

A SHORT REPORT ON THE INTERFAITH HARMONY AND DIALOGUE
PROGRAMS IN WHICH TEMPLE OF UNDERSTANDING INDIA FOUNDATION WAS
REPRESENTED OR COLLABORATED FOR THE ORGANIZING OF
THE EVENT, 2015-2016

Promoting discourses on interfaith harmony and dialogues among representatives of different religions stems from the belief that the many religions and denominations within religions all provide some facets of Truth which embodies oneness, which is progressive and relative to time and space.

For the past over 50 years Temple of Understanding has been promoting and participating in various initiatives nationally and internationally. In this Age of globalization the laudable efforts of many people of goodwill and like-minded organizations have perhaps stemmed major world-engulfing catastrophes but alas not be able to prevent local, regional, national and transnational conflicts in the name of religion and belief systems.

From the learning and experienced gained it has been noticed that the initiatives for promoting interfaith harmony usually take the following questions for better understanding of the aims and objects of religious communities so that followers of every belief system are able to better appreciate the spiritual truths and strive for practical action. (a) What should be the role of the interfaith dialogue in India today? (b) How can we make such dialogues more effective and meaningful? (c) How can we engage more women and youth in dialogue? (d) What are the spaces available to us to conduct interfaith dialogues?

Working in collaboration with a number of interfaith associations and organizations the Temple of Understanding [a global interfaith association accredited with U.N.] has forged healthy interface with many of these namely Sri Ramakrishna Mission, Prajapita Ishwariya Vishwavidyalaya Brahmakumaris; Judah Hyam Synagogue; All India Imams Organization; Baha'i Community of India; Parmarth Niketan & WASH Alliance; Astha Kunj; Catholic Bishops Conference in India; Institute for Harmony & Peace Studies; The Focolare Movement; Sarva Dharma Samvad; Indialogue Foundation; Interfaith Foundation; Sathya Sai International Centre for Human Values; Church of North India; New Delhi YMCA & National Council of YMCAs; The Tibet House; India International Centre; Delhi Parsi Dharamshala; the Parzor Foundation; Astha Kunj registered society; and the like.

Following are some of the programmes:

1. Interfaith Foundation & Indialogue Iftaar Dinner & Role Religions in promoting Swachh Bharat Abhiyan held on 11th July 2015 - different religions shared their perspective on the topic and unitedly committed themselves to lend full support to the Government's nation-wide programmes for Clean and Green India. The event was reported in The Hindu on 18th July 2015 in the Saturday supplement.
2. WALK OF HOPE being organized by Manav Ekta Foundation – Completion of the first 100 days of The Walk started from Kankyakumari on 12th January 2015 flagged off by Hon'ble Dr. Karan Singh, MP. Sri M and 100 odd marchers accompanying him
3. Interfaith Prayer Service and Tree Planting ceremony on the occasion of 80th birthday of H. H. the Dalai Lama was organized by Tibet House on 6th July 2015. Representatives from all religious communities offered prayers and planted saplings in honour of His Holiness.
4. Interfaith Harmony Prayers organized by National Gandhi Museum, Gandhi Samarak Nidhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation & Itihaas—NGO at J.M. International School, Dwarka Sector 6, New Delhi on 17th July 2015.

5. Role of Religions for World Peace jointly organized by National Gandhi Museum, Gandhi Peace Foundation & Global Peace Foundation at Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi on 18th July 2015.
6. To commemorate the first International Yoga Day of the United Nations 21st June the Brahmakumaris Movement held a colourful and spiritually uniting endeavour on 20th June 2015 at Red Fort early morning. Representatives of all the different Religious Communities greeted the peoples of India and offered prayers for the success of the auspicious initiative taken by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi.
7. Pre-Parliament Conference jointly organized by Ramakrishna Mission Vadodara Centre and Dr. Jayesh Shah, Ambassador, Parliament of the World's Religions, Chicago, on 7th, 8th, 9th August 2015. With the passing away of former President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, who was to have inaugurated the Conference in Vadodara, Hon'ble Dr. Karan Singh, had been requested to take his place and inaugurate the Conference. The inaugural conference would be followed by two sessions in which a select number of religious leaders / scholars would address the invited audience.
8. Participation in the Parliament of the World's Religions October 2015 themed: "Reclaiming the Heart of Our Humanity" held in Salt Lake City, USA. Some 9,000 peoples from all walks of life and coming from scores of countries representing every known belief system in today's world attended, each according to their own inclinations the 600 seminars and panel discussions over a period of six days. See the [2015 Parliament of the World's Religions Report](#) for full account. *The Asian Age*, a national daily and *Samachar Alokpravaha* carried articles.
9. International Interfaith Dialogue on 9th January 2016 themed: "The Influence of Religion on the Place of Woman in the Society" jointly organized by Der Missionszentrale der Franziskaner, Bonn, Germany, the Center for Peace and Spirituality International, Temple of Understanding—India and Bahá'í Community of India.
10. Interfaith Dialogue for World Peace jointly organized by Temple of Understanding India and Focolare Movement on 20th January 2016 in honour of the visit of Madam Emmaus, the President, Mr. Jesus Moran, Co-President, Focolare Movement held at India International Centre. Some forty speakers and guests had gathered to learn how the interfaith dialogical process could be carried forward in the 21st century mindful of the manifold crises and unique opportunities.
11. Report of an Interfaith Gathering of select Faith Leaders and Representatives 9th February 2016, National Baha'i Centre, New Delhi 110001, coinciding with the visit of a delegation of 10 friends from an interfaith organization called: "Religions for Peace" based in Rome, Italy. Signor Dr. Luigi Da Silva Secretary General of "Religions for Peace" Rome, described the work of his organization and its strong belief in the need for religious coexistence and a peaceful society. He said dialogue between religions is most essential, therefore, a representative delegation drawn from different Faiths were visiting India.
12. Silver Jubilee and First Karan Singh Interfaith Harmony Award function for honouring The Walk of Hope 2015-2016 initiative taken by Sri M held on 19th February 2016 at Teen Murthi Bhavan with Vice President, Shri M. H. Ansari as Chief Guest.
13. Round Table Discussion on Religious Coexistence and Respect for Diversity, jointly organized by Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs and Interfaith Foundation at Baha'i Lotus Temple, New Delhi on 18th June 2016. Nearly one hundred scholars took part, a compilation of short statements made by them on the subject is under preparation.

14. Celebration of 2nd International Yoga Day and 2-day International Conference organized by AYUSH Ministry on several dates starting from 18th June through 23rd June 2016. Brahmakumaris Ishwar Vishwavidyalaya organized a massive gathering on 19th June at the Red Fort and invited representatives from all religions to offer their blessings and take part in the Yoga demonstration.

15. Sarva Dharam Samvad and Indialogue Foundation hosted an interfaith symposium and Iftaar reception on 3rd July at Hotel Royal Plaza to address the burning topic: "How Religions can contribute to counter the forces of fanaticism and violence." Scholars and religious leaders representing different spiritual streams addressed the packed audience of some 250 people.

16. Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math, West Bengal, organized the Platinum Jubilee celebrations and the UGC-sponsored International Seminar on "Interfaith Harmony" on 7th and 8th July 2016. Religious scholars from different Faiths addressed the topic from their respective standpoint both as insider and outsider on the role religions have played in promoting "Interfaith Harmony" underlining the fact that there have been more challenges than successes.

17. The Brahmakumaris organized a Panel Discussion on 25th September at India Islamic Cultural Centre, themed: "Sabka Malik Ek" for sharing on how different religions understand the concept of God creator of the universe. Because the debate about God has lingered for centuries. Some people debunk all notion of a God. Some remain devout till death and, every so often, someone may remark, "Who cares?"

18. 4th International Dharma-Dhamma Conference on Dharma & Polity jointly organized by India Foundation & Sanchi University in collaboration with the Government of Madhya Pradesh at Bhopal on 19-21 October. It was a large gathering with many international participants from 15 different countries and delegates from all over India.

19. Times of India—Honda—DDA Green Drive involving religious communities and interfaith organizations for planting thousands of trees in different parts of Delhi NCR on 6-7 November with the largest number being planted at Tughlakabad and Tilpath Valley Biodiversity Park.

20. Round table Conference themed: "Religion & Sustainable Development—Fostering Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies" on 23rd November 2016 in collaboration with Woolf Institute, Cambridge and Georgetown University, Qatar. Some 27 outstanding scholars, including members of the Advisory Council of Temple of Understanding India Foundation were invited by its founder President, Hon'ble Dr. Karan Singh for deliberations surrounding the Agenda 2030—Sustainable Development Goals and the contributions of religious communities towards their fulfilment.

21. Celebration of 350th birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh (Guru Gobind Singh: Life & Legacy) by Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan & India International Centre on 25 & 26 November.

22. The Brahmakumaris in collaboration with some of Parliamentarians (Rajya Sabha) organized a Panel Discussion on 16th December at Parliament Annexe themed: "Sabka Malik Ek" for sharing on how different religions understand the concept of God, creator of the universe. Deputy Speaker Mr. P. J. Kurian was the Chief Guest.

23. "Religious Scriptures: Our Shared Heritage" a Seminar organized by Institute for Harmony & Peace Studies on 17th December 2016 in which religious scholars from different faith-based traditions presented the universal principles and teachings that could be suitably

transmitted to younger generations for removal of ignorance and prejudices in the society and for a peaceful world.

24. Interfaith Gathering and fellowship dinner hosted by the Church of Latter Day Saints, Delhi on 17th December 2016 for celebration of Christmas and inviting new year resolutions focussing on humanitarian services and collaborative efforts for promoting interfaith harmony events.

25. Inter-Religious Seminar by the Focolare Movement on 20-21 December on the theme of mysticism and the experiences of Chiara Lubich in Mumbai. It was largely an academic exercise drawing good representation from a number of Universities and Institutions of Higher Learning from different parts of the country.

26. Interfaith gatherings plus good governance day organized by Astha Kunj on the occasion of 92nd birthday of Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee as well as Christmas on 25th December 2016. The focus of deliberations on *Advaita* [oneness and wholeness] beside acknowledging the contributions of former Prime Minister Mr. Vajpayee was on work collectively to project India as "*vishwaguru*" and Delhi as a hub of the country's spiritual compass. All the major religious communities were represented and their contributions acknowledged.

The above is brief sampling of the numerous interfaith activities being held in the capital city and elsewhere in the country in the past one year (2015-2016).

(Report by Dr. A. K. Merchant, General Secretary, Temple of Understanding—India; National Trustee, Lotus Temple & Baha'i Community of India <ouindia@gmail.com>).