



Dialogue Summary

BUILDING SOCIAL HARMONY : AN INTER-FAITH YOUTH DIALOGUE

Organised By

Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies

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BUILDING SOCIAL HARMONY-INTERFAITH YOUTH DIALOGUE

Organized by Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) in partnership with the Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh. Held in Hotel Lake Castle, Gulshan, Dhaka, Bangladesh on 10th March 2014

DIALOGUE SUMMARY



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DIALOGUE SUMMARY

Inaugural Session

Welcome Address

President, BIPSS Major General A N M Muniruzzaman ndc, psc (Retd) made the welcome remarks at the outset. He stressed that interfaith dialogue is indeed very important in the socio-political reality of Bangladesh. He mentioned that BIPSS is an independent organization suitable for arranging such constructive new frontier dialogue in this sensitive area. BIPSS has opened an integral Strategic Dialogue Forum within it which undertakes new initiatives in these areas.

He drew from the recent attack on Buddhist minorities in Cox's Bazar-Ramu and said that such acts are utterly deplorable. He maintained that these developments signify the importance and relevance of this interfaith dialogue initiative. He thanked the Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh for partnering with BIPSS in this interfaith youth dialogue initiative.

Address by the Head of Programmes, Political, Economic and Public Affairs, Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh.

Mr. Daniel Loutfi, Head of Programmes, Political, Economic and Public Affairs, Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh addressed the participants. Mr. Loutfi focused on secularism and its importance in building a pluralistic society. He discussed secularism is a frame work that is meant to negotiate the relationship between, in one hand the institutions of government and on the other the institutions of organized religion. It was born at least in its modern form as a result of European religious wars and bloody history of inter communal violence in Europe. In the West today, it is believed that, to function effectively politics is needed to be practiced without becoming involved in questions of religious identity; also, just as important is protecting religious institutions from corrupting influence of politics.

Although, secularism in modern form was born in west, it's not that there was no interfaith harmony outside the west. To the contrary of the West, there is a long history of cultural tolerance in much of the Islamic world including south Asia and so in Bengal. While Europe was tearing itself apart into wars of religion, Islamic empires in Middle East and south Asia had relatively harmonious interfaith relations. But in its modern form secularism is a western concept and it is useful to acknowledge that. The question is how it can be adapted to other contexts such as Bangladesh.

Even within the secularism, different countries have adopted different versions of secularism. For example, French concept of 'Laicite' absolutely excludes religion from public life. For them religion is purely a private matter. French secularism advocates a public sphere where religion is essentially invisible. A contrasting example is in the USA. Their fundamental concept is to separate church and state. Many politicians are openly practicing their faith. Jimmy Carter, the former US president, famously taught in Sunday school at the church a few times while president. In all over of the US, the state doesn't financially support religion and that means more particularly that govt. money & funded facilities such as public schools are not allowed to be used for the promotions of religions. Other countries have developed some different versions of secularism. In some cases secularism is more de facto than de jure. For example in UK, they still have Christian bishops sit in the House of Lords although the church no longer has influence on govt. or the state.

Canada's approach is very pragmatic on inter religious issues. It is rooted in our history. Canada today is a nation of immigrants. Throughout Canada you can find communal groups that are both 100% Canadian but also firmly rooted in a country of origin. If one goes to Toronto which is our largest city, he or she can go to little Italy, china town etc. There is of course a large Bangladeshi community as well. There are Lebanese, Jewish, Ukrainian, Chinese, Japanese and people of many other origins. There are also European origin people like Scottish and French etc. As a result of this, Canada is full of vibrant religious communities and they are well represented in Canadian public institutions including in our government, at the bureaucratic level and state level. The state doesn't support any specific religion neither does it regulates specific religious organization. Member of any organization is subject to normal laws and regulations of the country. As a result of this diversity one will find Buddhist temple and Jews synagogues and Muslim mosque etc in most places of Canada. Canada is an example of celebrating diversity yet maintaining the essential unity.

Mr. Louffi stressed on unity through preservation of diversity and implied that secularism plays a crucial part in that. As for Bangladesh he said that the Bangladeshi people will decide for themselves what structural relationship they want between govt and religious institutions.

Session 1

The first session focused on the topics like the idea of faith, various forms of faith, each faith's perception of other faiths, interpretation of scripture, who interprets and how, nature of interfaith conflict, causes of conflict, various faiths and idea of mutual respect, is conflict necessary etc.

The main part of the session started with comments from clerics/ religious scholars from all four major religions. The Buddhist monk present said Buddhism propagates the message of nonviolence, peace and love professed by Buddha himself. Buddhism suffered in the hand of others in many places in the world and especially in this subcontinent. Yet Buddhism adheres to its fundamental tenets firmly.

The Islamic scholar defended religions on the face of the accusations that religions at times incite violence. He narrated the facets of Islam that propound upholding of minority rights. He drew from 'Madina Charter' and explained how the Prophet of Islam ensured everyone's right in

the state of Medina which he led as political leader. He said in the early days of Islam the Prophet was harassed in many ways by the residents of Mecca. But he demonstrated extreme patience and forgiveness.

The Hindu Swami quoted from Gita and narrated how Hinduism espouses love and wellbeing for all the humanity. He stressed that there is nothing in Hinduism against any other faiths or followers of other religions.

The Catholic priest explained that Jesus one of the central figures of Christianity and part of trinity spoke of love for all the people. He said Christianity profess compassion for the entire mankind.

One participant explained how a Quranic line is often cited out of context in its apparently harsh form that warrants lethal action against nonbelievers. Whereas once it is read along with the preceding and following lines the meaning changes and only says about harsh measures under certain adverse conditions.

Others spoke about various ideas and interpretations of faith. Some narrated personal anecdotes of faith based discrimination and persecution.

One participant drew attention to the fact that the most non-violent religion as perceived i.e. Buddhism was turned chauvinistic in Sri Lanka against the Hindu Tamil by some Sinhala Buddhist monk like Panasiha and Gyanasiha couple of decades back and more recently against Rohingya Muslim by the Burmese Buddhist monk Wirato. The Buddhist monk said there were and is certain instances but the phenomena isn't widespread in the Buddhist world.

A participant questioned how Hindu religion can have a hierarchical caste system with specific ritual status for each caste, as per *Manusmriti* in this modern era. The Swami replied that prime purpose of caste wasn't about discrimination as per birth rather about functioning of society as per designated occupational group. He cited an scriptural analogy of functioning of society as per caste system with the functioning of a human body.

One participant pointed out that despite the Prophet of Islam showed great tolerance and mercy even on the face of persecution, some people in the Islamic world including some in Bangladesh produce utterly disproportionate reaction and violence in the name of blasphemy of Islam.

A participant said that the state of minority persecution and sectarian violence in the Islamic world is astounding. In comparison few non-Muslim countries with similar phenomena appears as exceptions.

A participant mentioned about religion being explained in a ways of direct or implied Patriarchal power, which is by itself discriminatory. Sometimes a pseudo-liberal manner is adopted to hide the discriminatory male power play. This is more or less present in all the religions especially the versions practiced in the developing countries.

Session 2

The state of minorities in Bangladesh was the prime concern in this session. The recent incidents of attacks on religious minorities and the mixed legacy of communal harmony in Bangladesh were talked about including the 'Myth of Absolute Harmony'.

The issue of 'Missing Millions' with regards to silent Hindu migration to India was discussed. One participant said that the vulnerability of the minorities is being exploited by some crooks of the majority community for property grabbing. Another said that the culprits are from across party lines i.e. both from secular and the right wing parties are involved in grabbing Hindu property.

A participant said that pre and post-election violence against minority Hindus vindicated that in Bangladesh liberal democracy is still a far cry.

One participant mentioned that the Ramu incident i.e. attacks on the Buddhists and their places of worship by some local Muslim damaged Bangladesh's international reputation as a moderate Muslim majority country.

A participant said that well off minority members face much lesser persecution than the vast poor minorities in the far flung corners of the country. The real challenge is to protect them and give them equal rights.

One participant narrated the vulnerable state of the indigenous people in the CHT vis-a vis hostile Bengali settlers and uncompassionate administration and security forces. He said that the prolonged deadlock in solving the land issue which was a prime clause in the CHT peace treaty is creating frustration among the indigenous people.

Other issues discussed were democratic tenets e.g. equality, justice, fundamental rights, secularism and their spirit. The contradiction between democracy and majoritarianism was also touched upon by couple of participants.

Some participants addressed the issue of reaction against the minorities in Bangladesh following incidents in other countries. 1992 Babri Mosque incident in India and reactionary attacks on Hindus and their places of worship was mentioned. All were in agreement that a bad incident in one country can't be an excuse for reprisal in another country. A participant mentioned that majoritarian bigots in India sometimes cite state of minorities in Bangladesh and Pakistan to incite Hindu radicals against minority Muslims in that country.

A participant said that there is a tendency among some Muslim to avoid any communal responsibility where Muslims attack religious minorities in Bangladesh. Some try to put blame on certain segments or groups and relief the bulk from any responsibility. Some go only as far as partial or full admission of the fact. But that can't be an end by itself. Admission should follow practical action at individual and organized level.

Remarks by Chief Guest H.E Heather Cruden, the Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh

The Chief Guest of the event H.E Heather Cruden addressed the gathering at this stage. She said at the beginning that peace and security is a fundamental human right irrespective of the individual's faith or identity. In Canada, people believe in diversity of religion, ethnicity etc. The idea of this diversity is very popular to Canadians. Canada's relation with Bangladesh is focused on democracy, cultural diversity, pluralism, Human rights and security apart from trade etc. Canadian Prime Minister reiterated that, pluralism is the principle that unites people. It is central to a civilized society and its strength. Canada promotes diverse culture, language and religion of its population. Pluralism allows individuals to retain their cultural, linguistic and religious heritage within a framework of shared citizenship. It is very important to succeed as a society.

Canada is a country of many ethnicity and religions. History has shown us that religious freedom is required to be respected in a democracy. We know that the society that protects religious freedom is likely to protect all other rights and individual freedom. Unfortunately, restrictions on religious freedom are on rise. One third of the population of the world lives in the countries where governments, social groups or individuals restrict the ability of people to freely progress their faith. Canada is deeply concerned about the situation.

Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslim Rohingyas, Sufis and many others face difficulty in practicing their faith in different places on this earth. We strongly condemn attacks on places of worships, whether that are temples, mosques or churches. Every individual should be able to practice his faith in safety and security. Freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law are core values of a society.

Canadian government celebrates religious freedom and to do so in 2013, Canada officially opened festivals for religious freedom. Canada has been taking action against violation of this freedom. Freedom of religion can be violated in many ways.

Bangladesh is a modern secular country in south Asia. In Bangladesh there are many religious minorities. On January 2014, 352 temples were attacked and 72 people were injured. So there is a clear increase of violence on religious minorities. Bangladesh has big challenges in addressing interfaith relations. First one is strengthening the relations and mutual understanding between different faiths and communities. The second is a shift in the culture of politics and governance. These challenges must be posed to the vast majority of religious people of Bangladesh in the right fashion so that it encourages comprehensive positive changes.

In one hand the religion can bring many different enthusiastic policies, on the other- religion can also moderate people and make them compassionate and humble. Every progressive nation has faced the challenge of building a nation or society and recognizes the need for powerful imperatives that create space for all. In Canada as it is a country of immigrants and have many cultural heritages and the legends there is a very inclusive secularism. At the same time each person should be allowed to make their own decisions about their faith and live their life in accordance with those decisions. This is the fundamental promise in Canada that everybody

has the right to practice their religion or faith. Canada is uniquely placed with its pluralistic cultural heritage and religious diversity. Around this plurality Canadian people make a common and shared national community. Canada, along with its partners, works continuously for religious tolerance and pluralism including speaking against violation of religious freedom.

Session 3

This session put attention on religion and politics, constitution, Justice, equal opportunity, various political party and social group's take on religion and politics including their attitude towards minority faiths and their followers and the nature of state, govt and politics and society in Bangladesh.

A participant said that the erstwhile constitution of Bangladesh was highly discriminatory to people of minority faiths with the 'True faith in Almighty Allah' as a fundamental principle of the constitution. He questioned how could non-Muslim Bangladeshis reconcile with that? One participant added that, even the mention of Islam as state religion in the constitution is discriminatory to other faiths in Bangladesh. But another participant said that the other mentions in the constitution that, people of all the faiths are free to practice their religion in equal status and none can be discriminated on the basis of faith, gender, birth etc largely negates that effect. . Another participant said that mention of 'Secularism' in the constitution although contradictory to state religion issue, give some more relief to minorities and the liberals.

A participant said that the recent thirteen point demand by a newly emerged and apparently powerful Islamic socio-political group called Hefazat-E-Islami to effectively turn Bangladesh into an Islamic theocracy is an utterly regressive proposal. While couple of participants maintained that some of the demands have certain merit.

A participant mentioned that Islam provide sufficient protection for minority in a Islamic state or Caliphate. Another participant differed and said the idea of 'Dhimmi' that is exclusion of minority from military duty and imposition of 'Ziziya' tax are discriminatory and make the minority second class citizen automatically.

One participant mentioned that people especially young men with Islamic religious symbol like beard and Islamic attire often face discrimination and harassment even in Bangladesh. The students with Madrasa education background face discrimination in admission in the universities despite having good academic grading. A participant said there were instances of some discrimination but things are being streamlined. The participant added that some department may have some special requirement which also have to be taken into account.

One participant said that both the major political parties of Bangladesh are non-theocratic parties and they only use Islam at symbolic level in varying degree. They are somewhat modern capitalist parties officially. But the Islamist parties are different. They prefer fundamentalism and consider political sovereignty lies with Allah, not with the people, and in the way they explain things.

One participant said that the establishment in Bangladesh ignore the need of Quaomi Madrasas and don't help them. Another participant replied that the govt offered them help and fund but

obviously through some degree of regulation to maintain the standard of teaching; but they refused this outreach so far.

A participant said that children are also citizens of Bangladesh. State has responsibilities towards their proper education and groom up. He questioned whether the fate of the children studying in sub-standard and primitive institutions like Quaomi madrasa should solely be left in the hands of orthodox parents or guardians who sent them there.

One participant mentioned that despite very visible presence of cadre based Islamist political parties of various types, they never enjoyed popular support and could never surpass their little percentage, 4%- 8% generally, of vote shares in the elections.

There were also discussions about Shahbag Movement and the Hefazat-E-Islami reactions.

Session 4

The religious scholars/ clerics answered instant questions from the rest of the participants and the some questions posed in earlier sessions.

The Islamic Scholar agreed that the Muslim can't avoid responsibility when there are attacks on religious minorities by some members of their community. He said that the responsibility is befalling on the community naturally whether someone admits it or not. He said that there were Muslims both in the Islamist Hefazat movement and in the secular Shahbag movement. He recognized there are works to be done by the majority community in the spirit of their religion so that minorities aren't harmed.

A participant questioned that as radicals of religions getting unruly every now and then, are the religions failing control its followers? Are their problems in the religions per se? The Islamic scholar maintained that most problems are in the interpretations, not in the religion itself. He said that there are problems of lack of education among Islamic preachers and followers at grass root level.

The Hindu Swami said in answer to a question that inter-caste social mixing e.g. marriage are occurring these days. The society was required to be educated and ready for that and that is happening gradually. He said that the Creator extend the gift of the nature to all, believers and nonbelievers. He doesn't discriminate. Man should also not discriminate among the followers of various faiths and live with peace and harmony.

The Catholic priest in answers to few questions narrated about 'Papal Infallibility'. He said that the infallibility is more collective involving the other bishops rather than individual. About Vatican's or Catholic Church's position in relation to politics he said that the Vatican had mixed experience of influence and conflict in their involvement in politics in the past. With the passage and demand of time the Catholic Church has withdrawn itself from the domain of politics and Catholic Churches around the world including in Bangladesh maintain that strictly.

The Buddhist monk also answered few questions. He narrating some anecdotes said that when a true Buddhist renders kindness to a person in need he doesn't look at his/ her faith. He said that despite recent violence against the Buddhists he and his monastery also have experienced love, affection and ownership from his local Muslim brothers. He also narrated his encounter with a few Burmese Buddhist monks in an international forum. He finally said that all, from which ever faith, in a society are required to inculcate love, kindness and harmony for each other.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Interfaith dialogue in a society make definite positive contribution towards mutual understanding of general and country specific inter faith issues. It's a new effort here in Bangladesh but appears highly relevant. Inter faith issues and persecution of minority at a considerable degree has been a consistent phenomenon in this land for more than half a century now in this modern era.

Therefore, continuation of well-organized interfaith engagement in the capital Dhaka and in other major and related places of the country is imperative to have a meaningful, lasting and constructive impact in this crucial and sensitive area.

2. For wider impacts, alongside the youth dialogue, bigger interfaith engagement involving wider stake holders is a must to create practical positive effect in the society. Thus, comprehensive interfaith dialogue including prominent citizen, political leaders, social and political experts, theologians, religious scholars, practitioner clerics, lawyers are required to be arranged periodically with appropriate publicity and media coverage.

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SUMMARY OF BIPSS RESEARCH FINDINGS



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SUMMARY OF BIPSS RESEARCH FINDINGS

Most major faiths of the world are ancient. For a sensible resident of this world, a follower of an established faith or other spiritual opinion; it is almost impossible neither necessary to ignore other faiths. One's own faith and also the faith of others have always provoked thoughts among rational people. Since ancient time till now people of various faiths have lived in the same society, locality, country etc. While the wise always tried to find ways of coexistence, the bigots and manipulative people clashed since ancient time with the people of other faiths on the basis of faith or under the veil of faith for other evil purposes. Faith based violence and persecutions still go ON in many societies on the surface of the earth, mostly in the developing world.

Some causal links can be found IN faith based intolerance and persecution. Some are universally common and some are society specific. The prime general reasons, both common and society specific, for faith based hostilities in Bangladesh can be identified as lack of knowledge of other faiths resulting false vilification of others, disproportionate focus on own faith and perceived purity instead of rational distribution of intellectual attention, rigorous indoctrination with religious dogma since childhood, orthodox interpretation of scripture to impose social control and influence of clerics, land and property grabbing of minorities, capturing employment and business of the minorities, absence of proper liberal education- especially education of tolerance, propriety and respect for other faiths etc.

Interfaith dialogue isn't something entirely modern. There are records of inter faith dialogue Between Christians and Jews in 13th century Spain known as "Disruption of Barcelona". Moghul emperor Akbar hosted dialogue among religions and ended up with a syncretism *Deen-E-Elahi*. In modern time, in the late 19th century there were several interfaith conference/ dialogue under the rubric *Parliament of World Religions*. The Chicago one in 1893 was the most notable.

Since 1960 when the Roman Catholic Church started changing its take to a more accommodative one about other non-Christian faiths; hence interfaith discussion gathered pace. *The Common Word Between Us and You*, an open letter Initiative by 138 notable Islamic Scholars to the Christians in 2007 was a significant step towards Muslim-Christian reconciliation. Around this time prominent figures like King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, King Juan Carlos of Spain also took some useful interfaith dialogue initiative. Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement was established in 2008 through the collaboration of Southern Californian University, Omar Foundation and Hebrew Union College. This interfaith think tank works on issues of commonality between Islam and Judaism. A lot of interfaith work has also been done by the present Dalai Lama. Vatican recently has been actively supporting inter faith

conversation initiatives. In South Asia, especially in India, there are some forums where inter faith issues are being discussed. But nothing significant on this happened so far in Bangladesh.

Some major interfaith initiatives of last few decades are:

a. 1964: PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE (PCID)- formed by the Vatican in accordance with Second Vatican Council, in particular the declaration *Nostra Aetate*. The aim is speaking, listening, giving and receiving for mutual growth and enrichment through mutual dialogue.

b. 1970: WORLD ASSEMBLY FOR REGIONS FOR PEACE- It is a multi-religious organization aiming at sharing vision of peace through mutual understanding. Conducted the 9th world assembly in 2013.

c. 1978: INTERFAITH CONFERENCE ON METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON- Their vision is advancing justice, building community and nurturing understanding between different cultures and generations.

d. 1994: PAPAL CONCERT TO COMMEMORATE THE SHOAH- A key initiative to better Catholic-Jewish Faith Relation.

e. 1999: JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION- An initiative for unity through which the Vatican and Lutheran world federation will share a common understanding.

f. 2002: EUROPEAN COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS- Founded in Oslo and it is part of a more comprehensive coalition called Religions for Peace. The aim is to promote peaceful and fruitful coexistence for people beyond borders. As a result of the council's work the year 2008 was declared as the Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

g. 2004: JERUSALEM PEACEMAKERS AND THE HOLY CITY- A network of independent peace builders who aimed to inform the public and provide help for those dedicated to interfaith peace development.

h. 2005: KING ABDULLAH BIN ABDULAZIZ INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE (KAICIID)- Founded by Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Australia and Spain to ensure, empower & encourage dialogue among followers of different religions and cultures among the world.

i. 2007: THE UN HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE ON INTERFAITH COOPERATION FOR PEACE- It was founded by UN resolution 61/221 of 20 December 2007 to ensure interfaith & intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace through the UN.

j. 2007: THE GLOBAL PEACE FESTIVAL FOUNDATION- It is an international nonprofit organization aimed for moving beyond mere tolerance by affirming the universal principles common to all faiths.

k. 2007: A COMMON WORD BETWEEN YOU AND US- The “Eugen Biser Award 2008” winner initiative which is an open letter from the Muslim community to the Christian religion in an effort to forge inter faith dialogue

l. 2007: ELIJAH INTERFAITH INSTITUTE- This institute in Indian city of Amritsar organizes meetings on interfaith issues. The third meeting in 2007 focused on the subject “Sharing Wisdom: The Case of Love and Forgiveness”.

m. 2008: MADRID INTERFAITH DIALOGUE CONFERENCE- It was the first step to create a UN council on interfaith dialogue. The conference was focused on foundations and importance of dialogue and the need for peaceful co-operation.

n. 2008: FIRST MEETING OF THE CATHOLIC-MUSLIM FORUM- A three day summit between Muslim and Catholic communities where Pope Benedict met with Muslim scholars & religious leaders. The sessions have been built around the dual commandments in both religions: Love of god & love of thy neighbor.

o. 2009: WORLD RELIGIONS DIALOGUE AND SYMPHONY (WRDS)- In January 2009, at Mahuva in the Bhavnagar district in Gujarat on Tuesday, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzing Gyatso inaugurated an interfaith "World Religions-Dialogue and Symphony" conference, convened by Hindu preacher and renowned kathak, Morari Bapu from January 6th to 11th, 2009. The goal of the conference was to explore ways and means to deal with the discords among major religions, promote continuous interfaith relations and emphasize the importance of peace between religions & cultures.

p. 2009: THE NINTH INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN DOHA, QATAR – The aim of the conference was to spread the culture of dialogue, the peaceful coexistence of humanity and the acceptance of others.

q. 2010: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE CONFERENCE- Young Jewish, Muslim and Christian professionals discussed projects and cooperation between faith-based organizations at the Interreligious Dialogue Conference in Seville in 2010. The objectives were to discuss the functions, rights and responsibilities of religious communities in a society where religion is often perceived as the embodiment of fundamentalism.

s. 2013: 5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON YOUTH AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE- The International Conference, held in April 2013, brought together community members, including representatives of CSOs and Faith-based groups within Nigeria and globally to foster mutual respect between diverse ethnic and religious groups. The core idea was to create a model for dialogue and peaceful coexistence in order to overcome misunderstandings and stereotypes within the society.

Many developed countries in the West put special emphasis on religious freedom. They have embraced religious pluralism themselves and also encourage inter faith discussion in building pluralistic societies elsewhere especially in the developing world where situation isn't really ideal in this regard. Canadian government's opening of a office for religious freedom is a bright example.

There are many complex yet important issues needed to be addressed through inter faith dialogue and gradually some consensus is also required to be achieved for greater good of humanity. One problem is acute among many religious conservatives that they consider their faith as the only given truth and consider **the** rest as false. They don't clearly understand the idea of spirituality and religions being just part of it. There is also a lack of understanding about religion and freedom of choice. Some also think that their perceived only true faith is required to be established in the society by, almost, any means and, for that matter, throughout the entire world. They want others converted to their faith.

Certain rendition of faith, although primitive, attempt to transcends spiritual domain and seep into politics, economy, culture etc. People of other faiths and spiritual opinion are usually considered nonbelievers and sinners under these radical interpretations. But it has been observed that in some major religions there are indeed wholesome words for the members of other faith based communities. These verses are sometimes deliberately ignored and some lines, when taken out of context, appearing strong and derogatory against other faiths are inculcated for specific evil purposes. Faith based persecution thus further degenerates into pure criminal acts like property grabbing of minorities etc.

Minorities in Bangladesh are victim of most of these problems. Silent reduction through migration to Indian, yet at a striking rate, of Hindu population in Bangladesh vindicate this fact. Invocation of majority religion in politics and even to the level of national constitution is another controversial issue in Bangladesh. It set the tone of discrimination and sends the signal of State's majoritarian notion. Rise of Hefazat-e-Islami as a socio-political force and their 13 point demand to make Bangladesh an Islamic Theocracy added new worries in Bangladeshi society and polity. In the constitution Islam is already mentioned as state religion.

The youth in Bangladesh is changing over the years. There are socially more conscious and positively inquisitive. They want to bring about positive changes in the society. A free and open discussion on these wide ranging yet relevant topic is imperative to build the initial understanding for a society with true interfaith harmony in Bangladesh. The Youth seem to be the right segment to start with.

DIALOGUE SESSIONS AND TOPIC PLANNING

Session 1: The Idea of Faith and Discernment of Other Faiths. Are there Areas of Practical Conflicts and Hostilities among Faiths? Is Conflict Necessary? – The Bangladesh Reality.

Basis of Faiths, The Renditions and Who Does It ?, Faith and Spirituality, Demeanor of Each Faith Towards Others.

The lines of the scripture that the orthodox / radicals misuse to preach hatred and hostilities, the motivation and causal link behind this, the elements in the scripture that denounces conflict and hostilities, how spiritual agendas, if any, can be forwarded without hostility.

Session 2: Are Each Faith Based Communities Accommodating or Co-existing with Others – The State of Affairs in Bangladesh.

The history of harmony in Bangladesh, the history of faith based/ communal violence and persecution in Bangladesh, the prevalent majoritarian notions and the present situation.

Session 3: Impediments in Peaceful Coexistence and Remedies- Bangladesh Scenario.

Politics and faith, The neighbor Issue, National Ideology, Place of Religion in Politics of Bangladesh, Religion Based Political Parties, Changes in the Constitution, Social Reforms.

Session 4: Questions and Answers session with a Panel of Theologians from all four Major Faiths.

A details session wide topic list in Bangla is at annex A.

Annex A

(Bengali in Avro font)

SESSION WISE TENTATIVE TOPICS IN BANGLA

পর্ব-১ ধর্ম / আধ্যাত্মিক বিশ্বাস এর ধারণা। ধর্ম বা আধ্যাত্মিক বিশ্বাস গুলোর প্রকৃত পক্ষে বিরোধের জায়গা রয়েছে কি ? বিরোধ কি আদৌ প্রয়োজন ?

- ধর্মের ভিত্তি । একেশ্বর বাদ ও বহু ঈশ্বরবাদ। বহু ঈশ্বরবাদও কি এক ধরনের একেশ্বর বাদ, যেমন - বেদান্তি হিন্দু ব্রাহ্ম ।
- ধর্মের ব্যাখ্যা , কে ব্যাখ্যা করবেন ? কার ব্যাখ্যা করার অধিকার ?
- ধর্ম ও ব্যক্তি স্বাধীনতা । মতের স্বাধীনতা ।
- ধর্ম ও অন্যান্য আধ্যাত্মিক মত- এথিজম (নাস্তিকবাদ), এগনসটিসিজম (যা জানা যায় না , সে বিষয়ে কোন মত নেই), ডেইজম (সতন্ত্র আস্তিকবাদ)
- যুক্তি ,সাধারণ বিচার বুদ্ধি ও আলাপ-আলোচনার মাধ্যমে সহাবস্থান সম্ভব হলে বিরোধ কে সৃষ্টি করে ? কি স্বার্থে ? এক দিকে আধ্যাত্মিক সেবা ... অন্যদিকে জীবিকা, সামাজিক প্রভাব, রাজনৈতিক ক্ষমতা ইত্যাদি।
- ধর্ম গ্রন্থের কি কি শব্দ ও বাক্য ধর্মীয় ও সামাজিক অসহিষ্ণুতা সৃষ্টির জন্য ব্যবহৃত হয়। এ ধরনের out of context ব্যাখ্যা কি ঠিক ? (কাউকে কাফির, নাস্তিক, যবন, অনার্য, মুরতাদ এই সব অপমানজনক আখ্যা দেয়া কি ঠিক ?) অন্য ধর্ম বা মত কে খারাপ বলা বা শুধু নিজ ধর্ম বা মত কে সত্য ও সঠিক বলা কতটুকু যুক্তি সঙ্গত ? সভ্যতার এই পর্যায়ে এ গুলো কি মানানসই ?
- ধর্মীয় পার্থক্য বর্ণনার সুসভ্য উপায় কি ?

পর্ব-২ বাংলাদেশে ধর্মীয় সহাবস্থানের চিত্র ।

- বাংলাদেশে সাম্প্রদায়িক সম্প্রতির ইতিহাস এবং The Myth of absolute communal harmony in Bangladesh- ১৯৪৭ নোয়াখালির রায়ট, পাকিস্তান আমলে ঢাকা, নারায়নগঞ্জ ও অন্যান্য স্থানের রায়ট। সংখ্যা লঘুদের দেশত্যাগে বাধ্যকরণ। তাদের দুর্দশা ও উদ্বাস্তু জীবন।

- সংখ্যালঘুদের উপর সাম্প্রতিক আক্রমণ।
- গণতন্ত্র ও সংখ্যাগরিষ্ঠতাবাদ। গনতান্ত্রিক আদর্শ (সমতা, রাষ্ট্রীয় নিরপেক্ষতা, ন্যায় বিচার , বৈষম্যহীনতা ইত্যাদি) এর সাথে সংখ্যাগরিষ্ঠতাবাদ সংঘাতময়।

পর্ব-৩ বাংলাদেশে শান্তিপূর্ণ সহাবস্থানের পথে কি কি বাধা এবং তা দূর করার উপায়।

- পরমত সহিষ্ণুতা ও সামাজিক সহনশীলতা বৃদ্ধি।
- প্রতিবেশী রাষ্ট্র সমূহ ও সংখ্যালঘু সম্প্রদায়। প্রতিবেশী রাষ্ট্রে সংঘটিত সত্য বা বানোয়াট ঘটনার প্রেক্ষিতে নিজ দেশের সংখ্যালঘুদের নিপীড়ন।
- জাতীয় রাজনৈতিক আদর্শ ও এতে সমতার অভাব।
- ধর্ম এবং রাজনীতি। ধর্মের স্থান কি রাজনীতিতে না মানুষের ব্যক্তিগত ধর্ম্যাচারে? ধর্ম ভিত্তিক রাজনীতি হলে এতে অন্য সম্প্রদায় বা সংখ্যালঘুদের স্থান কোথায়?
- বিভিন্ন ধর্ম সম্প্রদায় ও রাষ্ট্রীয় ন্যায়নীতি।
- বাংলাদেশের ধর্ম ভিত্তিক রাজনৈতিক দল গুলোর আদর্শ ও বাস্তব আচরণ।
- সকল ধর্ম বিশ্বাস , ধর্মীয় সম্প্রদায় ও আমাদের সংবিধান।
- ধর্ম নিরপেক্ষতা ও এর সম্পর্কে ধারণা।

পর্ব-৪ ধর্মীয় পণ্ডিত/ যাজকদের সাথে প্রশ্নোত্তর।