



RURAL DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

Action Areas

-  Educations
-  Tribal Development
-  Environmental Protection.
-  Women Empowerment.
-  Inter-religious Co-Operation.

Primary Contact

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Faiths/Traditions Represented

Hindu, Christian, Tribal, Muslim

Date Approved

April 2007

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COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Summary

The Rural Development Society was established under the patronage of renowned social worker Late Rt. Rev. Santosh Kumar Kisku, Bishop of the Diocese of Durgapur, Church of North India, in Bankura district of West Bengal state as a social service organization dedicated to the development of poor and disadvantaged sections of the community. The main objective of the society is to launch integrated development programmes in the Chhotonagpur region for empowerment and mainstreaming of the rural socio-culturally oppressed and economically exploited masses through a people's participatory approach. The society initially focused its activities in remote areas of the Bankura district of West Bengal state, and has gradually extended its areas of operation in the states of Jharkhand and Orissa. Rural Development Society currently reaches about 50,000 rural and economically disadvantaged people from various faith backgrounds.

REFLECTION & LEARNING

- ***What is the current religious/cultural/social context in the area where your CC is working?***

Our CC is mainly focusing on tribal development in the districts. There are a number of tribal issues, religious minority conflicts, lack of social development, and political exploitations that often create situations that manifest as cultural and religious conflict. The lack of a basic infrastructure in education often misleads the younger generation and leads to unemployment. There are many issues of tribal conflicts due to environmental degradation in the areas where tribal communities live.

- ***Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed in the area where your CC works?***

We have experienced an influx of culture, traditions, and religious conversions that have led towards violence. There are high numbers of conflict experienced among the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Tribal groups, so religious bridge-building is necessary to address common issues which will help our children receive education, health services, and other basic services for survival.

- ***Please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is carrying out this year?***

We are running a Conflict Centre where youth and elders come face to face to discuss the various social development opportunities and scope of communal harmony. We are providing workshops for youth development and tribal development through sustainable farming programs, computer training programs, and engaging women in self-help programs.

Education Programme: Modern schooling is greatly needed for students of lower middle class families in Bankura district. Due to the commercialization of private educational institutions and high costs, our targeted students have no access to education facilities in the English medium. We have incorporated this program, considering the needs of the poor and talented students at the modern school. We have adapted innovative children-centered and teaching methods, and the process of learning through playing. In fact our education policy is directed to monitor dropout rates and enroll all non-school going children



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into government schools. The teachers of Modern School of RDS maintain constant follow up with parents and guardians. Social, health and environmental education has also been provided to the learners.

IGNOU Study Centre: RDS has been running the IGNOU (Indira Gandhi National Open University) study centre for students of scheduled caste, dalits, tribal, indigenous and minority communities. The target students get coaching facilities and other services in the study centre. Students have been provided with coaching, guidance and learning materials.

Youth Leadership Training: Leadership is very essential to move in the right direction. Currently the rural youth have very little scope to develop their leadership abilities due to various reasons. In fact, they have no access to information or education about various developments at local, regional and national levels. Students from various faith communities are actively participating in our training programs, as a result tribal youth have been playing an important role in local government, and running vocation training programs throughout the region.

- ***Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?***

We are working with Christian, Tribal, Hindu, and Muslim groups. People from all faiths are coming together and implementing these projects at the local level. A strong bonding and relationship is continuously building among these groups of people.

- ***Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that would otherwise not interact or cooperate with each other?***

Our strategies include running a children's education program, where families come to attend various school programs. Our self-help group program encourages women from different faiths to come together to work on creating handcrafts and selling these crafts to the local market. This provides the women with additional earnings to support their children with their education. We are also running an environmental program to clean the river. In this program, people from different faiths raise their voices against river pollution because we all obtain drinking water from the same river, and communities suffer equally from river pollutants and water quality.

- ***Given the current context you described, what does your CC hope to achieve (goals)***

Our main focus is to provide more in-depth training to promote local leadership that will help us in the expansion of our Conflict Centre activities. We also hope to engage and promote youth leadership for a bright future and to sustain communal harmony.

- ***How do you see your CC's work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?***

We see our work improving cooperation among people of different traditions because we are an interfaith organization that has members from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Tribal communities. We



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mainly focus on integrating all of our programs with diverse communities. Each project in our awareness program includes Hindu, Muslims, Christians, Tribal, and other minority groups.

Through our awareness program, we develop intercultural relations and interfaith harmony among communities. Also, since people receive benefits from our RDS programs, RDS has an easy flow of people attending various programs; there is always intercultural sharing among participants from various faiths in our projects.

- ***How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflict? (NOTE: This question is relevant only in areas with violence/open conflict.)?***



Expansion of RDS activities goes beyond the state level, which itself set a milestone for any nonprofit organization. The volume of the organization increased because of the impact of engaging different faith communities. With the help of the government and local legislatures, we are helping to provide basic amenities and facilities for livelihood which was not previously available in those areas.

Our current leader is a Christian, and has a central office in the church compound. Office staff includes: Muslims and Hindus working with tribal, indigenous, and other communities.

- ***What are some observations or signs you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?***

We see that when a particular faith community celebrates their festival, they invite our members and people from different traditions to take part and celebrate the event. Years ago when a tribal festival was celebrated, there were almost no participants other than tribals. We have worked to uphold tribal culture in the open society in order for people to understand the value of tribal / local culture. It is a good sign that we are helping each other deepen into the roots of our own culture and traditions.

- ***Please share a specific short story about your CC's work that might teach a lesson about interfaith or inspire other CCs?***

We have invited members and guests from other places to experience tribal culture during the tribal festivals. People attend and visit the farming grounds of the tribal community where they learn how tribal communities harvest with minimal tools. Members and guests are able to learn about these ancient cultures and their traditional wisdom. This knowledge sharing is very inspiring for outsiders, who otherwise would not know about traditional wisdom. Many of these members have carried the knowledge of natural healing from our tribal communities into modern society across the traditions / faiths.

- ***How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission of URI?***

As RDS is a cooperation circle of URI, we have set up a URI center for interfaith dialogue, where people from various faith traditions share their positive views and inspiring stories irrespective of caste and creed. We are helping to create interfaith cooperation at the grassroots level by engaging all citizens.



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We print the name and logo of URI in all of our printing materials. We also promote the PPPs of URI through community projects. We promote URI to new groups for URI's growth.

- ***Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths and cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation among your CC's members? What are the challenges?***

We have members from Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Tribal communities that understand and respect the diversity of our group and are committed to the work that we do for our own development. We face challenges on using technology as many of our members come from rural areas where computers or modern communication systems are not easily accessible, therefore it is hard for us to reach the global community easily.

- ***How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?***

Through URI we get new ideas and the chance to participate in conferences and connect with other organizations / individuals. These opportunities help us to expand our network, and URI provides us with local support that uplifts our actions.

- ***Aside from funding, what are some specific ways URI can better support your CC in reaching its goals?***

We are willing to work with other organizations that face similar issues. URI can help us to host workshop and training sessions for youth development, and peacebuilding techniques.

