

'INTERFAITH HARMONY DIALOGUE' HELD ON 3rd FEBRUARY 2011
held at CBDT Hall, Lok Nayak Bhavan, Khan Market, New Delhi

The National Foundation for Communal Harmony (NFCH) organized an Interfaith Harmony Dialogue on the 3rd February 2011 at New Delhi. Important leaders of the interfaith movement representing different religions / faiths participated in this dialogue to promote peace and harmony. Dr. Radha Kumar, a noted academician, interlocutor for Kashmir and a member of the Governing Council, NFCH, chaired the meeting.

Dr. Lalit Kumar, Secretary, NFCH while welcoming all the speakers and invitees, informed that this meeting has been organized as a follow up to the United Nation's proclamation to observe the first week of February every year as the World Interfaith Harmony Week. In this regard, the message of the UN Secretary-General dated 1st February 2011 was circulated. He further informed that one of the important missions of NFCH is to encourage interfaith dialogue for shared security, peace and prosperity. The Foundation has been striving hard and organizing such events to achieve its mandate and hopes to upscale these efforts with the help of all like minded people and organizations. The Secretary stated that the *Kaarvan* of NFCH is being enriched day by day and narrated a couplet:

*Manzil mile mile na mile iska gham nahim
Manzil ki justajoo me mera kaarvan to hai.*

Whether we achieve the goal or not, it should not bother us,
We should feel satisfied that the like-minded people are heading
towards the goal.

Before inviting the Chair to take over the proceedings, Dr. A.K. Merchant was invited to provide an overview on the subject and set the stage for discussion.

Dr. A.K. Merchant from the Baha'is Temple stated that this is indeed wonderful that the UN has at last appealed the world community to organize interfaith dialogues during the first week of February every year to focus on various issues that hit humanity again & again. The UN has come to this conclusion that the faith based traditions and the religious leaders have a vital role, responsibility and commitment on their part that they can undertake through interfaith dialogues. The younger generation

needs a concerted message to lead their life focused on spirituality rather than only focusing on the development of their careers, and being swept away with the need of materialism. UN, within its broad guidelines, has urged all the religious communities according to their own convictions and belief systems, to move forward because religion has got not only energy to transform individuals but also to collectively help civilizations to march ahead. Interfaith dialogue movement has a lot of positive things to contribute. These kinds of programs should percolate to the grounds to have a deep impression on the minds of the children of the country.

Dr. Radha Kumar, Chairperson of this event stated that the Interfaith dialogue is incredibly important for a country like India, where we have managed to maintain the diversity for hundreds of hundred years despite occasional or furious challenges to the fabric of our country. It is difficult to talk about the various examples of interfaith harmony that we have in our country, whether it is J&K which was not only once famous for its spirit of tolerance and the levels of scholarship in different faiths of this country, to the pattern of empowerment and equal opportunity that Kerala has given, to the way that Bengal has united people around in language and cultural identities, we have million different such examples. There have been movements of great stress that we have seen in the form of communal violence disturbing interfaith tolerance, harmony and coexistence. This is a matter of concern that we ought to give great priority. As this is a part of ongoing series of such events being organized by NFCH, she made a plea that all of us should make similar attempts for the peace building process in Jammu and Kashmir.

Acharya Lokesh Muni, religious leader of Jainism, congratulated NFCH for having invited leaders of different religions and started his presentation by highlighting the importance of such dialogues for reducing the distance by coming together, with the following couplet:

*Aao mil kar baithen aapas men baat Karen
Char qadam hi sahi chalne ka saath Karen
Yun to doori se doori badhti jayegi
Kabhi to hum khud se khud ki mulaqat Karen*

Acharya Lokesh suggested that it is feasible that religious leaders can formulate a common minimum program on the lines of political parties and meet regularly at a common platform. This meeting can be a milestone in this movement. Lord Mahavira promoted the objective of *Anekant* which suggests 'paying respect to the thoughts of others as one

respects his own thoughts' and believing that 'not only myself is correct, rather he / she can also be correct'. Therefore, we need to develop positive viewpoints. Religion preaches to unite not to divide. While communalism is dangerous, religion is never dangerous; as it preaches positive tenets like honesty, tolerance, forgiveness & mercy. The basic principle of Indian culture has been 'unity in diversity' and '*sarva dharma sadbhav*'. By adopting these principles, we would achieve the desired goals of social harmony.

Ms. Spalzes Angmo, Buddhist and Member of the National Commission for Minorities stated that Buddhism is both philosophy as well as science and it has two main principles, i.e. peace and compassion. In this age of materialism, it is important to know what does religion stands for and what is the meaning of life. Essence of Buddhism is that everybody must be respected and given space. India is a country of diverse cultures, religions and traditions and it stands for secularism and democracy. Sure enough, in this age of modernization and materialism, we ought to give the younger generation what we inherited in the past in the form of rich cultures and traditions. To be united, we have to give space to everybody, every community, every race and every culture. In this regard, spiritualism plays a great role to have peace in the world.

Ms. Binalakshmi Nepam, representing the Nature-worshiper and the Control Arms Foundation of India stated that North-East region of India is home to many conflicts. There are more than 32 armed groups operating in the North-East and many of them have divided on religious lines. Every religion preaches tolerance but in reality we see that the people are not tolerating. Therefore, message of peace and compassion needs to be spread by faith leaders. Young and the old need to work together to resolve conflicts and strengthen peace.

Maulana Umar Ahmed Ilyasi, a Muslim preacher and President of All India Organization of Imams of Mosques was of the view that doing any work individually and collectively bears different results. A lot can be achieved if religious leaders work jointly as people follow them. In the event of any untoward communal disturbance, NFCH can play an important role by bringing different religious leaders together and a common message can be disseminated amongst the masses for maintaining peace and harmony. There is also need of sharing each other's cultural and spiritual tenets to reduce conflicting myths and misunderstanding, which create differences and dis-harmony.

Rabbi Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, a Jew representative stated that they are a microscopic minority community in India and believe in the notion that 'we are Indians first and Jews second'. Rabbi emphasized that 'what is hurtful and hateful to you, do not do to others'. He suggested that people of different faiths may address, wish or practice the sermons of different faiths. This kind of tendency will have a deep impact on the goodwill among people. He felt that religious places may not be restricted and may be open for all, which will have enough space and opportunity to understand each other.

Sardar Paramjit Singh Chandhok, a Sikh representative said that Guru Nanak launched his mission of Sikhism, which is nothing, but embodiment of interfaith. Guru Nanak said that people are created as equals by God, none is superior or inferior as reflected in the following lines:

*Awwal Allah Noor Upaya Qudrat ke sab bande
Ek Noor se sab jag upje kaun bhale kaun mande*

Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhism includes gist of good points of different religions and also the teachings of saints like Kabir, Nam Dev, etc. who have stressed on interfaith.

Mr. Jeroninio Almeida, Christian and representing ICONGO, stressed the emerging need for promoting regional harmony as well, in addition to promoting the inter-faith and religious unity. He was of the opinion that youth of today have a broader mindset in comparison to their elders. So the parents also need to be sensitized to have the greater responsibility of nurturing the young minds in the right direction.

Ms. Simmi Kher, a representative of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation stressed the need to inculcate value based moral education amongst the students and youth. She stated that specific modules for specific target groups of children needs to be developed to nurture the mindset of young children, who are the future of any country.

Dr. M.M. Verma, representing the Interfaith Foundation of India stated that the communal divide is not a result of religious scriptures as none of these preach conflict or hatred. Referring Quran, Dr. Verma stated that it is Allah who has been sending prophets on this planet in different times and needs; one is required to respect all prophets and scriptures. Guru Nanak who believed in all faiths/religions, discarded specific physical

identification of religious leaders and adopted symbols of all in his attire. He can be said as the pioneer of interfaith movement because he lived it and proved it. Dr. Verma concluded by praying to God to teach us all to live together peacefully in following lines:

*Baha do prem ki ganga, dilon me prem ka sagar
Hamen mil jul ke aapas me prabhu rahna sikha dena.*

Air Chief Marshall (Retd.) Shri Nirmal Suri, an ardent supporter of interfaith dialogue, was concerned that efforts of such dialogues are not commensurate with the results achieved. He opined that some innovations are required to make interfaith movement more successful.

Dr. Mohd. Hanif Khan Shastri, a renowned Sanskrit scholar informed that there are so many common things in the scriptures of Hinduism and Islam. He cited examples of rituals being practiced in Islam for which the reference is found in the Hindu scriptures. He stressed that there appears to be need of understanding these commonalities so that the misunderstandings and myths about each other could be reduced.

The Chairperson, Dr. Radha Kumar summed up the meeting and suggested to act upon important suggestions of the learned speakers. She emphasized the need to upscale such activities and reach out to the masses by organizing public meetings to spread the message of peace & harmony.