An Interfaith ICP Women’s Journey to Colombo was undertaken from the 18th-22nd March, 2014. The ICP Women’s team to Colombo included the following participants:

1. Dr Deepali Bhanot (Hindu), Delhi, Co-ordinator of the Journey
2. Dr Shahina Khatib (Muslim), Nagpur
3. Dr Surjit Kaur Chahal (Sikh), Pune
4. Ms Christy Femila (Christian), Hyderabad
5. Ms Sribala Mylavavarupu (Hindu), Hyderabad
6. Ms Mamdooha (Muslim) Delhi
7. Ms Gladys Mathew (Christian), Delhi
8. Ms Tashi Dolma (Buddhist) could not attend as her Exit Permit from Dharamshala was delayed.

Rev Packiam Samuel, Secretary, Interfaith Coalition for Peace (ICP), India and Rev Ebenzer Joseph, Secretary, National Christian Council of Sri Lanka (NCCSL), Colombo had collaborated for the past few years to prepare the ground for making this journey possible..

The Women’s Group arrived in Colombo late at night on the 18th of March and were put up in Hotel Renuka at Colombo.

19th March: Day One:

NCCSL Headquarters, Colombo:

On the morning of the 19th the group left for a briefing to the NCCSL headquarters in a very comfortable, small AC Bus that had been hired for the participants for their travel during their entire stay in Sri Lanka.

The participants were greeted by Rev Ebenzer Joseph, Secretary, NCCSL. He was honoured by the presentation of an ‘Angavastram’ by Dr Deepali Bhanot, Coordinator of the Women’s Journey. She presented a brief account of the activities of ICP, India with a special mention of the Interfaith Women’s Journeys that have taken place so far. Each of the participants then introduced themselves and expressed their thanks to the hosts in Sri Lanka for this opportunity to visit their country.
Rev Ebenezer welcomed the participants and expressed his disappointment that the trip was very short and that the group would not be able to benefit fully from such a short exposure visit. However, he had tried his best to accommodate the proposed agenda of the group to meet the religious leaders, to meet the women’s groups affected by the conflict and to visit areas of interfaith initiatives in Sri Lanka.

He spoke to the participants about the many complex problems and issues existing in Sri Lanka, he said that though Sri Lanka is a small country, it has many. He mentioned about the three decades of conflict that had ravaged the country and said that currently the population consists of about 70% Buddhists, 12-13% Hindus and 7.5% each of Christians and Muslims. He also informed the participants about and interesting fact that at the Adam’s Peak in the Garden of Eden in Sri Lanka, there exists a footprint on the mountain the same footprint is claimed by all the religions to belong to them. For example the Christians consider it to be the footprint of Adam, the Hindus believe it to be the footprint of Shiva while the Buddhists believe it to be the footprint of Buddha. But instead of it being a source of conflict, it is symbol of unity between all the religions.

But there is a religious cum ethnic divide amongst the people. All the Buddhists are Sinhalese speaking while all the Hindus speak Tamil. The Christians speak both these languages as they are converts from both these groups. The Muslims, on the other hand, have a separate ethnic identity. In the North this group speaks Tamil and in the South they speak Sinhalese. But there is also a group that speaks a dialect of Arabic.

While talking about the perceptions of these different groups, he said that there is a feeling amongst many Buddhists that this country belongs to Sinhalese Buddhists because when Lord Buddha died, he had entrusted the Sinhalese to protect Buddhism. So this myth links the religion with the language and the country. But the majority of people are not confined to this ideology. After decades of war the LTTE was finally crushed in 2009. As a result, the Tamil community feels that they have been defeated, while the Sinhalese feel vindicated and victorious.

Before 2008 the entire place was full of military blockades but that has changed now and the entire city has got over all the effects of war. At present the city is undergoing a rapid developmental phase. Although it is amazing to find how Sri Lanka has emerged from war, the issues of conflict remain for the minorities.
There is a suppressed feeling of pain and bereavement for the victims of war. Women have been the worst sufferers. NCCSL has undertaken some activities to rehabilitate the war affected women. In the country, the fisheries and farming have been through a tough time. Due to the increasing number of mechanised trawlers for fishing, the local fishermen have to struggle very hard.

About 80% of population in the rural sectors have suffered due to the effects of the war. The farmers are losing their land due to urbanisation, industrialisation and the new roads that are being built. As a result the rate of farmer’s suicide is going up and at present it is rated as the third in the world. Moreover due to environmental changes the country is going through a drought.

There was a brief question-answer session after the briefing by Rev Ebenzer. After which the participants got a chance to do a little bit of shopping before lunch.

**Meeting with Women’s group among the Fisheries in Negombo:**

After lunch the group visited the inter-faith initiatives among the Fisheries & Free Trade Zone Sectors in Katunayake and Negombo areas.
The women’s group had assembled in one of the houses in the Negombo area which looked quite prosperous because many of the inhabitants of that area are working abroad, especially in Italy. The women present were from the fishing community and were mostly Catholics and from the Sinhala community. There were also some Buddhists in the group.

The main work of these women was to make dried fish and to sell fish. The income from storing and selling fish was mainly managed by the women themselves. There are about 500 women in that area who are working individually and not in a cooperative. Most of them were educated till high school and had a bank account. They had an exchange programme with a Buddhist farmer community in Anuradhapura through which they gave dried fish in return for paddy.

Challenges faced by the local fishermen’s community:

The greatest problem being faced by them was the rising price of kerosene oil and they were fighting along with men for controlling the price of kerosene. As a result they were facing many hardships. Although these people were not directly affected by the conflict but they are facing economic hardships. The fishermen community do not want their children to follow the same profession due to the many hardships that they have to face. For about 3-4 months in a year they cannot catch fish. As they do not have any income during that period, the
boys are taken away from the school and sent with their fathers to catch fish in deeper waters. They can hardly save anything because all the savings are used up in feeding the family.

The leader from the Buddhist community informed the participants that in the Free Trade Zone, in order to develop the economy, women from rural areas are recruited and have been brought to work in garment factories and other such endeavours. They work on meagre salaries and they are denied their rights for good working conditions. This is also affecting their culture because there is no place of worship for the Hindus in the Buddhist areas. Mixed marriages between the Buddhists and Christians are taking place. The people working here cannot voice their problems like low wages and human rights violations. They are made to lived in cramped spaces and have many health problems which remain unattended.

The meeting ended late in the evening and the participants on their way back to the Hotel in Colombo got a glimpse of the fishermen pushing their boats into the sea for going to fish in the sea at night. Already the sea shore was lined up with a number of Hotels and guest houses that has caused the fishing area to shrink. The participants got a chance to get down to the sea-shore briefly before returning back to Colombo.

A sumptuous Dinner had been arranged at “Raja Bhojan”, one of the best restaurants in town. Rev Packiam Samuel and Rev Ebenezer joined the group for dinner.

20th March: Day Two:

Inauguration of ICP Unit of Sri Lanka:
The Women's Group left the Hotel at 8.00 a.m. after an early breakfast to reach the **Sapugaskanda Buddhist Temple** for the Inauguration Ceremony of the Interfaith Coalition for Peace, Sri Lankan Regional Unit.

On arrival at the Temple, the participants were pleasantly surprised with the greetings of betel leaves offered to them by the tiny school children of the Mahabodhi society.

The programme began with silent religious observances. **Rev. W.P. Ebenezer Joseph** welcomed the guests and introduced the religious leaders. This was followed by a message by **Ven. Ittapanne Dhammalankara Maha Nayaka (Acting) Thero**. **Ven. Banagala Upatissa Nayaka Thero** of the Mahabodhi society addressed the guests. He told them about the school being run by the Mahabodhi society and expressed his happiness over the opening of the Interfaith initiative of ICP in Sri Lanka.

After the lighting of the ceremonial lamp by all the dignitaries on the dais and the members of the ICP women’s group, **Rev. Packiam Samuel**, Secretary of ICP, India spoke about his collaboration with Rev Ebenezer for the past few years for setting up of the ICP Sri Lankan Regional Unit. He said that this Regional Unit of ICP in Sri Lanka would go a long way in strengthening the Interfaith friendship between the two countries. He thanked Rev Ebenezer for his cooperation and support for the ICP Women’s Journey to Colombo. He then invited **Dr Deepali Bhanot**, Coordinator, ICP Women’s Journey and the members of the team to honour the Religious leaders and inform the audience about the Interfaith Women’s Journey.

Dr Deepali Bhanot introduced the members of the Women’s Group and spoke to the audience about the activities of ICP with special emphasis on the Interfaith Women’s Journey which is a unique programme of the ICP. She added that the women’s journey was a regular feature of ICP and at least three such journeys are organized each year to spread the message of Peace and Interfaith harmony.
This was followed by greetings from the religious leaders present on the dais. Brahmasiri Kuhanantha Sarma Kurukkal, religious leader from the Hindu Community, Moulavi Faroud from the Muslim community and Mr B. Duetrom addressed the audience. All of them pledged their support and cooperation to make the interfaith initiative of ICP in Sri Lanka a grand success.

The programme ended around noon and the women’s group left for Anuradhapura accompanied by Mr Ralston Weinmen.

**Meeting with Farmers Group and Religious Leaders at Anuradhapura:**

It was a long 5-6 hours drive to Anuradhapura. On the way the participants halted at a small restaurant for lunch and then proceeded on their journey. The long drive through the city and the country side gave the participants a panoramic view of the beautiful country of Sri Lanka.

It was evening when the group reached Anuradhapura to meet with the local religious leaders. The meeting was arranged in the local Anglican Church, The Christ of Church de Compassion.
The following religious leaders were present:

1. Brother Quinco le Colomboge (Methodist)
2. Swami Gyanchandran Kurukal (Hindu)
3. Thero Mahavilakshita Vimala Emi (Buddhist) from Sama Viharya, Anuradhapura
4. Father Sanath (Anglican Church)

Dr Deepali Bhanot introduced the ICP Women’s Group and explained to the local religious leaders about the purpose of their visit and also informed them about the opening of the Regional Unit of ICP in Colombo.

The religious leaders were happy to hear about the opening of the ICP unit in Sri Lanka and said that they were very happy to have a relationship with India. They spoke about the problems being faced by the local people after the long decades of conflict. The religious leaders have been visiting the conflict areas and are trying to help the people to overcome the trauma of conflict and to rebuild their lives.

**Challenges faced by the farmers’ groups:**

Mr E.M. Herat, a Social Development Worker who is working with the farmers, organizing programmes for women’s empowerment and helping the local people with their livelihoods, informed the ICP group that one of the most challenging problems that the local people are facing is serious kidney problems due to contaminated water. In order to get a better harvest, the farmers are using a lot of chemicals and fertilisers and as a result, the water is getting poisoned and is affecting the children adversely and the most common disease that they are suffering is kidney problems. Therefore, people are being taught organic farming. But the younger generation is going
away from farming as it is tedious and does not provide enough for the family because the land is being divided and sub-divided as generations grow. Moreover, due to urbanization, the machines in the field are cutting down the work of the farm-labourers and the income for working in the fields is very low.

Now the farmers are facing a bigger challenge. A new Parliament Act – the “Seeds Act” is going to be enforced on the farmers. Earlier the farmers could retain the seeds from their own harvest. But now if the farmers want to keep the seeds, they would have to declare it and also would have to register the same. The farmers would be punished if they failed to do so. There have been protests against this Act across the country. Mr Herat felt that Inter-faith committees and religious leaders should come together for such protests to make it more effective.

The plight of the farmers is the worst because they are blamed for using chemicals for raising the level of the harvest. But the tragedy is that if the harvest is more, the price of yield goes down. So they have to invest more to get more harvest but they are not getting back enough profit. Thus the farmers are caught in the vicious cycle from which it is difficult to escape. As a result the farmers’ suicide rate is going up.

Although education is free and books are also being given to the children, the cost of the note-books, uniforms etc are so high that the children from the poorer families cannot afford to go to school.

During the conflict, Anuradhapura served as a transit point for the Military. As a result this area has witnessed a high rate of prostitution. This is another problem that this area is facing.

The meeting ended late in the evening with a vote of thanks to the religious leaders and the local people present. The group then departed to Palm Garden Village Hotel, Anuradhapura for night stay. The Hotel with sprawling gardens and beautiful surroundings was very beautiful.

21st April: Day Three:

The women's group was advised to leave Hotel by 7.00 a.m. so that they could be in time for the forenoon meeting at Halamba Wewa in Distt. Padaviya at 11.00 a.m. After a rushed breakfast, all the participants left at 7.00 a.m for the four hour journey to the
next venue of meeting. The journey to Halamba Wewa through the lush green fields and the well-metalled road lined with thick bushes and trees, especially the coconut trees fascinated the participants.

On reaching the venue of the meeting, it was found that the long war had affected that area so much that there was hardly any habitation left. The participants were told that the area had been a stronghold of LTTE during the conflict and all the people living there had fled their villages and were afraid to return as nothing had remained of their houses. This area (about 900 kms) is now under Military control. The Army was encouraging the people to return and was helping the people in their rehabilitation process by providing them houses and helping them attaining some livelihood skills.

The venue of the meeting was a thatched hut which also doubled up as a Montessori school set up through the inter-faith collaboration of the NCCSL, led by Rev. W.P. Ebenezer Joseph and the Mahabodhi Society, headed by Thero Banagala Upathissa who is also the Nayaka Thero, the chief Nayaka for Japan.

The participants were greeted by the tiny tots of the Montessori school by offering them betel leaves in accordance with the local tradition.

The important people present were Rev. Ebenezer Joseph; Thero Banagala Upathissa; Thero Mahavilakshita Vimala; Ms Ambapali, Principal of the school of the Mahabodhi Society; Mr Hema Kumara Gunasekhara, Director of the school at Colombo; Col. Srikanth and a few others.

Mr Shyam Sunder, Secretary of the Agricultural Society welcomed the guests. He informed the participants that there are about 100 families in this area who are mostly Buddhists. The main profession of the people here is farming but it is a very tough job because there has been no rain for a long time. Although the farmers have been given land, but there are serious issues of water due to drought and lack of proper irrigation
system. There is not even any labourer’s job available here. The people are so poor that most of them have only one meal a day and about 25% suffer from kidney problems due to shortage of drinking water. Water purification project in such a large is difficult. Water is stored during the monsoons but that is not enough. The Army is considering of setting up of tube wells as an alternative. However, they have a huge water treatment plant in their brigade which caters to the Montessori school also.

A ray of hope in this area is the opening of the Montessori school. Earlier, the children had to travel about 11 kms to go to school. The NCCSL and the Mahabodhi Society considered opening a school in this area because education is the only thing that can give a better life to these people. The dream of this inter-faith initiative is that perhaps after a couple of decades these little children of this school would become doctors, engineers or political leaders who would change the history of this place by making it a comfortable place for all. Col. Srikanth and his brigade are providing all possible support in running this school.

The biggest challenge in running this school is how to maintain its cost. The school provides the children book, uniform etc. but there are no funds to pay the teachers. The teachers are working on a voluntary basis at present. But this cannot last long. Hence they appealed for funds for paying the teachers.

After the meeting, the participants were provided with heavy refreshments and a sumptuous lunch at the Brigade Head Quarters.

**Meeting with women at village Kokkadu Thoduwai in the Kokilai Area:**

At the village Kokkadu, the participants were greeted by the local women in the traditional Hindu way of lighting the lamp and applying the sacred ash on the forehead and throat.
The participants were informed that there are about 240 families in this area. The majority of the people are Tamils but this is an area where the two nationalities of the Sinhalese and the Tamils are living together in complete harmony like relatives. Although the majority of the people here are Tamils, there are followers of different faiths like Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism and all the religious leaders are well received and respected by the local people.

The NCCSL and the Mahabodhi Society have been working together on several projects for the welfare of the people. Col. Srikantha speaking to the women present appreciated the working of both of these religious organizations who are helping people to overcome their religious and ethnic barriers. Both these organizations have trained more than 100 school teachers and during the training the participants have formed deep friendships across the religious and ethnic groups. The NCCSL and the Mahabodhi Society recently conducted leadership training and training for income-generating programmes. They also provided resources to the trainees to start small initiatives for income-generation. The Army provides an active support to these religious organisations in all their activities of rehabilitation and people's welfare.
As a result of the long conflict, there are a lot of widows in this village. The NCCSL has introduced Post-War Trauma Counselling for the women here. The Counsellors come and stay here with the local people to help the women to overcome their trauma and get on with their lives.

The women are mostly involved with agriculture and some of them have their own land where they engage in home-gardening, planting groundnuts and tapioca. Some women are also involved in fishing. Training in sewing and tailoring has also helped women to get some extra income. In this way the women supplement the income of the family.

Most of the women are educated till class X. They have organised themselves into ten subgroups like Self-Help Groups and work in unison by doing physical labour together. They also celebrate festivals like Pongal, Deepawali and the Singhalese and the Tasmil New Year. This was an excellent example of the inter-faith initiative among the war affected women.

The meeting during the afternoon ended quite late and by the time the participants drove back to the hotel, it was already very late at night and they did not have any opportunity to see the ruins and the archaeological remains at Anuradhapura.

22nd April, Day 4:

The participants had to leave Hotel early in the morning by 6.00 a.m. in order to reach the Airport by 11.30 a.m. They were offered packed breakfast by the Hotel and the group checked out by 6.00 a.m. During the long drive to the Airport, the group utilised the time to catch up with their discussions and had a lot of fun. Mr Mahesh Somasunderam, who was accompanying the group made brief stops on the way to provide tea, king coconut and also some coffee before the group was safely delivered to the Airport exactly at 11.30 a.m., well in time to catch the flights.
Although this trip was very hectic, the participants enjoyed each moment of the journey and felt that they did not have enough of Sri Lanka and wished that the trip could have been a little longer.

Deepali Bhanot, Ph D
Coordinator, Women’s Journey to Colombo.