

Notes on Meeting of Quaker South Asia Interest Group

Venue: Selly Oak Meeting House, Birmingham

Date: October 24th 2015

Present: Andrew and Ann Noel Clark, Gerald Conyngham, Cora and Rob Gallagher, Stephen Petter, Barbara Panvel, Penny Robbins, Pat Saunders, Anne Smith (Treasurer & Membership Secretary), Fran Wilde, Stuart Morton (QSAIG convenor)
Speakers: Rianne C ten Veen and Andrew Clark

Welcome/Introductions

Stuart Morton welcomed the participants and each person present introduced themselves. We were sorry that Liz and Martin Schweiger were not able to be with us and sent our best wishes and hopes to Martin for a good recovery from his heart attack.

Ecological Perspectives on Britain and South Asia

Rianne C ten Veen gave us a fascinating account of developments in South Asia with a special emphasis on an Islamic perspective on ecology. She said that environmental issues had been key to her becoming a Muslim. The Koran takes these issues very seriously; for instance, there are chapters named after animals and we are expected to be guardians of creation, bearing in mind as well our responsibility to future generations. The more gifts one has, the more that is expected.

Moving on to South Asia, she pointed out that Bangladesh is feeling the effects of climate change although its people have not been a major cause of it, and rising sea levels could mean that the Maldivian Islands will be underwater at some point in the future. It was interesting to note that underdeveloped areas had suffered less from the effects of the 2004 tsunami than areas developed for tourism, since mangrove swamps had stopped the waves. In measuring loss caused by disasters, higher weighting is given to Europeans and Americans than South Asians.

Rianne gave some interesting examples of how faith can be used to encourage good practice in combating climate change.

She felt that Quakers had an important role to play in bringing moral issues to the table and told us about an interfaith group that is planning to march from Rome to Paris to focus on the moral dimension of climate change.

The Gulf states see it as religious merit that they have so much oil but other Muslims think it is given in trust and those who have it should be accountable for its proper use.

She also touched on quality of life measures as being useful and cited Bhutan where they had tried to do this.

Open Forum

Fran Wilde and Stuart Morton spoke about **Ekta Parishad** and the plans for a big march for livelihood rights in 2020. There will be a march from Delhi to Geneva and also marches of solidarity in different countries round the world.

Rajagopal, the Ekta Parishad founding President gave a talk in London and was also interviewed; it is hoped that this interview will be appearing in a forthcoming edition of "The Friend" (In mid January, 2016 yet to be published). Rajagopal received the Indira Gandhi award from the Congress party; he is the 29th recipient of this award.

The Land Resettlement Act in India is being reconstituted (after the Government delayed it) but the economic space is more limited now and there is more of a command economy. Organisations receiving foreign aid have to re-register. It is hard to pursue nonviolence when working and living amongst competing violences which include that of the Naxalites, big business and the Army. However, Rajagopal sees these challenges as opportunities that need to be made use of.

Rajagopal is keen to maintain links with Quakers especially in the run up to the big march in 2020.

Rob Gallagher gave an up to date perspective **about events in Bangladesh**. Sadly, there has been an increase in violence and 2 foreigners were killed recently and 40 Japanese volunteers are leaving the country.

Stephen Petter spoke about the **Sangam School near Delhi** in India with which he is involved. The village council support the school which is subsidized to enable them to keep the fees low, i.e. £5 a month. The school has been affected by the restrictions on overseas funding. The main base for Friends of the school is in Coventry and teachers have been sent from the UK to carry out training in Sangam School..

Pat Saunders spoke about her ongoing work **documenting historical maps of Bangladesh relating to river channels**.

Local policy makers had not known about these maps which will

be very useful in looking at weather patterns and how to make the best use of water supplies.

Quaker work in N.E.India: As a member of the Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) group working on a conflict in N.E. India, Andrew Clark gave an account of the work from information already in the public sphere.

Conclusion to the day

Overall people felt it had been a useful day and a wide range of issues to do with South Asia had been discussed. Willemina Morton was thanked for providing South Asian and other food, supplemented by food from a local South Asian takeaway. The QSAIG AGM followed.

(with thanks to Gerald Conyngham who took notes of all of the above and shared the first draft with the QSAIG convenor who made some alterations. The convenor consulted with Andrew Clark on the Naga section and it was agreed that this part would not be included on the QSAIG website).