

Brief Report on IARF Young Adult Programme held at Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, Kolkata – September 2004

by Zulfikhar Akram - Co-ordinator, IARF SACC

IARF SACC in collaboration with Ramakrishna Mission, Narendrapur, Kolkata, one of IARF's member groups, organised a three-day young adult programme at the Mission's Ashrama on 16th, 17th and 18th September 2004. Twenty five young adults from different parts of West Bengal State and other places like Delhi, Ahmaedabad, Nagpur, Vizag, Chennai, Tirunelveli, Tenkasi and Shillong took part. Some of the young adults had also taken part in the earlier young adult programmes of IARF in India.

The programme started with an inaugural function on 16th September which started with lighting of lamp and interfaith prayers. It was presided over by the Vice-President of IARF and Chairman of SACC, Mr. Thomas Mathew. The Secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Rev. Swami Asaktanaji delivered the welcome address. He recalled Swami Vivekananda's participation at the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. Special Guest Mrs. Gita Banerjee, a distinguished social activist and Chief Guest, Mr. Abdul Rouf, an eminent writer and journalist, spoke on the theme 'Religious Freedom and Tolerance'. Mr. Thomas Mathew in his presidential remarks spoke about IARF's focus and work. He stressed on the importance of young adults' involvement in IARF activities. Mr. Ranjit Mukherji, member of IARF International Council and SACC, Mr. Zulfikhar Akram, Coordinator of IARF SACC and Mr. Asit Kumar, Coordinator of the programme were also present on the occasion.

After the Inaugural, Mr. Ranjit Mukherji delivered a talk on IARF's philosophy, principles and objectives for the benefit of the young adult participants. Then the young adults sat in a circle and had their self-introduction done through a game. The young adults represented Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Unitarianism, Ramakrishna Sect and Brahma faith. Following the self introductions, they made presentations on their faith traditions. During this session, the young adults sought to understand each others religions, rituals and practices. They also had interactions on their own understanding of others religions and practices. Through this, an attempt was made to get to the core of each religion and explore commonalities. In a similar vein, the sources of misunderstanding and conflicts were also explored. For many it was the first opportunity to know about Bahai faith, Unitarianism, Brahma faith and Ramakrishna Sect.

In the session that followed, IARF's Statement of Purpose was discussed in detail. The young adults then shared instances related to the three broad aspects mentioned in the Statement of Purpose. The instances of denial of religious freedom and intolerance were drawn from their personal experiences to what they had witnessed and heard in their local areas to

regional, national and international issues. Some positive instances where religious communities upheld religious freedom of others and stood in solidarity in the face of violence were also shared. This was followed by a story writing exercise in which the young adults shared in small groups stories related to religious freedom and intolerance and analysed the underlying causes. The summary of the discussions and the findings were then shared in the larger group through presentations.

In the afternoon on the second day, the young adults went on an interfaith pilgrimage. They visited the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, one of IARF's member groups in Kolkata. The Secretary of the Samaj explained what the Brahmans believe and how the Brahma faith started as a Hindu Reformist movement to tackle the blind beliefs, superstitions, harmful rituals and idolatory Hinduism was steeped into in the 18th and 19th century. The SACC Coordinator recalled the long association of Brahma Samaj with IARF and interfaith movement and its significant contribution for their spread and growth. The young adults then attended the Brahma Divine Service organised at the Samaj Prayer Hall. A senior gentleman of Brahma Samaj read passages from the Upanishads and offered commentary. School children and a group of women sang Bhajans and Keertans. Later the young adults visited the Brahma Samaj Library which has a rich and rare collection of books on religion and philosophy.

The young adults then visited the famous Kali Temple of Kolkata. The rush of devotees and the sacred environment in the temple was keenly observed by them. On return, the participants attended prayer service at Ramakrishna Temple in the Ashrama premises.

On the final day, reflecting on the experiences of the interfaith pilgrimage the young adults shared different perceptions on religion, faith and places of worship. Mr. Ranjit Mukherji informed the young adults about the mythology and history of the Kali Temple and how after this temple that the City of Kolkata was named.

After reviewing the various issues identified in the earlier sessions, the young adults formed smaller groups according to the geographical proximity of the areas they came from and discussed interfaith and religious freedom activities as responses to the issues. Exercises on programme design were done. The programme thus designed were shared with the larger group.

Some of the issues identified were:

1. Religious Conversions and Re-conversions
2. Religion and caste based discrimination in educational institutions and jobs

3. Discrimination against women in the name of religion
4. Religious intolerance and violence during celebration of religious festivals
5. Discrimination at places of worship as a result of commercialization of the same
6. Opposition to inter-religious and inter-caste marriages
7. Religious fundamentalism and fanaticism

The suggested programmes to address these issues were:

1. Organising interfaith get-togethers and dialogues
2. Interfaith celebration of festivals
3. Interfaith education in schools and colleges
4. Education on religious freedom as a basic human right
5. Working with and through governments to protect religious freedom of all faith communities
6. Promotion of inter-religious marriages
7. Involving religious leaders for correct interpretation of religious scriptures and making them available to all to read and understand
8. Inculcating respect and understanding of other religions

Mr. Subrashil Basu of Ramakrishna Mission spoke briefly on what qualities are required to be a successful leader. The Coordinator of SACC had an interactive session with the young adults on how to successfully network with each other, other IARF members and bodies and NGOs working in the field of interfaith understanding and harmony and organise programmes.

The three-day programme ended with a short valedictory function.