World Conference of Religions for Peace/India
National Chapter Report (2016-17)

INDIA is a founder member of WCRP and ACRP. The source of our inspiration and interest in multi-religious approach to find solution to human problems springs from the age-old belief in, what we call, *"Sarva Dharma Smabhava"* (Equal respect for all religions). "Unity in Diversity" is India's national creed. "Ahimsa Paramo Dharma" (Nonviolence is the Ultimate Righteousness) is yet another ancient exhortation. 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 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.

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 jointly in association with institutions and groups with similar aims 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 caused by religious extremists – both internal and external. 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.

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 maintain peace and to help restore 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 exclusively to promote peace and harmony in the country. 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 to 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.

2016 ASIA-PACIFIC INTERFAITH YOUTH NETWORK (APIYN) YOUTH CAMP: The Asia-Pacific Interfaith Youth Network (APIYN) Youth Camp 2016 was held in Manila, Philippines on 17-19 November 2016. About 60 youth leaders and guests from 12 countries participated. Dr Karuna Sagari, an educator and classical dancer from Shanti Ashram, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu represented India at the Camp.

The theme for the camp was "Responding to the Marginalized Communities' Vulnerability to Climate Change: Strengthening Common Actions."

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 the National Chapter of RfP/Philippines. The camp was sponsored by Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Discussions, visits to religious sites, voluntary community social service and presentation of cultural programs were among the highlights of the Youth Camp.

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. Some members of the ruling party have been making derogatory and hateful statements/speeches against religious minorities. 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 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 programs like seminars, workshops and conferences on issues such as peace education, human rights, environment and sustainable development, communal harmony, gender equality and other social problems held in different parts of the country, besides organizing and participating in different religious festivals and commemorative events.

A Word about Our National Chapter: WCRP/India started functioning as an independent multi-religious organization in 1970. It was registered as an NGO in 1976. Over the past 47 years, like most such bodies, WCRP/India too had its share of ups and downs and it has become rather fatigued and weak. It now needs re-energising, it needs a new push, new blood.

Taking into consideration the changed circumstances and to make it more in tune with the International body, we have now decided to re-register WCRP/India under the name "Religions for Peace India". We hope to complete the official formalities in the next couple of months.

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