



INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNAL HARMONY

Saguna Puri Singh

The term 'Interfaith Dialogue refers to the positive, constructive and cooperative interaction between people of different religious faiths and spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels, with the aim of promoting understanding between different religions to increase acceptance and tolerance.¹

The Parliament of World Religions, held in September 1893, in Chicago USA, is regarded as a turning point in modern interfaith movement. It brought together leading global voices in the emerging religious studies to promote interfaith understanding and communal harmony. Several global leaders including Swami Vivekananda, one of India's foremost religious philosophers, a proponent of the Vedanta philosophy in the West, propounded the message of Global harmony, emphasizing on interfaith and interreligious understanding, through collaboration between different religious leaders and communities.

1 *Interfaith dialogue, Wikipedia.*

The iconic speech of Swami Vivekananda² had a profound impact on underlining Hinduism's rich legacy of interfaith, understanding and communal harmony.

Today at a time when polarization and fundamentalism has gripped various countries, Vivekananda's approach for inclusivity to preaching universal tolerance offers a salve. He quoted few lines from hymn.

“As the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee” Similar is the case with religion. the Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirits of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world, it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any exclusive religion in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character.

2 <https://wap.business-standard.com/article-amp/currentaffairs/full-text-of-Swami-Vivekananda'-chicago-speech-of-1893-117091101404-1.html>

No one should dream of exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others. Sole Motto should be “Help and not fight”, “Assimilation and not Destruction” “Harmony and peace and not Dissension”.

The power of religion can be used as a major force of unification among divergent factions and hence can play role in promotion of global peace and reconciliation by bringing various groups together, in this context, advice of great saint Sri Ramakrishna's "As you remain firm in your faith and opinion, leave the others the same freedom to remain firm in their faiths and opinions", is of great relevance, Dr Uma Mysorekar.³

It is distinct from syncretism or alternative religion. In other words, religious dialogue involves promoting understanding between different religions or beliefs to increase acceptance of others, rather than to synthesize new beliefs or create an alternative religion. Some interfaith dialogues have more recently adopted the name inter-belief dialogue, while other proponents have

3 Dr. Uma Mysorekar, President of the Hindu Temple Society of North America address at UN special event on world interfaith harmony;2015

proposed the term interfaith dialogue, to avoid implicitly excluding atheists, agnostics, humanists, and others with ethical or philosophical beliefs, as well as to be more accurate concerning many world religions that do not place the same emphasis on "faith" as do some Western religions. Similarly, pluralistic rationalist groups have hosted public reasoning dialogues to transcend all worldviews (whether religious, cultural or political), termed Trans belief dialogue.

As we navigate our diversity, we must learn not to be drowned or suffocate each other, but instead to swim alongside each other. Interfaith work allows us to deepen our own faith by learning about other faiths. We must not forget that harming one faith may harm all faiths and devoid us from the other paths leading to God. We may even benefit from reading, listening and interpreting religious

things through the lenses of others in order to enhance our sensitivity, compassion and most importantly, our relationship with God. Regardless of our differences, we must find ways to coexist with others.

Interfaith dialogue is also a challenging process by which adherents of different religious traditions encounter each other in order to break down the walls of division that stand at the core of most wars. The underlying objective of inter-religious dialogue is peace. There cannot be peace among all the religions without dialogue amongst all. Basic oneness and unity and the universality of belief in religion embraces all beliefs and races in brotherhood, and exalts love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom via its Prophets. Interfaith dialogue seeks to find common ground between religions, through an emphasis on harmony and peace, find solutions to many of our common problems.

The history of interfaith dialogue is as ancient as the religions. History records many examples of interfaith initiatives and dialogue throughout the ages, in our country. But here the question arises as to what's exactly an inter faith dialogue?

Interfaith Dialogue: The Universal and all-embracing principles of rich civilization and heritage of India, and core principles of Hinduism, as enshrined in scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, The epics, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Gita and philosophy of Buddhism, Jainism, legendary saints like saints like Patanjali, Shankaracharya, Ramanuja and others, sparkle with clarity about the seminal principal of One Supreme Creator for the entire humanity and the world is one family and needs the solace of

true Vedic Dictum i.e.— “Vasudeva Kutumbam” and is the most effective means to combat ills of war and religious fanaticism, that affects the humanity today causing untold suffering and wanton bloodshed. It declares the highest goal of humanity as –“Lead me from darkness to light” and “Lead me from death to immorality”. It looks forward to a world free from Wars and degrading religious conflicts.

Guru Nanak, Sikh Guru and founder of Sikhism, was a great advocate of humanism of the 15th century and in the medieval context of Indian social religious diversities and conflicts he is considered as the model of interreligious harmony. He dedicated his whole life to promote harmony among the people of different faiths. He emphasized the importance of righteous deeds on which the spiritual assessment of a man depends on. This idea is repeatedly reflected in many hymns of Guru Nanak like, “Through Virtue is one enlightened.”⁴

Guru Nanak stands tallest as a brand ambassador of communal harmony, for providing and integrating Bhakti tradition of liberal saints like Kabir and great Sufis like Baba

4 Daljeet Singh, The Sikh Ideology, Guru Nanak Foundation, New Delhi, 1984, p29.

Farid and laid the foundation of dynamic and progressive religion based on the concept of universal brotherhood, humanitarian vision, peaceful co-existence and acceptance of cultural pluralism.⁵

Guru Nanak encountered mutually antagonist religious groups belonging to Sidha Yogis,⁶ Orthodox Brahmins,⁷ Muslims of various denominations, Sufis, Shia, Sunnis, Mulas and Qazis⁸, and tried to articulate through dialogues about oneness of God and

Humanity setting aside all barriers of cast, creed and religion and surrender to Divine command 'Hukam'⁹. The teachings of Guru Nanak can be termed as the model for establishing universal peace by eliminating communal conflicts-a task which he himself wanted to accomplish throughout his whole life.¹⁰

In order to eliminate the caste system Guru Nanak established two systems; Sangat¹¹,Pangat and Langar. The former means that everyone is equal and will be treated

5 Dr Sunita Puri's book on, *Advent of Sikh Religion-, A socio- political perspective 1993* 6 Siddha Goshti, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* p938-945

7 *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* p359,471,472,493,465,635

8 *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* p24,47,468, *Bhai Gurudas Var1 pauri*33 9 *Ibid* p142

10 .(Md.Didarul Islam,Lecturer, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka)

11 *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, p 72,886,385,

equally irrespective of religion, caste or creed. And the latter means a system of food which will be cooked at the Gurudwara will be presented to all in the similar plates simultaneously. Akbar, one of greatest Mughal Emperor wanted to understand the underlying philosophy of this Pangat¹² system and when it was explained to him by the third Sikh Guru Amar Das, he was delighted indeed. The Sikhs got the Golden Temple, built on land given by Akbar by a Muslim Pir named Mir Mia.¹³

Guru Granth Sahib, the holy and sacred scripture of Sikhs was compiled with the writing of 36 contributors and only 9 of them were the Sikh Gurus. Some were from Muslim tradition and some were from Hindu tradition, thus showing the catholicity of Sikhism to give equal status to all irrespective of their caste or religion. And this was the dream of Guru Nanak.

Guru Nanak had a deep respect towards the religious texts of other religions like the Vedas and the Bible He warned those who criticize these sacred texts.¹⁴

12 *Pangat---sitting together of all present in langar,in rows for dining ,irrespective of caste/religion.*

13 *(Kazi Nurul Islam, 'Guru Nanaker Sampreetir Darsana', p5, 14 ibid p*

The Key feature of the Universal philosophy of Guru Nanak is: God does not belong to any particular nation, rather He is for all. That is why human being is one.¹⁵ "By the sin it is rendered pure by the love of His Nam."¹⁶ Sikh Ethos is the most magnificent interfaith religion that nurtures to fulfil the need of pluralistic societies with multiple identities to merge in to strong bonds of universalism and this is evident from the fact that Guru Arjun Dev did not limit authorship of Sacred Guru Granth Sahib to the Sikh Gurus, but extended to authors representing to other social religious denominations to bolster the Interfaith and Secular character of the Sikh Faith.

Interfaith understanding and character of Sikhism is further strengthened by multilingual media employed by the authors that enjoyed wide popularity in Indian subcontinent and to some extent in southeast Asia and Middle East and based on local dialects with expression from Sanskrit, Prakrit ,Bengali.

15 *(Kazi Nurul Islam, 'Guru Nanaker Sampreetir Darsana' p5.the, Persian , Arabic and many other regional languages.*

16 *Harbans Singh, The Message of Sikhism, 3rd edition, Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee, Delhi, 1968, p21)*

Guru Nanak 'teaching about God is summed up in what is often described as a cardinal statement of Sikhism, the Mool Mantra. The Adi Shri Granth Sahib opens thus ---

Ek-oankar Sat Nam Karta Purakh Nirbhau Nirver Akal Murat Ajuni se Bhang Gur-Prashad The title Mul Mantra was applied to an

abbreviated form of this invocation by Bhai Gurdas. Nanak himself declared that Harinam¹⁷ or name of God was Mul Mantra.¹⁸

Rendered in to English it reads: The One Supreme Indivisible Supreme,

“There is one God. He is the supreme truth.

He the creator,

Is without fear and without hate.

He, the omnipresent pervades the universe.

He is not born

Nor does He die to be born again.

By his grace shall thou worship him.

Before time itself There was truth.

When time began to run its course He was the truth

And evermore shall truth prevail.”

17 Sri Guru Granth Sahib p1040 18 ibid p1

Thus, the unique Sikh gospel is based on the concept of one reality i.e., EK ONKAR, which means one God for all mankind, based on philosophical foundation of unity in Global Diversity that celebrates the unique identity of each individual race and religion to weld humanity in to cohesive framework of inclusiveness cultural pluralism and humanitarian vision of interfaith understanding and communal harmony transcending all barriers and frontiers. Muslim companion of Guru Nanak, Mardana throughout his travel sang the favourite Hymns of Nanak, playing Rabab, a string instrument, most favourite hymn in sufiana kalam, being

“Awal allah noor upanya, kudrat ke sab bandey, Ek Noorsab sat

Upjaya,

kaun, bhale-kaun mande”¹⁹

(The Lord first created his light. All creatures are his production. From one Light has sprung the entire universe, why should we then divide human being in to high and low)

In the Medieval era, the greatest Mughal emperor, Akbar in order to preserve the unity of his empire, adopted

18 Sri Guru Granth Sahib p1349

programs that won the loyalty of the non-Muslim population of his realm. Although he never renounced Islam, he took an active interest in organizing discussions about other religions, persuading Hindus, Parsis and Christians as well as Muslims. He himself was an illiterate but he always encouraged scholars, poets painters and musicians, making his court a center of culture.

Sikhism though founded and consecrated by Guru Nanak, saw further systematization of its belief and organization in the next generation of Sikh Gurus. The rudimentary institutional structure carved out by Guru Nanak was by itself a unique and original feature, but the SECULAR and organizational dimensions added by the successor Sikh Gurus were no less responsible for providing a distinctiveness to the sikh panth. The period from, four Gurus from Guru Angad to Guru Arjun witnessed the flowering of the germinal ideas propounded by Guru Nanak.

The congregation that gathered to listen to singing of hymns ,(Kirtan), came to be known as Sangat. The Sangat became an important instrument of creation of brotherhood or fraternity and thus performed a Social Function as well., a common ground for the high and the low ,who mixed together without consideration of caste or status. Guru Nanak message which is traditionally followed globally, was the tradition of Pangat in which rich and poor sat down to eat from the Langar, a community kitchen, irrespective of caste, social standing or rank, imagine what a unique concept it was, which was integrated with the institution of Sangat. It was a revolutionary idea to forge bonds of solidarity amongst the newly carved out brotherhood. The langar was to be maintained with combined contributions of the community and taught the first lesson of CORPORATE LIABILITY. Thus, community was made to

realize their social obligations too. In response to growing requirements of Sikh Panth, Guru Amar Das, consolidated the LANGAR¹⁹ and also appointed ecclesiastical representatives to look after affairs of SIKH SANGAT at places other than his Headquarters, he devised a system of collection of Revenue from the community, for creation of new townships and to manage FREE KITCHEN i.e., Langar where devotees could eat meals together irrespective class and caste. The institution of Langar, based on the philosophy of equality, strengthened bonds of Interfaith dialogue and communal harmony and rendered magnificent service all over the Globe by arranging Langar during recent Covid19, Pandemic to all,

19 Sri Guru Granth Sahib p966-967

irrespective of caste and creed. The depredation of deadly virus led to the loss of millions of jobs, resulting in unprecedented large scale humanitarian crisis of hunger and starvation and Guru ka Langar rendered free meals across the length and breadth of country .Almost one lakh meals were being cooked and served at Gurudwara Bangla Sahib only to feed migrant labour and jobless needy persons..As a gesture of appreciation of Interfaith community services rendered by Gurudwara, Delhi Police performed Parikrama of Gurdwara Bangla Sahib. Regardless of our differences, we must find ways to coexist with others.

In our ever-changing world, no religion can exist in isolation by blatantly ignoring the others .We have the obligation of engaging in constructive conversation so that we can teach our future generations how to build bridges and not walls. We need to create an environment for them so that they can be proud of their own religious tenets, while also learning from those of other faiths. Regardless of our differences, we must find ways to coexist with others. Interfaith Dialogue :The universal and all-embracing principles of our rich civilization and heritage are the most effective means to combat ills of war and religious fanaticism, that affects the humanity today ,causing untold suffering and wanton bloodshed The world needs the solace of true Vedic dictum ,the world is a family— “Vasudeva Kutumbam”²⁰ ,it declares the highest goal of humanity as –“Lead me from darkness to light “ and “Lead me from death to immortality ”.It looks forward to a world free from Wars and

degrading religious conflicts.

Interfaith dialogue therefore plays a vital role in the field of cultural diplomacy by uniting faiths and by fostering reciprocal understanding, acceptance and tolerance among religious communities.

Inter-religious movement does not aim at evolving a single universal religion for all mankind. What interreligious stands for is the acceptance of the need and the face of variety in religious experience of diversity in a person's approach towards and realization of the one Eternal Reality. Religious pluralism, is religious toleration. Pluralism says that it is fine for us to have a different or even Contrary views about religion and

20 Vasudhaiva Kutumbaham is a Sanskrit phrase found in Hindu texts

such as the Maha Upanishad, which means 'the world is one family' it does not have to be a problem. The important thing for us to seek truth or God in the way that is most meaningful for us.

Interfaith dialogue therefore plays a vital role in the field of cultural diplomacy by uniting faiths and by fostering reciprocal understanding, acceptance and tolerance among religious communities.

Inter-religious Harmony and Religions for Peace and Transformation Measures Concerning India

India is a country of more than one billion people, with majority of Hindus, but simultaneously we have large population of minorities, with about 150 million Muslims, making this the second largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia. There are millions of Christians, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. In recent decades the conflict between religious communities has grown substantially and

thousands of people have been killed in these religious conflicts.

Critical concerns for inter-religious harmony in India have to be addressed. If economic situation deteriorates, and then communal issues may be used to divide the nation. The present period is one of consolidation, where the following issues need to be considered for reflection and action:

Progressive times require a new indoctrination- one that raises human values above everything else and promotes the oneness of humanity. "The present crisis is basically one of identification: Limited and fragmented identification leads to hatred, violence and war, People usually identify themselves with their profession, religion, race, culture, nationality, language, region etc, we need to bring an understanding in all people that they are firstly part of the universal spirit, and secondly, humanbeings"

For reaching out to people of different mindset, from intellectuals and experts, representing the highest social echelons to poor, rural village laborers, unique efforts to uplift everybody in human values and pluralism is required.

Development has to go hand in hand with inter-religious harmony and Combating fundamentalism and promoting pluralism.

The role of media is equally significant in achieving communal harmony, instead of focusing mainly on commercial items, fashion, consumer culture, entertainment

and sports, a creative campaign among publishers and editors of national and local newspapers and television channels can keep the enthusiasm upbeat by publishing stories where Hindus have

helped Muslims in times of dire need or vice-versa, or cases where Christians have helped Muslims and Hindus. There can be more coverage of inter- religious events.

Education can definitely play a pro-active role in educational institutions, by introduction of inter-religious curriculum that can promote communal harmony and present a more balanced view of religious history, as well as promote respect for all religious traditions.

Transformation of consciousness is only possible through integral education.

According to Sri Aurobindo²¹, a spiritual Guru, Integral education is the practical aspect of ideas, which is implemented throughout the world for transformation of the society. All kinds of curricular and co-curricular activities should aim at inculcating spiritual and psychic values like

21 Sri Aurobindo was an Indian philosopher, yogi, guru, poet, nationalist and a spiritual reformer.

love, truth, faith in God, competency in performing strength of mind and heart.

Further International understanding, Universal love, sympathy, fellow feeling, mutual understanding are also the desirable characteristics to be developed among students and children. In interfaith Dialogue, it is essential to cooperate with each other for the good of the society and to unite people towards a shared responsibility for the planet. Integral education integrates the inner and outer realities of life. It believes in harmony and synthesis. It

leads to individual, social and universal development.

According to Casto (the role of Education in promoting Interfaith cooperation, Center for Peace Education, Miriam college, December 12,2006, Dhal (Dharm Gigyansa MIRA, Darakholi Balasore, Odisha 2007) education can promote Interfaith Understanding, cooperation and harmony among masses by integrating in our curriculum, the following ideas and perspectives, particularly through subjects in the Social Sciences and Religious Studies:

- a) Shared the values of all religions in the world
- b) Coming out of narrow thinking
- c) Re-think and rejection of prejudices against other religions
- d) Sharing responsibilities among the religions
- e) Use pedagogy or methods that promote interfaith understanding and co-operation
- f) Initiate interfaith projects, activities and services for the students and faculty

Role of Global Harmony Association: (G H A) is too meant for world peace and harmony, and is based on harmonious education continue, and raise the ideas to a new level of the 21st century as a stage of harmonious civilization and world interfaith harmony on the foundation of global harmonious consciousness²².

(g) To urgently create conditions for pro-active pluralistic interpretations from the different religions from the perspective of pluralism, social justice and environmental action.

(h) Development organizations to ideologically and programmatically combat fundamentalism and promoting pluralism.

Understanding the need for universal welfare Guru Nanak gave a clarion call “Nanak nam, chardi kala, tere bhane ,sarbat da bhala” meaning

22.(the ABC of Harmony, www.peacefromharmony.org/)

blessings for everyone, prosperity, happiness and peace for all, guru said, we are all children of one GOD, though we may have different ways of Praying, but ultimately, we are one Family and we seek blessings of one single God, who gives us birth and same God blesses us all equally. By adopting Sarbat da bhala, we can achieve Socio-Economic change, that we seek to create. We have to rise from Individualism to Humanism and this philosophy of collective Good and concept of entire universe being one Family is a unique Heritage of Hinduism “VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM”, The world is one family, such is the value of this unique verse from Mahaupanishad, that this is engraved in Central hall of Parliament, which, NANAK endorsed.

Recently on the occasion of Foundation stone ceremony ,for a New Parliament Building in the Capital of India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the importance of Dialogue in the context of Interfaith communication , and said that ;Speaking and Listening is the Soul of Democracy ; He pointedly cited the teachings of Guru Nanak ,and spoke that “ Guru Nanak has said ,’jab tak sansar rahe, tab tak sambad chalet rehna chahiye’(so long as the universe exists ,dialogue must go on).

The PM emphasized on the importance of different views and perspectives to empower a vibrant democracy.

In the foregoing discussions, effort was to establish that despite our cultural and religious plurality one can respond by interfaith understanding and cooperation. The ultimate goal of interfaith education and of peace education is for us to learn new ways of thinking and acting, based on mutual respect and shared responsibility, so that the whole human community can live in peace

and can enjoy the fruits of a sustainable and equitable development. Let us come together, let us enjoy together, let there be light, let there be no hatred or poison of misunderstanding (Taitreya Upanishad). This is the key for interfaith harmony and peace, let us all pray and hope.

SAGUNA P SINGH is serving as a Senior faculty in Deptt of History ,Ramjas College, University of Delhi, She has brilliant academic credentials having Topped both in Graduate and Post Graduate History from St Stephen College, University of Delhi ,and was Awarded the prestigious Dr S Radhakrishnan Gold Medal.

