



Religions for Peace India

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Religions for Peace India National Chapter Annual Report for 2019-2020

Greetings from India. This is a brief Report of the activities of “**Religions for Peace India**” for the period from May 2019 to September 2020.

INTRODUCTION

We are observing the 50th year of the founding of “Religions for Peace.” RfP is a unique international, inter-religious body – representative of the religious population of the world and dedicated to the cause of peace and justice. It is in a way the spiritual successor to the famous “Parliament of World Religions” held in Chicago in 1893.

India is one of the founders of this multi-faith movement. The source of our inspiration and interest in multi-faith approach to various 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 Dharma/Righteousness) is yet another ancient exhortation we all believe in. Respecting and upholding these civilizational and cultural values, our Constitution guarantees equal respect and right to all religions. So, believers of all the religions co-exist and live together in India from ancient times to the present in relative peace, harmony and flourish and progress without hitch or hindrance.

Religions for Peace India continued to engage itself in various activities to promote peace, interfaith harmony and cooperation, and understanding among people across religious communities and social divides, though the outbreak of the catastrophic Covid pandemic early this year has disrupted or halted all normal activities.

CAMPAIGN FOR “VIOLENCE-FREE INDIA”

Being a vast, complex and diverse country, India continue to face many challenges. Among them are the menace of increasing conflict and violence caused by religious extremists and small sections of people with vested interests deliberately manipulating religious and sectarian sentiments as well as socio-economic backwardness to rouse passions, leading to tension, conflict and violence. They are a threat to peace and peaceful coexistence and orderly democratic processes of development and progress.

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 campaign for a **“Violence-free India”** (*“Himsamukt Bharat”*) for the past few years. This is an on-going **joint program** and we continue to be engaged with this campaign.

SHANTI SENA/PEACE CORPS

We have been organizing “Shanti Sena” or Peace Corps. Shanti Sena means unarmed peace army. They 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, among other things, 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 promote global peace and to reduce militarisation. The question is: If you can have a Ministry of Defence (in effect, war), why not a Ministry for Peace?

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 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 vast majority of people, including by us in RfP India, on mainstream media as well as in social media.

TENTH WORLD ASSEMBLY

As part of the preparation for the 10th World Assembly, an Asia Regional Consultation was held at Yangon, Myanmar in March 2019, which was attended by Dr Deepali Bhanot, Mr Shameer Rishad and Mr N. Vasudevan.

On behalf of RfP India, a five-member delegation comprising of Rev. Rodrigues Bento, Dr Deepali Bhanot, Abdul Mabood, Shameer Rishad and N. Vasudevan participated in the **10th World Assembly of Religions for Peace** in Lindau, Germany from 20 to 23 August 2019 on the theme “Caring for Our Common Future – Advancing Shared Wellbeing.”

Subsequently, Dr Deepali Bhanot and Mr N. Vasudevan have attended the two-day meeting on “Multi-religious and Multi-stakeholder Partnership for Peace and Development” on 11-12 December 2019 in New York as a follow-up of the decisions taken at the 10th World Assembly.

SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES

Members of RfP India have also participated in various other virtual/digital programs like seminars and discussions on issues like peace education, human rights, environment and sustainable development, communal harmony, and other social problems held in different parts of the country, besides organizing and participating in religious festivals and commemorative events such as Environmental Day, Human Rights Day, and International Nonviolence Day on Gandhi’s Birthday.

Our members are associated with several NGOs, educational institutions, civil society and 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.

Rev. Rodrigues Bento, President, RfP India participated in a few virtual Interfaith Prayer meetings and discussions on Covid and its consequences on Webinar.

Dr Deepali Bhanot, Secretary, RfP India, was invited to speak at the South Asia Regional Faith-in-Action Webinar, jointly organized by UNICEF and *Religions for Peace (RfP)* on May 7, 2020 to share the local experience in India regarding “The steps taken to counter rumours, misinformation, and stigma towards ethnic minorities, health workers or other groups in relation to Covid-19” and to share a good example with the Webinar participants and give suggestions for joint action for the same.

She was invited as a speaker in an Interfaith Zoom meeting organized by the Focolare Movement in India to present a paper on “*Daan* (Giving) as a social responsibility according to Hinduism” on May 14, 2020.

Dr Deepali Bhanot was invited to present the Hindu perspective at the Global Panel Discussion Webinar Series bringing the Global Leaders from the Inter-Faith and Religion Traditions of the World and Global Leaders of Science to join together at a panel discussion on “Inter-faith and Religion’s Role in Providing Ethical support and Guidance to the Community in Mitigating the Impacts of COVID” organized by the Department of Education, UNESCO Chair in Bioethics, Australia on August 23 and 30, 2020.

On 23 September 2019 **Abdul Mabood**, Treasurer, RfP India, delivered a lecture on the “Role of Religions in achieving positive Mental Health and Peace” in India, at the World

Learning Centre in which 22 students from different Universities of USA participated. Knowledge of different religions amongst these students was eye-opener.

On 16 March 2020 Abdul Mabood was invited as Keynote speaker by the Youth for Mental Health & Human Rights to speak on the topic: "Can different religions and cultural pluralism in our society play a sustainable role in promoting Good Mental Health, Peace and Human Rights amongst youths?" It was a well-attended gathering of college students. It was a learning for me the way searching questions they raised during the course of discussions. He also attended a few webinars meetings organized recently by the RfP.

YOUTH ACTIVITIES

From 2018 onwards, Religions for Peace India has an active five-member Youth Committee under the dynamic chairmanship of Mr Shameer Rishad.

Members of Youth Committee:

Mr Joel George Alex
Ms Priyanshu Krishnamoorthi
Mr Varun Sharma
Ms. Arpita Goel

Youth Camp: The Youth Wing of Religions for Peace India received a small grant of 1000 US dollars from RfP Asia Pacific Interfaith Youth Network (APIYN) earlier last year for generating awareness among young people on the theme "Our Earth Our Responsibility – Harmonizing Peace and Climate Change." Accordingly, a Youth Camp was organized at Mewat Engineering College Campus in Haryana State on 16 November 2019.

Besides introducing RfP to the local population and utilizing the funding effectively, the Camp succeeded in forging a new relationship with local governments in Delhi and Haryana and educational institutions and civil society organizations. We are planning follow-up sessions with 20 educational institutions – 10 each in Delhi and Haryana -- in the coming months.

The program included tree plantation and a public meeting which was attended by Secretary-General N. Vasudevan and Treasurer Mr Abdul Mabood. The newly elected member of the State Legislative Assembly was the chief guest, and he assured full cooperation from the local administration for similar activities RfP wants to undertake with the youth in Haryana in future.

[A detailed Report on the Youth Camp had already been submitted to APIYN and ACRP Secretariat in Tokyo.]

Presentation at the Global Gallery and Group Discussion Facilitation at Youth World Assembly: Shameer Rishad, as the Youth Chairperson of RfP India and as a Transition Committee Member of APIYN, co-facilitated a session on “transforming conflict” along with Ms. Meera Santosh, International Youth Committee (IYC) Member. Further, he was given the opportunity to present his work in India at the Global Gallery event of the World Assembly.

With a view to expand the RfP India Youth network and to learn new concepts from eminent speakers and understand the Indian context better, the Youth Chairperson Rishad Shameer attended the **5th World Parliament of Science and Religion** organized at the World Peace Dome, held in Maharashtra in October 2019.

APIYN Annual Youth Peace Camp

Shameer Rishad attended the annual Youth Peace Camp of 2019 held in Manila, Philippines. There he shared his experience of working with youth in India at a plenary session with Ms. Gasun Han, Co-Moderator of APIYN, Mr Yusuke Saito, Member IYC and Rabbi Rachel Rosenbluth.

Shameer Rishad volunteered to conduct a **Workshop** organized by Justice Coalition of Religions (JCoR) and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, Maharashtra in March 2020 to understand more about the UN-sponsored Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from a Faith-based perspective.

As a result of the Network building done in October 2019, Shameer was requested to handle all presentations and operational tasks during the Workshop. During the course of the three days, he had the opportunity to interact with 43 nuns from 21 different Catholic congregations.

He also got the opportunity to learn about mainstreaming SDGs in the workings of Faith-based Organizations (FBOs).

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, all plans as decided in 2019 of visiting schools and colleges in Delhi and Haryana to promote the theme ‘Our Earth Our Responsibility’ were disrupted and they have been postponed.

The RfP India Youth Committee has now shifted its mode of work to Online and launched the project, ‘Weekend Getaways with SDGs’.

In August 2020, Shameer Rishad organized eight Webinar discussions on “Weekend Getaways with SDGs” covering different SDGs, followed by a Workshop for skill development.

Following goals and topics were discussed on a weekly basis with 50 interested Indian Youth:

1. August 2, 2020: Introductory Session
2. August 8, 2020: SDG1 No Poverty, SDG-2 Zero Hunger
3. August 9, 2020: Skill-building Workshop; How to File a Right to Information Application?
4. August 15, 2020: SDG-3 Good Health and Well-being, SDG4 Quality Education
5. August 16, 2020: Skill-building Workshop; How to use Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System for Advocacy?
6. August 22, 2020: SDG-5 Gender Equality, SDG-6 Clean Water and Sanitation
7. August 23, 2020: Skill Building Workshop; Social Media Advocacy and Media Advocacy
8. August 29, 2020: Summing up & General Advocacy Strategies
9. August 30, 2020: SDG-10 Reduced Inequalities, SDG-16 Peace and Justice Strong Institutions

A total of 8 SDGs were discussed, followed by four skill-building Workshops. The final session on August 30, 2020 was taken by the RfP Philippines Youth Committee.

The RfP India Youth Committee plans to continue working to promote positive peace in India and around the globe with the hope that youth will take suitable action and contribute holistically to create a more sustainable future.

N. Vasudevan
Secretary-General, RfP India

ACRP EC Meeting By Zoom
14-15 October 2020
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