



## Country Report (2014-15)

# World Conference of Religions for Peace/India

**RECALLING 8<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY:** Just 9 months ago, August last year, we have had the 8<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of ACRP in that beautiful new city Incheon, South Korea. 12 delegates from India, representing different religions participated and contributed to the proceedings of the Assembly. The Assembly was very well organized: Wide and varied representation from all religions of the world. Plenty of prayers, benedictions, blessings, speeches and interactive discussions and debates on a variety of topics, including youth and women issues. Excellent arrangements. Lot of high class culture and cuisine of Korea and much more. I take this opportunity to thank Dr Sunggon Kim, our former Secretary-General, for his dynamic and creative leadership during the last 12 years to ACRP and for all that he did to make the 8th Assembly a grand success. We also thank the Secretariat staff and volunteers led by Rev. Taesung Kim for their dedication and selfless service.

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 inclusive 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 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 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 communists. 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 last 7-8 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, what we call, “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.

**CITIZENS’ COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE:** It is universally accepted that Dialogue and Reconciliation are the only way to resolve disputes and conflicts. In order to encourage dialogue instead of armed confrontation in internal conflict or insurgency situations, like the challenge posed by the Maoists and other insurgents in certain parts of India, we have established a “Citizens Commission for Justice, Dialogue and Reconciliation” as a response on behalf of Civil Society. This Citizens’ Commission works as a facilitator to bring both the contending parties to the Dialogue Table to resolve disputes rather than resort to armed confrontation, resulting in violence and killing of fellow-citizens.

**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 8<sup>th</sup> 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 28<sup>th</sup> April 2015. About 400 people, including students, attended the meeting organized also to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> 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.

**PROTEST AGAINST HATE SPEECHES:** With a Hindu Right Wing government in power in India now, we have been 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 places of worship of minorities. Of course, all these have been roundly rejected and publicly condemned by vast majority of people, including by us, on mainstream media and social media.

I am mentioning this here because it is linked to Recommendation No.6 of 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.

**FUTURE FOCUS ON “UNITY AND HARMONY”:** Lastly, the point that I want 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 in the months and years ahead.

The 11-point Recommendations contained in the Incheon Declaration give us a fairly useful, workable framework to pursue the goal of Unity and Harmony in Asia.

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