



Lok Manch:

Exploring opportunities - Experiencing graces



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A pilgrim journey

Lok Manch as a pilgrim journey that began in November 2015 has its roots in the historical experiences of the Jesuits of South Asia. The seed of Lok Manch can be traced back to the historical initiatives of the Jesuits in 2003. 'Another world is possible' was the slogan globally at that time. Over 1,500 Jesuits, collaborators, and a large number of women, men and youth from priority communities participated in the Mumbai World Social Forum from 16th to 21st January 2004, under the banner of South Asian Peoples' Initiatives (SAPI). It included 45 international delegates. Frs Prakash Louis and Joe Xavier were the facilitators of this process. For the first time the historically marginalized communities accompanied and served by the Jesuits living in remote villages had an opportunity to travel to Mumbai. It was also an opportunity for the Dalits, Adivasis and minorities cutting across language, culture, religion and ethnicity to meet face to face and share with others

their responses to these questions: Who am I? What am I doing in a Jesuit Social centre? What is my passion and dream?

In the years that followed the SAPI platform continued to bring fresh air with the Right to Information, Election Manifestos, National Dalit Policy, Forest Rights, National Budget critique, Fundamentalism and Human Rights violations. SAPI flag was carried forward by Fr Xavier Jeyaraj. In 2008 the Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat, Rome organized a global conference at El Escorial, Spain, and SAPI was presented as a model to reflect on networking opportunities in the Society of Jesus.

The remnant rises from the dust

Despite the decline of SAPI, the spirit of Magis of South Asian Jesuits could not be buried for long. On 21st March 2014, three Jesuits - Frs Joe Xavier, MK George and Sannybhai - met in Delhi where Joe shared a draft concept note 'To promote

focussed collective interventions'. Joe and Sannybhai sent the concept note to different stakeholders. The response was overwhelming, with a tagline 'with you in this journey'. At this stage, hardly anyone knew that the seed of Lok Manch was planted in fertile soil.

First consultation held in Bangalore (July, 2014)

The primary purpose was to draw up a strategic plan to develop a collaborative network at the Assistancy level by engaging in a concrete thematic area that would provide space for Jesuit and like-minded partners. A quick SWOT analysis was conducted to assess JESA. Duly recognizing various hurdles, the Province social action coordinators agreed to go ahead even if some Provinces were not part of this network. From fifteen possible thematic areas the participants short-listed two. The members unanimously decided to take forward this conversation in their Provinces.

Second consultation held in Pune (November, 2014)

By the beginning of November, the facilitating team in consultation with the Province coordinators decided to work on National Food Security. In 2013 the Government of India promulgated the National Food Security Act. In this consultation, the focus was on developing goals and appropriate strategies. There were some disagreements as some felt access to food entitlement was a soft thematic area. At this point the group prayed over and discerned the following proposal:

- Primary goal was to build a proactive and advocacy network platform
- Access to food entitlement was to be understood only as an operational theme, and
- Local organizations could effectively use this platform to respond to challenging issues locally.

The group unanimously approved the proposal. After this consultation a three-member team – Frs Joe Xavier, Stanny Pinto and Sannybhai met in Ahmedabad to work on the details of the project log frame and budget. This discussion paved clear direction for networking. Each Province was encouraged to form its own working units, each unit comprising of four organisations with a maximum of only two Jesuit organisations. This was a key moment of partnership building.

The third consultation held in Kalady (2015)

By April 2015, 23 units were formed in thirteen Provinces. Four partners from Kolkata and Goa came forward to be part of this national network and the organizational membership was 100 (44 headed by Jesuits, 32 by lay persons, 19 by religious and 5 by Diocesans priests), working in fourteen States and in fifteen Jesuits Provinces. As the final proposal was prepared – Development and Access to Entitlements of the Marginalised, the erstwhile name ‘common programme’ was rechristened as ‘Lok Manch’ (Peoples’ Forum). Some Province coordinators continued to raise eyebrows and asked whether the Lok Manch would become a reality, whether the facilitators would be able to raise the resources and, if so, when?

In May 2015, Joe Xavier met the head of Asia desk in Misereor in Aachen and discussed the new way of proceeding by the Jesuits. Misereor gave the much-awaited green signal. Following this development, Jesuit Mission offices and Porticus came forward to extend their support.

Fourth consultation in Mumbai (August, 2015)

Being assured of financial support, once again, the social coordinators gathered to recommit and reimagine the journey of Lok Manch asking, ‘What difference would the Lok Manch make in the lives of the people and Jesuits by 2018?’ Adhering to the Ignatian tradition, it was an exercise of ‘Repetition’, recollecting the goal setting initiated in the first consultation in Bangalore. This time, the visioning exercises kindled fire among the participants and strengthened ownership.

First Phase of Lok Manch

After 20 months of preparation the first phase journey of Lok Manch began from 1st November 2015 as a faith inspired, rights-based and inclusive movement, rooted in local contexts and engaged in grassroots advocacy. Through bottom-up structural linkage and decentralized decision-making processes, space was created to build leaders and informed citizens in the communities. The first six months were spent in anchoring the Lok Manch concept at the State and Zonal levels. These efforts culminated with the formal launching of Lok Manch in Delhi in April 2016 in the presence of Mr Harsh Mandar, Fr George Pattery, Mr Marcos Ibáñez from Alboan and other dignitaries.

Fr George Pattery was all along the ardent campaigner of Lok Manch, taking the good news to many corners, including JCSA, other Conferences and Rome. Through his efforts, Lok Manch became a talking point as a ‘model collaborative and network programme’ in the Assistancy.

The first major activity was to prepare the status report on access to entitlements among 273,802 households comprising of 64.6% Hindu, 13.9% Christian, 6.7%

Muslim, 14.6% Sarna (tribal religion) and 0.1% from other religions. Socially these households belonged to: Dalits (26.7%), Adivasis (44.3%), Other Backward Classes (20.6%) and General (8.4%). The data collected was analysed and gaps were identified. This study report was prepared by Fr Joe Xavier.

The process of collecting the data was a revelation for Lok Manch partners to taste the first fruits of “peoples’ power”. In many instances, the process led to immediate interventions by the local officials to set right the wrong and allow ordinary people to have better access to entitlements.

Teams led by Frs Denzil Fernandes, Joy Karayampuram, Selvaraj Arulnathan, and Benny Chiramel prepared three training modules on Right to Food, Scheduled Caste Sub Plan and Tribal Sub Plan and WASH. Frs Edward Fassett, Secretary for Collaboration, and Renato from MAGIS, Italy, were present in Pune. Fr Ed said, “In my assessment Lok Manch tops as the right way to build collaborative network platform in the Society of Jesus.”

Mr Vijay Parmar, former director of Behavioural Science Centre, and Jan Vikas in Ahmedabad, provided consultancy services from January 2017. Under his guidance, Lok Manch marched towards greater heights closely working with members of the Core Team, comprising of Jesuits and lay collaborators. Sannybhai travelled extensively to monitor the progress, ably supported by Denzil Fernandes. Sr Ruby Mary Kujur was the programme coordinator of Lok Manch.

Based on the external evaluation report and observing effective process of empowerment of the marginalised through Lok Manch at the grassroots, Misereor extended financial support for three more years starting from 1st November 2018. Campaign and advocacy is the objective of the second phase and the pilgrim journey of Lok Manch is on.

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