

QUAKER SOUTH ASIA INTEREST GROUP (QSAIG) Annual Gathering

**Westminster Quaker Meeting House 52 St. Martin's Lane, London WC2N 4EA
Saturday 26th October 2013 (10 a.m.- 4 p.m.)**

Present: Abu Siddique (Bachchu), Anne Smith Treasurer/Membership Secretary), Martin and Liz Schweiger, Stephanie Ramamurthy (until lunch time), Stephen Petter, Stuart Morton (Convenor), John Gibbs, Sheila Ragg (part of the day), Gerald Conyngham (QPSW staff), Martin Williams (QPSW staff)

Apologies: Ruth Baker, Cora and Rob Gallagher, Manan Ganguli, N Ramamurthy (Ram), Penny Robbins, Pat Saunders, John and Sue Smithson, Margaret Johnson, Maggie Waterworth

NOTES OF GATHERING

Welcome, Worship, and introductions – to one another and to the day Ram is in hospital, following a heart operation. (Ram is now back at home recuperating- Editor 20.11.2013). Pat Saunders is also in hospital (and reports a good recovery – Editor early November 2013). We remembered them during our time of worship together. This is John Gibbs (of Bournemouth Meeting) first QSAIG meeting.

“The peace networking and training work of Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) in South Asia: recent work and likely changes”: Gerald Conyngham: Programme Manager, QPSW

Gerald distributed a paper about the history and present situation of the South Asia Peace Alliance (SAPA). See Appendix One of these notes

Gerald, as a Quaker with a concern for peace, justice and the environment, first encountered QPSW work in South Asia in 2007 when he attended, in a voluntary capacity, the Ekta Parishad Janadesh march for livelihood rights. He took over the work from Stuart Morton in the later part of 2011.

The South Asia Peace Alliance (SAPA) has three important needs:

- a. Strong leadership in the region
- b. A well resourced secretariat based in the region
- c. Firm commitment within each of the constituent countries.

All three of these aspects have been difficult to secure, mainly because those involved have had substantial loyalties to the work within their own countries and organisations/movements. QPSW will receive a report of a one week training programme to be held in Pakistan in early December at which David Mowat, Clerk of the QPSW Overseas Peacebuilding Group will co-lead the training with a South Asia Partnership- Pakistan (SAP-PK) female staff member, Zainab Bedawi, who had attended the SAPA training in Sri Lanka in 2008 and the Core Group meeting in Nepal in 2010. David will travel on to Nepal and during his visit will hope to meet Shobha Gautam, the key SAPA Core Group

member there. QPSW Central Committee will make a decision in the first part of next year about future South Asia work.

"Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) Peace-building Work in Nagaland - an Overview" Martin Williams, the QPSW Naga Conciliation Group Coordinator.

QPSW has supported a group of volunteers, called the Naga Conciliation Group, who are working for peace in the strife-ridden state of Nagaland, in North-East India, for twelve years. The aim of the group is "To support and enable key groups and individuals involved in the conflict relating to the Naga people to deal with their conflicts in the region without recourse to violence". Martin, with the help of a power point technology, summarised the conflict – its history, main actors, present challenges, and near future possibilities. Nagaland is approximately 6,400 sq miles (about the size of Wales); 97% of the Naga people are Baptist, "Nagalim" is the larger area in which Naga people live (this includes Nagas in other adjacent states and in Burma). The Nagas had hoped to gain independence on the departure of the British colonial power in 1948 but this did not happen. The Naga national movement fought the Indian Government and splits in the national movement occurred. A cease fire with the most militarised Naga Group made a ceasefire agreement with the GoI in 1997 and negotiations have continued. Most of the deaths inside amongst Naga people since 1997 as a result of the conflict have been between the armed groups. The Naga Forum for Reconciliation (FNR), led by the Rev Dr. Wati Aier, is the civil society group that has worked closely with QPSW since its launch in February 2008. The senior leaders of the militant groups (now four groups with one situated mainly in Burma) are elderly. In the Naga culture "elders" are held in great respect. Much of the recent direct work of QPSW has taken place in Thailand (Chiang Mai) – 18 meetings with leaders of the armed groups have happened there with QPSW and the FNR facilitating the meetings. Deaths as a result of the conflict reduced considerably as a result of these many meetings and the courageous, inspirational work of the FNR in Nagaland.

The Naga representatives are no longer pressing for the same high degree of "sovereignty" that they once demanded. In January 2013 the GoI announced that a settlement with the Naga representatives was "imminent" but no final agreement has been signed and it seems likely that the Congress led Government of India will lose next year's elections, with the Hindu party, the BJP, taking power. What effect this will have on negotiations remains to be seen.

The people in Nagaland state pay no direct taxes to the Indian Government. In October 2013 the Naga people are gaining increased confidence in their challenge of the numerous "taxes" placed upon them by the armed groups. The voice of the Action Against Unabated Taxation (ACAUT) and the church leadership is taking a more prominent role in bringing pressure for peace.

There is a need for capacity building amongst the Naga people regarding the "nuts and bolts of democratic government" so that a peaceful transition from militant group to political party can be established.

Open Forum- sharing of our South Asia related work and concerns:

We first remembered those who were unable to be with us and mentioned their work.

The draft newsletter - printed copies available at the meeting - had brought news and thoughts from Rob Gallagher (at present in Bangladesh), Cora Gallagher (on a recent visit to Bangladesh looking at mental health situation in a rural area), Gono Unnayan Prochesta (its annual 2012 report and its recent workshop on road safety), Subhash Kattel on the challenges of building a more just and peaceful society in Nepal, "The Scholarship for School Kids" programme in Myanmar supported by Erica Cadbury and John McConnell and others, an article on the real meaning of development by Manan Ganguli (who was in India at present).

Stuart Morton had also been in contact with **Maggie Waterworth who had been invited again to India, this time by the British Council, beginning in West Bengal**, to involve in teacher training. Stuart had also spoken on the phone with Geoffrey Carnall whose eyesight is deteriorating and who is aware that there are unsold copies of his biography of Horace Alexander, the Quaker who was for many decades (1920s onwards) a great friend to India. Some of these are held by the author, and by Philippa Gregory, one of Geoffrey's former students, who was substantially involved in the publishing of the book. If you would like to order a copy please contact Geoffrey through Stuart Morton.

Abu Siddique (Bachchu): aware of the early influence of Quakers in East Pakistan in the early 1950s, particularly in helping to introduce the work camp method and volunteering. Bachchu and Ataur Rahman had both been helped at a later date by this and the influence of Service Civil International in their lives was very great indeed. Bachchu also remembered with gratitude the early pioneering Inter Faith work of Quakers that probably had a very positive influence on one of Bangladesh's interfaith thinkers.

Sangam School - Stephen Petter reports: through Eleanor Nesbitt, Stephen had been encouraged to visit Sangam school, about 50 miles outside Delhi. This is a school for disadvantaged children. He has visited it regularly. Quakers help to fund it. The bequest which supported the school's development is now going down significantly. Some Quakers in Britain give £6 per month to the school. While local self reliance is being encouraged to fund such a school from local resources, this will be very difficult to achieve. Any reading this newsletter who would like to give a regular or one-off donation should contact Stephen direct (or through Stuart Morton).

Road Safety in Bangladesh – report by Liz and Martin Schweiger: Rob Gallagher and his daughter, Megan, had stayed with Martin and Liz recently. During this visit Martin had spoken about his (Martin's) 40 year concern for the appalling death and injuries on the roads of Bangladesh; deaths in double figures weekly for many years. Martin will be in communication with Gono Unnayan Prochesta (GUP- People's Development Efforts) to see how some of the many good ideas at the workshop might be developed. Liz responded to questions about her long involvement with the **Sylhet Bangladeshi community in Leeds** where she retired from her work as a school nurse in July. She noted that some families are concerned about their young men being drawn into anti-social behavior. Some are involved in the restaurant trade and will arrive home late from work. The boundaries around appropriate behavior are weakening. Bachchu

noted that those children brought up in families whose parents had come from Bangladesh and had been born there, are not so likely to see education as a priority whereas other families encourage education. Liz noted that the mothers who did not speak English are more isolated and may lose the constant support of fathers who work away from home in other parts of the UK. (The fathers may be regularly absent for a fortnight). Liz also noted that families involved in arranged marriages that brought cousins together were more likely to have metabolic disorders. She had raised this issue in a discreet way 15 years ago with a particular family and six months ago the grandmother of that family referred back to Liz's comment when pointing out the healthy nature of her five grandchildren.

John Gibbs' main experience of the is from holidays in Thailand. He is considering the possibility of travelling to India, about which he has no direct experience.

Martin Williams: had visited the Karen refugee camps in Thailand. They had fled from Burma. Many had been converted to Christianity, a much greater proportion within the camps are Christian than within the wider Karen community in Burma. QPSW had been asked whether they might involve. He noted that the Peace Industry is burgeoning in Burma- the Japanese and the Norwegians are particularly active and International Non Government Organisations (INGOs) are seeking real estate in Yangon (Rangoon) where land is amongst the most expensive in the world.

The QSAIG website: this has been developed in the past year by Martin Schweiger. We agreed to check on the availability of the QSAIG website directly from the BYM website. This includes the Email link through to convenor, Stuart Morton. Gerald Conyngham (QPSW) will speak with Quaker Communications Dept. about this. We hope to develop a "projects" section on the website. Those involved in projects in the region are encouraged to write a maximum of one page of A4 about their project for Martin to place on the website if he agrees the content. Ideally, a contact Email to the person linked to the project should be noted.

Ekta Parishad (Unity Forum) in India. Stuart Morton has remained in contact with its leader, Rajagopal P.V., and met Ramesh Sharma, who leads policy matters in Ekta Parishad, in Friends House when he visited QPSW, Action Village India and Christian Aid earlier in the year. Plans had been well developed for a visit by Rajagopal to Britain (London and Birmingham) December 9-12 but his visa application was rejected, probably because of technical incompetence. It is hoped that he may be able to visit again early in 2014.

Future work and ideas:

In addition to the website noted above we identified at least three **categories of Quakers in Britain linked to South Asia**, and that there may be some overlap between "b" and "c":

- a. Those working as staff or committee members of QPSW - including QPSW Central Committee, Overseas Peacebuilding Group, 30 (?) maximum

- b. Those in QSAIG – 15 actively involved and/or in contact,
- c. 20+ others on a mailing list. Those with links to the region who are rarely, or not at all, presently involved in “a” or “b”. It is possible that this group is larger than either of the other groups.

There is also:

- d. Others interested are those in the South Asia region who are aware of QSAIG through its members and who help inform QSAIG of peace and justice issues in the region.

Martin Williams focused on **young people**. Some young people have significant experiences of work/travel in the South Asia region. They may be interested to learn of contacts in the region prior to those visits. Some young people of today may become tomorrow's Quakers. The promotion of our website may play a part in this. **Britain Yearly Meeting** at Bath (August 2-9, 2014): Liz and Martin Schweiger are willing to person a stall. We agreed that we would produce a Newsletter in time for BYM.

QSAIG website: website links to projects in the region e.g. “Peace Direct”, which has good Quaker links, has many projects in the region. Might QPSW work in the region also be linked in an easily accessible way to the QSAIG website?