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Jesuit intervention in farmers protest at Delhi borders

Fr Stany, the POSA constituted a committee on 31 December 2020 for planning and monitoring Jesuit intervention in farmers' protests at Delhi borders with Fr Tony Dias as the Coordinator and Fr Denzil Fernandes, Fr Arun Mozhi, Fr PR John and Fr Sunny Jacob as members.

What is considered 'the largest protest in history', played out on the streets leading to the political Capital of India, has resulted in an unusual churning. Indian democracy is again at the cross-roads and being severely tested. Political parties are forced to take a clear stand. The 'sentinel on the qui vive' and protector of the Indian Constitution - the Supreme Court of India - is on trial. And it is as if all of us - the so-called civil society members, religious and the Church - are being interrogated and challenged. This is clearly a moment of reckoning, a conscience call for each one of us.

Farmers, and those dependent on farmlands, all

over India are asking for the repeal of the three controversial farm laws rammed through Parliament without due process and with scant respect for democratic principles and norms. The farming community knows that these laws are detrimental to their interests, and to their existence. At the time of writing this piece the farmers are out there on the roads braving the icy winds, the shenanigans of the government and the greed of the corporate world. More than 70 persons have died and there have also been instances of suicide. A suicide note left by a priest said "injustice is indeed a sin; and to suffer injustice passively is also a sin".

The Church, including the Jesuits and their collaborators, has been trying to respond to the crises. A Farm Committee (FarmCom) has been constituted by the President of the Jesuit Conference. This team has visited the border areas where the farmers, including women farmers, landless labourers and children, eke out a

precarious existence. Although there is enough supplies of essentials and food, the uncertainty and the stress of living on the streets is taking a toll. These people long for support and solidarity, and compassion. It is heartening to note that several civil society members and Church organizations have organized relief and solidarity visits.

On the 15th of January, the FarmCom members (Denzil Fernandes, Arun Mozhi, PR John, Sunny Jacob and Tony Dias) organized a unique programme at the ISI Delhi. Three farmers from the

borders, along with a female law student from a Jesuit institution in Bangalore spoke to a group of civil society members, the staff and the Jesuits. They analyzed the laws, expressed their anguish at being labeled 'anti-nationals', khalistanis, naxals and so on. They spoke about their determination to fight for Justice and Dignity right till the end. A panel of speakers consisting of Fr P R John (Principal of Vidya Jyoti Theological College, Delhi), Fr Adv Arun Mozhi and Mr Parvez from ISI shared their views on the subject.

On Republic Day (26th January) FarmCom members and several other Jesuits and their collaborators, including nuns went to the border areas and other strategic sites to welcome the farmers' arriving in Delhi for their 'Tractor Rally'. Unfortunately, allegedly miscreants engaged in violent behaviour that marred the solemnity and significance of the rally. The FarmCom has proposed a Webinar on the 31st of January 2021 wherein it will share experiences with Jesuit social activists and lokmanch partners. This is being done with a view to garnering more support for the farmers' movement. Scholarly articles and stories are also circulated for better information and action.

Observing and interacting with those fighting for their right to live a dignified life, we see genuine secularism, socialism, equality and fraternity - all Constitutional Values - being lived out and celebrated in the open streets. There is creativity, humor, tears and laughter, sharing from the heart and fellow-feeling. The gender discrimination is not seen. The women and children feel safe and cared for. The determination to agitate for their rights till the end peacefully is solid and inspirational.

If we fail the farmers, we will fail not only them but also those who are vulnerable and oppressed. We will fail democracy, the Indian constitution, the rule of law, the philosophy of peaceful protest popularized by Gandhi ji. At the end of the day, we will fail our own conscience. We cannot afford this to happen. We need to bear prophetic witness by engaging not only in relief of various kinds but also by doing advocacy on behalf of the farmers and with the farming community in general as the agrarian distress continues to rage and take its toll. The longer term task is to focus on Democracy. We need to strengthen democracy in every area of human endeavor.

