

The Good You Can Do With One Foot in the Grave.



This man Fede is around 14 years older than Pope Francis, but I cannot truly swear that the Pontiff picked up some of his radical ideas from this older fellow, who spent 71 of his 90 years in India. When Pope Francis started saying and doing the things for which he is now loved, we were not in the least shocked. Our family had got a foretaste of the new Pope from Fede. It was as if he prepared us, many years in advance, for this new, refreshingly different vicar of the Church. When Francis uttered his famous Who am I to judge? Or his pronouncements regarding the poor and when he articulated his idea of inclusiveness of all religions within God's salvific embrace, we said "Hey! This is our friend Fede all over again!"

Fede's English, though a little better than the Pope's, is not as good as his Hindi and Marathi. The Iberian accent is more pronounced in his English than in his Hindi and Marathi. And when he speaks his native Catalan, they think he is speaking Marathi with a Spanish accent.

That is because his best friends are all from Roha, Tara and the other villages of Raigad district. He loves jhumka bhakar and dal roti more than tandoori chicken or vindaloo.

"Dal does not stick in your teeth," he says, without for a moment passing judgement on your carnivorous palate.

In the 70s, Fede, who was parish priest of the Holy Family Church packed his suitcase, his personal chalice and paten together with his books and walked out of the Holy Family parochial house. He took up residence two kms down Mahakali Caves Road, Andheri in a single-room bamboo and mud chawl in Achanak Colony. He said that comfort was a painful thing if your friends happen to live in a poky chawl-room.

He seemed happy in Achanak Colony, bathing in the outdoors, in a 2'x 2' bathroom whose walls came up to a little lower than his shoulder.

Here he set up a project for women (they were more ready to work than their husbands) enlisting help from another committed person -- Sr. Isabella. They produced handicraft such as handbags, dolls, household linen and designer clothes, which were then marketed under the label "Creative Handicrafts."

He set up what was perhaps one of the first CBSE open schools in the city, the Jivan Nirwaha Niketan, where school dropouts were given the chance of completing their secondary education free of cost. He organized adult literacy classes and empowered the people to ask for and get better civic amenities, like water, electricity and drainage.

Before long Achanak Colony was transformed into a busy and productive community, well on the way to good, decent living.

He became restive again. He had got things going here. Others could now carry on the work he had started. He had read of the plight of the farmers and the katkaris of Raigad district. Something could be done for them, he thought.

That became his next calling. He took up temporary residence in Tara to assess their needs and see what could be done.

On one of his trips back from Tara on his Vespa scooter, he spied an electric wire which had snapped and was lying across the road. That could be dangerous, he thought. He got down from his vehicle and carefully dragged the wicked-looking thing away from the road and circled it round the bark of a tree in the nearby field. He got on to his scooter and was driving away, when the high tensile wire broke free from the bark and sprang back right across the path of Fede's moving vehicle. It got his ankle, cutting right across the bone leaving his foot dangling, held by a little flesh and skin.

We met him in the Sion municipal hospital a day later. He narrated the story with an almost delirious glee.

"There was I, sitting by the side of the road" he said. "With foot in my hand. It was not at all comfortable, I assure you. Because, as you know, I am more used to having it in mouth."

"Were they able to fix it back?" we asked. "It was too far gone," he said. "They are going to amputate right up to my knee. Hopefully, after that I may get a Jaipur foot."

They did amputate up to his knee and he did get a Jaipur foot. And his trips to and from Tara continued.

To the people of Raigad district Fr. Federick Sopena is a hero. They call him Baba. Fede and his team have trained the farmers and the tribals in the methods of sustainable agriculture, introducing them to alternative crops and planting ideas that serve as a buffer to the vagaries of the monsoon.

We once asked him about his severed foot. "Was there no chance of saving it?"

"None. They were going to just dispose it off. But I requested them to have it buried," he told us.

"Why buried?" We wanted to know.

"Now I can truthfully tell people that I have one foot in the grave," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

By Ivan Arthur