turn, is intricately connected to *sal* or *salt* (known as *salz* in German), once acclaimed as white gold and a vital medium of trade in ancient China, Mexico, and Europe. Beyond its role as the ubiquitous food preservative, salt stands as the quintessential seasoning. Salzburg, Austria, finds a name trace in the historic salt(z) mines. The Adriatic Sea, with its high salinity, remains a rich source of salt, evident in the numerous coastal towns adorned with salt ponds and open salt fields.

Our Bavarian sojourn unfolded as an opportunity to delve into a historical and scientific narrative on salt, particularly its formation and extraction. Nestled in the Alpine valley near the Austrian-German border, the Berchtesgaden Salt Mine provided a vivid tableau for exploration. As the bus ascended towards the old border crossing on that picturesque Saturday afternoon, the absence of border police welcomed us to a serene landscape adorned with farms and villages against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. The Eagle's Nest, identified by the guide as a mountain residence frequented by Hitler during the Nazi Third Reich era, crowned a summit.

Founded over 500 years ago in 1517, the Berchtesgaden Salt Mine near the alpine town

of Obersalzberg became our gateway to adventure. Clad in miner's attire—long, thick, high-necked suits adorned with fluorescent stripes—one embarks on a journey that not only shields from the subterranean chill (12 degrees Celsius) but also safeguards the skin during a thrilling 30-meter descent into the mine.

The mine's railway transports visitors 650 meters into the mountain, reaching a depth of nearly 120 meters from the surface. Crouched in tight, narrow carriages reminiscent of the fetal position, one navigates the low, twisting network of caves. The culmination of the subterranean voyage unfolds in the expansive Salt Cathedral, a cavern where, centuries ago, water seeped in, reaching the ceiling and dissolving the salt rock to form brine. Today, the salt crystal formations adorning the rock walls set the stage for a captivating laser sound-and-light show, painting the history of salt in a palette of colours and a symphony of musical notes.

The evolution of salt mining, once laboriously manual with a drilling rate of 2 cm/day before 1990, now boasts modern electronic-precision drilling machines achieving a speed of 6 meters per day. Sample exploration precedes the extraction process, evaluating the purity of salt mixed with iodides, fluorides, and other compounds. Bore wells, filled with pure mountain water, leach rock salt into the brine, which pumps out using compressed air through a cor-



Sound of Music tour bus



Sound of Music trail Werfen



Salzach river footbridge, a dance location of SoM

rosion-resistant bronze pump—an ingenious historical invention of German engineering. The journey of brine continues 29 km to the Bad Reichenhall Salt Works, where it undergoes processing, contributing to Germany's renowned Bad Reichenhaller AlpenSalz. The cave's Salt and Brand Museum further enriches one's understanding of this product's intriguing history, transforming the tour into an adventure of discovery and uniqueness, lending deeper meaning to the name and history of Salzburg.

Salzburg's connection with music adds another layer to its charm. Immortalised as the star and stage of the 1964 movie *The Sound of Music*, Salzburg exudes an epic blend of charm, romance, and nature's grandeur. By welcoming around three million fans annually, the city offers a pilgrimage site for enthusiasts eager to relive the movie's scenes and melodies. The Sound of Music Tour meticulously guides visitors through each locale, unveiling the captivating tales and music associated with them.

While the movie showcases various city locations and breathtaking panoramic views, it is intriguing to know that the framing of its significant portions took place within the confines of Hollywood Studios. The Mondsee Cathedral in the Lake District hosted Maria and Captain von Trapp's wedding, while the footbridge scene and the iconic Do-Re-Mi picnic sequence took place in the Mirabell Garden. The gazebo,

featuring Liesl von Trapp's enchanting dance, was relocated from Leopoldskron Palace Park to Hellbrunn Palace in 1991 for publicity. The movie, inspired by the real-life story of Maria, unfolds the challenges she faced in a convent, her love for the outdoors, and her role as a tutor to one of Captain Georg von Trapp's daughters. Later, she married him (as also portrayed in the movie), and the story immortalises. The von Trapp villa in Salzburg now operates as a bed-and-breakfast, with ten rooms all named after the movie's children, while the Trapp Family Lodge in Vermont stands as a sprawling luxury mountain resort across 2,500 acres. Ranked as the third most-watched movie in cinema history after *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Star Wars* (1977), *The Sound of Music* cements Salzburg's place as an epic cinematic phenomenon.

The exploration of Salzburg culminates with a walking tour of the old town and along the Salzach River banks. Make-shift market shops dot the riverbanks, enticing visitors with exquisite wares. A river cruise aboard the highly maneuverable hydro-jet propulsion boat Amadeus, which turns 360° and offers visitors an all-around view of the city and the imposing Hohensalzburg Fortress that looms over the old town.

In the embrace of Salzburg, we discovered a city brimming with charm, offering a worthwhile experience that left an indelible mark on our hearts. ■



## CHITRA SANTHE, BENGALURU

Art exploded on to the other; and the other can't remain mere spectators any more. Chitra Santhe 2024 was an event where 1,500 artists from all over engaging about half a million art-crazy Bangaloreans with all genres, styles and mediums. Some works had unexpected languages and forms that provoke, challenge, confront, oppose, and even threaten one's beliefs, practices, and certainties. One is forced to contemplate, interpret, question, and answer—art at its best.



## Art Is Liberating

Kodhai Narayanan, a young artist at the Chitra Santhe, speaks to *Together*

*1. Tell us about your take on Art Santhe 2024. What is it and how is this art event different from all other exhibitions in Bangalore?*

Art or Chitra Santhe is the biggest annual art event in Bengaluru and the atmosphere of celebrating art, showing your talent to so many people who visit. I think it's different because they offer a platform for artists at every level but not just based on payment, it's only after a screening process. It was brilliant to see around 1500 artists from all over the county participate. The range of artwork from traditional folk art to modern art was lovely to witness.



*2. You are young and you are a woman, what did participating in Art Santhe mean to you as an artist?*

I honestly wasn't expecting to get a selection email and when it did come, it was validating. It was humbling to be selected to display my works with senior artists who have been painting for years professionally. The whole experience was empowering. I sold a few of my art works and to think that people would choose to buy something from me when there were so many options available made me believe in myself more.

*3. Tell us about one or a couple of works of yours that you exhibited at Art Santhe 2024.*

My paintings happened to be all about different transportation modes coincidentally and there were a few landscapes as well. All of them were done in the watercolour medium and they ranged from being as small as a postcard to A3 size. Personally I loved my *Ducks on the Pond* painting followed by the *Train Amidst Weeds*.

*4. What are your artistic goals and aspirations? Since art is not my profession and it is something that I do in my free time, the only goal I have right now is to not give it up under any circumstances and always find time for it.*

*5. You began art pretty early in life, and you have made a mark in the art field. What were your challenges to reach here?*

I began painting diligently when I started my under graduation. I never started with the intent of reaching a big platform so when I look back I still feel surprised at how far I've come. There's a big difference in my paintings from 2018–19 to now. I never learnt painting professionally, it's all just practice. In a way I'm glad I didn't learn in a structured way, it gave me the freedom to experiment in any way I wanted.

*6. What would you tell young aspiring woman artists?*

Art is liberating, there's no such thing as bad art so if creating something is making you feel good, that's all that should matter. ■



# Chitra Santhe: A Democratic Act!

JAMESMON PC OFM

The Chitrakala Parishad in Karnataka conducts Chitra Santhe (Art Fair) every year and this year it was the 21st edition. Both the mighty and little artists find space side by side, and they stand shoulder to shoulder at this art fair. It is a one day affair, where Lakhs of people from all walks of life flock to see and buy paintings. Just as you see in a vegetable market, paintings and handicrafts are spread on either side of Kumarakrupa Road in Bengaluru and it is that simple. It is great to see people on two wheelers and four wheelers or walking away with their new found treasures in paper wraps.

## Why Not?

Is collecting artworks or paintings reserved only for the high and the elite in the society? Why not the wall of a humble home of an ordinary family be adorned with a painting? The Chitra Santhe opens up such a possibility. All homes should have a painting or two, thereby lifting the aesthetic quality of their life. It was a joy to see ordinary men and women and families with their children feasting on the vibrant and the sober colours spread around and at one moment you feel it is an endless river of art.

## A Democratic Act!

Chitra Santhe is a Democratic act. It began in 2002 with a mission of making art exhibition and art viewing available to all. 'Art for all' was their motto. Now in 2024, it has become a giant of an art fair and the organisers have maintained its democratic and simple nature. Democratic, because there is no powerplay of the mighty here, at least not obvious. All artists are treated equally and are given space side by side. As long as this simplicity is maintained, the art lovers and the not so accustomed viewers of art works would have a field day and it is highly educative for the young minds as well. Bengaluru is home to such extraordinary events that can lift your spirits. ■



## A Journey Of Introspection Through Art

MATT JOE

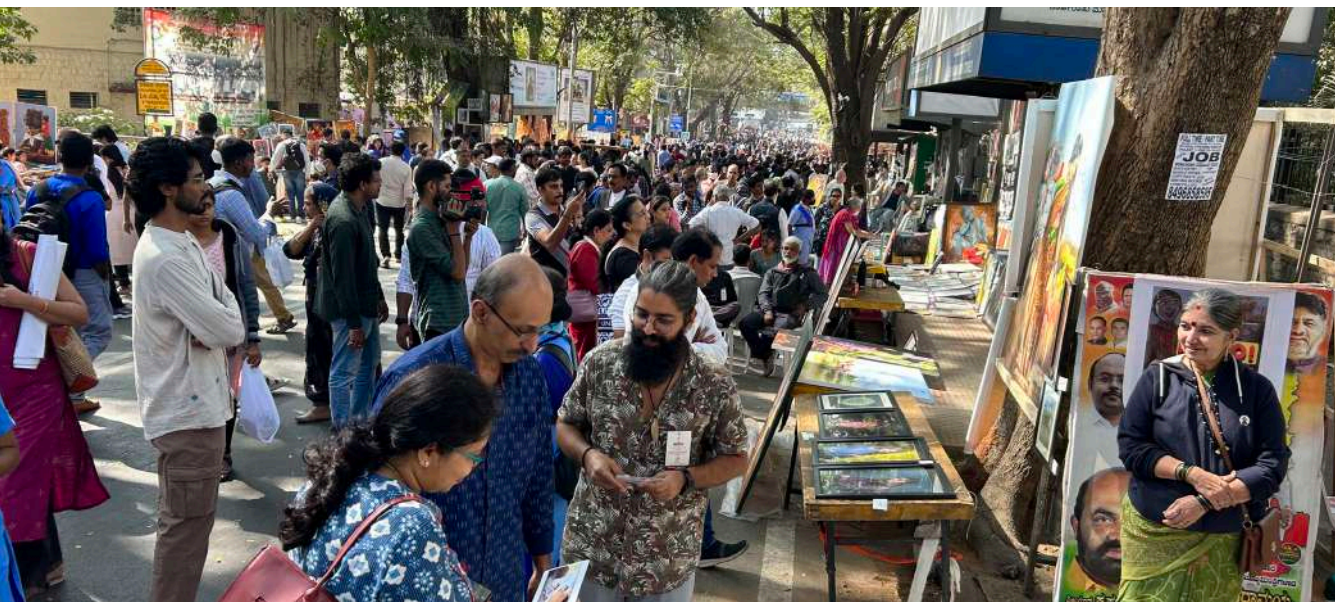
The Chitra Santhe/Art Fair 2024 was a lively canvas creating a vibrant tapestry of creativity. It was more than just an exhibition; it was a celebration of art dedicated to Indian scientists in space research. Organised by the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, the event featured a diverse range of artworks, from traditional Mysuru and Tanjore paintings to Rajasthani and Madhubani styles, alongside a mix of traditional, modern, and contemporary pieces.

Reflecting on my previous visit to Chitra Santhe, I vividly recall the bustling crowds that filled the space. It seems that Bengaluru, with its dearth of such events, draws the entire city when such celebrations of art take place. The event's popularity underscores Bengaluru and Chitra Santhe's reputation as strong promoters of the arts. The definition of art expanded beyond wall hangings, encompassing items like wearable art, home decor, and children's toys. This diversification underscores the pervasive influence of art in various aspects of our lives.

George Bernard Shaw's profound statement, "You use a glass mirror to see your face. You use works of art to see your soul," resonated

throughout the exhibition. Some artworks transformed the audience from passive spectators into active participants, sparking a dynamic conversation with the art. The disruption of routine thinking became evident as people explored the edges of familiarity and confronted the unfamiliar, embracing the discomfort associated with such encounters. This represented art at its peak—not merely a visual experience but a cognitive and emotional engagement. It prompted viewers to step out of their comfort zones, encouraging interpretation, questioning, and answering.

A notable incident highlighted the transformative power of art when *Together Team* acquired a watercolor portrait of Dr BR Ambedkar. It wasn't a mere transaction. The hope lingered that more individuals would view artworks not merely as decorative items but as tools for self-reflection and growth. The watercolor portrait symbolised a commitment to facing discomfort, confronting challenging history, and questioning personal beliefs. The echoes of the art fair served as a call to action—an invitation to embrace art that challenges, confronts, opposes, and ultimately transforms. ■





# Neru: A Rape Victim Sculpts the Moment of Truth

ROMIL UDAYAKUMAR TNV

The movie starts off as an investigative plot that unravels at an extremely fast pace, and it is the acting of Anaswara Rajan that holds it together. The plot is simple—nothing complicated or too difficult to understand.

However, when the court drama begins, it weaves a curious web. What seems like an open and shut case complicates into a spiral of factors that appear imperfectly nuanced. Although the story is detailed, it has faults every now and then. Half an hour into Jeethu Joseph's *Neru*, almost all the cards are on the table, unlike the filmmaker's previous outings. We know almost everything about the crime, the accused, and the court proceedings have started. No ground-breaking reveal happens in the two hours that follow, as we have come to expect in his films. Yet, it leaves one with a sense of satisfaction.

*Neru* has one compelling idea at its heart—the challenges faced by Sara (Anaswara Rajan), a blind rape victim, in identifying the accused and convincing the world that her other senses can compensate for the lack of eyesight. This one idea is powerful enough to sustain the film, even when it is close to sagging. The way she identifies him is quite a story. No less is the manner in which it is ripped apart in court and used for character assassination in sequences mirroring some high-profile trials. *Neru* is also the story of redemption of Vijayamohan (Mohanlal), a down-and-out lawyer who hasn't been in court for a long time after being suspended from the bar. Ranged against him are powerful forces—a rich business group and their high-flying lawyer Rajasekhar (Siddique), with whom Vijayamohan has some history. This plot

is quite normal—nothing overboard, nothing different or unique—it's just the characters in it and the influence of the characters on the story.

After setting the stage, Jeethu, who collaborated with Santhi Mayadevi on the script (who also has a role in the film), delves into the court proceedings, occupying a significant portion of the film's duration. While certain courtroom scenes, particularly those involving the victim, are gripping, others feel awkward, such as the recurring reaction shots of a smirking accused or overly impressed spectators during the prosecutor's triumphs. The frequent shifts to television commentary for additional courtroom explanation also dampen the overall experience. There are occasional nods to *Drishyam* through passing references. Anaswara Rajan excels in her role, portraying it with immense conviction. Mohanlal delivers his performance in a subdued manner, introducing a noticeable shift in his dialogue delivery that adds a more natural tone compared to his recent films. It was a delight to witness him in good form after a long time, although it doesn't quite match up to the excellence of his finest performances.

In a genre often centred around the portrayal of a brilliant male lawyer saving an innocent woman, *Neru* presents Sara as a survivor who is equally intelligent. Sara's bravery is portrayed without patronizing survivors, acknowledging the significance of her courage. She serves as an almost flawless character study, advocating for consent in one scene while being allowed the space to break down in another. Sara's sculptures often convey her thoughts, even though there's a desire to learn more about her beyond



Jeethu Joseph's *Neru* is a straightforward courtroom drama—among other things, about navigating the complicated corners of the Indian judicial system.

her passions. While scenes of abuse are not sensationalised, they could have been omitted in a film that otherwise empowers women to narrate their own stories.

However, one of *Neru*'s notable strengths is its departure from the typical dramatic courtroom scenes often seen in Malayalam films like *Jana Gana Mana* (2022) and *Queen* (2018). In those films, a star or well-known actor playing the lawyer delivers a powerful speech that dramatically changes the course of the case, prompting the court to "acknowledge its errors." Instead, *Neru* skillfully focuses on the intricacies and routine aspects of a trial, avoiding the opportunity for both Vijayamohan and Sara to use the courtroom as a stage to showcase their acting skills or deliver impassioned monologues.

Jeethu Joseph's *Neru* is a straightforward courtroom drama—among other things, about navigating the complicated corners of the Indian judicial system. And there's nothing really wrong with an ousted advocate (Mohanlal) fighting for the justice of a young woman (Anaswara Rajan) violated by a man who comes from wealth, even if we've seen it play out on the screen many times. But what Jeethu and Santhi (whose expertise in law lends *Neru* a unique touch) do with this film is what makes this a memorable fixture in this genre. It takes all the tropes of the courtroom drama, nodding along with every stock reactionary shot and heavily vitriolic defence lawyer, only to open our eyes and ears to an ingenious take on a woman's right to consent. ■



# Aalandapatchi Fire Bird

DR SUSHEELA B

Janani Kannan translated *Aalandapatchi* (originally Tamil) to *Fire Bird* meaning a mystical bird. It is a thought-provoking and beautifully written exploration of the human desire for stability in an ever-changing world. Its poignant tale of a man seeking permanence in a world where displacement is inevitable, *Fire Bird*'s protagonist Marimuthu embarks on a journey in search of agricultural land after the shocking split of his family's farm. His quest for a place where he can establish a home for his newly-formed nuclear family takes him to the Kongu region. Threading through this tale of hope and sustenance is the perennial question about what unfolds in the lives of individuals when their connection to the land is forcibly severed. This is particularly so for a farmer. Its beautifully crafted tale of one man's search for the elusive concept of permanence. Muthu has his world turned upside down when his father divides the family land, leaving him with practically nothing and causing irreparable damage to his family's bonds. Through the unscrupulous actions of his once-revered eldest brother, Muthu is forced to leave his once-perfect world behind and seek out a new life for himself, his wife and his children. In this transcendental novel, Perumal Murugan draws from his own life experiences of displacement and movement, and explores the



fragility of our fundamental attraction to permanence and our ultimately futile efforts to attain it. Translated from the nearly untranslatable *Aalandapatchi*, which alludes to a mystical bird in Tamil, the titular fire bird perfectly encapsulates the illusory and migratory nature of this pursuit.

As Marimuthu's initial discontent transforms into a happiness rooted in liberation, Murugan underscores the idea that life inherently involves instability and change and that certainty is a mirage. He describes the futility of the pursuit of permanence, pointing out that while the quest for everlasting stability may initially appear successful, the truth is that growth comes through change. Only those within the confines of a coffin truly settle; the living must embrace constant evolution. At some point, the readers are cheering the protagonists on, willing them to succeed, vanquishing the evil or pettiness that tries to cow them down.

Undoubtedly, it's Murugan's sheer mastery over his craft, though camouflaged by a deceptively simple tone, that makes the reader experience immersive. The novel is a portrayal of a crisis that emanates with changing power structures accompanied by the withering of old feudal as well as traditional caste bondages. As we read the novel, in many parts there is a sporadic bursting of fetish compassion which raises a ray of hope for reclaiming humanity.

But it doesn't take away the fact that there is a subtle but firm undercurrent of systemic ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. The societal structure it depicts is an old decaying as well as a decline of traditional Indian society. It is a sneak peek into the class divide within the Shudra community which Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd divides as upper shudras and lower shudras. The journey gives a foray into the thoughts of Marimuthu who is travelling with his ati-shudra multipronged helper. It slowly takes us to the backward linkages as to why this quest had to be taken in the first place. The events and the images of Murugan are a reflection of multiple social complexities at work. The son meta-preference is reflected in Marimuthu, his brother's family as well as thoughts of other family members. With the frameshifting slowly towards his close shot—his thoughts, the contradictions of neoliberalism arise. The fragmentation of land, its division only among sons in a non-democratic yet traditional way, has an effect on the conscience and consciousness of brothers. One can gauge that in Marxian terms, this is a perfect reflection of the economic base building up the superstructure of the feudal economy laden with Gramscian cultural hegemony. In fact, it astonished me how the traditions, which dictate the dialectics and *modus-vivendi* of relationships, appearing with an emotive touch of blood and bonds since times immemorial, are used as means to maintain this feudal setup. The economics is what triumph and kith-kin relations are unconsciously-consciously centred around it.

But then one realises how important and true it was when Ambedkar stated that gender operates via caste and caste is an enclosed class. Multiple power hierarchies are at play here. Patriarchy which was thought to be only the biological man-woman binary enters a gendered realm in Murugan's novel. Land associated with feminine fertility is now a bone of contention between the males of the family. It's means as well as the end for establishing dominance.

The novel debunks the myth of patriarchy only affecting women but also shows its leviathan effect on males as per their hierarchies within the family. Marimuthu's dilemmas that are reflected in the journey for the searching the land opens up insights into communitarian ethics which are based on caste(s) and regional consciousness. This is excellently portrayed in episodes where dialects, habits and customs are insights into everyday practices of the community. The translation by Janani Kannan is excellent. In an episode Marimuthu's daughter calls him 'Daddy'; an anglicised version of father in this social setup is a rare event and a background of symbiotic Tamil-English relationship. It also provides a glimpse of rising new modernity which is challenging the traditional system and has as a matter of fact put it under immense stress. But the translation gives a feel to a person like me who is not well versed in Tamil and a taste of changing subaltern dialects as Marimuthu moves to the East within the Kongunadu region. The portrayal of local cuisines, the labouring sub-castes as per sanctioned shastras, the crisis of the agriculture community sharpening the upper Shudra and lower shudra distinction reaches a non-Tamilian with Tamil consciousness.

All that said, in this tale of ambivalence, it is Peruma, Muthu's wife, who turns out to be the titular fire bird or *alandapatchi*. Carrying an unwavering commitment to her own sense of self, she implores her husband to leave immediately so as to ensure their pride is not hurt anymore. In the end, Murugan might have written Muthu as his protagonist, but it is Peruma who comes across as the more impressive character. Murugan gives us a tight narrative, a memorable love story and a truly unforgettable ending. It is one of those books that will forever haunt, especially the dramatically chilling end. It's translated with elegance and beautifully brings out typical problems faced by rural societies.

Pick up this book on a day when you feel that you have been dealt a bad hand. It's a treasure waiting to be discovered. ■



## POETRY

# There Is No God in that Temple

RABINDRANATH TAGORE



*"There is no god in that temple", said the Saint.  
The King was enraged;  
"No God? Oh Saint, aren't you speaking like an atheist?  
On that throne studded with priceless gems, beams the golden idol,  
And yet, you proclaim that it is empty?"*  
*"It is not empty; rather, it is full of royal pride.  
You have bestowed yourself, oh King, not the God of this world",  
Remarked the saint.*  
*The King frowned, "Two million golden coins  
were showered on that grand structure that kisses the sky,  
I offered it to the Gods after performing all the necessary rituals,  
And you dare claim that in such a grand temple,  
There is no presence of God?"*  
*The Saint calmly replied  
"In the very year in which twenty million of your subjects  
were struck by a terrible drought;  
The desperate masses without any food or shelter,  
came begging at your door crying for help, only to be turned away,  
they were forced to take refuge in forests, caves, camping  
under roadside foliages, derelict old temples; and in that very year,  
when you spent two million gold coins to build that grand temple of yours,  
that was the day when God pronounced:  
'My eternal home is lit by everlasting lamps,  
in the midst of an azure sky.  
In my home the foundations are built with the values  
of Truth, Peace, Compassion and Love.  
This poverty-stricken puny miser,  
Who could not provide shelter to his own homeless subjects,  
Does he really fancy he can give Me a home?'*  
*That is the day God left that Temple of yours.  
And joined the poor beside the roads, under the trees.  
Like the emptiness of the froth in the vast seas,  
Your mundane temple is hollow.  
It is just a bubble of wealth and pride."*  
*The enraged King howled,  
"oh you sham cretin of a person,  
Leave my kingdom this instant".*  
*The Saint replied calmly,  
"To the very place to which you have exiled the Divine,  
Banish now the devout too". ■*



## LITTLE SISTERS OF THE POOR AT THE SERVICE OF THE ELDERLY POOR!



In 1839 in cold winter, Jeanne Jugan met and found God in the face of a poor elderly woman, blind and paralysed. She gave her bed to the poor woman, opened her home and her heart to her. Since then, many elderly people were welcomed by Jeanne Jugan and her daughters who are called "Little Sisters of the Poor" present all over the world in 32 countries. Jeanne said, "It is so good to be poor, to have nothing and to count on God for everything." She literally lived her saying and taught her daughters to trust in God's divine Providence.

**"Whatever you do to the least of my brothers you do unto me."  
Would you like to take care of Jesus in the elderly poor?**



**If you hear the call to follow Jesus in the footsteps of Saint Jeanne Jugan,  
COME AND SEE!**

**Little Sisters of the Poor**

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