

COMMUNITY CHRONICLES

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

VOLUME - 2

HATE
DIVIDES
LOVE
UNITES



UNITED RELIGIONS INITIATIVE

Community Chronicles

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

Volume - 2

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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...

Mr. Biswadeb Chakraborty

Mr. Biswadeb Chakraborty is URI's Regional Coordinator for the East India & Bangladesh Regional Office, and the National Coordinator for India. His association with URI can be traced back to the year 1996, when he was introduced to Charles Gibbs - former director of URI, during a workshop in South Africa. At the time, Mr. Biswadeb was engaged in coordinating programs around education and literacy for another organization in Mumbai, India. He was gradually attracted by and pulled towards the work that URI was involved in.

A musician at heart, Mr. Biswadeb believed in the power of music to bring people together. He was troubled by the then existent class system in India, and wished to use music as a convener to get people from all walks of life under the same umbrella. This led to the formation of '*Ektaan*', one of URI's earliest Cooperation Circles in India - in 1998. The organization was born out of the need to use music in order to create cultures of peace. Mr. Biswadeb was fortunate enough to be present when URI's charter was signed in the year 2000. URI's scope of activities helped him develop his own sense of ways in which he could promote interfaith harmony. It was around 2004, when URI started growing in India. Mr. Biswadeb was one of the young leaders who relentlessly worked for this cause under the able guidance of senior leaders like Dr. Mohinder Singh, Charles Gibbs, Nirmala Deshpande, and other members from Bhai Veer ji Seva Sadan (under Dr. Singh's leadership). As the network grew, regional offices came up in west, east, south and north India. These zonal and regional offices were structured according to the specific local geographies, cultures and needs.

One incident that Mr. Biswadeb recalls being of particular significance in URI's journey is the Global Assembly that was hosted in Mayapur, West Bengal in the year 2008. Over 500 participants from more than 80 countries were a part of this assembly that attracted considerable social attention. People started talking about the work that URI was involving itself in. Interns and volunteers joined the cause, and the network started expanding over the years. Cooperation Circles started taking a lead role in creating cultures of peace. In the decade after 2008, the URI network saw a growth spurt. A number of new strategies were being adopted at the grassroots level and a tangible change facilitated by URI started showing itself. According to Mr. Biswadeb, URI has been helping grassroots organizations in prioritizing and strategizing a plan of action at the local, national, regional and global levels. Over the last few years, organizations have been joining the cause with a specific focus and a predetermined course of action. The understanding and use of their resources and strengths has grown manifold over the years.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed things monumentally around the world. According to Mr. Biswadeb, it has grounded us all and has motivated us to rethink about our priorities. Peace and harmony have become the new priority. Social distancing has ironically brought people across cultures and social structures closer together – thanks to the internet! Mr. Biswadeb wishes for the society to keep this change going and to do better overtime. Over the next few years, he aspires to come up with a **'URI India toll free number'**, which would help people reach out and seek assistance in case of issues and problems. For this, Mr. Biswadeb hopes to gradually develop a team of intergenerational leaders. Such a team would also be instrumental in creating and promoting cultures of peace – through interfaith harmony and cooperation at all social levels.





In conversation with...

Mr. Sushil Salwan

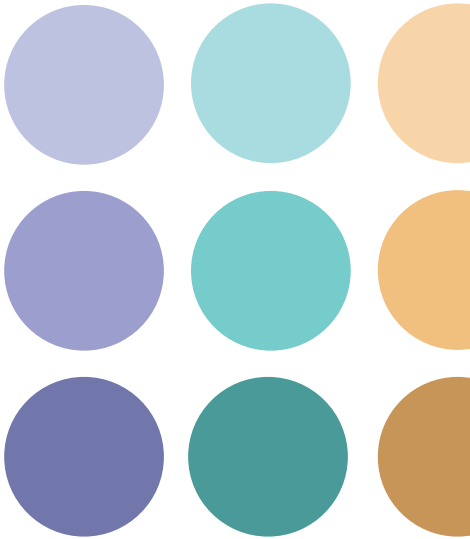
“The purpose of life is to find your own purpose”, is what Mr. Sushil Salwan quotes when asked about his motivation to join United Religions Initiative (URI) back in the days. He is a practicing Lawyer and is enrolled with the Bar Council of Delhi since 1985. He is associated with Salwan Education Trust, a philanthropic society, running 9 schools and a charitable dispensary in Delhi and NCR. He has extensively handled cases pertaining to the challenge to ‘Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act’, and ‘Delhi School Education Act & Rules’. He also renders advice to various Educational Institutions, Federations and Associations. His association with URI has been rather long.

Mr. Salwan was associated with a UN student body during his college days in the capacity of the Delhi chapter President. He was responsible for visiting schools, colleges and introducing students to UNO concepts and principles. It was around this time when Dr Mohinder Singh introduced him to URI. Mr. Salwan has organised and coordinated a number of URI’s activities. In one of the programs, he invited school students and parents of different schools to speak about how ‘their’ faith was tolerant towards accepting other faiths and values. He did this in order to get the younger generation to talk about interfaith harmony, and to accelerate youth-driven action. He believes in the quote, “the worst distance between two faiths is misunderstanding”. He organised a number of other assemblies and school & college-based interventions. Mr. Salwan believes in the strength that faith convening organisations like URI have in driving policy level action. He says, “though we follow a particular faith, we are born out of one creator who is responsible for our lives and happiness; and that our journeys would

ultimately lead us to the same destination”. According to him, “one should mold a mind to think and not mold a mind to only do”. It is due to this very reason that it is necessary for organisations like URI to assimilate everyone for a common cause. This, he believes is the only way to promote humanity in the world.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way in which communities are organized. According to Mr. Salwan, in such a situation, it is necessary for URI to strategize and re-strategize the way in which it views community development, peacebuilding and faith-based initiatives. Mr. Salwan is of the view that, in today’s uncertain times, forging new institutional partnerships with the youth through schools and colleges in order to involve the youth in specific action areas, and in addressing governance issues is the key. He agrees to the saying that ‘intellectuals solve problems, geniuses prevent them’. As URI continues to nurture young talent, bringing in leaders who understand and recognize efforts made by all faiths will help in further accelerating URI’s aim of creating cultures of peace. He believes that our religion is what we do when the prayers are over. According to him, we should not fight against people but against the circumstances. By fighting with people, we create negativity; there by getting stuck in quicksand. By fighting our circumstances, we create our destiny, a new order and a new world.







Abhigyane Foundation

Freedom through Education

More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim rejected the idea that education could be the force to transform society and resolve social ills. Instead, Durkheim concluded that education “can be reformed only if society itself is reformed.” He argued that education “is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter...it does not create it”. Different critics have targeted different villains for failing education systems across continents: poor quality teachers, pampered, disruptive or ill-prepared students, the culture of their families, unions, bureaucrats, university schools of education, tests that are too easy, or inadequate curriculum. If Durkheim was correct, it would be safe to say that a society has the school system it deserves; and that education and social change find themselves trapped in a never-ending vicious cycle. Keeping in mind the above, what would be safe to concur is that the first step in improving education is to recognize that the problems plaguing our schools are rooted in the way our society is organized.



Addressing these issues and making quality education available for all is something that a number of civil society organisations and NGOs are involved in. What sets Abhigyane Foundation apart is its aim of promoting a sense of freedom through education.

Abhigyane Foundation, that runs on the motto '*extending support for education and health care of disabled, orphans and underprivileged*' was established in 1996 in Vasundhara, Delhi NCR. It was born out of the dire need felt by Dr Barkhaa Versha, Founder of the organization to create a platform for underprivileged children – especially children of laborers and maids, to learn and hone their skills. Home-based tuitions gradually expanded to include classes for children up to Grade 8. The organization further facilitates school admissions for the children for classes 9th and 10th. Abhigyane also actively intervenes in child health and lends its support to orphanages. It regularly organizes health camps for children. It has tied up with several orphanages across the National Capital Region; and is actively involved in their activities. The organization's endeavors are not limited to rights of children. It also actively advocates for women safety, women welfare, mental health awareness and skill development.

Abhigyane Foundation through some of its endeavors has been using music, culture and art as tools for community mobilization and peacebuilding. The organization has successfully conducted health camps and supported the specially abled. It promotes social and cultural inclusion in the society and actively works against all forms of discrimination. According to Dr Barkhaa, this is where the role of 'education for all' assumes importance. In addition to this, and in order to reach out to people belonging to all walks of life, Abhigyane has time and again involved itself in distributing food and other essentials as a part of Iftari celebration on the occasion of Eid.

The organization joined the URI network as a cooperation circle in 2015. Since then, it has benefitted from the latter's vast network of

member groups spread across whole of north India and parts of Afghanistan. The organization lays a strong emphasis on interfaith unity and religious pluralism. It organizes educational tours for children where they visit places of worship belonging to multiple faiths – temples, mosques, gurudwaras and churches. In a novel initiative, Abhigyane recently celebrated the Hindu festivals of Diwali and Basant Panchami in the Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi. It also organized the celebration of Holi for kids in a Muslim orphanage. As the organization spreads its wings, Ms. Barkhaa hopes for a future where Abhigyane can reach out to every person in need irrespective of his/her country of residence. With its scope of activities slowly expanding abroad, what keeps the organization going is its drive to work for sustainable peace, and the belief in fact that '*humanity transcends borders*'.





CEEO India

Navigating the hurdles of policy implementation

Public policy implementation has been described as a major problem for developing countries in their efforts to achieve national development. It is often taken for granted that once a policy is adopted by the government, it must be implemented and the desired goals achieved. And, in most cases, little or no attention is paid to the problems and complexities associated with execution of policies. Large amount of energy and resources are spent on designing and preparing plans for all kinds with little or no thought given to the complex chains of reciprocal interactions and variables required, and this can be seen usually in the widening gap between intentions and results.

This very situation of public policy implementation is best described by George Honadle and Rudi Klaus, (cited from Egonmwan, 2009)

“Implementation is the nemesis of designers, it conjures up images of plans gone awry and of social carpenters and masons who fail to build to specifications and thereby distort the beautiful blue prints for progress which were handed to them. It provokes memories of good ideas that did not work and places the blame on the second (and Second Class) member of the administration team”

Cultural, Educational and Environmental Organization (CEEO – India) is a non-governmental organisation registered in Jammu & Kashmir that



has been working in order to bridge this very gap - between the making and the implementation of government policies. While the organisation has been around since 1947, it gained the form it has today in the early 1990s. This was when people following the Gandhian ideology across the country joined the movement with the view to maximise the impact of social action through effective policy implementation. The organisation aims to make sure that every child is guaranteed primary education, no child goes hungry, the midday meal scheme reaches every child, scholarships reach students, women are able to come together to form self-help groups, and farmers are able to find local markets. To ensure this, it has been working relentlessly in the sectors of education, agriculture, literacy, healthcare awareness, self-help groups, and livestock protection. Issues arising out of the implementation of Section 370, the Kashmir floods and the Covid-19 pandemic have had devastating effects on the economy of Jammu & Kashmir. In order to boost the local produce and to find buyers for manufacturers in the region, the organization has been promoting '**local is vocal**' – under which it has been working to find local markets for the local produce.

CEEEO India joined the URI network in 2018. The concept of 'interfaith' plays a very important role in Kashmir. Hussain Ali, who is a part of CEEEO believes in the power of dialogue in the process of development (D for D). He further believes in the fact that URI has an important role to play in bringing about a systemic change in the society by involving faith leaders and faith-based organizations. Grooming effective leadership to drive home a dialogue about interfaith and developmental issues at the rural, semi-urban and urban levels is the need of the hour. The social sector is riddled with a number of problems. To tackle them, CEEEO India has been striving to build a wider visibility. In this regard, the organization aims to work on a number of initiatives; one of them being the Women Development Innovation Centre (WDIC). This initiative is aimed at creating a



market for local products and initiatives of women through innovation.

Effective implementation of policies is preordained by good leadership. External monitoring of the implementation process is also a crucial variable. Organisations like CEEEO India and URI play the important role of creating a platform that facilitates the intervention of all relevant stakeholders. Effective and successful policy implementation is the key to national development. It is a building block that facilitates socio-economic and political progress, and can only be achieved through a continuous commitment, a clear definition of responsibilities and effective coordination.

Golden Way Peace Foundation

Countering the perils of uncontrolled urbanisation



Rapid urbanisation has led to the growth of numerous slums and squatter settlements in many Third World cities. Delhi NCR is no exception. Slums are on the increase due to the high incidence of rural-urban migration and economic growth. Rapid urbanisation taking place within weak economic conditions creates pressures on housing, and on public services and utilities. Scarcity of affordable housing for the poor underlies the increase in New Delhi's slum settlements. Basic facilities, such as water and sanitation provision, and health services are inadequate. Urban-development experts believe that NGOs can help squatter settlements through community organisation and mobilisation (Keivani and Werner 2001: 77). **Golden Way Peace Foundation (GWPF)**, a young non-governmental organisation working in Faridabad since 2015 is testimony to the above. The organisation's efforts began in the form of an informal group of friends coming together in order to create a sense of community awareness in the slum that they themselves lived in.

Over the years, the group has been using instruments like *nukkad nataks* (street plays) and puppet shows as community awareness & peace building programs in schools, and in slums. The organisation has partnered with a number of other NGOs in the country in order to boost the geographical reach of the program. In 2017, the members registered

themselves as an organisation with the Government of Haryana.

The story of urbanisation in India is replete with some remarkable statistics - the number of people residing in urban India has risen five times since 1961. The net population increase is now more in urban areas than in villages and is expected to grow to 600 million by 2030. Rapid urbanisation has its set of problems and issues. Growth of cities gives rise to several **child protection** issues. The million+ cities are major contributors to crimes against children such as trafficking, kidnapping, rape and infanticide. The girl child is particularly affected due to the proliferation of sex work in cities.

In order to combat this, in addition to community awareness programs, the organisation conducts skill development and vocational training workshops for daily wage labourers and migrant workers living in the slums – especially for adolescent girls. Girls in such spaces are usually forced to leave schools, and eventually marry young. The organisation runs tailoring and beautician courses free of cost – with the aim of making such girls self-sufficient and helping them fend for themselves and their families. A higher-than-average crime rate clearly means that children in the cities are not only victims to such violence, but are in the danger of becoming a part of organised crime rackets, especially when faced with disruption in schooling and lack of parental care. Mr. Narender, who is one of the founders of the organisation finds a sense of communal harmony missing in such spaces. A lot of energy is usually spent over thinking about differences in caste, class and gender. This makes it important for the organisation to try to bring a mindset shift amongst community members. Workshops on gender equality and mental health awareness seems to be doing the job for GWPF in this regard. A number of institutional partnerships have been aiding GWPF in some of its activities. The organisation associated with the north India & Afghanistan Zone of United Religions Initiative (URI) in 2018. Since then, it has benefitted from URI's vast network of individuals and organisations working in a similar space. The organisation ran a campaign in association with

Love Care Foundation, another Cooperation Circle of URI to distribute relief material for migrants affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Around the same time, URI was also able to help GWPF with sanitary napkins and other essentials for the latter to distribute amongst community members.

The organisation has come a long way and has a long way ahead. In its initial days, the members had to tackle a number of administrative and bureaucratic hurdles in the form of difficulties in registering, and not being very comfortable with conversing in English – which made it difficult for them to network with people. Their association with URI helped them tackle this too, to an extent. Narender and Priyanka from the GWPF team were able to participate and benefit from a training provided by the Times of India & British Council, facilitated by URI. This not only helped them develop skills as trainers in order to teach English to slum students, but also helped them build confidence for job interviews and other prospects. Mr. Narender is hopeful about a bright future for the organisation. In this light, all members have been keen on learning on the job, building the necessary trust and confidence, and working for the betterment of the communities that they live in.





Kathak Dharohar

Community building through Art



This excerpt from the book **‘The Creative Community Builder’s Handbook: How to Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Arts and Culture’** makes a compelling case that cultural projects are not simply a luxury but play a fundamental role in reviving the fortunes and boosting the prospects of poor, minority and other disadvantaged communities:

‘Civic institutions, like museums, public galleries, community art organizations, performing art institutions, arts councils and public arts organizations have a rare opportunity to lead significant change by engaging specific groups to help devise and carry out creative community-building neighbourhood programs.’

Arts, craft, and culture have a crucial role to play in processes of community mobilisation and development. Art makes available a common thread that helps tie communities together, helps uplift underprivileged communities and boosts opportunities. Putting this into practice is Kathak

Dharohar, an organisation that has been working to spread performing arts to communities that seldom have access to them. It was established in the year 2012 by Sadanand Biswas, who is a trained Kathak dancer himself. He has been practicing the art for over 30 years now. Foundation stone of the organisation was laid during Mr. Sadanand's tours across India where he noticed a wide disparity in the level of access that various sections of the society have to not just performing arts, but also to opportunities of growth. He stumbled upon a number of kids from less privileged backgrounds with the talent, grit and determination; but a dearth of opportunities. With Kathak Dharohar, he aims to tackle this very problem face-on. The Kathak Dharohar family has grown over the years to include art and culture practitioners and volunteers from across India.

The organisation has its centres in Uttarakhand, Delhi, Goa, Pune, Trivandrum and Visakhapatnam. It collaborates with *divyang* centers (for those fighting disabilities), orphanages, and other places like leprosy centers in order to work with people from varied backgrounds and age groups – to make available a platform for them to showcase their art. Children and other interested individuals are trained in Kathak, with a unique opportunity for them to showcase their efforts in a national-level event which is held in Delhi every year. In addition to this, the organization is also instrumental in organizing skill development workshops that train individuals in painting, stitching, art and craft; and also provides vocational training opportunities – free of cost!

As a Cooperation Circle of the North India & Afghanistan Zone of URI, Kathak Dharohar has its objectives aligned with the larger vision and mission of URI. URI members have always lent their support and inspiration for the work that Kathak Dharohar is involved in doing. Mr. Biswas believes in the universality of music as a language, and how it transcends the boundaries of race, caste, religion and gender. Art, in general

is something that glues people and communities together. In this light, the organization's work pays no heed to cultural, ethnic, and caste-based differences. Rather, it tries to weave everyone together. Trying to tackle financial issues and other bureaucratic problems, Kathak Dharohar, for the past 8 years, has been striving to make sure that 'everyone' is awarded the respect and opportunities that one truly deserves!





Love Care Foundation

Creating an ecosystem of change

The ecosystem for NGOs and social entrepreneurs is rapidly changing. New levels of philanthropy and corporate social responsibility, new approaches to giving, new technologies, and role definitions of civil society actors in multi-sector governance demand new skills, new institutional set-ups and new ways of communication. Love Care Foundation (LCF), a not-for-profit organization has been striving to build such an ecosystem with its multi-sector corporate partnerships. It has been working with the underprivileged in BPL areas and slums for uplifting & changing the face of the society. The organization provides direct and indirect care to more than 21000 children in India. Currently, LCF works in the spheres of education, health, vocational training, women empowerment and disaster management.

The organization was conceptualized by Mr. Sunjoo Dadroo with the aim of creating equal opportunities for children and women - for them to become independent and to escape the cycle of poverty. This was done through activities



aimed at providing quality education for all-round development. What started as a modest centre in Delhi has now grown to include 25 non-formal centres and 15 vocational training centres. One of its prime initiatives is the *'bageecha'* project, that creates opportunities for children and women belonging to different castes, religions and social statuses to come together, discuss their problems and come up with effective solutions. Love Care Foundation also runs a number of health campaigns and community awareness programs to promote organ donation. Furthermore, it has tied up with hospitals across the national capital, and organizes health check-ups, distributes medicines and conducts awareness programs on issues like sanitation – for the underprivileged. *'Suchita'*, a project that the organization runs under the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan* is aimed at creating awareness about the importance of a clean and green environment. Under its disaster management initiatives, the organization has carried out relief work and has constructed 60 hutments in flood affected regions across Chennai, Kerala, Kashmir and Nepal. More recently, to fight the situation arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic, Love Care Foundation established its own kitchens to feed migrant laborers. Over a period 5 months, the organization supported more than three lakh families.

Their vast network of volunteers from India and abroad, school students, colleges, individuals, and corporates make it possible for the organization to tackle a number of social issues under one umbrella. LCF has been a Cooperation Circle of URI – North India & Afghanistan Zone for more than five years and has actively collaborated with URI in organizing a number of activities and initiatives. Very recently, URI was able to get Love Care Foundation in touch donors who facilitated the supply and distribution of dry ration and other essentials towards the latter's Covid-19 initiatives. URI has also made possible for LCF to network with a number of organizations and individuals

working in a similar space. Ms. Reema Malhotra, Director-Programs & Mr. Sunjoo recognize the importance of 'social inclusion' at the grassroots level to bring a long-lasting change in the society. This, according to them is the only way to navigate through the ideas of religion, peace, and brotherhood.

Love Care Foundation through its activities has been trying to stay true to these very ideals by effectively tackling monetary issues. Looking ahead, the organization plans to initiate a program to develop India's villages. To this effect, it has already adopted a village, located around 100 kms from Delhi NCR; and has started working on improving water and sanitation infrastructure there. Any long-lasting social change boils down to a change in the mindset of the society. Love Care Foundation aims at positively working to make this happen in the years to come.





Mahila Chetna Kendra

Selfless contribution towards
the betterment of women's lives

In 1972, a young woman, who was a part of NSS, was inspired by social reformer Acharya Vinoba Bhave's work to contribute her share to the society. Today, more than 4 decades later, Veena Didi, as she is fondly called by everyone, continues to work in the social sphere, undeterred by her age or even by the pandemic that has affected people around the world. In the 1970s, Veena Didi began working on women issues in rural India, a fairly bold step for the time. She extensively worked on issues like education, health concerns, family issues, child marriage among others to make the society a more inclusive place for women. Gradually, she also started taking steps towards creating a sense of public awareness about issues that plagued the Indian society at the time – interfaith harmony, untouchability, class divide etc. With this, she aimed to make the process of development a more inclusive one. What motivated her to actually start working for the greater good of the society was many of Vinoba Bhave's '*padyatras*' (journeys on foot) across the lengths and breadths of the country that she was a part of.



Her work began in the Dera village, in a remote part of Delhi, where she strives to make women self-dependent. She has spent her life in improving the lives of women in the village and has helped them establish household businesses and self-help groups. She has also been instrumental in finding local markets for local produce in order to help these women earn and fund for themselves. Gradually, the sphere of her social action extended to children as well. Most kids in these poverty-stricken villages were malnourished and anaemic. Veena Didi has been taking initiatives towards providing care and support for all such children. With the help of all her supporters that joined the cause over the years, she has also been engaged in taking classes for these children.

Mahila Chetna Kendra, a registered organization which is a culmination of the above, has been working for over 40 years for the betterment and support of women in rural India. An initiative of the organization – ‘*Maa ka Aanchal*’ (which roughly translates to ‘mother’s care’), is a centre for destitute women in the Dera village. It has been acting as a source of care and support for women who have no means of livelihood or support to earn for themselves. Products or services that these women make and provide, are sold in local fairs which are organized in neighbouring villages. Local markets like such make sure that the produce finds customers without incurring high costs of transport or logistics. Mahila Chetna Kendra has also been striving to raise the literacy rate in rural and semi-urban areas. In fact, the organization’s work was a strong motivation behind the government’s literacy mission in the country. Their work across sectors and issues, and the results that this work has had on the society, was made into a film. This helped maximize their reach and social impact. The organization’s association with the URI network has motivated a number of women to join this movement. The association has also allowed Mahila

Chetna Kendra to network with other organizations and stakeholders.

Nirmala Deshpande ji’s and Vinoba Bhave ji’s ideals have motivated Veena Didi for long. The one ideal that she strives by is ‘*aabhav ka vaibhav*’ – greatness in limited means. She has been trying to relentlessly work for the social good with whatever limited means she can mobilise, and through the never-ending support of all stakeholders and individuals who have helped her overtime. She firmly believes in the fact that an attitude change in the society about women strongly depends on a change at the individual level. For this, it becomes extremely crucial to bring about a mindset shift. The members of the organization have not only tried to bring about a mindset change in the society, but have also moulded themselves according to changed social norms from time to time. What she wishes for from the future generation is a sense of gratitude and thankfulness for the society; and a willingness to ‘give back’ through their actions. She believes that every small, whole-hearted action like this would go a long way in making this world a better place!





Paschim Vihar CC

Creating a sense of socio-cultural
awareness

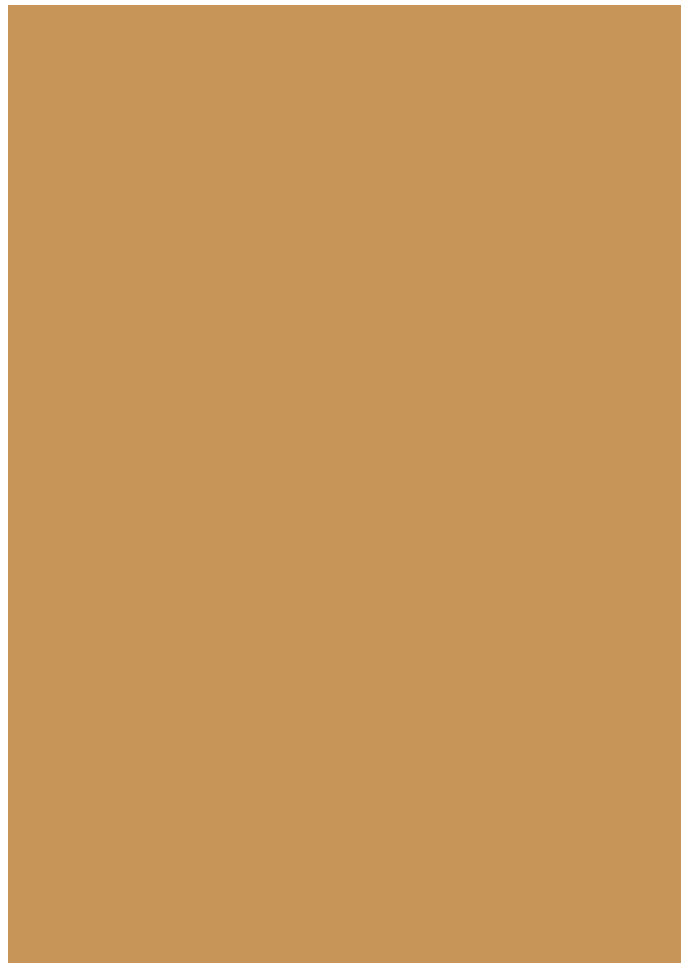


In 2010, when Mr. Balmiki was associated with the Department of Buddhist Studies at the University of Delhi, a chance visit to one of URI's programs in Patiala motivated him to contribute his share to the society. Dr. Hira Paul Gangneji, who was the Regional Coordinator of URI – North India at the time and Mr. Balmiki's senior at the university, was the one who persuaded him to attend the meeting in the first place. The selfless service that other URI members displayed motivated him to work in a similar sphere.

Lack of clarity and unavailability of enough funds to start an organization of his own pushed Mr. Balmiki to test the waters before he could approach Dr. Gangneji with an idea. During his stint as a professor, Mr. Balmiki was troubled by the stark social differences in the society. He firmly believed in the fact that creating a sense of public awareness was the need of the hour – and that is exactly what he decided to step foot into. Trained in Buddhist studies, he started taking classes on Sundays (after having worked full-time during the week). During these classes, he spoke about Buddhist culture, principles, the Pali language; and tried to propagate social values. He spoke about several cultural and social issues and used historical anecdotes from all religions. As this gained popularity, more and more children and their parents started attending these classes. People belonging to a number of faiths, traditions, cultures and religions joined this movement that Mr. Balmiki had kick started. This gave rise to the creation of Paschim Vihar CC in Delhi NCR.

Gradually, as Mr. Balmiki moved elsewhere, his classes came to a halt. This did not deter him from contributing his share to the society. In 2016, he joined the Non-Collegiate Women's Education Board (NCWEB) – where he started teaching on Sundays. Today, he continues speaking in such forums, and talks about moral ethics and culture in a bid to motivate and mobilize his listeners. Going ahead, he wishes

to talk about and work on bringing about a structural change in the way in which women are viewed in the society – both historically and contemporarily. He wishes to create awareness about violence and discrimination against women by using anecdotes about how different religions and cultures view them. Mr. Balmiki's strong experience in research and academia, and a stronger background in humanities, history and religion has helped him speak about social issues using anecdotes from history, culture, belief systems, philosophy and religion. He aims to use this positively in order to bring about a structural change in how the society views women. "The society that considers a woman to be a goddess, is the same society that mistreats her. This needs to change", he said as we closed the interview.





Patiala CC

Spearheading social action in Punjab



The government's view of slums and unorganised colonies is that they are a manifestation of poverty and rapid migration. The relevant ministries (through their respective departments and autonomous bodies) are trying to address the problems faced by slum dwellers, focusing broadly on issues such as in situ development, slum upgrading, low-cost housing, relocation, or even eviction. The slum dwellers tend to work in large informal sectors, especially in the garment industries or in other skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled markets. Children in such spaces are in a particularly vulnerable position. Patiala CC, one of URI's oldest cooperation circles working in the state of Punjab works for the betterment of such children who reside in slums and beggar colonies. The organisation is a group of around 500 active members who have come together over a period of 20 years to work for the common good. They do so without any help or funding support from government authorities. The organisation helps children get admitted in schools, and pays for their tuition and conveyance fees. Lubhana ji, founder of the organisation believes in the far-reaching impact of this action. Kids who receive

aid from such civil society organisations have a changed perspective towards life. Their lifestyle undergoes a transformational shift. These children then contribute towards motivating others to study, thereby giving birth to a chain reaction.

In addition to working for the good of children, Patiala CC is also actively involved in organising blood donation camps. What it also actively works towards is trying to eliminate the stigma associated with blood donation, transfusion and use. It tries to educate people about the safety procedures that are usually followed in order to make blood donation a no risk affair. Furthermore, Patiala CC also works to provide vocational training to girls and women living in slums in Patiala. It has set up stitching centres close to these slums – which have pushed a number of girls towards starting their own boutiques and supporting their families. The organisation has been able to provide this free-of-cost training to over 3500 girls until now. Patiala CC also regularly contributes to activities conducted by old age homes. Members of the organisation visit these spaces during festivals in order to distribute sweets, and to distribute woollens during winters. During the

Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown in the country, the organisation was able to provide ration, masks and other essentials to those in need.

Lubhana ji has a number of memories with URI by the virtue of him being one of the oldest CC (Cooperation Circle) members. He particularly remembers memoirs from URI's regional and national assemblies – which re-affirm within him the power of collective action for a common good. These events also help strengthen the institutional partnership between URI, a global network with a presence in over 108 countries, and a number of civil society institutions and non-governmental organisations working at the grassroots level. The quest that Lubhana ji sees today is a way to make politics more transparent. He wishes for people to consider voting for candidates on the basis of his/her qualifications and mettle as against religion, caste, class or political leaning. This, he feels would go a long way in the society being able to positively work towards a more inclusive growth and a more sustainable tomorrow.





Patiala School for the Deaf & Blind, Punjab



More so than its cities, India's villages are living repositories of ancient, diverse traditions that have survived down the ages through a combination of constancy and adaptation to changing circumstances. This resilience has enabled myriad village lifestyles to flourish in environments ranging from fecund, irrigated agricultural plains in India's north and southeast to the vast, arid plains in its centre and the temperate mountain ranges of the east and west coasts. As Stephen P. Huyler states in *Village India*, the financial poverty of village existence is offset by a wealth of communal customs, rituals and attitudes:

"Their faith and the interdependence of their societies provide a unity and sense of purpose rarely experienced in the contemporary West ... Modernisation is essential but its most healthy expression would be a blending of traditional forms (and the wisdom gained through centuries of subtle adaptations to the environment) with innovative technologies."

For a global grassroots interfaith network like United Religions Initiative (URI) - that seeks to create cultures of peace by using religion as a

tool, it is enriching and important to create an inclusive platform for the culture of the rural hinterlands of the country. URI's activities in its early years were predominant in urban centres and metropolitan cities. However, the support and cooperation of members like Ashwani ji, one of URI's oldest CC members from Punjab enabled a transformational shift in this regard. Ashwani ji spoke vehemently about the fact that India's culture is often most visible in its truest and rawest form in the villages – and that is where URI must thrive. The rampant commercialisation of religion and culture in cities often underscores the purpose of an interfaith network like URI working in a multi-ethnic and pluralistic society like India. It was due to his efforts and passion that URI India hosted two of its assemblies in Paonta Sahib and Amritsar respectively.

Ashwani ji was one of the earliest members to have joined URI's cause in India. His journey began with Dr Mohinder Singh, who is credited to have first supported URI in India. Ashwani ji was instrumental in bringing together likeminded individuals and organisations working in Punjab under the wider URI network. He was the one who enabled these individuals and organisations to join URI and build institutional partnerships in order to address social issues. He can be credited for having formally integrated a number of CC organisations in Punjab like – Patiala School for the Deaf & Blind, Patiala CC, Patiala Vriddh Ashram, SGB Children's Home CC, Sangrur CC etc. The organisations that he has been working with - **Patiala School for the Deaf & Blind** and **Society for the Welfare**

of the Handicapped have been instrumental in creating a safe space for children living with special abilities. Efforts like such have allowed these children to have empowering experiences through education.

Ashwani ji has also been at the forefront of motivating young individuals to join the interfaith movement. **CA Gagan Kumar** is one such talented individual that has been supporting members of URI in Punjab as a pro-bono financial consultant. He is associated with a number of civil society institutions across Punjab - Society for the Welfare of the Handicapped, SGB Foundation, and Special Olympic Bharat to name a few. He met Kuldeep ji, founder of SGB Foundation during one of URI's regional assemblies, and has been working for the organization ever since. URI's assemblies have helped Gagan get in touch with a number of such organizations working across India; and this has helped him maximize his social impact.

Gagan finds himself highly motivated by the work that URI and all its partner organizations have been involved in. He believes in the strong role that organizations like these play in transforming societies. However, he feels that the concept of 'social inclusion' is largely misinterpreted and misrepresented. According to him, the key to a truly inclusive society lies in translating social inclusion into a more practical solution that can be implemented on ground – at the grassroots level.



Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre

Driving policy change through
social action



Global politics has gone through a drastic shift resulting from the growth of non-governmental organisations. NGOs or CSOs (Civil Society Organisations) have moved from being in the background to having a presence in the midst of world politics, and, as a result, are exerting their influence and power in policy making at a global scale.

Given the unprecedented growth in the numbers and the power of NGOs, it becomes necessary to understand how their role has changed or matured. These NGOs are unfettered, not answerable to specific agendas, and, in many instances, can act independently. Even though NGOs are highly diverse organizations, the one common goal is that they are not focused on short-term targets, and hence, devote themselves to long-term issues like climate change, disease prevention, or human rights. In addition, public surveys state that NGOs often have public trust, which makes them a useful proxy for societal concerns (Hall-Jones, 2006). NGOs and civil society organisations play a crucial role in (1) social development, (2) sustainable community development, and (3) sustainable consumption.

One such non-governmental organisation in India, that has been driving social change for over three decades is **Prayas Juvenile Aid Centre**. The organisation was founded by Amod Kanth, who was the Joint Commissioner of Delhi Police in 1988. A huge fire broke out in the Jahangirpuri locality of North Delhi that year which resulted into a number of casualties, devastated families and left a large number of children orphaned. Amod Kanth, who reached the site for inspection saw around

25 such children there. He rushed them all to the Jahangirpuri A Block Police Station for some food and shelter for the night. He soon realised that there weren't strong legislative policies that covered such children and that they were practically homeless. This was how Prayas was born. It was established by Mr. Kanth, who brought together the Delhi Police, Shramik Vidyapeeth (an organization that provided vocational skilling to laborers in the unorganized sector to improve their working conditions, and to rehabilitate them), and the Department of Social Work, Government of India. The very first centre of the organization came up in Jahangirpuri in 1988. The organization gradually grew as Mr. Kanth built another centre in the same locality in the year 1998. This contributed towards preventing such children from being trafficked. Today, Prayas has over 200 such centres across India. All of Prayas' shelter homes are covered under the Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act. The Act prescribes two types of shelters – one for children in need of care and protection; and the other type which acts as observation and correction homes for children who commit crimes. Prayas facilitates school education for kids (through national open schools), opportunities for higher education (through its accreditation to IGNOU) and vocational training courses including those

for plumbing, electrical work, beautician training, art and craft, stitching, and computer use. Child Line- a toll free emergency helpline for children was an initiative that Prayas spearheaded in the 1990s. The helpline acts as a point of contact for children to reach out, voice their problems, and raise their concerns. The helpline number (1098) was suggested by some children in one of Prayas' shelters – counting backwards from 10 up to 8, which would make it easier for them to remember. Today, the helpline works across India.

In the year 2000, Prayas took over the functioning of Shramik Vidyapeeth. Today, it is called 'Jan Shikshan Santhaan' and works towards providing livelihood opportunities to workers in the unorganised sector, unskilled workers, women, workers belonging to the socially underprivileged classes, and the illiterate. This initiative is focused on facilitating functional literacy – providing a source of livelihood and associated learning opportunities. Jan Shikshan Santhaan functions under the Ministry of Skill Development and covers over 50,000 people across 40 shelter homes and 250 skilling centres across India. Prayas also runs night shelters for daily wage workers who live on roadsides and footpaths. Prayas joined the URI network in 2008. URI has been instrumental in



supporting the initiatives of Ms. Sadhana, Director - Jan Shikshan Santhaan in carrying out health checkups, organizing art-based competitions and celebrating special days with the children of Prayas.

Over the years, Prayas has liaised with the Government of India to bring about policy changes – especially in the way in which the homeless and the socially underprivileged are viewed. It carried out a nationwide survey on child abuse which led to the formulation of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act in 2012. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, Prayas made and distributed cotton masks in communities across India; in addition to generating public awareness about personal hygiene and social distancing. Ms. Sadhana believes in the transformative role that NGOs play in community building and awareness. The massive public trust that NGOs garner over the years contributes towards helping them build a strong foothold at the grassroots level. This very trust has an instrumental role to play in formulating and driving policy action.



Rohini CC

Small steps towards a better tomorrow



In a few decades, humankind is going to go through a dramatic irreversible demographic change. By 2050, people over 60 will outnumber those under 14; and a staggering two-thirds of these older people will live in Asia. Such demographic changes have enormous implications for our societies.

Older people are an asset to their families, communities and the society. Their contribution – as caregivers, advisers, mediators, mentors and breadwinners – is invaluable, but frequently unrecognised. Harnessing and nurturing such capacities through older people's associations has proven to be a decisive contribution to development theory and practice. Additionally, women play a big role in the sustainability of any community. Unfortunately, for so many years, their importance has been overlooked. However, that has been changing due to the empowerment of women in the community as part of community development process. Older women contribute enormously to our communities, through paid and unpaid work, caregiving, volunteering, and much more. They also bring great knowledge and experience to their work. However, many older women experience barriers to their well-being. This has an impact on their ability to participate in community initiatives. Veena Gaur ji, and other members of her organisation – Rohini

CC, a Cooperation Circle of URI – North India & Afghanistan have been relentlessly working for the betterment of elderly women in the national capital for over two decades.

Veena Gaur started working for children from underprivileged backgrounds while she worked as a professor with the University of Delhi. Gradually, she started spending time with elderly women in the vicinity who merely needed an ear to talk to and express themselves. She used to meet them in public parks, talk with them, help them express themselves and motivate them to talk about their problems. While she still continues to do so, the scope of her activities has now expanded. Over the years, she has worked with women from all walks of life – including refugee women, to help them become self-sufficient and self-reliant.

The organization joined the URI network in 2004. Veena Gaur ji sees URI as a platform to not only network with fellow individuals and organizations, but also to develop oneself. This association has motivated Veena ji to continue the good work in spite of many members of her organization dropping out over the years. Veena ji is also associated with Mahila Chetna Kendra, another organization working for the good of women – where she is involved in teaching English. As Rohini CC continues to work relentlessly, Veena ji is desirous of building a dedicated safe space – a center for elderly women. This center, according to Veena ji would give women a platform to express themselves, work and just ‘be’. She believes in the fact that all that people need sometimes is a gentle push for them to create wonders. Rohini CC has been doing just that; transcending all barriers of religion, caste and class.

As the interview drew to an end, Veena ji fondly quoted the famous Lata Mangeshkar song ‘*rahein na rahein hum*’, thereby expressing her desire for generational perpetuity of good work!





ROYA, Afghanistan

Creating a platform for a bright
Afghan future



In the Dari language, the word ‘roya’ means dream. Resources of Young Afghans (ROYA), a non-governmental organisation was born out of the desire to translate dreams of young Afghans (to see a country without corruption and discrimination, and to see a better future for themselves) into reality. The founding member of the organisation is Kara Lazier, an American national who has been in contact with Afghan students for over 10 years. What started as an online writing guide for students has now grown to become a nation-wide movement that trains students from underprivileged backgrounds in English speaking, computer skills; and helps them with livelihood opportunities and supplementary classes.

Human rights in Afghanistan is a topic of some controversy and conflict. Afghanistan has a strong human rights framework within its constitution. The right to life and liberty are constitutionally protected, as are the right to a fair trial and the presumption of



innocence for all persons. This gives the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan a strong human rights framework that is guaranteed to all citizens. While the Taliban is well known for numerous human rights abuses, several human rights violations continue to take place in the post-Taliban government era. These conditions make it difficult for the youth in the country to shape a future for themselves.

The ROYA mentorship program started with helping the Afghan youth with English and computer skills - something that is extremely crucial for job opportunities and scholarships abroad. This initiative began with training around 10 to 20 students in the capital city - Kabul. The initiative was funded through sponsorships received from Afghans studying abroad/working for multinational corporations. A contribution of 10\$ takes care of this training for one underprivileged child. Gradually, the initiative extended to provide weekly wages to those in need. The ROYA team figured that it made it

difficult for students that have to work part time to support their families, to focus on classes. The weekly wages program greatly helped the students in addressing this concern.

The organisation's endeavours gradually expanded to school education too. ROYA has been working towards helping underprivileged students enrol in private schools. Over the years, the organisation has also come up with a mini library for the benefit of the students; and has commenced supplementary classes for those who're unable to catch up with the curriculum in private schools. ROYA has been gradually trying to expand its work in other provinces of Afghanistan as well. This is particularly difficult, given the fact that a number of provinces are still under the Taliban rule.

The organisation joined the URI network recently. Visiting India for one of URI's national assemblies was a transformative experience for Mr. Shoaib, who is one of ROYA's team members. Ethnic and religion based conflicts are on a rise in Afghanistan. Watching people belonging to different faiths sit together and work on finding a common ground in the national assembly motivated Shoaib to make the same happen in Afghanistan as well. In this regard, ROYA has been bringing mentors and mentees belonging to different ethnic groups together. This is done in order to push a dialogue between different ethnicities and to move one step closer to communal harmony in the country. This initiative has been working over the years. Seeing a *hazara* and a *pasthun*, for instance, working together for a bright Afghan future is something that keeps motivating the ROYA team to work despite a number of problems and issues. The team of volunteers wishes to bring all ethnicities together as a part of one large ROYA community; and further wishes to grow this community of love, compassion and a promise for a bright Afghan future to all provinces of the country.



Samagra Vikas CC

A Voice for All



Samagra Vikas, that roughly translates into ‘growth for all’, is a cooperation circle of URI-North India & Afghanistan that operates in Uttar Pradesh. It is engaged in bringing a grassroots level change in a number of domains – child development, women empowerment, gender equality & sensitivity, health & fitness, and environmental sustainability. The organization operates on the motto of ‘making a big family out of people coming from all walks of life’. Their activities began in 2004 with an aim to promote women empowerment. A chapter in the Hamirpur district was kick-started by introducing organic farming through active involvement of families in the village. One of the key activities of the organization is the promotion of yoga and naturopath. It organizes health camps which involves people coming from all faiths. Regular health awareness camps are conducted in schools. It also lays emphasis on menstrual health for women. Camps to boost awareness about menstrual hygiene in community spaces in the village is a regular feature of the organization’s sphere of work.

Savita Ji, Founder – Samagra Vikas believes in the importance of children and youth in establishing a sense of communal harmony and peace. In order to promote the above, Samagra Vikas regularly conducts workshops and competitions in schools

and colleges. These workshops stress on the importance of gender equality, gender sensitivity and peace in the society. The organization has an ashram in Hamirpur that is engaged in the propagation of moral values and the fact that 'peace begins at home'. In order to promote child development, the organization works with children in juvenile homes. This helps them understand their mental health concerns through art and craft activities and initiatives. Environmental crises are on a rise these days. In order to tackle them in its own small way, Samagra Vikas regularly organizes 'sapling planting' camps. What makes this initiative sustainable is that the organization cares for and makes sure that the sapling actually lives on after it is planted. Samagra Vikas has also been lending a helping hand in facilitating relief work for those affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in Uttar Pradesh.

Samagra Vikas' association with URI as a member group began in 2008. The former views URI as an effective knowledge sharing platform that brings together organizations working in similar spheres. URI's participation in an eye camp organized by Samagra in Hamirpur paved way in strengthening this mutual association. The organization has been striving to break stereotypes associated with faith and religion. One common myth that it has been trying to tackle is the association of yoga with Hinduism alone. By doing this, it has taken a step towards making yoga accessible to all. Through activities like these and more, it has been striving since its inception to be a strong 'voice for all'.



SGB Foundation & Sri Garib Das CC

Combating gender-based discrimination



Violence against girls is all too prevalent in the world. It crosses cultures, economic status and social structures. This violence finds its roots in the patriarchal structures of the society. In a country like India, that is rife with gender inequalities and an underlying nature of patriarchy, girl children often find themselves at the short end of the stick. Discrimination against girls is rampant, and due to the fear of abuse and exploitation, they are kept at home and not sent to school. Violence, as discussed above - can take many forms; domestic abuse, trafficking, rape, or harmful practices such as early marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting. Child marriage is a glaring issue due to which girls are forced to give up going to school at an early age. In certain parts of India, the birth of a girl child is not welcomed. The effects of this discrimination and gender based violence against women and girls can be deep and far-reaching. The ripples reach families, communities and nations.

The alarming rate of rampant gender discrimination and the resultant impact that it had on the girl child in the early 2000s, inspired a group of committed individuals in Punjab to come together and work for the cause. **SGB (Sant Ganganand Bhuriwale) Foundation**, a faith based institution that looks at cross cutting social issues, started working for the

benefit of orphaned kids, especially girls in 2003. The organisation provides shelter, care and protection for children who're trapped in situations of domestic violence, sexual abuse, sex trafficking and drug use. It acts as the first point of contact for the Child Line emergency service in Punjab. Kuldeep ji, who is one of the founding members of the organisation lists the precarious conditions from which some of the children are rescued – from being dumped in a polythene bag in the river, to being left unattended at railway stations; he has seen it all. SGB Foundation runs a shelter for all such rescued kids under the name '*balghar*' – which roughly translates to 'home for the kids'. The organisation also provides for their education. It provides several means based and merit based scholarships, which keep the kids in the shelter motivated to outperform themselves. Many of the organisation's members have chosen to lead a celibate life and devote themselves for the good of the children.

SGB Foundation is one of URI's earliest cooperation circles. Kuldeep ji was one of those social pioneers in Punjab who associated with Dr. Mohinder Singh (who is credited to have first supported URI in India). Kuldeep ji and Krishna Kant ji, another member of the organisation were amongst the strong pillars of support who helped organise one of URI's national assemblies in Amritsar. The organisation has always stressed on the importance and need of interfaith

harmony. It organises the '*Sarva Dharma Sammelan*' (Congregation of Religions) every year; where people belonging to all faiths are invited. Its association with URI helped members of the organisation gain an international exposure, and helped them network with like-minded organisations and individuals working in similar spheres.

Over the years, the organisation has been trying to bring about a mindset shift in the way in which the society views the girl child. Krishna Kant ji firmly believes that a mindset shift would be possible only if the society stops ascribing the family's pride on the woman or girl of the house. This, according to him puts an unnecessary pressure on the girl child and restricts her growth and freedom. This would also go a long way in curbing the 'commodification' of women to a great extent. Krishna Kant ji points out how girls are often asked to 'behave like boys' in order to be safe. He firmly believes that we as a society have failed if we expect girls to live like boys in order to ensure their safety.

The addressing of this concern requires supportive legal frameworks at structural levels. The onus of enacting, enforcing and raising public awareness lies upon not just the government, but also grassroots organizations like SGB Foundation. These efforts can go a long way developing, supporting and implementing comprehensive and integrated strategies for the same!





Shantivan CC

Transforming communities using the spiritual paradigm



Religion, spirituality and community building are terms that are seldom spoken of in the same sentence. Generally speaking, spirituality is a concept that has been used in a variety of contexts. At times, spirituality refers to religion, faith, and beliefs around meaning, purpose, and realms beyond the physical. Crisp (2010) describes spirituality in a rather broader sense as, “our needs and desires for meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence, which may or may not be associated with a specific religious framework”. Spirituality is not tied to any one particular worldview, but encompasses a way of being on an individual level, as well as a way of interacting with the world.

There are several definitions that explain community development and some include concepts of community economic development, community organizing, and social change. In this context, community development is “the planned evolution of all aspects of community well-being (economic, social, environmental and cultural). It is a process whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems” (Frank & Smith, 1999, p. 6). The role of community members is key to the community development process and the role of the community development professional practitioners is to empower and support community members to

bring about sustainable change. Can spirituality and community development be then brought together? Shantivan CC, a Cooperation Circle of URI – North India and Afghanistan might just have the answer to that!

The organisation, located in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand has been working since its inception for the betterment of the society, and the humankind at large. It primarily works in the following focus areas:

1. Education
2. Health
3. Peace
4. Spirituality

Brahmanand ji, who is the founder of the organisation strongly believes in the power of spirituality in peace building & community development processes. Shantivan CC is a group of spiritualists joining hands to help those in need. The pandemic that we're all living in has posed numerous problems for a large number of people. The organisation has been trying to put forward its best efforts to provide ration, medicines and other essentials to all those in need. Over the years, Shantivan CC has been instrumental in organising health camps and awareness workshops in association with medical professionals to help maximise the reach of medical services in the country. Brahmanand ji, who is a professor himself actively helps people with queries about education. He, along with others at the organization has organised several seminars and lectures in this light. These efforts are with the aim of providing quality education to the underprivileged and to those living in the rural hinterlands of the country – where there's a dearth of good schools, roads and medical services.

The role that spirituality plays in the organisation's work is of particular importance. Spiritual qualities, such as compassion and justice, are often directly connected with the work of community building. Spiritual assets, such as compassion and forgiveness, are widely valued qualities found in every culture and community. Although acknowledged in virtually every religious tradition, they are not the province of a particular religion, denomination, or sect. They can be seen in people who do – and do not – believe in a higher power or God. These spiritual assets

can lead to more effective community building and community life in general. What members of Shantivan CC firmly believe in is that - when community members are aware of the needs, beliefs, and emotions of others; when they take pleasure in their interactions with them; when they are disposed to seek out and value connections with others; when they feel common bonds with them and are motivated to maintain them – those personal qualities and spiritual assets – are likely to facilitate community building. The organisation actively uses these 'assets' to translate a goal into action.

Shantivan CC's association with URI has helped the former in interacting with a wider network of individuals and organisations operating in a similar sphere. Shantivan CC aligns with URI's principle of '*sarva dharma samabhaav*' (*every religion / everyone is equal*). The organization has been striving to transcend all boundaries as it works towards building a more inclusive society.





Slam Out Loud

Making art accessible to all



Art instruction as a part of the formal education system helps children with the development of motor skills, language skills, social skills, decision-making, risk-taking, and inventiveness. Visual arts teach learners about colour, layout, perspective, and balance: all techniques that are necessary in the all-round development of a child. However, most not-for profit organisations working in the domain of education, parents, and children themselves have limited aspirations from education when it comes to low income & socially underprivileged sections of the society. The aspirations are limited to job security and academic success; there by excluding any and every avenue of having creative arts to be a part of the process.

Ms. Jigyasa Labroo, Co-founder & CEO, Slam Out Loud recalls having empowering experiences through art as a student. Making these experiences accessible for kids belonging to underprivileged sections of the society was the very thought that went behind the inception of Slam Out Loud. What pushed Jigyasa further was the appalling ratio of art teachers to students in Delhi – 1:1400 – which translates into less than 20 hours of art-based education. Art is a very powerful tool to build social emotional skills; and children usually do not have access to this. Ms. Jigyasa believes in the necessity for us to rethink our priorities around education. She started by introducing art and music to her own classroom while she worked as a teacher with ‘Teach for India’. This initiative brought a positive change in her classes. She noticed a huge transformation among students – from increased participation to enthusiastic engagement in class activities. This is where the foundation stone of Slam Out Loud was laid – out of a need to spread this to

other students.

Amongst the earliest and longest running programs of the organization is the 'Jijivisha Fellowship'. It came out of the idea to engage artists to be a part of the education process. Under the fellowship, Slam Out Loud engages artists (fellows) who work with the same group of children for a period of 5 years; since a change at the mindset level usually takes time. Every year, a new artist (storytellers, theatre artists, visual artists, spoken word poets) joins the program and works with children. The fellows go through a rigorous process of selection, feedback and inductions before they're able to engage with the kids. Another program that the organization runs is 'Voice for all'. Under this program, students, teachers and communities are trained to get access to arts and other opportunities through assets that are created during the learnings of fellowship. These assets include recorded lectures, lesson plans, and videos. This initiative makes the fellowship impact more accessible to a wider audience. Slam Out Loud's partnership with Pratham has helped it in reaching out to more than 50,000 children in 950 villages across Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan through their 'Voice for all' program. Pratham is an innovative learning organization created to improve the quality of education. It has a network of schools across India.

Slam out Loud is a member group of United Religions Initiative – North India & Afghanistan. URI has been instrumental in encouraging Slam Out Loud to lead conversations around religion in schools, rather than shoving these discussions in the closet. URI has played a crucial role in helping the organisation think through and not shy away from having an active conversation around religion. Social inclusion remains central to all of Slam Out Loud's activities. Ms. Jigyasa believes that education is where the discussion around social justice and inclusive development begins; and that art plays an important role in facilitating this discussion.

In order to keep making art accessible to children in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, Slam Out

Loud has created an online series of high-quality arts-based experiences in Hindi and English aimed towards learning through poetry, theatre, visual arts, and storytelling. Children, parents and teachers receive these bite-sized activities through a daily WhatsApp alert which engages them in hands-on activities, helps them share their art and interact with accomplished artists. Through safe spaces for creative outlets and sharing, their children have been attempting art activities within their homes every day, as well as disseminating inspiration within their own communities. From drawing Corona superheroes to writing poems about how they're coping, kids are the primary source of hope during these unprecedented times for the organisation.

One pressing concern that Slam Out Loud has been battling with is the rampant de-prioritization of social-emotional and art-based learning for students in policy circles and NGO spaces in the country. Promoting an approach to education that goes beyond academic excellence, to also include social emotional learning is crucial at this stage. It is necessary to bring about a mindset shift to do so. The organization thus aims at reaching out to children in the direst areas through partnerships and at-home solutions in the coming years – and bringing about this mindset shift!





World Vision India & Golden Way YPJP

Creating a culture of community service



With over six decades of experience at the grassroots, World Vision India employs proven, effective development, public engagement and relief practices empowering vulnerable children and communities living in conditions of poverty and injustice to become self-sufficient and bring lasting change. It works towards a nation where every child experiences life in all its fullness, grows in strong communities, and becomes a responsible citizen. The organisation works in 140 districts impacting around 26 lakh children and their families in over 6200 communities spread across 26 states and union territories to address issues affecting children in partnership with governments, civil societies, donors and corporates.

Mr. Amanat Masih has been associated with World Vision for more than 33 years; and has been working with their national office in Chennai since 2013. Although he retired recently, he has worked in several of World Vision's areas and programs over the years – disability support, accounting and audit, field interventions, and event coordination. From 2013 to 2017, he handled World Vision's India operations out of Chennai. Mr. Amanat has to his credit the inception of a number of organisations - which have been registered as Cooperation Circles with URI across India. Golden Way Young People for Justice and Peace Group (Golden Way YPJP), one such organisation has been associated with the

North India & Afghanistan Zone of URI. Members of this organisation try to bring to life the Preamble, Purpose and Principles of URI on the ground and try to work on building a peaceful world. One of their programs is “Play for Peace”; and is focused on providing quality education in the community they serve. The organisation runs several Young People for Justice and Peace (YPJP) groups, promoting peace messages to the masses in an attractive manner. Youth empowerment, capacity building, education, income generation programs, leadership & personality development are some of the key action areas that the organization works in. It has plans to make the youth self-reliant to work and, through their careers, spread peace in their respective areas. A number of members from Golden Way YPJP have been associated with Delhi

Police and have contributed as Covid-19 warriors.

Mr. Amanat Masih’s association with URI has been a rather transformative experience for him. He was motivated to absorb and translate URI’s values of communal harmony and peace in his own work. Over the years, URI has helped Mr. Amanat network with a number of individuals and organisations. He very closely works with several other CC members of the north zone on specific action areas. According to him, in spite of several community mobilization and funding problems, what keeps the association between World Vision India, Golden Way YPJP and URI strong is the shared commitment to work on interfaith issues and to promote peace, brotherhood and a sense of harmony.





WPSO, Afghanistan

Finding a voice for Afghan women

Women empowerment is a multidimensional social aspect that aspires to cover the holistic narrative which is imperative for the development of any nation. In Afghanistan, efforts for securing women's rights have been undertaken since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. The Ministry of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan was endeavoured as per the agreements of Bonn Conference, and became part of the executive of the Interim Administration. Women empowerment in Afghanistan is taking its shape sporadically; however, the gigantic momentum has to come through stability followed by inducing education, employment opportunities, legal status, freedom of speech and inclusion in the social sphere systematically. Nevertheless, economic development is an important element of sustainable development - which can be achieved through women's equal participation in nation building.

In order to promote the participation of women in nation building, Women & Peace Studies Organisation (WPSO) was established in Afghanistan in 2012. The foundation stone was laid with two



main objectives in mind – (1) promoting knowledge and (2) bringing about a sense of sustainable peace & harmony in the country. The organisation focuses on involving women as peace negotiators and peacebuilders in transforming conflicts and countering violent extremism. It seeks to empower women in security organisations (especially, in the police forces). The organisation works very closely with the Ministry of Interior Affairs, Government of Afghanistan. It has a grassroots focus – whereby it tries to mobilise local actors and peacebuilders in its projects. This helps it in understanding the functioning of civil society organisations and in building institutional partnerships.

Its association with URI made it the first organisation in Afghanistan to join the URI network. Mr. Naveed, who is one of WPSO's members believes that there are a number of similarities in the activities and objectives of URI and WPSO. URI is largely an interaction between people that belong to different faiths, religions, traditions, and cultures. While WPSO is also engaged in a similar sphere of work, the volatile social situation in Afghanistan makes it a difficult task for the team members. Mr. Naveed was able to interact with other NGOs and CSOs working in similar spheres while in India for one of URI's assemblies. He is keen on working on a possibility of linking approaches used by both organisations in coming up with a common action plan.

The socio-cultural fabric of Afghanistan is deep rooted in power sharing structures between ethnicities. The making of laws in the country is at times influenced by the majoritarian vote; there by painting a vivid picture of exclusionary politics. Mr. Naveed strongly believes in the fact that Afghanistan has been grossly underutilizing its resources due to a lack of cohesion between social structures. A successful peace negotiation, or even the process of inclusive development requires strong and unfettered leadership. In this regard, WPSO has been striving to build a new generation of women leaders to bring forth newer ideas in peace negotiation and development discourses.



Author's Note

“Volume 2 of the ‘Community Chronicles’ project explores the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society institutions (CSOs) in Delhi NCR, parts of North India and Afghanistan. NGOs and CSOs 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. This project allowed me to interact with such grassroots organisations, understand their work, and explore how communities navigate through the ideas of urban poverty, education, women & child empowerment, politics of exclusion and the process of development. These organisations are all Cooperation Circles (CCs) of United Religions Initiative (URI): Asia – North India & Afghanistan Zone. Creating a strong network of such organisations is paramount to initiate dialogue and policy advocacy; and this is something that URI is actively involved in doing. This project lays the groundwork for research based interventions and grassroots-focused policy advocacy.

The project was an enriching and engaging experience for me – as a researcher and as a writer. Grassroots organisations, I believe are best avenues to truly understand and make sense of social issues. They help blur the line between academia and practice. We at URI aim to come up with a framework for possible policy interventions using the ‘Community Chronicles’ project as a foundation.”

-Atharva Mehendale

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Masoom Grover works as the designer for the North India & Afghanistan Zone of United Religions Initiative. She is a Fashion Design student from National Institute of Fashion Technology, Delhi. Apart from being an apparel creator she has a decent knowledge of Adobe applications and therefore, also works as a freelance graphic designer. Her passion for writing made her cross roads with United Religions Initiative.

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