

QUAKER SOUTH ASIA INTEREST GROUP (QSAIG)

NEWSLETTER – Sept 2020

<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 19 years. We meet annually in London, Leeds or Birmingham and have a newsletter at least once a year.



QSAIG News Round-up

This newsletter follows the previous QSAIG newsletter of May 2019 (see <http://www.qsaig.co.uk/what-we-do/>). The past 16 months can be divided into two parts: pre- and post-Covid. Since the coronavirus swept the world at the beginning of the year, countries have gone into lockdown and work, travel and communications have all been greatly affected. Consequently, QSAIG's activities this year, like those of friends and organisations we interact with, have been much curtailed.

The following section highlights some of the main activities that QSAIG members have taken part in during the past year.

May 2019: QSAIG organised a table at the Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) in London, set up and hosted by Gerald Conyngham.

August 2019: QSAIG circulated an e-mail questionnaire to members on their interactions with

QSAIG, how the group might develop and what role members might play in this. The response was limited (5 replies) but mostly positive.

October 2019: The AGM was held in London (Westminster Meeting House) and 14 attended. The meeting was very wide-ranging, and the minutes are on the QSAIG website. Of particular note was Martin and Liz Schweiger's participation – their first AGM in two years since Martin's first operation in 2017 – and Ram and Stephanie Ramamurthy's participation – Ram celebrated his 90th Birthday in 2017.

New QSAIG Convenor: At the 2019 AGM, Stuart Morton stepped down as Convenor, to spend more time on working in support of the Ekta Parishad initiatives (more below). Stuart had held this role for seven years and brought great energy and understanding, helped by having many contacts from his QPSW work over the years.

Norman Smith took on the role of QSAIG Convenor for one year. Norman lives in London and has been close to the Quaker movement through visiting Meetings in the USA, Britain and India, and is the author of a book on Marjorie Sykes and her life as a Quaker in India.

Ekta Parishad and JaJagat 2020: JaiJagat is Hindi for 'Victory of all people of the World', and very close to the concept of Sarvodaya ('well-being of all') given by Mahatma Gandhi. The Ekta Parishad (<https://www.esqr-net.org/member/ekta-parishad>) launched JaiJagat 2020, a new campaign for poor and marginalized people. It proposes global action, as genuine social change requires collective action across groups and countries. While Ekta Parishad's actions remain focused on India, JaiJagat 2020 aims to work with as many organizations as possible at every country and global level.

One key component is a march from Delhi to Geneva in support of the four pillars of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Starting in October 2019, the marchers planned to reach Geneva in September 2020. By March 2020 they had completed the Indian stage and reached Armenia, but the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic meant the march had to be halted.

The JaiJagat 2020 UK support group has been recognised as a "concern" by Stourbridge Quaker Meeting (Central England Area Meeting) and is working in parallel with Ekta Parishad. Latest information on the campaign is available at the JaiJagat 2020 website: <https://jajagat2020.eu/jai-jagat-campaign/>

Up-coming Events:

QSAIG AGM (via ZOOM): Saturday 24th October 2020

In two halves: 10.30am–12 noon, and 1.30pm–3pm

*This year's AGM will be held via ZOOM due to the Coronavirus situation.
If you would like to participate, please contact Martin Schweiger for a ZOOM invitation at: germ.buster@phoncoop.coop*

News from India

Responding to Coronavirus – IIMC’s Work in West Bengal

by Dr. Abu B. Siddique, Consultant to IIMC, and Trustee Member, IIMC-UK, written in May 20th 2020

IIMC (Institute of Indian Mother and Child) is an NGO established more than 30 years ago by Dr. Sujit Brahmochary to provide medical service to poor mothers and children in West Bengal (<https://www.iimcuk.org.uk/>).

IIMC serves the people of both North and South 24 Parganas, which are some of the most populated and economically backward districts in West Bengal. When the Covid-19 outbreak started, IIMC paused its on-going activities and engaged to save people from the corona virus.

About ten million people in West Bengal became house-bound after the government announced lockdown on 24 March 2020. As many people lost jobs in major cities, they flocked to the rural areas, adding to the existing rural population struggling for their existence. More than 50 areas in Kolkata Municipalities were declared as ‘hotspots’, putting them under strict lockdown measures.

Giving food and raising awareness



Food being packed

Under Dr. Sujit Brahmochary’s leadership, a Corona Virus Awareness Group (CVAG) was formed with experienced, senior volunteers, most of whom have worked with IIMC since its inception, plus many dedicated, young volunteers working for IIMC from different sub-centres in remote areas.

The CVAG members distributed food to all the people who were striving for their survival, including many poor mothers and sponsored children of IIMC as their family earning dropped down significantly. Every day, CVAG members handed out 120 to 160 food packages, each to support all the members of a family.

The food was purchased from remote, local markets where marginal farmers brought their produce. This avoided creating artificial food crises in city markets, and at the same time encouraged the marginal farmers to keep their economy running in this crisis period.

Doctors and nurses were also included in CVAG to raise the awareness among the victims. They are experienced in providing treatment as health education, following IIMC’s motto: ‘prevention is better than cure’. As well as offering advice over the phone, they moved from one food distribution area to another, often accompanying the food distributing volunteers. They spread the cautionary message by talking as well distributing leaflets – how to protect from the Covid-19 and how to ‘self-isolate’ if infected.

IIMC will continue the service of offering food and raising awareness till the life-threatening effect of the virus is controlled.



The distribution

How Coronavirus affected the Brick Kiln Industry in India

In the May 2019 issue of the QSAIG Newsletter we featured an article from Jon Ellis on the brickfields schools programme of Loreto, near Kolkata.

The following recent article is taken from the website of 'Brick Kiln News', <https://www.brickkilnnews.com/> which reports on conditions of labour, particularly child labour, in the brick production industries of South Asia - Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan.

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.

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

COVID 19 AND THE BRICK INDUSTRY

September 1, 2020

<https://www.brickkilnnews.com/single-post/2020/09/02/COVID-19-AND-THE-BRICK-INDUSTRY>

On 24 March due to the Covid-19 Pandemic the Govt imposed a complete lockdown of industry and transport throughout India, giving workers and bosses 4 hours' notice. Most brick kilns were closed from this date. Workers found themselves without wages and unable to pay off the advance of cash they had received when they signed up to work at the kiln in November (bonded labour payment). Those migrant workers in kilns who could do so returned home. Many were unable to do so and remained stranded at a kiln hundreds of miles from home without wages. Trains and buses did not run and for a time trucks were not allowed to cross state boundaries. Kiln owners in many cases fed the trapped workers a basic daily diet.

Kilns were allowed to re-start work in May, but employing only 15% of the staff they had done before lockdown. Subsequently, as the lockdown was eased in much of India, many workers have been able to return home. Some special trains were arranged by the Govt. It is not known whether brick kiln migrants, among the poorest people in India, were able to avail of the special trains. The monsoon rains, affecting most of India from June have in any case closed down the brick industry until the end of the monsoon in October.

Owners of kilns, and the whole brick industry, have been thrown into extreme financial difficulty by the lockdown, from which they may take years to recover. The brick kiln labour force, mostly migrants from the poorest districts of Odissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, UP, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan, who were already struggling to survive from year to year, now face more extreme poverty. In most cases state governments are giving only dry rations to the poor.



The spread of the pandemic in India was only slowed by the lockdown. The disease is spreading at an increasing rate in many parts of the country. It is most severe in large cities. Workers returning home from these places are unknowingly bringing the virus back to their families and neighbourhoods.

It is inevitable that those groups - unions and NGOs trying to bring beneficial change in the conditions of labour in the kilns – will now face greater challenges, and are less likely to get positive action from the National and State Governments.

ADVERT: Action for Bhopal

www.actionforbhopal.org

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

Action for Bhopal is a small but growing group, with members in the UK and Germany, It joins other organizations such as the Bhopal Medical Appeal (UK) and the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (USA) in working to ensure that pressure is brought to bear on the responsible corporations.

Action for Bhopal aims to keep Bhopal in the public eye, and 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

News from Bangladesh

Nasir Ahmed Uddin – Peace-worker at GUP and close friend of QSAIG

Not long after the previous QSAIG newsletter was circulated, came the sad news of the death of a long-standing friend. Mr. Nasir Uddin, a development worker and peace activist, was born in 1954 in a tiny disaster-prone offshore island of Bangladesh. In 1970, after almost half of the island's population was lost in the disastrous cyclone, including Nasir's beloved mother, sister, relatives and neighbours, he decided to engage in development work to



assist the most disadvantaged and backward communities of rural Bangladesh including his own island village Moudubi in Patuakhali.

Initially beginning as a volunteer of Service Civil International (SCI), which is known as IVS in UK, Nasir later joined GUP, a noted NGO in Bangladesh and served as Director of the organization. He managed the GUP Peace Centre at Rajoir, was a core member of the South Asia Peace Alliance (SAPA) – a peace initiative of the British Quakers – and was also a leader of

Nasir Uddin, 1954 - 2019

the Action Asia Peace Builder's Forum. Pat Saunders wrote.....

"He told me once about his experiences as a boy during that cyclone in 1970 when 300,000 Bangladeshis died. He and his family lived on an island near the front of the Meghna estuary that was completely inundated. Incredibly powerful winds. He survived the cyclone by clinging to a tree for hours as the storm raged and eventually the waters subsided. When he came down he was the only member of his family to have survived. I met his cousin. She, her father and Nasir were the only members of their extended family still alive. Ataur Rahman was there helping survivors. He adopted Nasir. The rest is history. He was the principle architect of GUP's peace work. Founder of the Peace Centre. A great man. An inspiration."

He is survived by his wife Fatema, sons Apu and Lincoln, and grandsons. His memory lives on amongst so many friends in Bangladesh and the UK.

John and Marilyn Miles – Visit to Gono Unnayan Prochesta (GUP) 28th to 29th January 2020

Marilyn and John Miles of Nailsworth Quaker Meeting, Gloucestershire visited Bangladesh in January 2020, travelling to Dinajpur where John re-connected with families he had first met 53 years ago, and later GUP in Rajoir. The following are some extracts from John's report.

Gono Unnayan Prochesta (GUP) means People's Development Efforts. GUP was born out of the relief and rehabilitation activities funded by Quakers during the Liberation War of 1971. GUP was established in 1973 in the Rajoir Upazila (Sub-District) of Madaripur.

At Rajoir, John and Marilyn met S. A. Wahab, Retired Executive Director; Khondoker Md. Nurl Islam Showkat, Director Programmes; Rezaul Karim Alam, Director Microcredit; Shajahan Molla, Gardener; and Manir Hossain, Work Assistant. They toured the Rajoir Campus and visited various GUP programmes, including:

- Microcredit scheme
- Livestock centre
- Craft and teaching area
- Batik section – *“Mostly sold through Aarong but they have cut their margins recently. Employs 30-40 people and continues to train new people. However from annual accounts this bit of the GUP is not profitable and in fact never has been”*
- Women's education project
- Healthcare assistants' meeting
- Physiotherapy centre – *“The scheme has been running since 2015. The centre has a very good reputation and is considered to be the best organised in the region”*

*“We last visited the **Peace Centre** (Shanti Kendra) in 2003 and in particular we wanted to see the Ataur Rahman Peace Library which was opened in 2010. This was built with money raised by Quakers led by Pat Saunders and Settle Quakers in Yorkshire. The library itself on the ground floor has a mixture of English and Bengali texts as well as some journals. Some of the texts were scientific and management texts and some related to peace. The books have been either purchased or had been a gift from organisations such as the Asia Foundation. Also on the site is a Hindu temple and a Mosque as well as a much older building – 150 years - which is used as a training venue. There is accommodation on site too. It was not clear how well the Peace Centre is used but there is no doubt there is a lot of potential. The grounds are attractive and are used as a local park occasionally by residents. Whilst we were there three or four students were walking in the park. It has a very peaceful atmosphere.”*

“We were also pleased to have a meeting with CEO Monzurul Islam Chowdhury (Monju) in the GUP Dhaka office, who is the successor to Wahab. Nor should we forget the late Nasir who was acting CEO immediately after our beloved friend Ataur died in 2003.”

Further details of GUP can be found at: <http://www.gupbd.org/about.html>

Commentary on recent events in Bangladesh

Rob Gallagher, September 2020

I flew to Dhaka on 15th February this year to continue work on a transport project in Dhaka (feasibility of a new highway and bus corridor). This was two weeks after the UK had recorded its first official case of coronavirus, and no-one seemed too concerned at this stage. On the plane I sat in front of a lady who coughed all the way to Dhaka – I didn't bother to move although the plane was half-empty, as I still felt quite relaxed about it all. On arrival, the hotel rep who came to meet me was very proud that "Bangladesh hasn't had any cases, unlike the UK and Europe". How quickly things changed.

Bangladesh recorded its first 'official' case on 8th March – three returnees from Italy. Soon the numbers were rising fast, and the official response was chaotic. People returning from countries at risk were told to quarantine at home, but that simply didn't happen (just like the UK!). By mid-March many expatriates were leaving Bangladesh, and a friend advised me I should go home too. I tried to book a flight but the airlines were all closing down. In the end I was lucky to be on one of the last Cathay Pacific flights out of Dhaka before they also shut down. Passing through Hong Kong was like something out of a movie – people in white protective suits, hats and masks.

Back in England (and two weeks' quarantine at home), I followed the news in Bangladesh via the online newspapers. Although the Bangladesh Government tried to implement measures, it was hopeless. As a friend wrote from Dhaka:

"It is a very strange time here, as I am sure it is for you also. Even though the cases here are soaring, the government has given up on being able to create lockdowns, so the virus is everywhere. Even in a few areas where they have tried to create serious lock-down lately, they have had tremendous difficulty enforcing it. People want to go to work, they want to survive, and they can't afford to stay at home. The local markets I have been to are pretty full of sellers and buyers."

The pandemic exposed some major, major weaknesses in the government administration. Great scandals were unearthed in the purchasing of sub-standard PPE, fake covid testing by hospitals, issuing of fake certificates (at a high price), and so on. Arrests were made, top officials were transferred, but I imagine that the underlying weaknesses haven't fundamentally changed much.

On 31st July another dramatic event occurred when a retired army officer was shot dead in Teknaf (near Cox's Bazar). He was a highly respected former bodyguard in the PM's special security team. He was now working in education and on a trip with several university students to film a travel documentary. Their car was stopped and he was shot by police. This caused an upheaval in civil society, because it was the latest in hundreds of killings (euphemistically called 'crossfire') by police agencies over the past few years. Investigations are still going on and numerous policemen have been charged, but the case has highlighted how the official response is often to blacken the victims and intimidate witnesses.

Coronavirus is still widespread in Bangladesh, though there are hopeful signs that the worst may have passed. The official statistics should not be taken seriously – many people with coronavirus did not want to admit it in case they were evicted from their homes. Hospitals often refused to

admit patients with coronavirus symptoms. On the other hand there were plenty of brave volunteers who went out helping people. Bangladesh's economy is picking up again, and the country is perhaps an example of the 'herd immunity' approach – though the human cost may not be known until the overall mortality statistics are available.

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

Nepal – visit of Subhash Chandhra

Subhash Chandra is a peace activist in Nepal and involved in many programmes and initiatives, both nationally and internationally. Quakers have been friends with Subhash for a number of years – for example, Stuart and Willemina Morton first met him at a Quaker Peace & Social Witness/Ekta Parishad nonviolence training in India in 2004, and he has contributed to QSAIG meetings and newsletters on a regular basis.

Norman Smith, the current QSAIG Convenor, had the opportunity to spend some time with Subhash during his short visit to the UK at the end of November, and gave this report:

Subhash lives and works in Nepal and was here in his capacity as an Executive Committee member of War Resisters International (WRI). WRI had a 3-day meeting in their offices near Kings Cross, London to which he was first introduced in 2010.

I learned from Subhash that he has several other interests in Nepal as well. He recently helped in the publication of a book about ten Nepalese women who lost their husbands but have, with a positive outlook, been able to support themselves and their children- towards healing, reconciliation and rebuilding their lives. The book is written in Nepalese and English and during this visit he submitted a copy to the British Library.

For more than a decade he has been part of the largest non-violent social movement for land and agrarian rights/reform in Nepal. He is also involved with a NGO that works to reduce girls' trafficking through educational support. It provides safe housing and education for about 20 young women who have been severely sexually abused – usually by close and loved ones. It is managed by two women, one of whom is a well-known sports athlete.

He told me that he had a 5 year-old son. For the first three years he was the one who stayed at home as his wife had a good-paying job, which I thought was quite commendable. His child is now not interested in plastic toys due to their difficult environmental recycling content.

When I watched him pack his bag to return to Nepal, I noted the large number of books he had acquired. Some I know he got from Friends House bookshop, others from Stuart and Willemina. I am sure that they will be shared with others back home.

Obituary for Andrew Clark, former General-Secretary of Quaker Peace and Service

by Bill Robinson (submitted to the Guardian 'Other Lives' section)



My friend Andrew Clark, who died of leukaemia on 23rd April 2020 aged 77 was, in his own words, “a small boy grafted onto a privileged family tree”. He was the third of six children adopted by Zettie, nee Halliday, a trained nurse, and Arnold Clark, wealthy glass merchant and pillar of the Baptist church. He grew up in Great Missenden, Bucks, in a strongly religious household. Educated at Leighton Park School, Birmingham University and Manchester University, he became a prominent Quaker and passionate pacifist in adult life.

Andrew’s faith, constantly evolving, was the mainspring of his actions. He was aware of his privileged position and by his teens he had decided to devote his life to others less fortunate. Adventurous, hungry for foreign travel, heedless of his personal comfort or safety, he was naturally attracted to relief work in a war zone. His practical intelligence, allied to his great warmth and humanity, made him an outstanding aid worker, setting up relief and rehabilitation services

for the Quakers, first in Biafra at the time of the Nigerian civil war and then in newly independent Bangladesh.

Back in England for a brief respite, Andrew’s father, worried about his safety, said: “I don’t mind what you do next as long as you don’t go to Vietnam.” A fortnight later the Overseas Director of Oxfam invited him to work with the Buddhists there. He couldn’t resist the challenge. There was a fitting reward. Working with and learning from the Buddhists was the best job he ever had, he later said. And in Vietnam he met the perfect partner, Ann Noel, who was working as a volunteer nurse. Two years later, in May 1975 they were married in a Quaker ceremony in Amersham. Honeymoon? A small hotel and a diet of goat stew in Kebri Dehar. Oxfam had sent them both to the Ogaden area of Ethiopia during a famine.

The consternation of relatives was compounded a year later when the young couple, plus 10-week old Joel, set off for India to create the Oxfam West Orissa programme with respected development worker A.V.Swamy. Finding solutions to rural poverty became one of Andrew’s defining skills, deepened by post-graduate study of agricultural engineering at Cranfield, and honed by years in the field. Andrew conducted a review of Oxfam’s work across India, and then worked and lived happily with his family (completed by the new-born Zettie) among the locals in Damoh, Central India.

He returned home, now nearly 40, because he had been asked to become the General Secretary of Quaker Peace and Service. He moved into Chipko, a house spectacularly located on the Chiltern escarpment that he designed to be sustainably powered by wood logged from his land. Andrew’s need for physical activity and danger would in future be satisfied by a chainsaw, a quad bike and a wood-burning stove.

For seventeen years Andrew ran Quaker Peace and Service. For another five he led the International Association for Religious Freedom. On retirement he became chairman of Anti-Slavery International, for which he was a tireless fund-raiser. He was one of the great and good in his chosen field.

Andrew’s love of Chipko was shared by his children, and the last years of his life were lived in an extended family, who all survive him. He spent his last months surrounded by them, writing his memoirs. It was a fitting end to the life of a truly good man.

Librarians at Friends House seek back copies of QSAIG Newsletters

David Irwin, Librarian (Printed Collections) at Society of Friends Library, Euston, wrote:

“I have e-mailed the QSAIG Convenor to ask that the Library be put on your mailing list to receive the Newsletter..... I am also looking for early issues of your Newsletter, viz, Nos. 2 (Autumn 2003) and No. 4 (Spring or Summer 2004)to complete the Library's collection of QSAIG Newsletters. Do you think a short notice in the Newsletter might result positively? They might even be scanned and put on your website with the others.”

Can anyone help?

Please contact: Tabitha Driver and David Irwin, Librarian (Printed Collections) (job-share), Library of the Society of Friends, Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ

e-mail: printedcollections@quaker.org.uk

Tel: 020 7663 1133 or 1042

QSAIG – 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 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@phonecoop.coop

QSAIG Membership Subscriptions

This year we request members, new members and donors to pay QSAIG on-line or by cheque in the post:

Subscriptions: £10 for those working, and £5 for the unwaged

Bank Transfer details:

Account name: Ecology Building Society
Sort code: 08 90 72
Account no: 70361591
Reference: 2601-00524-7

Please could you let the Treasurer know that you have made the payment: m_anne_smith@yahoo.co.uk

Paying by Cheque:

Made out to: the Ecology Building Society
On the back write: 'Quaker South Asia Interest Group Account no 2601-00524-7'
Post it to: Anne Smith, 37 Hermitage Court, Woodford Road, London E18 2EW

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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.