

## **Signis India National Assembly 2009**

Held at Nav Sadhana, Varanasi from 13 – 17 February, 2009

The sixth national Assembly of SIGNIS India, started at Nav Sadhana, Varanasi, on February 13, 2009. About 90 delegates from different parts of the country attended the assembly. The theme of the Assembly this year was – “Spirituality and Religion- a Media Perspective”.

The inaugural Eucharist was presided over by Bishop Patrick D’Souza, the Bishop Emeritus of Varanasi and con-celebrated by Bishop Thomas Thuruthimattom of Gorakhpur. In his homily Bishop Patrick D’Souza spoke of the need to be united and fearless in the media ministry. He recalled the message of Pope Benedict XVI and exhorted SIGNIS India members to take media seriously and with a sense of mission. He also appreciated the gradual growth of SIGNIS India, and reminded the participants about their specific mission saying: “The Lord has given you a responsibility as communicators, to proclaim His Word.” He also expressed his joy for having been able to do whatever he could while he was the chairman for Social Communications in CBCI.

Bishop Thomas Thuruthimattam CST, breaking the Word with the participants said, “We are called to respond to the challenges of the media in our present day. The treasure of communication Technology is a gift of God to us to proclaim his message of love. Media communication is the most effective and fruitful means of proclaiming the message of God’s Love.”

The highlights of the liturgy were - Entrance dance, offertory procession and Aarati during the Doxology. The inaugural Liturgy organized by SIGNIS Agra Region rendered a prayerful mood and an atmosphere to the Celebration

After the mass, the SIGNIS India flag was hoisted and the theme song composed by Nav Sadhana was sung by the students and staff of the Nav Sadhana.

Reliving the Indian Tradition, and with the background music of “Lead me from darkness to Light....” the representatives of various Regions lit the Indian Lamp together with the Chief Guest for the function, Rt. Rev. Patrick D.souza, the Bishop of Varanasi.

The Director of Nav Sadhana Fr Paul D’Souza welcomed the participants to the Sixth National Assembly. In his welcome address, he briefed the participants about the Centre and the activities carried out in and through Nav Sadhana.

The audio-visual presentation of the Theme of the SINGIS Assembly prepared by Fr Prannoy IMS received the praise of all.

In his presidential address Fr Rappai S.J. pointed out that every religion has spirituality; and spirituality is the search for the Divine. We have to go beyond the religion and search for the Divine.

After the address of the President, Bishop Patrick declared the Sixth National Assembly open.

Swami Schidananda Bharati who heads the Dharma Bharati Ashram and is the promoter of a movement for national regeneration, in his keynote address spoke of the need to work together for promoting a culture of peace. He stressed the need for religious leaders and communicators to have a more inclusive vision and mission.

In response to the keynote address Prof: Shahena Rizvi said that our science, religion and spirituality are inter-related and are different sides of truth. And the aim of the religion is to tell what is right and what is wrong.

At the end of the session Fr Varghese Palappillil, the president of Agra region proposed the vote of thanks. Fr. Pranoy IMS beautifully anchored the inaugural function.

### **Highlights the Study days 16-17 February, 2009**

The **first session** was the talk on topic “Impact of Media on Religious divisions and disharmony”.

Teesta Setalwad who was supposed to speak on the subject could not be present. Hence at a short notice Fr Anil Dev IMS shared some reflections on the topic.

Sharing from his experiences he said, “Media productions can educate people, concentrate them and save them from certain bad habits and situations.” He pointed out an example of how an audio programme helped to bring down the liquor-addiction in a particular area of Madhya Pradesh..

He reminded that often vernacular Press is used to malign the religious feelings of various communities and that electronic media is used to create communal disharmony.

In response to the topic, Fr. George Plathottam, the CBCI Secretary for social communications also shared his experiences with regard to the impact of media and he stressed the need to come together.

Mr. Allen Brooks moderated the session very effectively.

The **second session** was devoted to the topic, “Religious Fundamentalism – a challenge to democracy in India” by Fr Lancy Lobo SJ.

Using power point presentation to illustrate his arguments, among other things he pointed out saying that we, Christians carry out 25% charitable works in India through our institutions like hospitals, schools, colleges, orphanages, home for the aged and so on but we do not have a say or little influence in the policy making in the country. We do not have even a little voice in the power structure. He also spoke of how Hindutva brigade use print media to malign Christians.

Prof. Dr. Geshe N. Samten, the Vice Chancellor of Central Tibetan University, Sarnath who was responding to the topic said that religious fundamentalism cannot accommodate others. It is an obstacle to Democracy. We need to teach children about all religions. In Democracy we respect others; but in Fundamentalism this attitude is absent. We can change this through education, education on Peace.

In another response Mr. Amitabh Bhattacharya, the Chief Editor of Northern India Patrika, also shared his views and experiences of the theme. Fr. Peter Selvanathan chaired the session.

The evening was marked by the colorful and touching dance drama on the “Life of Jesus” presented by the artiste of Nav Sadhana.

SIGNIS India honored Bishop Patrick D’ Souza with a memento and a shawl for his valuable contribution in the field of communications and very especially to SIGNIS India.

SIGNIS India also honored a prominent personality of Agra Region Ms. Neerja Madhav for her contributions to the region. There were other awards given by SIGNIS Agra region to the various artists for their contributions.

The day closed with the screening of the Award-winning film YERANG by Fr Joseph Pulinthanam sdb.

The day two started with mass on Indian spirituality which was animated by Nav Sadhana; and presided over by Fr Anil dev IMS.

The **third Session** started with the talk on the topic, “Use/abuse of religion in Politics **by** Former Professor of IIT and activist Ram Puniani who has won Fr Maschio Peace Award.

Ram Punyani highlighted how fundamentalist ideologies had high jacked the national ethos and unleashed hate campaign and violence in the country. He said people in India are deeply religious but religion is being grossly misused by religious leaders for political gain. His factual and humorous sharing based on his experiences presented deep thoughts for reflection. He spoke of three components of religion—Identity, Faith and Morality. He said that religious identity is used in Indian politics to cause Communalism and politicians use religious identity to propagate their hidden agendas. Further he says Hindutva projects every small event as communal events. In communal violence the innocent people are killed but the culprits go unpunished. He strongly holds the view that Hindutva has a hidden Agenda that dalits remain uneducated; hence the Christian missions are attacked because these are the Christian missionaries who educated this poor and marginalized people.

He further says that journalism and education are two powerful means today to combat Hindutva agenda and we have to go beyond religions that inculcate commonality.

After the talk Fr. Joachim SDB the moderator of the session, briefed the presentation and invited the participants for interaction.

For the **fourth session** Ram Puniani continued his sharing on the topic, as Mr. Sunil Dang could not be present for his talk.

In his interaction to the participants he put forward his views saying the innocent people are killed in violence and those who instigate violence go unpunished. We are concerned yet we are silent.

He comments on “social Common sense” saying it is a set of beliefs that help but it keeps us sometime silent. And on the other hand the “Social Common sense” helps the hindutva to succeed in their hidden Agenda. Thus he says, “The “Social commonsense” has to be prevented.” Hindutva is not a religion and Secularism goes beyond religion.

He emphasizes to use and produce films consistently on secular values to educate various groups regularly. And reach out to more people.

In his response the public relations officer of MP and Chhattisgarh Fr Anand Muttungal said that the church kept away from the politics in India and thus did not engage in nation-building.

Another Response came from Fr.Jude Botelho, the director of National Institute of Social Communications research and Training (NISCORT). He said that all of us are part of product of media. And religion and politics interact with power and politics in the country. And further, he says that religion controls values. And he cited the example of famous film “Ram Ke Nam” by Patwardhan. He said that films influence lives of people. And the film actors, actresses and their images become real. After the talks there were few interactions from the participants which was well handled by Fr. George Plathottam, who was moderating the session.

**The fifth session was a panel discussion.**

Fr. Geo George SVD who was the moderator of the session introduced all the speakers.

The first speaker Fr Joseph Pulinthanam shared his experiences about making his award winning film YARWNG (ROOTS). He said that the film touched the emotions of the people and according to him that was its success.

The second speaker Mr. Priyankar Upadhyay, the director of Malviya Peace Study Centre, Banaras Hindu University (BHU) presented his paper on the theme “Media for religious Harmony”.

In his presentation, **on Cinema and Spirituality** Mr. Magimai shared the 12 skills in watching a film.

Due to lack of time he screened a film based on the theme after the dinner.

**Third day was devoted to Banares Darshan. It was really like a spiritual journey.**

It began at 5.00 am and concluded at 8.15 pm.

The participants were led by three guides in three groups to various important places in the city.

Highlights of the day were the Sunrise meditation on the banks of Ganga; boat ride through Ganga, Visit to the Convent of the Little Sisters of Charles De Foucauld, Visit to

various Buddhist Centres, Archaeological Museum, visit and lunch at Bishop's House, Visit to the exhibition of the SRA sisters Charism, Visit to the School for the Blind and finally the Programme at the Fr Anil Dev's Ashram which included Dances by the Blind Students and drama 'Amanat' by Prerana Kala Manch.

SIGNIS India President Fr. Rappai Poothokaren SJ handed over awards to leading artists of Viswa Jyoti Communications, Varanasi, who have performed about 5000 theatre shows for about 20-lakh people during the last two decades of its existence.

### **The Highlights of Business Days 16-17 February, 2009**

The Assembly started with a short prayer led by fr. John Paul Herman SVD, the Secretary/Treasurer of SIGNIS India. Mr. Allen Brooks, the Vice President welcomed the gathering and then homage was paid to the two departed members of SIGNIS India Fr. S.M.George and Mr. Dubey. After the roll call by Fr. Rappai SJ, the President of SIGNIS India, the voting cards were distributed to the voting members. The number of voting members from various regions totaled to 45.

After the roll call 3 new members were accepted by the assembly. An then the time-table was presented and approved by the assembly.

Mr. Augustine Lourdasamy, the President of SIGNIS World then addressed the gathering. He explained to the members the meaning of the word SIGNIS, the sign of fire, the Holy Spirit. He also pointed out how the boring activities of Church create disinterest among the people and children. He stressed on the need for networking, bringing out the quality productions, conducting good training programmes and bringing professionalism in the organization. He also stressed on the need for life witness.

In his address Fr. Rappai, the President of SIGNIS India reminded the members about the role of SIGNIS in communicating the Good News. He insisted on the following matters – Building up a SIGNIS family and owning it too, networking, financial support, using 'Wavelength' as means of communication, making SIGNIS a group of professionals and committed people, going beyond and creating a nation that is hunger free, caste free and corruption free and reaching out to all people of goodwill.

The minutes of the previous assembly were read and were passed with a few corrections.

The second session started with reading and presenting the report of 2008-2009 on Power Point by Fr. John Paul Herman SVD, the Secretary/Treasurer of SIGNIS India. The Secretary/Treasurer also presented the financial report of the year 2008-2009. Noticing the big expenses for the Asian assembly a question came up that should all the executives need to go for the meetings or not. All members supported the idea that all the executive members need to go for the Asian and World meetings as they represent the country.

The third session started with the proposal of sharing the resources between SIGNIS India and regions which was accepted by all.

Then Fr. John Paul presented the proposed budget for 2009-2010. The members suggested that a few corrections could be made and the extended executive committee could approve the actual budget.

The fourth session was the presentation of the reports by all the regions. It was wonderful to see many regions presenting their reports with the help of audio/visuals.

In the evening a special prayer session for the suffering Christians in Orissa and other parts of India was organized by Orissa and West Bengal regions. Also during this session the video magazine produced by Fr. Rappai and a documentary on Orissa and Karnataka was screened.

### **17<sup>th</sup> February, 2009**

The last day of the assembly started with screening of the video on attacks on Christians in Karnataka by Karnataka region as part of the morning prayer.

After breakfast the session started at 8.30 am with the screening of the video on SIGNIS World brought by Mr. Augustine, the President of SIGNIS World.

After the screening the issue of our magazine 'wavelength' was discussed as how to increase its subscriptions and make it more professional. The president Fr. Rappai insisted on the team work and asked all the members to contribute to the magazine.

As the national office was finding it difficult to register the organization under the societies act, Fr. George Plathottam came forward to offer his office (Media office of the CBCI) address for the purpose of registration.

For venue, date and theme of the next assembly three places were proposed – Mangalore, Ooty and Orissa. Many members opted for Mangalore as the first choice. The date for the assembly was proposed to be in the first half of February, 2010.

Following two themes Women and Media and Youth and Media were suggested for the assembly. The assembly authorized the extended executive team to finalize the venue, dates and the theme.

Fr. George Plathottam shared in the assembly the activities of Social Communications of CBCI.

After this the amount disbursed for 2007-2008, recommended by SIGNIS Asia for 2008-2009 were read out by Mr. Allen and Fr. Rappai subsequently.

Then Fr. John Paul, the Secretary together with the other screening committee members Mr. Magimai and Fr. George Plathottam explained to the assembly the difficulties in screening the projects as many had not followed the guidelines given earlier. They

informed the gathering that they have conditionally recommended the amounts for those who have to re-write the projects under the guidelines prescribed by SIGNIS. Then the amounts recommended by the screening committee were read. .

After this there was a short evaluation of the assembly. Most of the members expressed that the place and the warmth of the reception was good. All the members enjoyed the hospitality of Fr. Paul D'souza, the director of Nav Sadhana and his team

At the end Fr. Paul D'souza thanked all the Members.

The General Assembly came to an end with the thanksgiving Eucharist which was presided over by Fr. Rappai, the President of SIGNIS India.

