

Initiatives for Building Communities of Fraternity and Social Harmony in Salem District

- by *AMAITHI Sangamam* (Peace Collective)

Of the 163 countries around the world ranked, India ranks as the 126th most peaceful nation in the 2023 GPI (Global Peace Index). Interestingly, as per the study, India experienced an improvement of 3.5 per cent in overall peacefulness over the past year, owing to reduction in violent crimes, and improved relations with the neighbouring countries and political stability. The improvement on the neighbouring countries relations indicator occurred because of fewer incidences of cross border violence and ceasefire violations with Pakistan and China in 2022. Furthermore, the reduction in geopolitical tensions with China owing to the reduction in border incidents, as well as less social unrest more generally, led to an improvement on the political instability indicator. This piece of information leaves a sense of peace of mind among the people of India and all those peace lovers around the world.

On the contrary, at the national-level, there is a growing unrest experienced among the people of different faiths in India, especially in certain selected States. This has been studied and being confirmed by an empirical study recently. The spirit of tolerance and love for each other, which has been celebrated over the last several hundreds of years, has been one of the special features of Indian society. People of different faiths living in one geographical area sharing life styles was witnessed; Indians were seen as people of an ancient land that had promoted many different schools of philosophy and spirituality over the millennia. Despite some remote and rare instances of conflicts, India had been a model of peaceful coexistence. But this peaceful coexistence has now been disturbed very much over the last one decade due to several reasons. On account of the same, there is a growing incidents of hate speeches, religious intolerance, and violence witnessed which has been conveyed in all forms of media.

Call for Understanding Diversity and Inclusion

Having studied the on-going disturbance related to interfaith peace in Ayyoithiapattinam region, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Salem and their Partners-in-Mission have evolved a strategic plan to work at the grass-roots-level to build peace in the arena of caste, religion and gender related conflicts. One of the initiatives taken by them in this line is the creation of a platform for the leaders of different faiths to promote peace in relevance to the today's context. Accordingly, some of the religious leaders working in the vicinity of Ayyaothiyapattinam region in Salem District who are in line with the vision and mission were identified and were called for a dialogue in 2021. As a result of the same, *AMAITHI SANGAMAM* (Peace Collective), a platform for building interfaith fraternity and harmony was formed to address problems related to peace. Religious leaders from Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and members from spiritual movement such as Brahma

Kumaris are the members of AMAITHI SANGAMAM. Members of AMAITHI SANGAMAM have committed to equip themselves on the concepts related to interfaith peace and have expressed their oneness to work collectively for social harmony.

4th Meeting of AMAITHI SANGAMAM

On 13th September 2023, the 4th meeting of AMAITHI SANGAMAM took place at SHIV SHAKTHI BHAWAN which is the place of Brahma Kumaris who are providing training on meditations. Shiva Shakti Bhawan of the Brahma Kumaris is a Centre in Suramangalam, Salem is a top player in providing Meditation Centre in the Salem. This well-known establishment acts as a one-stop destination servicing customers both local and from other parts of Salem. Mr. Sam, Project Coordinator of PEACE MISSION briefed the participants about the milestones of AMAITHI SANGAMAM. In his deliberation, he has listed the development which are being explained shortly:

AMAITHI SANGAMAM was officially initiated on 25th October 2021 at Nochipatti under the aegis of Sisters of the Good Shepherd. After that, the members have met at least 3 times to organise events such as i) Observation of International Day of Peace, ii) Amaithi Sangamam together celebrated interfaith festivals in different location such as Diwali, Christmas and Pongal celebrations, iii) Participated in a Meeting at Mosque, Ammapettai, iv) Expressed their Solidarity in a District-level Programme “Millathu Manadu” organised by the Tamil Manila Imamgal Pervai, and v) Expressed their Solidarity in a National-level Programme organised by the Suni Students Federation (SSF).

The International Day of Peace 2022: On 21st September 2022 the IDP 2022 was observed along with Students from different colleges in Salem city; a rally was taken out from District Collector Office to YMCA Campus to build awareness among the public on the need and importance of peace and a public meeting at YMCA, Salem was organised to provide input for the students on the relevance of working together to build a peaceful nation; discourses by eminent speakers from different faiths and a Mime-Act & Cultural dance on peace by the students marked the occasion.

Interfaith Festival Celebration: In order to promote the solidarity among the different faiths, village-level Interfaith festivals were organized and celebrated by the AMAITHI SANGAMAM team in different location of the Salem District such Diwali, Christmas and Pongal Celebrations.

Meeting at Mosque, Ammapettai: Members of AMAITHI SANGAMAM planned to hold the meetings on rotation in the respective worship / working places, as this would promote their involvement and participation. Accordingly, the 3rd meeting of the members of “AMAITHI SANGAMAM” took place at Mosque, Ammapet. Discussions were made on the day about the upcoming peace programmes, and as per their suggestions from all the participants they have formed a Core Team with representation from all faiths to plan and initiate the interfaith events at different levels.

Participation in the Suni Students Federation (SSF): While the students of SSF took a rally from Kashmir to Kanyakumari to promote peace among the people of different faith, the members of AMAITHI SANGAMAM expressed their solidarity while the rally passed Salem city in the midst of the year 2023.

Strategies for Prevention and Intervention to Conflicts: In order to train the minds of the members of AMAITHI SANGAMAM on 'conflict prevention and intervention', the participants were divided into three groups and were asked to discuss on one or two striking incidents of interfaith related conflicts and were asked to discuss at two levels. The first level is what should have been the precautionary works if such conflicts to have not occurred and what would have been the response to resolve such conflicting situations.

Rising of a Peace Movement

In response to rising interfaith conflicts due to structural and ideological conflicts which are caused by oppressive behaviours exerted on others, as a grass-root organisation, Sisters of the Good Shepherd in association with their Partners-in-Mission took an initiative to create a platform for the religious leaders of different faiths to come together and work together for a peace mission. Towards such an effort, a regional-level group was formed in the name of *Amaithi Sangamam* which means 'Peace Collective'.

AMAITHI Sangamam (Peace Collective) is a need-driven movement by the religious leaders of different faiths that values diversity and strives to create a fairer environment free from harassment and discrimination, and the one in which everybody exercises their rights to follow the religion they are comfortable with, where they feel included and valued. For the 5th time the members of *AMAITHI Sangam* of the religious leaders of different faiths met on 13th September 2023 at Shiva Shakti Bhawan, a centre by the *Brahma Kumaris* (Daughters of the Creator) in Salem to review cum plan the future course of activities.

Responses from the Group Discussions for Prevention and Intervention to Conflicts:

- **Stop Prejudicial Understanding:** In general, all people must be treated equally; prejudicial treatment must be avoided.
- **Need for Proactive Role:** People must take smart enough to come together to stop any form of violence or discrimination exercised on them on the basis of caste, religion, and gender differences.
- **Rapport Building, a Precondition:** Building rapport with the people of other faiths is a precondition for building interfaith peace.
- **Identify the Root Causes for Conflicts;** Identifying the root-causes of the conflict is the first and foremost step towards resolving conflict.

- **Stop Prejudicial Treatment:** In the name of caste, religion, and gender people are subject to ill-treatment, abuse, shame, and indignity. This trend must be pointed out and the concerned people need to be educated to address the problem.

Future Plans of AMAITHI SANGAMAM

- **Identity Card:** An identity card can be developed for the members; this would give value to the members when they try to involve themselves as mediators.
- **Peace Education to Children/Students:** Seeds of change must be shown in the minds of the children and students, who are the future. Children/students can be educated to treat all with respect and dignity.
- **Spreading Constitutional Values:** Values related to religion, caste, and gender need to be spread into the minds of all sections of people.
- **Emphasis on Moral/Value Education:** Children and students can be educated on moral education.
- **Posters on Peace Promotion:** In order to educate the people, posters of different themes can be developed and circulated among the members.
- **Observation of IDP 2023:** Observe the IDP 2023 on 21st September 2023 to promote peace among the various sections of people. Fix the target and organise training programmes to promote peace.
- **Joint Action:** Wherever possible, plan and execute common activities. For example, in the longer run, members can think developing policies that advocate for fairness, Inclusion and respect committee in all Institutions and companies. The immediate activity that can be thought of is to form a Cultural Team for Peace. This team can be trained on advocating for interfaith peace and harmony.

Salient Points Discussed

- As a first step, AMAITHI SAMGAMAM, which is a consortium of the leaders of different faiths have to develop an action plan to deliver the required services and actions. This will give rise to clarity on the future course of action and also on the roles and responsibilities of the members.
- To begin with, a common minimum agenda has to be worked out. A core team for this purpose was to be formed. This core team is responsible for taking care of determining the agenda and share the same with the members.
- Children must be given education that would form appropriate character that strive for peace. Wherever possible, children need to be provided with value education that would promote a character that would unite people of different faiths together.
- Undertake activities that promote peace among different groups and communities. As a first step, the members expressed the need for creating a Cultural Team for Peace. This Cultural

Team can be formed with representatives from members of different faiths who can stage performance purely on promoting interfaith solidarity among the people.

Certain Observations

One of the important things observed from the interaction of the leaders of different faiths was happiness over coming together which is happening for the first time in the human history. Since this has not happened in the past, there was lot of joy and happiness being witnessed from the participants of the programme. In fact, there was no budget for organising such a meeting, no money even to spend for a tea. But, to our shock, the organisers received a spontaneous response from the sisters of Brahma Kumaris who instantly volunteered to provide refreshments and lunch for the participants. It was like a celebration altogether. Sisters of the Good Shepherd and their Partners-in-Mission take this opportunity to express their gratitude to all the participants for their active participation and also to the sisters of Brahma Kumaris who expressed their love for one another in grand manner.

Reflection & Conclusion

Needless to point out here that all religions focus on 'love for one another', but in reality, one can see every day violence being inflicted on one another by the people of different faiths. Religious leaders need to play a pivotal role of educating the minds of people on the universal truth that all are children of God. All religions say the same truth, therefore, we, the people of different faiths, need to internalise the same. Hereunder seen are few catchy verses from the books of different faiths, for reflection:

"See everything as light. You are light, me your father is light and every-thing is made of this pure light of love and peace. You are co-creators of this Universe. Imagine you the soul residing in the body made of light".

- Prajapita Brahma Baba (Founder of Brahma Kumaris)

"You can achieve the peace. A person who is not disturbed by the incessant flow of desires – that enter like rivers into the ocean, which is ever being filled but is always still – can alone achieve peace, and not the man who strives to satisfy such desires".

- Bhagavad Gita verses in Chapter 2

Peace is one of the names of God himself: "He is God, other than whom there is no god, the King, the Holy, the Peace, the Defender, the Guardian, the Mighty, the Omnipotent, the Supreme."

- Quran 59:23

"Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid".

- (Bible) John 14:27

When every child is born, it has no knowledge about the religion it belongs to; the child does not know whether it is a male or female and in the Indian context, it does not know the caste it belongs to. The child enjoys every moment and it does not ascribe anything to any situation until

it is six months old. The child laughs at everyone and shows diamond-like character glittering and shining. As the child grows, it starts recognising its mother, and then its father and then the family members. The family trains the child on food habits, faiths and traits. The child as it grows, the diamond character slowly gets fading and the child's mind is shaped as per the teachings of the family members. As the social circle enlarges, the child interacts, its social circle widens and the child develops a different kind of character, taking inspirations from the social circumstances it lives.

Until recently, i.e., around a decade ago, in India people of different faiths have been living together sharing the common services without giving much room for ill-feeling or heartedness. Problems are erupting nowadays between the people of different faiths only on the ground of claiming their superiority of each one's religions. Strangely, those who have been living together on understanding started abusing each other pointing out some of the unscientific religious practices in each of their religions. Linking the religion with the politics again another major development which has given rise to the conflicts with the people of different religions. Some religious fanatics keep insisting that only people belong to a particular religion alone have the right to live in this country. All these kinds of claim are only aim at autocracy and dehumanising.

Sisters of the Good Shepherd and their Partners-in-Mission are in the mission of building society that respects the plural culture. They use multi-pronged approaches for building peace among the people of different faiths, castes, and people who perceive that women are lesser to men. It is hoped that the present generation of the forthcoming generation slowly develop a culture that embraces humanity as a whole without neglecting people on the basis of castes, religion and gender. This is possible and it is possible only with open mindedness of all sects of people. Together let us strive to respect and respond positively for a world of differences.

Documented by

Mr. Sam, Project Coordinator for Peace Mission

&

Mr. Ayyadurai John Aruldass

Partner-in-Mission

Good Shepherd Convent, Salem (Tamil Nadu, India)

List of Participants of the Meeting

Sl. No.	Name	Sl. No.	Name
1	Sr. Rani	15	Mohamed Jabair
2	F. Ziaudeen	16	Sr. Nirmala
3	Yazeen	17	BK Ravindrabai
4	R. Vijayan	18	Sr. Maria Rose
5	B.K. Raman	19	B. Muniyammal
6	Justin Raj	20	Periyasamy
7	Madheswaran	21	Sr. Rajakumari
8	John Aruldass	22	Ananad
9	Anbarasu	23	J. Prabhu
10	Shakilaftar B	24	Kasturi
11	Natarajan	25	Sr. Clara Francis
12	Nagajyothi	26	V. Mohanraj
13	Maheswari	27	P. Shoba
14	Faizullah	28	R. Sam

. . . continued with photographs of the event

PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE DAY



Ms. Maheswari, a member of Brahma Kumaris, welcomes the members of *Amaidhi Sangamam* (Peace Collective) for a fruitful 'review and plan' for building peace.



Mr. Sam, Project Coordinator of Mission Peace, briefs the participants the initiation and development of *Amaidhi Sangamam* (Peace Collective) over the last two years.



It is important to inculcate and recognize the crucial role of education in contributing to building a culture of peace, says Mr. Faizullah Bukhari.



We need to increasingly teach people who come to worship places to learn to accept the concept of diversity in understanding of faith, says Mr. Shakil Afthar.



Mr. Justin Raj, one of the active members of AMAITHI Sangamam shares that it relevant to come together to work for peace among the people with whom we work.



All religions offer ethical visions that can motivate believers to get into action for peace and harmony in the society. This needs to be promoted further, says Fr. Anbarasu



Appreciating cultural diversity is a wayforward to peace among the people in India, says Madheswaran, a member of Brahma Kumaris.



As religious peacemakers, we need to tend to focus on playing the roles as advocates, intermediaries, observers, and educators, says Mr. Faizullah.



Ms. Maheswari, a member of Brahma Kumaris, briefs their mission and the different meditation practices and its connection with building peace.



Imams (Priests in Mosques) in Salem are increasingly becoming aware of the need and importance building peace among the people, says Mr. Faizullah Bukhari.



Religious leaders & institutions serve as a communication link between opposing sides, and provide training in peace-making methodologies, says Mr. Justin Raj.



It is a great opportunity for all of us coming together to share our ideas and learn from each other at this time of crisis, says Mr. Faizullah Bukhari.



Mr. Madheshwaran, a Hindu Priest interacts with Sr. Nirmala about his experience in working with the people and his learning from *AMAITHI Sangamam* (Peace Collective)



Mr. John, a Partner-in-Mission of the Good Shepherd Sisters says that *AMAITHI SANGAMAM* is a platform for the religious leaders to learn and work together.



Sr. Rani of Good Shepherd Convent shares the peace initiatives being in the offing through *AMAITHI Sangamam* (Peace Collective) in Salem District.



Salem District is experiencing threats and motivated violence; this has affected socio-economic development & hindered co-existence, says Mr. Shakil Afthar.



Mrs. Mythili, a Partner-in-Mission of the Good Shepherd Convent in Salem shares her understanding and experience of peace mission with Sr. Clara Francis.



AMAITHI Sangamam must be promoted and the members have to meet often to get trained on peacebuilding and mediation skills, says Mr. Shakil Afthar



NGOs are expanding their mandates and training to include peacebuilding activities, says Mrs. P. Shoba, Community Organiser of Good Shepherd Convent.



Mrs. BK Ravindrabai, member of Brahma Kumaris shares her happiness about the focus of AMAITHI Sangamam and its importance in today's context in Salem.



Ms. Maheswari, a member of Brahma Kumaris, ties Rakshana Bhandan, tie a colourful decorated “rakhi” or thread to express sign of love as brothers and sisters.



AMAIITHI SANGAMAM - a Peace Collective of the Leaders of Different Faiths, committed to work together to bring about peace and harmony.

