

QUAKER SOUTH ASIA INTEREST GROUP (QSAIG)

NEWSLETTER – July 2017

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



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About QSAIG

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 are also interested in working with and learning from people from these countries who now reside in the UK. We meet annually in London, Leeds or Birmingham and have a newsletter at least once a year. Our network has been active for over 17 years and was one of the Society of Friends' informally listed groups. We are now applying to become a Quaker Recognised Body (see below).

Recent QSAIG Activities

<i>July 2016</i>	<i>QSAIG Newsletter (see website)</i>
<i>Oct. 2016</i>	<i>QSAIG AGM in Leeds – 11 members attended: Presentation by Margaret Waterworth on 'Education in India', and Skype conversation with Subhash Kattel, co-ordinator of Alternatives to Violence Programme (AVP) in Nepal. (See more below)</i>
<i>On-going</i>	<i>Visits to Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal by QSAIG members for work, NGO support and personal visits</i>
<i>On-going</i>	<i>Peace and development initiatives assisted by Quakers in South Asia</i>

Forthcoming Events

<i>1st August 2017</i>	<i>Two workshops at Yearly Meeting Gathering, London on Land Rights in India – Ekta Parishad's movement and how we can help</i>
<i>14th Oct. 2017</i>	<i>QSAIG's Annual General Meeting, Westminster Meeting House, London - see website, http://www.qsaig.co.uk/</i>

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 Convenor, Stuart Morton, at stuartm46@gmail.com
- The QSAIG newsletter editor, Rob Gallagher, at gallagher.rob@hotmail.co.uk
- The QSAIG website manager, Martin Schweiger, at germ.buster@phonecoop.coop

News from your QSAIG convener

Becoming a Quaker recognised body

At its annual general meeting in October 2016, QSAIG agreed to apply to Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) to become a Quaker recognised body (QRB). This is a required change from our present status as a Quaker listed informal group (LIG). The application reached the office of the Recording Clerk in May this year and is likely to be processed in the coming months. It is Meeting for Sufferings that finally agrees our status, and it seems possible that one of the proposed changes will be the establishment of a stronger connection with a BYM staff member.

News from Subhash Kattel in Nepal

Subhash is deeply involved in the coordination of the Alternative to Violence (AVP) World Gathering to be held in Nepal 5-11 November 2017. In the early part of this year Subhash travelled to Indonesia to visit Friends Peace Teams Asia West Pacific (FPT AWP) peace centre. There was also a training package including Alternative to Violence (AVP) and transformative mediation during the visit. He helped a land rights' activist from the Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC) Nepal to participate in the training. This was appreciated and it may lead to some AVP and mediation training with land rights movement leadership at the district level in Nepal. Subhash has been invited to a War Resistor's (WRI) Council meeting in the UK to take place in September. Whether a visa to visit the UK will be granted remains to be seen.

Yearly Meeting Gathering (YMG) workshops:

QSAIG (through Gerald Conyngham and Stuart Morton) is facilitating two "Land Rights Workshops" on 1st August. The aim is to further inform Quakers in Britain about the methods and skills that Ekta Parishad has used to build a very large people's movement in India. It will also develop a network of people in Britain who may be interested in supporting a large people's march that will connect Delhi to Geneva in 2020. QSAIG will also be represented at the YMG Groups Fair on that evening.

Stuart Morton

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Shaheda's adopted son, Bangladesh. Photo by GMB Akash (more on Page 12)

LETTER FROM MERRYL TITUS, BHOPAL FRIENDS MEETING

Dear Friends,

My name is Meryll Titus. I have a concern as to how Young Friends in India are connected with Friends activities in the world and most important thing that there is lack of communication between Young Friends of other parts of world. I will try as how YF share with each other their concerns around the world. And there is also a need for Quaker Teachings in YF of India.

I am born in a Quaker family and grew up in a Friends Church, Bhopal, India. In India we are first Christians and then Quakers. There are around 2,000 Quakers in India. Here in India it is very challenging being a Quaker how we present ourselves and share testimonies among Non-Quakers and Non-Christians. Because Christians are in a minority in India.

I am grateful to participate in World Conference of Friends in Peru last year which helped me to meet friends all over the world and to know Quaker concerns. I am really moved by Quaker living, testimonies and the faith which keep us alive.

Generally, we have a Programmed Worship but every 1st Sunday we have Unprogrammed Worship. We don't have a large group of friends in our meeting. Our meeting has a small group of Young Friends. We like to do social work in our society. On Quakers Day last year we went to slum area among small children and there we distributed Bible story books, shared a song and a Bible message. The children were overwhelmed and enjoyed our company, they too presented songs.

During Christmas we YF went to an Orphanage of Children which is run by an NGO. There we distributed cakes, story books and presented an action song including a message. In last winter the warm clothes were collected from our YM's members and sent to distribute among tribals living in interior places in the jungle near Hoshangabad.

Recently we YF celebrated Father's Day in Friends Church Bhopal. The collection was done by YF funds. We used to collect monthly some amount and save it for future events and needs.

I feel happy to be a part of Quaker family and will always try to serve society as possible as I can.

Thanks.

In Peace and Love,

Meryll Titus - FWCC Representative of Bhopal YM

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Impressions of Pakistan – Rob Gallagher

I visited Pakistan for a transport project between April and July 2017. This was my first visit to the country after many years of working in Bangladesh and visiting India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. It was a great opportunity to learn about the country and compare it with the rest of the sub-continent – though my visit was limited as I spent most of my time in Lahore.

Lahore is the world's 32nd largest city (population 10m), capital of Punjab Province and proudly described as Pakistan's cultural capital. I compared it with Dhaka and was struck by its lower density, fewer high-rise buildings, cleanliness, and wide modern highways. Lahore has undoubtedly been built for the motor car on the American model, but somehow pedestrians were forgotten – hardly one safe crossing place in the entire city.

My employers were very concerned about our personal security, but this may have been insurance-driven as other risks tended to be overlooked, such as dangerous driving to and from work, household risks such as faulty electrical plugs, and fire risks at the office.

I had a glimpse of the national politics through my work colleagues. People said the situation in Pakistan had improved greatly over the past few years. While there are still plenty of incidences of violence related to politics, generally the national mood is more optimistic and security seems much better. The recent resignation of the Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, due to revelations of the Panama Papers and the Supreme Court's independent line, was seen as a positive step for Pakistan's democracy and future. People remain scathing about the rule of the last military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, and wonder about the good life he now enjoys in the UK.

Regarding transport, I worked on the Peshawar rapid bus project, part of a team designing a rapid bus system on dedicated lanes on Peshawar's main east-west corridor (known as the Grand Trunk Road). It was a 'fast-track' project because the provincial government wanted it open in time for next year's elections. Again, I contrasted this with Bangladesh, where a similar bus project in Dhaka seems to be on the back-burner. What a difference it makes to have strong political backing for a good project.



Five on a bike plus luggage and no helmets – a common sight in Lahore



Qingqi: motor-cycles adapted to carry up to 10 passengers; often highly-decorated



Lavishly decorated buses in Lahore – Pakistan is famous for its 'truck art'



Plenty of gora-garis and gada-garis (horse and donkey carts), even on the fast highways

Stephen Petter – Travelling around India

Stephen is a former convener of QSAIG. Now in his 80's, he toured India in February and March 2017, staying at ashrams, bathing in the Ganges, and travelling in buses, taxis, trains and even motor-cycle pillion. He kept an electronic journal and sent regular e-mails to family and friends about his trip and impressions, from gurus to the Ganges. A few extracts are re-printed below:

19th Feb. 2017: Theft and generosity on the Delhi Metro

I had to stand, half asleep, for many stops on the Metro before a young man in the Priority seat gave me it. (More often I'm humbled by the rapidity in which people offer me their seat. Respect for old age is strong.) I slept all the way to Ravij Chowk which is the big central station. A big, rather pushy man sat next to me, invading my space, which was irritating. But I had not got enough credit on my Metro card and when I went to buy more I found to my disbelief then horror my wallet was missing. I had an exceptionally large amount of money in it, and two ATM cards. Still tired, I was in a state, and spend a while trying to find the police post. It was empty but I sat inside it, listing my losses. It came to about 150 pounds. Eventually three pleasant young women calling me 'Uncle' appeared, and told me they were Security. At first I thought this to be a misunderstanding. They took me to the huge Control Centre where people watched dozens of CCTV screens, took all my details, all very friendly and respectful. They called the Delhi police which turned up in the form of a large friendly chap who again took my details. I kept repeating that I could not leave the station as my card had insufficient credit. Davinda (or Davindra) – the policeman insisted I take 300 rupees of his own, and then insisted on taking me on and off the metro the one stop to my destination, ushering me though the barrier with his pass card. I said I'd give the 300 to charity when I got some money.

When I got back to my hotel I was able to phone my friend Jim to update him. No sooner had I cancelled the cards and logged on to the online police theft reporting site (which did not work) than I found an email from someone saying they had my wallet and cards. They'd been found, dumped, along with the wallet of a young woman. We arranged for me to collect it next day, in an area called Dwarka. I was too tired to go searching for a working ATM, and went to bed earlier than usual.

Next day I was able to take the Metro to Dwarka. I found the big 4 star hotel where I was to meet the chap with my wallet. It turned out he was a senior manager there. After a while the manager came and told me the story of how a woman found the “wallets” and cards, called his family, and they then contacted me with some difficulty as my visiting cards have my UK mobile number. In the process they found that my UK number after an Indian dialling code reached a Stephen Petter in some distant part of India. I cannot explain that. It turned out there was no wallet, nor of course any money, only my two now-useless cards. But friendships had been made and I invited him and his family to our house in Bristol. (Unlikely they'll take up my offer as his brother is a doctor in Exeter. He even offered to lend me big money should I need it).

26th Feb 2017: At Shantivanam Ashram, Tamil Nadu (it was Stephen's third visit)

One of the guests is a serene young Belgian woman in priestly white, a devotee of Ama. The loud French woman was amazed I'd never heard of Ama. “She has a following of millions, million, all

over the world! She hugs!” Then I remember a rather mocking article about her by a journalist who's been up for a hug. So I asked the devotee (she's taken on an unpronounceable Indian name, but it begins Rajiv which is a man's name) seriously about Ama. Apparently as an 8-year-old child Ama drew attention by her extreme concern for poor people, even to the extent of stealing from her parents, and setting up a night shelter in the family's barn. Opposed by orthodox religion and offending her social and caste norms her name spread and eventually her father agreed to let his farm be used; I gather it has become a bit like a bit like Glastonbury – acres of buildings to house and hospitalise the poor. Ama now has a large staff (including Rajivxxx) who mind the ashram while she goes touring the world, giving hugs. Rajivxxx challenged me to go there – it's not far away, in Kerala, saying that once I set eyes on Ama I'd be converted. An exciting thought, but I don't think I have the courage to risk it. Besides the danger of conversion is that of finding it all a bit ridiculous. But that's India, and it's not the first time I've heard of spiritual leaders with followings of millions. In this district it's mostly Sai Baba; a bit farther north is Swami Ramana. I would not find either of those ridiculous.

A quick mention of how often people are kind and helpful. I've told you about the policeman who insisted on giving me 300/- after my wallet had been stolen, and accompanying me through the next stage of my journey. Other examples include yesterday when I was shopping for something a bit difficult to describe. A shop keeper who finally understood what I was looking for, but had not got any, got his son to give me motor-bike a ride to another similar shop which had what I wanted. I think and hope this is respect for old age; not race.

12th March 2017 (in Delhi)

I had tried several times to contact the Quaker contact person to no avail. Last time I came here I went to the place where they meet and was the only one. I did not feel like repeating that, moreover I think the venue has changed. So I just went for a walk instead, and then went up to the roof garden of the hotel and wrote two chapters of my memoirs.

19th March. Dipping in the Ganges

Not much to report. The only interesting events have been the two times I've been down to the Ganges, or Ganga as it seems to be called now. The first time, I was wondering if I could manage a long steep set of steps, when a chap on a scooter insisted on taking me on his pillion, his daughter in front of him. He dropped me near a wide, paved, clean open space alongside the river. There were temples with huge statues of Gods, and many sadhus as well as children selling little baskets made of leaves, filled with moss and flowers, to be used as a gift to the river, or the god of the river. One cost only 10 rupees. I bought one then rolled up my trousers and stepped into the river, bowing to splash water onto my head, then releasing the flowers. I sat by the bank watching it float away, softly chanting the Gyatri Mantra three times, followed by "OM, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti". It was near sunset, so I waited to see the Aarti ceremony. About 13 monks. each with an assistant, mounted small platforms and chanted to the music of a live band (horribly over-amplified). Then each had a container which produced dark clouds of incense smoke. After that they had a tray with a conical array about a foot high of flaming torches, Which they waved in circles in all directions. We were also given smaller trays with a burning torch on it. The sight of all these flames being waved reverently in the gathering dusk was very memorable.

Extract on Sikhism – by John Gibbs

Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world with a population of upwards of 30 million worldwide. Sikhism originated about 500 years ago. Raman, my Sikh friend writes:

"The Sikh religion was formed as a separate religion to Hinduism. The first guru also began the service of langar (giving free food) that still continues today. Langar was started so that everyone can sit together despite caste, colour, religion or gender and you can experience it in any Sikh temple. In Sikhism men and women have equal rights."

FROM SIKH SCRIPTURE

God is only one; His name is true.

He is the creator; He is without fear.

God has not been or cannot be created or established by anyone.

Everyone and everything is controlled by his command.

Sing the praises of God and keep love for him in your heart.

Sikhs can pray at any time and anywhere and some of each night 'spending time with God'.
I like that - I do too but usually after breakfast.

John Gibbs

Article on Marjorie Sykes and Rabindranath Tagore – by Abu Siddique (Bacchu)

Bacchu has written a long and interesting article on how Marjorie Sykes met Rabindranath Tagore and stayed and taught at his ashram at Santiniketan ('House of Peace'), Bengal from 1939 to 1947. She lived in a three-roomed house at the ashram and worked alongside Rabindranath till his death in 1941, translating his works and joining in all of Shantiniketan's activities. Rabindranath had founded a school there in 1901, which became Visva Bharati University in 1941. The university's motto is: "Yatra Visvam Bhavaty ekanidam", "where the whole world meets in one place", and today it is 'a veritable nerve centre of Bengal's art and culture, attracting students from all over India and overseas' (quoted from Lonely Planet).

Bacchu describes how Marjorie Sykes continued to work there after Rabindranath's death, passionately engaged in finding the elements of truth, non-violence, peace in the lives and works of Rabindranath and Mahatma Gandhi, and writing copiously on the peace activists in India as well in England.

The full article can be read in Bacchu's blog at: <http://shagarsideation.blogspot.co.uk/#!>

Stories and Photos of Bangladesh – by GMB Akash

From an article in the Bangladesh Daily Star,

<http://www.thedailystar.net/lifestyle/spotlight/the-light-bearer-hope-1371826>

The following photos were taken by GMB Akash, a Bangladeshi photographer well-known among Facebook users in Bangladesh. For over 20 years he has been taking pictures of ordinary people and recording their stories. He recently published his second photography book, 'Survivors':



Saira Begum's story: 'I got married at the age of twelve. My husband was twice my age. I cried whole night by sitting on my wedding bed. He was embarrassed. Shyly he said he will allow me to do whatever I want to do. He kept his promise. He brought me dolls to play. But my in-laws did not like my freedom. They asked him to send me back to my parents. When their torture became intolerable, by holding my hands he left his parent's house. Here, we built our heaven fifty years ago. I played with dolls and then with my five children. By fishing he earned for us. Every corner of our hut was built by him. I used to sit beside him, sang songs and he continued to repair our broken bamboo walls. One night he left me alone, died in sleep with a slight smile in his face. Our house was his existence for me. I used to touch the fence, wall and could feel him there. During 'Aila', flood washed away my hut, now there is no sign of my home. Still I come here to find a sign of my existence, try to find him in my lost home.'



Amena Begum's story: 'I am tired, very tired. I am tired of fighting for food, fighting to live, fighting for love. No one ever loved me. I do not know how it feels to be loved. When I will return from work my parents will ask for money, when I will give them money they will smile. Once I had fever and could not go to work for a week, my father took out my bed from the house and threw in the yard. While I am capable of giving, I'm capable of living. When I was five months pregnant my husband disappeared. And I never saw him last five years. He never loved me, I had seen him with other women many times but I fought for his love too. I am a defeated person. Sometimes I feel like to go somewhere leaving everything behind. But I do not have any place to go. I hang on the train as I am hanging in my life. Knowing the train will never take me to a place where someone will care for me, someone will love me, but still I hang on and look forward.'

Documented by GMB Akash

Finally.....The Decline of Tigers in Bangladesh

Daily Star, 29th July 2017

Bangladesh's national cricket team are nicknamed 'The Tigers', but soon none of the original animals may be left in the country. A government census recorded only 106 in the Sunderbans in 2015, down from 440 in 2004. Worldwide there were only 3,890 tigers in 2015, including 103 in Bhutan, seven in China, 2,226 in India, 371 in Indonesia, 2 in Laos, 250 in Malaysia, 85 in Myanmar, 198 in Nepal, 433 in Russia, 189 in Thailand and 5 in Vietnam. Cambodia had 50 in 2010, but now none.

A recent thesis by Samia Saif of Kent University on "Investigating Tiger Poaching in Bangladesh Sundarbans" found that tiger skins fetched Tk40-90,000 (i.e. only £380-£850). The most common form of poaching is poisoning, and experts fear the Bengal tiger will soon be extinct if the poaching continues.