

CONVERSION OF A MURDERER



Swami Sadanand

The story behind the change of heart of Samandhar Singh, the man who killed Sr. Rani Maria in Madhya Pradesh, and the role of Swami Sadanand in this unique missionary work >>>



BY VARGHESE ALENGADEN

I was glad when Swami Sadanand informed me that he would visit me with Samandhar Singh, the one who brutally murdered Sister Rani Maria in a passenger bus in front of a crowd at a village in Indore district of Madhya Pradesh in 1995. Today, after 17 years of the cold blooded murder of the Franciscan Clarist nun, the process of her canonization is in progress. They came with three friends from Italy who were producing a film on the life, work and martyrdom of Sr. Rani Maria. Sr. Selmi, the sister of Rani Maria, also came with them.

Today Samandhar is a

transformed person. He had stabbed the nun 54 times in front of the passengers. Everyone fled the scene except one Ram Singh who intervened to stop the murderer. Since he was a TB patient he did not have the strength and stamina to stop the strong man. Though physically weak he was strong mentally and spiritually to give witness in the court which resulted in the awarding of life imprisonment to Samandhar. It was indeed a bold prophetic act by this poor man who never bothered about the consequences.

Though much is written about the life and work of Sr. Rani Maria, the world does not know the facts and the process leading to the conversion of Samandhar.

Swami Sadanand, a CMI priest, came to Udainagar village in Indore in 1997, two years after the murder. When he came to know that Jeevan Singh, the person who hired Samandhar,

was running a shop in the village, he decided to meet him. Though Singh was also arrested by the police as the prime conspirator in the case, he was acquitted for want of evidence.

When Swami Sadanand reached Jeevan Singh's shop, the latter did not know that he was a Catholic priest because he was clad in dothi and shawl like an austere Hindu sadhu; he had beard and long hair and wore no sandals. When he introduced himself as a Catholic priest, Singh became suspicious and arrogant. He turned down Swami's proposal for reconciliation and peace. With anger he first demanded eight lakh rupees which he spent to fight the case before he was acquitted. The initial failure of Swami's mission only increased his passion for peace and reconciliation. His next aim was to meet Samandhar who was serving his sentence in Indore Central Jail. He prayed

intently for discernment and help from God.

In those days, Swami Sadanand was staying in Sachidanand Ashram, Narasingpur. He had developed a personal relationship with people of all religions in the area. Once the public had honoured him with an award for promoting communal harmony and peace. He had been visiting Narasingpur Jail to meet the inmates and counsel those in need. The Superintendent of the Jail was an admirer of Swamiji. On his recommendation, Swamiji came to Indore to meet Samandhar. On that day, he visited me and spoke about his plan to meet Sr. Rani's murderer. This took place six years after the killing.

When Swami Sadanand met Samandhar, the latter was in utter despair. He felt betrayed by Jeevan Singh for whose sake he murdered the nun. He had considered Singh as his own brother and he could not bear the insult the latter suffered due to Sr. Rani Maria's support for the tribal Christians who had attacked and wounded him during a quarrel. An infuriated Singh used Samandhar for the killing. After Samandhar was sentenced to life imprisonment, Singh abandoned him. His wife also left him and started living with another man. So in his bitterness and anger, he had decided to kill his wife, family members and even Singh and then shoot himself.

It was at this juncture that Swamiji met him in the central jail. Swamiji travelled all the way to Indore, covering 450 km, several times and visited the convict to counsel him. He gave him hope and assurance of his support. He even welcomed him to his ashram where he could stay for all his life in peace. Swamiji also promised to make

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efforts to get him an early release from the jail.

By this time Samandhar had experienced the sincerity of Swamiji and placed his trust in him. He had become Swamiji's friend and disciple. It was selfless love, compassion and forgiveness which converted the prisoner. He repented of his sins and resolved to be a new person without hatred and revenge toward any one. Swamiji became his guru. This was evangelization in the true sense.

Some Church personnel who knew about Swamiji's efforts were not happy. They considered it as an interference with law because they wanted maximum punishment to be meted out to the accused and others who were part of the crime. However, Bishop George Anathil, then Bishop of Indore, appreciated and encouraged Swamiji's efforts. With his knowledge and

approval, he brought Sr. Selmi and some other Franciscan nuns to meet Samandhar in jail and tie a Rakhi on his hand. It was an emotional moment for the killer. With this, his conversion was complete.

Having achieved the conversion of Samandhar, Swamiji's next effort was to get him an early release. He met the parents and family members of Sr. Rani Maria and inspired them to forgive the man. They were prepared spiritually to collaborate to get him an early release. Meanwhile, Swamiji prepared himself in prayer and fasting for this great mission. Because of Swamiji's authentic spirituality and humanitarian concerns, many government officials, judges and police personnel had become his admirers and devotees.

With the advice and help of a District Judge, Swamiji prepared a formal letter in which Rani Maria's family appealed for the

early release of Samandhar. He met the Governor of Madhya Pradesh, the Minister for Prison Affairs, the Secretary of Jail Administration and other officials.

Meanwhile, the jail authorities also noticed a gradual change in Samandhar and sent their recommendation. Since the family members of Sr. Rani Maria made the appeal it had special merit. The convict was released from jail on August 22, 2006. Though he was to be in jail for life he was released after 10 years of imprisonment.

What happened to Samandhar Singh was the true conversion of a criminal. It was a genuine witness of forgiveness on the part of Sr. Rani Maria's family. It was only because of the prophetic zeal of Swamiji supported by 10 days of his fasting and prayer that this unique miracle took place. Samandhar was healed of his hatred and feeling of revenge because of the constant companionship of Swamiji. Samandhar accompanied Swamiji to Kerala and visited Sr. Rani Maria's home to ask pardon from her parents and family members. The media gave much publicity to this rare case of forgiveness and reconciliation. Bishops and other Church personnel were very happy with the outcome. TV channels also did their part to broadcast this unique story of conversion.

Swami Sadanand has intervened in many conflicting situations within the Church and outside to ensure justice, peace and reconciliation to the oppressed. He is authentic in his prophetic call to be the conscience of society. He has gently and fearlessly intervened wherever people suffered unjustly. He has persuaded authorities both in the Church and outside to ensure justice to the oppressed and

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exploited. As a true Gandhian, he has opted to inflict suffering on himself by undertaking indefinite fast on different occasions.

There are several occasions when Swamiji rushed to places where Church personnel in the north Indian missions were in crisis due to attacks by anti-Christian forces. He took the initiative to meet hostile people to negotiate peace. In almost all cases he succeeded due to the power of his spiritual persuasion. While he has succeeded in convincing and winning over even the aggressive Hindutwa elements, often he has failed to negotiate with the Church authorities. An example is his intervention in Thalore parish of Trissur Archdiocese in Kerala to broker peace between two warring groups. The Archdiocesan authorities filed a complaint against Swamiji and 27 parishioners after he ended his 12-day fast in this regard.

Following the complaint from the Archbishop's House, the Magistrate sent summons to Swami Sadanand and 27 parishioners to be present in the court. All the parishioners presented themselves before the Magistrate and got bail. Swamiji was in Madhya Pradesh undergoing medical treatment after his indefinite fast. Since he was not present in the court, the Magistrate issued an arrest warrant against him. How could the Church implicate a priest and

laymen in a false case?

Another example of intolerance towards Swami Sadanand took place when he was prevented from participating in a mission seminar. As part of the golden jubilee celebrations of the Syro-Malabar Church's missionary activity, a national seminar on evangelization was organized for Church personnel in Wardha. The organizers had invited Swami Sadanand as one of the speakers to share his experiments of setting new trends in evangelization during his 36 years as a missionary priest in north India.

The organizers, who were members of his own congregation, had to cancel his talk because of the reported directive from Archbishop of Trissur who was also the chairman of the department of evangelization in the Syro-Malabar Synod of Bishops. The organizers, who were mostly theologians, succumbed to the pressure from the hierarchy. At the same time all these theologians and bishops are very proud of the conversion of Samandhar Singh. They attribute it to the power of Sr. Rani Maria from heaven, without knowing the details of the sacrifice, prayer and fasting which Swamiji made. Neither have these details recorded anywhere nor has Swamiji made any effort to reveal it to the media.

The Church hierarchy, with the

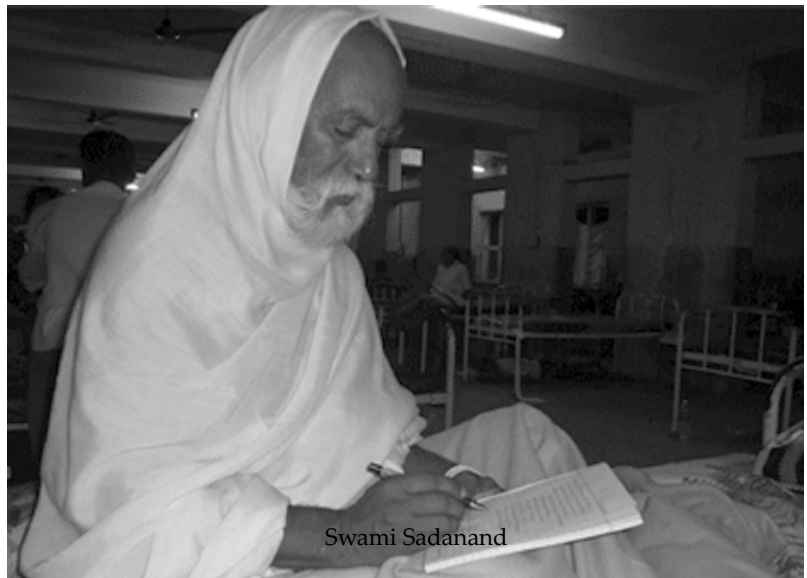
exception of a few, cannot accept the mission of prophetic persons. They are yet to understand the meaning of the prophetic vocation, "I have called you before I gave you life and selected you to be a prophet to the nations". Church authorities and laws want to limit the activities of prophets with formalities of jurisdiction and boundaries. Swami Sadanand considers his mission without boundaries of diocese, province, state and country.

Once when the prisoners of Narasingpur jail expressed their desire to get a statue of Hanuman, Swamiji got one and presented it to them. Because of their reverence for Swamiji, they wanted him to install it in the prison temple. When the prisoners insisted, the jail superintendent requested Swamiji to perform the ritual of installation in his own way.

At one moment, the prisoners asked Swamiji about his guru. He made use of this opportunity to speak about the life and teachings of Christ. "Jesus is my guru and his life inspires me. My whole life is guided by him". That was a unique way of evangelization. Hundreds of inmates of the prison together with the officials accepted Swamiji as their guru. They chose him instead of their Hindu priests, knowing well that he was a Catholic priest. Learning about Jesus from Swami, the prisoners and officials of the jail asked for a picture of Jesus to be installed in the prison. Swami presented a large picture of Jesus to them and it was installed in the prison.

The paradox was that Swami Sadanand who evangelized hundreds of people from all walks of life was not permitted to share his experiences with the participants of the mission

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seminar. The Church leadership will not be able to bear witness to Christ in this manner and evangelize as Swamiji does.

Swami Sadanand does not own schools, colleges and other mighty institutions. Yet this half naked fakir priest has influenced hundreds and thousands of people from all walks of life. He is able to establish personal relationship with the poorest of the poor, top government officials and rich people because of his simplicity and authentic spirituality. He sustains this relationship by visiting them in their difficult moments. He heals people who suffer from cancer and other illness by providing herbal medicines and prayerful blessings. Several childless couples have been blessed by Swami's prayer and medicine from nature.

Because of his personal and spiritual relationship, the Italian film-makers got permission recently to shoot in the Indore Central Jail with Samandhar Singh. The secret of Swamiji's public relations is his credibility and authentic spirituality. The clergy and religious who are facing opposition and harassment should learn lessons of PR from Swamiji.

When I met Swamiji recently, he informed me of his plan to undertake another fast and prayer in Trissur Archdiocese against the delay in implementing the decision of the Syro-Malabar Synod to solve the conflict in Thallore parish amicably. The prophetic spirit of Swami Sadannad cannot be defeated by any power on earth because he believes with St. Paul, "If God is with us who can be against us?"

