

COMMUNITY CHRONICLES

'A collection of community anecdotes and stories by URI - North India and Afghanistan'

VOLUME - 1



UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE

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FOREWORD

A nursery of flowers is a beautiful reminder to humankind of not only the uniqueness, value and beauty of each individual plant, but also their co-dependence in the cycle of life. Likewise, 'YOU ARE I' (URI)'s 20th anniversary celebration is a reminder of this very beauty in diversity during these difficult times. URI brings together people from different religions, faiths, spiritual & indigenous cultures and traditions together as Cooperation Circle members. And more importantly, it ignites a 'Hope' that this cooperation between all individual members, cooperation circles, regional and global offices could solve problems at a local, national and global scale.

This year, as URI turns 20, we at the regional office thought of sharing with you this power of the 'collective WE'. We embarked on a journey of documenting stories - stories of people that helped create this worldwide movement and community of interfaith peace builders and torch bearers of harmony, love and inclusion. We hoped to pen down experiences that would enable people to gain perspectives and strength by reading stories of change that have far too long been overlooked. We hope that this would motivate people to share the zeal and passion of the ones that have been marginalized.

In these multiple series of chronicles that will be released successively till the end of the year, our hope is to bring to YOU narrations of every member from North India and Afghanistan region that would not just talk about their background and work, but also their journey with URI and the larger movement of building cultures of peace, justice and healing for all including our mother nature.

We are sincerely grateful to our members for supporting our initiatives, devoting their time and making us a part of their experiences. Hence fasten your seatbelts and get ready to experience the roller coaster ride of adventure, emotions, resilience, passion and fearlessness with us!

Ms. Subhi Dhupar,
Regional Coordinator – URI North India & Afghanistan



In conversation with...

Dr Mohinder Singh,
Founding Member of URI in India

"I'm happy to share my joy on the 20th birthday celebration of URI. I am one of those fortunate interfaith leaders who conceived and delivered this baby on 26th June 2000. By western standards, URI has turned 20, and is no longer a baby. But URI is not completely western and does share an Indian lineage. URI is lucky to have an affectionate father in Bishop Swing, a caring young mother in Kiran Bali; and also, a dynamic Director in Victor Kazanjian"

This is what Dr. Mohinder Singh, one of URI's founding members in India, has to say about its 20th birthday celebration. We were lucky enough to be able to talk to & seek blessings from him as a part of this endeavor. As he rejoiced in the fact that URI completed 20 long years of its existence, he recalled how he joined hands with Bishop Swing back in 1996. It was Bishop Swing who came up with the idea of forming a global body which would work on the lines of the United Nations with respect to religious matters. The endeavor was then named 'United Religious Organization', and was later changed to 'United Religions Initiative'. Bishop Swing often quoted from Hans Kung's Global Ethics Project, *"No peace among nations without peace among religions, no peace among religions without a dialogue between religions"*. URI was born out of this very need to facilitate an active dialogue between religions, interfaith leaders and organizations. Dr. Singh recalls how this idea was perceived to be 'crazy' at that time. However, this did not deter Bishop Swing in pursuing his mission and he took upon himself to translate this idea into a reality.

Dr. Singh associated with the Bishop as the coordinator and later as the representative of URI in India. He took this idea to schools and colleges across the country to mobilize the youth to be a part of this global movement. He attended many of URI's meetings and conferences around the world in this very capacity. He talked about the amount of time and efforts it took to draft URI's charter which upheld the values of equality, interfaith peace and inclusive development. Bishop Swing introduced the concept of a 'circle' for this initiative which meant that everyone was equal; and that there was no hierarchy. He even allowed jail inmates to form a cooperation circle as in his thinking, No one is bad. It is the circumstances which force some people to do certain things which are not considered appropriate by the system and they are sent behind the bars." Bishop's intention was to reform rather than punish such people.

Dr. Singh had a long association with URI but had to give up being a Member of URI after he was appointed as a Member of the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions, Government of India – by the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. This constitutional position required him to not have any formal association with any organization at home and abroad. Dr. Singh, however, continued to stay in touch with URI's activities and endeavors – informally. He drew parallels between the scope of work that URI is invested in with anecdotes from Sikhism. Sikhs all around the world are known for their '*langars*' – that translates into community services and a sense of inclusion. Foundation of this institution was laid by Guru Nanak who fed hungry sadhus with all the money his father gave him to do some profitable business. On way to the city young Nanak saw some sadhus who have not eaten for many days. From the city he purchased food with the money given for business. On return to home when his father asked him as to what business he had done with the money, he replied that he had made a true bargain (*sacha sauda*) by feeding the sadhus.

As Dr. Singh recalled his fond memories with Bishop Swing and his interaction with Dalai Lama, he expressed a sense of joy for URI's exponential growth in the last 20 years. URI has spread its wings in 108 countries in the world and is emerging as the world's largest interfaith family. Today, it actively works in 15 action areas globally – **arts, community building, education, environment, health, human rights, indigenous people, interfaith & intercultural dialogue, media, peace-building & conflict resolution, policy advocacy, poverty alleviation & economic opportunity, women and youth**. On the 20th birthday of URI, he wishes that URI becomes an 'Eternal Light' promoting lasting peace in a troubled world.

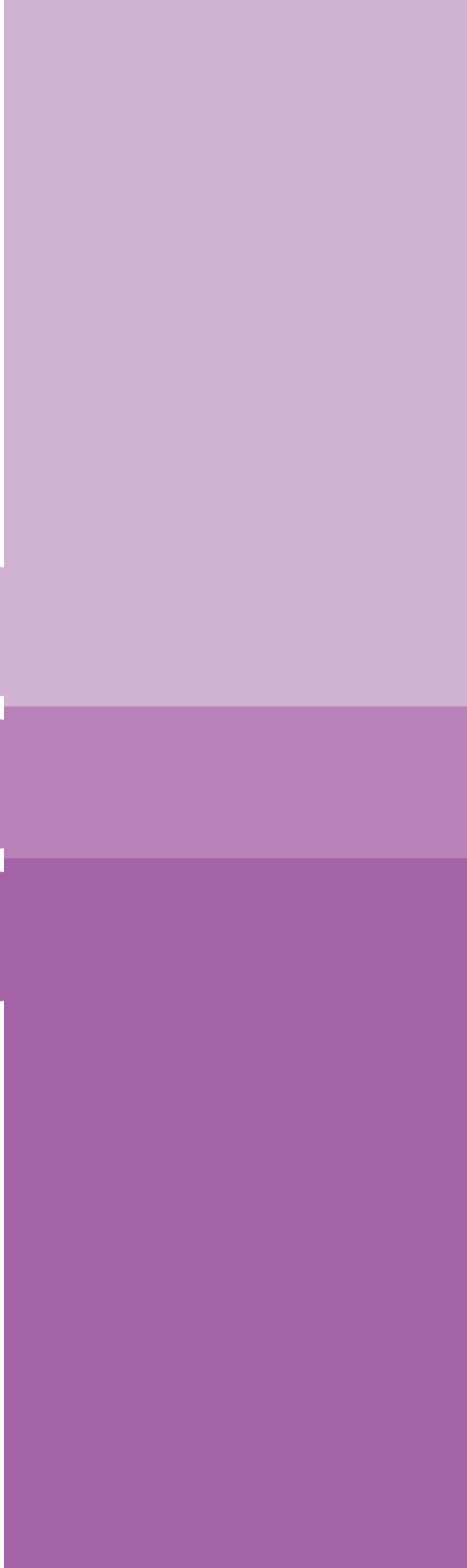


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Asia Culture House	10
Afghanistan Youth Empowerment & Peacebuilding Organization (AYEPO)	12
Brotherhood of Humanity	14
Chahat	16
Chetna Educational Society	18
Choti Si Khushi	20
Dwarka Peace Society	22
Gram Swawlambi Swadeshi Swaraj Foundation (G3S Foundation)	24
Kasturba Balika Vidyalaya	26
Light Up	28
My Perch	30
Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan	32
Porsesh Research & Studies Organization (PRSO)	34
Samvaad	36
Sangrur	38
Sarvodaya Bundelkhand	40
Shristi	42
Support Foundation	44
Tronica City	46
Youth for Peace International	48
Author's Note	50
Contributors	51
Contact Details of Cooperation Circles	52



Asia Culture House, Afghanistan

Driving social change through art & culture

War and conflict, among other social, political and economic impacts - lead to devastation of historical sites, cultural assets and folklore. More than four decades of continuous war in Afghanistan have forced Afghans to care solely about their living conditions, survival, honour and access to the very basic resources. This has caused the rich cultural heritage of Afghanistan and the diversity to be largely side-lined in the state discourse.

Asia Culture House, established in 2014, is a non-profit, issue driven, multi-ethnic, multi-generational and inter-disciplinary arts and culture organization that promotes cultural democracy and artistic expression. It firmly believes that cultural heritage can be a key factor in political, social and economic post-conflict stabilization and reconciliation, with the potential to foster intercultural dialogue, and provide a stable base for economic development. Asia Culture House tries to use research projects, documentary film making, publishing, debates & conferences,



exhibitions, festivals, and other activities as tools to catalyse community development. It facilitates networking, capacity development services and advocacy in the spheres of visual arts, theatre, music, performing arts, literature, mixed media, global network and education. It functions through its 100+ members who are well-known artists, cultural practitioners, authors, university professors, young professionals and activists. To ensure a far-reaching impact, Asia Culture House has registered itself under the Ministry of Culture & Information and the Ministry of Economy in Kabul.

Active collaborations and partnerships with organisations in Afghanistan and beyond have helped Asia Culture House organise street art festivals, seminars, conferences and other events in Afghanistan since 2015. It promotes strengthening of democratic values, supporting tourism and crafts, fostering gender equality and empowering the vulnerable through a number of its activities.

The organization associated with URI in 2016. This association gave representatives of Asia Culture House the opportunity to travel to India and network with a group of organizations and individuals working in the social sphere – in India and other parts of South Asia. This facilitated the exchange of ideas, resources and knowledge. Similar to what URI does, Asia Culture House has also been working towards creating a network for inter-organizational collaboration. These efforts are being made with the aim of increasing efficiency of art activism in the country.

Mr. Najeeb from the organization stressed upon the importance of art in the process of community building. Art & culture has an important role to play in the regeneration of areas whose residents are disadvantaged - economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally. The creative energies of local individuals can greatly enhance culture and encourage more and more people to take up an active role in community development.

Working in order to promote art and culture in Afghanistan comes with its own set of challenges - security threats being the most significant in the list. The society in Afghanistan is conservative. Anti-social elements often do not find expression in the form of art acceptable. As a result of this, members of the organization work under a constant threat to life. In spite of these challenges, the organisation has been working towards identifying and strengthening Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage, sub-cultures of its various ethnicities; as well as towards cultivating a cultural exchange between Afghanistan and other countries in Asia. Efforts like these in the right direction can go a long way in helping Afghans reclaim their cultural heritage.



AYEPO

The role of Afghan youth in the country's socio-cultural transformation

Religious leaders and networks have always played a prominent role as civil society forces in Afghanistan. Within the country, there are over 15 major and minor ethnicities who speak over 30 separate languages or dialects. Its citizens naturally identify with those who speak their language and share their culture. To add to this, Afghanistan's rugged physical environment serves to isolate residential communities and to create microenvironments.



Members of the same ethnic group and tribe who reside in different locations adapt to their own microenvironment, which may result in different kin-based subgroups within the same tribe and ethnic group. Identification with an abstract 'Afghan nation' has always been fragile. In this light, Afghanistan Youth Empowerment & Peacebuilding Organization (AYEPO), a non-governmental, non-profit organization was established in Kabul in January 2019. It has been working since with a vision to witness a peaceful Afghan society, where the youth plays a crucial role in peacebuilding and in promoting a sense of social cohesion and unity. The organization aims to develop the youth as 'agents of change' for community development. In order to promote this, AYEPO seeks to create a platform to build an inclusive Afghan society that thrives on peace, unity, and belongingness. It has been working since with a vision to witness a peaceful Afghan society, where the youth plays a crucial role in peacebuilding and in promoting a sense of social cohesion and unity. The organization aims to develop the youth as 'agents of change' for community development. In order to promote this, AYEPO seeks to create a platform to build an inclusive Afghan society that thrives on peace, unity, and belongingness.

Community development is an overarching concept that attempts to group together any attempts by groups of people who work together to transform the places and spaces they live, work and play in. Concerned with justice, equity and transformation, community development includes structured government and non-profit programs, grassroots social justice activism, and much more. The youth, through their active role as community organizers, planners and advocates have a transformative role to play in community engagement and development. AYEPO has been trying to help youth find unity in diversity and work together for the progress of their lives and communities. The organisation provides the youth with tools and a set of skills in mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding - to become agents of change. It works with school & college students to help build leadership & interpersonal skills through tailor-made programs and activities. It has particularly tried to work with young girls in Afghan schools in order to make them more self-reliant & independent.

Mr. Ahmed Shah Karimi – the director of AYEPO stresses on the importance of partner organisations in furthering social action and achieving a common vision. AYEPO’s association with URI – North India & Afghanistan region as a Cooperation Circle has been an enduring and promising one. URI, in association with AYEPO organized an art competition for students in Afghanistan - which acted as a great source of motivation for all budding artists.

Social inclusion is something that the organization has strongly held as one of its core values. Mr. Karimi states how inclusion is particularly pivotal in the Afghan context. Afghanistan is home to not only several religious sects but also to a host of different ethnic, linguistic, and tribal groups. Rivalry and even armed hostilities have traditionally been common between and within many of these groups. Historical and geographical factors have led to the creation and preservation of diversity. Additionally, minorities have for long been marginalized. In order to address this, AYEPO welcomes people from all communities and walks of life. What keeps the organization running is a commitment to work for the greater good of the society, and to promote peace & social cohesion. It further promotes gender equality by actively involving women in leadership, peace & community



building processes. While most of their activities are restricted to Kabul, AYEPO has actively been trying to reach out to other provinces in the country through its online initiatives.

Actively trying to tackle security and funding issues, AYEPO has been able to create a place for itself in the Afghan landscape through community-level interaction & collective action. In the years to come, the organization aims to further its cause by propagating ‘peace camps’ – an idea that brings key actors and/or youth leaders from a number of communities together. The camps would be aimed at sharing experiences, culture, and to work on differences that have for long divided these communities. It further focuses upon identifying a common purpose, and propagating the message of unity, togetherness and peace across the country. The organization also aspires to plan other programs that promote peace, conflict transformation and leadership to empower youth at the grassroots levels. A youth-led change could just be the need of the hour!

Brotherhood of Humanity

Fighting violent extremism and radicalism through religious and social inclusionary ideas



No one is born a violent extremist; extremism is fuelled. It can manifest in connection with a range of issues including politics, religion and gender. Brotherhood of Humanity, a member group of United Religions Initiative – North India & Afghanistan has been using religion to counter these very extremist views and to build social cohesion. Established in 2017, it has been working relentlessly to inculcate a feeling of harmony and love; and to prevent violent extremism. It does so by using Islam to build narratives and counternarratives to extremist ideologies. Basit Jamal, the founder believes in focusing on stories from scriptures to build these narratives and counternarratives.

The organization has been doing this through several of its initiatives like the ‘Honeybees – Train-the-Trainer Project’, developing audio

and video content, and publication of booklets. Its central project – ‘Honeybees’ is targeted at college students. A group of 20 students are taught thrice a week to develop counternarratives using Islam. These 20 then train others; thereby forming a chain. Under the program, the organization has been successful in conducting two retreats, in Himachal and Ladakh for deeper learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant 21-day lockdown in March-April 2020 did not deter Brotherhood of Humanity from spreading the message of love and peace. In these trying times, the organization conducted several online sessions and kept the message going. The Honeybees Project is supplemented with similar programs in

madrassas, mosques and Islamic centers in Delhi. For wider dissemination of content, the organisation has been working on an app. The app is updated with audio, video and text files on a weekly basis. In order to promote peace, love, forgiveness and harmony between people, the organization runs a campaign that goes by the name ‘Nafrat ka Hal’. It is aimed at countering enmity with friendship; and avoiding confrontation wherever possible.

Their association with URI as a Cooperation Circle has helped them reach out to a wider global audience and showcase their excellent projects. One program in particular that URI assisted Brotherhood of Humanity was in organizing a workshop for students from Afghanistan.



The aim of the workshop was to train the students in such a way that they could go back and start working on peace building in their own communities. Brotherhood of Humanity as an organization has upheld the values of social inclusion, interfaith harmony and mutual respect in all of its activities and initiatives. This is where their activities align with URI’s objectives. Making use of narratives to propagate peace and social harmony has the potential to garner universal appeal. Keeping this in mind, the organization aims for a global impact in the coming years, with a special emphasis on bringing in a more positive understanding of Islam for Indian Muslims.





Chahat

Child Empowerment & Skill Development in Alwar



Chahat, a member group of URI-North India & Afghanistan in Bhiwadi, Alwar in the state of Rajasthan has been striving to make education accessible to kids living in slums who do not have the means to attend schools. Chahat's endeavors started with an education survey in a slum in Bhiwadi to gauge the number of such children who would be willing to attend such a school. After meticulous planning, coordination and bearing the brunt of opposition from parents, the school started with 8 students in 2016. Today, Chahat stands at 4 such centers with over 200 students learning under their guidance. Each center has a set-up where kids between the age group of 5-15 years study together. To make these sessions more interactive and interesting, games and fun activities are regularly incorporated as a part of session plans. Over the years, Chahat has been striving to be able to provide salaries to all teachers working in these centers. Through these efforts, it aims to raise the literacy level in Rajasthan state.

In addition to the ‘school for children’ initiative, the organization has adult education centers in place for those women who are forced to marry young and cannot attend primary school. This initiative has been running over the past few years in Bhiwadi. Thanks to this initiative, the women can now use mobile phones, operate their own bank accounts and can even help their own children with homework. This center has helped them become self-confident and self-reliant. Chahat’s interventions have also expanded to a skill development center in the area. The center offers beautician and stitching courses. This has enabled women who’ve studied in the adult education center to progress towards financial independence.



Chahat’s association with URI has enabled the former to reach out to a wider audience. URI has been instrumental in creating a knowledge sharing platform at the local, regional, national & international levels. In the month of April 2020, URI collaborated with Chahat in facilitating relief work for the needy during the Covid-19 Pandemic. URI’s national assembly last year helped Chahat reach out to a wider audience. The women from Chahat’s skill development centers were able to use their skills in order to make products that were used as souvenirs for guests and stakeholders at the program. This is one of the ways in which URI – North India & Afghanistan has been able to uplift and brand the efforts of local grassroots communities in the country by giving them a platform to display their work and skills.

One of the major problems that Chahat as an organization has to face is the stigma associated with education amongst underprivileged communities. It has been trying to tackle this issue over the years through a number of its associations and collaborations. Small steps in the right direction has enabled Chahat to magnify its social impact and to reach out to a wider social base.





Chetna Educational Society, Delhi

Rethinking Community Mobilization & the Role of NGOs

Chetna Educational Society, one of URI's oldest Cooperation Circles, was registered on 19th January 1990. Since then, it has been working relentlessly for the social and economic upliftment of the poor and the underprivileged in Delhi NCR.

While provision of primary education opportunities to all was what it began with, its scope gradually expanded to include community awareness programs on consumer affairs, consumer awareness, conservation & protection of the environment, promotion of road safety measures, the impact of road safety on public administration, the society and the environment. Furthermore, woman empowerment is another area that it actively works towards. It has been organizing stitching and tailoring workshops – and thereby providing vocational training to women from all walks of life to make them self-reliant and more independent. Chetna Educational Society's broad sphere of work has not taken it away from



what originally laid its foundation – education. It continues to conduct classes for children up to class 5 – thereby using educational upliftment as a weapon against urban poverty. It has been over the years receiving grants from the central and state governments for all of its exceptional activities.

Dr. D.K. Mishra – Chairman, Chetna Educational Society considers URI to be an agent that brought about a transformational shift in the way NGOs in India view religion. He further added how it was URI that spearheaded the use of religion as a tool to promote peace and sustainable community building. It is a platform that brings together individuals and organizations around the world who would want to create a social impact. This is what prompted Dr. Mishra to align with URI as a Cooperation Circle. This association has been of mutual benefit to both. He recalls how URI gave him countless opportunities to travel across the length and breadth of India and to create a network of likeminded organizations and individuals. It facilitated a platform for sharing of ideas and a new ‘view’ of the use of religion as a binding force for community building. Dr. Mishra sticks by Swami Vivekanand’s ideal of ‘obey one, respect all’ – and this very ideal has helped him work in a sphere that aligns with URI’s activities.

Sustainable societies are built on the premise of social and economic equality and the principle of inclusion. Dr. Mishra critiques how NGOs working in this field are perceived as business enterprises working for profits. He therefore calls for a need to bring about an active discussion about the scope & work of not for profit organizations in the society, and to create a platform for underprivileged communities to be heard. Furthermore, he thinks there’s an ardent need to bring to light a common ground between people that come from different faiths and to use religion as a tool for community mobilization.





Choti Si Khushi

Education as a tool to tackle the urban poverty conundrum

The world today is living in what is often described as the “urban century” – most of the world’s economy and more than half its population is now in urban areas. Although urbanisation generally contributes to economic development and hence to urban capacities, growing towns and cities in low-income countries often face severe urban housing, infrastructure and service deficiencies as well as forms of urban congestion (Tacoli, McGranahan, & Satterthwaite, 2015). This pressure on resources brings out social hierarchies in the distribution of wealth. The scale and depth of urban poverty is underestimated by most governments and international agencies, and this helps underpin ineffective policies. This is made worse by the lack of voice for low-income urban dwellers and their lack of influence within governments and aid agencies.

The working group on Urban Poverty appointed by the National Commission on Urbanisation observed that –

“the most demanding of the urban challenges is the challenge posed by urban poverty; the challenge of reducing exploitation, relieving misery and creating more humane conditions for working, living and growth for the disadvantaged people. The task of adequately feeding,



educating, housing and employing a large and rapidly growing number of such city dwellers – who are migrants and daily wage laborers; and live in poorly services chawls, slums, illegal squatters and other forms of inadequate settlements is the essence of urban development planning.”

Choti si Khushi (CSK), a not-for-profit organisation working in Delhi NCR has been striving to make primary education attainable for children of migrant workers and daily wage laborers in the city. What pushed the organisation to work in this sphere was the under-representation of the urban informal sector in the country’s planning circles and the deep-rooted stigma and bias of the urban middle-class against those living on the city’s social fringes.

CSK approached construction sites around Dwarka in Delhi and engaged with daily wage

laborers to get their children to come and learn while they continued to work. Lack of trust and uncertainty about civil society organizations and NGOs working in this space made it difficult for the laborers to trust CSK at first. In order to build trust, the organization tried to push parents to get their kids enrolled in the local government-run school in the area. This ensured that the kids got the midday meal every day. CSK also helped parents with the admission process. This, and explaining the importance and significance of primary education gradually helped build the required trust and a sense of certainty. Kids started turning up for extra classes in the evening. The endeavor started with a mere 5 kids in 2013 and classes were run in an open space near the construction site. With 3 centers and more than 250+ enrolled students, the organization has come a long way. Ms. Namitha Choudhary, co-founder, Choti Si Khushi recognizes the importance of primary education in the social and economic upliftment of the urban poor. To promote a sense of willingness to learn amongst kids, CSK lays emphasis on overall development of the child. In addition to academics, art & craft, stitching, dance, and music classes allow

the kids to explore and boost their hobbies & interests – there by promoting overall personality development.

Over the years, Choti si Khushi has moved beyond education to include a number of other social causes under its umbrella. ‘Little Lamps’, ‘Prayas’, ‘Udaan’, and ‘Jagriti’ are few of its many result-driven projects that promote education, adult literacy, women empowerment, community awareness, and tackle child drug addiction. Drug addiction among children is a growing problem – especially in urban slums - due to lack of education and other opportunities. Project Udaan identifies such kids and strives to provide them with the necessary vocational training. Project Prayas is tailor made according to the skill sets of each woman and is aimed at making women from these communities independent and self-reliant.

CSK joined the URI network as a Cooperation Circle in 2018. URI has proven to be an effective platform for CSK to connect and share ideas with other organizations and individuals working in the social space.

URI in association with CSK and Music Basti organized a 4-month long program that used music as a tool to promote community development, teambuilding and leadership. Additionally, URI in association with CSK has worked on a number of

peacebuilding and team development initiatives over the years. During the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown in India, the URI network was able to make available for CSK dry ration for 50 individuals for a month.

The organization has been striving to use community development as a tool to fight urban poverty. In doing so, it has had to fight several social biases and the stigma about children from slums studying in community areas & public spaces. Ms. Namitha and her colleagues often find themselves questioning and addressing the stark difference in the attitude that the urban rich / middle class has about their domestic help/maids as against the attitude towards their children studying in public spaces around them. More often than not, those living in slums are considered to be anti-social elements; and this contributes to the furtherance of social marginalization. In spite of these issues, CSK has been striving to bring about a transformational change in the way in which the urban poor are viewed on the landscape of the city.





Dwarka Peace Society

Peace & Harmony Through
Interfaith Dialogue



Dwarka Peace Society was born out of the need to build an organisation that promotes peace and inclusive development. Environmental conservation and right to education for all is also something that the society lays its emphasis on. Mr. Mahinder Pal, Founder, Dwarka Peace Society believes in and strives to uphold the principle of ‘Unity in Diversity’, which he thinks also binds the country together. In order to make sure that the above happens, the society proactively celebrates all festivals that are a part of different faiths and religions. In the month of January 2020, the society celebrated Lohri under the name ‘Harmony Lohri Celebration’; which saw participation from people belonging to all religions. In a similar fashion, Iftar Dinner & Diwali organized in 2019 saw active participation of people from all faiths.

Dwarka Peace Society strives to bring in inclusive growth, development and peace at the grassroots level. It ascribes to a number of internationally celebrated and followed causes. The society actively celebrates World Interfaith Harmony Week in the month of February every year. This year, the society organized a trip for school children; and it stressed upon the need propagate interfaith awareness at the school level. As a part of the trip, the children were taken to places of worship of a number of religions like the Lotus Temple, ISKON Temple, Buddha Temple and Bangla Sahib Gurudwara in order to understand the importance of interfaith harmony ‘first-hand’.

The society celebrated ‘World Health Day’ on April 23 last year; where Ms. Subhi Dhupar, Regional Coordinator, URI – North India & Afghanistan was invited as the chief guest. The aim of the celebration was to promote protection and conservation of the environment. On the occasion of ‘International Peace Day’ on September 21 last year, the society organized a drawing competition for children that saw massive participation. Their association with URI – North India & Afghanistan

as a member group has been a long one. The society upholds URI’s idea of the use of peace to counter disharmony and discord in the society. The society also stresses upon the importance of education in laying the foundation stone of a truly inclusive society. ‘It is through education that we can change the face of the world’ is something that Mr. Mahinder Pal strongly believes. A huge section of the society in India has little or no access to primary education; and this is something that the society strives to change. It is through education that one is able to find a place in society. Dwarka Peace Society believes that URI has an important role to play in the use of religion to promote this idea of harmony and it is in complete support of the same.





Gram Swawlambi Swadeshi Swaraj Foundation

Inclusive
Development: The
core of cohesive
societal growth



‘Social inclusion and non-discrimination go a long way in promoting holistic development of the society’, says Mr. Pawan, co-founder - G3S (Gram Swawlambi Swadeshi Swaraj) Foundation, a group of committed and enthusiastic undergraduate and graduate students from University of Delhi. The group was established in the year 2016 in Narela-Alipur, Delhi. To promote this very objective, G3S has been tirelessly working on issues around primary education, child & women empowerment, healthcare and environmental sustainability. Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society—improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity. Reaching out to the fringes of the society to ensure that the economically and socially disadvantaged are guaranteed primary education, health services and a clean environment irrespective of their religious or social background is something that the group has laid emphasis on - thereby promoting inclusive growth.

Their endeavours started with a community school in a migrant slum in Narela in 2016. Children of migrants moving to urban areas like Delhi from other parts of the country usually

have limited to no access to primary education and healthcare. They struggle to achieve the same level of educational success as their peers. Relocation causes discontinuity in education, which causes migrant students to progress slowly through school and drop out in most cases. Migrant children are also at a disadvantage because a majority of them live in extreme poverty and must work with their parents to support their families. Modest beginnings of the community youth center saw G3S volunteers bridging the gap between expectations and the real state of primary education available to these children. The youth center also laid emphasis on extra-curriculars, sports, etiquette, dressing, and general awareness with respect to sustainability, environment conservation and health & personal hygiene. G3S' intervention also extended to parent awareness initiatives and establishing channels of communication between teachers in public schools, students and migrant parents. It wasn't long before G3S spread out its wings to Muzaffarnagar in Bihar where it opened a computer-training center for women and children. This center also helped propagate the significance of e-payments and a cashless economy. With assistance from AIIMS and URI, G3S led an intervention for flood victims in the Purnia district of Bihar in 2018. With active support from Bihar's education minister, G3S succeeded in setting up a mechanism to promote primary education and solve issues at the Panchayat level. Around the same

time, G3S helped create a platform for children living in the neglected fringes of the national capital to showcase their talents. This was done in a makeshift center in Ibrahimpur in Outer Delhi.

Over the years, the group has been involved in several projects aimed at environmental conservation. One significant project being the Yamuna clean-up project that the group took up with the help of a few volunteers, but without any government intervention. In March 2017, the group celebrated World Environment Day in Rajasthan, and organised sapling plantation and water conservation drives. In association with AIIMS, the group organized a free health-checkup camp in Alipur, Narela and Ibrahimpur in Delhi and Patna in Bihar for all age groups. It conducted several workshops to promote skill development and self-defense.

The group's association with URI as a cooperation circle has helped them reach out to a wider global audience and showcase their excellent projects. URI's regional and national assemblies in Delhi and Varanasi respectively gave G3S a formal platform to reach out, collaborate and network with other likeminded organisations and individuals. This path to social inclusion and inclusive growth hasn't however been without hurdles. Lack of funding, lack of social awareness around primary

education, stigma associated with several health issues were few of the issues that the group had to tackle.

Looking ahead, G3S aims to lay greater emphasis on its inclusive education project - in order to spread it to other parts of the country. This becomes necessary especially in the case of migrant children because relocation has negative social consequences caused due to isolation from peers, cultural differences and language barriers. Many migrant children live with a large number of extended family members in migrant camps or temporary housing facility. This crowding in a small, poorly lit and sparsely furnished space is not conducive environment to study and concentrate. The group believes in the chain-model of inclusive growth; whereby quality education provided at the grassroots level percolates through all levels of the society. A drive to bring about a sustainable change in the society has kept G3S Foundation alive and running.





Kasturba Balika Vidyalyaya

Education, Social Upliftment &
Gandhian Values



“After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that all religions are true, all religions have some error in them; all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one’s own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of religious inclusivity and universalism as stated above forms the base and foundation stone of Kasturba Balika Vidyalaya, a government run school for girls and a cooperation circle of URI – North India & Afghanistan.

Kasturba Balika Vidyalaya (Kasturba Girls School), located in Okhla, Delhi primarily works with girls belonging to socially underprivileged classes. The school offers a number of programs and classes in Humanities and Sciences. This educational setting places importance on interfaith prayers and collective dining. With these practices, it aims to offer an open space for the girls to be equal and responsible towards the humanity at large. The school was established in 1944 with the inspiration of Kasturba Gandhi, spouse of revolutionary Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi. It was one of the pioneer schools for woman education during pre-independence India where girls from all sections of society were trained in Indian values propounded by Mahatma Gandhi. It is a residential school and the hostel has capacity to accommodate around 200 girls. It offers education in humanities and sciences to 630 students of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and Jain communities. It aims at working together for 'promoting non-violence and communal harmony' through Gandhian values & principles. One of the main activities of the school is to provide quality education and boarding facilities to the Harijan (a term used by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to those belonging to socially underprivileged classes) girls. The Gandhian and Sarvodaya ideologies that form the basis of values imparted at the school go hand in hand with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles of United Religions Initiative. Gandhism is a body of ideas that describes the inspiration, vision, and the life work of Mohandas Gandhi. It is particularly associated with his contributions to

the idea of nonviolent resistance, sometimes also called civil resistance. The two pillars of Gandhism are truth and non-violence. Gandhi was primarily a man of religion. His religion was based on truth and love, and non-violence. It is his religion that became his philosophy of life, and it gave him strength. He strongly believed that religion did not teach mutual enmity. He considered different religions to be roads leading towards the same destination. Gandhi out of his own experiences and readings came to the conclusion that all religions are based on the same principles - namely, truth and love. He claimed that religion was a binding force and not a dividing force. Kasturba Balika Vidyalaya has been established on these very principles. The school believes in celebrating all Indian festivals in order to celebrate and promote India's rich cultural and religious diversity. It also organises and celebrates International Day of Peace and Interfaith Harmony Week. It believes in the power of collective prayer to strengthen and boost mutual trust and cooperation; which it believes to be the need of the hour.

Mr. Vinod Dubey who is a part of the school says, "With growing awareness and education these young girls show remarkable presence of interfaith values in society wherever they go and work. Moreover, these girls come from different states with different social values and live together as a family. The warden herself is the product of this very school and is committed towards interfaith peace building activities". This member group has been working over the years on pressing issues that are also in line with URI's sphere of work and has been instrumental in providing wonderful opportunities for all the students, teachers and non-teaching staff. Mutual understanding, trust and harmony remain central to all of the school's activities.



Light Up

Social Inclusion and (in) Mental Health – A crucial link made possible by **Light Up**



Mental health awareness is a cause of concern for all educators, who are often the first line of defence for their students. Students who suffer from mental illnesses themselves, or those who have friends or family members who suffer from mental illnesses, can be affected by the stigma that is sometimes attached to it. It is necessary for educators to understand the impact that a student's mental health has on learning and achievement, especially in low income and socially underprivileged communities. An effective social and emotional learning program goes a long way in developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making.

Light Up - Emotions Matter Foundation, a member group of United Religions Initiative – North India & Afghanistan was born out of the need to advocate emotional intelligence in low income spaces. It was established in 2017 and has been working since, to shatter the conventional view of emotional intelligence being a rather 'elitist concept'. It has been striving to decode it for low income spaces. Juhi Sharma, Founder – Light Up believes that mental health is something that the conventional education system usually leaves out; and this is where Light Up tries to intervene. Their modules are developed around real-life instances; contextualized on a need basis. Light Up commits to transform school eco- systems of children, parents/guardians, teachers and school

leaders with social emotional skills to recognise, understand and manage emotions so as to reduce the impact of psychological and physiological trauma on behaviour and development. It primarily works with children in:

1. Schools
2. High risk spaces like juvenile homes
3. Urban slums

Light Up follows an ‘educational psychology’ approach rather than a clinical approach to address these issues. It has been striving to normalize mental health and counselling - issues that are usually considered to be taboos in the society. It focuses on school-level transformation by developing emotional intelligence in children, parents and teachers through social - emotional learning workshops. These skills have proven to be tools to better cope with everyday trauma, struggles and lead happier and healthier lives. Starting from creating change in a community of 35 children in Sanjay Camp, Chanakyapuri - an urban slum in Delhi, Light Up has grown to impact 6800 beneficiaries. The children come from low income communities, and in most cases are first generation learners.

Education and development of emotional and social skills is imperative to addressing behavioural problems, preventing early stage mental health issues and building a cohesive and compassionate society. In addition to working with schools, Light Up works with juvenile homes. These have been particularly difficult spaces to intervene. People surviving in high risk zones have higher propensity to develop mental health issues, aggressive behaviour, self-harm and anxiety issues. This is where social inclusion becomes particularly difficult. URI has been instrumental in navigating these spaces for Light Up. Light Up and URI have in the past collaborated on a number of workshops in Kashmir and Chandigarh. URI has made approaching and dissecting social inclusion in high risk spaces possible for Light Up.

People who don't fully understand mental illnesses may make incorrect judgments or unkind assessments of people who suffer from them. People with mental illnesses may also face discrimination & stigma in their communities - including in schools. Increasing awareness of mental illness increases knowledge of mental illness. And with more knowledge, there is less stigma.



One pressing problem that Light Up has been tackling since its inception is that of people not thinking of emotional wellbeing and mental health as a fundamental problem; especially in the NGO space. Advocating to make emotional well-being and emotional intelligence a fundamental human right - like roti, kapda, and makaan; is something that Light Up has been striving to achieve. It makes this possible by placing social inclusion at the center of all its initiatives. Trying to strike the right chord between social inclusion and emotional wellbeing, and making mental health a socially inclusive and accessible concept has kept the light up in the truest sense!





My Perch

Is Education Enough?



Education for all, at all levels, and at all ages is an instrument to bring about a transformational change in the society. It has been identified as one of the major agencies of socialisation; with teachers and educational institutions acting as socialising agents. It can bring about an attitude change against orthodoxy, obscurantism, caste-class syndrome, religious dogmas and towards accepting a secularist outlook. Besides, it helps in creating the right kind of institutions which in turn assist in changing patterns of group relationships in the society. As such, change in attitude accelerates social change. However, social interventions over time have often revealed that education is not always enough. In low income-spaces and amongst underprivileged communities, where mental health concerns are often pushed under the blanket, it becomes necessary to actively think about mental well-being and emotional healing as indispensable components of the education process. Research shows that social-emotional learning not only improves academic results, but also increases prosocial behaviours (such as kindness, sharing, and empathy), improves student attitudes toward school, and reduces depression and stress among students (Durlak et al., 2011). This is exactly what My Perch, a social organisation in Delhi NCR has been striving to do.

Established in January 2015, the organisation has been working to create a safe space where kids can share their stories, experiences and can express themselves through music, dance, arts & crafts. It runs a space in Sector 49 Noida close to the Barola community - which houses a number of daily wage labourers, migrants and domestic workers. The space has designated corners dedicated to arts & crafts, music, dance, storytelling and cooking. It lets children explore their interests and creates a platform for them to express themselves. The centre is for the children and by the children; which means that it is solely managed by the kids in the presence of My Perch's centre coordinator. It currently has a membership of 350, with more requests coming in each day. Ms. Kamyra, who is the founder of My Perch believes that the space allows children to heal themselves. In order to supplement these activities, My Perch also regularly conducts workshops on gender, sexuality, emotional healing and other social issues. Furthermore, in order to make the kids feel more included in the process, it allows children above the age of 18 who've been with My Perch for a while to take up key responsibilities of the centre against a stipend every month.

My Perch's association with URI has been a rather recent one. This association has helped the former in engaging the children into active discussions around religion as a binding force and the importance of social inclusion in the education process. A program that URI ran with My Perch gave the children an opportunity to connect with children from a school in Afghanistan and exchange ideas. Ms. Kamyra considers social inclusion to be a crucial catalyst in the process of bringing about a transformational shift in the society. My Perch has been contributing its share to social inclusion by tirelessly working for communities living on the fringes of the city. A more inclusive model of social development requires policy discussions to actively involve the interests of the informality – the 'fringes' of the society. Informal settlements in a city are prone to health risks, livelihood risks, discrimination,

environmental hazards and government risks. The role that My Perch plays is instrumental in maximising the impact that education has in such spaces. In the next few years, it aims to actively involve parents in this process, in order to develop a conducive environment for children back home. It has been striving to bring about a change in the mindset of the society, government authorities and parents about the importance of social-emotional wellbeing in the education process. What we can hope in the future is that kids around the country have access to a similar 'perch'!





Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan

A Voice for All - Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan, Panipat



Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan, a civil society organisation was established in the industrial city of Panipat, Haryana in 2009 in the honour of Nirmala Deshpande, noted Indian social activist. She devoted her adult life to promotion of communal harmony and service to women, tribal people, and the dispossessed in India. She was awarded Padma Shri & Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India. Additionally, she was awarded Sitara-e-Imtiaz posthumously by Pakistan and the Order of Peace by Russia. She joined Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement in 1952 and undertook a 40,000-km long journey on foot – a padayatra – across India to carry Gandhi's message of Gram Swaraj. She recognized that it was difficult to practice Gandhian principles; yet, believed that – doing so was the only way towards a truly democratic society. She actively worked for harmony & peace between India and Pakistan.



To preserve her legacy of social service, a group of her followers established the Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan in 2009. A school for street children was established as the organisation's very first endeavour. It was named 'Hali Apna School' after Altaf Hussain Hali, an Urdu poet and writer who propagated education for women. Panipat - an industrial city has a large number of migrant labourers and industrial workers. The school, which started with merely 8 students on board was aimed at providing primary education to kids of these very industrial labourers; and to thereby tackle the growing problem of child labour. As of today, over 250 students learn in this very school. To stay true to Nirmala Deshpande's ideals, the school promotes values of religious harmony and peace – through their practice of interfaith prayer every morning. Every student, irrespective of his/her religion participates in reciting of verses across Jainism, Buddhism,

Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. This fosters a sense of togetherness and unity in the school environment. The organisation has also established the 'Nirmala Deshpande Library' inside the school premises. The Nirmala Deshpande museum showcases the remnants and works of Mahatma Gandhiji and of Nirmala Deshpande ji herself.

In addition to the school, the organisation also regularly conducts awareness camps and workshops for women and children. It organizes community counselling for female sex workers to tackle the high rate of unregularized and illegal female sex work in Panipat. In order to facilitate out-of-court settlement of family disputes, the organisation has established a family counselling center. Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan joined URI – North India & Afghanistan as a member group in 2013 and has since then benefitted from URI's vast network across North India. URI organized a workshop on child abuse in Panipat that saw participation of around 50 adolescent children from Hali Apna School. In May 2020, URI joined hands with Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan in order to provide relief in the form of dry ration and other essentials to migrant workers in distress due to the CoVid-19 Pandemic. Ram Mohan Rai, Founder – Nirmala Deshpande Sansthan considers social inclusion to be of utmost important in the organization's sphere of work. The religious polarization in the country today has made taking steps in this direction particularly necessary. In this light, the organization organizes a yatra every year from Delhi to Atari Border in Amritsar in the month of August. The yatra, which is joined by a number of participants across India (including participants from URI) is aimed at promoting a sense of mutual peace and cooperation between the people of India & Pakistan irrespective of the festering political differences between the two Governments.



Porsesh Research & Studies Organization (PRSO), Afghanistan

Research as a driver for community-level change



Porsesh Research and Studies Organization (PRSO) is an independent non-profit research organization based in Kabul, Afghanistan. It was established with a vision to produce and disseminate quality research, and to promote the culture of research in Afghanistan. Foundation stone of the organisation was laid in August 2015 with an aim to provide quality and fact-based research for policy-based decision making. Since its inception, PRSO has been working in 5 key focus areas:

- culture and pluralism
- peacebuilding and conflict resolution
- governance and the rule of law
- youth & women empowerment
- economic development

In addition to the above-mentioned areas, the organization has laid its focus on the status of minority rights in the country. The marginalization

of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs has often been an ignored area of research in Afghanistan. In a country where the overwhelming population is Muslim and the state religion Islam, members of non-Muslim minority communities face issues of poverty, unemployment, education deficits and forced conversion. In order to tackle this, PRSO has in place a strong network of volunteers and researchers that work on this very issue. “Ignored Identities – The Status of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan’s Legal System”, a detailed research piece written by the team examined the rights of non-Muslim Afghan citizens, particularly Hindus and Sikhs, in Afghanistan’s legal system through human rights discourses and a comparative examination of Afghanistan’s laws on a chronological basis since 1923. The report brought to light the contradictory & discriminatory legal system in the country - in terms of civil and human rights. Furthermore, in order to boost research and data analysis skills, PRSO conducts a course on Data Analysis with R. The course provides a short but intensive introduction to the field of data analysis; and includes three broad topics: data

manipulation with R, data analysis and statistical techniques, and data visualization.

In addition to this, PRSO regularly engages itself in a number of capacity building and peacebuilding initiatives. Facilitated by PRSO’s active partnerships with organizations like United Religions Initiative and Art of Living Foundation among others, it has been successful in bringing together people from different ethnicities and minorities in Afghanistan – to promote the idea of integration and peace among the youth. Though PRSO’s association with URI has been a rather recent one, it has facilitated the participation of the former in a number of events organized by URI in India.

In a diverse and multi-ethnic country like Afghanistan, sustainable peace seems far-fetched without an active involvement of all ethnic groups and communities in the development process. Mr. Ehsan Shayegan, Founder & Director of the organization identifies how modern history of the country has essentially been a history of the ‘majority’ and not all ethnic groups.

Many non-Muslim ethnic groups like Jewish Christians, Buddhists and more recently Hindus and Sikhs have been subject to marginalization. While the first two have been wiped off the Afghan landscape, PRSO has been staking all it can to promote and preserve the ones that have sustained. As the organization continues to work, it sees for itself a plan to document the long history of marginalization in Afghanistan with a focus on making available evidence-based open data for the public and other policy-driven institutions to explore and work upon. PRSO has also been compiling and listing information about Afghanistan’s Research Institutions and Think Tanks with a view to enhance communication and foster data sharing and dissemination among research organizations and researchers in the country. Security issues and a lack of resources & funding opportunities to mobilize a professional team are some of the many pressing problems that Afghanistan’s fragile landscape poses as organizations like PRSO work to bring about a positive, sustainable & long-lasting change.



Samvaad

Striking the right chord between the environment, social inclusion and religion



Nature and religion are indispensable parts of human life. They're however seldom discussed under the same umbrella. Sarva Dharm Samvaad (SDS), a civil society organization based in Delhi has been working since its inception in 2004 to initiate a dialogue - in order to make the above discussion possible. SDS aims to reduce religious violence, casteism, intolerance, bigotry and the associated emotional harm through creating and providing forums for interfaith dialogue and shared experience. It is a youth centric organisation that uses religion as a tool for the betterment of the society. Samvaad, which is an arm of SDS is a Cooperation Circle of United Religions Initiative – North India & Afghanistan. Samvaad has actively collaborated with URI in organising and addressing several of the latter's programs and activities. URI's work in interfaith peace and community building, and its grassroots connect has helped Samvaad build a sustainable network.

Sarva Dharm Samvaad opts for a three-pronged approach to achieve its goals: 'Research & Networking', 'Programmes', and 'Advocacy & Communication'. SDS aims to promote interfaith dialogue by conducting rigorous, explorative and analytical research. SDS has initiated the pioneering work in providing theoretical understanding and expertise to interfaith dialogue. It involves policy makers, religious leaders and politicians to discuss and create a positive discourse on religious and communal issues. It organises capacity building trainings, workshops, youth camps, discussions and talks involving the youth, religious leaders, interfaith practitioners and experts to form a larger spiritual network.

Mr. Manu Singh, who is a part of SDS believes that the framework through which religion is looked at is usually narrow and confined to understanding the differences between two given religions. The more

spiritual framework – which promotes nonviolence, compassion, justice is usually ignored. SDS' area of work is centered around 'eco-spirituality' – which is a decantation of spiritual traditions from across the world – Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Sikhism, Jainism, and also various tribal religions. The society tries to use this spiritual framework to address the youth in order to explain the need to have a cordial relationship with Planet Earth. It focuses on the need to decode this web for the youth through sessions and awareness building programs.

Samvaad has a very unique take on social inclusion. Mr. Manu talks about how love and compassion have been highly commodified, and how one needs to wake up and stop taking the planet for granted. It is also important to ensure that there is equal access to resources and equal opportunities to all; which can be made possible only through social and economic empowerment. A spiritual mindset of inclusion would go a long way in making this possible.





Sangrur

Promoting Interfaith Harmony in a Polarized World



Sangrur CC, a member group of URI- North India & Afghanistan has been actively working in a number of social spheres in Sangrur, Punjab since 2012. In general, people with less power along a variety of dimensions - underprivileged communities, tend to be more vulnerable and may fare more poorly in and after natural calamities and disasters. They are more likely to live in homes that are more vulnerable to the impact of disasters than those of people of higher SES. As a result, their experience of a disaster may involve more material losses, less protection from disasters, and perhaps greater damage to, or destruction of their homes. Identifying this as a cause of concern, Sangrur CC has been working towards extending a helping hand towards those who're most vulnerable during natural calamities - specifically floods in Punjab. The organisation is a group of 60 members; and is dedicated to this very cause. It has also been involved in distributing ration and other essentials to the underprivileged in the face of a natural calamity; more recently during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

In addition to the above, the CC is associated with a few government schools in the area. Through painting competitions, essay writing and other activities, Sangrur CC has been trying to inculcate a sense of communal harmony, interfaith peace and brotherhood amongst kids at the school level. Gandhi Jayanti and International Day of Peace are two of the many days that the organisation targets in order to plan the above activities in schools. Very recently, the organisation also organised a sapling planting activity that saw active community participation. Salim Mohammed, who is a part of the organization finds its association with URI to be a fruitful one. Sangrur's objectives align with that of URI's - in spheres of interfaith harmony, peacebuilding, social inclusion and inclusive development. This alignment in objectives has pushed the organization's collaboration with URI on several occasions in the past. Sangrur CC

has been receiving active support from locals in its endeavours, with many wanting to join them in the same. It believes in the importance of the 'centrality of social inclusion and peace' in mankind's existence on earth; and has been striving to achieve these objectives through all of its activities.

The history of Sangrur as a place - the fact as to how Muslims and Sikhs have coexisted in the space for years adds a sense of grounding to the work that the cooperation circle has been involved in. Their work in this space is particularly significant, given the rampant faith-based polarisation in the country today. Sangrur CC can be seen as a strong example that highlights the importance & significance of grassroots organisations in building and promoting interfaith harmony





Sarvodaya Bundelkhand

India's villages: the drivers of social change



Bundelkhand is a geographical and cultural region in central India. It is a hilly region which is divided between the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; and comprises of 13 districts spread across the two states. The region has a common history and has often been part of common kingdoms. Life of people in the region is affected by the topography and geographical features, including natural and human-made environmental issues. Mostly rural, the region is among few of the most underdeveloped regions in India. It is plagued by developmental issues, problems of drought and resultant failing crops, meagre livelihoods, high rate of out-migration and issues of human trafficking and bonded labour.

These conditions make Sarvodaya Bundelkhand's intervention particularly challenging. Sarvodaya, one of URI – North India & Afghanistan's member groups has been striving to achieve socio-economic development, rural upliftment and peace in the Hamirpur, Banda and Mahoba districts in Bundelkhand. The organization was established in 2009, and since then it has been working along this rural belt on a number of initiatives. Over the years, it has run a number of programs aimed at

promotion of peace, communal harmony, interfaith peace, and mental wellbeing in the region. The organization has also actively worked to promote woman and child development, primary education, healthcare and conservation of the environment. It does so through organic agro-based production centers, health camps and knowledge 'exchange & transfer' initiatives.

Mr. Shiv Vijay, who is the founder of the organization stresses upon the need for organizations to work together in order to achieve common agendas. Keeping this in mind, Sarvodaya Bundelkhand has been instrumental in creating a platform to tackle pressing issues in cooperation with Samagra Vikas, another of URI's member groups in the Hamirpur district. Sarvodaya's association URI as a cooperation circle has helped the former in networking, forming associations and collaborations, and in actively sharing and disseminating knowledge. Mr. Shiv Vijay believes in starting small. He is of the opinion that the idea of peace starts with 'self'. He also believes in the untapped potential of rural areas to

contribute to collective growth of the society and the nation. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The future of India lies in its villages". The four characteristics embodied in Gandhi's idealized village would be:

1. Access to an ever-expanding scientific and technical base in two areas - individual healthcare and assistance in food production
2. Respect and codes of conduct in human actions and toward natural resources
3. A democratic political institutional framework
4. Physical and electronic linkages between the village and both rural and urban areas.
5. A desire to diminish the divide in access to educational as well as economic opportunity, and a job-led economy rather than a capital intensive one.

Keeping this in mind, it imperative to start a dialogue about inclusive growth, social development, interfaith harmony and peace at the rural level; and to then expand it to a wider audience; and Sarvodaya Bundelkhand has been doing just this!



Shristi

Building Communities through Arts & Science

Shristi was born out of the need felt by a group of committed professionals from the technical, management, legal, statistical, economics, marketing and logistics sectors to 'give back' to the society. The organisation was established in 1998 by Late Sh. Sudipto Mukherjee, a talented and visionary chemical engineer with the objective of enhancing socio-economic conditions in rural as well as urban backgrounds through appropriate interventions and capacity building. It focuses on strengthening the livelihoods of marginalized communities - communities that don't have access to education and healthcare. The society runs on the objectives of working with the informal sector and providing them with technical know-how, appropriating interventions to the rural sector, creating self-sustaining and viable producer groups, and encouraging them to use their own inherent skills as a means of employment.

Shristi, since its inception has diversified into a number of domains. The society stays true to its objective of 'building communities through arts and science' through its focus on handicrafts and the artisan community in India. Under its 'Ecoskillarts' initiative, it imparts creative



training, creative capacity building and skills to people from vocational backgrounds, and to those passionate to diversify into arts. The target group for the society ranges from artisans to government officials. It follows the circular economy approach – an approach that believes in the value adding potential of each and every stakeholder in the supply chain. Shristi has successfully implemented a multi-craft Common Facility Centre (CFC) for Artisans in Barasat, West Bengal with the grant-in-aid of Development Commission (Handicraft), Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India. Today, Shristi has grown to be recognized as a national resource organization for handicrafts.

The society regularly conducts workshops on peace, faith, environment, renewable energy and entrepreneurship development programs

(EDP). Shristi has so far provided design and technology interventions to more than 2000 artisans and 500 students under EDP programmes. In today's competitive world, it is essential to possess knowledge and skills which match global intellectual requirements. These can be acquired through a systematic approach involving creative concepts as well as practical exposure. EDP on sustainability intends to provide an edge for the participants on acquiring world class skills by imparting innovative conceptual knowledge. This program is meant to boost the career growth of professionals and provide students with thorough knowledge of sustainability concepts. Through this program, Shristi aims at creating a space where people understand the importance of financial, cultural, environmental and social sustainability.

Shristi's association with URI – North India & Afghanistan is a rather recent one. The society aims at being able to collaborate with URI for projects, programs, interventions, trainings and capacity building. Mr. Pinaki Dasgupta from Shristi believes that a deeper connect with the society is possible

only when faith and religion is actively used in conversations about compassion and fairness. Members of the artisan community belong to many different faiths. Shristi hopes that their association with URI would help the former to understand the nuances of multi-faith representation; which would make their interventions more socially inclusive. The organisation firmly believes in the need to embed social inclusion in all of its activities. It does so by reaching out to the under-represented sections of the society and developing more inclusive interventions. The handicraft sector is a rather under-represented, unrecognized and unsupported one. This often makes it difficult for Shristi to raise funds and awareness; and makes scaling up the intervention difficult. Shristi is eager to collaborate with national and international creative and research communities to percolate their solutions and technologies for the upliftment of marginalised sections of the society through appropriate scientific interventions. The society has been striving over the years to address this and to bring more inclusivity and visibility to the sector.





Support Foundation

Small Steps Towards an Inclusive Society



Individuals together create a society – societies together create a state – states together create a nation.

Keeping this very ideology in mind, Support Foundation was born out of the need felt by Mrs. Jacintha Reema Barua, Founder/Director of the organisation to bring about a sustainable change in the society. The purpose of this organisation is to promote interfaith co-operation – in order to end religiously motivated violence and to create a culture of justice and healing for the Earth. Since its inception, Support Foundation has diversified into a number of domains that require active social intervention. The ideology of the organisation does not allow it to stay confined and limited to one social problem. It has thus spread its wings into education, interfaith peace & harmony, woman and child empowerment and conservation of environment to name a few.

To say education is important is an understatement. It is probably the most important tool to change

one's life. The organisation believes that education enables the imbibement of tolerance, respect and compassion. It thus forms one of the most important arms of Support Foundation. Modest beginnings of the organisation saw a group of teachers giving free education to the underprivileged at the grassroots level. Through activities like yoga, meditation and by imparting teachings of Gautam Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi, Support Foundation tries to talk about larger problems associated with interfaith peace, harmony and brotherhood.

In addition to education, the organisation has been consistently working in spheres of woman empowerment, support program for widows, transgender rights, relief and rehabilitation, and child rights. The organisation regularly distributes saplings among communities in a number of areas to promote conservation of the environment. It regularly visits orphanages and old age homes; thereby spreading a sense of love, respect and companionship for children and the elderly. Vocational dance and karate classes for children are regularly conducted which enable children to move beyond classroom education. It has also been lending support to children with special needs. Regular interventions in family planning and female reproductive health campaigns is also something that Support Foundation is involved in. The organisation collectively donated to the Kerala relief fund in order to support relief efforts in the flood prone and flood affected areas in the south-Indian state. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the organisation has been conducting regular awareness campaigns that are aimed at spreading awareness about personal hygiene. Support Foundation also extended support in the form of distribution of dry ration in order to help stranded migrants during the lockdown period in India.

The organisation is a Cooperation Circle of URI – North India & Afghanistan. In order to promote social inclusion, it makes sure that all of its interventions reach every level and strata of the society. It tries to promote interfaith harmony and peace by regularly

visiting temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras in order to start a dialogue about brotherhood and harmony; and to help people in need. The organisation has collaborated with URI on a number of its interventions modelled around interfaith peace. Fighting through several considerations and limitations with respect to time and money, Support Foundation hopes to continue all of the above activities and more in order to create a more inclusive society that thrives on love, peace and harmony.





Tronica City

Redefining Social Impact



There's evidence to show that today's youth is increasingly interested in making a positive social impact through careers and business models. Broadly speaking, social impact is how organisations and businesses affect the surrounding community. Divya Tyagi Ji, from Tronica City CC has challenged this definition by single-handedly working for the social good over the years. She is one of URI – North India & Afghanistan Zone's oldest members and has been relentlessly working for social betterment for over two decades. Over the years, she has associated with several organizations by lending a helping hand to underprivileged communities in the national capital. For most parts, she has been associated with Tronica City, which is also a Cooperation Circle of URI. Though she has been working for the society for much longer, Divya Tyagi Ji associated with URI in the year 2006. Being one of URI's



oldest members, Divya Ji has been the glue that has held all members of the regional office together. She has always extended the much-needed logistical support for all of URI's activities and has been a backbone for the same by providing constructive feedback and criticism whenever necessary.

What drives Divya ji every day is her undying passion to make primary education a reality for every child. She believes that an investment in education is in fact an investment in India's future. Tronica City has also extensively worked in the sphere of woman empowerment – to find voice & representation for women belonging to all walks of life. Social inclusion has been fundamental to Tronica City CC's work. Divya Tyagi Ji believes that inclusion is paramount for one's 'own' safety. The politics of exclusion in the society creates a pattern that manifests over time and continues to exist across generations and social classes. To ensure that this does not happen,

she works with women and children belonging to every social class and religion – without any bias or discrimination. She brings together women from different faiths in order to work for the common good of the society that they live in.

Divya Ji derives the inspiration to work every day from her family. She recalls how her parents, taking inspiration from Vinoba Bhave's Bhudan Andolan always sacrificed for the greater good. 'Doing something for the society' has been a family value that was imbibed on Divya Ji's mind as a child. This motivates her to work in spite of several financial issues and social obligations. She fondly expressed her desire of how she wants to be 'missed' by everyone she has ever met, rather than being 'remembered' for her work. She often shies away from taking any credit for any of her activities. Tronica City CC's work aligns well with URI's values. The organization stresses upon the need to actively talk about the social gap created by religion. She says 'Religion is not something that we should talk about after a situation of communal riot. Rather, we should promote an active dialogue around it.' She talks about using religion as a tool for community mobilization and development, and not as a cause of conflict.

As she talks about what the future holds for Tronica City, she fondly recalls all the times that she associated with URI in the past; and hopes for a continued association in the years to come. Looking ahead, she wishes to continue working for underprivileged communities in the national capital in whatever small way she can, in order to leave a fond memory of her work and to be 'missed' rather than 'remembered'.





Youth for Peace International

The Human Face of Conflict Transformation



The idea of Youth for Peace International (YfPI), a member group of United Religions Initiative – North India & Afghanistan came out when UNSCR 2250 was launched on 15th Dec 2015 which recognises the important and positive contribution in the maintenance and promotion of International Peace & Security; and also from the need of bridging the gap between people who work at the grassroots level and the policy makers in the conflict resolution and peace building domain. The organization envisions a peaceful world of empowered individuals and sustainable societies. The team of young peacebuilders are on a mission to develop the capacities of young people through peace education and civic engagement. Through theoretical and experiential learning modules, YfPI aims at empowering young people in recognizing and understanding inclusiveness, acceptance and how diversity as individuals and communities is a collaborative and not a competitive factor.

Capacity building, ground action and advocacy are broadly the three areas that YfPI works in. Under capacity building, the organization is involved in conducting and facilitating training programs on conflict transformation at the local, national, regional and global level. Social inclusion in her projects, according to Ms.

Saumya Aggarwal, CEO, YfPI forms the basis of the kind of work the organization is involved in and translates into each of its arms. Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities – that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizen participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. The capacity-building programs strive to be inclusive in terms of eliminating any gender-based or faith-based barriers by being open to all. Spaces for marginalized youth from across all levels of the society make the programs a more cohesive space.

Another arm that the organization is actively involved in is providing rehabilitation to Rohingya refugees in India; with a focus on trauma healing and striving to bring them into the mainstream Indian education system – under their Project Inaayat. The community comprises of both members from the other states of the country and the Rakhine state of Myanmar – all who face conflict in their vulnerable environment, marked by struggle for basic resources, space and opportunities. The project aims to facilitate conflict transformation through positive community engagement by facilitating awareness and wellness sessions, imparting peace education to children and women as well as providing necessary aid for a holistic community development.

Bridging inter-community conflicts in the refugee camps is also something the organization is actively involved in. An in-camp school for the refugees that focuses on holistic education and also on bringing refugee children in the mainstream system is the highlight of the ground action of the organization. The school is open not to just the Rohingya refugees, but also Indian immigrants goes a long way in building a sense of social cohesion and creating an inclusive space for the students to express a sense of solidarity and togetherness. The medium of instruction in this school is not restricted to English alone. With teachers in the school well-versed in English, Hindi and Urdu, the experiential learning space ensures a freer flow of ideas in spite of linguistic differences.

Advocacy is primarily carried out through creative online campaigns and policy advocacy forums. 'Guftagu' - an online campaign that stressed on highlighting commonalities between India and Pakistan amidst the differences through positive narratives saw huge success. On August 15th every year, a group from URI – North India & Afghanistan travels to Wagah Border in Amritsar to be a part of a conclave where peacebuilders across the country come together to light candles for peace, brotherhood and humanity. URI has been facilitating members of YfPI in attending the



said conclave over the years. It is through forums like the recently developed national network on youth peace and security, and platforms like the United Nations Major Group for Children & Youth and UNOY that the organization has been actively working to amplify its advocacy efforts at International level through policy changes.

YfPI's association with URI has aided the former in connecting with a wider network of peacebuilders and grassroot workers actively involved in the field of conflict transformation, social inclusion and community building working in marginalised communities. URI has also actively helped YfPI in making available necessary resources that have aided the latter in its sphere of activities. URI has also been instrumental in facilitating and forging relevant partnerships at national level. Looking ahead, YfPI aims to focus on increasing visibility at the national level; and on facilitating a more focused advocacy that gives visibility to youth-led initiatives and an agency to the youth to be equal stakeholders in peacebuilding processes.

Author's Note

“Not for profit organizations and civil society institutions have a pivotal role to play in community development and peacebuilding processes. They promote the idea of social inclusion by actively involving marginalized & underrepresented communities living on urban fringes (social & otherwise) - in development & policy-making processes. The ‘Community Chronicles’ project allowed me to interact with such grassroots organisations in Delhi NCR, parts of North India and Afghanistan to explore & analyse how communities navigate through the ideas of urban poverty, education, politics of exclusion & development. These organisations are all Cooperation Circles (CCs) of URI. Creating a strong network of such organizations is paramount to initiate dialogue and policy advocacy; and this is something that URI is actively involved in doing. It has been an absolute pleasure and a great learning opportunity to engage in so many meaningful conversations with motivated individuals and organisations over the last few months. Looking forward to many more in the time to come”

-Atharva Mehendale

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