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Folk School

In our working methodologies, we have mentioned folk school as one of the methods we try to employ in order to help particularly the less privileged sections or low income groups to come together to discuss their problems. The aim is that through discussions among people who have similar problems, certain ideas could be developed which could develop into a certain degree of consensus of what to demand from their government and other institutions of their society.

This model was based on a study of the folk school tradition of Denmark. The founder of approach is regarded as N.F.S. Grundtvig who is among the three great Danish thinkers of the 19th century. The three great Danish thinkers, Christian Andersen for fairytales, Soren Kierkegaard for philosophy, particularly existentialism and N.F.S. Grundtvig for his contribution to democratization of Denmark.

AHRC's interest in the folk school movement began in early 2020 when after reading certain writings of Grundtvig, the AHRC made a request from the Danish Centre for Human Rights with which the AHRC was then working to provide for an opportunity to study the folk school method and to have an opportunity to discuss this matter with persons who are knowledgeable on the subject. Danish Centre for Human Rights provided this opportunity and as a result Mr. Basil Fernando, then Executive Director spent several months in Denmark in doing this study. As a result of that, a manuscript was developed entitled demoralization and hope, a comparative study on democratization by N.F.S. Grundtvig of Denmark and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar of India. This manuscript was published by the Danish Centre for Human Rights. Thereafter, it was also published as a book by the Asian Human Rights Commission. With that began an experimentation where the method was applied in a large number of "schools" organized by the AHRC at their center in Hong Kong where many participants from many countries in Asia participated. There is a YouTube presentation that explains this methodology produced by Josefina Bergsten which is available at ...

In the new project which started in June 2020, we had the ambition of following this methodology and it was prevented due to the Covid-19 situation. However, later, we were able to develop folk school sessions particularly in the recent weeks.

From the middle of June up to now, there had been ten sessions of this nature carried out in ten remote areas in Sri Lanka. This was an activity that the Right to Life Centre together with the Asian Human Rights Commission organized. The theme around which it was organized was the international day for torture victims which falls every year on the 26th of June.

In the ten sessions that were organized, following are the details. Each of the sessions lasted for two and a half hours or a little more. The average attendance was around 70 persons. In each session, these persons were from different areas. They were mostly people from the local areas who had been living in those areas as their normal habitat. They were between the ages around 25 to 40 and there were people who were also older.

The participants were mostly people who are involved in civil society activities in one way or the other and this group constituted the majority. However, there were also others. There were three members of parliament who attended and spoke at some sessions. There were school principals, persons from the educational department and also officers from the police department. And there were others who held various positions in the local government or other government or private sectors. In one session, even the President of the Gem Business Society from the area which is famous for precious gems also participated which is quite a rare event.

The manner in which the meeting was carried out was as follows. One of the members associated with the Right to Life work in the particular area, sometimes a lawyer involved in cases or National Human Rights Commission member of the particular branch of that area or local member of the Right to Life will make a presentation about certain problems identified in that particular local area relating to the situation of practice of torture and ill-treatment as well as other human rights abuses related to the bad legal institutions working in the area. Often, they centered around the police stations, court houses, the schools, in terms of the physical punishment of children and other forms of harassment of children, and also prisons.

After the local experience is presented, two or three members from The Right to Life and ALRC gave brief presentations to the audience on the related themes and the approach suggested by both organizations in terms of the objectives of people's education and also creating of public opinion for necessary changes in order to facilitate better services to the people. And then the session was open for questions. Surprisingly, a large number of questions were raised during these meetings by the local audiences. Usually persons who raised questions all speak about experiences they had locally in relation to their rights and they would ask an explanation both in terms of law and also practical strategies for dealing with that problem. Answers to these are then provided by the resource persons.

The whole list of questions that have been raised and the discussions that followed will be recorded in a separate document in the coming weeks and this will be shared with similar meetings in the future.

What this experience showed was that there was a very great opening for such discussions because all these people who participated have voluntarily registered for these meetings when they were announced. Numbers were far beyond what was expected by the Right to Life and the ALRC.

The Covid-19 situation has prepared the background for greater use of online facilities among the ordinary people. These people who participated were generally average citizens and they do not belong to the privileged classes or even the sophisticated middle class based in Colombo and other cities.

The AHRC/ALRC and the Right to Life will analyze this surprising experience and try to utilize it for future purposes for ongoing folk school sessions on matters relating to the objectives of this project.

References:

1. <http://www.humanrights.asia/resources/books/demoralization-and-hope/>
2. Folk School - AHRC's Approach - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEbMNGIY8gc>
3. Teach me and I Remember - The 14th Folk school - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGNbKT4VV4>

**Folk school sessions recently held for school sessions
(Months of June and July 2021)**

In our working methodologies, we have mentioned folk school as one of the methods we try to employ in order to help particularly the less privileged sections or low income groups to come together to discuss their problems. The aim is that through discussions among people who have similar problems, certain ideas could be developed which could develop into a certain degree of consensus of what to demand from their government and other institutions of their society.

How the meeting is held? **a.** Human rights activists from that particular locality make a presentation of violations of rights, experienced in the locality. Such as, illegal arrests, detention, torture, other forms of harassments and intimidations, and right to participation. **b.** 2 or 3 resource persons from the Right to Life and the ALRC responded to the first presentation, both in terms of human rights issues and practical ways to solve these problems. **c.** Session is opened to questions and comments by participants. **d.** Final responses by resource persons and conclusions.

For details, kindly see the note on folk school sessions.

Date	Event	Participants
20 June 2021	Deniyaya HRFAC	48
21 June 2021	Hatton HRFAC	64
22 June 2021	Monaragala HRFAC	36
23 June 2021	Galle HRFAC	37
27 June 2021	Book launch – Amitha's book	73
30 June 2021	Rathnapura HRFAC	83
01 July 2021	Anamaduwa HRFAC	72
02 July 2021	Matara HRFAC	80
03 July 2021	Anuradhapura HRFAC	82
04 July 2021	Hambanthota HRFAC	74

NOTE: Total number of people who participated are 649. Average for a meeting is 65.

ALRC Narrative Report on Submissions to the United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms

The Asian Legal Resource (ALRC), being a Non-Governmental Organisation with the General Consultative Status of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations (UN), has been active at the UN Human Rights Mechanisms through submissions of individual cases of human rights violations on a regular basis. The ALRC submits alternative reports to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and the Treaty Bodies apart from its Written Statements and Oral Interventions to the Sessions of the Human Rights Council of the UN.

ALRC's Mid-Term UPR Assessment Report on Bangladesh:

During the period of implementation of the MISEREOR Project since June 2020 the ALRC has made a Mid-Term Report assessing the progress of implementation of the 3rd Cycle of UPR on Bangladesh in December 2020. The ALRC had submitted this report along with its regional and international partners who are part the Bangladesh Solidarity Group. The report had highlighted that the Government of Bangladesh officially accepted 71 percent of the 251 Recommendations adopted in the UPR 3rd Cycle. During the Mid-Term Assessment of the civil society groups found that 77 percent out of the accepted Recommendations remained unimplemented while only 23 percent were partially implemented. The unimplemented aspects include prevention of gross human rights violations such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, kneecapping, torture, arbitrary arrests and detention. Bangladesh disregarded the calls for protecting the freedom of press, freedom of expression and opinion, and freedom of assembly. Instead, the government intensified its crackdown on the civic space by using draconian laws against the dissidents and the political opposition parties. The criminal justice institutions including the police, crime investigation, forensic medicine examination system, prosecution and the Attorney General's Office, and the Judiciary were intently subjugated and were abused against the critics of the government and the ruling party elites.

The ALRC previously submitted reports to all the three cycles of the UPR on Bangladesh held in 2009, 2013, and 2018.

ALRC's Written Statements to the UN Human Rights Council Sessions:

The ALRC had made four Written Submissions on Bangladesh on the thematic mandates of Independence of Judges and Lawyers, Arbitrary Detention, Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and Torture since June 2020. All the Written Statements had specially focused on the issue of 'access to justice' in the given context of Bangladesh. The detailed contents of the Written Submissions can be found from the following links:

[BANGLADESH: Access to justice amidst COVID-19 for pro-opposition litigants are dealt with draconian laws and discrimination](#)

[BANGLADESH: Arbitrary Detention used as a complementary tool for the unelected government and a coercive law-enforcement system](#)

[BANGLADESH: Victims of Enforced Disappearances Denied Access to Justice](#)

[BANGLADESH: Torture being used to block access to justice](#)

The ALRC has submitted two Written Statements on Indonesia focussing on the issues of Enforced Disappearances, Arbitrary Detention and Torture during the same period since June 2020. These two Written Submissions have covered the aspects of numerous cases of enforced disappearances under the prolonged military dictatorship that still remain unresolved and entangled with manifold socio-economic, psycho-somatic, and political problems. The use of pretrial detention under the Criminal Law Procedure having widened scope of prolonged detention without legal representation and systemic torture in custody is highlighted in the context of access to justice in Indonesia. The detailed contents of the Written Submissions can be found at the following links:

[INDONESIA: Twenty two years of unresolved enforced disappearances while the offender enjoys impunity](#)

[INDONESIA: Pretrial detention under the Criminal Law Procedure needs serious reform, having caused torture and ill-treatment](#)

ALRC's Oral Intervention to the UN Human Rights Council:

The ALRC has made five Oral Interventions during the 47th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in June 2021. The virtually presented statements focused on the thematic issues of Arbitrary Detention, Extrajudicial and Summary Executions, Independence of Judges and Lawyers and the deepened crisis of Myanmar. The ALRC emphasised on building justice institutions in the Asian region where the emergence of authoritarianism is on the rise to destroy peace, stability, rule of law, and democracy.

Individual Cases of Human Rights Violations Submitted to the UN Special Procedures:

The ALRC's sister concern - Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) - submits individual cases of human rights violations to the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Mechanisms on a regular basis.

Arbitrary Detention of Bangladeshi Writer submitted to the UN WGAD:

The AHRC made submissions to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention on the case of Mustaq Ahmed, a writer, arbitrarily detained for his critical writings. After detaining him a case was filed under the Digital Security Act-2018. He was detained in prison for 297 days from 4 May to 25 February 2021 until his death in prison. The judiciary of Bangladesh denied Mushtaq's bail petitions six times during the prolonged period of detention.

Arbitrary Detention of Bangladeshi Cartoonist Submitted to the UN WGAD:

The AHRC submitted the case of Ahmed Kabir Kishore, a cartoonist, to the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the UN. Kishore was arbitrarily detained for publishing cartoons criticising the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. After detaining him incommunicado a case was filed under the Digital Security Act-2018. He was detained in prison for 306 days from 2 May to 4 March 2021. The judiciary of Bangladesh denied Mushtaq's bail petitions six times during the prolonged period of detention.

The AHRC has made application to the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) for financial supports for medical treatment of the victim's injuries inflicted as a result of torture in custody. The OMCT disbursed a fund of BDT 80,000 to the victim for medical treatment.

The victim has filed a case with the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court of Dhaka under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prohibition) Act-2013 in mid March 2021. The Court has ordered the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) to probe the allegation of torture. The PBI has not made any known progress in investigating the case while police have reputation for covering up the allegation of human rights violations by the law-enforcement agencies of Bangladesh. However, a medical board formed following the Court's order to examine the victim's injuries inflicted due to torture had concluded that no injury sing was found in the body of Ahmed Kabir Kishore as a result of torture.

Female Lawyer's Arbitrary Detention was Submitted to the UN WGAD:

The AHRC submitted the case of Ms. Nipun Roy Chowdhury, a lawyer and opposition politician, to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. She participated in a fact-finding mission of the opposition political party - Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to investigate the atrocities committed by the ruling party leader on Hindu community in Shalla Upazilla in Sunamganj district. The fact-finding report was published on 25 March 2021 at a press conference in Dhaka - the day

before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to visit Bangladesh for the golden jubilee celebrations of Bangladesh. On 28 March 2021, a plain clothed team of Rapid Action Battalion abducted her while she remained disappeared for hours. Late in the evening the RAB admitted that it arrested Nipun Roy Chowdhury. A case has been filed against her under the Anti-Terrorism Act-2009. She has been denied bail twice since her arrest and was in police remand for three days. Nipun was released from jail on bail after 82 days detention, on 20 June 2021. Since then she remains silent about her experiences under the custody.

Tortured and Detained Journalist's Case was Submitted to the UN SR on Torture and Freedom of Expression and Opinion:

The AHRC submitted the case of Mamunur Rashid Nomani, a journalist based in Barisal Metropolitan City of Bangladesh, to the the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and to the Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of Freedom of Expression and Opinion. Nomani was tortured in public place by the local city mayor Sadiq Abdullah Serniabat who is a niece to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. He was detained arbitrarily for two weeks in a fabricated case filed under the Digital Security Act-2018. He got his right hand's plum fractured due to torture.

The AHRC has helped make application to OMCT for financial supports for medical treatment of the victim's injuries inflicted as a result of torture in custody. The OMCT has granted the application and has disbursed BDT 200,000 to the victim.

Four Men's Disappearance Case Submitted to the UN WGEID:

The AHRC submitted the enforced disappearance case of Mr. K. M. Afsanul Adnan Anto and his three companions, namely 1. Mr. Amir Uddin Foyez, owner and driver of the car; 2. Mr. Abdul Muhit; and 3. Mr. Firoz, to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID). These four were abducted by the Detective Branch (DB) of Police on 11 June 2021. All four of them returned home on 18 June 2021 - eight days after their disappearance and two days after the AHRC had submitted the case to the UN Special Procedures. Bangladesh's police have provided a narrative that Mr. K. M. Afsanul Adnan Anto went to his friend's mother's home in Gaibandha district (a neighbouring district of Mr. Adnan's home town, which is around 300 kilometres far from Dhaka where the four men were reportedly disappeared from) instead of returning to his residence, which was just few kilometres away from the scene of disappearance. The police claim that the four disappeared men stayed in Mr. Anto's friend's mum's house while the friend does not live in that house (while the friend lives in Rangpur where he works and Rangpur is Mr. Anto's home town). The police did not provide any clarification about the reason of for the three other men's stay in Mr. Anto's friend's mother's house as none of those three men had any relationship with the friend, and why none of the four men did not inform their respective families about their whereabouts while their cellphones were switched off during the eight days.

The four men including Mr. Anto did not speak to the media or human rights groups about the truth behind the eight-days' disappearance. Instead of talking directly to the AHRC Mr. Anto informed through his co-brother that he has nothing to say beyond whatever the police are saying about him being disappeared along with his companions and rented car-driver.

The AHRC contacted the families of the three other disappeared people; all of them expressed their reluctance in talking about the matter. They said that they are happy to come back and looking forward to living a normal life in future.

On the contrary, the AHRC learned through its reliable source that the Detective Branch of the Bangladesh Police abducted the four people from Gabtali of Dhaka city. They were held

incommunicado at the Joint Interrogation Cell - a unit comprising the officers of the military intelligence Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), National Security Intelligence (NSI), Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit (CTTCU) and the Detective Branch (DB) of the Police during the period of disappearance.

The AHRC has provided an update to the UN WGEID after their return from disappearance.

Islamic Preacher's Disappearance Case Submitted to the UN WGEID:

The AHRC submitted the case of enforced disappearance of Mr. Md. Mahmud Hasan - an Islamic Preacher, whom the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) abducted on 6 July 2021 from Noakhali district - 200 kilometres from Dhaka toward the South of Bangladesh.

MD. MAHMUD HASAN (Also Known As Mufti Maolana Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi) went to meet his religious teacher Qari Muhammad Yousuf at the latter's home in Village- Pashchim Shulukia, Post Office- Karmula Bazar, under the jurisdiction of Sudharam Police Station in Noakhali district. He stayed back in that house following his teacher's suggestion.

On 6 July 2021 at 7:00 AM a group of around 20 plain clothed men arrived at the house of Qari Muhammad Yousuf by two Toyota Hiace (model) vans and a SUV having the name of 'RAB '[Rapid Action Battalion] inscribed on its body. Almost half of the plain clothed men were carrying firearms in their hands. They claimed to be from the law- enforcement agency of the State and looked for Mufti Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi. The plain clothed men denied to show any search warrant or arrest warrant or identity cards to confirm the legality of raiding the house and official identity to prove that they were, in fact, from the agencies of the State. The family looked for the man in the Sudharam police station and the Rapid Action Battalion's office in Laxmipur. The police refused to register complaint regarding the disappearance of Mr. Mahmud Hasan. In addition, the police intimidated Qari Muhammad Yousuf whose house Mahmud Hasan was abducted from. The RAB, on 13 July 2021, called in the family members of the disappeared person to its headquarters to intimidate and asked not to talk about the case in public and with media or human rights groups. A RAB team went to the disappeared man's home to coerce signatures of his wife and elder sister on blank pieces of papers. Two days after the AHRC had submitted the case to the UN WGEID the RAB, on 16 July, officially claimed that Mahmud Hasan was arrested from the outskirts of Dhaka on the previous day, 15 July. The RAB also brought militancy charge against him.

The Future Implications of the Impact of Covid-19 on Communications in Social Movements

Covid-19 is a moment of beginning in terms of substantive cultural change in the poorer countries in Asia. Having closely observed the situation of societal reactions to Covid-19, which is one of the most challenging moments faced particularly in developing countries like the four countries related to this project: Nepal, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the AHRC has come to observe that what may become a momentous change in the social communication has been developing in these countries.

Unable to cope with workloads at every level, schools, workplaces, places of religious worship, and social organizations, media organizations and cultural organizations and in short in all areas of life, the societies have entered into a communication change unprecedented in their histories within such a short period of about two years.

People who have not had the chance to get exposed to the industrial revolution and the resulting changes which gradually came about in the Western countries have now been forced into dealing with the issue of the speed in communication as it had never been experienced before.

This is not possible to be expressed in a few short paragraphs but we will try to give a short summary of the potential which has opened up for very strong social communications and therefore social movements in the counties of this region.

It needs to be realized that one of the major patterns that slows down the speed of social transactions in a developing country is the extreme backwardness of its transport systems. To communicate with each other in physical terms as it happened before the Covid-19 situation, one of the major obstacles to overcome was the slow speed of transport. For example, a worker who may have to come to a city or to the capital from a distance of 30 or more kilometers would have to spend more time to get to work and to return from work than what he or she would sometimes spend in terms of actual working time. The same applies to all others like students and those in every other sector. In such a context, the development of internal communications through online means has become a major event, changing the speed of communications. For the same reasons of the difficulties in covering distances physically, there are people particularly from the rural sectors who do not get the chance to meet people from many other areas as well as from different social sectors. To this, we may add that those who are more proactive are also now brought into contact with international contact bases than ever before.

Once such a speed enters into society, particularly by way of social communication change, it becomes impossible to reverse this trend.

Thus, this has opened up enormous possibilities to overcome the problems of building of internal connections, solidarity movements and improving social interactions. It is an irony that social distancing brought about by Covid-19 has in fact introduced a different form of social connectivity which would create great potential for changes if there are persons who could consciously make use of such situations for bringing about improvements of the life conditions of the people, particularly the poorer people.

The repressive mechanisms established by authoritarian regimes which exist in these countries are now facing a challenge they are simply unable to cope up with. Thus, while externally there may be

greater external forms of repression, the actual internal social controls are seriously being undermined in these situations.

The little experiments that the AHRC has been engaged in, the use of online facilities, Zoom facilities and electronic mail families, has shown to us the tremendous potential that exists now of influencing people with substantial ideas for social change.

Thus, while poverty has increased due to Covid-19 related unemployment and income deterioration and the like, on the other hand, the possibility of greater social consciousness and intercourse has increased. These social intercourses could become one of the mobilizing factors for fighting censorship, other forms of repression and also bringing about greater awareness of the problems of people and creating solidarity among the people.

What is required is new imagination to understand in depth the problems of inequality and the ways to overcome this inequality not merely through income distribution but also by strengthening the mechanism of protection that are expected to provide substantial legal equality. Substantive legal equality for the poor needs to become one of the major themes that should be pursued under these circumstances. Thus, the pessimism that has prevailed in the past that some of the basic social institutions cannot be easily changed have to be rethought of in terms of the present circumstances.

Under these circumstances, approaching Sustainable Development Goal Number 16 with new imagination to utilize the social interactions will bring about greater access to justice and the improvement of the mechanism of protection needs to be thought out. What is missing at the moment mostly is that there is the very slow development of the social imagination for bringing about changes in a substantially changed social environment.

Improving social consciousness is a more difficult task than the mere distribution of services. The approach to the theory of change adapted by the AHRC which is also followed elsewhere like for example the Dutch Foreign Ministry relating to civil society involvement can now be tested in these countries where very backward social communication systems existed. More time needs to be devoted to understanding these problems and communicating such understandings, than ever before. This is the way that the AHRC has been trying to respond to the Covid-19 situation.