

Caritas always reminds us of that great global and universal hand of charity that stands at the forefront in any time of emergency that affects humanity. The pandemic has witnessed the immense work and services offered by Caritas, and it has directly touched the lives of millions of people giving them solace, comfort, and hope. Fr Harris Pakkam, SDB, Dicastery for Communication, Vatican, conducted this interview with the Director of Caritas, **Fr. Paul Moonjely**, who shares his experiences on the mission and role of Caritas.

Can you give us a gist of what Caritas India stands for and is doing in India today?

Caritas India, as the social arm of the Catholic Church in India, has the noble mission of translating the human and Christian values into social action that is enabling and empowering. Caritas India, with her broad spectrum of development services, has been rendering credible contributions to nation building since her inception in 1962. With a mission in serving the poor and marginalized, Caritas in India promotes inclusive and equitable development with a constant striving to be relevant to the needs and aspirations of the poor.

Can you explain to us the nature of your mission and how it is realized?

Caritas India integrates her faith-inspired base with secular approach to work. Our strength involves international collaborations on development issues with representation on global working groups. Our priorities lie in empowering local communities through poverty alleviation and resilience building, promoting, and developing local, regional, and national structures and encouraging formation of people's organization to sustain social justice.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have provided a common framework for governments and Civil Society Organizations to work together. Having intense forte and international experience in managing calamities and disasters, Caritas India envisions her intervention in collaboration with the government on important sectors of health, sustainable agriculture, emergency response and disaster risk reduction, anti-human trafficking and migration, child rights, inclusion and

Caritas India - The Visible Hand of Christ to the Needy

Interview with
Fr Paul Moonjely



disability.

Government's commitment on climate change including the adopted national and state plans have laid a strong foundation for Caritas India to develop and collaborate on related initiatives. There are many development issues being addressed by Caritas India which are also of interest to middle class and youth.

Caritas is an international organization and how does it operate and where does all your help come from?

Caritas is the development arm of the Catholic Church. Affiliated to Caritas Internationalis, the Caritas confederation comprises 164 member organizations working in nearly 200 countries, making it the second largest humanitarian network in the world. Our support is generated and mobilized through this confederation. A good source of help also comes from our indigenous resources. In India we have 200 plus partners at the ground level working together, of which 174 are the diocesan partners together with other religious organizations.

What is your target group and who are your prime beneficiaries? How do you empower them?

Our focus communities are those suffering, underprivileged sections of the society, hailing from socially excluded communities, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes, and religious minorities. Our intervention is rooted in its commitment for human dignity and social justice.

What are your main areas of intervention?

The present interventions are in the areas of livelihood security, climate change adaptation through natural resource management and sustainable

agricultural practices, disaster risk reduction and emergency response, good governance through political participation, anti-human trafficking, peace-building and community managed and owned health care systems with focus on HIV/AIDS, Malaria, Cancer, Tuberculosis and other communicable diseases, with special focus on COVID 19.

There has been a big shift in your approach. From the charity model you have moved towards the empowerment and development model? How are you able to achieve that and what are the strategies you follow?

Our commitment to integrated human development and our strife to be relevant to the needs and aspirations of the poor and the marginalized, have greatly amplified our involvement in the social sector. We have gained and gathered a wealth of experience through community mobilization, animation, and capacity building. This has prompted us to facilitate the people's liberation from inequities and help transform their deplorable conditions as befits human dignity. In accordance with these objectives, Caritas India began restructuring her ideology and perspective. Animation embodied Caritas' vision of empowering process. Animation as practiced by communities across the country has become an efficient and effective strategy for enabling communities to become part of each one's life and destiny by mutually sharing the resources and expressing solidarity in their struggles. This has been a great platform for them to practice *diakonia* in their own context. Strategic Plan 2018-2023 is the integration of the

principle of Diakonia with all strategic and operational considerations of Caritas India. Diakonia, as the mission for establishing and safeguarding justice and dignity, is the guiding force of the Strategic Plan and it will continue to help Caritas India channel her resources in the best possible ways for the best purpose. Strategic Plan 2018-2023 charts a new course for Caritas India by defining the four strategic pillars i.e., Empowerment Animation, Dialogue, Volunteering and Giving Communities. These four strategic pillars represent the development philosophy and the theory of change of Caritas India.

It is interesting to note that you have taken dialogue with nature as an important component of your strategy. How are you able to achieve this?

The papal encyclical of Pope Francis "Laudato Si" has given us the mandate to move towards protecting, loving our common home "mother earth" through dialogue with nature. The whole construct of this approach is that today the natural resources, biodiversity, resources of mother nature are to be protected and responsibly used. We sensitise the people towards the adversities of natural disasters and educate them on climate justice. We speak of green parishes, green buildings green lifestyle and so on, to adopt good food systems for healthy life. We recently launched the "Garden of Eden" campaign, wherein each family can grow and cultivate their own vegetables and help people to protect the resources of nature.

You have been playing a key role during this Pandemic? Can you share with us about your interventions?

Covid 19 was an upheaval crisis that was gradually evolving by the day. With a nation-wide lockdown, from restricted to no movements, the gruelling fear psychosis and with an alarming death rate on the rise, this pandemic was unprecedented with severe uncertainty. However Caritas India under the aegis of CBCI guided by her mission "the Joy of Service" and led by Pope Francis's call to "**Go out to the Peripheries**", played a critical role in this distressful moment, bringing forth creative and collective emergency responses. **Journeying with the**

Government and civil authorities maintaining protocols and directives, in identifying the vulnerable in the pursuit of protecting the citizens from this deadly virus. Caritas India has been responding to the crisis since March 23, 2020 through her partners across 28 states and 3 Union Territories networking with more than 200 civil administration, reaching out to 2 crore 6 lakh population in total. With the help of 98000 frontline volunteers, specific priority was given on Food and nutrition security; Sanitation and hygiene kit; COVID related awareness generation and Psycho-social counselling to the high risk/vulnerable population particularly workers and families migrating due to lockdown, people/migrant workers in temporary camps and stranded. In the endeavour to support the distressed migrants, Caritas India had conducted a comprehensive research study titled "Walking with the Migrants", that presented the huge complex reality of the migrants and understands their coping strategies and protective mechanism. The report brought forth immediate needs of these migrants. In response to addressing their distress, Caritas India reached out to 14 lakh migrant population.

What are your other programmes and how about your interventions?

On the whole Caritas India is present in 28 states. With her 400 ongoing projects and programs, she covers 4,52,448 households, in 12740 villages under 9701 Gram Panchayats and Villages Councils in 699 blocks in 315 districts of 27 states and Union Territories. These interventions are classified into three categories. Cluster programs, individual projects, and micro projects. Cluster programmes are those which have more than one partner implementing the same programme. This may be in one state or more than one state. At the moment we have 23 such cluster programmes ranging from 2 partners to 16 partners. The geographical coverage ranges from one state to three states as maximum. Under cluster programmes, 156 partners are covered across the country. Caritas Core beneficiaries are the vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society.

Can you tell us something about your Christmas and Lenten Campaigns?

Lenten and Christmas Campaign has been one of the driving strategies of Caritas India to mobilize support non financially and financially towards a common cause of eradicating hunger and poverty. For the 2020 Christmas, we had the "Christmas Express" campaign, through which all our volunteers did mobilization providing the poor people with blankets, cooked food to all those people hit by the serious cold wave in North India. The Lenten 2021 campaign is with the theme "Healthy life and Healthy India" in the context of COVID19. *Misereor*, Caritas Germany and Caritas Australia also join hands with us in carrying out the campaigns.

Do you foresee any challenges because of the new FCRA 2020 amendments?

The new FCRA 2020 amendments open a new avenue for Caritas India to broad base her humanitarian operations and development orientation through direct facilitation. Caritas India has always played a proactive role in facilitating and accompanying her natural partners with a common mandate. The new amendment increases our scope for increasing our operations and engaging more with local stakeholders for strengthening the community emancipation.

Can you throw light on this new concept "Parish Caritas"?

The Church's social action initiatives in India are quite well organized at the national, regional, and diocesan levels. However, Caritas India is now proposes the idea of taking it to the next level i.e. to the level of Parish for more impact on the community by strengthening, hand-holding and facilitating the parish for dealing with its own issues and leveraging the resources from within the community and from other stakeholders like the duty bearers, for meeting the needs and well-being of the local communities for a dignified life. This will widen the scope of Caritas for effectively empowering the Laity belonging to the local communities through Parish Caritas. Community leaders and volunteers from each parish will be part of Parish Caritas for taking different care and support services as per the norms set by the local Parish communities. ●