

QUAKER SOUTH ASIA INTEREST GROUP (QSAIG)

NEWSLETTER – May 2019

<http://www.qsaig.co.uk/>

About QSAIG

QSAIG is a Quaker Recognised Body affiliated to the Britain Yearly Meeting. We are a network, mainly of Quakers, with personal or professional links to people or projects in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan and neighbouring states. We also work with and learn from people from these countries who now reside in the UK. Our network has been active for over 18 years. We meet annually in London, Leeds or Birmingham and have a newsletter at least once a year.

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1. Sri Lanka

Statement from Gilda Levy, Women's Interfaith Network *(from the QSAIG website)*

“We would like to express our deepest and sincerest sympathy and condolences to the people of Sri Lanka and all those who have suffered such an appalling and tragic loss in the deaths and serious injuries of their loved ones in recent attacks in Colombo.

Whatever belief system one adheres to nothing can ever justify the dogma of violence and murder. We believe that it is our duty as human beings and citizens of civilised societies to dismantle stereotypes, to build understanding and trust, to replace ignorance with knowledge and prejudice with friendship.

The only way forward towards global peace and compassion is to commit ourselves to help eradicate violent extremism from our midst from all aspects of the social spectrum.

Our hearts and prayers go to all the victims and their families in the recent attacks, who will be in our thoughts.”

WIN (<http://www.wominet.org.uk/>) is a charity founded in 2003 by Lady Gilda Levy and Pinky Lilani CBE, DL as a result of the 9/11 bombings. It brings together women from all walks of life from different ethnic, religious and non-religious backgrounds. It supports them in joining and creating local groups that undertake a diverse range of activities. WIN emphasises the vital role that women have to encourage understanding and create safe spaces for dialogue.

Sri Lanka’s War, 10 years on: Finding Father Francis

From a report on the BBC World News website, 18th May 2019
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-48300279>

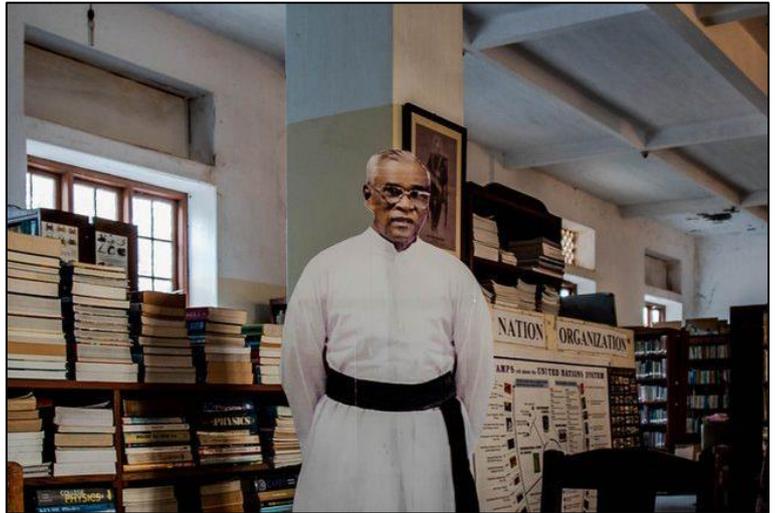
It's been 10 years since the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka. For thousands of people, missing family members and friends are a constant reminder of the trauma of the conflict. This is the story of Father Francis.

On 18 May 2009, a brutal conflict which lasted almost three decades came to an end. It's estimated that at least 100,000 people lost their lives. Many thousands are still missing.

The war was fought along ethnic lines. A desire for an independent state amongst parts of the Tamil minority gave rise to an armed separatist rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, also known as the Tamil Tigers. They took on the Sri Lankan military and both sides stand accused of committing atrocities against the civilian population.

On the final day of the conflict, a Catholic Tamil priest led and negotiated the surrender of at least 360 people, including Tamil Tigers and children as young as two. All of them boarded military buses - never to be seen again.

Father Francis was an ardent supporter of Tamil independence but he never picked up arms. Words were his only weapon. Eight days before the war ended, he wrote a desperate three-page letter to the Vatican pleading for help and expressing a sense of abandonment. It was written in a bunker, now a memorial of concrete blood-stained hands to commemorate the Tamil dead. The BBC contacted the Vatican for comment but is yet to receive a response.



Excerpts from Fr. Francis's open letter:

10 May 2009

To His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

The Sri Lankan Government is waging the war to annihilate the Tamil nation, it is a genocidal war. The cries of woes and agony of the babies and children, the women and the elderly, fill the air that was polluted by poisonous and unhealthy gases.

It is unfortunate that the Church in Sri Lanka does not have the wisdom and guts to air her views forcefully and unequivocally regarding the ongoing war.

I am not unaware that this letter would arouse the wrath of the Sri Lankan government, which will resort to the revenge by killing me. Imploring your holiness Blessings,

Rev Fr. G.A Francis Joseph

Shortly after writing his letter, and with the Tigers all but defeated, Father Francis walked alongside thousands of Tamil men, women and children over Vattuvagal bridge in the north-east of the country from rebel-held land to government-controlled territory. Witnesses say the waters were teeming with dead bodies and blood.

To this day, thousands of people - including friends and former colleagues of Father Francis - regularly take to the streets of northern Sri Lanka to demand answers about the plight of the missing.

Many of the protesters were among 300,000 Tamils who were squeezed into a narrow coastal strip in the final phase of the war. The UN says up to 40,000 of those people died in the final months and countless others were seriously injured. However, the Sri Lankan government disputes that - it has previously put the death toll at less than a quarter of the UN's figure. The military insists that those who surrendered were not killed. It does not comment on individual cases.

Moses Arulanandan, now in his 90s, is a close cousin of Father Francis. Haunted by the priest's

disappearance, he's urged a local court to help and has petitioned the United Nations, both without success.



"All we could do is worry about him and cry," he said. "We were very close. He was like my biological brother... He was the only son to his parents and I'm the one who used to help his mother as she was living alone while Francis was living at the college."

Father Francis first came to St Patrick's college in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, as a schoolboy. After being ordained as a Catholic priest, he returned to the campus as an English teacher and later became school principal. Most of his life was spent between classrooms, the college chapel, and the oval where he cheered on the school cricket team.

Former students say that he knew everyone at the school by name. Today, his legacy looms large and a cardboard cut-out of him watches over students in the school library.

"Every day I pray to God and Mary, to show me his whereabouts, to inform me of his status," cries Mr Arulanandan, his hands raised in prayer.

While Father Francis was highly critical of government forces, he remained silent about the atrocities committed by the rebels.

In their mission to create a separate Tamil state, known as Eelam, the Tigers employed brutal tactics, including targeted assassinations, mass killings and the use of both male and female suicide bombers. Between 2002 and 2007 the Tigers are believed to have forcibly recruited at least 6,000 children, and more than 1,300 remain unaccounted for, according to the UN.

In the week leading up to the final surrender, fighters and civilians alike awaited their fate at an army checkpoint in a large field.

Jayakumari Krishnakumar was married to a prominent member of the Tamil Tigers who boarded the bus with Father Francis. She said the priest wrote a list of all those who surrendered.



Jayakumari Krishnakumar

"My husband boarded the bus first, then many others, and finally Father Francis. Father Francis believed the army would respect the white robe," she recalled. "He seemed scared but believed he'd be OK. And people believed that if they went with him they'd be safe."

"This particular event is the single largest number of people who have been subject to enforced disappearances at the hands of the Sri Lankan army," said Yasmin Sooka, a former member of the UN panel of experts on Sri Lanka.

The family members of the missing say they have not been able to find any justice through the courts. Ms Sooka says the state has failed the missing people. "Once they had surrendered, they were entitled to the protection normally afforded under humanitarian law: to be treated with respect and certainly that you remain with your life intact."

The military denies that they could have been victims of a war crime. "People who have surrendered to the army have not been killed - that is for sure," said spokesman Brigadier Sumith Atapattu. He added that no prisoners were being held today. "Foreign delegates including the UN have come and checked our camps. There is no underground detention camps in Sri Lanka... People who've surrendered or have been captured for terrorist thinking have been accounted for."

But where is Father Francis? After years of international pressure the government set up an Office on Missing Persons in 2017. It was given the enormous task of finding thousands of people unaccounted for. So far not a single person has been found. But the office insists it is trying.

For the families of those that disappeared, there are heartache and hope in equal measure. The wives of the missing men still wear red bindis on their foreheads, signifying their married status. Children are still waiting for their parents to come home - and no one has lost faith in finding Father Francis, or at least learning his true fate. "The truth will come out one day," said Mr Arulanandan.



2. Nepal – news from Subhash Chandhra

On 10th January 2019 Subhash wrote:

“I would like to share this recent news about 'Creating Cultures of Peace' Training in Nepal. I am on the way to Indonesia for the Sixth Friends Peace Teams' international peace training – creating cultures of peace. This time unlike before, I have chosen mostly to be a participant and experience and learn. It is all about practicing. (On this occasion) I am not bringing anyone from Nepal either as I have ended up interpreting and facilitating in the past.

The last series of trainings in November in Nepal have opened up a new horizon of possibilities. All wanted to continue the practice, bring workshops to their groups and communities, and many wanted to recommend for their family members. Even amazing is that the son of the leader of the Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC-<http://www.csrcnepal.org/>) also participated. They now want to include this experience as a key approach to land rights movement in Nepal. They also want to spread the training at the community level. That means a lot of workshops in this and coming years.

In addition, there are at least five different locations around Nepal where ex-participants want to organize workshops and I am willing to give time and attention for these citizen leaders for peace to grow local practice and facilitator teams. I am delighted with all this development!”

Stuart Morton adds.....

Subhash Chandra remains in close connection with Willemina and myself. We first met at a Quaker Peace & Social Witness/Ekta Parishad nonviolence training in India in 2004 and Subhash has been contributing to QSAIG meetings and the Newsletter on a regular basis.

We have known him as Subhash Chandra Kattel; in January 2019 he informed us that he now holds back his family name “Kattel” as it also indicates the caste to which he belongs, which is the case with most family names in Nepal. In this way he is demonstrating one way of rejecting the caste system.

If you are inspired by their work, as I am, one way of donating would be to see the website: <https://friendspeaceteams.org/donate/>

More News from Nepal:

Creating Cultures of Peace

Subhash works closely with Friends Peace Teams in Asia West Pacific (FPT-AWP – <https://friendspeaceteams.org/awp/>). They regularly meet, share and learn how to practice cultures of peace in our private and public life. Currently, they meet twice a month for an online

training for facilitators, with the aim of developing an on-line course of 'Creating Cultures of Peace' training. This training mainly covers empowerment, trauma resiliency, freedom from oppression and liberation, and is an AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project) adaptation course.

Over seven days in November 2018 two trainings were organized in Nepal. CSRC (Community Self Reliance Centre) and National Land Rights Forum were among the hosts, and the core leadership of these two organizations were among the participants. Peace workers from various parts of the country also participated. We hope to host one international and one national such training in Nepal this year. FPT-AWP has been organizing similar international training for peace for the past five years in Indonesia.

Jai Jagat 2020 team in Nepal

The Jai Jagat 2020 team led by Mr. P.V. Rajagopal visited Nepal for sharing and consultation with Nepali friends to prepare the Jai Jagat campaign. Subhash was able to participate for one day before attending the Creating Cultures of Peace training. He met long-time friends from India and discussed about South Asia Peace Alliance (SAPA) with Bijay Bharatiya, Ganga Gurung and Sarad Neupane, among others.

Developing resources in local language

For many years Subhash has been involved in developing reading and reference resources about peace, nonviolence and justice. He is mainly translating such materials from English to Nepali, including most of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) manuals, and a handbook for nonviolent campaign published by War Resisters' International (WRI).

Currently, he is translating the 'Creating Cultures of Peace' book and 'Power of Goodness' stories into Nepali language, and aims to develop an online resource in Nepali language fully dedicated to peace and nonviolence.

3. News from India

Letter from Kolkata

Maggie Waterworth, 7th May 2019

Yesterday was Rabindranath Tagore's 175th Birthday. The Indian Museum had a musical morning playing some of his compositions. The Rabindranath Bharati University, North Kolkata, opened a new wing in their museum to display a newly acquired painting by the maestro, not seen before. Thousands streamed in. The temperature reached 39 degrees. It was unbearable and not worth the journey. The Indian Museum was cool, however the music played lacked depth or sympathy with Tagore's feelings – more of a functional exercise than a reflective one.

These were the major cultural events in a Kolkata gearing itself up to the 7th and final stage of the national elections results to be declared on 23rd May.

Coming back from the museum a group of young children had gathered outside their homes and were singing Tagore songs. What a contrast to the earlier functions. The songs were chosen by the children and the programme impromptu. Their lovely singing floating into the houses bringing out an audience perched on balconies or sitting by open doors. I think Tagore would have joined the street party.

Just recently I have come across his ideas for teaching English as a foreign language. So simple and straightforward. Completely in tune with how Bengali children learn by actions, deeds and a little drama. He devised his methods sitting under a tree in Shantiniketan and talking to his class about what they could see and hear. He gave them little tasks using commands in English like sit down, stand up, go and fetch the water. Actions and words together involving the children in useful activities that they needed to do. He did not waste a minute of their time by needless repetitive book exercises.

His classes were full of busy children listening to the next challenge, correcting each other and completing his tasks, and the ones he invited them to share. Then talking about what they had heard, done and seen. Exciting conversations followed.

Having spent months, years even, trying to redraft the Bengali government schools textbooks, written by 'experts' to teach useful aspects of English, Tagore's methods seem to surpass all others. Faced with the daunting task of training scores of teachers in classroom methodology through activity-based lessons, Tagore's methods will fit the bill in the Primary Classes. Once the summer holidays are over and election results declared, schools will open again on the 30th June, or thereabouts

The now established two periods a week in Kolkata's primary schools for what is termed spoken English, all 66 schools can base their curriculum on Tagore's methods. The results measured by oral comprehension conversations and presentations and performances will follow.

Recently we held a Drama Festival, in Jharkhali, Sundarbans. Five schools participated and 125 children were actors, designers, script writers and stage hands. 700+ children were in the audience cheering and egging on their own school. There was a great deal of audience

interaction and talking, as many children did not fully appreciate that the playlets were in English, and they needed help to understand the dialogue. The whole experience was summed up by the Head of the local Higher Secondary School.

“In 20 years of my work in schools I have never seen or heard Bengali children take part in a festival like this where the total dialogue, including songs and poems was in English language. Not a single actor had to read from a script.”

This morning we had discussions with an NGO based in Kolkata that promotes environmental awareness programmes for school children. Two of the plays in the Festival were about crocodiles and tigers. The NGO, called SHER,¹ is interested in making a film of the Festival to use as part of their awareness campaign on tiger preservation and conservation.

Once the film has been made and circulated, they will open up a new Environmental Resources and Community Centre in Sundarbans. We have been asked to select ten Class 11 students from seven schools to participate in short courses to study, and then receive a diploma in environmental issues and conservation. This work will start after the monsoon as the Sundarbans will not be accessible till then.

By that time India will have a new government and hopefully all the current political upheavals will have settled down. At present the state of West Bengal is in turmoil due to infighting with various political parties acting against each other. They often erupt into violent and unpleasant behaviour. It is not only verbal onslaughts but aggressive physical attacks, as people go to vote.

Unfortunately, the main issue underlying the aggressive nature of the campaigning process is the division between Hindu fundamentalism and the growing number of Muslims now residing in West Bengal. Thousands of Rohingya people were offered sanctuary by the West Bengal Government. The BJP party, in power at present, is critical, saying these people can now vote for Trinamol, who now run the West Bengal State Government, and not BJP or any other party. In other words a 'rigged result'

No conflict resolution in place and a long way from Tagore's peaceful and considerate approach to teaching, training and engaging with people. He worked for the benefit of whole communities whether it be in rural or urban areas. However, he was not a political person.

The people I have the privilege of working with are on the whole young and enthusiastic, wanting the best for their futures and the future of their country. Hopefully they can be inspired by Tagore. He is still revered. He can still appeal to the people as a guide and mentor. His legacy lives on especially with teachers.

The uncertainty of the election results may lead to more conflict. Many teachers are at present electoral officers in remote areas surrounded by police and army personnel. They have to spend a few weeks setting up and manning the Voting Centres and are often fearful of their health and welfare in unknown territory. I look forward to hearing that they are safe and well and back with their families as soon as possible ready to start the new term. We keep in touch.

¹ SHER = Society for Heritage and Ecological Researches, <http://www.sherindia.com/>

Migrant Child Labour in India's Brick Kilns

Jon Ellis, December 2018

Jon is a retired primary school teacher from Southampton, UK who has worked in child education in W. Bengal for 25 years. With the help of Sr Cyril at Loreto School Sealdah, Kolkata, Jon initiated the brickfield schools programme of Loreto, which runs 60 open air schools at brick kilns near Kolkata. Jon is married to a Bengali and is an Overseas Citizen of India. He lives almost half of each year in Kolkata.

With friends in the Czech Republic and Norway, Jon organized the crowd-fund appeal and hopes to support the paid staff of the Child-Labour-Free Bricks campaign for years to come. The campaign is funded for about 9 months until August 2019. An annual income of at least UK£ 6,000 a year thereafter will give it long-term viability and campaigning power.

The campaign is hosted for financial purposes by a small local NGO (Howrah Danesh Sheik Lane Navaday Seva Niketan, or NSN for short) which takes very little for management and accounting costs. Its secretary is Bimal Paul.

Staff employed by the campaign work with their phones and laptops in virtual offices – their own homes, trains, tea stalls and brick kilns. Jon's flat in central Kolkata serves as a meeting point when necessary.

The website <https://www.brickkilnnews.com/> features news items covering the brick industries of India and the rest of South Asia – Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Jon writes: *"We are in this work for as long as necessary. We are optimistic that useful gains can be won for the children of the brick kilns in the next few years. Please support us."*

Jon Ellis: jonpardeshi@yahoo.co.in Kolkata and Lymington, Hampshire, UK

The Present Situation:

In India today the largest single group of children engaged in labour and out of school are those migrants who leave their homes every year to spend 6–8 months in brick kilns. They probably number around 1 million.

Child labour is illegal in India. School attendance up to 14 years is compulsory. But these are laws which India chooses not to enforce – neither the state nor society – in its brick kilns.

Who are these brick kiln migrant children? Where do they come from? Why? What do they do?

Several states of eastern/central India contain the country's main hunger belts: for example Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Orissa, and parts of neighbouring states. These are places where many of the poor cannot survive for 12 months a year without migration. Rainfall is

erratic and often inadequate, giving at best one crop a year and little work to labourers. Most of the poor are landless or have too little land for subsistence. Caste relations in the countryside are still semi-feudal in many places. The government administration in these regions typically functions badly, denying the poor access to schemes and benefits they should enjoy. Government schools often function so poorly that school attendance may be of marginal benefit to children of the poor.

Every year at the end of the monsoon season, and after the harvest of whatever crop was planted, several million people migrate out of these areas to work as labourers in brick kilns, construction sites, and any other available seasonal work. Brick kilns are found scattered all over India, but large concentrations are clustered around the main cities and wherever urbanization and industrialization are going on. To transport building bricks is expensive so they are made as close to the market as possible. Kolkata, capital of W Bengal, is surrounded by several hundred working kilns. Delhi and Mumbai also, and all the cities of north and west India, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Chennai in the south.

The kilns close during the monsoon season when making, drying and firing bricks in the open air becomes impossible. Most kilns run from November – May/June. Migrant workers are usually supplied by labour contractors who recruit large groups comprising many families from the same village or locality. An advance is paid to heads of families, so an element of bonded labour is built into the system. Families get a weekly allowance from the kiln owner, and the balance of their wages is held on account in the owner's books until the end of the season when workers get the balance, minus the advance and deductions for food and fuel, if they are lucky. Few adult workers are literate and fully numerate. Owners always are.

Brick kiln owners prefer migrant workers to locals. Locals may form unions, engage in politics, and are better organized because they are in their own place with local support networks. Migrants come to maximize their income and then leave, seldom returning to the same kiln next year. They lack local support networks, are rarely unionized and are very much under the control of the owner.

Note that society, politicians and the administration in the vicinity of the kilns typically have no interest in the fate of the migrant workers because they have no votes in this locality and are therefore not an interest group whose needs must be considered.

Typically a family group travelling several hundred miles to a kiln comprises two parents, several children (babies to teenagers), possibly grandparents, and maybe other branches of the same family. In an average brick kiln there may be 150 adult workers, and 40-50 children below 14 years. The family's accommodation at the kiln is usually a single room about 3 x 2.5m in a terrace of low, roughly-built dwellings. A person must stoop to enter the door. There is no furniture and no window. Everyone sleeps on mats on the earth floor. Cooking is done on a clay stove on the ground outside each door. The fuel is wood, cow dung, straw, twigs. Water comes from a hand-pumped tube-well on the site. Bathing is at the pump or in a nearby pond or river. Normally each room now has an electric light; it may also have a socket. If a toilet was provided it is possibly never cleaned and therefore not in use.

Are children forced to work? Well, the circumstances lead all able-bodied family members to

contribute to the family's earnings. Most children work to support the family output of bricks from the age of about 8 years. Children expect to contribute their labour, for self-respect and for economic benefit. Some work is relatively light – bringing sand to the adults so the clay does not stick in the mould, turning bricks to dry on the ground. Other children, particularly girls from about 10 years upward, are employed directly by the owners for carrying headloads of bricks from stacks into the kiln and out again after firing. These headloads range up to 30kgs. The load is carried hundreds of times a day. Damage is undoubtedly caused to the girls' bodies.

A brick kiln owner will say that if he prevents children from working labourers will not remain long at his kiln. They will go to another kiln where children's labour is permitted. Owners, on an individual basis, are partly correct in their assertion. But owners belong to associations and have contact with the local government machinery which is supposed to regulate the kilns. There is a loose coincidence of self-interest, neglect, bribe-taking to ignore infringements, and the wish of migrant workers to maximize their income.

Children do not come to the kilns with birth certificates; indeed most do not have them because they are born in shacks rather than hospitals and nursing homes. The age of children cannot therefore be verified in most cases.

At the vast majority of kilns there is no provision of education for the children. The language of children is usually different from that of the local primary school if there is one and if the master would enrol short term migrant children. Rare! There is therefore nothing to take children away from work by offering an alternative for at least part of the day. In a few places, NGOs with funds run open-air schools or 'centres' for children for a few hours daily. For example, in the 4 districts surrounding Kolkata, NGOs have such schools/centres at about 70 kilns (out of 500+). Their existence is precarious because of funding issues. Even where a school runs for three hours daily most enrolled children above 10 years cheerfully agree that they work at other times.

What is to be done?

The excellent laws India has made concerning child labour and school attendance need to be extended to migrant children in brick kilns. At present they are not, though there are some positive indicators:

- 1) Few brick kiln owners are nowadays unwilling to host a school for their migrant children if someone else will organize and pay for it.
- 2) Migrant children are increasingly likely to be enrolled in primary schools during the months when they are at home in their native villages. They may learn little, but at least they are enrolled and benefitting from the midday meal provided. We estimate that 50% of 6–14 years migrant children now have some school experience.
- 3) It is likely that mechanization of brick kiln work, and possible substitution of other materials such as fly ash bricks for clay bricks, will diminish demand for migrant labour in the kilns in future years, leading to reduced child migration.

- 4) India is no longer a very poor country. It is almost a middle-income country, which chooses to maintain an extreme and increasing income gap between the elite and the bottom 50%. It has the resources to end child labour and extreme poverty, if it chooses to do so.

However, there are also some negative factors:

- 1) Climate change is impacting the poor and agriculture-dependent classes in the already poor states from which the brick kiln migrants come. If work in kilns disappears there is no certainty that other types of work will become available. The precarious economic condition of brick kiln communities may worsen.
- 2) Right-wing political forces espousing a pro-big-business, semi-fascist, 'Hindutva' ideology are dominant in many of the source areas of brick kiln labour. It remains to be seen whether the poor comprising low castes and 'tribals' can assert their identity and successfully obtain the facilities, such as decent education and welfare schemes, to survive the coming changes and improve their position.

This writer and his colleagues believe that a sustained, flexible and creative campaign is needed to advance the interests of migrant brick kiln children. The campaign must not ignore the needs of adult workers to be organized and get better pay and conditions. Nor must it ignore the need of children at brick kilns to receive some kind of education by whatever means possible, and ultimately the quality education they need to transform their world. In seeking to end child labour in the brick industry of India we seek also gains in the material position of the migrating communities.

What has happened so far?

A successful 'Crowd Funding' appeal in September/October 2018 (which continues) raised enough money to employ a person in Kolkata, West Bengal as 'Advocate for Migrant Children in Brick Kilns'. Rahul Das is now actively working in this post. For the next six months our priorities are:

- 1) To research and collect information about the brick industry in India.
- 2) To contact other persons and NGOs active in this field, to share information and campaign jointly.
- 3) To identify brick kiln owners who are willing to exclude child labour at their kilns, encourage them and help to identify a market in Kolkata for guaranteed 'child-labour-free bricks'.
- 4) To sign-up customers to a 'CLFB' pledge.
- 5) To conduct publicity among civil society and institutions, government and world public opinion for change in the brick industry.
- 6) To support local NGOs seeking funds and training to run schools for children at brick kilns.
- 7) To prepare a 3-year plan of work and collect the resources to implement it.

Please support us!

I haven't been to the "Bede Griffiths" ashram (Shantivanam, in Tamil Nadu) since January 2017. But I get a taste of it by attending retreats in the UK organised by the Bede Griffiths Sangha. This is an association of those who have been to the Ashram, and those with similar attitudes. Bede Griffiths was a Benedictine monk particularly interested in seeking the commonalities between Christianity and Hinduism. During the retreats, which are silent, we try to follow the routine of the Ashram, reciting chants and Bhajans in Sanskrit, Hindi or other Indian languages, and sharing a wide range of religious texts. This routine is repeated after half an hour of meditation, three times a day. Autumn retreats have been held near Stroud, UK, and the Spring retreat which I attended recently was held in very beautiful surroundings near Monmouth.

During my 2017 trip I also went to Rishikesh. I booked a place via Airbnb but although the hosts were obliging the place was in an industrial zone. I shall keep to my usual custom of relying on the Rough Guide. Through it I found a delightful hotel on the outskirts of Rishikesh. Bathing in Ganga (the old name, River Ganges, is deplored) was blissful as it is clean and refreshingly cool, here at the foot of the Himalayas.

My only other piece of news relating to Asia is that Friends of Sangam Foundation (FOSF) is about to dissolve itself. It was founded to support a school near Gurgaon, near Delhi. It is good that the school is now able to stand on its own feet.

Stephen Petter

Two links recommended by Stephen:

<https://bedegriffithssangha.org.uk/>

<http://www.sacredearthjourneys.ca/blog/sacred-sites-in-south-india/>

Action for Bhopal

www.actionforbhopal.org

A new, Quaker-initiated group working for justice and a clean-up in Bhopal

by Annie Murray and Alick Munro

The charity 'Bhopal Medical Appeal' has been working since 1994 to alleviate the on-going suffering of the people of Bhopal affected by the 1984 chemical disaster. Now working alongside them is the newly formed **Action for Bhopal**, set up by Quakers from Streatham and Brixton, Twickenham and Reading Meetings, to add impetus and a new voice to the work that needs to be done on Bhopal's toxic legacy.

Background

Most people remember Bhopal as a place where a catastrophe happened in 1984. In what is still counted as the world's worst industrial accident, an explosion at the Union Carbide (UC) pesticide plant leaked tons of highly toxic gas over its densely populated surroundings, killing thousands and leaving many more with acute pain and sickness to this day. The Union Carbide Co, majority shareholder, made an out-of-court settlement of \$470 million in 1989 – a pitiful amount for each individual (the other shareholder, the Indian government, paid nothing). Union Carbide – and its successor owner from 2001, Dow Chemical – refused all other responsibility for the dangerously poisonous site it left behind.



But UC's contamination of Bhopal did not begin with the events of December 1984. Toxic chemical waste was already polluting the local water supply, making people sick. Today the abandoned plant still stands, leaching toxins into the water. This is known as *The Second Poisoning*.



For many years the afflictions of Bhopal people went untreated or inadequately treated. To help alleviate the suffering the Bhopal Medical Appeal, a British-based charity, started in 1994. However, the poisonous effects continue into the second and third generation. Children of gas and water-affected parents are being born with extreme deformities and suffering agonizing, debilitating conditions.

Lack of Accountability

Despite years of litigation through the Indian courts, no one has ever been brought to justice for this outrage and UC/Dow Chemical have repeatedly failed to appear for legal hearings. Corporations act with impunity. In 2017 Dow Chemicals merged with DuPont, This year DowDuPont has split into three new entities, further distancing itself from liability for Bhopal. And Bhopal is of course only one of the world's toxic hotspots. So far there is no mechanism for enforcing the principle that the 'polluter pays.'

In the 35 years since the explosion, liability for the continuing leak of toxins from the site has been evaded by UC and then by Dow Chemicals, (which bought Union Carbide at a price that reflected its tarnished reputation), and similarly by the Indian Government. Following the merger with Dupont and its splitting into three divisions in 2019, the chain of responsibility is now even harder to pursue through legal channels.

Action for Bhopal

Action for Bhopal therefore seeks to put moral and financial pressure on the successors to the original owners of Union Carbide India Company by harnessing the views of investors, customers, regulators, politicians and electors to get this mess sorted out.

It is estimated that there are about 1000 sites around the world where industrial premises have been deserted by owners without the site being returned to a safe state. The world cannot go on with toxic despoliation by the owners of industrial plant with no environmental or human consideration. This business model is destructive and discredited. We have noted that one of the new divisions of DowDuPont has set itself the task of providing consultancy services on the de-toxification of chemical waste.

Executives of industrial corporations are wary of accepting responsibility for toxic waste. We have to convince them and government regulators that they must do so. As a result of their association with the Union Carbide disaster, DowDuPont's standing in India is low. Understandably, they are not deemed trustworthy – a fact which affects their share of growth in that rapidly expanding market. We must redouble the moral pressure on Dow/Dupont and on the government of India and the government of Madhya Pradesh, which now owns the Union Carbide site, to collaborate on sorting out this mess.

What Next?

Action for Bhopal is a small but growing group; its members so far are in the UK and Germany, adding another voice to that of the other organizations such as the Bhopal Medical Appeal (UK) and the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (USA) to ensure that pressure is brought to bear on these corporations.

We are working to keep Bhopal in the public eye. We are also trying to approach the company in a way which focuses on how it might make a new start by putting right what its predecessor did in the past as well as adopting 21st Century environmental standards for the future. We would love you to join us – there are things you can do – writing one letter would be a start!

We consider this concern to justify action by Quakers worldwide, and we hope you do too. If you would like to get involved, please contact Martin Wright at actionbhopal@myphone.coop

Annie Murray is a writer, Quaker and founder member of Action for Bhopal, UK

Alick Munro is a retired G.P, a Quaker and also founder member of Action for Bhopal

Letter from Merryl Titus, Bhopal Yearly Meeting, on recent village development activities *May 2019*

Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia, Hoshangabad² has been organizing BioSand Water Filter Training Camps for the past 5 to 6 years with the support of Friendly Water for the World.³ The camps have been attended by representatives of social organisation working in rural areas, local village people, Young Friends from all the Yearly Meetings, and workers of the Rasulia Rural Centre. We have gifted a few BioSand Water Filters to the workers of the Centre, Friends School Sohagpur and local villages.

Recently two Friends from our Bhopal YM, workers from the Centre and the Sohagpur school staff visited a village named Chejda, Sohagpur. This village is helped by an NGO "Gandhiwadi Ashram" in Bhopal. They grow Bio-Organic Grains there in the village. And a demonstration of BioSand Water Filter Plant was given by the Bhopal YM friends and workers of the centre.

BioSand Water Filter is made of locally available materials of sand, gravel of a particular size,

² <http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/361/Friends-Rural-Centre-Rasulia-India>

³ <https://friendlywater.net/>

and cement. During the process of filtration harmful bacteria, amoeba and other germs are removed from the water and we get clean water without needing any kind of energy such as electricity. By using this clean water there will not be any diseases of polluted water. And this equipment was gifted to the village.

This is some brief news which I think would be useful to share among friends.

In Peace and Love,

Merryl Titus, Bhopal YM

JaiJagat2020: Ekta Parishad's global campaign to progress global justice and peace agendas

Stuart Morton, May 2019

Many Quakers in Britain have been inspired by the witness and work of Ekta Parishad (Unity Forum) in India. Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) has also had the opportunity to work with this people's movement in South Asia where peace and justice have been persistently pursued in nonviolent ways.

The leaders of the "Victory to the World 2020" campaign are P.V. Rajagopal and his wife Jill Carr Harris – both known to many Quakers. They have launched a global campaign "JaiJagat2020" and a group of Quakers, mainly Midlands-based and supported by Stourbridge Local Meeting, are already involved in coordinating a response in Britain. Building on Ekta Parishad's magnificent work alongside some of India's most marginalised people, we are being encouraged **to move**.... to march and to use different channels such as art, music, drama, social networking, literature, journalism and education to counter the violent political economy with nonviolence and positive change.

The Global Peace march begins in Delhi on October 2nd 2019, which is the U.N.s International Day of Nonviolence and, on this occasion, the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth. A form of continuity will be found to keep the initiative alive across many countries. It will culminate in Geneva on September 25th 2020 where the city is ready to welcome eight days of advocacy, dialogue and celebration of life in a "Geneva Action Forum". The aim is to bring the voices of civil society to the UN so that the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals can be pushed forward. We aim to highlight creative solutions to poverty, climate (in)justice, social exclusion and the methods of violent conflict.

We intend to work with Quakers and others in Britain to conduct a short parallel march in England, to enable some to take part in the large march or to be part of the final stage of a march in France from Lyon to Geneva. If you would like to volunteer to be part of this adventure for a more just world – you can find out more from:

www.jaijagat2020.org or/and **Facebook: jaijagat2020** or/and **Twitter: jaijagat2020**

We will need all available skills and energy to link with partner groups such as Extinction Rebellion in Britain; money will be needed; nonviolence training is planned for those who feel led to take up this challenge and learning opportunity.

For further information, Stuart Morton can signpost you onwards: e-mail: stuartm46@gmail.com

Find out more from the JaiJagat Midlands UK Group who will host a Special Interest Group at Britain Yearly Meeting on Sunday 26th May in Friends House Ada Salter Room 3 from 12.30 – 1.30 p.m.

4. Bangladesh

Letter from Dhaka

Rob Gallagher, 20th May 2019

During the past few years I have visited Bangladesh quite a few times to work on urban transport projects in Dhaka. I was there a few weeks before the attack on the Holey Bakery Café during Ramadan 2016, in which 20 persons were brutally killed – both foreigners and locals.

In the light of the recent attacks in New Zealand, Sri Lanka and many other places, this letter is a personal view of how it felt to be in Dhaka subsequently, and some of the developments that have since taken place there.

The attack on the Holey Bakery was carried out by educated young men from fairly well-off families – hence a lot of similarity with the recent bombings in Sri Lanka. The attacks were indiscriminate: Japanese, Italian, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis and others were brutally killed, ostensibly in the name of God. Most Bangladeshis were horrified – one university professor I talked to who knew some of the victims cried as he talked about it. Two friends of mine had been close to some of the victims.

The attack triggered a powerful response from the Government: all efforts were made to track down the killers' associates (as the killers themselves had been killed at the scene). When the associates were located they were mostly killed in 'shoot-outs'. Within a year over 60 'militants' had been killed in 17 separate operations, which have continued subsequently.

The attack on the Holey Bakery sent a shock wave through Bangladesh. The foreign community largely withdrew; aid projects were put on hold; foreigners who remained were not allowed to walk around Dhaka or attend functions.

When I visited Dhaka last year (2018) the shock had greatly subsided. I moved around fairly freely, though some travel restrictions were still in place for most embassy and foreign company staff. Nonetheless, the atmosphere was much more relaxed.

Extra-Judicial Killings

Yet the attacks had left behind an impact. One impact is the use of extra-judicial killings to remove 'undesirable' elements. Having had success against the 'militants', which was largely supported by the general population, the same approach has been extended to drug dealers and now 'rapists' too. In 2018 over 466 persons were killed in 'shootouts' or in police custody (Daily Star, 12/01/2019). Human rights activists, lawyers and journalists have spoken out against it, but the programme continues at full speed. The programme in the Philippines has received much publicity, but that in Bangladesh does not seem to attract much attention in the international media.

Demonstrations against Anarchy on the Roads

Like many other countries at the moment, Bangladesh seems to be going through a period of political intolerance and harshness. On 29th July 2018 a speeding bus ploughed into some high school students in Dhaka, killing two of them. Widespread street demonstrations by school and college students followed, paralysing Dhaka for nearly a week. The demonstrations were entirely peaceful: the students stopped vehicles, asked to see driving licences, and basically did the traffic police's job for them. They were campaigning against the corruption that allowed Dhaka's traffic to be so chaotic and dangerous. The authorities acknowledged the justness of their demands, but used underhand methods to try to end the demonstrations, such as allowing gangs of armed activists to attack demonstrators; arresting some of the college student leaders; arresting an eminent photographer who gave a critical interview to Al Jazeera; and alleging that the demonstrators were being manipulated by the opposition parties.

There have been some improvements in traffic discipline since the events of July 2018, but not much. Crossing the road in Dhaka remains as dangerous as ever, and it's largely 'business as usual' in the various agencies responsible for managing Dhaka's traffic.

National Elections, December 2018

Meanwhile, a national election took place in December 2018. The main BNP opposition party took part this time, though the election itself turned out to be completely one-sided: out of 300 parliamentary seats contested, 288 were won by the ruling Awami League, their 'best-ever' result. There were widespread allegations of vote-rigging, intimidation and harassment of opposition candidates, and so on. The BNP opposition has refused to take up the meagre five seats it 'won'. (And some people privately believe the BNP alliance might have won the election had it been completely free and fair).

Conclusion

I remain as fond of Bangladesh as ever, and when I arrive it feels like coming home, to some extent. But while the country is making rapid progress economically, it seems to me that underlying problems of rule of law, social justice and sustainable development are not improving.

Robert Gallagher is a member of Chippenham Meeting, and has visited / lived in Bangladesh since the late 1970's

5. News of late QSAIG friends

Stuart Morton (QSAIG convener) writes:

Quaker peace work in South Asia has been blessed by the dedicated service of Friends over many years. This year two of the most faithful, Ruth Baker and Peter Jackson, have passed away. In my experience, **Ruth Baker**, who died on January 1st 2019, had deep capacities to listen and encourage others; she was part of the bedrock of the Quaker work in Sri Lanka in the 1990s and when, in 1996, I became the staff member working with and for the people of Sri Lanka in its time of civil war, she was my first clerk. Later, her thoughtfulness, thoroughness and non-judgemental approach were great gifts in the Quaker conciliation work in North East India.

Peter Jackson, who served Quaker Peace & Service (QPS) in the 1980s and 90s, and Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) thereafter, died on January 21st 2019. Peter had served on the Quaker food convoys in the Sri Lanka during the civil war; he had brought his huge life experience as an educator, an adventurer, an artist and as a very “human” being to the QPSW conciliation work in North East India in the 2000s.

Both were Friends who worked alongside the staff in ways that strengthened the potential of the work and gave heart to me personally. They are greatly missed.

Stuart Morton

Who served as the Asia Coordinator of QPS/QPSW, 1996-2011

6. QSAIG – forthcoming events, and other items

Forthcoming Events

Sunday 26th May 2019	QSAIG stall at Britain Yearly Meeting, Friends House, London QSAIG will hold a stall at the Group Fair on Sunday 26 th May
Sunday 26th May 2019	JaiJagat Midlands UK Group will host a Special Interest Group at Britain Yearly Meeting on Sunday 26 th May in Friends House Ada Salter Room 3 from 12.30 – 1.30 p.m.
Saturday 12th October 2019	QSAIG's Annual Meeting – this year in London Westminster Meeting House (in the library) 52 St Martin's Ln, Covent Garden, London WC2N 4EA Arrivals from 10.00am: meeting 10.30 – 16.00 Bring-and-share lunch. PROGRAMME: To be published later on the QSAIG website: http://www.qsaig.co.uk/
Oct. 2019 to Sept. 2020	On-going support to the Ekta Parishad 'JaiJagat 2020' Global Peace march to Geneva

Get in Touch

We are always interested to hear news of friends and groups in South Asia and Europe. If you have anything you would like to share, please do get in touch with:

- The QSAIG co-convenor, Stuart Morton, at stuartm46@gmail.com
- The QSAIG membership secretary & treasurer, Anne Smith, at m_anne_smith@yahoo.co.uk
- The QSAIG newsletter editor, Rob Gallagher, at gallagher.rob@hotmail.co.uk
- The QSAIG website manager, Martin Schweiger, at germ.buster@phoncoop.coop

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If you no longer wish to receive communications from the Quaker South Asia Interest Group, please contact Anne Smith at m_anne_smith@yahoo.co.uk and your details will be removed from our list.