

TEMPLE OF UNDERSTANDING – INDIA & THE UNITED STATES
International Conference on Interfaith Harmony for Peace & Nonviolence
India International Centre, New Delhi, 6th, 7th, 8th February 2015

A Report

A two day conference of Temple of Understanding USA & India was held in the backdrop of the United Nations interfaith harmony week which is commemorated every year in the first week of February. Scholars and interfaith practitioners from the US and India representing different religious communities addressed the topics of contemporary relevance particularly focussing on Peace and Nonviolence in their respective countries and the world, largely from a Gandhian perspective.

The event began with a gala reception and screening of the documentaries featuring the activities of The Temple of Understanding worldwide centred the life-journey of Juliet Hollister, its founder, who established this global interfaith association in 1960 at the Cathedral of St. John in New York. Hon'ble Dr. Karan Singh, MP and President of Temple of Understanding—India along with Dr. Anindita Balslev and Dr. A. K. Merchant, both members of the Executive Committee and the latter, its General Secretary, as well as Ms. Alison Van Dyk, Executive Director, Temple of Understanding—USA, warmly welcomed all the guests at the Reception cum Dinner on 6th February evening.

INAUGURAL SESSION (7th February 2015)

The inaugural session included Lighting of the Lamp of wisdom by representatives of different religious communities and silent prayers. After the welcome by Dr. Merchant, Hon'ble Dr. Singh inaugurated the Conference with a recitation of an invocation in Sanskrit and continued that we live in times of great turmoil despite the emergence of a global society. The history of human violence appears to be accelerating when our very survival is being questioned due to religious disputations and *en masse* human folly; where it will take us no one knows. The interfaith movement that had begun with 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago also continues to be gaining in momentum; umpteen numbers of events and activities are being carried. However, the Temple of Understanding as one of the oldest interfaith organization has done its bit and now stands poised for soaring to new heights. He acknowledged the divergences of beliefs and doctrines and yet there are universal values all can uphold. There is no sole selling agent of the Divine, we must honour the multiple paths reaching to Him. For the interfaith activities to succeed we must begin with the children, raise them without prejudices or ill will towards any particular community. Unfortunately, there are texts provided to children that preach hatred. The light that lighteth the world is within every human being. The next Parliament of the World's Religions will be held this year in October (15-19), let's all support the interfaith movement.

Ms. Alison Van Dyk spoke on behalf of the Temple of Understanding—United States conveying her appreciations for the work being done in India. It is true the world is in a state of great commotion and there are looming dangers of climate change economic, global economic disparities with huge corporations recklessly exploiting the finite resources of the planet including capture of agriculture simply for profits. So how do we create a peaceful and just society. Hence this Conference would focus a lot on the Gandhian approach and the Temple of Understanding itself has been re-visioning its mandate. To this end, the religious leaders must make a positive contribution.

Dr. Balslev, delivered the keynote address, she noted that Ahimsa (Non-Violence) as understood in different religions and practiced today. She recalled what Mahatma Gandhi has said: 'hate the system and not the people', it is defective system that we need to get rid of, we should not harbour any ill-will toward people. She also invoked the example of Swami Vivekananda. Her work in the field

of cross cultural communication involved interface with politics, law and global strategy for sustainable living.

Dr. Merchant reminded everyone that the UN Interfaith Harmony Week had been introduced only a few years ago and it had underscored the fact the solutions to problems of humanity must seek recourse to spirituality and religion. Simply pragmatic approaches had not proved successful as is well demonstrated by the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015).

SESSION A

Chairperson, former Governor, Dr. B. P. Singh, I.A.S. (retd.). It featured three speakers as follows:

In his opening remarks, Dr. Singh expressed his agreement with the many topics taken up in the inaugural session and added that something like US\$ 4 trillion had been spent in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, the interfaith movement has great relevance and needs to be expanded to cover larger issues.

Ms. Grove Harris, T.o.U Representative at the United Nations: *“Earth-Based Religions and nonviolence, with a focus on community resilience and systemic change.”* Although UNO is a huge bureaucratic enterprise yet there are many opportunities for Temple of Understanding to contribute to its work such as the environment and she referred to the Earth Charter that made a significant impact in 1992 Rio Earth Summit; issues of Human Rights; the Millennium Development Goals (inadequate from the interfaith point of view), hence the need to include a spiritual dimension to the soon-to-be launched Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2020). Her predecessor, Sr. Joan Kirby had rendered admirable services at the United Nations as an accredited representative of the Temple of Understanding and what had been shown in the life of its founder, Juliet Hollister, last evening should continue to inspire all. There were 30 non-governmental organizations at the U.N. working together on the issues of religious freedom and human rights. Voices from the civil society provide a powerful impetus to the U.N. and Governments.

Currently efforts are ongoing to produce a position paper for Temple of Understanding in response to the energy crises, the natural and man-made disasters. She reiterated that what had been said earlier with respect to huge economic disparities – soon 1% of the world population will own 99% of the world's resources.

Ambassador Ashok Sajjanhar, Secretary, National Foundation for Communal Harmony: *“Non-violent approach in diffusing communal tensions & religious conflicts.”* He had been to the Philippines recently, he pointed out that Muslim extremists in that country had been slaughtering innocent citizens; in the same vein, he recalled what the German Chancellor Angela Merkel had said recently: *“Multiculturalism was a failure due to the violent behavior of local immigrants...”* Likewise the challenges were being faced in Sweden, the United Kingdom and France where the heads of government had voiced grave apprehensions vis-à-vis the Muslim minorities in these countries. Integrating these minority groups had become a formidable task. The need today is not simply for smart citizenship but good citizenship. There can be no peace without peace among religions. Most of the followers of their respective religions have very inadequate understanding of their own religions and none about other religions. Therefore, the work of his Foundation which is largely rehabilitating children and youth affected by communal violence has to do with providing values education and spirituality. The Foundation is a wholly autonomous agency of the Government and does its own fund raising.

Dr. Vimla Siddharth Lalbhai, Gandhian scholar, social worker & educationist: *“Concept of Non-violence from a Gandhian perspective.”* “She recalled her meeting with Mahatma Gandhi when she was just 21 years old, given the fact she was nearly ninety year old. She used to attend the prayer meetings that Gandhiji would organize at the Birla House in New Delhi. There was a bomb blast on one occasion, Gandhiji remained unruffled and continued with the prayer program. However on 30 January 1948, that fateful day, a fanatic pumped three bullets into the chest of Bapu and Gandhi was dead. As a follower of the Jain religion she had been inspired by her Guru Kirtichandrajji to spread the message of religious fellowship. Therefore, she had compiled messages from all the major religions on the subject of Non-violence and published it simultaneously in three languages—Hindi, Gujarati and English. The plight of children in terms of espousing family values needs to be addressed urgently. Her work in the field of education for the past several decades had convinced her that children must be taught the basics of all the religions / dharma. For, the source of our spirituality is to be found in religious teachings.

During the interaction, Hon’ble Dr. Karan Singh raised the issue of confronting the ideology of hate; why has the world allowed the phenomenon of ISIS and Boko Haram to emerge. Perhaps the Interfaith movement may be able to provide an answer.

In summing up the Session A, the Chairperson, Dr. B. P. Singh underscored the plurality of culture and religions in India. He strongly advocated the “Bahuda principle”: “Ekam Sat Vipra Bahuda Vedanti” (truth is One, the Wise describe it in various ways). As Secretary, Culture, Government of India, he had done considerable work to promote the ethos of pluralistic values and deepening people’s understanding of India’s multi-religious civilization. Whilst in Sikkim as the Governor also he had disseminated the principles of Bahuda among the largely Buddhist society.

SESSION B

Chairperson, Dr. J. S. Rajput, former Director, NCERT.

Welcoming the three speakers Dr. Rajput conveyed that he had been an educator for the most part of his life and was well acquainted with Government policies and educational framework. In mid-sixties the Government of India had produced what is now famously known as the Kotahri Commission. Despite the far-reaching impact of Dr. D. S. Kotahri’s contribution we are seriously lagging behind in fulfilling some of the basic goals in education. “We are neighbors but we are not neighborly.” Teachers are transmitters of values and there are five universal Values that the interfaith movement must reinforce: Truth (Satya), Non-violence (Ahimsa), Righteous Conduct (Dharma), Peace (Shanti) and Love (Prema).

Prof. Ephraim Isaac, Director, Institute of Semitic Studies, Princeton, New Jersey, USA: *“Peace work in Ethiopia from a Jewish perspective.”* He started off by inviting the attention of the assembled delegates to the four philosophers who have shaped much of what he considered present-day humanity: Moses, founder of Judaism; Jesus Christ, founder of Christianity, Karl Marx propagator of communism and Sigmund Freud for his seminal contribution to modern psychology for understanding the root causes of conflict in society from time immemorial. Moses said ‘people are lawless’ (head to heart); Jesus believed conflict was due to hatred (heart to stomach); Karl Marx propounded his thesis of poverty, hunger and disease as the basis of conflict (cravings of the stomach); Freud opined that all conflict stemmed from human sexuality (human emotions below the navel).

However, there are other causes of conflict such as control over territory and resources. Wars today are rarely started by the poor and the marginalized. He referred to the Prophet Isaiah, greatest of the Jewish prophets, whose prophecies are being fulfilled even today. He also recalled the 30 years of conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea that finally ended in 1991 through bilateral negotiations. Ethiopia was the cradle of ancient knowledge and wisdom even the Egyptians borrowed from them. Sadly, religion continues to be used and abused. How can the interfaith approaches and methods help to build bridges and end conflict?

Mr. John Miller, Member, Board of Trustees of ToU USA, *“Impressions of a U.S. Citizen of India’s cultural and religious ethos through direct experience.”* “Sharing his personal life story Mr. Miller inspired everyone; born a Catholic encounters with Jain Monks and Indian spiritualists and secular leaders was a transforming experience. In his narration he quoted several times from The Bible and some European philosophers and studies some of the great books of the Western World including the Apologetics by Thomas Aquinas. Why is there so much barbarity in the world—dangers of thermonuclear war, racial conflicts. The crux of non-violence and peace has to do with duties. As Gandhiji has said: “If everyone does their duties than all will get their right fulfilled.” He recalled his visit to India along with Juliet Hollister in early 1980s and meeting with the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. One of the things he still remembers is her statement to the effect that India is a very difficult place to govern. He had also met Mr. Morarji Desai, who had succeeded, Mrs. Gandhi. Quoted the Gospel of St. Mark: ‘For those who have ears to hear, the kingdom of God is near.’

The great tragedy today is that people have no time; don’t even give time to themselves. We need to reclaim some quiet space for ourselves. We must change the world from inside out. Encounters with saints and mystics in India had taught him that even the worst of humans have emotions and tenderness deep inside them. Speaking of non-violence he quoted Walt Whitman (American poet 1855): ‘I don’t ask the wounded person how he feels. I become the wounded person.’

Ven. Sumati Sahasana, Director, Tushita Mahayana Meditation Centre, New Delhi, *“Reflections of a Buddhist Monk on Life, Peace & Non-Violence.”* In his inimitable style he touched the hearts of the audience sharing pithy aphorisms from the life of the Buddha and other saints as experience by him, born of an English mother and Indian father. There is too much of talk but very little action on the ground for the betterment of the world. The brutality of ISIS is not something out of the blue; humans have been even more brutal in the past. He was glad to be part of the Temple of Understanding Conference although he learnt about it quite late and was actually filling for another speaker.

AWARD CEREMONY TO HONOUR MS. ELA GANDHI

In the evening of 7th February delegates along with a number of guests assembled for the Award Ceremony at Le Meridien organized by Temple of Understanding—USA to honour Ms. Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, social activist and ex-Member of Parliament of South Africa for the 2015 Juliet Hollister Award. The ceremony, conducted by Mrs. Laxmi Shah, member of the Executive Committee of Temple of Understanding—USA, began with interfaith prayers by leaders of different religious communities: Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islam, Jain, Jewish, Sikh, and the lighting of the lamp of wisdom. Hon’ble Dr. Karan Singh and Ms. Alison Van Dyk conferred prestigious award. In her acceptance speech Ms. Gandhi traced the history of non-violent movement and peace building initiatives shown by Mahatma Gandhi, starting with countering the oppressive and brutal apartheid in South Africa and upon success of which Gandhiji launched the freedom struggle in India. She also recalled how the Mahatma philosophy of Satyagraha and Swaraj had inspired many

others throughout the world particularly Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela, so much so that today millions look upon Gandhiji as the Apostle of Non-violence.

SESSION C (8th February)

Chairperson Prof. Priyanka Upadhyaya, UNESCO Chair Professor at Banaras Hindu University for Peace & Intercultural Understanding. He began by briefly summarizing the previous day's proceedings that were truly memorable and introduced the three speakers for the session.

Mrs. Laxmi Shah who would be sharing the message of her Guru, Acharya Muni Shri Kiritichandraji, "*The importance of Ahimsa for the world today;*" coupled with personal reflections as to how the Jain community had been promoting non-violence and peace. A very major challenge facing the adults, especially the parents is how use technology judiciously; there is so much of violence everywhere. Living in the United States she felt that Television and video games are sources of behavioral distortions in children and youth. It is estimated that 60% of all TV shows contain some form of violence. Her personal concerns were the plight of our children for they would have to face a future of uncertainty and crises that one cannot imagine today. The spiritual education, therefore, should be the number priority of the interfaith movement. She reaffirmed her commitment to the Temple of Understanding and wished for the joint collaboration between the U.S. and India to take off to new heights of collaboration and cooperation.

Prof. M. H. Qureshi, Jamia Millia Islamia University, in his inimitable style shared "*An Islamic perspective on Non-violence—The India Experience;*" being well versed in Sanskrit he quoted a number of verses to draw upon the commonalities between Muslims and Hindus in India. Islam is a religion of inclusiveness. The Qur'an and the Life of the Prophet is the basis for proper understanding. He quoted extensively from the Qur'an to show that Islam was against the kind of violence and terrorists acts by the misguided Muslim leaders. Dara Shiko got the Upanishads translated into Persian with the help of Pandit Jagannath of Varanasi. His other great work is: *Majmu'al Bahryn*, a compilation. Likewise, another great soul who exemplified the Ganga-Jamna *tehzib* is Amir Khusrau. Conflicts in the society are due to political, social and economic competition. Integration of the social order and unity has to come by example. When the early Muslims went to Abyssinia the Negus was inspired beauty of the Prophet's teachings and behaviour of his followers. In the Qur'an Jesus is mentioned 75 times; Moses 200 times whilst Muhammad only a few times.

Dr. Mohinder Singh, Hony. Director, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, Professor of Eminence, Punjabi University, Patiala, "*The ethos of Non-violence as understood in the Sikh community;*" candidly spoke of the challenges within the Sikh community as it obtains today in not only remaining united but also influencing the youth of their community. In today's world of stereotypes and prejudices it is hard to define who is a Sikh, physical appearance is another matter. A true Sikh is known by the following: "kiratkarna, van chukna, naamjapna." Referring to the Akali Movement, the two vows that characterized them are: wear khadi and be non-alcoholic. The British had established the Sikh Gurdwara Shrines Act and gave the community the right to vote only in 1925. Therefore, it is important that we transcend boundaries, go beyond present-day politics and material display.

Prof. Upadhyaya offered his perceptive insights on the current trends for developing indigenous pedagogy for peace studies. Recently the UNESCO at Banaras Hindu University had published a book to address the subject: *Peace and Conflict – the South Asia Experience*. Giving the example of Varanasi which has 3,000 Hindu Temple, 1,500 Mosques, hundreds of Churches yet all the religious communities have lived in harmony. People are used to ritual crossovers from one culture to another.

Sadly, since the end of Cold War in 1989 some 18 million people have lost their lives; in Rwanda over a million were killed in just 90 days.

He recalled Gandhi's critique on social civilization and what could have been Gandhi's response to 9/11 (attack of the terrorists on the World Trade Centre in New York).

Peace Education and Values Education is not on the Agenda of most conferences and seminars. In fact, Jawaharlal Nehru University still does not have a Chair for Peace Studies. However, at the Banaras Hindu University there has been the prevalence of composite culture. Recently, a very successful two-day symposium had been organized on "Multiple Identities in India" in which academics and scholars from all over India and abroad had addressed the topic.

During the intervention time after each session many members of the audience and speakers were able to further expand on the ideas and issues that were being debated. Dr. Merchant pointed out that there were a number of success stories in the past decades when contentious conflicts had been resolved, for example the peace between Egypt and Israel after the 1973 war brokered by President Jimmy Carter; he further believed the Baha'i community around the world had a lot offer in crafting a conceptual framework for world peace. "The well-being of humankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established." The military-industrial-complex must be dismantled. Huge amounts of world's precious resources by the arms industry; nations will be forced to outlaw war.

SESSION D

Chairperson Dr. Khwaja Iftikhar Ahmed, President, Interfaith Harmony Foundation of India & Member, Executive Committee, Temple of Understanding—India & Co-Chair, Ms. Grove Harris, Temple of Understanding—USA. Discussant to share their reflections & future plans for strengthening Temple of Understanding connections worldwide, building peace & harmony, fostering stronger interfaith partnerships. Ms. Ela Gandhi to launch the discussion with a 15 minutes presentation, followed by brief presentations by: Dr. M. D. Thomas, Rabbi E. I. Malekar, Prof. N. K. Ambasht, Dr. Rajni Tandon, Dr. Hanif Mohd. Khan Shastri.

Dr. Ahmed gave his opening remarks and this session was quite different from the earlier ones in the sense that there would be many short speeches starting with Ms. Ela Gandhi who would be the lead speaker.

Ms. Gandhi began by pointing out that most people suffer from double loyalty: (a) loyalty to one's own organization or religion; (b) loyalty to the interfaith movement. How does one balance both these loyalties? How much time / money is one willing to put into which activity? How can one succeed unless one is willing to sacrifice, this is the example set by Mahatma Gandhi. Had the world followed his example we not have had to face such harrowing situations of violence day-in and day-out. Resources are available but people need to be convinced.

One by one each of the listed speakers—Dr. Thomas (Sant Kabir is a great example of interfaith harmony; develop new peace inducing educational tools), Rabbi Malekar (Jewish community in India has never faced anti-Semitism), Prof. Ambasht (healthy balancing of the left and right hemispheres of the brain), Dr. Tandon (developing pedagogical tools through arts) , Dr. Shastri (respect for all religions and understanding the commonalities)—enriched the deliberations of the past two days and offered ideas and practical suggestions of how to take forward the Interfaith Agenda mindful that a

world that is conflict-free and completely non-violent implies an arduous struggle that could take decades. A lot would depend on the youth of today, they must show forth a great maturity than any previous generation, for they are being called upon to pass through perhaps the gravest crisis in history of the world and they must meet their destiny with faith, understanding and renewed commitment to the lofty ideals of peace. "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the instruments of peace must be constructed," as stated in the UNESCO's preamble and what force would be capable other than the Word of God to bring about such a transformation in today's world.

In summing Dr. Ahmed expounded at length why the Muslim world was in the throes of world engulfing crises each more worse than the earlier ones. Historically one needs to go back to Ottoman Empire and how colonial powers subjugated vast areas of the globe and started conflicts and wars to suit their independent agendas. The Wahhabis, the Salafist, the Taliban have spawned a host of militant schools of thought and the conflicts have gone out of hand. They completely destroyed Islam by their distorted understanding of the nature of human beings and nature of society. In India the Muslims are largely moderates, 99% of Kashmiri Muslims are not Wahhabis.

His remarks were supplemented by a number of other participants in the audience. Mr. Shiv Khemka, founder of TGEF, an educational think-tank body, said that the Educational System created during the Industrial Revolution turned humans into machines hiding the development of the inner world. Values based education couched in the vocabulary of leadership excellence is actually a spiritual development program. The best role models are presented for imbibing leadership skills. Altruism and ethics are integral in all the endeavors of TGEF which has reached out to some one million school-going children in the world. The model it has developed is scalable. We are like spiders with a spread out net. New innovations and creativity have a humble beginning, important thing is to get started.

Dr. Jyoti Singh shared her work at the Dara Shikoh Centre for the Arts which organizes a number of cross cultural events each year to promote values for understanding how we can learn to live together.

The participants were given the following questions for spearheading the Interfaith movement:

1. What can you do to promote community resilience?
2. What methods bring systemic change?
3. How do we mobilize resources?

As the conference drew to a close Dr. Merchant thanked everyone and members of the organizing team—Dr. Anindita Balslev, Ms. Alison Van Dyk, Mrs. Laxmi Shah, and others in the office (Shri G. D. Sharma, Shri Naren Pawar) for their logistical support; to Mr. Raja Choudhry for the DVD recording and screening of the documentaries. Most importantly, without the guidance of Hon'ble Dr. Karan Singh who gave many hours from his very busy schedule to every aspect of the planning and execution the Conference could not have progressed so smoothly and successfully.

All participants were invited to the screening of "I Believe" which presents the interfaith personality of the Hon'ble Dr. Karan Singh spanning a major part of his 60 years in public life.

<p>1. Dr.Mohinder Singh Director, Bhai Vir Singh SahityaSadan Bhai Vir Singh Marg New Delhi 110 001 Email: s.mohinder@gmail.com</p>	<p>2. Dr.Khwajalftikhar Ahmed Interfaith Harmony Foundation of India D-119/A, 4th Floor, Westend Apartment Zakir Nagar West New Delhi 110 025 Email: ifhf2005@yahoo.co.in</p>
<p>3. DharmacharyaShantum Seth 309/B, Sector 15-A Noida – 201 301 Email: ahimsatrust@gmail.com Tel: 9811239931</p>	<p>4. Fr. (Dr.) M. D. Thomas Institute of Harmony & Peace Studies Plot 88, Block B, Near Shemrock School, Amberhal Extension, Sector 19, Dwarka 110 075 Tel: 9810535378 Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com</p>
<p>5. Ven. GesheDorjiDamdul Tibet House, 1 Institutional Area Lodhi Road New Delhi 110 003 Tel: 011-2461-1515 Email: dordam@gmail.com</p>	<p>6. Dr.ShernazCama Parzor Foundation F-17, HauzKhas Enclave New Delhi 110 016 Email: shernaz.cama@hotmail.com</p>
<p>7. Rabbi E. I. Malekar Judah Hyam Synagogue 2 Humayun Road New Delhi 110 001 Email: eze_malekar@yahoo.co.in</p>	<p>8. Dr. A. K. Merchant Trustee, Lotus Temple & Bahá'í Community of India; General Secretary Temple of Understanding of India S – 28, Greater Kailash Part I New Delhi 110 048 Email: akmerchant@hotmail.com</p>
<p>9. Dr. N. K. Gupta General Secretary Indian Council of Religious Leaders 1, Prithviraj Road New Delhi 110001 Email: drnkgupta@hotmail.com Tel: 9810031691 / 9811844844</p>	<p>10. Archbishop of Delhi Anil Couto Archbishop's House Sacred Heart Cathedral Ashok Road New Delhi 110 001 Tel: 011-23363593 / 23343457 Fax: 011-23364615</p>
<p>11. Dr.Mohd. Hanif Khan Shastri G – 452/19, Sir Sayed Road Batla House, Jamia Nagar New Delhi 110 025 Email: drhanifkhanshastri@gmail.com Tel:9891068307</p>	<p>12. Prof. M. H. Qureshi JamiaMillialIslamia Jamia Nagar New Delhi 110 025 Tel: 9312637470 Email: profmhqureshi@gmail.com</p>
<p>13. Acharya Guru Chaya Ahimsa Vihar C - 599, Defence Colony New Delhi 110 024 Email:</p>	<p>14. Prof. Susheela Bhan Treasurer, Temple of Understanding--India 81, Gagan Vihar Delhi 110051 Email: bhansusheela@gmail.com Tel: 9891911007</p>
<p>15. Dr. M. M. Verma InterFaith Foundation R – 265B, Greater Kailash Part I New Delhi 110 048. Email: mmvinterfaith@gmail.com</p>	<p>16. Prof. (Dr.) B. B. Puri Senior Architect W – 151, Greater Kailash Part I New Delhi 110 048 Email: profpuri.associates@yahoo.com</p>