

National Workshop on Religion, Human Rights and Peace

15 April, 2009

Government Arts College, Paramakudi, TamilNadu, India

Jointly organized by:

- **South Asian Coordination Council (SACC) of IARF**
- **Amnesty Panchayats of Government Arts College, Paramakudi**
- **Alagappa University Evening College**
- **Guru Rural Empowerment & Action Trust, Paramakudi.**

Bomb Threat

As preparations were going ahead for this workshop, the Principal of Paramakudi Govt. Arts College received an anonymous letter warning him that between 10th and 20th April, a bomb would be planted in the college, and cautioning the authorities to ensure the safety of students.

Police and revenue authorities took over charge of the campus and when they come to know that a national level workshop is to be held on 15th April, they were concerned about the safety of national and international leaders of IARF and made investigation whether there is any threat for the life of international or national leaders from any terrorist group.

This area is very close to the Arabian Sea, where many Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka had migrated due to the civil war there. And Dalit and Thevar (upper caste) community clashes are very common here. So the IARF's Human Rights Seminar was closely watched by both Government and various religious communities.

Only after assurances from the Workshop Director and Principal-in-Charge Dr. G. Rajaram, were police authorities convinced, and preparations for the workshop allowed to proceed. Nonetheless full police protection was provided for the entire programme, in which about 100 people participated, comprising faculty, students, consumer and human rights activists, and the public.

The Workshop

Inter-religious prayer by Hindus, Muslims and Christians opened proceedings, and Dr. G. Rajaram welcomed the gathering, explained the workshop's purpose, and thanked SACC for giving an opportunity to organize a workshop in Paramakudi. College Principal Prof. S. Banumathi emphasized the need for such workshops, and appreciated the organizers. IARF President Dr. Thomas Mathew inaugurated by narrating the various IARF and SACC activities; he requested that activities be strengthened at district level, by youth - especially students - conducting peace marches and inter-religious activities. Chief Guest Mr. Ravichandra Ramavanni, President, District Panchayath, emphasizing the need for religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, pointed out that the district had experienced conflict in the past based on religion and caste. So this venture was a wonderful opportunity to work toward harmony.

National President of IARF Mr. Rengapashyam stated that people should become involved in humanitarian activities, such as blood donation, to improve religious harmony. Mr. Shabeer Ahmed, National Secretary of IARF, gave many examples of discrimination based on caste, and emphasized the need for religious tolerance and appreciation of other religions' rituals. He explained the Indian HRE program of IARF, and the UDHR.

The first business session was facilitated by Prof K.Mayilvel, in which the causes for religious conflicts were identified. In his opening remarks he traced out some causes for disharmony from history and literature, and helped the participants come out with their ideas.

Open discussion started with Mrs. Packialakshmi, General Secretary of the Federation of Consumer Rights Organizations of TamilNadu & Pondicherry, explaining how her mother-in-law, due to her orthodox beliefs, was reluctant to accommodate people of other religions in their house. Through various approaches her attitudes were changed, so that later she was very cordial with them, and visited their home for their religious functions.

A student participant, Ms. Durgalakshmi, shared her experience of having some Europeans visit her home while she was weaving a sari; they were attracted by the design and wanted the piece she was weaving. As she was cutting it from the loom, she cut her finger, so one of the women visitors removed her handkerchief and made a bandage. She still keeps the handkerchief as a token of love and mutual help, though her mother, an orthodox Hindu, often urges her to throw it away, as it once belonged to someone of another religion. Her point was that these types of orthodox feeling may be among root causes of religious conflicts.

Mr. Gopalakrishnan, Secretary of TamilNadu Progressive Writers Association, was of the opinion that **some religious fanatics and political leaders** are the main cause for spreading the message of religious disharmony, so youth must be very careful.

In the second business session, Dr. Madhava Soma Sundaram, Head of the Dept. of Criminology & Criminal Justice from Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, explained **the spirit of humanism** and facilitated the participants coming out with suggestions for mutual appreciation between religions and peaceful co-existence. All participants came out with lots of practical solutions.

Dr. Kayarkanni, Dept. of Economics Sri Parasakthi College for Women, emphasized the need for **participation in inter-religious functions**, so that understanding about other religions can take place. Mr. Veerachamy, a Consumer Activist from Dindugal, pressed for the need for constitutional amendments to remove religious disparity.

Mr. Ayyapan, a social worker who is preparing to start a new IARF Branch in Paramakudi, has pointed out that **blood donation** is a medium through which religious harmony could be achieved. He assured that, next IARF Foundation Day (May 25th

2010), he will organize a blood donation camp to highlight the importance IARF as a world interfaith organization.

Mr. Balamurugan, a student participant, stated that more **training in human rights** will helps students understand humanism and remove religious disparity. Mr. Manickam, another student organizer, stated that sometimes government policies lead to religious conflicts.

Prof. Marudachalam, Dept. of Computer Science, came up with numerous practical solutions for countering religious disharmony. He suggested that more such workshops should be conducted across the country to help youth think and act. Mr. Ramachandran, HRE facilitator from Chennai, shared his rich experience with the participants, and suggested that students should be proactive and willingly participate in such programmes. Dr. R. Pandi, Dept. of Commerce, Govt. Arts College Paramakudi, anchored the inaugural session and offered various suggestions. Prof. K. Kudalingam, Prof. S. Sriramulu and Prof. S. Suresh made extensive arrangements for the workshop and contributed to the success of the programme.

The workshop generally agreed that lack of information, illiteracy, poverty and the power games of politicians are the main causes that disturb religious harmony in India. All welcomed the role of the UN in monitoring the impacts of the UDHR in various countries.

Participants also agreed that constant vigilance and a message of love through actions, especially solidarity with the victims, are the main pillars of Peace.

A youth group was selected to convey those messages to the students in the University and Colleges. Finally, all participants took an Oath to work for religious harmony and Peace.

Along with the workshop, a **Photo Exhibition** was arranged by the organizers which portrayed numerous human rights violations and abuses around the world.

On 16th and 17th April, HRE programme for 40 student participants was conducted by HRE facilitator Dr.Rajaram as per schedule.

On the whole, the National Workshop and HRE programme was very useful to the student community, the minorities, Dalits and other participants.

Prepared by Dr.Rajaram, HRE Facilitator & Organizer and edited by T.K. Jyothiraj, HRE Administrator.