

REVISITING ERAIYUR

Eraiyr, a Catholic parish in the Archdiocese of Pondicherry, which paradoxically means ‘**place of god**’ in the local language, has been in the news for sometime for wrong reasons. This dominantly Christian village since more than 100 years has indeed exposed the iron grip of caste in the Tamil Nadu Church. *The ‘place of God’ became a den of caste violence and hegemony. The conflict in March 2008, resulting in the death of two persons belonging to the Vanniar (higher) caste and the looting of properties and the burning of hundreds of houses of Dalits, created a sense of shame in the Church of Tamil Nadu.* Realising that the situation was getting out of control, the Church authorities and the state machinery were forced to look for a peaceful settlement and the restoration of law and order. The state subtly diverted the issue as one of caste conflict within the Church and passed the buck on the Church authorities to settle the issue amicably.

The Archbishop’s Statement

The Church became proactive and looked at the issue from a human rights point of view. His Grace the Archbishop of Pondicherry-Cuddalore and the priests of the Archdiocese gathered on 18th March 2008 in the Archbishop’s House. In an atmosphere of fraternal cordiality, they discussed the issue of the Eraiyur village and came to unanimous decisions. Adhering to the just demands of the Dalits, **the Archbishop therefore declared a five-point agenda to rebuild the ‘faith community’ at Eraiyur – based on social justice, equality and non-discrimination.**

1. *The church road, namely the main road leading to the Parish Church at Eraiyur, is to be freely used by all the Catholic faithful, irrespective of caste, for purposes of marriages, funerals and other common celebrations.*

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2. *The Parish Church shall have one common funeral car (thoomba), which is to be used by all the Catholic faithful without any caste discrimination.*

3. Subscriptions for the parochial feast are to be collected from all the Catholic families irrespective of caste.

4. In addition to the customary route, the parochial feast car procession will be further extended through the Kurumbur road up to the Assisi Hospital.

5. Wherever possible, we shall arrange for a new cemetery which will remain common and open to all the Catholics irrespective of caste.

These resolutions are to be implemented from 20th March 2008 by the Committee constituted by the Archbishop (http://pondicherryarchdiocese.org/reports_eraiyur.php).

We, a team of priests, Fr. A.J.X. Bosco SJ (Director of the Centre for Information Training Research and Action, Hyderabad), Fr. A. Joseph Xavier SJ (Head of the Human Rights Unit of the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore) and Fr. Cosmon Arockiaraj (Secretary of the SC/ST Commission of the CBCI, New Delhi) visited Eraiyur on **4th September** for the second time. (Our first visit was on 7th April and the Report was published in the *Indian Currents, Examiner* and other magazines, cf. (<http://indiancurrents.org.in/images/Archives/ic%2017.pdf>).

Besides dialoguing with some of the villagers, **we met the leaders of the Makkal Mandram** (People’s Forum), composed of representatives from all Dalit communities, including the Hindu Dalits, and Fr. Bosco, presently the Headmaster and Correspondent of a School at Paganthaikooturoad. Earlier, Fr Bosco spent a few years as parish priest of Eraiyur. Even today, he commands respect from both communities and the Archbishop appointed him as a member of the Peace and Monitoring Committee.

Church Reopened! Common Road Freed!

To give flesh to the resolutions, the Church authorities took some proactive steps to address the human rights violations of the Dalits and bring peace at Eraiyur. In the third week of May for instance, *the*

Church organised a peace meeting. It promised the implementation of the resolutions of the Archbishop and so the Dalits accepted a peace settlement. *Subsequently, the Church was reopened.*

Another visible result is that **the Dalits have gained access to the main road leading to the Church**, while they were till now allowed to use only the side road to enter the Church premises. *In fact, the 1999 caste conflict was related to the Dalit demand to access the main road.* For the Vanniars had then denied the entry of the funeral car of Fr. A.C. Irudayanathan's mother in the presence of the Archbishop, who later closed down the Church. At that time the Vanniars had proclaimed: "Caste is more important for us than religion. Even if it is for only an hour, we will live and die as Gounders" (<http://www.dalitchristians.com/Html/TNBCSCST.htm>).

The entry issue was not resolved in 1999 and it took another nine years for the Dalits to gain their right to access the common road. Despite the law of the land, **The Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955**, which clearly denounces preventing Dalits from accessing common and public places as crime, the Dalits of Eraiyur thus took 53 years to step into the main road! "*It is a great victory and morale booster for our struggle*", said the members of the Makkal Mandram. This victory was celebrated on 29th May when the Dalits carried the festive car and danced through the main road, spending nearly two hours to cross the 250 feet road.

The Archdiocese has moreover helped the Dalits to rebuild their lives. It has provided dry rations and utensils to the affected families; it has also exempted the students from this year's academic fees in the parish school, and provided scholarships to those who undertake special studies like Teacher Training, etc. **But still, have the practices of discrimination and exclusion based on caste come to an end? The members of the Makkal Mandram do not think so. The developments after the peace negotiations indeed show the emergence of new forms of discriminatory practices.**

New Forms of Discrimination

While acknowledging the above mentioned success stories as a result of their struggle for dignity and self-respect, **the leaders of**

the Makkal Mandram list several new forms of discrimination. They said: "We believed in the diocesan authorities and agreed to hold peace talks. *Now, after four months, it is quite obvious that we were deceived once again.* Was it the game plan of the Vanniars to reopen the Church at the earliest to fulfill their 'religious' compulsions?" The Secretary explained: "A number of marriages and an ordination were to take place in June for the Vanniars. So they made us believe that Eraiyur will be different from now on. **But not much has happened.** We have only seen new forms of discrimination cropping up."

After the peace negotiations, the Parish Council asked the President of the Makkal Mandram to collect whatever the Dalits could contribute for the village festival. While the Vanniars paid the usual subscription, a concession was given to the Dalits as they had been burdened with huge material losses during the violence. The Dalits took this as a prestigious issue and mobilised Rs 18,000. *For the first time, the Parish Council accepted the contribution of the Dalits, who thus realised their right to participate in the village festival.*

The Parish Council then announced that the feast will be celebrated for three days from 29th to 31st May. The first day was allotted to the Dalits. When the Dalits gathered in large numbers for the celebrations, only one of the four festive cars was given by the Parish Council, and the car looked unattractive as there was no decoration. Contrary to the custom, the Church was not specially illuminated with colourful bulbs for the festival, and the statue was not provided for the car. The Dalits therefore brought the statue of *Sagaya Madha* from their chapel and conducted the car procession through the traditional route as well as the streets in the Dalit settlement. *To the utter dismay of the Dalits, large-size colourful posters were pasted at Eraiyur and the neighbouring villages on the following day, announcing the village festival on the 30th and 31st May. This deeply irked the Dalits, and they refused to participate in the 'village festival'.*

Furthermore, the common funeral car is yet to be provided by the Church authorities. While the old funeral car is used by the Dalits, the Vanniars still use a separate car which is kept in their demarcated graveyard. How is it that the Church authorities have not

kept their promise of providing a common funeral car? This would have put a full stop to the discriminatory practice of two funeral cars, one for Dalits and the other for upper-caste Christians. *The indifferent attitude of the Archdiocesan authorities raises serious questions about the promises of the Archbishop to the leaders of the Makkal Mandram.*

Dalits were employed under the NREGS as daily labourers to clean and deepen the pond at Eraiyur. The only nearby drinking water sources were wells owned by Vanniars. When Dalits tried to draw water from these wells, they were stopped and refused the access to water. Dalit women also reported that they were not allowed to eat under a tree which belonged to a Vanniar. The Dalits who have lost their livelihood during the 2008 March-April conflict have no other way but to keep quiet and continue to undergo pains and agonies to eke out their living. *Though these discriminatory practices were taken to the notice of the members of the Peace Committee, not much has changed at the grassroots level.*

As in other villages, at Eraiyur the public offices like the panchayat, electricity and telephone are all located within the Vanniar settlement. A youth said, "Every time we enter these offices with fear and anxiety". *In the Parish Council, only four of the 50 members are Dalit Christians.* Repeated appeals to have proportional representation and put an end to caste governance have fallen on the deaf ears of the administration.

During the attacks on Dalits on 9th March, some teachers of the Parish school were involved and destroyed the books and school materials of their own school children. This was obviously a traumatic experience for the children. The state officials, particularly the Revenue Officer who conducted the peace talks, took serious note of this cruel act, named four culprit teachers and instructed the Archdiocesan authorities to transfer them. *Yet, the four teachers continue to teach in the same school, enjoying impunity.* Attempts are also made by some Vanniar leaders to woo the Dalits who have filed cases against them during the conflict, either to withdraw the cases or to forge a compromise. **These developments among the Vanniars and the Church authorities have annoyed the leaders of the Makkal Mandram.**

What Will Now Happen?

The president of the Makkal Mandram observed: "*There appears to be peace now, but it is only temporary.* On our part, we were magnanimous and decided to cooperate with the Church authorities and partake in the peace meeting. *If what has been promised is not progressively implemented, we will need to rethink our strategies. I hope that the Church will not stab us in the back.*"

Questions have been raised by the Dalits as to whether the Archbishop's promise to have a common cemetery irrespective of caste will ever be realised. Though the leaders of the Makkal Mandram have reported to the Church authorities the new forms of discrimination and the continuous violations of their human rights, *the authorities have not convened the meeting of the Peace and Monitoring Committee.* Fr. Bosco, one of the members of this Committee, does not deny the ongoing discriminatory practices at Eraiyur.

The price paid by the Dalits to assert and reclaim their human rights at Eraiyur is huge. More than the economic losses, the traumatic experience of caste oppression is still deep in their hearts, particularly among the youth and children. Unless the Church authorities make serious and systematic efforts to rebuild the faith community, protecting, promoting and fulfilling the human rights of the Dalits, *we can well expect a repeat of the bloody caste conflicts at Eraiyur in the near future!*

We appeal to the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Conference and the leaders of the Church in India to take serious note of all forms of discriminatory caste practices across India and pursue uncompromising actions to eradicate such practices within the Church. This is the fitting response that the Church can offer to uphold the values enshrined in the Constitution of India and at the same time confront the communal agenda of Sangh Parivar groups, who continue to woo the Dalits and Adivasis to reestablish 'Manuvada' on the Indian soil – *an ideology which is completely against both humanism and Christian principles and values.*