



World Conference of Religions for Peace/India National Chapter Report (2015-16)

INDIA is a founder member of WCRP and ACRP. The source of our interest and commitment in multi-religious approach to finding solution to human problems springs from the age-old traditions and belief in “*Sarva Dharma Smabhava*” (Equal respect for all religions) – an ancient Hindu principle going back to the Vedic times. “Unity in Diversity” is India’s national creed. “Ahimsa Paramo Dharma” (Nonviolence is the Ultimate Righteousness) is yet another ancient exhortation, still reverberating and echoing the ethos of India. Respecting and upholding these civilizational values, our secular, democratic Constitution guarantees equal right to all religions. So, believers of all the world religions live together in India from ancient times to the present in relative harmony and flourish and progress without hitch or hindrance.

WCRP/ACRP in India continued to engage itself in various activities to promote peace, interfaith harmony, amity and understanding among people across religious communities and social divides.

Most of our members are associated with several NGOs, educational institutions, civil society movements, Gandhian organizations, and thus a great deal of our work is done through networking. We conduct programs on our own and often jointly in association with those institutions and groups with common and identical aim and objectives.

CAMPAIGN FOR “VIOLENCE-FREE INDIA”: Being a vast, complex and diverse country, India faces many daunting challenges. Among them are the menace of increasing violence and terror caused by religious extremists – both internal and external – and the Maoist insurgents. They have become a constant threat to peace and peaceful coexistence and orderly democratic process of development and progress. It is a matter of serious concern to peace-loving people everywhere. Small sections of people with vested interests are deliberately manipulating religious and sectarian sentiments as well as socio-economic backwardness to rouse passions, leading to conflict, violence and terrorist acts.

To counter this, some of us who are committed to Gandhian values of peace and nonviolence and democracy, have come together and started a national-level campaign for a “**Violence-free India**” (“*Himsamukt Bharat*”) for the past few years. This is an on-going program and we are continuing with this campaign.

CONFERENCE ON CONFLICTS AND VIOLENCE AND DIALOGUE: As part of the Violence-Free India campaign, we organized a two-day International Peace Conference on the theme “**From Conflicts and Violence to Dialogue, Reconciliation, Development and Peace**” on 2 and 3 February 2015 at Baliaghat Gandhi Ashram in Kolkata. About 200 scholars, peace and social activists, journalists, artists, women and youth from different parts of India and abroad attended the Conference.

SHANTI SENA/PEACE CORPS: We have been organizing “Shanti Sena” or Peace Corps. Shanti Sena means unarmed peace army. Shanti Sena will comprise of student and non-student youth as well

as adult citizens trained in Nonviolence and in peace-building and peace-keeping. Qualification to become a Peace Volunteer (Shanti Sainik) is total adherence and commitment to Nonviolence under all circumstances. The task of such Peace Volunteers is to help restore and maintain peace and normalcy whenever and wherever conflicts and violence occur.

CAMPAIGN FOR MINISTRY OF PEACE: Another program we are engaged in is an on-going campaign to establish a Ministry of Peace in the Government to exclusively promote peace and harmony in the country. We believe that if there can be a Ministry for War/Defence, why not one for Peace? This is part of a global campaign to set up such Ministries in national governments across the globe to reduce militarisation and to promote global peace.

PEACE CLUBS IN SCHOOLS: Due to various factors, including exposure to mindless violence in films, on television, video games, etc., children are becoming increasingly aggressive and often indulge in violent activities. This is of great concern to everyone. To inculcate moral values of tolerance and understanding among children and promote harmonious co-existence and acceptance of diversity and plurality by children, we have persuaded the concerned education authorities to start Peace Clubs (Shanti Kendras) in Schools and other educational institutions in some parts of the country. This, again, is also an ongoing program. This program is linked partially to Recommendation No. 4 of the 8th Assembly Declaration, namely Peace Education.

ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN: Endemic corruption has become a major political and social issue in India. Corruption adversely affects economic progress and the poor are the worst victims. The result is continued deprivation, persistence of poverty and backwardness and denial of social and economic justice particularly to the poor. The Civil Society, which is a major force in India, has been currently engaged in a relentless campaign demanding suitable legislation by Parliament to create State and national-level Ombudsman (Lokpals, as we call it) to check and root out political and administrative corruption at all levels. We are part of this anti-corruption campaign.

INTERFAITH MEET FOR RELIGIOUS HARMONY: An Interfaith meeting for “Religious Harmony” was held at Agnel School in Greater NOIDA, a suburb of Delhi, on 28th April 2015. About 400 people, including students, attended the meeting organized also to celebrate the 70th birthday of Swami Sushil Maharaj, a venerable Hindu religious leader. The various religious leaders who spoke, exhorted the people to maintain religious and social harmony for progress and peace. Fr Bento, one of our EC members, has organised this programme.

2015 ASIA-PACIFIC INTERFAITH YOUTH NETWORK (APIYN) YOUTH CAMP: The Asia-Pacific Interfaith Youth Network (APIYN) Youth Camp, 2015 was held in Cambodia from 7 to 10 December. The theme for the camp was “Multi-religious Youth Action to Overcome Violent Religious Extremism.”

The objectives included preparing an Action Plan to develop national and local level interfaith youth networks in respective countries and to launch Cambodian Interfaith Youth Network under the Inter-religious Council (CIC).

The camp was hosted by ACRP Seoul Peace Education Center and co-hosted by Religions for Peace Asia (ACRP) in partnership with Korean Conference of Religions for Peace (KCRP), Religions for

Peace International, and Cambodia Inter-religious Council (CIC). The camp was sponsored by Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Dr R. Anitha, youth leader, represented India in the Camp.

The opening ceremony of the Youth Camp began with a silent prayer for the victims of religious extremism and refugees all over the world.

Dr Sunggon Kim, Chairperson of ACRP Seoul Peace Education Center, inaugurated the Camp. Rev. Yoshitaka Hatakeyama, Secretary-General of ACRP, Rev. Kyoichi Sugino, Rev. Taesung Kim were among those who addressed the participants in the camp.

Discussions, visits to various religious sites and museums, teaching local school children about the culture of other countries, voluntary community social service and presentation of cultural programs were among the highlights of the Youth Camp.

The Declaration issued at the end of the Camp stated that “it is our religious imperative to combat violent religious extremism. Though we proclaim our religions to be those of peace, we must also recognize a shameful truth: many have and continue to commit violence on behalf of our faiths.”

PROTEST AGAINST HATE SPEECHES AND MINORITY BASHING: With a Hindu Right Wing government in power in India now, we are witnessing a kind of majoritarian dominance creeping in to our polity. Some members of the ruling party have been making derogatory and hateful statements/speeches against religious minorities, including icons like Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi. There have also been attacks on political dissidents and places of worship of minorities. Of course, all these have been roundly rejected and publicly condemned by vast majority of people, including by us in WCRP-ACRP, on mainstream media as well as in social media.

I mention this here because it is linked to Recommendation No.6 of the Incheon Declaration on “protection for citizens against hate speech” and we are determined to resist any attempt to dilute or erode the secular character of Indian society.

SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES: Our members have also participated in various other seminars, workshops and conferences on issues such as education, human rights, sustainable development, communal harmony, gender equality and other women’s issues, minority and other social problems held in different parts of the country and abroad, besides organizing and participating in different religious festivals and commemorative events.

For instance, Dr Deepali Bhanot participated in the “All Religions Conference for World Peace” organized by Gelug Committee for Celebrating the Kindness of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the occasion of his Eightieth birthday at Habitat Centre, New Delhi on the 14 March 2016.

She presented a paper on “Educational Development of Women in India: Issues and Challenges” at a Symposium on Educational Development of Women in India and Iran: Issues and Challenges jointly organized by the Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia University and Culture House of Islamic Republic of Iran, New Delhi at Jamia Millia Islamia, in New Delhi on 18 February 2016.

She also presented a Paper at the Conference “Making Pluralism Possible: The Promise and Challenge of Religious Peacebuilding” held at Dhaka University by and organized by World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), BRAC University’s Department of Economics and Social Sciences, and Dhaka University’s Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue on October 3, 2015.

Dr Bhanot spoke on the “The Relevance of Dialogue in Today’s World” at an inter-faith symposium held in New Delhi on the 20th of January 2016 on the occasion of the visit to India of *Madam Maria Voce*, President of the Focolare Movement and Dr. Jesús Moran, Vice-President, Focolare Movement. Dr Bhanot attended the ACRP Associate Secretaries-General’s meeting at Seoul on 23-to 26 November 2015.

FUTURE FOCUS ON “UNITY AND HARMONY”: Lastly, the point that I wish to stress here is the theme of the Eighth Assembly: namely “Unity and Harmony in Asia.” Unity and Harmony should continue to be ACRP’s main focus, both within nations and between the nations in Asia-Pacific region. Because without unity there cannot be harmony; without harmony, especially religious harmony, there cannot be development and progress; without progress there cannot be justice; and without justice there cannot be Peace. I hope we will keep this as our main focus as we strive to make ACRP as a “Multi-Religious Movement for Peace in Asia” in the months and years ahead.

N. Vasudevan
Secretary-General, WCRP/India
Co-President, ACRP

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Seoul, Republic of Korea
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Email: n_vasu@rediffmail.com

