

Fr. John Khanna- A genuine priest and a friend of all



Johnny, as we used to call him fondly, was a friend of all and will be much remembered always for his love, humour and spontaneity. When John Khanna died, Gujarat province lost one of the finest Jesuits we had and I personally lost a very good friend, companion and my confidante who has helped me very much at different occasions and in different ways. For the last 37 years. We had been together in conducting training programmes for all walks of people. With no exaggeration I can say I grew with him and because of him.

It was in 1977 when John and myself went to Kenya to attend the international workshop on DELTA (Development Education and Leadership Teams in Action-Paulo Freire's methodology for conscientization and community development) that I came into close contact with John. Ever since we have been conducting DELTA, later on re-christened

by us as PACT (Peoples Awareness for Community Transformation) for different groups both in Gujarat and all over India. Besides this, John has been a companion, friend and supporter for me in the different works and programmes I had undertaken. He was also associated with Rajpipla Social Service Society right from the time of Fr. Joe Idiakunnel and recently as a member of the training team of the Diploma course in ICDRD (Integrated Community Development and Rural Development) conducted by RSSS in collaboration with National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) Hyderabad

John was a very human and approachable person. Sincerity and spontaneity were his characteristics. In his dealings with people he was very personal and also straight forward. He was not afraid of criticisms or making mistakes. He was a person who was open to new ideas and ready to experiment and learn from his and others' experiences. It was John's spontaneity and sincerity that had attracted me to him. He was a friend who could talk to you straight your defects and weakness without hurting you. That was a very attractive quality whom you could trust.

As a Jesuit he loved his vocation and was proud of being a companion of Jesus. Johnny was a good companion and a joyful community man. He had no cliques or prejudices. He was open to all and accepted all. He was sincere in criticism and frank in appreciating others. With people outside and in his apostolic field also people loved him because of his genuineness and frankness. In our PACT-DELTA team of Valley De Souza, Sr, Valerie Siqueira and my self he was a good trainer and a very sharp observer. Hence his feed backs and interventions were useful and effective. He did not keep any grudge or revenge on the contrary he4 was always ready to forget and forgive.

'Be happy and make others happy' seems to have been his motto and surely he practiced that in his daily dealings with people. His philosophy was to see good in every event and in every person. When I went to visit him in the hospital he was almost unconscious and could not talk. However, when I called him and asked him "Johnny, how are you?" he opened his eyes and in clear words told me " I AM DOING WELL". Mr. John, one of his old parishioners and his devote disciple was surprised at this and told me, "Father, after bringing from Sterling Hospital this is the first time he recognized any one and spoke so clearly" . To make sure that he recognized me, the Sister Jai who was there asked him who I was and he said "Xavier". For me it was the last expression of Johnny's love for me and our bond of freindhip. ...

His greatest achievements was he was a friend of all. People loved him and he was very personal with all. As a parish priest he had challenged people to think independently and become self reliant. Wherever he went he had insisted on people becoming responsible for themselves and their development. When John was in Khambhat people wanted him to give them money and other helps. Though he knew people would be angry and he would be unpopular John was convinced that 'just giving' would only make people more dependent on the church and he stood his ground. Later people realized the wisdom in John's behavior and people became very fond of him. This was all the more striking because in many places people tend to depend on us and many of us unconsciously like to "mother" our Catholics and students where as he would 'let them go and be themselves'

When he went to Nairobi for the DELTA workshop he was so natural and spontaneous that the participants would not believe he was a priest. He was equally strong when he had to express his opinion. It so happened that when his team had to put up a learning even in the same workshop his team could not even come to one theme even after 3 days because of the strong differences in the opinion and methodology. John would not give in just because of what others would speak. He would do only if he was convinced. It was only John's group that could not come up with any programme..and John was as normal as ever!.

As I mentioned earlier, Johnny was a good trainer, a good team mate in training sessions and very good in observing, challenging and helping groups. He never got into power struggle but had the generosity and magnanimity to let go and focus on real issues rather than non issues.

Johnny, as I continue with my training programmes, and other works I will miss you very much in our programmes, and in our works above all as my closest friend, companion and confidante. Bye, then, till we meet in heaven, but as you are already pray for us and the people whom you always loved.

Xavier Manjooran, SJ
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DELTA ANIMATORS-2FROM KENYA WITH JOHN &XAVIER-
IN THE FIRST DELTA WORKSHOP IN GUJARAT (1979)