

28.02.07. Генеральный Секретарь Всемирного Совета Церквей посещает Индию, где подчёркивает уникальную роль культуры религиозных меньшинств и синкретической культуры Индии для развития экуменического диалога во всём мире и для укрепления культуры церковных приходов.

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For Kobia, India visit a "memorable experience" of churches' "vibrant life"



Kerala 17 Feb. 2007 - Women crossing river at the Maramon Convention, organized annually by the Mission and Evangelism wing of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar

By Anto Akkara (*)

Just before his departure for Geneva, Switzerland, World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia summed up his impressions of his recently concluded visit to southern India by saying that it had been an unparalleled opportunity to experience the "vibrant life" of the churches and their local traditions.

Beginning on 13 February in Chennai with an address to the top leadership of the Church of South India (CSI) and ending on February 20 by the laying of the foundation for a multi-purpose disaster shelter in a tsunami-hit village on the Arabian Sea in southern Kerala, his visit, Kobia said, had given him "the chance to visit the churches and to interact with their old and young members"; as such, "it has been a memorable experience".

The rich gamut of local cultural traditions offered many ways of honouring the WCC general secretary, ranging from acrobatic dancers at the CSI Synod headquarters in Chennai, to Dalit drummers at the offices of the Student Christian Movement in Bangalore, to a golden ceremonial cap given to Kobia at the golden jubilee celebrations of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) in Bangalore.

More cultural presentations followed as Kobia entered the Christian stronghold of Kerala - the largest Christian enclave in India, most of whose 6 million Christians trace their faith to the apostle Thomas, who is said to have reached the Kerala coast in AD 52 in the company of spice merchants from the Middle East.

Symbol of love and compassion

However, one of the most spectacular receptions came at the end of Kobia's visit, in Edavanakad, a Muslim-majority fishing village 25 kms north of Kochi. With almost the entire population attending the function, dozens of women and children showered flower petals on Kobia and other church dignitaries as they walked into the village whose 200 houses had almost all been swept away or destroyed by the December 2004 tsunami.

On the site where CASA (Churches' Auxiliary for Social Action), the social action wing of 24 Orthodox and Protestant churches in India, is to build a multi-purpose disaster shelter, Kobia took up a trowel to lay some bricks in the shelter's foundations. "Though we are away from you, we will continue to be concerned about you," Kobia told the villagers.

Local political leaders acknowledged the churches' commitment to reconstruction: "The foundation that has been laid now here is a symbol of love and compassion," declared M. K. Purushothaman, a Hindu local elected member in Kerala's 140-member state legislature. V. K. Equbal, a Muslim who is the village council president, described the church workers as "angels".

With the support of Action by Churches Together (ACT) International, CASA has already handed over some 4,000 disaster-resistant houses on India's eastern coast, and has built community centres, schools and other facilities in the 52 villages in which it is working. It has also provided boats and nets for fishermen as well as livelihood training for the people affected by the tsunami.

After the speeches, young Muslim girls presented traditional bridal dances for the church dignitaries while the villagers sat with Kobia for a community lunch served on plantain leaves, Kerala style. "This is the biggest event in our village in my memory," remarked K. Valappan, an elderly fisherman.

Maramon enthralles Kobia

The event that stood out from all the others in his colourful programme, Kobia said, was the 112th Maramon Convention in Kerala. For the WCC general secretary, the nearly three days in Maramon were "a unique experience that will remain in my memory for a long time. I had never seen anything like this before," Kobia said of the event organized annually by the Mission and Evangelism wing of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, one of the WCC's member churches in India.

In fact, moved by the rapt attention paid by the 100,000 Christians and others patiently squatting under a pandal of coconut leaves on the dry sandbed of the river Pampa near the village of Maramon, Kobia discarded the scholarly sermon he had prepared for the convention's valedictory session on Sunday 18 February. "They were looking for a pastoral message. So I decided to address them in a pastoral manner," he said.

Kobia preached to the gathering about encountering Jesus. "One who has not encountered Jesus will look at the cross as a mark of disgrace, but when one encounters him, the cross becomes a symbol of salvation," he pointed out.

Kobia compared the world - where "hatred is preached in the name of religion", violence against women and children is rampant, people living with HIV and AIDS are discriminated against, and there is "mountain of wealth amid poverty" - with a house in flames. "The world is burning," Kobia said, "and God is looking for those who can save it."

After Maramon, Kobia travelled on 19 February to Kottayam, home to one of the broadest ranges of Christian traditions in India, where he was welcomed at an ecumenical reception by the Kerala Council of Churches (KCC), a forum of 13 Orthodox and Protestant churches chaired by Mar Thoma Bishop Isaac Mar Philoxinos.

Among the bishops and lay Christian leaders of various denominations present, Roman Catholic Archbishop Mathew Moolakkat, who heads the Nilackal Ecumenical Trust, remarked that "We are all called to work together, and when we work together, it will move us towards greater unity.

Discrimination against Dalits simply apartheid

A common refrain in Kobia's addresses at the Church of South India, at the Lutheran Gurukul theological College in Chennai and at the SCM assembly and CISRS golden jubilee in Bangalore was the continued discrimination against Dalits - the members of India's lower castes, formerly known as "untouchables".

"South Africa has abolished apartheid, and it is a sin to practise it in India in the 21st century," exclaimed Kobia in his address at the CISRS, referring to the plight of the Dalits in India's caste-ridden society.

Earlier on, Kobia had expressed his concern for the ostracized Dalits in his address at the Lutheran Gurukul Theological College, also attended by officials of the National Council of Churches in India, grouping together 29 Orthodox and Protestant churches.

"Oikoumene is a movement for the affirmation of life - a movement to uphold the sanctity, integrity and dignity of all God's people," he pointed out. "The ecumenical movement must therefore embrace the identity of the excluded and despised."

Though churches have been instrumental in bringing about positive changes in India, Kobia suggested that they "need to be constantly on the move, open to change, and play a creative part in shaping the world in ways that make sense to the last and the least".

[1,114 words]

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[Photo essay on Samuel Kobia's visit to India](#)
[On-site coverage of the visit by Ecumenical News International](#)