

## **A brief report on Human Rights Education – A Workshop for Young Adults 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> July 2005, Visakhapatnam**

A two-day workshop on Human Rights Education for young adults was held at St. Ann's College for Women, Malkapuram, Visakhapatnam on 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> July 2005. It was organized by the local IARF member group, Bala Vikas Foundation for Peace and Harmony (BVFPH). It was inaugurated by Mr. Thomas Mathew, Chairman of SACC. In his inaugural address Mr. Mathew spoke about the philosophy and work of IARF. Prof. Krishna Prasad, Professor of Politics and Public Administration, Andhra University delivered the keynote address on human rights. Mr. Prakasa Rao, Chairman of BVFPH, Sister Tresa Mary, Principal of St. Ann's College and Mr. Zulfikhar Akram, IARF HRE Project Administrator were also present on the occasion. Fifty two young adults (28 male and 24 female (41 Hindus, 9 Christians and 2 Muslims) from 10 different colleges of Visakhapatnam took part in the workshop.

After the inauguration the workshop got underway with the introduction of the young adults. Ms. Bhagyalakshmi, Programme Coordinator and faculty at the St. Ann's college conducted a session on creation of awareness of human rights. The adults made an exhaustive list of human rights and freedoms and shared with each other.

In the afternoon session, Mr. Thomas Mathew and Mr. Prakasa Rao spoke about IARF's statement of purpose and religious freedom as a human right. Mr. Akram about the human rights education project of IARF that would be implemented in India. In the following session conducted by Ms. Bhagyalakshmi, the young adults divided themselves into seven groups and prepared skits on different themes related to violation of human rights. This exercise evoked much enthusiasm among the young adults. In the presentation of the skits the young adults displayed their creative talents and effectively conveyed issues of human rights. Real-life scenarios on issues like exploitation of women, dowry system, inter-religious marriage, religious intolerance, denial of education and equality to women, injustice to poor and landless farmers, etc. were depicted.

On day-2, Mr. Akram informed the young adults about the IARF young adult network. Then he introduced **IARF's consultative draft on**

### **“Towards an Affirmation of Religious Freedom and Responsibility”.**

The participants had in-depth interactions and discussions on the draft. They agreed that there is religious dimension to many of their day-to-day affairs and that they should be carried out with responsibility. They felt that all the religions in essence were good and their true purpose is to guide humanity on the path of righteousness, welfare and progress. All the religions uphold human rights and freedom while exercising these rights and freedom, responsible conduct and respect for each other should be observed. To specifically look at some of the religious beliefs and practices that required responsible conduct on the part of individuals and communities, the participants divided themselves into seven groups. Human rights, moral values, respect for life and, human well-being and dignity were taken as the basis to arrive at what should constitute as religious freedom with responsibility. Through the exercise the groups listed out some of the issues in religious beliefs and practices and considered what should be done and what should not be. A strong link between religious beliefs and practices and social, economic and political life of the followers emerged along its positive and negative manifestations.

The participants identified some principles and moral values that are common to all religions and felt that by using these commonalities an acceptable code of responsible of conduct can be prepared. For this the co-operation and involvement of religious leaders, teachers and parents is a must. A few examples of religious principles that can unite human beings as identified by the young adults are:

1. Following the principle of “Vasudevakutumbam” (the world is but one family of God) – from Hindu scriptures
2. “Ardhanareeshwara” ( men and women are equal) from Hinduism
3. Love your neighbour as yourself – Christianity
4. There is only one God (All religions say this)
5. Empowerment of women. Women is worshipped as mother and Shakti (power)
6. All religions prescribe financial and material support to newly married. Dowry is its negative manifestation.
7. Universal brotherhood – Islam
8. Charity and selfless service – All religions
9. Respect for life and tolerance
10. Non-violence as practiced in Jainism
11. The Astangamarga of Buddhism

12. Protection of women as in Sikhism
13. Care for aged and sick
14. Importance of education and science
15. Respect for life and environment
16. Stress on good deeds and the concept of reward and punishment

While enumerating the above points the young adults expressed confidence that all the religious communities can hardly disagree on them. This will help us to come to a common understanding of what is good and responsible conduct. They concluded that religion has always been a major influence in social, economic and political life of people. It helps in forming communities around shared values and the practices that embody them.

The young adults also looked at some of the harmful practices that have no religious sanction.

Some of the issues identified were:

1. The system of dowry and child marriage as having religious sanction in most of the religious communities in India
2. Stopping women's education after they attain puberty
3. The practice of untouchability, caste system / discrimination, etc. as divine social arrangement
4. Lack of truth, ethics and honesty and going against the basic tenets of all religions
5. The practice of polygamy and easy divorce
6. Opposition to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages
7. Denial of right to follow religion of ones choice, and denial of freedom to choose life partners and career
8. Sacrifice of animals as religious rituals
9. The Devadasi system, female infanticide, the practice of Sati and opposition to remarriage of widows
10. Carrying weapons like swords, daggers, trishuls (tridents) etc. as allowed in religion
11. Waging wars and terrorist activities and calling them holy
12. Corruption in all walks of life
13. Reservation policy and admissions into colleges, schools and jobs and economic support based on religion and caste affinities

14. Depending on horoscope and astrology for match-making and marriage alliances which hurts the self-respect and dignity of individuals
15. Claims of ones religion as being the only true religion and criticism, hatred and exclusion of other religious communities and their practices
16. Depending on faith healing and invoking spirits instead of seeking modern and scientific medical care while dealing with health problems
17. Observance of irrational and extremely cruel and painful religious practices such as offering blood to deities, offering children in sacrifice, fasting (starving) unto death, etc. to invoke blessings of God.
18. Religious conversions through force, allurement and inducement
19. Gender justice and equality. Share for women in property
20. Excommunication and social boycott of those who change their religion
21. Religious education that breeds fundamentalism and fanaticism
22. Blind following of religious leaders

They felt that all these can be abolished through proper education and understanding of religion and responsible conduct. The religious communities have to start working collectively towards addressing them and the Affirmation exercise is a step in the right direction.

The young adults strongly suggested inclusion of “Treatment of Women” as a specific issue as women are the worst sufferers in all religious communities. Consciousness and religious responsibility towards protection of environment were also stressed.

The workshop closed with a simple valedictory. Mr. V.S. Krishna, human rights activist spoke about instances of violation of human rights and activities to address them. He also gave away certificate of appreciation to all the participants.