Report of ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey to Varanasi, U.P

20th – 23rd July, 2016

(Report prepared by Dr Deepali Bhanot, Co-ordinator of the Journey)

List of Participants:

Ms Vihutoli Kinimi, Christian, Kolkata

Ms Leena Thomas, Christian, Kerala, presently in Delhi

Ms Shaina Khatib, Muslim, Nagpur

Dr Qudsia Anjum, Muslim, Saharanpur, U.P.

Ms Anusha Nema, Hindu, Madhya Pradesh, presently in Delhi

Ms Tsering Dolma, Lay Buddhist, Dharmashala, H.P.

Ms Tenzin Tselha, Buddhist Lama, Dharamshala, H.P.

Sr Pamela, Local Contact & Participant, Christian, Varanasi

Dr Deepali Bhanot, Co-ordinator, Hindu, Delhi

Fr Packiam Samuel, Ph.D, Secretary, ICP, Advisor

The Holy City of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh:

It was a long time wish of ICP to organise an Interfaith Women’s journey to the Holy city of Varanasi (also known as Benaras or Kashi) situated on the banks of the sacred river Ganges in Uttar Pradesh. This city is considered to be the Spiritual Capital of India by the Hindus and Pilgrims throng to this city in large numbers all the year round. Although the ICP journey was originally planned to be held in the month of June as some of the participants have summer holidays during that period, the programme got postponed to monsoon, in the month of July.

The importance of the sacred month of monsoon, ‘Shravan’ (July-August) in Varanasi:

The sacred month of “Shravan” (July-August) according to the Hindu calendar, has a special significance. Hindu and Jain sages, sadhus and mendicants do not move about during the four months of monsoon (chaturmas). They just rest wherever they are and resume their journeys in autumn. However, the month of Shravan is known to be very dear to Lord Shiva and thousands of “Kanvariyas” (devotees of Lord Shiva) make long and arduous pilgrimage on foot from Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, U.P., Punjab and Chhattisgarh to either Gomukh,
Gangotri, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Varanasi or Allahabad to fetch holy water from the Ganges and to bring back the water from Ganges (Ganga Jal) in decorated earthen pots tied to decorated bamboo poles slung across their shoulders to be offered to the local Shiva temples in their hometowns.

**Challenges in fixing up the schedule for the ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey to Varanasi:**

ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey to Varanasi was a big challenge for us as we did not know any local person in Varanasi to work out the logistics of the journey for us. So after searching the internet, the Hotel Palace on Ganges in Assi Ghat was chosen because of its location on the banks of the Holy River Ganges, for the participants to stay during the duration of the Journey.

Fr Packiam Samuel gave us the contact number of Fr Rajdeep from IMS to help us in locating the women’s groups from different religions. Fr Rajdeep put us in touch with Fr Jerome Sylvester, IMS who gave us the names and phone numbers of a few people from different faith groups. After a number phone calls (as some people on the list did not have email facilities), and many emails later, we were finally able to fix up a schedule for our visit to Varanasi. The theme for this journey was, “Respecting and Celebrating Diversity”.

**Arrival in Varanasi:**

The participants arrived in Varanasi in the mid-morning of the 20th July. From the Airport, a long drive of more than an hour through crowded streets and narrow lanes brought us to the Hotel. Like most of the lanes and streets of Varanasi, the entrance of the Hotel stood on the edge of a dirty narrow lane. But, inside the Hotel, the rooms were clean and pleasantly decorated. The accommodation for the participants was on twin-sharing basis and as usual, participants representing different faith group and from a different state shared rooms with each other.

**Introductions & Orientation:**

After checking in, the participants gathered together for an orientation meeting to welcome the new participants and to discuss the schedule and objectives of the Journey. All the participants introduced themselves and Dr Deepali Bhanot explained to the participants about the purpose of the ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey and discussed about all the sessions and meetings for the next four days.
In the afternoon, Sr. Pamela and Sr. Kamala from “Mariam mayi Ashram” came over to the Hotel to meet us. Sr Pamela was our local contact and she very graciously agreed to be a part of the group and to accompany us in all our visits and meetings.

Meeting with the Women members of Mar Thoma Congregation:

Our first meeting was with a group of young Christian women who follow the doctrines of the Mar Thoma Church which is a reformed indigenous church in existence in India from AD 52. As the Mar Thoma Church was far from the Hotel, these ladies were scheduled to meet us at the residence of Mrs Mary Grace, who had very graciously offered her house in the Banaras Hindu Univeristy (BHU) Campus for the meeting.

The local priest of the Church, Rev. Reti John Skariah and his wife were also present. Ms Leena Thomas from ICP introduced the participants to the local group and informed them about the purpose of the ICP Interfaith Journey. Rev Skariah introduced the women from his Church and gave a brief history of the beginning of Mar Thoma Church in India. Living in harmony with one another and practising hospitality are the two important teachings of Christianity. The participants experienced this at Mrs Grace’s house. Some of the local women were working in the BHU campus while some were also involved in small business. The women interacted with the visiting group and all agreed that respecting all religions is the key to harmonious living and peace in the society.

At the end of the meeting, two members Ms Sheena and Ms Shantamma accompanied the ICP group to visit the Hindu Temple, the Birla Mandir situated inside the huge BHU campus.

Meeting with the Women devotees of Digambar Jain Temple:
The ICP group was welcomed by Mrs Pramila Samariya, Secretary, Akhil Bharatiya Digambar Jain Mahila Sangathan and the Jain women devotees in the Digambar Jain Temple in Bhelupur. This temple is considered to be the holy birthplace of revered Tirthankar, the 23rd Parshavanath. Dr Deepali Bhanot introduced the ICP group to the Jain women devotees who come to the temple early in the morning to perform their daily worship. The daily “Abhishek” is performed by the male devotees while the women simply watch the ceremony and then they offer their individual worship. They observe fasting till their worship is over and eat only after serving food to their families on reaching home.

Mrs Nirmala Jain, who teaches Jainism in a college nearby, gave a short account of the Jain philosophy. She said that the most important tenet of Jainism is “Non-violence” which should be observed in thought, speech and action. She added that that the female monks in the Digambar sect are known as “Arika(s) who renounce the world, wear only a single garment and live their lives in “mathas”. The head of such female monks is known as “Ganani”. There was a lively interaction between the Jain women and the ICP women’s group. The ICP women informed the group about their interfaith journey carrying the message of harmony and peace. As the meeting was getting prolonged, some of the Jain women had to leave.

A young female monk from the Shwetambar Jain Temple situated next door, came to visit the group and blessed all the women present. The ICP group then visited the interior of the Digambar temple where ladies were offering individual worship and the small museum in the temple premises. They then visited the beautifully and intricately carved Shwetambar temple nearby and having visited the Shwetambar Jain Temple, they proceeded to the next meeting.

Meeting with the Hindu Women:

The meeting with the Hindu Women was organised by Sr Pamela in the “Mariyam Mai Ashram”, where she lives with three other Sisters. As the Ashram is situated in the interiors of Kalika Lane, located near the famous Kashi Vishvanath Temple, the ICP women had to get off the vehicles at the main road and had a great experience walking through a maze of long winding extremely narrow lanes, lined on both sides with shops selling all kind of stuff
including material for worship, flowers, souvenirs, religious books, saris, trinkets, small eateries and so on. Rubbing shoulders with the local people who were moving around in their unhurried pace of life, the Kanwarias dressed in orange, who were walking along with an urgency chanting “Bol Bam Bam” (glorifying Lord Shiva), pilgrims of all ages and from all walks of life and even stray cows, the group finally reached the meeting place.

Quite a few Hindu women, most of them home-makers from nearby area had gathered for the meeting. Some of them are serving as tailoring teachers in the nearby area, empowering more than 80 young girls. **Ms Tsering Dolma** introduced the ICP group and spoke about the importance of respecting all religions and shared the message of H.H.Dalai Lama. After the introductions, the local women spoke about the Holy city of Varanasi, the city of Lord Shiva and also the rituals and religious practices of the Hindus. Monsoon is celebrated with a lot of fervour by the Hindu women as during the months of monsoon as the festival of “Teej” occurs when the married women visit their natal home and return after the “Raksha bandhan” festival, which is festival dedicated to tying sacred thread on their brothers’ wrists. The women also emphasised on the important role of women as mothers in inculcating good moral virtues in the children.

During the interfaith discussion the role of women in peace building and communal harmony was highlighted by the ICP group. At the end of the meeting, Sr Pamela showed the group the nearby tailoring classes, the small health centre that she runs in the ashram. In the evening, small children from the nearby lanes come for studies to the ashram.

**Visiting the Kashi Vishvanath Temple and Gyan Vapi Mosque:**

Another long walk through the maze of crowded lanes, where we had to constantly look back to ensure that all members of the group are following and that some member has not taken a turn into the wrong lane we reached the gate of the heavily guarded (by Army personnel and the Police) famous Vishvanath Temple that shares a common wall with the Gyan Vapi Mosque. The temple was full of people from all walks of life. Having visited the main shrine of the temple, and the smaller shrines, we wanted to visit the Mosque. But there was disappointment in store for us as we were told that the Mosque is inaccessible to women. We had to console ourselves by peering at it from outside only.
On our way back, Sr Pamela guided us through some more lanes and we stood in front of a flight of stairs of a house. The owner, a Hindu wholesaler of saris greeted Sr. Pamela very respectfully and guided us to a room in the upper storey of his house-cum-shop and from the window, we a wonderful view of the gold covered “Shikhars” (conical tops) of the temple. It is believed that these are covered with about 900 kgs of gold. Unfortunately, nobody is allowed to carry a mobile, camera or any purse into the temple. Hence we could not click any picture there.

More than the spectacular view of the temple, what amazed us was the respect and greetings that the gentleman accorded to Sr Pamela and her guests (us). This was really an example of interfaith living where the Hindu temple and Muslim Mosque stand alongside each other and a Hindu welcoming a Christian Sister and her guests with so much respect was such a welcome sight.

**Witnessing the mesmerising evening “Maha-Aarti” of the river Ganges:**

Varanasi is famous for the “Maha-Aarti” performed on the Dashashvamedha ghat (bank) to eulogise the sacred river Ganges each evening at sun-down. Usually, people gather at the ghat and sit down in rows behind the priests performing the Aarti and watch this beautiful worship. While some people take boat rides in the river to get frontal view of the “Aarti”.

We had originally planned to take a boat ride to watch the Aarti from the river. But as the river was swollen due to monsoon, the ghats were submerged in water and the boat-rides had been cancelled till the water subsided. In such situations, when the ghats go under the water, the Aarti is offered from the roof-tops of houses situated along the banks of Dashashwamedha ghat.

**Sr Pamela** and **Sr Kamala** guided us to the Dashashwamedha ghat to see the Aarti. We had to almost fight through the swelling crowds going to watch the great event. The ghat was crammed with people and there was no way to set foot on it. Sr Pamela got hold of a young boy she knew to take us to another nearby ghat from where we could see this ritual. It was already getting dark and we braved our way through more crowds and narrow lanes to reach Shitala ghat. After
climbing down a dangerously steep flight of stairs in the dark, we reached Shitala ghat only to discover that nothing was visible from there. The entire group by this time was not only tired but was also dejected because by now it appeared that we would miss the event. Without losing hope, Sr Pamela guided us back towards the Dashashwamedha ghat and very soon we arrived in front of a house in a narrow lane. The person at the door was a Hindu priest. On seeing Sr Pamela he greeted her very respectfully and when she told him that she had an interfaith group wanting to see the Aarti, he immediately opened the door to the stairs. One young boy was sent with us to escort us through the stairs that led to the roof-top where five young priests were standing on make-shift platforms ready to begin the Aarti. We were guided to a room with a fan from where we could see the ritual from close quarters. But some of us chose to sit down on the floor behind the platforms in the first row to have the best view of the performance. This was indeed nothing short of a miracle for us, who had given up all hopes of witnessing the event. It was also an **interfaith moment for us to see the Hindu priest letting in a Christian Sister with an interfaith group inside a private house.** It was again a great interfaith moment when the ICP group got to light the Ritual Lamps to be used for the Aarti.

**A Visit to the Holy site of Sarnath:**

Varanasi is not only a Holy city for the Hindus alone, but it is also a very important place for the Buddhists because it was at Sarnath, situated on the outskirts of the city, where Lord Buddha first preached his Sermon. The ICP group visited Sarnath along with Fr Jerome Sylvester, IMS. Unfortunately, the Museum was closed on the day of our visit, so we could only visit the ruins of the Sarnath and the great Stupa.

The tour of Sarnath was very informative as all the sites were very well labelled with explanations. Our Buddhist friends offered prayers at the site for peace and well being of all the people on earth.
After visiting Sarnath, the ICP group visited the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, a temple where a branch of the Bodhi tree under which Lord Buddha gave his first sermon has been planted.

Visiting the Vajravidya Tibetan Women’s Nunnery:

At the Vajravidya Tibetan Women’s Nunnery, the group was received by Mr. Dachan Dorjee, who showed us round the Nunnery. About 30 Tibetan nuns of various age groups stay in the center. As the nuns staying there had a language problem in communicating with the ICP group, the meeting was held in the temple in the Nunnery premises where Mr. Dorjee interacted with the group in English and explained about the history, activities and the daily routine of the Nuns staying in the Nunnery.

The group then proceeded to the Central University of Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, where the ICP group had a chance to visit the Manuscript library and see the large number of Buddhist manuscripts which the Tibetan scholars had managed to bring with them when they fled from Tibet. The librarian was very happy to share with the group about the way the delicate manuscripts have been painstakingly preserved. Also, how the original wood-block printed manuscripts are now being preserved by getting these printed. He also said that there are a large number of manuscripts that contain the teachings of Buddha and other teachers along with commentaries which need to be read, translated and researched.

Having some time in the beautiful campus of the
Central University of Tibetan Studies, the group returned to Varanasi for a meeting with the Muslim women.

Meeting with Muslim Women:

The venue for the Meeting with the Muslim women was a room in the building of Vishwa Jyoti Communications at Varuna Pul that had specially been hired by Fr Jerome for the women to meet. Mr Mohd. Arif had invited some young Muslim women to interact with the Interfaith ICP group. Ms Shaina Khatib introduced the ICP Interfaith women’s group and laid emphasis on the role of the younger generation in promoting peace. Dr Deepali Bhanot apprised the local women about the objectives of the ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey. Speaking about the exemplary role of women in establishing peaceful existence, gave examples from the past journeys in Kenya, Gujarat and Orissa where local women from different faith groups had come together despite prevailing communal tensions to rebuild their lives. Mr Mohd Arif informed the visiting group that he has been actively involved in interfaith activities in Varanasi for a long time. The young Muslim women also have been involved in interfaith activities from time to time. Most of them were students and a few were social activists working for women’s empowerment, fighting for Human Rights against the prevalent caste system and were engaged in the educational programmes for Muslim women. Although a little hesitant in the beginning, the Muslim participants soon opened up and an interesting discussion between the both the groups followed. The local women were very vocal regarding the gender discrimination existing in the society and said that they in their own humble ways were working to empower themselves and the women associated with them.

The members of the ICP women’s group also put forth their views regarding the importance of communal harmony and respect for all religions for a peaceful society. Ms Vihutoli Kinimi said that she strongly believed in Love culture as Peace can prevail only by unconditional love towards others. She also spoke about her A.A.P.formula for Pluralistic Spirituality i.e Acceptance, Appreciation and Promotion of differences. If these were incorporated in our daily lives, our world would be a better place to live in. Ms Tselha (Lama ji) mentioned that H.H. the Dalai Lama believes that promotion of harmony between humanity and the various religions is a very sacred and important work. The other ICP members also presented their views on how women can pay an effective role in overcoming religious prejudices and establish peace.
Morning Aarti at Assi Ghat:

On the last day of the journey, we had to abandon the scheduled programme of ‘Meditation and walking along the Ghats’ as the river was swollen and there was no place to walk on the banks. However, some of the participants who could manage to rise early at 4.30 a.m. were lucky to witness the morning Aarti at Assi Ghat which was a two-minute walk from the Hotel. The preparation for the Aarti starts at 4.30 a.m. and begins at 5.00 a.m. sharp with the worship of Lord Surya (the sun). This is followed by Vedic Chants by young girls and the morning worship of the river Ganges. An NGO known as ‘Subah-e-Benaras’, organizes a cultural programme each morning after the Aarti which is followed by classes in Yoga. The whole programme takes place from 5.00 a.m. – 7.00a.m. While the Aarti is going on, the sun rises in all its glory over the river and it is a beautiful view.

Concluding Feedback session:

At the end of the journey, the participants met for a feedback session to share their experiences of the journey and to offer suggestions to improve upon the journey in the future. All the participants felt that it was indeed a wonderful journey. Sharing room for four days with a person from another faith group and from another state was a unique experience. It was realised that despite all our differences in religion, profession, life-styles and cultural background, peaceful co-existence is possible if we choose to “respect and celebrate diversity”.

The Hindu participants of the group, Dr Deepali Bhanot and Ms Anusha Nema explained to the others about why the city of Varanasi is considered to be so Holy. The sacred river Ganges is supposed to liberate all those who die here and are cremated along its ghats. There are innumerable Hindu temples dedicated to various Hindu deities in the city, especially to Lord Shiva. They also explained briefly about the Hindu temple architecture. The Muslim participants Dr Qudsia Anjum and Ms Shaina Khatib shared about the Holy cities of Kaba,
Mecca and Madina and the concept of the religious pilgrimage, the “Haj”. Ms Vihutoli reiterated about her formula of A.A.P, which indeed is the key to peaceful co-existence.

All the participants were deeply impressed about the way Sr Pamela had made a special place in everyone’s hearts. Her quiet demeanour, humility and service to others had earned her a deep respect in others. This was evident by the great respect shown to her by all those whomsoever she met in the course of our journey.

The participants thanked Ms Tenzin Tselha (Lama ji) for her prayers before and after the meals. Ms Dolma said that she had been eagerly waiting for the last four years to be a part of this journey and she had not only enjoyed the trip but also had learnt a lot from it.

Meeting with women from different faith groups and from different backgrounds has helped in creating interfaith women’s networks.

Everyone felt that this was a truly blessed journey because despite the monsoon season, it did not rain at all for all the four days. Hence, we could move about unhampered by the rain and could keep our appointments with all the local women.

At the end of the meeting, everyone thanked ICP and Fr Packiam Samuel for organising the interfaith women’s journeys and each one is looking forward to meet again in another interfaith journey.

Deepali Bhanot

Co-ordinator, ICP Interfaith Women’s Journey.

(See newspaper cutting below)
Interfaith women’s delegation visits Varanasi

Staff Reporter

A GROUP of eight women delegation from Interfaith Coalition for Peace (ICP), Delhi had been to holy city Varanasi on peace building journey recently. During the visit, the delegation interacted with different faith groups women as Mar Thoma congregation women, Jain women group at Jain temple, and Hindu women’s group. They have observed Maha Aarti at the banks of River Ganga. The women also visited Banaras temple and interacted with Buddhist monks and nuns. Muslim women’s group was also addressed by them. Visiting ghats of Varanasi was an enlightening experience.

The delegation comprised, Prof. Dr. Deepali Bhanot, co-ordinator ICP Women’s wing, Leena Thirumal, Anusha Nema, all from Delhi, Dr. Shalina Khateeb, Co-Director Peace for Progress Nagpur, Teertha Dalmia and Tenzin Tserla from Dharamshala, Dr. Paudarya Agrawal from Saharanpur, Vibhuti Khurana from Kolkata, local co-ordinators were sister Pamali, sister Karmala, Father Jerome, Dr. Mohd. Afzal.