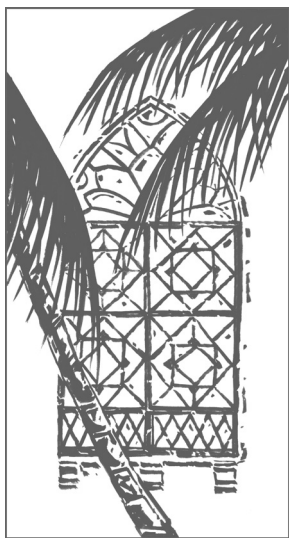


I Am Not Alone

Father Francis D'Britto



Translated by
Kapil Kelkar

Rajhans Prakashan

With deep faith
To divyaang Deepali
and all Divyaang and
Special Children like her...





A Jar of Clay

To speak or write about oneself is the most difficult task. But you have to speak about yourself when writing an autobiography. This book documents my life, as well as my surroundings. I put it down on paper as I remembered it. The writing of 'Nahi Mi Ekala' (I Am Not Alone) gave me a reason to examine and question my life. For leading a thoughtful life, retrospection is very beneficial. Saint Pope John Paul says that the life of each one of us is a "gift and mystery." Autobiographical writing provides an opportunity to look at the mystery of life with a sense of gratitude. It provides a vision. Things that transpire in one's life are always beyond imagination. We begin to feel Lilliputian in the face of life's vastness and its expanse. The people in our life are grander than the sky, and the destiny they bestow on us is stranger than fiction. I was born in the midst of flowers, fragrant groves of *ketaki* and *kardal*, and the shade

of coconut-arecanut palms. It was a Gokul, as my mother used to say. When I look back on my childhood, I am filled with a sense of gratitude and humility.

When I think about my life, I become keenly aware of my own unworthiness. I am a mere drop in the vast ocean of life. Whenever I accepted God's grace, this drop was lit with brilliance; when I sank in pettiness, it lost its light. Light and darkness have been inalienable elements of my life. Light is noticed due to its starkness; darkness is noticed due to an absence. I have been journeying, ceaselessly, from darkness to light. I am not a *siddha*, someone who has attained his spiritual goal; but a *sadhak*, seeker. A seeker at God's feet. Both light as well as darkness have contributed to the making of my life. A full moon is appreciated because there is also the moonless night. The Mad Potter (*as Marathi poet G. D. Madgulkar addresses God in one of his songs) was slapping and shaping the pot of my life. Those slaps were necessary, they were salutary. Like St. Paul, I am fully convinced that 'we are jars of clay' containing the treasure of spirituality, and 'this surpassingly great power is from God, not from us'. If there is a spark of light in me, it is God's creation; if there are spots of darkness, it is because of my own actions.

There is a noticeable difference between a plant growing in the wild and one growing in a garden. A plant in a garden is cultivated carefully. It is given water and fertiliser, it is trimmed. A plant in the wild grows on its own. Nobody has the time to tend to it. The surroundings in which I grew up were partly a garden, but mostly a wilderness. My parents did not get the opportunity to learn the alphabet. Most

people of their generation did not. The main reason was poverty. Only a handful of kids, sons of rich fathers who could afford to stay in Mumbai's boarding schools, were lucky to receive education. There was no question of being given training in performing arts such as music, dance or theatre. Nor did I possess any literary heritage. I was the first boy in my lane to reach the 11th standard.

My forefathers never held a slate and pencil in their hands, but they possessed innate wisdom. They were poor, but not helpless. There were conflicts and struggles in their lives, not hostility. They were a superstitious people, but did not embrace barbarity. The house had walls of mud and karvi sticks, but their minds had not been confined by any fence. Most importantly, they had faith, bequeathed by the church. It was an unquestioning, gullible faith, but it was also rock solid. Even when they faced storms in their lives, were dealt a bad hand, or life mocked them in a cruel way, they protected the flame of faith within them; and it helped them tide over all storms. It gave them strength for living, for overcoming adverse situations, and for imparting good values to us. The word they used for faith was 'bhav-rut'. Bhavrut became our legacy.

No man is an island, says the poet John Donne. He is part of a vast community of people. He lives, grows up, interacts and matures within a community. After the mother's womb, it is the womb of the community which matters the most. The community accommodates us, shapes our personality. It teaches us the importance of sharing and social awareness. A life without a community is like a fish out of water.

My family, my village, my school, my church, my parents, my siblings, my friends, the priests I met, my teachers, my seminary, my foreign friends, my enemies and opponents, my friends of all religions, the media, agitations, movements, the nature around me, trees and vines, birds and animals, mountains, the sea, streams, nullahs -- these are concentric circles, forming in a succession. Sometimes circles also turned into chakra-vyuha, death traps. These circles and traps have shaped me. As I look back on my life, what do I see? From a blade of grass to the entire universe and its master, all were at work to nurture and protect this tiny creature. I am astonished, stunned, humbled. How can I forget those baby quilts, blankets? How can I forget breast-feeding, the first tiny morsels fed by my mother, the thin gruel of rice? How can I forget lullabies, the cradle, the soft soil? How can I forget the starlight, sunshine, drops of dew? How can I forget 'Tambya' the bull, our cat 'Mani', the dog 'Moti'? How can I forget water, jungle, the land? The whole sky has turned into a rain cloud of blessings. I stand under its shower, get drenched, and occasionally shiver. How do I repay this debt of gratitude? And who do I repay?

Unknown to me, the wind of agitation blew in. Green Vasai, anti-corruption, social justice.... Sometimes the wind turned into a gale, at times spinning whirlwinds. We fought together....while fighting, we changed and evolved. We picked up only a fistful of salt, but it was enough to shake the foundation of an empire. My dear volunteers, it was all your doing. I salute thee again and again. My plunge into the movement expanded my own horizons. My personality

acquired a different dimension. I started hearing the sobs of the exploited. I was pained seeing their wretched poverty, and humbled by their noble morality. These people live real lives. I bow before them in all my humbleness. I consider it a great blessing.

An agitation is a challenge to the establishment and a call for the creation of a new system based on justice. It is a kind of a battle. Which means one inevitably gets wounded. I do not complain. Those wounds are, in fact, awards. But innocent activists were implicated in false cases and subjected to mental agony. Many were jailed. Some were even beaten up in broad daylight in order to take revenge. Some had their shops broken -- while the protectors of law simply watched. It was all inhuman. God will judge those who methodically orchestrated these atrocities. He is the Ultimate Judge. But we must pray, without harbouring anger and hatred in our minds, 'Father, forgive them....'

In an agitation, one has to take a stand. And I realised that only those standing on a foundation of sound thinking can take a stand. The people whose vested interests were threatened by our agitations considered us their enemies. But I never thought of any person as an enemy. Nor did I ever harbour hatred for anyone. To hate is to accept defeat, to extinguish the flame within. I was not fighting against a person, but the system. And I will keep fighting the system. So, to hate a person was out of the question. But I fought against the enemies of humanity. Occasionally I had to use strong words such as 'mafia', but yet never stopped praying that these men too undergo a transformation. I

firmly believe that circumstances change; and people too can change.

I am happy, contented. As the poet John Paul Moore says, 'I am drinking from the saucer, because my cup has overflowed.' In my journey as a writer, I found several associates. This book came into being because of encouragement from Rajhans Prakashan's Dileep Majgaonkar, a thinker-publisher. Dr. Sadanand Borse, the ever courteous in-house editor of Rajhans; Vaishali and 'Trupti who acted as a conduit connecting us all and who loved me like sisters, and the entire Rajhans family are now my life-long friends. While preparing the publication-ready manuscript, received invaluable assistance from : Stanley Gonsalves, Stephen M. Pereira, Sandeep Raut, Fathers Shailendra Rodrigues, Thomas Lopez and Raymond Rumao; Balbina Dias, Roger Rodrigues, Sharad Vichare, Rudolf Pereira, Johnny Farell, Royal D'Souza, Herold and Bella Dabre, Bageshri Sutar, Francis D'Mello, Eric Lobo and so many others! And it is a pleasant feeling to be in debt to Rahul Deshpande who designed the cover and also did the internal design, and proof-reader Aarati Ghare.

I met so many people in the course of my life. Each one of them guided me. The list is very long. I stepped into public life and then my life was no longer mine. I gladly served whichever parishes and institutions the Bishop sent me to....people accepted me warts and all. Without people, a priest is a nobody. People are our deities, our patrons....what did I give them in return? Really, the debt remains unpaid.

While serving as a priest, I spent nearly a quarter of a century of my life -- a period filled with hope and energy -- as

the editor of 'Suvarta'. Readers, writers, poets; distributors, subscribers, donors; audiences, volunteers, clerks -- such a long chain....unbreakable and invaluable...how do I repay the debt of all of you?

In the words of Reverend Narayan Waman Tilak :

I am lacking so much, Lord ! I am still lacking

Of the great debt owed to my siblings ! Not repaid even a fraction

And I will remain in your debt forever ! O Saviour of the fallen

To remain indebted is my source of joy.

Some of my kin and friends have departed this world. I believe their loving gaze always protects me : My parents Lawrence and Santan, my elder brother Pascal and sister-in-law Janu-bai, brother Alex (Nana) and Mary (Nani), my sister Angeline Rumao, niece Luizana D'mello, nephews Willie and Joseph. May they rest in eternal peace.

Finally, to my readers and critics :

My offering is not worthy of your praise

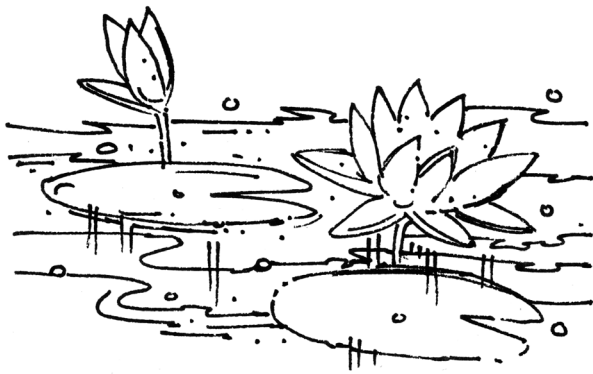
Do accept and sweeten it with thy grace!

Father Francis D'Britto

17 February, 2019

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1. My Flowery Village

Vasai - it can be described as a taluka, or perhaps a rather large village. To its East are the Sahyadri ranges, in which are located the temples of Jivdani and Tungreshwar. To the West lies the Arabian sea, like the fluttering end of a blue sari. From the South and the North, the creeks of Vaitarna and Bhayandar stretch their pulsating arms, as if to embrace this Green Empress. A coastal, hilly land of orchards and groves, on which nature has generously showered its bounty.

Here is a folk song sung by our women :

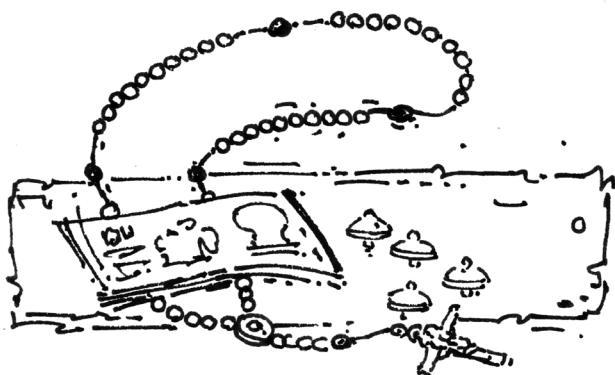
The kunbi's son yokes his plow

Tills his orchard of nutmeg.

(*Kunbi : farmer)

It is a fertile land of nutmeg plantations, groves of coconut and toddy palms, and betel vines.

The Portuguese called this emerald island 'Dona Bassein'.



2. Holy Balance in Account

Microsoft founder Bill Gates says, 'If you are born poor, it's not your mistake, but if you die poor it's your mistake.'

My father did not think of poverty as a curse, he looked upon it as a challenge. He had imbibed the aphorism much before Mr. Gates.

Ours was a large family. Few earning members, and quite a few dependents. We did not possess much farmland. To make matters worse, Uncle Jyaiv (John) died at a young age. The burden of the entire family fell on my father's shoulders. To make ends meet, my elder brothers Babu and Alex and cousins Sylu (Sylvester) and Kaitan (Kajitan) had to drop out of school. All four of them were good students, but poverty put paid to their dreams. The shovel and hoe replaced the slate and pencil. My aunt was not ready to live

in a joint family, so the family had to be split into two units. The farmland was divided resulting in fewer sources of income. Babu was asked to start a milk business. Every day, he would rise before dawn and go to Byculla in Mumbai to sell milk.

With the help of Manya Rumao, an enterprising local farmer and trader, Father constructed a well at Sambhale village to irrigate orchards. He also rented land for farming at Khalar village from Uncle Babulya, a Samvedi Brahmin landlord. It remained in our possession for several years. After the 'Kul Kayda' (the Maharashtra Tenancy and Agricultural Lands Act, 1948) came into force, tenant farmers could claim ownership of the land they had tilled hitherto. But my father did not stake a claim to the rented land. He returned it to the original owner, even though it was *bagayati* land, suitable for horticulture (and hence more lucrative). To this day, Uncle Babulya's descendants express gratitude to us for this act of his. As a result, the close relations between the two families have endured. I, thus, acquired my first lessons in social justice at home.

Father was an extraordinarily gutsy man. He possessed the confidence to turn dust into gold. He knew the ways in which a small farmer could shore up and even increase his income. He ventured into many things. Our milk business was doing well; father decided to expand it. There were buffalo traders in nearby Virar and Nalasopara, but they charged exorbitant price for the animal. Father travelled to Bharuch in Gujarat and purchased two she-buffaloes. We saved a lot of money.

Father was a man gifted with a sweet temper and a honeyed tongue. To make new friends was almost his passion. Baltis (Baptista) Kurel, Philya (Philip) Dabare, Bisha Damel (Vincent D'mello) and Lusu Minej (Louis Menzes) were members of the local gentry. Father enjoyed friendly relations with all of them. Every Monday, this



5. In Love with School

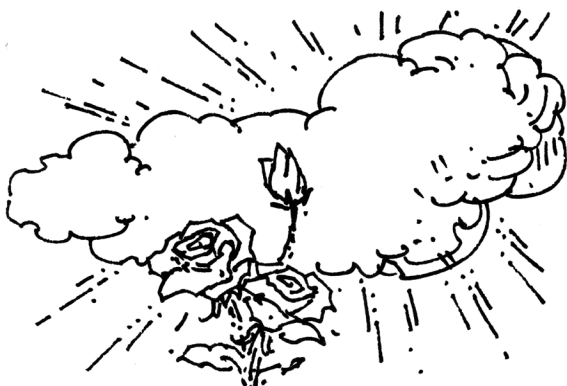
I still remember the first day of school. June 1. Three-four kids from my village set out for school. I joined them. Children were admitted directly to the first standard then. There was no burden of schoolbag. A slate, a pencil, and a book were all that we carried. Nobody from my family accompanied me. I carried no (birth) certificate. The school was located in our village, and the teachers too were from our village. I was asked my name. At home, I was called Francis, so I gave the same name. The teacher then asked me my date of birth. I didn't understand the question. He entered something in the register in front of him. The admission process was over.

My Christian name is John. How did I then acquire the name 'Francis'? This I found out quite late in life. I was visiting a relative at Shirlai village in 2015 when I met an old gentleman related to my aunt. As we got talking, he

said, “John is your uncle’s name. In those days, women were not supposed to utter their husband’s name. So your aunt started calling you ‘Francis’, which was her brother’s name. And it stuck!” Thus, after crossing the age of seventy, I learnt the secret behind my dual name!

The school stands next to the church at Nandakhal, a verdant village which lies to the west of Virar station. In keeping with the policy ‘where there is a church, there should be a school’, the priests started Saint Joseph School in 1939. The medium of instruction was Marathi. All the students were local Marathi-speaking Christians. The school did not have its own buildings. Classes were held in various parts of the church itself : on the front porch, in the backyard, or on mezzanine floors. At the beginning of the year, every student brought a gunny sack to sit on. At the end of each day, it was put away in a corner. In the seventh standard we received the privilege of sitting on a *paat*, : a rectangular polished wooden plank slightly raised off the ground. There were no tarred roads. All of us walked to the school barefoot. But no one complained.

The way to the school passed through green banana farms. How kind were those paths! Soft, velvety, dripping with love. The midday sun scorches them, but they give up all that heat as the evening approaches. They care for the feet of those who walk on them, and carry their imprints with pride. Every footstep is recorded, every footprint is preserved. On our way to the school, there were sprawling tamarind and mango trees in an orchard. It belonged to Motya Sheth, a rich farmer. We acted as if they were our property and it was our birthright to knock down ripening tamarind pods and raw mangoes by hurling stones. Sheth, a fair and good-looking man, would sometimes be seen walking through the orchard, holding the loose end of his dhoti in one hand. He would see us hurling stones at his trees but pretend not to notice. And therefore, we



7. Living to Give

We Catholic priests lead an austere life, but its goal is to be with the people. We are called ‘secular priests’. To be secular is to be able to identify with the joys and sorrows of the community. Serving as a member of clergy, I devoted a lot of time to teaching and journalism, but I always remained connected to people. While in Vasai, I had the opportunity to serve in the parishes of Pali, Mulgaon, Girij, Sandor and Shirlaiwadi. The population of a parish can range from about fifteen hundred to fifteen thousand. Every parish has a church with a school attached to it, and depending on population size, up to five or six priests serve within its jurisdiction.

For Catholics, the local church is a spiritual, social and cultural centre of their lives. We come in close contact with parish residents at every important juncture in life, from birth to death. We are witness to their joys and sorrows,

their moments of disappointment, even their heart-breaks. We baptize a newborn baby. When the baby is seven or eight years old, we conduct the 'First Communion' rite. When they enter adolescence, we impart them lessons in faith and ethical behaviour, and conduct 'sacrament of Confirmation'. When they are of marriageable age, we organise pre-marriage guidance camps for them. To help them deal with conflicts and tensions within married life, we offer a counselling facility. If a person is bearing an insufferable burden of guilt, we offer them absolution through confession. For their spiritual salvation, we give them the Eucharist, consecrated bread. In a person's twilight years, we offer the sacrament of 'Anointing of the Sick' to prepare them for the eternal journey. When a person dies, a priest accompanies the body to the burial ground and takes part in the last rites. Thus, we provide spiritual company to the faithful from birth to death.

First Love

After I became a priest, my first appointment was as an Assistant Father at the Mother of God church at Pali near Naigaon. Back then it was a dreamy village with a population of about two thousand. Close to Mumbai, yet far away from the urban hustle and bustle. Nestled in nature's lap, self-absorbed. It had a mixed population of Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Though faiths differed, Marathi was the common thread binding the people. Like a tender coconut with water inside, the people were full of sweetness.

I joined the Pali church on June 30, 1973. On arrival, Father Peter Gomes, the head priest, welcomed me with a smiling face. A Goan, he had been serving alone in this church for thirteen years. Gomes was twice my age. Local people visited the church office only if they had some business. Father Gomes was not given to hold long



8. Lessons in Pune

In keeping with the new thinking within the Church, Marathi was given primacy as language of prayer and worship. Marathi, my mothertongue, began to be used extensively in the Church's religious affairs. Me being a Marathi-lover, someone who wrote in that language, the authorities selected me for a stint in Pune where I could become more familiar with Marathi and its culture. I shifted to the Sneh Sadan institute in Shaniwar Peth in June 1974. I wanted to do an MA (Master of Arts) in Marathi at Pune University, but it was not possible because of the issues of equivalence of qualification. I then enrolled in the Marathi Sahitya Parishad's 'Sahitya Acharya' certificate course.

Ahmednagar

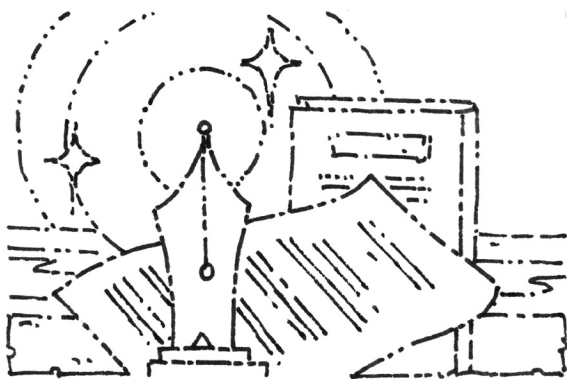
Classes for the Sahitya Acharya course were yet to start, and I had some time on my hands. So I joined

the Shrirampur Mission in Ahmednagar (now renamed Ahilyanagar) district. During the three-month period from June to August, 1974, I got the opportunity to become acquainted with the Dalit Christian community which lived in the rural parts of Ahmednagar. British and German-Swiss missionaries had arrived in Ahmednagar more than a century ago. They started schools and hospitals in the region. The missionaries embraced the communities whom the higher classes of Indian society had spurned. They dedicated their entire lives to helping these people who were languishing in wretched poverty.

After Independence, the Indian government introduced special concessions for the Dalit community, but the converted Dalit Christians were denied their benefit. Simultaneously, the aid from foreign countries was dwindling. It was a double whammy. Yet, many determined youngsters from this community overcame adversities and charted their own course in life. They have preserved their identity as well as their faith.

At Ahmednagar, I saw up close the austere way in which the missionaries lived. Their unwavering dedication to duty, the natural inclination to adapt to adversity, the resolve to be a part of Indian culture, their simple living and high thinking, the empathy for the weaker sections, and their very act of shunning the pleasures of life and choosing to dedicate themselves to service -- all these things left a deep impression on me.

The annual fair of Mot Mauli at Haregaon was a big attraction of the district. Local youngsters invited me to direct a play. I agreed, and cycled to Haregaon from Ahmednagar for many days. There I met Father Benz, a missionary. He was related to the founders of the automobile brand Mercedes Benz. Once, his relatives offered to give him a car. He refused. Jokingly, he told them, "You are sending me a car, but don't forget to send some roads with it!" He



11. Worshipping Words

I grew up in a mixed, Hindu-Muslim-Christian settlement. The ways of worship were different, but the social bonds between communities were very strong. My mothertongue is Marathi. At home, we spoke to each other in Samvedi dialect and continue to use it even today. I studied at a Marathi school run by the church. School textbooks introduced me to well-known Marathi writers like Pandurang Sane (more famously known as Sane Guru-ji), Y. G. Joshi and V. S. Khandekar. Marathi writers permanently occupied a corner of my innocent heart. Would I ever be able to write, express myself like these writers? I asked myself this question again and again. Our textbooks also introduced me to saints. I was deeply influenced by their experiences of self-enlightenment. They too occupied a part of my heart permanently.

When I enrolled in the seminary to become a priest, the

doors of its huge English and Marathi libraries opened for me. Father Patric Hearn, our English professor, was Irish by birth. He had studied English literature extensively. He taught us to appreciate the works of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Chaucer, et al. At the same time, I was also reading Marathi fiction, short stories, plays and biographies. Around this time I came across a collection of Tukaram's 'abhang' poetry. While I read the Bible many times, I enjoyed reciting Tukaram's abhang verse too.

Because of my love for Marathi, I appeared for the three graded examinations conducted by the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad to test a person's knowledge of the language : Pradnya, Visharad and Sahitya Acharya. Preparation for these exams helped me understand the intricacies of Marathi. I was also writing short pieces for Christian magazines Suvarta and Niropya during this period. As I wrote, I found a formula of writing : bringing (cultures) together and dialogue. I was familiar with two religious traditions : Hindu and Christian. I knew two languages : Marathi and English. I was, as it were, enjoying the riches of two distinct traditions, and wanted to share them with others.

After reading and rereading the New Testament, I was filled with deep admiration for the noble, grander-than-the-sky character of Jesus Christ. His compassion for the poor and oppressed, and his indignant anger about hypocrites turned me introspective. I was reading, simultaneously, the biographies of Christian saints who had attained enlightenment, and also enjoying the compositions of mystic poets of the Bhagwat sect. I began to sense that there existed a silent dialogue between German theologian Meister Eckhart who unravelled the mysteries of spiritual enlightenment, and Marathi saint-poet Dnyaneshwar who explained the philosophy of the Bhagavad Geeta in a Prakrit language. There was a similar connection between