



Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat (SJES, South Asia): News and some Views

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Covid Relief: Taking cognizance of the enormity of the suffering of the people, especially those in rural areas both in terms of the spread of the disease, economic distress and hunger, SJES and Lok Manch (LM) are focusing their attention on providing immediate relief. A collaborative effort with LM and other partners such as ISI, CDO and so on is launched. Four states in which the LM is active are being attended to.

Another related initiative is a locally funded one and involves our Jesuit institution, XLRI, Jamshedpur. This is a promising one in terms of the opportunities to reach relief (both medical and food) through a lot of networking efforts with secular organizations. It is titled # MISSIONVISHWAS.

Lok Manch: Launched in the year 2015, it completes its second 3-year phase in October 2021. We have undertaken an Evaluation of LM which is now complete and we are awaiting the final report by the end of the month. We have started the process of applying for the next 3-Year Phase. LM has been instrumental in changing the lives of people, especially the most vulnerable sections of society. Grassroots leadership has been created and a large number of women leaders have emerged. LM has disturbed the status quo and so it faces stiff resistance in many pockets of the country.

Think Tank (TT): The newly-revamped TT had its first meeting 10 May, 2021. The

members made short presentation on the state of our civil society and the impacts of the Pandemic. Many felt we should have such meetings every month. As the Republic goes through its toughest and most difficult period, the need for such a group becomes very important.

All-women Webinar Volume: In order to listen to the voices of women especially in the context of the arrest and imprisonment of Fr Stan Swamy and other Rights Defenders (Rights of Nature plus Human Rights), SJES had organized a women's Webinar early this year. It was well-attended and highly appreciated. Among those who spoke was a woman whose husband is still in prison (Adv. Ms Susan Abraham). Younger students, one of them hailing from Kashmir also had spoken. A follow-up in the form of a Book was planned and is now in the final stages. The editor of this volume is Dr Astrid Lobo-Gajiwala. The book is published jointly with the Indian Social Institute, Delhi.

Meeting on the 2nd Wave: This was a collaborative venture with LM. Several women from LM presented their views. There were also experts from Sri Lanka who spoke. We noted the best practices.

Apostolic Planning: SJES, SAsia provided the lead having its Apostolic Planning well ahead of time. It was held online from the 28th to the 30th May. One goal for 3 years has been set for each of the Conference Apostolic Planning. The feedback received from the participants was very



encouraging. The method of Spiritual Conversations employed seemed to have helped a lot. Several participants said that the three days of prayer, intentional speaking and active listening made it a truly spiritual experience. A proper disposition for this is vitally important.

A unique feature of the process was that it was truly an experience of South Asia, as most of the countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan were represented. Their resource persons such as Fr Milroy (Sri Lanka), Raja/Vijay Toppo (Nepal), Fr Jerry (Bangladesh) and Fr Jerome (Afghanistan) explained the situation in their respective countries and how they are approaching and implementing the CAPs. The main resource person for the three days was Fr C J Arun, currently the Director of LIBA. His inputs and guidance were appreciated by all the participants.

Campaigns: SJES and Lok Manch have been promoting and participating in some important campaigns such as the Right to Food; the Right to Health, Free Vaccinations to all and also promoting vaccinations as a means to combatting the spread of the corona virus. There is a lot of awareness material that has been circulated. Our staff members have participated in several online campaigns.

Dissemination of literature for ongoing reflection: The Secretariat is regularly disseminating articles, posters and other publicity material to promote an ongoing

reflection and analysis of the situation. It believes in evidence-based Advocacy. We also do some writing work as and when asked by various forums.

Farmers' protest: We were involved in responding to the protests which were interrupted by the 2nd wave of the Pandemic. These protests are continuing and Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) report mentions it clearly. This is a protest we must try and understand and support because it has to do with the farming community, which is going through very rough times. It is also a lesson in conducting peaceful long-drawn-out protests to fight for the rights and dignity of peoples. It is a great teacher of the art of Democracy itself!

Concluding Comment: The danger to the secular fabric of the nation and an existential threat to the Republic itself have come from anti-democratic and anti-people forces. The root causes of many of the problems we witness today are due to a decline in democracy and rise of authoritarianism rule; or, to put it in the words of a woman analyst, a genocidal majoritarianism. The spectre of fascism stalks our land. The biggest and the most urgent need are to restore and strengthen democracy in all its manifestations. This is a herculean task which would succeed only if all the Ministries and Institutions work together and join hands with secular and democratic forces within and outside of the country. This is difficult but not impossible.