

From: *A Short History of the IARF* by Robert Traer

100 Years of the IARF in India

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This article commences with a description of the interest aroused in India when the IARF was founded, and goes on to trace the formation of the member groups and their participation in the various activities of the IARF during the last 100 years. Representation of the member groups in the IARF council, participation in the triennial Congresses, the regional conferences and the social projects in which the IARF has collaborated with the member groups are covered in detail, sounding an optimistic note about the future of the IARF in India.

Just as the Renaissance and the Reformation were followed by the Enlightenment in Europe, there came in India a similar period of enlightenment, which is sometimes inappropriately called the 'Indian Renaissance.' This period began towards the close of the eighteenth century, and continued through the nineteenth century till the present day. The man who paved the way for this

Enlightenment

was Raja Rammohun Roy, who is generally accepted as being the Father of Modern India. Centuries of dogma and bigotry through the medieval ages had created an India where rational thought had been ruthlessly suppressed by vested interests, and religion had degenerated into meaningless and sometimes, cruel, rituals, sustained and nourished by a caste system which sought to deny all semblance of human dignity to the so called lower castes.

It was at this time that the seeds of the French Revolution had been sown in Europe, and the cry for 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' wafted throughout the world. The intelligentsia in India responded to this cry by demanding social and religious reform, and Rammohun Roy was soon joined by the elite of the nation who, together with him, ushered in the age of Enlightenment in India. He established the Brahmo Samaj, a liberal church with avowed universalist ideals, While orthodox Hinduism and orthodox Christianity put up a front of strong opposition, his ideas were supported throughout India and the world by the liberal churches, notably, the Unitarian church. Ever since, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Brahmo Samaj have evinced strong bonds of friendship arising out of common aspirations and ideals.

The Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893 brought together religious leaders from all over the world. It is generally accepted that one of the major findings of this Parliament was that while there may be differences of opinion, the process of dialogue is of inestimable value in bringing people together. While establishing the Brahmo Samaj, Raja Rammohun Roy in the Trust Deed proclaimed that "...the said message or building, land, tenements, hereditaments and premises with their appurtenances, to be used occupied enjoyed applied and appropriated as and for a place of public meeting of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction as shall behave and conduct themselves in an orderly, sober, religious and devout manner, for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe, but not under or by any other name designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to any particular being or beings by any man or set of men whatsoever, and that no graven image, statue or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait, or the likeness of anything shall be admitted within the said premises ..."

With such a background it was only natural that the Brahmo Samaj would enthusiastically participate in the Parliament, and Mr. Protap Chandra Mozoomdar, a devout Brahmo missionary, was sent to represent the Brahmo Samaj. His inspired lectures were appreciated by all, and newspapers were eloquent in his praise.

The IARF was founded in 1900 after a series of meetings in Paris and Boston. These meetings aroused a great deal of interest in India, and the main journal of the Brahmo Samaj, viz. 'The Indian Messenger' carried regular reports of these meetings. The following excerpts from the 'Indian Messenger' will serve to show the degree of interest aroused:

IM - Jan.31, 1897 The Proposed Universal Religious Congress

A proposal is already on foot to hold a congress of all religions under the above name in connection with the Paris Exhibition in 1900. A number of leading Frenchmen have already formed themselves into a sort of committee for that purpose. These organisers of the present movement have the excellent record of the Chicago Parliament, compiled by Dr. Barrows before them, and the work of carrying out this new scheme would be much easier for them than it was for Dr. Barrows and his colleagues. We wish all success to the new movement.

IM - Feb.28, 1897 The following is the text of the address presented to Dr. J. H. Barrows by the members of the Southern India Brahmo Samaj, Madras:

"On behalf of the Brahmos of Southern India we beg leave to approach you with this address and offer you a hearty welcome on the occasion of your visit to our capital city. It is with feelings of utmost pleasure and gratitude that we looked forward to the day of your arrival in our midst—pleasure because we, an essentially religious body, see in you the worthy President of the Parliament of Religions, where members of different nationalities and leaders of different faiths met together on a common platform and expounded their principles with feelings of brotherly love and sympathy unto the glorification of our common Father, and gratitude because of the kind cordiality and warm affection with which you greeted our representative and brother Babu P. C. Mozoomdar will never fail to evoke a kind and sympathetic response in the heart of every Brahmo . . . As a community which seeks to establish a connecting link between the East and the West we convey to you and Mrs. Barrows our deepest and most heartfelt regards, affection and love, and wish you a happy stay in our midst."

IM April 22, 1900 The Liberal Congress of Religion

The Liberal Congress of Religion in America, to which Mr. P. C. Mozoomdar goes as the representative of the Brahmo Samaj, proposed to hold a meeting in Boston in the last week of April. "A very large committee," says the Christian Register, "has been appointed and plans are making to secure the co-operation of eminent men representing many different forms of religious belief. The spirit of co-operation is in the air, and many are moved by it more than they know. If wisely planned and magnanimously conducted such a meeting must reveal the secrets of many hearts. For many loyal to their own convictions and associations are desirous of showing their respect for others who have faith in a different form, and to express their confidence in those who, honestly seeking the truth, work in other ways than their own. The names of the persons who have already consented to serve, and those who have allowed their names to be printed as members of the local committee, furnish sufficient guarantee that the effort will be made in good faith to magnify agreements, to unify differences, and to bring about unity of spirit and co-operation in good works. According to the announcements that we have received, the meeting seems to be entirely in the hands of the local committee, of which Dr. L. G. James is the chairman."

IM June 10, 1900 The Boston Congress of Religions

"The first installment of the sayings and doings of the religious congress of Boston has reached us. The first thing noticeable is that the word "Liberal" as signifying the character of the Congress was omitted from the title for the purpose of, says the *Unity* reporter, "avoiding the misapplication and double meaning which has gathered around even this one of the best of words."

"The Congress," the reporter continues, "recognised that in its antecedents, constituency and purpose, it was not in any sense a congress of 'Liberals' versus 'Orthodoxy', but a congress including 'Liberals' and 'Orthodox'. The following resolutions, indicative of that spirit of inclusiveness, perhaps, were unanimously adopted:

"The Congress of Religion, assembled at Boston, in its sixth general session, would set forth the spirit that it seeks to promote and the principle for which it stands.

"It recognises the underlying unity that must characterise all sincere and earnest seekers of God, and welcomes the free expression of positive convictions, believing that sympathetic understanding between men of different views will lead to finer catholicity of mind and more efficient service of men. Hence it would unite in fraternal conference those of whatever name who believe in the application of religious principles and spiritual forces in the present problems of life."

"Believing that the era of protest is passing and men of catholic temper are fast coming together, it simply seeks to provide a medium of fellowship and co-operation where the pressing needs of the time may be considered in the light of many spiritual resources.

"It lays emphasis upon the value of this growing spirit of fraternity, it affirms the religious value and significance of the various spheres of human work and service, and it seeks to generate an atmosphere in which the responsibilities of spiritual freedom shall be heartily accepted equally with its rights and privileges."

"We were not aware that the word "liberal" had come to have such a bad odour as to need its omission. Without deprecating this spirit of inclusiveness, we feel liberal religion as distinguished from orthodoxy has need for strength of organisation."

When the IARF was founded in 1900 the Brahmo Samaj was one of the founder members and at the first of the triennial congresses held at Amsterdam in September 1903 the Brahmo Samaj was represented by V. Ramji Shinde.

There appears to be a gap after this until the interaction between the IARF and the Indian member groups recommenced with the visit to India in February 1980 of Ms. Lucie Meijer of the IARF secretariat and Ms. Christine Hayhurst, Deputy Secretary of the British Unitarians. The two representatives met and exchanged views with different member groups in India, viz. Unitarian Union of Meghalaya, Seng Khasi also of Meghalaya, the Ramakrishna Mission at Calcutta and Narendrapur, and of course, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Likely areas of involvement of the IARF in various social projects were discussed.

This was followed by the visit of Punyabrata Roy Choudhury, then the Assistant Secretary of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, to the IARF Secretariat in Frankfurt in March 1980, and subsequently a delegation from the IARF, including Diether Gehrman, then General Secretary, Lucie Meijer, and several members from different parts of the world visited India.

From 1981 onwards a number of social service projects were taken up by the IARF and the member groups in India, the earliest projects being in Meghalaya with the Unitarians, the Balya Bhavan (orphanage) and the Mahila Bhavan (womens' centre) of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta. The triennial Congress in 1981 at Amsterdam had a number of Indian participants, and the author of the present paper was invited to deliver the keynote address. Punyabrata Roy Choudhury

was elected a member of the IARF council, the first Indian to be so elected.

The first All India IARF conference was held at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta, in early 1982. An IARF India chapter was formed with a steering committee being elected with representatives from the Unitarians, the Lokasiksha Parishad of the Ramkrishna Mission of Narendrapur, the Brahmo Samaj, the Guru Nanak Foundation, the Seng Khasi and the Donyl Polo Mission of Arunachal. Subsequent IARF India conferences were held at New Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai and Narendrapur. The last such conference was held in March 1998 at Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu. Indian member groups were represented at successive IARF congresses at Tokyo (1984), Palo Alto, Stanford (1987), Hamburg (1990), Bangalore (1993) and Korea (1996). Punyabrata Roy Choudhury continued to be a council member till the Congress in Korea. He had been elected the international president at the Congress in Hamburg in 1990 for a period of three years. S.S. Chakraborty of the Lokasiksha Parishad, Ramkrishna Mission was elected to the council at Bangalore in 1993 and subsequently to the post of Treasurer at the Korea Congress in 1996. Other council members from India at present include Dr. Mohinder Singh of Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan and Bhikku Sangasena of the Mahabodhi Society.

The Congress at Bangalore was especially significant as it coincided with the centennial celebrations of the Chicago Parliament of Religions. Apart from the IARF congress an All Faiths Conference was also held. The 1993 Congress also marked the shifting of the IARF headquarters from Frankfurt, Germany to Oxford in the UK.

At this time it was also decided to decentralize the activities of the secretariat and form regional coordinating councils. Accordingly, the South Asia Coordinating Council was set up consisting of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka with S. S. Chakraborty as its chairman. In order to coordinate social service projects a social service network was formed with Harish Jain as the coordinator. After Mr. Jain left the IARF due to ill health, Dr. P. S. Datta became the coordinator for South Asia.

Efforts were also intensified to properly reorganize the individual members of the IARF through the IARF Indian Chapter. It was decided to have a national chapter with branches all over India. Elections were held for office bearers of the National Chapter in November 1995. Punyabrata Roy Choudhury was elected National President, C. N. N. Raju (Bangalore) as the National Secretary and A. V. Ezhilarasu as the Treasurer. Efforts commenced to build up a strong base of individual members throughout the country. A constitution was drawn up and formally adopted at a meeting of the National Chapter held in 1997 at Bangalore.

Punyabrata Roy Choudhury and C. N. N. Raju were reelected President and Secretary of the National Chapter for three years with S. R. Hiremath as the Treasurer. Elections were also held to fill other posts of the Executive Committee. The strength of the Chapter is growing steadily. The coordinating council has been meeting twice a year, overseeing various social service projects and spreading the ideals of the IARF. Its constitution has been finalized, and a revolving fund has been set up to assist beneficiaries involved in projects through loans etc.

The following projects are running today in India with the involvement of the IARF:

- Indian Christian Association, Chennai Dispensary
- R. K.Math – Jamtara, Bihar Tribal Development Program.
- Harinavi Brahmo Samaj, Calcutta a) Paraprofessional Nurses' Training;
b) Community Development Program.

- Unitarian Union, NE India, Meghalaya Education Project
- Mahabodhi Centre, Ladakh Health Project
- Calcutta Social Project Girls' Craft Centre
- Asian Youth Centre, Chennai Young Hotel Workers' Project.
- Bhai Bir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi Self-Help Project for Women.

The most noticeable achievement of the IARF in India of late is to be found in the increased awareness among the young people of the member groups about what the IARF stands for and what it is trying to achieve. If this trend continues into the new millennium then the future of the IARF in India is indeed bright.

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