



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Roshini CC

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists

Location of CC: Bapunagar, Ahmedabad, India

Key Areas of Focus: Women Empowerment, Campaigns for peace among different religious community

Summary:

Roshini CC is located in Ahmedabad, India. Roshini strives for women's empowerment and fostering peace between women of diverse faiths. The CC's programmes have seen a consistent increase in participation and support from local groups, a result of their successful outreach efforts. Roshini CC has been at the forefront of providing women with resources and educational training in stitching and cosmetology. The CC is addressing the aftermath of the Gujarat riots by promoting interfaith understanding among women and all groups through rallies that promote communal harmony and open dialogue.

1. Can you please help me understand the current religious/cultural/political contexts in the area where your CC is working?

The political situation in the western state of Gujarat has been volatile since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power in 1997. Gujarat has been subjected to fundamental forces for many years, encouraging communalism along religious lines. They were successful in polarizing many of our communities. However, before the violent riots of 2002, in which thousands of Muslims were killed, people did not realize how dangerous fundamentalist organizations were to our state. There is now a complete divide between Hindus and Muslims in the state. It is very difficult for minorities to secure education and jobs. We live in an atmosphere of fear.

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed where your CC is working?

We need bridge-building because communities need to come together to survive and fight for their rights at the state level. We believe that only unity among people from



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different faiths can fight fundamentalism in a state like Gujarat. Trust is important to bring healing and peace.

3. Can you please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is doing this year?

We conduct monthly CC meetings, and interfaith gatherings to celebrate Diwali and Eid. We also collaborate with other NGO's for International Day of Peace, Women's Day, Non-Violence Day, Independence Day, and the West India Zonal 'Save Girl Child' Campaign.

4. Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?

After the Gujarat riots it has become important to build bridges between Hindus and Muslims. We also include Christians in our programmes.

5. 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.

We only work among women. It is relatively easy to approach Hindu women on the issue of gender discrimination, something that is prevalent in all religious communities. Initially, it was difficult to bring Hindu and Muslim women together, but slowly we have been able to convince both groups that it is in our interest to come together and fight discrimination. We have seen that women face exploitation by men regardless of which religious community they belong to, we use that as a platform to bring women together for peace and interfaith dialogue. URI's PPPs are appreciated and accepted by all of our members.

6. Given the current contexts, you described, what does your CC hope to achieve?

Women suffered the most in the Gujarat riots of 2002. This motivated me to work for peace among women. We want to educate women in Ahmedabad that no matter what religion they belong to, the biggest victims are ultimately women and children. Many Hindu fundamentalist organizations have a women's wing, where women participate in riots and use weapons too. Many women supported Hindu mobs during the riots. We



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hope that through our peace activities and interfaith dialogues we can disassociate Hindu women from communal organizations and include them in our URI movement for peace.

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

In our area we are organizing programmes for Sarva Dharma Sambhava (Interreligious harmony) in which we preach that we all are children of God. When He is the creator of all human beings then why should we think about religious boundaries? Religious boundaries should be a private matter. We feel that our problems are the same regardless of our religion, and we must unite to fight.

8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts?

Earlier it was very difficult to Muslims to visit Hindu areas or for Hindus to visit Muslim Mohallas (neighborhoods.) Even now it is not easy to visit Muslim Basti for a Hindu, or to visit Hindu Basti for a Muslim. Slowly our CC visited the Hindu areas and started working among Hindu women. In the beginning, the Hindu women were not listening to us, and now after many years of work they have accepted us and are cooperating with Muslim women on the issues of women empowerment, peace, and interfaith dialogues. The interactions between Hindus and Muslims are helping to remove so many biases which in turn are preventing religiously motivated violence.

9. What are some indicators /observations you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

Earlier it was very difficult to work among Muslim and Hindu women. In Muslim areas, males generally prevented their women from going outside. But we persisted, and continued to work with them and gave courses on stitching and beautician training to generate more opportunities. In the beginning, nobody was coming, but gradually when they saw the benefits, Muslim women started participating in our programs. We have made many leaders from Muslim Bastis, their numbers are now more than 50. In a similar manner, we also work among Hindu women and make them the leaders. There are many Hindu women who work as leaders in their Bastis. We are now seeing women leadership increasing day by day in both communities as the benefits of our work reach more people.



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10. Do you have a specific short story you can share about your work that might inspire other CCs or teach us a lesson about interfaith?

There is one story which is very close to my heart and I think it can inspire others CC's who are working for peace around the world. There was a woman in Ahmedabad who was a member and a leader of a Hindu fundamentalist women's organization, Durga Vahini. She used to distribute Trishuls (Hindu religious symbol of a trident) to women for use whenever there was a riot between Hindu and Muslims. I would talk to her regularly, and inquire why she was doing that since in communal riots it is the women and children in the community who suffer the most. She would tell me that she was doing this to save Hindu women and children. She had so much hatred for Muslims and other minorities in India that it was nearly impossible to convince her that the path she chose for herself was against humanity. I never gave up even though she persisted with her communal approach. I was in constant communication with her. I visited her house for two weeks, sat there with other CC members, and community women. Slowly and gradually our approach paid off. After days of being in contact with us, she became convinced that whatever she was doing was against humanity. She not only left the Hindu fundamentalist organization, but is now a CC member working for peace, and also convincing others from the Hindu community that they should leave the communal approach of Hindu fundamentalist organizations.

11. How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission of URI? (Interfaith bridge-building)

We are helping achieve the mission of URI through our women's empowerment programme among Muslim and Hindu women. Our Sarva Dharma Sambhava programmes especially are helping to build bridges among different communities.

12. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths/cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation between these members? What are the challenges?

In our CC, members from different religious communities cooperate with each other on secular issues of gender discrimination, local problems, and whenever there is a natural disaster. They have started believing that religion should not be the only basis for interaction with other human beings. However, the challenges are also enormous, particularly in Gujarat. Hindu communal and fundamentalist organizations are working at the grassroots level, constantly fueling the myth that Muslims are a threat to their society and cultures. There are so many biases and prejudices in the minds of Hindus



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towards Muslims, and Muslims towards Hindus that it is very difficult to demolish them in one instance. It will take time. We are moving in this direction slowly and gradually.

13. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?

URI through its training programmes, networks, and resources is helping us in building the infrastructure at the grassroots level to build bridges among members of different religious communities. For instance, Qutub, our RC has really energized members and provided us with guidance on how to move forward on the path of peace building in our areas.

14. How can URI better support your CC in reaching its goals?

The URI infrastructure and training support can help us realize our dreams of building a society that is free of violence.