

Report of the ICP Interfaith Women's Journey to Bhubaneswar

August 21-24, 2013

An **Interfaith Women's Journey** to Bhubaneswar, organized by **Interfaith Coalition for Peace** from August 21-24, 2013, included ten women representing Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

The Women's Group reached Bhubaneswar on the 21st morning and were received by the ICP local Coordinator, Mr Akshay Kumar, who guided the group to the Crown Hotel that had been chosen by ICP for the comfortable stay of the participants.

Day One : 21st August, 2013

After checking into the Hotel, the group visited the Women's Studies Department, Utkal University and met the Head of the Department, Dr N. Rath to discuss the detailed programme about the Seminar to be organized by ICP and the W.Studies Department on the 24th August at the University. The participants also met with the other members of the Department, Ms Aliva Mohanty & Dr M. Chinara. After the meeting, the participants took a round of the Utkal University Campus.

The meeting at the University was followed by a visit to a few religious places. The participants visited Dhauli Giri, to see the famous Rock Edicts of Emperor Ashoka that he got inscribed after his victory in the bloody Kalinga war(2nd cent BC). It is said that so many people were killed in that war that the river Daya became red with the blood of the slain people. Although the Emperor attained victory, he was totally dejected to see the total devastation incurred by him. He was overwhelmed with great sorrow and his heart was filled with remorse for his violent actions.



As a result, from the 'Prachand (terrible) Ashoka', he was transformed into 'Dhamma (righteous) Ashoka'. And he turned towards spreading the message of Non-violence, Peace, Interfaith tolerance and disarmament. He got his message inscribed on Stone Pillars and Rocks, which till today spread his message of Peace. The Lion Capital on his pillars and the Dhamma Chakra (the wheel of Dharma) has now been adopted as our National emblem and is found on our currency notes and the Dhamma Chakra has found a place on our National flag.



The participants also visited the Shanti Stupa, a much revered Buddhist Shrine built near the Rock Edicts of Ashoka. The participants of the journey took a round of the Shanti Stupa and from the parapets of the shrine they could not only see the River Daya which caused the transformation of Ashoka's heart but it also provided a grand view of the area lying around it.

In the evening, the participants visited the Archbishop's house to meet Most Rev. John Barwa, the Archbishop of Cuttack and Bhubaneshwar. He welcomed the participants and on



their request, he informed them about the religious conflict that occurred in Kandhamal few years ago. It was a very informative meeting as the participants learnt about the details of the conflict between the Hindus and Christians in many villages near Bhubaneshwar.

The tribal belts of the Kandhamal district of Orissa witnessed a large scale communal violence on the 23rd August, 2008 after the murder of a Hindu leader Swami Laxmananda Saraswati and five other disciples. It is believed that although these people were killed by the Maoists, the Hindu fundamentalist groups used this incident to create widespread communal conflict by turning it into a religious conflict between the Hindus and the Christians. About 241 villages in the district were affected and many Churches and thousands of houses were looted, burnt down or destroyed in this ethno-communal riots which raged for several weeks. Many people were killed while thousands of people were rendered homeless and a large number of people went into hiding into the forests or escaped into other districts and cities. The Government set up relief camps for providing shelter to thousands of people who had lost everything in the violence. At present, five years later life is limping back to normalcy but there are still a lot of people who have not received any help or support.

The Archbishop was very appreciative of the initiative of Intefaitth Coalition for peace for providing an opportunity to the interfaith women's group to travel together to understand the dynamics of communal conflicts and to find ways to overcome the religious prejudices.

Day Two: 22nd August, 2013

The next day the participants left the Hotel at 8.00 a.m as they had to visit the village Alkund Nuagaon which was around 120 kms from Bhubaneshwar. After a long drive of about two hours, the group reached Nuagaon.



This journey through the rice fields, lined with coconut trees, crossing two rivers and passing through dirt roads along small ponds near thatched mud huts, gave an opportunity to the participants from the cities to see the interior parts of the rural areas near Bhubaneshwar.

On arrival they were welcomed by young girls who were the students of Anchalika Baldev Jew Women's College, where the meeting in the forenoon was to be held. It was a delight to see hordes of young girls of the village coming to the college on their bicycles. They did present a very promising picture of empowered young women.

Mr Akshay Kumar introduced the ICP Women's group to Mrs Urmila Samant, the Principal of the college and other local important people who had come to attend the meeting. Dr Deepali Bhanot, Coordinator of the Interfaith women's group explained to them the purpose of the group's visit. The ICP group was then guided to the main hall for the meeting where a large number of enthusiastic and eager students were waiting for the programme on 'The Role of Women in Communal Harmony'.



After a welcome song by the students, the Principal, Mrs Samant formally welcomed the ICP members. Mr Akshay Kumar introduced the group to the students and briefly spoke about the importance of different religious working together.

Giving a brief history about a major communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the area, he said that in 1935, the Muslims objected to the Hindus doing Kirtan (singing religious songs) outside the mosques when the Muslims were performing Namaz. This led to a

conflict and the matter went to the Court. The case dragged for about 20 years and in 1955, the Supreme Court passed the Judgment allowing the Hindus to continue with their religious processions singing religious songs while the Namaz was being performed because both of these religious activities could be done simultaneously. Interestingly, the Judge himself was a Muslim who passed the judgement in the favour of the Hindus. People gladly accepted and welcomed this verdict and communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims persists.

He also mentioned that during the Kandhamal riots, ICP played an important role in sending a team of interfaith members to visit the area and a seminar was organised for communal harmony. The school teachers were mobilised to play a significant role in bringing about peace in the affected villages.



Dr Deepali Bhanot spoke about the role women of faith can play in establishing peace and communal harmony and also about women's empowerment. Dr Shaina Khatib spoke to the students about the role young people can play in creating peaceful society. Ms Nyima Lhamo giving example from her personal experiences and of other Tibetans spoke about the trauma of being a refugee living in exile. She spoke about the constant struggle and hardships that all young Tibetans face in their daily lives and for their non-violent struggle for freedom. She urged the young students to make most of the opportunity that they have to receive education and to be responsible members of the society. Dr Qudsia, Ms Premlata Behera



and Mrs Nibedita Mohanty also presented their thoughts on the occasion. At the end of the meeting, during the question session, the students asked a number of questions. The main questions centered around how to deal with violence and oppression meted out to women. One student also asked if a training is needed for empowering women as agents of Peace. They were very motivated to be a part of women's empowerment

campaign and wanted ICP to start a training programme in conflict transformation and Peace Building. The meeting ended with a small cultural programme organised by the students.

The participants then proceeded to a local villager, Mr Keshav Mohapatra's house where lunch had been arranged and the participants were treated to a sumptuous lunch of rural Oriya dishes. After the lunch the ICP women met with a group of local



women who had assembled in a nearby

house. Mr Akshay Kumar informed the group that this village had both Hindu and Muslims families living together in perfect harmony. This was evident when the participants met the women's group. The interaction with the village women mainly centered around topics of health, pension, Self-help groups and

economic empowerment. There did not appear to be any rift between the two religious communities but the common problem faced by the villagers was poverty, clean drinking water and regular supply of electricity. The women wanted to know how they could become economically empowered. Mr Akshay Kumar was requested to get the Block Development Officer to speak to the women about the existing Government schemes for women's empowerment and also to tell them about how to access these. The women enthusiastically discussed about how there is no tension between the residents of the village on religious lines. Moreover, how they sometimes participate in the religious festivities of the other communities as well. Quite a few men of the village also had gathered out of curiosity and were looking for an opportunity to speak to the participants. They too felt that the women need some kind of training or skills so that could start earning some money to supplement the men's incomes and share the burden of running the household.



Although most of the girls are being educated, the drop out rate from the education system is higher among the girls than the boys. The number of Muslim girls studying is also lesser than that of the Hindu girls.

The participants reached back to the hotel at dinner time after a long bus journey. During the dinner, there was a feedback session, wherein the participants shared their experiences of the day.

Day Three: 23rd August, 2013

The group set off from the Hotel at 8.30 a.m. to visit Botigaon in Jagatsinghpur district. The journey through Cuttack was almost as long as the previous day and after more than two hours of journey through the rural areas the participants reached Botigaon which was hit by the Super Cyclone in 1999. The inhabitants of this village mostly belong to Hindu and



Christian communities. The participants divided themselves into two groups so that they could interact with more families in the short time available.



It was indeed surprising for some of the participants from the cities to find that in the 21st century, the villagers are living without basic needs in this remote area. A survey of the village showed that most homes did not have any toilet facilities and they were going out in the open for toilet.



Due to the lack of facilities, many families have sent their children to boarding schools. Most of the elderly women are leading a difficult life without any financial assistance from either the Government or from the male members of the family. The young girls want to study but they have no means to attend the coaching classes to clear the SSC exams. They were also clueless about how to achieve life-skills or regarding their future. Most men and women were working as labourers in the rice fields on daily

wages and were struggling due to poverty.



Unfortunately, the participants could not ask questions regarding the relationship between the religious communities. 23d August being the anniversary of the Kandhamal ehno-communal riots, the villagers evaded the topic and were also wary of the women's group from

outside and chose not to speak about any communal tension. But distinctly both the communities stayed in a situation of relative peace where there was no obvious tension but there was no comfortable relationship either.



After lunch at a local villager's house, the participants met a group of women from the village for an informal interaction. They were introduced with the participants and were informed about the purpose of the journey to their village. Despite the poverty, lack of basic amenities and the constant struggle for making both ends meet, the women were in good spirits and they discussed about the problems faced by them. Brightly

attired, with children in tow, the women who came to the meeting wanted to know about how they could be more economically empowered so that could improve their standard of living.

The participants returned late in the evening after a short shopping spree at Cuttack.

Day Four: 24th August, 2013

On the last day of the journey, the ICP group reached Utkal University to participate in a Seminar on, "*Role of Women in the Promotion of Peace and Communal harmony*" jointly organized by ICP and the School of Women's Studies, Utkal University. The Seminar was also attended by the University students and teachers.

In her welcome speech, Dr Mitali Chinara, Course Co-ordinator, SWS spoke about the role of women in sustainable peace. She mentioned the Security Council Resolutions 1325 regarding inclusion of women in peace making in conflict situation, SCR 1820 that addresses sexual violence in time of conflict, SCR 1888 that calls upon reduction of conflict and sexual violence and SCR 1960 that addresses the issue of punishing the perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict situations. She mentioned that the women have several barriers that prevent them in Peace building efforts. These are mainly due to restrictive social gender roles that result in violence against women and girls. The women who work for peace are intimidated and threatened by men to restrain them from peace activities. The rape survivors of conflict situation have no access to justice. Rather, they are traumatised and the rights of women and girls remain elusive. Although they bear the double burden of doing all the household work and bringing in additional income by working outside the home, they have no say in any decision making. And lastly the women have no proper access to education. In order to empower women as agents of peace, the above mentioned issues need to be addressed first.

In his brief but succinct and thought provoking keynote address, Fr Packiam Sasmuel, Secretary of ICP gave an inspiring message of interfaith harmony and peace to the students in the audience.



Dr Deepali Bhanot gave a power point presentation on the aims, objectives and activities of Interfaith Coalition for Peace with a special emphasis on the Interfaith women's journeys that have been an unique contribution of ICP towards strengthening interfaith cooperation and communal harmony. This was followed by sharing of experiences from the participants of the journey. Dr Shaheena Khatib stressed on inculcating human values in the upbringing of children and the role of women in peace building at every level. She said that women must make use of the God given emotional quotient to women in peace building process. Mrs Premlata Behera and Dr Nibedita spoke in Oriya and inspired the students to take an active part in conflict resolution and peace building.

There a number of questions from the students regarding how to stop violence against women, about Islam, Burqua, misguided religious teachers who create conflicts and about the role of youth in peace building. All the speakers took turns to answer the questions and a very interesting debate ensued.

The Seminar ended with a vote of thanks by Dr Aliva Mohanty, Lecturer, SWS around 2.00 p.m. The participants returned to the Hotel and proceeded to the Airport for their homeward journeys.



This journey was a very hectic one as too much time was taken up in travelling. But during the journey, the participants got time for interaction and exchange of ideas. The long drives provided an insight into the lives of the poverty stricken rural folk. The stories of horror during the communal conflicts in Kandhamal brought to light the vulnerability of women in conflict situation. But women are not always the victims...they are also healers who can reach across the conflicting communities to rebuild the lives of their families and children. This also established the urgent need of women from different faith groups to come together and make joint efforts for establishing peace. The journey ended with heartfelt thanks to ICP for providing this opportunity to the interfaith women's group to visit Odisha.

Reported by:

Deepali Bhanot,

Coordinator, Women's Journey to Odisha

Participants of the Women's Journey to Odisha:

1. Dr. Deepali Bhanot – Coordinator

2. Dr. Sahina Khatib

3. Sr. Gracy Rebun

4. Ms. Annie Pudussery

5. Ms. Nyima Lhamo

6. Ms. Dorji Kyi

7. Ms. Gurmeet Kaur

8. Dr Qudsia Anjum

9. Dr. Nibedita Mohanty

10. Ms Premalata Behera

