

Hills people show the way to harmonious living



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Darjeeling: An inter-faith group in Darjeeling has shown the way to harmonious and peaceful living among members of all religious beliefs amid news of rising incidents of intolerance and religious bigotry in the society.

The Darjeeling Inter faith group on May 25 held a two hour session on the theme, “Dialogue and Fellowship: Shared Beliefs and Practices Across Communities.” The group was formed in 2005 under the leadership of Father George Thadathil, principal of Salesian College Sonada who is also secretary of Darjeeling Diocesan Commission for Inter-faith dialogue.

Some 50 members of various religious affiliations were present for an opening session by visiting professor Dr Georgios T Halkias, from Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong. He gave a 20 minute presentation on “A Cross Cultural Exploration of Hellenism and Buddhism in India and Central Asia,” at Divya Vani, a Christian pastoral centre.

“Buddhism was a personal subject for me as well as my research topic, especially Tibetan Buddhism,” said Dr Halkias.

“Alexander the Great brought the meeting of East and West possible,” Dr Halkias reminded the audience, showing how much were Greeks influenced by Buddhism and even converted to and adapted Buddhist beliefs.

He further explained saying, “Greeks who migrated to India have adapted Buddhism as their religion and have given expression to it in Gandharva art.”

The Tibetan historian Taranatha gives further evidences of the conversion of Indo-Greeks and Greco-Bactrians to Buddhism starting with the reign of Ashoka and which flourished after.

Dr Halkias did not hesitate to say, “Greeks were the first Europeans to embrace an Indian religion - Buddhism. However, they did not convert to Hinduism or Jainism, and so Buddhism was the only religion which accepted others or foreigners.

The edicts of Ashoka written in Greek and Aramaic also testify to the influence of Hellenism and Buddhism.

“Responsibility of dialogue is not the responsibility of the members of the dialogue forum alone but also of all people of good will,” said Dr Thadathil opening the floor to sharing and discussion.

“If there is a net work and inter connectedness [among us], it is a sign of inner resources to ward off unwanted trends,” added Dr Thadathil who acknowledged the presence of representatives of Hindu, Muslim, Sai Bhakts, and Christian religious groups.

“Exploring the parallels and celebrating differences, our scriptures offer parallels to connect humanity and minds in dialogue,” said Prof Irshad Ahmed, Dept of English Sikkim University.

He insisted that our ignorance and limited understanding of other religions is an obstruction to harmonious living. He added, “Our society is becoming less and less livable in spite of our advancement and education, hence there is need of inter faith dialogue. It is important for scholars to come forward and explain religious scholarship rising above dogmas and rituals.”

Ninety year old Captain Moktan, retired Inspector General of Prisons who journeyed some 15 years in the inter faith dialogue movement in Darjeeling, lamented the growing tendency of “inter-religious competition and tendency to become great and famous than a more attempt to make one good.”

Captain Moktan said, “Darjeeling is a place of inter religious unity. you find the cardinal religions of the world. Here there is unity of faith. If you want to see unity in diversity, is at the funeral of a persons. All religionists are there at the funeral and contribute generously to defray expenses incurred by the family.”

Director of Divya Vani Dr Samuel Lepcha explained his search on Sacred consciousness of what is relationship between God, humans and nature in the Lepcha scriptures.

Patrick Sada of All India Catholic Union affirmed, “Darjeeling is a very good example of harmonious living in the country.”

“If one can understand other’s religion, we can live in peace and harmony,” said Mr Sada stating that no religion presents false teachings and wrong elements of salvation for the people. We have suspicion about other religions, because we do not have ongoing sharing of our beliefs and practices.” He insisted, “Today, in the world there is lack of tolerance. Hence more such meetings are required to live peacefully and in brotherly manner.” Mr Sada also warned, “India is not only religion of one country, but also a country of many religions.”

Mahindra Pradhan district president of Sai Samity praised the interfaith spirit saying, “In Darjeeling we have to feel proud of our local people. Here we can live peacefully. Why can’t the whole world live like this?” “We have to teach our younger generation,” said Mr Pradhan. We are born humans. But we look and say, he is Muslim, he is Christian.” He praised the Darjeeling spirit saying, “This is a Christian institution, discussing Buddhism by a Greek Orthodox Christian coming from Hong Kong.”

Mr Devi Agarwal, a Chartered Accountant said, “I am connected with all religions. Teachings of all religions are same. Not to harm others, love all, and have no hatred toward others. Love and respect each other and live in harmony.”

Notre Dame Sister Ranitta said, “Religion should not be a divisive element but a unifying force - it is the religion of humanity.”

The vice-Principal of Loyola College of Education Dr A.V. Francis explained the need of Understanding Self - the human being - for mutual respect. Religions need to respect each other, more than tolerate.

Assistant Professor Choden Yolmo from Education department at Salesian College Sonada wished, “This forum should involve more of young generation and parents, especially women.

Salesian College History department Assistant Professor Prayash Rai insisted on critical education to students.

Forum member Imamuddin Ahmed was of the opinion that, “We must organize this type of dialogue, especially in the present scenario of India and the world, where people are losing faith

Foccolare Movement Rey Pacheco, a Filipino living in Kalimpong appealed to all to live in peace and harmony, respecting all religions.”

T.R. Sharma of Sai Samity appreciated the forum work and insisted on taking the forum to the rural area.

New York based Professor Loren Weybright praised the themes of oneness of humanity, love for each other with dialogue practice. In the U.S. they elected President someone who does not believe in “oneness”, in India too we have seen a similar situation.

Youngest person in the forum Yangchen Lepcha said, “We have come here because we enjoy doing dharma - religion - a living example of unity in diversity. We have to increase the population of young people and take the message to the youth through the forum, that religion and coming together is not boring. Acceptance, and a happy face, is needed to see good, to be good and to do good.”

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BY CM PAUL

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