



## **25 Years of Pastoral Life in Bihar**

*Saji Augustine*

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I am a fortunate pastor in the outskirts of Bihar, a parish priest for the last 25 years who has travelled extra miles of responsibilities, leading communities, families, and so forth. Everything was an opportunity at hand. Going beyond, stretching a bit extra, and being benevolent without measure have made my attitude and aptitude worth living.

I have a vivid memory of driving a 22-year-old gypsy to a hospital in the extremely foggy cold winter of January at midnight. And our ailing employee to the hospital, away again of 2 hours' drive, who was gasping for his last breath due to asthma and unfortunately taking his breathless body back to the village on the same night. First of all, it was frightening to remember that I had not taken the vehicle paper my fault; secondly, we could not reach him at the hospital in time; thirdly we could not get the death certificate as there was only compounder available in the hospital; and finally, though not the least, the old vehicle was giving trouble and trembling due to the fuel tuning problem. Alas! While reaching back to the parish just half a kilometer away, the supporting plates of rear wheel axil broke because of the extremely bad road, and I had to walk back to the parish shivering, chasing the dogs away. The next day early morning, I went to my Muslim friend, one kilometer away, to get the vehicle repaired and, after having fulfilled my Sunday obligation in the parish, again went to the village with the children to give solemn burial mass.

Events and stories of these kinds are full of my dairy. A pastor who is a driver, technician, plumber, electrician, engineer, musician, farmer, gardener, social activist, and the list added to the merit of being in the remote village. In fulfilling all kinds of duties and responsibilities, I always faced this question of Jesus: "Do you love me?" He commanded that if I love so, I have to educate the village's children and create and provide job opportunities in a competitive world. I fondly remember my parishioners complimenting me, saying "There is no lack of work for us when Fatherji hears our request." "*Ham kaam mange,*

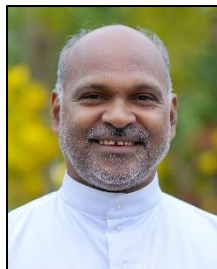
*aur kaam na ho! Ye ho hi nahi sakta. Fatherji sab prabandh karta hei*” It was true, though certain works that could wait, I would take up for the sake of villager’s primary need. I could not send them back home empty. I always believed that there is dignity and opportunity in work. Instead of giving money in charity, providing an opportunity to earn is far better and more dignified.

My success story as a spiritually and pastorally connected person has been influenced by creating a children’s fund from their daily wages. I encouraged them to work selflessly and motivated them to be yearning and compassionate. As a priest, I had access to almost anything that the church permitted institutionally and personal talents of creativity. I happily shared my gifts with my parishioners, companions, coworkers, and people of all faiths. Certainly, it was a fulfilling ministry to mentor my young people in the parishes and encourage kids in school through music, special classes, exposure, and so on. I am proud to see them heading up offices and leading communities.

There was a delight in celebrating life at the community level in the villages. Activities included liturgical and BCC (Basic Christian Community) prayer services, family prayers, facilitating marriage rituals, and so on. I keep this virtue as my strength, being available to everyone in the parishes at all times, irrespective of their capacity in terms of caste, colour, economic status, or educational qualifications. To be there for everyone is a sacrifice, the unacknowledged indirect sacrifice. Because no one ever would realize that I have resisted my temptation to take the easy path.

There were occasions when I have not been able to love some of them unconditionally. They had their weaknesses, and I refused to accept them to cover up my shortcomings. Yet I have gained most of their hearts, including those who sounded bitter and resentful. I know my arguments carry no weight when I am not understood. So to become a prophet like to the community, a priest like to the faithful, and a king like to the public is not an easy responsibility, especially when political powers are working against you.

I took hold of my Master Jesus, who managed everything for me. I loved people’s language, spoke like them, relished the taste of their ordinary meals, and am one with them. Nothing can separate me from the presence of my God in them. This is my prayer: God may grant me the company of my people wherever possible so that I might love them sincerely and wholeheartedly.



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