

Annual Interfaith Iftar & Dinner Program on the Role of Religion in Countering Violent Extremism

NEW DELHI, 11 July 2016: Indialogue Foundation and Sarva Dharma Samvaad have jointly hosted Annual Interfaith Iftar Dinner, themed with “*The role of religions in countering violence*”, attended by diverse cross-sections, government officials, media persons, academics and clerics from across the religious spectrum, at Hotel The Royal Plaza, Venetian Hall, 19, Ashoka Road, Janpath Lane, Connaught Place, New Delhi. The event was supported by renowned organizations; amongst them are **Csp International, Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission, Power Foundation, and Interfaith Foundation India**. The occasion garnered a lot of attention with over 100 in attendance.

We believe that the attitude of violence and the violent extremism has become a matter of grave concern in our contemporary world to both civil authorities and religious communities and institutions. Countering these challenges and the threat they pose to living and non- living beings around the world call for the use of a wide range of approaches to promote tolerance and reconciliation, respect for cultural diversity and freedom of belief, thought and expression.

Background

Indialogue Foundation organizes Iftar Dinners during the Holy Month of Ramadan each year as a special occasion to invite people of diverse backgrounds to come together and share meal under high human values. Ramadan is a social occasion too. Fasting gives ones the opportunity to put him in the shoes of the hungry. This empathy not only encourages, but also imposes generosity. Since 2009, organizing Iftar Dinners during the Holy Month of Ramadan became an annual event of Indialogue Foundation when it organized the first of this kind of event at its Hyderabad Office under the theme of “**Common Values**”. Carrying forward this noble legacy and keeping in mind that a theme always motivates and inspires spirit and achievement the foundation used to schedule Iftar Dinners every year under the different themes like “**Rights of Neighbours in Religions**” in 2010, “**Respect to other Faiths in Religions**”2011, “Respect to others Faiths”. In

2012, “**Care for Elders in Religions**”, in 2014. “**Cleanliness in religions**” was the inspiration of the last year’s dinner.

Objective:

The main objective of the thematic discussion was to impart an opportunity for faith leaders, along with other stakeholders to share experiences and to address key issues and challenges relating to the promotion of tolerance and reconciliation with the aim of fostering peaceful and inclusive societies and countering violent extremism. These include:

- How can religious and community leaders engage at the local level to reach people who might be vulnerable to radicalization?
- How can specific actors, including faith leaders, take the lead in unmasking and rejecting the misuse of religion as a justification for violent extremism?
- How can religious leaders promote tolerance for diversity, freedom of expression and human rights?
- How can religious leaders promote the sustainable development goals in local communities in order to address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism?

Compendium of talks;

An abstract of the talks highlighting the key messages from the panellists is given below.

The program commenced with a formal and brief introduction of Indialogue Foundation and Sarva Dharma Samvaad (organizers of Interfaith Iftar Dinner 2016) given by program coordinator Indialogue Foundation Mr. Behzad Fatmi and General secretary of Sarva Dharma Samvaad Farha Iman Tyagi respectively.

At the outset, in line with the theme of program, the president of Indialogue Foundation regretted that the perpetrators of violence and their incendiary arguments often dominate the public discourse, thus demonising the religion they claim to represent. While arguing he urged that It is crucially important that all the right-minded, progressive and true believers of different faiths come forward more assertively and shape the popular narrative about their religions as they truly are – peaceful, compassionate, humanitarian and dignified. Furthermore, he strengthened his argument by quoting Islamic peaceful scholar Fethullah Gulen; “The true test for belief is not

slogans or dressing up in a certain way; the true test of our beliefs is in living up to core principles shared by all major world faiths such as upholding the sanctity of life and respecting the dignity of all humans.”

Representing the Baha’i’s faith, director of Baha’i House **Ms. Nilakshi Rajkhowa** the first speaker on the panel started with some Baha’i prayer and continued by saying that this prayer has been playing a crucial role in her life. She further emphasized on the oneness of all human being and concluded that the thoughts of hatred can be destroyed only by a more powerful thought of love.

Interfaith advisor of Indialogue Foundation and president of Interfaith Foundation India Prof. M M Verma next on the row, by describing sacredness and spiritual atmosphere of Ramazan denounced those who desecrated the holy month with heinous terror attacks which can never be justified under any pretext, and there is no legitimate cause for such savage and coward actions. He has also condemned and ruled out the perverted ideology of jihadist which is being propagated by ISIS and other terror outfits to malign Islamic image.

Choreographer and spiritual guru Goswami Sushil Maharaj started to heap enormous praise for joint effort made by both the organization to conduct such a meaningful program. He, further by acclaiming India to be an accommodative land urged people of positive thinking to come forward to combat the negativity and extremism.

A science graduate spiritual female master Sadhvi Tapeshwari, next on the panel has claimed religion to be a science. By the virtue of being a graduate of computer science she used terminologies of computer science to argue her points and bifurcated religion into software religion (esoteric form religion) and hardware religion (outward form of religion i.e. rituals). And very interestingly she has tried to prove that software religion (esoteric form of religion) is only solution to insane violence. She said that hardware forms of religions are prone to misinterpretations and conditioning of human mind and in most of the cases they are politically or cynically motivated while software form of religion or metaphysical aspect of religions only can help to drive out our negative propensities.

In his address a renowned figure Ambassador **Ashok Sajjanhar** has stressed that religion has played a very crucial role not only in shaping people’s personal spiritual bent but prominently

contributed in arts, culture and in every walks of life. But, unfortunately it has been misused and misinterpreted and instrumentalised to ignite violence and extremism. He suggested that each and every element of the society has a potential role to play in countering unrest and violence. In his address he seemed to be more forward looking rather to problematize the issue any more.

*By quoting **Swami Vivekananda** the deputy secretary of Ramakrishna Mission Swami Swasamvedynanda has emphasized on complexity of the phenomenon of violence committed in the name of religion, and in particular the urgent need to overcome simplistic interpretations of religious violence. He opined that violence cannot be curbed by another violent activity rather a child must inculcate the universal values from the atmosphere around.*

*Spiritual master **Swami Parkarshananda** from Chinmaya Mission believes that we must focus on understanding the actions and behaviors of individuals and groups at every grass root level. An understanding of the behavioral basis of violent extremism, radicalization, and terrorism is crucial to the development of programs to mitigate these behaviours and foster societal resilience.*

Director General: Indian Institute of Mass Communication Dr. K G Suresh was of the view that science and technology cannot be blamed for disastrous and deadly attacks that have carried out in history by exploiting them likewise religion can also be not incriminated for violence being done in the name of religion. He also gave a more inclusive narrative of acceptance in spite of tolerance which is conditional in some or other way.

Representing CPS International Mr. Rajat Malhotra read out the message of globally acclaimed Islamic thinker Maulana Wahiduddin Khan to this program. Message says that the basic ideology of Islam is based on Tawheed (The oneness of God). In the modern term it can be said that there are two aspects of Tawheed i.e. spirituality and peace. Twaheed means living with Rabbani mind or a god oriented mind. This is the essence of spirituality. In social term Tawheed means living with compassion for all. Peace is outcome of this compassionate culture. The message concludes that peace is greatest social good. All kind of developments religious or secular in nature can be attained only in a peaceful atmosphere.

Broadly speaking from the perspective of Hizmet Movement and its narrative of countering violence a young interfaith practitioner and research scholar Mr. Ghulam Rasool Dehlavi, has

argued that various terms and phrases from the medieval era are instrumentalised to present a dichotomous worldview of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. One of them is dar al-harb (abode of war) and dar al-Islam (abode of Islam). Gülen opposes such a worldview. Rather he proposes dar al-hizmah (abode of service) as a single concept to replace the other two by seeing the entire world as a place to serve and help others.

After taking some reflections from audience, by summarising the talks delivered in program, the chairman of Sarva Dharma Samvaad Mr. Manu Singh has proposed vote of thanks.