



Fr Joe Chenakala SJ speaks to us about *Jana Jagaran*

Jana Jagaran is an extensive social outreach programme

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QUESTION: Could you tell us in brief the works you undertake at *Jana Jagaran*?

Jana Jagaran is a social action wing of the Goa Jesuits. Our area of operation presently consists of Belagavi and eleven other districts of North Karnataka and Kolhapur district of Maharashtra. Ours is an experiment at the grass roots for the creation of a better world. We perceive the root causes of poverty and injustice in terms of denial of opportunities to the vast masses of our people for their personal, political, cultural and economic growth. Many of the underlying causes of poverty and exploitation are linked to the global politics and economics over which we have no control. Hence our strategy is to use the available resources to empower the common people to bring about lasting improvements in their personal, economic, cultural and political lives. For that cause we join hands with all women and men of good will.

At the heart of ‘*sustainable economic development*’ is ‘*human*’ development, involving investment in resources and time, harnessing the energies and aspirations of the people and developing their skills and capabilities. To achieve that, we provide the overarching inspiration and guidance and initiate activities that enable people to have access to food, health, education, employment and shelter in a clean and healthy environment with opportunity to participate in the decisions making process that affects their lives.

QUESTION: Could you share with us something about your various initiatives?

Our work among the traditional shepherds empowers them to protect their pastoral lands, pastoral rights, and put in place better policies for marketing of sheep and sheep products, fodder promotion, medicine and vaccine delivery, disease control and treatment. The target of the movement is 15 million ruminants and 8% of Karnataka’s population who are *Kurubar* and other communities that depend on ruminants for their livelihoods.

SHG movement: We are working with a large number of persons. These SHGs are formed at panchayat, taluka, and district levels, even at the support of the elders of many elected peoples’ panchayat, district and have good rapport with



animate and guide 2050 members of 30500 federated at village, district and in the case of state level. They have the their communities and representatives at the state level. Besides they government officials and

bureaucrats at various levels. It is no exaggeration to say that SHGs older than 10 years have become mini banks that take care of the financial needs of their members. Our SHG movement has been instrumental in promoting organic farming and accessing work and wages under MGNREGA.

Community Health: We cover 49 villages. Our health workers focus on the health needs of women, children and the poor. Besides providing medicines for common ailments, they sensitize people on preventive measures, promote herbal medicines and enable people to demand better services from the government.

Under the Functional Vocational Training initiative we train adolescent rural girls with garment making skills. The training includes modules of personality development, family life education and status of women in society. Annually we reach out to 700 girls.

Student Sponsorship: Many rural students, who with a lot of difficulty complete their twelve years of schooling, have no opportunity for further education. Their poverty and lack of employment opportunity is alarming. We partly respond to this situation by sponsoring 25 students annually for professional courses. So far we have sponsored over 250 students.

Biogas plant cum toilet units for rural households: Annually we construct over 1000 units. This



Biogas cum toilet unit under construction

initiative makes a remarkable difference in the life of beneficiary households and contributes to the overall health and hygiene of the villages. This intervention has a very positive impact on gender mainstreaming. Its contribution to women empowerment is evident. Women are saved from humiliation, dehumanization resulting from open defecation. They are saved from the smoky kitchen and its bad effects. Besides, the project achieves directly and explicitly the goals of climate protection and conservation

of forests and biodiversity and green energy.

In short, the *Jana Jagaran* movement is an attempt to implement on ground what GC 32 and the GCs that followed mandated - an attempt to be at the *Frontiers* witnessing to *Faith* and *Justice* and *Reconciliation with Creation*.

3. What were some of the difficulties you faced in adapting to new cultures and working with diverse groups of people?

Strictly speaking, I did not face any difficulty in working with people of diverse cultures, religion, language and political affiliations. My study of anthropology and my familiarity with Jesus - *God Made Flesh* - helped me to cherish my personal identity as a child of God and my

identity as a Jesuit. The same identity enabled me to see others as having their personal identity as the images of 'Our Father' with their cherished cultural, religious, linguistic and political identities. My logical conclusion was that in my relationship with others and with creation I had no choice other than honour the Creator in His living images with their varied personal and cultural identities. Hence I understood that my mission, the mission of "*Jana Jagaran*" was to affirm the reality of the Divine in the other in communion with others and fight the forces that obstruct the humanization or rather the divinization process. Hence from its very beginning we described *Jana Jagaran* as an experiment at the grass roots to transform society, by promoting communities founded on values of Peace, Justice and Love in solidarity with the poor in their struggle to affirm their humanity. We have not *baptized* it as a *missionary* or *Jesuit* work. *Jana Jagaran* is the outcome of genuine collaboration between Jesuits and other men and women of goodwill from the cross section of the rural community. *Jana Jagaran* finds welcome and active support from all quarters.

4. What suggestions would you make to young Jesuits today about the universality of our Jesuit mission?

My suggestion to young and old Jesuits today is to avail of all the necessary means for self discovery and the discovery of the other - to discern and affirm ones personal, cultural and Jesuit identity and cherish it and help others with whom one interacts to discover their unique individual and community identities.

Don't feel intimidated by diversity and plurality of individual, cultural and religious and political identities but ask for the grace to discern and honor the presence of the ONE in whom everything has its origin and existence and to whom all return. Or in other words - to come to the realization of what GC 35 Decree 3 says in its concluding section: "*Our mission is not limited to our works. Our personal and community relationship with the Lord, our relationship to one another as friends in the Lord, our solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and a lifestyle responsible to creation are all important aspects of our lives as Jesuits. They authenticate what we proclaim and what we do in fulfilling our mission*". Our faith in Christ should be incarnated in our persons and ministries through the justice of our relationships with God, others, and creation.

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