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The Mafia and an Italian Renaissance

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A park near Milan is a memorial to the victims of the mafia, and an inspiration for people fighting to make the country free of organised crime.

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TITLE PAGE ILLUSTRATION BY KARTHIKEYAN R**

There is a green woodland park near the rural town of San Vito Gaggiano, some 16 kilometres from one of the world's well-known fashion centres, the city of Milan in northwestern Italy.

There are no flowers of the type usually seen in European public spaces at this park: no startling-blue lupins, or bold yellow and orange tulips. That conventional beauty is supplanted by the tranquillity of 11.68 hectares of green meadow, of which 7.8 hectares is this forest of growing, youthful trees, now middling sized but with promise of tall heights, some 1,500 of them, mostly oak (*Quercus robur*) and the elegant European hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), both of which grew here in the original forest cover of the Po Valley.

Each of these 1,500 trees bears a plaque with a name on it. There are names like Giancarlo Siani, Graziella Campagna, Giovanni Falcone or Don Peppe Diana: all names of dead victims of the mafia. Bosco dei Cento Passi ("Woodland of 100 Steps") is thus a memorial park to Italy's anti-mafia advocates who gave their lives trying to stop the mafia's activities in Italy.

Giovanni Falcone, now just a "tree" in the park, was an Italian prosecuting judge who spent the better part of his professional career fighting the Sicilian mafia and its connections with political authority. His efforts at stemming a judicial system that allowed mafia leaders to go free resulted in him needing police bodyguards, but Sicilian mafia leader Salvatore "Totò" Riina won his battle against Falcone. On May 23, 1992, Falcone, his wife Francesca Morvillo, also a magistrate, and his police bodyguards died when their car exploded due to half a ton of explosives placed underneath the motorway from Palermo international airport to the city. The motorway now bears his name.

Less than two months later, his close childhood friend and fellow judge who replaced him, Paolo Borsellini, was killed in a car bomb explosion outside his home, while

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Graziella Campagna died for no fault of hers: she came across a compromising document in the pocket of a capo, the Italian word for a mafia affiliate.

Another tree is Giancarlo Siani, an *Il Mattino* reporter who died at the age of 26 for his work investigating the Camorra clan of the mafia. The park itself is memorialised in the name of yet another young journalist, Giuseppe Peppino Impastato, born into a mafia family in Cinisi in the province of Palermo in Sicily. Peppino became an avowed anti-mafia activist, disowned by his father and involved in revolutionary movements and peasants' struggles. In 1976, he set up Radio Aut where he exposed mafia dealings in Cinisi and Terrasini of local mafia boss Gaetano Badalamenti.

Peppino was kidnapped in 1978 at the age of 25, under orders from Badalamenti, strapped down with explosives onto a railway track at the local station, and blown up. The Impastato home was just 100 steps from the Badalamenti home, hence the "100 steps" in the park.

There are 1,500 stories in that park, stories of violence, vendetta and bloodshed that belies the peace of that green shade. There are many more that have not been written of or memorialised elsewhere.

The mafia's roots in Italy are both cultural and deep. Not necessarily seen only for its criminal activities, the mafia sprang from complex socio-economic roots since ancient times and to grow by offering protection to family, possessions and community in the face of conquering invaders, especially in Sicily.

The word *mafiosi* is more a cultural term, denoting the acceptance by a people of a quasi-political system that heavily influences local, social and political life. Those heading this system, were the "bosses".

Social status, power and control over communities and its economic interests grew from this system into one where personal gain, wealth and power took enough hold to stop all those that came in its path, first starting its modern form of criminal activities from Sicily in the 1800s.

Today there are three main sets of mafia organisations with complex sub-branches and family-based clans. The most prominent is the Sicilian mafia, the Cosa Nostra, with about 150 confederate groups located in Palermo and western Sicily while the Ndrangheta, also with 150 confederate groups come from the Calabrian region in the peninsular south as well as in the north. The third, the Camorra, is a complex cartel stemming from the Campania area around Naples, especially in Caserta.

The culture of killing and silencing dissent has pervaded deep into Italy's moral and social fabric. Murdered journalist Peppino Impastato's brother, Giovanni, testified before the Italian Antimafia Commission that local mafia boss Badalamenti was well-liked by the *carabinieri* (Italian police) as an affable, mild man facing unnecessary "troublemakers" like Impastato.

There are several reports from the Antimafia Commission of the mafia's links to politicians, to the Christian Democratic Party and to former premiers. In October 2014, 89-year-old Italian president Giorgio Napolitano was called by the Antimafia Commission to give testimony of secret deals between the State and the mafia in the 1990s.

The Antimafia Commission was set up after much delay in late 1962, and even then with hardly any cognizable outcome till as late as the early 1990s with Giovanni Falcone's murder, which roused a weak and submissive administration to toughen up. In 1996, Italy introduced its antimafia law, *Rognoni-La Torre*, better known in the country as "law number 109/96".

Rognoni-La Torre allows the seizure of immovable properties, such as lands, estates and houses of convicted mafia individuals by the State for the purposes of social and

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community benefits. The concept is not one of confiscation, where an owner's possession is expropriated even if it has been illegally held, but one where these possessions are being "liberated" from mafia power and that control, including some measure of economic power, then handed over to the community. Besides striking at mafia power and control is the symbolic significance of taking away a mafia affiliate's lands, factories, cars, or yachts.

That power seems to have kept even the Roman Catholic Church silent in a country with a deep cultural connection to its faith. In northern Italy, where Bosco dei Cento Passi is situated, no one spoke much about the mafia, leaving it to common thinking that those "gangs" belonged down south.

It was left to Giuseppe Diana—a murdered Roman Catholic priest commonly known as Don Pepe Diana and memorialised in that northern park—to be one of the first to speak out about the Church taking a stand in denouncing the mafia. He was a parish priest and writer from Casal di Principe near Aversa in the Caserta region of southern Italy, the home of the Camorra clan, also called the Casalesi clan.

Don Pepe Diana called the mafia rule a "form of terrorism". In December 1991, he wrote a now-famous letter to his parishioners titled "For the love of my people, I will not keep silent", urging his parishioners to shun the Camorra. The letter called on the Roman Catholic Church to denounce the rule of the mafia and the business practices of the Casalesi clans, describing their activities as "extortion that has left our region with no potential for development; kickbacks of 20 per cent on construction projects; illegal drug trafficking, which has created gangs of marginalised youth and unskilled workers at the beck and call of criminal organisations".

The Camorra is well-known for turning the area from Naples to Caserta in the region into a giant "garbage bin", notwithstanding the azure scenic blue of the Amalfi coastline or the fiery red of a Sorrento sunset. Finding waste disposal an easy front for generating and laundering money because no one in authority paid much attention to this sector, the Camorra began by charging industries from the north for disposing of their toxic wastes which industries found cheaper and easier than the costs of proper disposal.

The Camorra then mixed this with local garbage and dumped it on fields, ponds, sites for housing—literally anywhere. The deadly outcome of cancers and disease caused from these leachates is well-documented, while the Camorra's money is now being pumped as start-up capital for other legal businesses such as wind energy and construction projects.

Diana refused to marry individuals from this *camorristi*, threatening to stop administering Holy Communion to them. In early 1994, he testified in an investigation of ties linking the Camorra to politicians and businessmen. On March 19, 1994, he was shot in his own church while getting ready for Mass celebrating his patron saint, San Giuseppe.

Diana's influence has now seeped in slowly into the Roman Catholic Church. In 2013, Cardinal Sepe from the Vatican, addressing an international media gathering, called on parish priests to stop administering the sacraments to mafia affiliates and in March 2014, Pope Francis gave a speech urging the mafia to change their ways, donning a garment once owned by Diana.

Diana's more prominent legacy has been to spawn a collective resistance to the mafia in Caserta, home of the Casalesi clan. Enabled by the new law, *Rognoni-La Torre*, assets belonging to the Camorra have now been turned over to local communities.

The local community, also sharing the same name, Casalesi, and wanting to disown its connotations, began a network of organisations that have banded together to work on the lands: in organic farming, in a restaurant and pizzeria that uses organic produce from these lands; in designing fashionable garments; in growing and producing extra virgin olive oil, organically produced wines and several foods like pastas, dried beans, coffee and chocolates, all beautifully packaged and sold through various outlets. The outfits are

all doing well in Italy's growing recognition of healthy foods, or perhaps those untainted by the mafia.

The umbrella group is called Nuova Cooperazione Organizzata (NCO), or new cooperative business, deliberately using the same acronym NCO of the Nuova Camorra Organizzata belonging to the Camorra mafia. It has four main organisations—Agropoli, Eureka, “What Dreams May Come” (or Cooperativa Sociale Al di là dei sogni) and Un Fiore per La Vita or “A Flower for Life”, all working on seized mafia lands. There are 40 smaller co-operatives that feed into the NCO network.

All these ex-mafia properties in this southern region are now called “Don Peppe Diana's lands” in memory of the priest that gave local communities the courage to defy the mafia.

NCO promotes not just organic but an ethical supply chain, working with socially disadvantaged people from the community, those affected by the mafia, and people being rehabilitated from drugs or mental issues. The mental concept is one of recovery: from mafia trauma or reclamation of lands poisoned by toxics. A re-birth, if you will.

What Dreams May Come, for instance, is a co-operative managed by technical experts who train mental health rehabilitants for particular job skills, running a placement-cum-training centre on the confiscated property of Maiano of Sessa Arunca.

At Castel Volturno, near Casal di Principe, home of the Casalesi mafia clan, a group of African women—pulled out of prostitution—design and tailor fabrics for Italian fashion, set up on the estate of former mafia boss Michele Zazza who turned the town into one of drug dealing, prostitution and general social degradation. The tailoring by immigrant women is in defiance of an infamous massacre of African immigrants by the Casalesi outside an ethnic fashion tailoring shop, in a bid for dominance over African drug dealing gangs.

In Aversa, at the organic-food restaurant Fuori di Zucca—meaning “out of a pumpkin”, with connotations of eating wholesome foods directly from farms and run by NCO's A Flower for Life—Valerie Taglione, an agricultural producer associated with the antimafia movement, narrates his personal story of intimidation by the mafia.

Coming from a cultural background of community bonding, he accepted an amiable offer of coffee, back in 2007, from an ordinary-looking man, but realised it was the mafia when he got told over coffee that he would have to employ someone they would send to his office.

That “someone” turned out to be the brother of the local mafia boss. When he ignored them, they came back: “We are like insurance; now it's time for you to pay”, sitting for two hours outside his home, and next dumping toxic wastes, the speciality of the Camorra in this region, outside his home.

“When people tell me they are scared of what will happen if they don't comply, I tell them ‘look at me, I am still here’”, says Valerie.

“For change to happen we need to work in a new way, so we want to show that we can change this country and its society,” says Antonio Piscaceria, president of Cleprin, a chemical company that manufactures organic household products such as detergents and deodorants. Cleprin is associated with NCO.

The pioneer of this movement to bring back lands and people, and indeed of law 109/96 itself is another Roman Catholic priest, Luigi Ciotti, from Turin in the north. He founded an organisation called Libera, now spread, like the tributaries of a river, into a network of 1,200 associations, groups and schools, all dealing with recovery—mentally, economically and community-wise—from the mafia. Ciotti began by collecting signatures to push parliament to enact the law, now known as 109/96, to confiscate mafia properties and hand them back for community benefit.

Libera, headquartered with its headquarters in Rome, runs wineries and orange orchards

in Sicily on confiscated lands from the Corleone clan of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra, indigenous legumes and wheat for pasta on lands from the Neapolitan mafia near Naples, runs a teaching programme for the Italian ministry of Universities and Research, collaborates with sports groups to foster values that fight lawlessness, is involved with various groups in tackling environmental crimes, intellectual property fraud, in illegal human trafficking and in several more areas that go deep into the social psyche of a nation.

In 2011 alone, branded products from Libera Terra, a branch of Libera, grew by 38.6 per cent from 2010, involving nine countries.

Till 2012 in the southern region alone, Libera Terra received and helped set up locally over 7,000 properties (apartments, villas and commercial properties) confiscated from the mafia by law 109/96; rejuvenated over 1,500 hectares of land; signed 18 production agreements with neighbouring farmers on 160 acres of land; and employed over 150 people in enterprise with a sales turnover of over €5 million.

Figures on the total quantity of assets seized under law 109/96 vary between different Italian administrative departments, though the National Agency for the Management of Assets Confiscated from Organised Crime, newly set up in 2010, cites a total of 18,625 assets seized till 2013. Of these, 11,238 are immovable properties.

Behind the figures however, are stories of spirit and courage, earthily rooted to the soil and sprouting a renaissance of resistance to the mafia in Italy, pushed forward in the memory of those who have died in Italy's tortuous path to tackle its mafia.

The stories might seem a distant reality to those elsewhere, but organised crime is not the domain of Italy alone, though its grim but indomitable path to contain it might be a guide for others to follow.

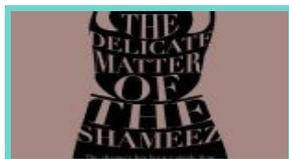
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