

Voices from the South



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Holy Sites and Unholy Sights:

An Indian Dalit's Reflections on Power and Dominance in Palestine and India

The following is an excerpt of speech by Rev. Raj Bharath Patta, General Secretary of the Student Christian Movement of India and a Dalit theologian, given at the Kairos Global Encounter in Bethlehem, Palestine in December 2011.

Israel happens to be the cradle to three of the world's major religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - and thereby receives the attribute 'holy' to their land. India, like Israel, also happens to be the cradle for four other major world religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - and thereby receives the holiness to her land. In both these holy sites, unholy sights have been practiced and perpetuated.

Journeying into the streets of Palestine led me to anger, distress, disappointment and frustration. Witnessing the segregation and separations made by the cruel Israeli occupation, the confiscating of Palestinian land, the building of walls, fences and gates that divide and disperse Palestinian towns and villages - all realities beyond one's imagination in this so-called 'holy land.'

There are foreign 'settlers' on mountain tops, guarded by the security forces, while the native inhabitants of the land of Palestine are forced to live in gated communities. The humiliation, discrimination and human rights violations done against the Palestinians knows no bounds.

These sights are not very new for a country like India. Our Indian societies have been divided in the name of caste for ages. We have the dominant groups living around the temple

inside the village, while those that are born outside the caste - the Dalits - live segregated outside the villages as communities.

We have invisible gates around these Dalit communities, gates that are strong and deep, for they are built on claims of purity and pollution. There are several examples to illustrate how Dalits are denied entry to the dominant caste localities and are humiliated and ostracised when attempting to walk through their daily paths.

Oppression to Dalits has become subtle and aggressive these days, as there has been an increase of violence against Dalits with several killings, rapes and arrests. Many go unreported, while others go unattended. Dalits are forced to work as manual scavengers, cleaning human excreta with their bare hands. This again is an occupational-based and caste-based

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Photo: The Israeli Separation wall serves as a constant reminder of domination for Palestinians.



“...delay and denial of justice and peace have been modern techniques employed by those in power.”



Photo: Rev. Raj Bharath Patta

discrimination that goes unabated.

The cries of Dalit women are beyond description, for they have been oppressed in the name of gender, class and cast. Walls of divisions in the cemeteries, walls in the Churches, walls among different communities, and so on, are the realities done today in the name of caste.

From these contextual realities, and deciphering the signs of our times, one can draw parallels between Palestinians and Dalits. One can observe several similarities and commonalities among our struggles.

Both happen to be the indigenous, local, inhabitants of their own lands, yet who do not have their lands with

them. In both cases lands and natural resources are owned and controlled by those in the power.

Both have been segregated and are oppressed either in the name of nationality and religious identity or in the name of caste and ethnicity.

Both the oppressions have religious sanctions and have used religious scriptures in justifying the oppressions.

Both of these communities do not enjoy religious liberty, for they are denied access to the holy places; Palestinians on the pretext of security, and Dalits on the pretext of pollution.

Both these communities are humiliated and subjected to various kinds of torture, creating a fear psychosis among them.

Both these communities have lived as refugees in several areas, as emigration and displacement among these people have been on the rise.

Both these communities have been the victims of unjust laws and policies, as international human rights laws are not

applied and implemented by their respective governments.

Both these communities have been viewed by the international community as a matter of humanitarian aid or objects of charity and have never been analysed as a matter of justice and peace.

In line with this: if caste is pronounced as sin, occupation in Palestinian context needs to be pronounced boldly as sin.

The moment of truth and justice is now. Delay and denial of justice and peace have been modern techniques employed by those in power, making ‘nowness’ redundant and forgotten. Delay and denial are the deadliest forms of injustices happening. ‘Now’ is not just a matter of time period sandwiched between hours and seconds. ‘Now’ is an invitational situation calling for action towards justice and peace.

To read Raj’s speech in full, visit <http://www.karibu.no/viewstories.asp?id=122>

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