CONFERENCE REPORT

INTER-FAITH APPROACHES TO ADDRESSING GLOBAL CRISES

Seeking Solutions Through Dialogue Amongst Plural Religious Traditions

Conversations
Intersectionality
Challenges

16th to 19th October, 2024

Pipal Tree
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Introduction

The report presented here summarizes the discussions and outcomes of a conference on "Inter-faith Approaches to Addressing Global Crises". This four-day strategy meeting was held from October 16-19, 2024 at the Fireflies Intercultural Centre in Bangalore. The meeting was organized to kickstart a network or think-tank of individuals who are committed to peace and social justice. The goal of such a network was to develop these ideas and promote strategies within civil society. With this objective in view the participants invited to present their ideas included opinion makers, teachers, theologians, activists, and writers to discuss how to deepen these values within their communities.

Through a series of presentations, panel discussions, and workshops, the conference aimed to explore the transformative power of interfaith dialogue as a tool for promoting pluralism and achieving social justice in multicultural societies.

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the conference proceedings, highlighting the key themes, insights, and outcomes that emerged. By focusing on the intersections between religious dialogue and social justice, the event underscored the importance of inclusive dialogues that not only bridge religious divides but also address systemic inequities and promote human rights.

From examining historical challenges to exploring contemporary solutions, the conference invited participants to reflect on the role that interfaith initiatives can play in addressing the complex challenges faced by diverse communities worldwide.

The meeting sought to explore how wisdom traditions can help create conversations around individual and social transformation. It focused on promoting deep democracy, justice, equity, inter-faith tolerance, and environmental sustainability.

The conference was an opportunity to bring together people from a variety of wisdom traditions, including Buddhist, Vedanta, Islam, Sufi, Kashmir Shaivism, and Christian, for intersectional conversations.

The Fireflies Intercultural Centre is a project of the Pipal Tree Trust, which works on issues of peace, climate, social justice, and inter-faith harmony.

The conference funding was provided by The Heinrich Böll Foundation, Germany. For which Pipal Tree, The Fireflies Inter-cultural Centre, and the organisers and participants are truly grateful.

Background

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, understanding and appreciating religious diversity has become essential for fostering peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and social harmony.

Today's world is facing multiple crises exacerbated by increased polarisation. The crises have manifested in different ways- endemic poverty, social inequity, gender inequality, structural violence, systemic injustice & exploitation, human trafficking, forced migration, social exclusion, ecological destruction, minority persecution, pandemics, etc to name a few.

To add to this, humanity is facing the unprecedented challenge posed by the twin issues of climate change and rise of religious fundamentalism. Worse, we have witnessed the re-emergence of extreme ideologies that thrive on manufactured hatred, intolerance and majoritarian world-views. As if this were not enough, imperialistic genocides have been unleashed in the last two years alone, on innocent citizens of Ukraine and Gaza by governments waging wars causing untold suffering.

Despite globalization, the world seems ever more fragmented and at war with itself. It is saturated with ideological, religious and resource conflicts that threaten to bring about a civilizational and ecological collapse.

Unfortunately, all of the above is true despite tremendous progress in science and technology that contributed immensely to the human experience. It seems that all the gains of the past centuries – whether in science, culture, art etc - are in danger of being lost.

It is clear that humanity is facing a civilizational crisis.

Above all, at the root of it all, perhaps it is a spiritual crisis.

At the same time, we see an unprecedented transnational opening up of spaces for spiritual and philosophical learnings and reflections across denominations – facilitated by the internet and online media. There is a growing swell of people of all ages, races, ethnicities raising questions, and asking for new answers. There is a proliferation of teachers, traditional and non-traditional; of spaces that call themselves “spiritual but not religious,” of traditions that are lineage-based and those that are emergent; and so on. In short, in the midst of what may seem like hopelessness – there are also fresh shoots of new dialogues and hopes.

India too, being a part of the world system, has not been spared any of the challenges mentioned above.

In a globalized and inter-connected world, how can we face these multi-pronged challenges?

If as mentioned above, it is at root a spiritual crisis, is it not necessary to adopt a spiritual approach to strike balance between material progress and spiritual and humanitarian values?

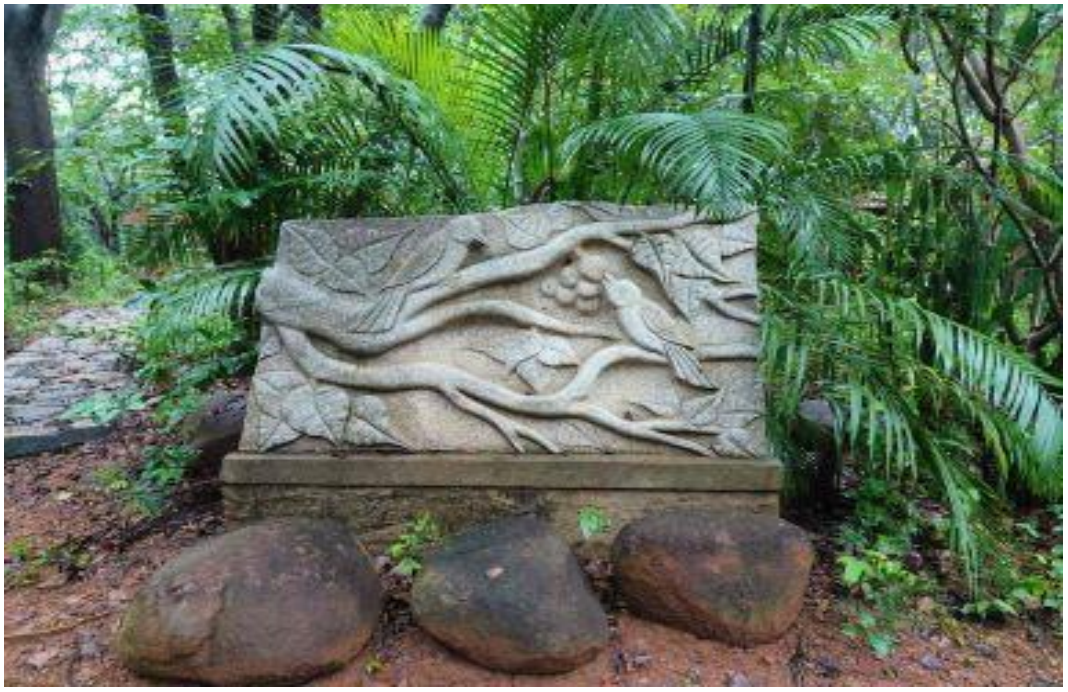
As also mentioned above, how can more of India be engaged in ever-fresh ways with its rich multitude of philosophies and religions and – and take part in the global growing undercurrent of hopeful engagements and discussions.

How can what the Dalai Lama has called a sense of universal responsibility - a deep concern for all irrespective of superficial differences in creeds, colour etc. - be fostered?

Perhaps it is time to explore the potential of our ancient and plural religious and spiritual traditions to usher in a new era of peace and justice. All major religions preach love and have contributed to human experience and have much to contribute to the task of universal responsibility if they are rightly understood and correctly applied to our current situation.

However, both steps are essential: a correct interpretation of the sources, and their living use to solve the problems of society. Often, we see a split between the two realms and social, political and economic activities proceed as if they had no connection to spiritual traditions of a society in question. On the other hand, spiritual and philosophical traditions are pursued as if they had no relevance in modern society: Either religion is seen as divorced from our day to day social, economic or political activities or it is hijacked to serve electoral advantage through the polarisation of societies.

With what do we replace this paradigm?



Objectives

The objectives for this conference could be stated as a series of themes and questions that the meeting was designed to explore:

- *Understanding* the root causes of cultural and religious misunderstandings and conflicts in India and the world. And attempt to analyse the factors contributing to discord and tension arising from cultural and religious differences both within India and globally.

- *Examining* the contributions of different religions to peacebuilding in India. This objective aims to explore how various religious traditions have historically and currently contribute to peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution within the Indian context.

- *Exploring* the relationship between constitutional values of pluralism, equality, social justice, and democracy, and religious teachings. How can we analyse the connections and potential tensions between the secular principles enshrined in the Indian constitution and the doctrines and practices of different religious faiths.

- *Addressing* the challenge of reconciling individual religious/spiritual aspirations with broader social transformation. How do we navigate the complexities of balancing personal spiritual growth and fulfilment with the pursuit of positive social change and collective well-being?

- *Developing* a framework for future conversations and collaborations that will emerge from the initial meeting. To establishing a roadmap for ongoing dialogue and collaborative action beyond the immediate scope of the inter-faith meeting.

The belief being that now is the right time to launch this venture given the recent social and political turmoil in India and the world. Indian democracy provides a model for navigating these challenges as it has historically proven to be robust. Despite aberrations, it has survived thanks to the people's struggle to preserve and nourish the idea of India.

In the coming years, the organizers plan to hold such conferences on a regular basis.

Report Structure

The following sections of the report detail the presentations, discussions, and action-oriented recommendations that emerged from the conference, serving as a resource for individuals and organizations committed to advancing interfaith understanding, pluralism, and social justice in their respective fields.

This report is broadly divided into three parts:

1: Introduction: Background, Objectives, Table of Contents

2: ***Session-wise Summaries & Key Take-aways of the Presentations and the Discussions***

3: ***Documentation – Links to Recorded Audio Files & Photo Gallery***

Part 1 consists of the sections already preceding this one.

Part 2is presented in the order in which the sessions unfolded. This order was slightly different from the programme that was sent to the participants earlier, to adjust for the personal difficulties of some of the participants.

Each session is recorded as follows:

i) An overview of the presentation by the main speaker for that session. Wherever some extracts appear in *italics* or inverted commas, they are the actual words of the speaker taken from the transcript of the presentation. Wherever the speaker has screened a video or PPT, the link to the same is given on a cloud drive.
ii) A few Key Take-aways from the presentation
iii) An overview of the discussion if any held after the presentation.

Part 3 consists of the following documentation:

i) The audio recordings of the actual sessions which may be downloaded by the reader from the link to the cloud folder provided in this section.
ii) A photo gallery – Some key photographs are included in the report. The entire lot can similarly be accessed on the cloud drive.

PROGRAM SCHEDULE

The Program Schedule below outlines the actual order of presentations and speakers as the 4-day conference unfolded. As stated earlier, the original schedule was slightly amended to adjust for a couple oflast-minute drop-outs and to accommodate a few speakers who had to leave early due to personal reasons.

Wednesday,Oct16		**Day1: Welcome&Gathering**	
Session:Opening		**Facilitator/Presenter**	**Speaker**
OpeningSession		***IntroductiontotheGathering***	**Milind/ Siddhartha**
5.30 - 7.00 pm		**ParticipantsSelf-introduction**	
Thursday,Oct 17		**Day 2 - Theme:Pluralism,Self &Social Transformation**	
9.15-9.30 am		**Interplay**	**Savitha**
9.30-9.45 am		**Introduction**	**Milind/ Siddhartha**
		Panel1:Pluralism	
		FACILITATOR:Milind	
9.45 - 10.15	**1**	**Polycrises,decolonialclimatejustice,andspiritualecology**	**Abhayraj Naik**
10:15- 10.30		Discussion	
10-30-11.00	**2**	**LessonsfromVeeraShaiva/Basavamovement**	**RamjanDargah**
11.00 - 11.15		Discussion	
		TEABREAK,11.15- 11.30AM	
11:30 -12.00	**3**	**Pluralitiesandintesectionalityassocialframework:Theelephantintheroom**	**DakerlinMukhim**
12.00 - 12.30		Discussion	
		BREAK&LUNCH,12.30 -2.30	
		Panel2:SelfandSocialTransformation	
		FACILITATOR:Anannya	
2.30 - 3.00	**4**	**Gandhi,Non-violenceandCharkha**	**SanjeevKulkarni**
3.00 - 3.15		Discussion	
		TEABREAK, 3.15- 3.30pm	
3.30 - 4.00	**5**	**IndianThoughtandPracticalApproachtoContemporaryLife**	**Vivek Dhareshwar**
4.00 - 5.00		Discussion	

Friday, Oct18	**Day3**	**Panel2:*Continued*(Selfand SocialTransformation)**	
		FACILITATOR:Anannya	
9.45 - 10.15	**6**	**Feminism&SpiritualityforAnotherWorld**	**JoyciaThorat**
10:15- 10.30		Discussion	
10-30-11.00	**7**	**ActinginourSocialandPhysicalEnvironments:AChristianPerspective**	**FrRayappa Kasi**
11.00 - 11.15		Discussion	
		TEABREAK,11.15- 11.30AM	
		Panel3:Dharma	
		FACILITATOR:Milind	
11:30 -12.00	**8**	**ReinterpretingReligionandAddressingChallengestoIndividualandSocial Transformation in Contemporary Times through a BuddhistPerspective**	**MrigendraPratap**
12.00 - 12.30		Discussion	
		BREAK&LUNCH,12.30 -2.30	
2.30 - 3.00	**9**	**CelebrationofPluralismfromanIslamic/ReligiousPerspective**	**BehzadFatmi**
3.00 - 3.15		Discussion	
		TEABREAK3:15-3.30	
		Panel4:Art,Culture,Bhakti	
		FACILITATOR:Aspi	
3.30 - 4.00	**10**	**TheCynicalPoliticsofNegatingthePossibilityofSubversioninCulture**	**SadanandMenon**
4.00 - 5.00		Discussion	
Saturday,Oct 19		**Day4 - Panel4*Continues*& Theme:Strategy andWayForward**	
9.45 - 10.15	**11**	**PartitionasMemory andMetaphor:Continuities**	**Maya Joshi**
10:15- 10.30		Discussion	
11.00 - 11.15	**12**	**Introduction&InitialDiscussiononStrategy andtheWay Forward**	**Siddhartha**
		TEABREAK,11.15- 11.30AM	
11.30 - 12.30		**Break-outinto Groups**	**Siddhartha**
		BREAK&LUNCH,12.30 -2.30	
		FACILITATOR:Siddhartha&Milind	
2.30 - 3.30	**13**	**PlenarySession-GroupsPresent& Discussion**	
3.30 - 4.00		**SummingUp&Adios**	

DAY 1

Theme: Welcome & Introductions

*(**Note:** The following summaries have been extracted and composed from the original transcripts of these session. Hence most of it is reported in the language and nuance of the speaker in the first person. The objective in keeping these self-introductions with so much detail is to help the reader understand where each speaker is coming from, when they present their main papers)*

The session began with Milind Wani welcoming the participants.

Savitha and Devraj from the Fireflies Inter-cultural Centre were introduced to the group followed by some announcements and instructions regarding the logistics of reimbursement of travel expenses, timings, recording of sessions, etc.

Savitha then highlighted some of the main features and activities of the Fireflies Centre.

Savitha: She explained that the campus focuses on climate change initiatives. There are more trees than AC units, low carbon boilers, and hot water available (only from 6:00 to 9:00 AM) via firewood boilers.

Fireflies operates under Pipal Tree Trust. The various projects include an Adivasi kids' education program in Mysore district's Rajiv Gandhi National Park, which focuses on reducing school dropouts by providing food, accommodation, and tuition for high school students.

Yet another project is implanted to support women's millet cultivation and sustainable agriculture practices involving around 350 women farmers. Another initiative is the Community Leadership Program, aiding families displaced from forests in obtaining essential documents like Aadhar cards and voter IDs.

In addition to the field programs, the organisation conducts climate change workshops and national conferences on campus

Milind then suggested a round of self-introductions.

Milind began with himself, followed by Siddhartha, and then the participants going round the room in the order in which they were seated.

Milind: I am from the organizing team along with Siddhartha, Anannya and Aspi. I have been working with Kalpavriksh, an environmental action group in Pune for nearly 20 years after spending two decades in the IT sector.

Kalpavriksh was founded by Ashish Kothari and has focused on conservation and livelihood issues related to governance systems like the Forests Act and the Wildlife Protection Act. In 2013, we started Vikalp Sangam (Alternative Confluence) meetings to bring together diverse groups working towards a better world.

These meetings led us to develop an alternative framework encompassing direct democracy, gender equity, social equity, ecological resilience, cultural resilience, social well-being, and justice.

I got involved with Fireflies through my interest in re-engaging with religion as part of social change efforts. This collaboration led us to organize Vikalp Sangams focusing on social well-being through spiritual lenses.

Siddhartha discussed the challenges posed by communalism in India and the global climate crisis. He stressed the importance of reinterpreting religious traditions positively and engaging in constitutional discussions about pluralism and democracy.

As an example of how even traditional practices can be re-interpreted, he highlighted how Ganesh puja celebrations have been adapted in villages around their campus to focus on vision for the community, removing obstacles collectively with Ganesh's guidance, and maintaining a connection with nature using eco-friendly practices.

This conference is planned with an emphasis on addressing both communalism and climate crises through positive reinterpretation of religious symbols and fostering dialogue across communities.

Siddhartha continuing: I have a friend in the U.S., Anantanand Rambachan, who has written a book called *Hindu Theology of Liberation*. In the Christian context, there is a significant amount of literature on Christian theology of liberation, which is open, plural, and justice-oriented. Similarly, Buddhism has various writings along these lines. These are some of the issues we will be discussing in the coming days.

I studied in college in Chennai with Sadanand, (Sadanand Menon) and we were involved in Marxism and left-wing politics. I spent years in Paris as the director of an institute founded by Paulo Freire in ODEP and later founded South North Cultures and Development, focusing on culture and social liberation. Currently, I am at Pipal Tree in India, dealing with the intersection of culture, religion, politics, and social justice.

Dr. Sanjeev Kulkarni: I am from Dharwad, Karnataka. I have been practicing obstetrics and gynaecology for 35 years at a maternity hospital with five colleagues. Alongside my medical practice, I have interests in education, ecology, and spirituality. We run a school called *Balabalaga* in Dharwad for the past 28 years. It started as a kindergarten for our son and has grown organically into a comprehensive learning environment.

We also own a 17-acre farm called Sumana Sangam near Dharwad that has become a biodiversity haven over the years. We conduct various workshops there on health, meditation, spinning, and lifestyle. Additionally, I am involved in Kannada literature and write poetry.

I am the president of the Gandhi Peace Foundation's Dharwad branch and an executive committee member of *Karnatak Vidya Vardhak Sangh*. Recently, we formed a group called *Parisarakkagi* to address environmental issues statewide.

We run *Swayam Deepa Zen Centre* offering courses primarily for rural Kannada-speaking youth to teach meditation and dignity of labour through farm work and theatre. Our fifth batch is currently active.

My publications include collections of poems and books on the environment, meditation, and translations of Rumi's poems. I have donated blood 123 times and have planned for body donation after my demise. Spinning on the Charkha is one of my recent hobbies.

Dr. Maya Joshi: I teach English literature at Lady Shri Ram College, part of Delhi University. I'll talk about partition literature as an entry point into interfaith dialogues. My reasons for being here are deeply personal. LSR has been a vibrant space where I was introduced to Gandhi; my grandfather was a Gandhian who spent nine months in jail. My father became a Buddhist during his PhD studies and taught Buddhism and comparative religion.

I grew up in Punjab, attended a Christian school, and was exposed to various faiths. We moved to the US for my father's academic work before returning to India after his sudden death. Working at LSR has been about survival, but my spiritual sustenance comes from other engagements. I took students on a *Gandhi Vichar* camp 25 years ago and worked with Tibet House for 14 years.

I've tried to incorporate Buddhism and Gandhi into my academic work, which has been challenging. I've written about figures like Sarla Ben and Mira Ben in relation to Gandhi. My intellectual pursuits include Marxism; I noticed a shift in how the left rediscovered tradition post-Babri Masjid demolition.

I've engaged with various traditions and have friends from different faiths. My name, Joshi, offers some protection in the current socio-political climate despite not feeling like one due to our upbringing.

I met Milind online while discussing Buddhism and Tibet House. I've published works on ecosophy and critiqued economics through a Gandhian lens. My PhD focused on Rahul Sankrityayan, a polymath who transitioned through various religious identities and contributed significantly to rediscovering Buddhism in India.

My interests include reading, photography, art, food, and engaging with people across disciplines and ages. This diverse interaction fuels my passion for intellectual and personal growth.

Joycia Thorat: I come from southern India, specifically Kanyakumari, born into a religious Christian family with strong ties to the church. In college, I was active in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) of India, questioning blind beliefs and contextualizing our actions.

After marriage, I moved to Mumbai and worked with Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), an organization founded in 1947 to assist partition victims. CASA focuses on emergencies, climate issues, and long-term development programs across rural India.

Since 2014, I've been deeply disturbed by the country's socio-political climate and the church's relative silence. As an ecumenical activist questioning both internal church issues and its broader contributions, I engage with global organizations like the World Council of Churches.

CASA's work includes climate change resilience and disaster preparedness for rural communities but has been hindered by FCRA issues affecting our operations.

We must unite across social spaces to reclaim India's constitutional values while supporting marginalized communities like Muslims facing severe atrocities. I'm here to explore collaborative efforts for positive change.

Dr. Mrigendra Pratap: I'm currently an assistant professor at the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies in Pune since 2006. Originally from Bihar near Bodhgaya, my family was involved in the Jayaprakash Narayan movement against casteism in the 1970s.

My interest lies in religion, particularly Buddhism, which led me to study Pali language at University. I've worked with NGOs in Delhi and completed social work training in Pune while pursuing my PhD on modern Buddhism.

Our department offers courses on Pali language, Buddhist society studies, and applied aspects of Buddhism like socially engaged Buddhism and Ambedkar's teachings. We aim to integrate social training with Buddhist perspectives for holistic self-transformation.

I connected with Milind Wani in 2012 through these academic pursuits. Engaged Buddhism offers solutions grounded in religious reinterpretation relevant to today's context.

I'm eager to learn from this diverse gathering while contributing my insights on modern Buddhism's role in addressing contemporary issues.

Abhayraj Naik: I'm from Bangalore where I live with my partner Rachel and our Labrador Tara. I'm obsessed with ending suffering for all beings through social justice and transformative possibilities.

I work with Pipal Tree coordinating interfaith peacebuilding and climate action workshops while exploring new strategic directions for our changing world.

Formally trained as a lawyer, I'm also affiliated with Azim Premji University, National Law School, and Kriya University focusing on experiential learning around climate breakdown.

I co-founded several initiatives including the Initiative for Climate Action focusing on urban resilience, South Asia Network for Justice Education promoting experiential legal education, and State Clean Electricity Transition Tracker for India advocating cleaner energy transitions at state levels.

Currently passionate about preserving knowledge pathways amidst global upheaval, I'll share more tomorrow about these endeavours aiming for sustainable futures amidst ongoing challenges.
To prevent the current right-wing authoritarian trend from taking over or something new from emerging, it's crucial to preserve the environmental work done in India over the last five decades. This ensures that the younger generation of climate and environmental activists can build on this legacy. My role is to keep these pathways open, build bridges, archive materials, and ensure ongoing conversations. I manage an informal space called the Centre for Spiritual Ecology in Cox Town, Bangalore, where we host wisdom-sharing events and maintain resources for activists.

Personally, I enjoy cycling and music. My family is Mangalorean, and I'm on a healing journey. Throughout my life, I've faced significant challenges that have led me to re-evaluate and eliminate toxic elements while nurturing positive aspects. This journey has shaped who I am today.

Fr. Rayappa Kasi: My name is Kasi though many call me *Kazi*. I identify with multiple denominations depending on the context. My name was given to me without my conscious choice, just like my religious baptism as an infant. This lack of choice extended through various sacraments and shaped my path, including becoming a priest.

Raised in a strict Christian environment by an orthodox mother, I experienced abuse from religious figures throughout my childhood. This harsh upbringing led me to question the institution of Christianity and its role in ecological crises. Misinterpretations of Christian theology have contributed to issues like climate change, global warming, and deforestation.

Despite the abuse and challenges within the church, I used these experiences to fuel positive change. I believe that suffering leads to growth and complexity, akin to the concept of resurrection in Christianity. Reinterpreting biblical texts through a Cosmo centric lens rather than an anthropocentric one can address ecological issues inclusively.

Theology remains influential today as people often believe what they perceive as divine instructions. My book Rush to Riches: The War on Creation highlighted how human greed causes ecological destruction, drawing attention from the Vatican's Peace and Justice Commission. This led to Pope Francis' environmental encyclical *Laudato Si* in 2015.

The church now emphasizes ecological education, spirituality, and lifestyle as essential for addressing environmental issues. Ignorance is seen as a root cause of devastation; hence education is crucial. Spirituality helps find divinity in creation, fostering commitment to environmental stewardship.

As a priest for 45 years, I've endured abuse but also found purpose in teaching these principles across various religious platforms. By promoting ecological awareness and sustainable practices, we can improve our environment and future.

In summary, preserving past environmental efforts while fostering new generations of activists is vital. Reinterpreting religious teachings can play a significant role in addressing ecological crises inclusively and effectively.

Aspi Mistry: I was born in Bombay and educated in Jesuit institutions - St. Xavier's School, St. Xavier's College, and the Xavier Institute of Communications.

After graduation, some friends and I decided to not join the rat race and formed a group called VISTAS, (Visions and Tasks) to help the rural poor through development projects. From 1973 to 1975 we worked in the villages of Pathardi taluka in Maharashtra.

We met Denis von der Weid, a student of Paulo Freire, who had initiated some projects in Tamil Nadu, who introduced us to conscientization. It was not long before we were into leftist ideas and Marxism. We organized, very naively and prematurely, a strike at a sugar factory that was under construction, but were threatened and had to leave during the Emergency in 1975. Later, we founded the Centre for Education and Documentation in Bombay.

I worked in documentary film production and software development, mainly for NGOs. I was also a founder-member of the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights in Bombay.

In 1992, when faced with fake criminal charges and prosecution, in an attempt to get us to vacate our residential premises, and going through that trauma and experience, I turned to Buddhism and have been practicing and teaching it since.

I am also interested in other religions and comparative religion studies. During the pandemic, I continued to teaching over Zoom meetings. Now, I am still exploring Buddhism, Kashmir Shaivism, Hinduism, Sufism, and Islam.

Behzad Fatmi: My name is Behzad. It's a Persian name, very uncommon in India. There are many Shehzads you may find, but Behzad is very, very uncommon. And my surname is Fatmi. So, anybody familiar with Middle east or West Asia think that I have some Egyptian connection because there was a Fatmi dynasty there once upon a time. But no, there's nothing, no such connection.

I come from pious Muslim family in Bihar Purnia. My father is a social science teacher, my mother is a Quran teacher. I grew up in my hometown till the 10th grade. And then I moved on to Delhi for my further studies as a child. My father, as I said, we come from a practicing Muslim pious family. But my father was also very concerned about the not so progressive behaviour or attitude in the seminaries and the *madrassas.*

When I moved to Delhi, I studied in Jamia Millia Islamia.

I was very interested in commerce at the time. Stock exchange and all of those things. I started doing a lot of stock trading using my father's bank account and. But after my first year of university, I got very interested in international relations, international politics. And I then started writing for student run newspapers and magazine in Jamia. There was one called Jamia Journal. I started writing for them on the politics of Middle east.

And I, I then started dreaming of becoming a war journalist because I was very inspired. Inspired by a journalist character in the movie Blood Diamond.

I wanted to become one such journalist while I was writing on the politics of the Middle east. And therefore, I wanted to learn one of the languages of the Middle east which of course was Arabic first. But then as I completed my university, I got an opportunity to learn the Turkish language in Turkey. There was a scholarship that I got. I went to Turkey for 6, 7 months only initially that was the plan. I was going to learn the Turkish language, understand, start understanding the country and the region better and then continue to do my journalism. But while in Turkey I got introduced to this very interesting and fascinating international social movement called *Hizmet.*

H I Z M E t which literally means service in English or *hidmat* in Urdu, *seva* in Hindi. So, this social movement was started by a Turkish scholar called Fethullah Gulen in 1960s in Turkey. Then it grew to become a national movement, national educational movement within Turkey. By 1990s it had established about thousand Schools in the country. In post the collapse of Soviet Union, the movement people inspired by the Hizmet's teachings went to Central Asia, the newly formed republics there, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and other countries there. They established schools there. And then slowly the movement became international and now it is present in 150 countries worldwide.

That brings me to what I do as a professional. I run an organization called In Dialogue foundation which is affiliated to the Hizmet movement and it works to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue through various academic and cultural programs. It was established in 2005 and since then we have been organizing a lot of academic programs, some cultural programs, anything that basically brings people together and try to contribute positively to the society. So that is what the idea is. At different times, our flagship or main programs have been different.

In fact, the first time we visited fireflies and met Mr. Siddhartha was with a professor from Georgetown University, Washington D.C. he we were hosting him here in India. And we organized programs in five different cities. While in Bangalore we visited Fireflies and Mr. Siddhartha. And that's how I met go got to know about this organization.

One more thing to add about myself personally - I am a trained dialogue practitioner. I have a Master's degree from Keele University UK in International Relations with specific focus on dialogue. So, it's a pleasure to be here again and I look forward to our discussion.

Sadanand Menon: I run Space Foundation for the Arts in Chennai, offering classes and performances. My journey began at Loyola College where Siddhartha's influence led me into

Marxism and journalism. I co-founded Pace magazine, which planted the seeds for my journalism career.

Joining Indian Express post-graduation solidified my interest in media. My first task was editing a report on blood donation patterns linked to MGR movie releases—a significant experience that shaped my career.

Politics and culture are deeply intertwined. During college, politics seemed separate from daily life and culture, focusing on demonstrations and slogans. However, I realized that culture profoundly influences behaviour and actions. This revelation shifted my focus as a journalist and academic to explore cultural politics.

Siddhartha and I were influenced by dancer and feminist Chandralekha. We collaborated with her to start an NGO called Skills, aiming to train people in alternative communication methods. We wanted groups like trade unions, Dalit organizations, and women's groups to become self-reliant in communication tasks such as writing pamphlets or creating audiovisual content. Darshad Patel, a prominent designer who received the Padma Shri, joined us in this effort. We conducted street campaigns, street theatre, and poster campaigns challenging democracy's shortcomings.

In 1982, the MGR regime charged us with sedition for our activities. We fought the case in court for seven months before the Madras High Court dismissed it. This experience strengthened our bonds. Chandralekha returned to dance and became a renowned radical choreographer. Darshad Patel resumed his design work, becoming the chief designer for international festivals. I returned to professional journalism after initially leaving Indian Express due to conflicts over reporting on a national railway strike.

I joined a new newspaper started by Vinod Mehta and later worked at the Economic Times as the national arts editor, shifting from political journalism to cultural journalism. The Economic Times provided extensive coverage of the arts, allowing me to focus on this area for several years.

Chandralekha produced significant dance productions that redefined traditional Indian dance by moving away from religious themes to social and abstract ones. I supported her as a lighting designer while continuing my journalism career.

After the Emergency period, I co-founded the Madras chapter of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL). Despite facing challenges such as the sedition case in 1982, we continued our activism.

Through these experiences, I developed scepticism towards institutions like religion. While religions claim to offer universal humane values, I believe their interpretations can be problematic. Religion should not be left solely to believers; non-believers should also contribute to discussions about humanity and spirituality.

Over time, my views evolved from Marxism to anarchism, questioning institutions that uphold property rights and other societal norms. For meaningful connections among people, we must look beyond religion to basic cultural roots.

Dakerlin Mukhim: I appreciate being here today. My name is Dakerlin Mukhim from Shillong, working with the Student Christian Movement of India (SCMI).

SCMI aims to integrate faith with social action by building perspectives among students from marginalized communities on issues like gender justice, human rights, higher education, freedom of religion or belief, and ecology.

And we also work a lot among students from the marginalized communities and we have a specific project that is dedicated to, you know, building their skills, building the perspectives and trying to touch the communities. And a few of the current concerns that we have taken up in the recent past are gender and social justice, human rights, Dalit, tribal adivasis, issues in higher education, for freedom of religion or belief and of course ecology. I believe that the need of the hour is to come together and work together in a more.

Collaboration is essential for addressing these concerns effectively. I look forward to engaging with everyone here on various topics. Thank you for inviting me and providing this platform for discussion.

The following participants could only join in on Day 2. However, their brief introductions are included here for the sake of completion of this section:

I'm **Vivek Dhareshwar**. I live in Bangalore. I Right now I run a sort of online platform learning teaching platform called Indian Slate.

Ananya Bhattacharjee. Hello everybody. Sorry to meet miss last night. I am Ananya and I have been working with Aspi, Milind and Siddhartha on this initiative. And I'm really glad to meet all of you. I'm looking forward.

Mirza Rehman. Hello. We came in a bit late yesterday evening so could not meet you all. My name is Mirza Rahman. I am based in Guwahati and I'm working for the Heinrich Boll Foundation with focus on the realities and democracy component.

Jochen Luckscheiter.Good morning, everyone. Nice to be here. My name is Jochen Luckscheiter. I'm the director of Heinrich Boll Foundation based in Delhi. I'm in the country since February this year.

Summary of Key Points from the Introductory Session:

1. This was an introductory session for a multi-day workshop or conference, with participants from diverse backgrounds including academics, activists, writers, teachers, theologians, religious leaders, and NGO workers.

2. Many participants expressed interest in interfaith dialogue, social justice, environmental issues, and reinterpreting religious traditions to address contemporary challenges.

3. Several speakers discussed their personal journeys of questioning or moving away from orthodox religious beliefs while still finding value in spiritual/philosophical aspects of traditions.

4. There was discussion of the current political climate in India, concerns about religious intolerance, and the need for pluralism and constitutional values.

5. Multiple participants emphasized the importance of connecting spirituality/religion with social action and the need for collective, strategic work across different groups to address societal issues.

DAY 2

Theme: Pluralism, Self & Social Transformation

The day began with a few ice-breaker games and inter-play conducted by Savitha.

After the fun and games, the day began on a serious note by the first presentation of the conference:

Polycrises, Decolonial Climate Justice, and Spiritual Ecology

Abhayraj Naik

"I think I love the ambiguity in the theme invitation because that's kind of the terrain in which I'm going to be pitching my comments. What I'm speaking about today is in the nature of a speculative opening up of a discourse and a discursive field. So, I offer all of these comments with humility and with a disclaimer that these are in the nature of speculations and the hope is that as we proceed through the next three days some of the vocabulary, some of the terminology, but also some of my own offerings of how I'm apprehending this particular juncture in history in civilizational unfolding will be useful for some if not many to engage in this dialogue right to allow for an inter-subjective meeting and exchange of ideas."

Abhayraj began his talk with a Power Point presentation. Here is the link to this document: https://drive.google.com/file/d/11VJkydLYBeedxhfkjHETLAd29eHlOJUj/view?usp=sharing

We as a society don't hold anything sacred anymore. We've convinced ourselves that everything that matters can be measured. That old animal, emotional, spiritual connection to the natural world is gone. If you don't acknowledge that sense of specialness, holiness, otherness, wonder and beauty, then you haven't got anything.

“Increasingly, it seems to me that the kind of spiritual void, if you want to use that word, at the heart of our culture is the essential thing. If you don't hold anything sacred at all, if you don't believe as a society or as an individual that there is anything greater than you, whatever that thing is, then everything is about you. If you have a society that doesn't believe anything is greater than itself, then it becomes what we've become, I think, narcissistic and materialistic. Really, almost a society of what Buddhists would call hungry ghosts wandering around and eating the world. I was always very struck with the meaning of the word ‘holy’. It is an old English word. The original word is ‘hālig’ which also meant whole as in not separated not divided. If you see the earth as whole, you have a very different relationship to it than if you see the earth as a collection of separate parts which you can use and manipulate. I think that we as a society don't hold anything sacred anymore and even using words like sacred or spiritual will invite derision in a lot of quarters.”

I offer a little poem that I wrote. It's a poem that came to me about three years back when I was visiting my maternal grandmother's home that's in Mangalore. Part of what is in the title, a decolonial imagination, has become very salient to me. And I think that is something that I would contribute as an essential element for a pluralist dialogue.

The speaker, Abhay, delivered a thought-provoking presentation on the themes of plurality, climate justice, decolonial imagination, and spiritual ecology. He framed his talk as a speculative opening up of discourse and offered his comments with humility, acknowledging their nature as explorations rather than definitive statements.

Abhay began by sharing a personal anecdote about visiting his maternal grandmother's home near Mangalore a few years ago. This experience led to a moment of rupture for him, causing him to question many of his previously held beliefs and identities. He discovered aspects of his community's history, including its feudal and patriarchal nature, as well as its connection to colonial land reforms. Importantly, he realized that the gods his community prays to are not Hindu gods, but rather ancestral spirits. This experience led Abhay to commit to acknowledging and dealing with unprocessed trauma, including the trauma of colonialism and ancestral violence.

“This poem finding slowness, rootedness, and renewal in ancestral places, webs of time that refuse linearity/ Spirits that outlast modernity. /Smoky stairways and sooty stoves /whispering tales of times long past. /The land has worlds with decolonial joys. /Feudal horrors, myth and healing, /forgotten except in the here and now, /found again to be lost in plain sight.”

This personal revelation informed Abhay's embrace of a "decolonial imagination" or "decolonial imaginary," which he sees as essential for pluralist dialogue. He emphasized the importance of acknowledging that there is a world in which many worlds are possible, invoking the Zapatista movement's philosophy. Abhay argued for the need to question the very structures of thinking, language, and ways of being that were implanted by colonizers, drawing on the work of Walter Mignolo and the concept of "swaraj of ideas" from K.C. Bhattacharya.

How do we collectively build an equitable world in the face of climate anxiety and the poly crisis? How do we become the transformative agents we need to be in times of ecological collapse? And finally, how do we show up at the end of the world as we know it?

“Of course, how can we impact social movements as well as institutional change and which tools are there to be used? And finally, I think a poetic prophetic, integral question - how do we show up at the end of the world as we know it - is the tempo or the intensity of or the temporal nature of this process of inquiry. I do believe that the same kind of urgent rushed scarcity mindset that got us into the problem can't help us find our way out of it. And so, Marie Brown reminds us that there's such urgency in the multitude of crisis we face, it can make it hard to remember that in fact its potential success lies in doing deep slow intentional work.”

Climate justice allows for me to bring together my interests in international relations, constitutional law, human rights and ecological studies. Fixing the climate is only possible if we also fix all the other inequalities that exist. Who's winning and who's losing as a consequence of climate change?

“Because I find it not only the most urgent, important issue of our times, I also find it as an issue which is sort of causally connected to all other inequalities and injustices and violences that we are nonetheless still required to grapple with. And I find that it also amplifies each of these in turn. Right. So, it's really a great place to focus one's attention if you want to change the world and change the world on gender, on caste, on global north, global south dynamics, so on and so forth.”

The polycrises is one way of referring to this big interconnected set of issues of which climate change is only one. Pollution of soil, water and air, resource capacity, ocean acidification, more plastics in oceans and marine life are happening along with climate change. The stressed planet is connected to our stress systems.

“Large buildings, skyscrapers where food is being grown, even as farmers, as a category of work, as a workforce, as an imaginary, are evacuated or eviscerated from our ways of being. So that's one direct way of thinking about it. But there's also the historical dimension which brings colonialism and the slave trade, the original patriarchal sins into question. Who is responsible for getting us into this predicament? And as an Indian, as speaking as a resident of India today, I wouldn't be, I think, wrong in pointing a finger and saying the English are partly responsible for my climate vulnerability today. They really screwed things up for us by sort of making the economy dependent in certain ways on a particular modality of economic operation.

Or I can sort of point my finger even deeper into time and say it's actually enlightenment-based reason and the white dead men behind that who are responsible, right? Those guys who sort of about 500 years back, let's start from Francis Bacon and proceed onwards, go through Descartes, so on and so forth. But really there's a much larger antiquity. One could almost go back to Aristotle and 2500 years back who posited that nature, which is always ‘she’ is separate, nature is out there to be controlled. Nature can be quantified, valued, and reason is the ability to in some ways measure, control, quantify and dominate nature. Maybe they are responsible for my predicament at this moment.”

The systemic problems really require systemic solutions. What we do can be done ethically only if it results in our collective liberation. I invite us to problematize the self and the other. That might be the ethical way forward.

How do we think about climate justice:

1. Who is winning and losing as a consequence of climate change?

2. The historical dimension, which brings colonialism and the slave trade into question.

3. The current dynamics between the Global North and Global South in setting the agenda for climate action.

What is needed is a revival of "scruple" in our ethical considerations, asking how we can extend the class of beings to which we feel responsible. Take the example of the Gaza conflict to illustrate the need to think beyond national boundaries in the face of global crises.

“Today at the breakfast table, I was sort of sitting in a corner and sneakily listening into a conversation about Ardhanarishvara, right? The half man, half woman imagery that turns out. And so, we have in the archive these possibilities of breaking the evil, which is actually quite a recent evil, an evil of positing nature as separate, nature as female and nature as something that is to be dominated, controlled and measured. Right?

And maybe that is where we find the possibility of overcoming this hold that the utilitarian logic has on our political, legal and moral imaginations? This idea that the benefit of many will trump the interests of a few. We will calculate the interests of each person in clear blocks and we will use a little calculator to take a decision on whether the Narmada Dam is required or not. Yes, it's required. It will contribute so much to the GDP. Or the Kudankulam power project is required. Yes, it's required. It will give us so much energy. Or whether a solar power plant should continue to exist in Gujarat and Rajasthan and the few hundred great Indian bastards that we have should continue to sort of hit those power plants and die. Put it in the car. Yes, we should allow it because we'll again get so much power, right? What is not being asked in these felicific calculations, to use Bentham's language, is who's really winning and gaining, right? Is, is that power that is being evacuated from Kudankulam actually going to the poorest Indian who Gandhi reminded us of, or is it going to light up for many days and many nights, ballrooms and yachts, that a young Ambani is celebrating his wedding in? That question is not posed - who is actually benefiting from the power and how income inequality continues to sort of really, really increase in current times?”

We can conclude by presenting four principles of spiritual ecology, as a way to address the original separation between humans and nature:

1. Reverence: Recognizing the sacredness of all life forms and the long history of creation that has shaped them.

2. Interconnectedness: Understanding that we carry the Earth within us and that real communication with the Earth is possible.

3. Stewardship: Approaching our relationship with the environment as caretakers, seeking permission and guidance in our interactions.

4. Service: Breaking free from the focus on individual spiritual journeys to embrace a larger, all-encompassing vision of service to life.

“Milind, may I have one more minute to explain this? Yeah. So, this is one example of art that brings together some of these sometimes-obscure foundational ideas of climate justice, decoloniality and spiritual ecology into a practice. Right. And this is a Pacific islander Artist called Angela Tiasha. This is her work called Lick, and the artwork is her actually in water, just immersing herself in water with

the camera, really focusing on some beautiful tattoos that she has on her thigh, but also really just seeing how she is relating to the water. And the idea, this might be called a hydro choreography, right? It's a short film. The idea is to upturn this usual imagination we have of island people as passive, weak victims. As sea levels rise due to climate change, the islanders will be drowned. So sad. We must save them. Right? Through her work she's overturning that because she's showing you that I have an ability to talk to the ocean and be in the ocean and be the ocean, which you really don't have. You've forgotten it."

This is one example of art that brings together some of these sometimes-obscure foundational ideas of climate justice, decoloniality and spiritual ecology. The idea is to upturn this usual imagination we have of island people as passive, weak victims. How can we develop an anti-extractive relationality?

Key Points

1. The speaker advocates for a "decolonial imagination" and pluralist approach to addressing global crises, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging ancestral trauma and colonial legacies.

2. Climate justice is presented as a central issue that intersects with and amplifies other forms of inequality and injustice. The speaker argues for considering historical responsibility and power dynamics in addressing climate change.

3. The concept of "polycrises" is introduced, highlighting the interconnected nature of various global challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and social issues.

4. Spiritual ecology is proposed as a framework for reconnecting humans with nature and overcoming the artificial divide between the two. Four principles are highlighted: reverence, interconnectedness, stewardship, and service.

5. The speaker calls for developing an "anti-extractive relationality" based on reverence, reciprocity, care, and love, rather than constantly extracting and measuring. This approach is presented as a way to work towards decolonial climate justice and spiritual ethics.

Abhayraj Naik – Discussion Summary

This discussion revolved around a presentation given by Abhay, which touched upon a variety of interconnected themes including the polycrises, adaptation, decoloniality, and the need for a different understanding of change. The participants engaged with Abhay's ideas, offering their own perspectives and raising critical questions about how to approach the complex challenges of our time.

Summary of the Discussion

The discussion opened with praise for Abhay's presentation, particularly noting its comprehensive and engaging nature. The conversation quickly moved to the core issues raised by Abhay.

One of the first key points is the idea of **adaptation as a necessary response to the current polycrises**, a term used to describe the multitude of interconnected challenges humanity faces. The concept of adaptation is framed not just as a practical necessity but also as a philosophical shift in how we perceive the world.

Drawing from Darwin, the idea is put forth that survival depends on adaptability rather than strength or intelligence. There is a discussion about different types of adaptation, such as genetic, structural, and behavioural.

The discussion then delves into **the concept of loss and damage** within the context of environmental issues. It is pointed out that the dominant narrative often portrays loss as absolute, while many communities view it differently. The current compensation regime is also questioned, as it is seen as part of a broader system that needs to be examined. This leads to a conversation about worldviews, where it is suggested that the challenges are not perceived the same across different communities.

The concept of **decoloniality** is introduced as a crucial lens through which to view the current crises. Participants argue that issues cannot be seen purely from a "first world" perspective. The discussion highlights the complexity of the world we have inherited, which includes the lingering impacts of colonialism.

There is a query about whether the past can serve as a resource for addressing the current issues, which ties into the idea of going back to ancestral lands. The need to address these challenges through multiple lenses is emphasized, especially considering the various layers of complexity.

A recurring theme is the **question of human agency and freedom**. The influence of media and societal structures on individuals is discussed, with an argument that we are all constructed to some extent by what we see and hear. Participants explore how these constructions impact our perceptions and the challenges of bringing about change.
Participants discuss the notion that those who are focused on deep thinking and decolonizing are often seen as out of touch. The perspectives of those who are more materially focused are mentioned. There's a concern that those who are focused on spiritualism and idealism can be seen as living in a bubble, particularly when engaging with communities facing different challenges.

The idea of engaging with those claiming to speak for "reality" is brought forward as a challenge. This part of the discussion also raises the question of whether a decolonial discourse is a type of nostalgia for a past that is not easily accessible.

The **ontology of change** is also brought up, questioning what exactly is meant by "change". Participants explore if the idea of change often carries a desire to go back to a previous time. The question is raised about whether we can view the world as it is, including human-made elements such as plastic, as sacred. There is a sense of moving away from the idea that change means returning to the past and instead embracing a more inclusive notion of change that acknowledges the complexities of the present.

This is further emphasized by a Zen story where the idea of change is brought into question by seeing how one's understanding of 'mountains' and 'rivers' develops over time.

The discussion also brings in the **perspective of the labour movement**, which is seen as being very much rooted in materialism. There's a discussion of how the labour movement's focus on wages and material conditions often clashes with the more abstract themes being discussed in the room. The conversation touches upon the concept of a "just transition" as a way of addressing this divide. The participants agree that it's important to change ourselves and the way we relate to each other, regardless of what movement one belongs to, as this will help us understand the world.

The conversation concludes with a **critique of the current global economic system**, which is identified as neoliberalism. This system is described as having moved from a capitalist world to a world dominated by a global elite which influences our thoughts and actions. There is the suggestion that we have moved away from being citizens and are now merely consumers. The idea is put forward that strategizing to challenge the dominant ideology is necessary.

The conversation ends with a reminder of the teachings of Gautam Buddha and his emphasis on service and reverence, as a counterpoint to the ideas of Aristotle.

Main Points:

1. **Adaptation as a Necessary Response:** The discussion emphasizes that in the face of the polycrises, adaptation is not just a choice but a necessity. This is underscored by drawing on Darwinian concepts to highlight that adaptability, rather than strength or intelligence, determines survival. The focus is less on solving the problems that exist and more on surviving and adapting to changing conditions.

2. **Decoloniality as a Critical Lens:** The importance of decolonial perspectives is stressed as a necessary framework for understanding the current issues. The discussion moves past a "first world" perspective to highlight the complexities of the global landscape which is impacted by colonialism. There is also a question of whether the past can be a resource for the future as we seek solutions.

3. **Challenging Dominant Narratives:** The participants raise a number of challenges to the dominant narratives surrounding such topics as loss and damage, human freedom, and the definition of change. The conversation questions whether the ideas of 'loss' and 'damage' are too simple, and that in fact loss can be re-deposited and re-interpreted. The discussion also emphasizes how constructions through media and society can influence our thoughts and actions, making us question our own freedom. The concept of 'change' is challenged as being a notion that often seeks a return to the past, instead of an embrace of an inclusive future.

4. **Bridging Materialism and Idealism:** There is a clear tension that is brought forward, concerning the differing perspectives of the labour movement and those focused on more abstract concepts. The need to find common ground and to understand the materialist concerns of the labour movement, while also maintaining the ideals discussed, is deemed to be of critical importance. It is suggested that personal change is a necessary element in bringing the different perspectives together.

5. **Critique of Neoliberalism:** The discussion identifies neoliberalism as the dominant economic and ideological force shaping the world. This system is critiqued for reducing individuals to consumers and for promoting the idea that there is no alternative to the current mode of production. The discussion concludes with the notion that the dominant philosophy must be challenged in order to bring about meaningful change.

Lessons from Veera Shaiva / Basava Movement

Ramjan Dargah

(The presentation is summarised below, followed by a full transcript of the talk)

This presentation summarizesthe inclusive philosophy of Basava, a 12th-century philosopher from Karnataka, India. The presentation emphasizes Basava's unique approach to spirituality, social justice, and ecological balance, contrasting it with prevailing societal norms and religious practices of his time.

The presentation begins by contrasting two major slogans in the Indian context: **"Sarve Jana Sukhino Bhavantu,"** which translates to "May all people be happy," and **"Bahujana Sukhaya, Bahujana Hitaya,"** which means "for the happiness of the many, for the welfare of the many".

The first slogan, often associated with traditional Hindu thought, is seen as exclusive because it only includes the "*Savarnyas*" – the upper three castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas). The fourth caste, the Shudras, and the Dalits (formerly known as untouchables), are excluded because they are considered "*Anamikas*" or nameless, and therefore not considered as people.

The second slogan, from Buddhist tradition, is inclusive, using the term "Bahujana" to refer to the rest of the people, including the marginalized. **Basava's philosophy aligns with the inclusive approach represented by "Bahujana," advocating for the welfare of all, regardless of caste**.

Basava's Background and Movement Basava, originally a Saiva Brahmana, served as prime minister of the Kalyana State under the Kalachuri dynasty. He initiated a movement of the working class, the "have-nots" of his time. He is described as the first working-class leader of the world.

His movement led to the formation of a unique monotheistic religion, Lingayat, which departs significantly from other monotheistic religions. This religion rejects the concepts of hell, heaven, and salvation, focusing instead on the importance of work, or *"Kayak,"* as the path to both physical and metaphysical experience. This philosophy, known as *"Anubhava*," emphasizes that mystical experience arises from physical experience, making it a product of the working class, and not one that originated in isolation or seclusion.

Key tenets of Basava's Philosophy:

Rejection of traditional religious concepts: Basava's monotheism is distinct because it denies the concepts of hell, heaven, karma, rebirth and salvation. It also rejects the notion of gurus or swamis, asserting that individual conscience is the only true guru and God.

Emphasis on work and production: The concept of "*Kayak,*" or work production, is central to Basava's philosophy. It elevates the importance of physical labour and sees it as the foundation for spiritual and metaphysical understanding.

Inclusivity and Equality: Basava's philosophy is inclusive, embracing all individuals regardless of their background, caste, or gender. His teachings advocate for equal opportunities, respect for diversity and the removal of barriers that prevent social participation. Basava's view extends to

nature as well, considering all creatures, including plants, as part of the "*Mahamane*" or big house. This holistic approach underscores the interconnectedness of all life.

Critique of the caste system: Basava directly challenges the caste system and the social hierarchy perpetuated by the code of Manu (*Manusmruti*). He rejected the notion that Sudras and untouchables were born to serve upper castes due to their karma. He critiqued the discriminatory practices associated with the caste system, such as the denial of wealth accumulation and the use of specific utensils and clothing. He sought to create an egalitarian society where all individuals are treated with respect and dignity.

Creation of a new community: Basava created the Sharana Sankula, a commune based on egalitarian principles. This society had no barriers of gender, race, class or caste discrimination. It emphasized the equality of all work, rejecting the notion that some work is superior to others. It was a casteless society where there was no place for untouchability.

The concept of *Ishta Linga*: Basava introduced the concept of the *Ishta Linga*, a personal deity that each person wears as a symbol of their inner God or conscience. This practice is intended to make everyone equal, irrespective of their social background. The *Ishta Linga* is a reminder of one's own conscience and rejects the worship of external deities.

Basava's *Vachanas* and Social Impact: Basava's teachings are captured in his "*Vachanas,*" devotional songs similar to the dohas of Kabir and *abhangs* of Tukaram4. These *vachanas* are used to educate people and to break down discriminatory barriers based on gender, race, and class. He emphasized the importance of treating all people with equality.

Basava also stressed that the entire earth is sacred and that every person is an embodiment of Shiva, urging people to end all forms of discrimination. He is considered an organizer of the working class and is an advocate for social justice. The principles he espoused in the 12th century are in line with the human rights declared by the United Nations in 1948.

Ecological Awareness Basava's philosophy includes an awareness of ecological balance. He coined the term "*Jeevajala*," meaning the web of life, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living things. His emphasis on the relationship between humans and nature reflects an understanding of ecological principles that was ahead of his time. He saw God as a businessman who maintained the perfect ecological balance.

Relevance and Challenges The presentation underscores the relevance of Basava's philosophy in the modern world. It calls for a greater understanding and practice of his teachings, particularly in India where the caste system still exerts significant influence. The presenter notes that even among the Lingayats, the religion started by Basava, his teachings are not always followed or fully understood. The loss in translation of Basava's ideas from Kannada to other languages is also cited as a reason why his inclusive philosophy is not widely understood.

In conclusion, the presentation makes a compelling case for the enduring relevance of Basava's teachings. His inclusive philosophy, centred on social justice, equality, and ecological balance, offers a path towards a more harmonious world. Basava's emphasis on the dignity of work, the importance of conscience and the rejection of discriminatory practices make him a figure of great

historical and contemporary importance. His philosophy remains a powerful resource for those seeking to create a more just and equitable society.

Full Transcript of the presentation

"**Basava was a 12th century philosopher of Karnataka, the northern part of Karnataka.** Before talking of this philosophy, I want to go back, to two very famous *Mahagosha*. *Mahagosha* means two big slogans in Indian context. And these two slogans always in very contradictory position.

The one is **Sarve Jana Sukhinu Bhavantu.** This is one of the big slogans of the *Manuvadis*.

Another one is Buddha's slogan. That is **Bahujana Sukhaya, Bahujana Hitaya.** Both mean that everybody (*jana)*should be happy.But according to them, *Jana* belongs to *Savarnas*. You know, there are four *varnas* in Indian context. One is Brahmana, then Kshatriya, then Vaishya. These are all called Savarnyas and you may call in the modern context, haves. And the fourth one is Shudra and *ati-shudra*. I mean the present-day Dalit. These are have-nots. That's why this Sarve Jana means we are not people. The Shudras and Dalits are not people, they are Anamikas. Because they have no name, they will never come in that context. That's why these are 90% people in India. That's why Buddha used the word Bahujana. We are Bahujana, they are Jana. We are Bahu Jana. The Bahujana means the rest of the people who are Jana, this is Bahujana. The rest of Savarnyas are called Bahujana. That's why they use the Buddha's word, you know, Bahujana Samaj party or something like that. This Bahujana, this is the concept of Buddha. Bahujana Sukhaya, Bahujana Hitaya and **Basava belongs to this concept.**

And you know, in India, we are having four major religions born in India. One is Jains, they are atheistic by nature. And second one Buddhism, agnostic and Basava, monotheistic, and Sikhism also monotheistic. All these four religions are non-Vedic religions. And they denied varna system, they denied caste system and they denied polytheism. They may be having different concepts, but the common character of these four religions are like this. That's how Basava started.

He was actually Saiva Brahmana. He belonged to Saiva Brahmana family.

And he was prime minister of Kalyana State, the northern part of Karnataka. We call, you know, one of the places near Bidar, that is Kalyana and ruled by Kalachuri dynasty. That king was Bijjala and he was prime minister at that time.

He started a movement of working class of that time, the have-nots of that time. And they were all, you know, types of workers. And he is the first working class leader of the world. And this. There are many monotheistic religions in the world like Islam, Judaism or Christianity. But this is the first monotheistic religion in the world which denies hell and heaven, which denies salvation. And the base of this religion is Kayak. **Kayak means work production. It is production-oriented religion.** It is having its own philosophy. We call it Anubhava. Anubhava is mystical experience.

But Basava says there is no mystical experience without physical experience. What we derive from our physical experience, and that is the end of physical experience, is metaphysical experience. That's why this is the product of the working class. This metaphysics is the product of the working class. And it has born among the masses. Not from Himalaya, or not from any cave, or not beneath the tree. It is the product of the masses. That's why this, you know, I would like to read some points and I want to be with you in interaction.

That's very, very important for me because this is the first of its kind. This article and credit should go to Siddhartha because he gave me this subject. I have written 25 books, 15 among them where you know, they belong to Basava philosophy and Basava religion, that is Lingayat and then from Lokaith to Likaita. There is a big difference between the so-called Hinduism and this. Like you know, Jainism, Buddhism, they are all united. You know, line of thinking is same. And this is monotheistic. This is the first religion in India and first religion in the world while denying hell and heaven and salvation.

This I will just read out some sentences, then we can have discussion. There are many monotheistic religions in the world. But **Lingayat is the only monotheistic religion which denies the concept of hell and heaven. It rejects karma theory. It denies rebirth and salvation.**

Its concentration is on the earth only. Basava called Earth Mahamane. Mahamane means big house. Entire nature including human beings and all other creatures comes under the Mahamane. According to Basava, even plants are having life. His inclusive philosophy takes care of everything which is in the nature. That's why his concept of inclusiveness based on plants, birds, animals, human beings and also other creatures. This kind of holistic approach is able to save the earth.

The world needs this kind of inclusiveness among human beings. There are many hurdles in achieving this kind of inclusiveness. In India, we are having a society with vertical system which is based on caste hierarchy. This society follows the code of Manusmruti written by Manu. This hierarchical society is always against inclusiveness. It is a typical exclusive society. It can be criticized for perpetuating social inequality, fostering elitism, limiting inclusivity and diversity, and encouraging discrimination. Based on this type of discrimination, the Hindu society created four varna and thousands of castes, including untouchability. Basava says, you know, this is a religion of vachanas. Vachanas are like, you know, dohas of Kabir and abhangs of Tukaram. Like that, you know, the small devotional songs.

Basava says, let them not ask who is this fellow? Who is this fellow? Let them say he is ours. Ours Kodala Sangama deva. Let them say he is the son of our own house. This is one of the famous vachanas of Basava which stands for inclusiveness of humankind.

Basava's concept of inclusiveness creates an environment where everyone feels self-respect, dignity and equality in every aspect of life, regardless of his nature of work, economic background and caste identity. It promotes equal opportunities. It respects diversity and accessibility and removes barriers that might prevent individuals from social participation. He was having concern towards untouchables and miserable. He thought the sacred thread divides between men and women of Brahmin community and also between Brahmins and Sudras who belong to the working class. That's why he rejected the sacred thread ceremony and left his home.

His sense of inclusiveness has so many dimensions.

In 12th century society was full of craftsmen and labourers, guilds. Different types of workers live in the guilds of their own caste. Thus, there was gap between different types of workers also. Even though they belonged to the same Sudravarana. There was hierarchy among them also. They are exploited by the other three upper varnas called Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya.

The Shudras and untouchable Panchamas, I mean Dalits. never united against exploitation. They were having superiority complex among themselves. Basava thought of a commune system. He created the Sharana Sankula. Sankula means commune. Sharana Sankula is an egalitarian society. It has no barriers of any kind. There was no gender discrimination, no racial discrimination and there was no class discrimination. It was a casteless society. There was no place for untouchability. It was a society of mixed races and castes. Any work is neither superior nor inferior. They are bounded by philosophy of inclusiveness.

This society was exactly against the Manuvadi Hindu society which runs according to the code of Manu, that is Manusmruti. According to the Manusmruti, Sudras are not allowed to accumulate wealth. Untouchable people should use earthen vessel for cooking food and earthen plates for eating. They were not having the right to wear golden or silver ornaments. Their cloths should be old which were given by the upper caste people. Those were the clothes of the descendants of the upper caste families. There was no respect for manual labour and services. The upper caste people thought that the Sudras were born to serve them because of their karma of previous life. God sent these Sutras to the earth as a punishment. This kind of thinking still alive in the society.

Basava denied this karma theory. He denied rebirth theory. He denied rebirth theory itself. According to Basava, there is no hell or heaven, no salvation, no guru, no Swami. Conscience is the only guru and that guru is Swami. Because God. That conscience is only God and it is immortal. Basava gave highest respect to the working class. All these workers are Shudras and untouchables. They were not allowed in the temples.
Basava created a new personal deity called Istha Linga for these working people. This is a small round shape, black material which is symbol of our conscience or Antaryami, or we call it, you know, Antar Sakshi or Antaryami. Every Lingayat man and woman wear this like a necklace after a religious ceremony. Then they go on worshipping the Istha Linga unto the last. This is called Linga Chara. They should not worship any other deity. This is the symbol of our inner God who is in the form of our conscience. Any man or woman who are having Istha Linga are equal in every aspect of life. They may belong to a king's family or a prostitute's family. But they are equal by all means.

Thus, Basava united Sudras and untouchables. Another Vachana. He said, if you are having narrow sense of gender discrimination, racial discrimination and class discrimination, no use of worshipping Lingam. You are not ready to. If you are not ready to mix with all the races. If you are not ready to mix with all the races. Like river merging with river, no use of worshipping Lingam. Thus, Basava educated people in this Vachana. In this vachana, he eradicates the discrimination of gender, race and class. Then he unites all these people like river merging with river.

According to Basava, there is no holy land. There is no chosen people. The entire earth is the workshop of the Lord. We call it Kamitu means the workshop of the Lord. That's why the entire

earth is sacred and every person is Shiva Swarupi mean charm of Shiva. That's why nobody has right to discriminate anybody.

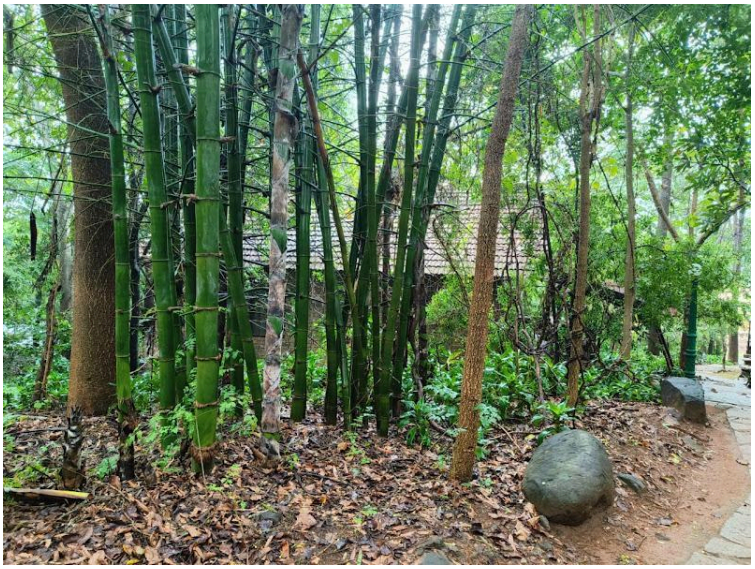
Basava is the first organizer of working class. This is a religion without images and temples. This is a religion of conversion. It is a religion of the resurrection of the fallen. Religion of the social justice. Religion which faced public inquiry at the time of King Bijjala. This is a religion which rejects discrimination of caste, class and gender. A religion which protected knowledge. A religion of human rights. All the human rights declared by UNO on 10th December 1948 are in Basava's Vachanas. All the 30 points. Basava is one of the first ecologists who wrote about the ecological balance. He coined a wonderful word that Jeeva Jala.

That is the web of life is the word Jeevajala. Web of life. Web of life is a new concept. But he thought about it in 12th century. This is the reason I call Basava Philosophy as an inclusive philosophy. He talks about ecological balance. He wrote so many vachanas. One I am using here.

God Mahadeva Sethi is a businessman. He tells God Mahadeva Sethi is the biggest shopkeeper of the world. He will respond quickly if you have oneness of mind. Otherwise, he will not respond. He neither loses a pie. He neither loses a pie nor gains half of it. Look, he is wise. Our Lord Kudal Sangamadeva maintains perfect ecological balance. And that is the business of God.

Thus, he explains about the relationship between relationship between man and nature.

Thank you all. And I want direct questions because I am very eager to answer. Because there are many things to talk about this philosophy. And before forgetting it, I say Lingayats never practice this religion. I have never come across a single Lingayat. That's why. Because even they are not ready to understand. Not ready to listen. Because they are afraid of their own guru, their own religion.



Ramjan Dargah – Discussion Summary

The discussion explored the challenges of translating Basava's philosophy, which possesses multiple layers of meaning, and examined parallels with St. Francis of Assisi. The speakers also considered how Basava's tradition is transmitted and preserved, noting both oral and written sources, and referencing relevant English-language books for further study. Finally, the conversation touched upon the concept of rights within Basava's philosophy

The participants expressed a deep appreciation for the beauty, strength, and charm of the subject matter, but one of them lamented that much of it is lost in translation. The speaker described it as a "universal religion," the first of its kind, uniting the working class and enabling them to find meaning in their daily vocations, whether those vocations are prostitution or killing animals, which are all necessary for society. The speaker emphasizes that everyone, regardless of their work, is eligible for self-realization. The participants felt that for this subject much more time is needed to delve into these ideas.

The presenter continued, mentioning that in actual fact 1,600 prostitutes were converted and empowered to pursue justice by Basava. This is stated to have only happened twice in the world, once in a "tall century," and again after the Cuban revolution. The speaker links this to a strong family culture, describing it as a "religion of family," where people come under the shadow of the family. This is described as a very important moment.

The next participant interjected to add that they come from the Basava tradition, where, in their home, Basava is treated as a god, with a separate religion and caste. The speaker notes that many families, even within the Basava caste, do not follow Basava's teachings, and that there are numerous sub-castes, which they see as an insult to Basava. The speaker also points out the difficulty of translation, explaining that there are four types of meaning to each word: dictionary meaning, selective meaning, deep meaning, and philosophical meaning. This means that a single word can have different meanings in different contexts. The speaker uses the concept of social consciousness as an example, stating that there are so many philosophical meanings that one four-line concept could fill a thousand pages. The speaker believes Basava was born in the 12th century, around the same time as St. Francis of Assisi.

The first speaker agreed with the connection to St. Francis, noting that he also preached inclusiveness. The speaker references a concept called "*mahamos,*" a cosmos which is like a big family, relating to nature. The speaker references St. Francis's song, "Brother Son, Moon, Brother Wind," and "Brother Fire, Sister Water, Mother Earth," including even "Brother Wolf, Sister Lamb, and finally, Sister Death," highlighting the all-encompassing nature of the philosophy. The speaker suggests that the same kind of ideas were being developed during this period in both the East and West. The speaker has read about Basava their whole life, not as a religious leader but as a spiritual father who considered everyone a child of this planet.

It was repeatedlyreiterated that everyone belongs to the same home, and that listening to this philosophy is like being at home. Whenever discussing Basava, the speaker is reminded of Francis of Assisi, since they were contemporaries who both rejected money and believed in living on one's labour, not interest. The speaker notes that St. Francis was a rich man who gave up everything, just as Basava, whose father was a powerful leader, rejected his inheritance. Basava's message was that the world belongs to everyone, and he was the first to state that plants have life, emphasizing his all-inclusive view of life. The speaker is pleased that St. Francis was mentioned.

Another participant expressed gratitude and asks a basic question: how is this tradition transmitted? They noted the loss in translation and the four levels of meaning, drawing a parallel to Kabir, whose writings were collected posthumously and whose oral tradition continues. The speaker asks about the "authenticity" of Basava's teachings.

The presenter mentions that Basava had a kind of parliament called "*anubhawa montapa*," where they would sit, debate, and record dialogues on palm leaves. The speaker explains that the dialogues were questioned, recorded, and systematically collected. It was a unity of shastra, where the literature of *manuvadis* and the king was burned. 90% of the literature was taken away when they went to Ulvi, and they tried to save what was left. Everything was recorded. The speaker notes that mystical songs often have a deep meaning and that words have "wings" that give them different levels of meaning, not just dictionary definitions.

The speaker explains that what has been discussed is the social face of the "*vachana,*" which includes both an inner and outer journey and that without the inner journey, it is impossible to understand the outer movement. This philosophy suggests that to change the world, one must change within oneself, and that to see the beauty of the world, one must create beauty within.

Another participant expressed gratitude for the shared ideas and acknowledges similarities that were already pointed out. The speaker mentions that these ideas are not limited to Basava and St. Francis, noting that the later concept of Sukhawati is also similar. The speaker then expresses the need for more research into the life of Basava and those with similar perspectives.

Siddharthamentioned a book called "Speaking of Shiva," edited and translated by A.K. Ramanujan, a scholar from the Chicago School of Sociology, which has a wonderful introduction. The speaker also mentions another source, a book by M.M. Kalburgi, who was assassinated. This work has been translated into 30 languages. The government of Karnataka provided funding and Kalburgi himself gave some of his own money to the project to translate 200 selected pieces.

The presenter stated that he was attempting to explaining some of these things earlier, but there was a lack of time. He acknowledged the inspiration and insights gained from the discussion but questions the discourse on rights. It is one thing to say everyone is equal, and another to say everyone has individual rights and can strive for them.

Pluralities & Intersectionality as Social Framework: The Elephant in the Room

PersonalReflectiononIdentityand Plurality

Dakerlin Mukhim

(This is the essay submitted by the presenter on which she has based her presentation. The actual transcript of her talk is below this essay)

I come from one of the Northeast states called Meghalaya, a place with three different and distinct tribes – the Garo, Kasi, and Jaintia. Each of these tribes have different languages, different cultures, cuisines, traditions, rituals, different belief systems/faiths, and so on. Yet despite thesedifferences,therearecommongoalsandidealsthatunitethetribes, such as, honouring the land/environment we live in, revering and upholding the ethical teachings, values and oral traditions of our foremothers and forefathers, looking out for the wellbeing and protection of the other.

Apart from these three tribes, Meghalaya and Shillong in particular is home to a good number of non-tribals coming from Bihar,Assam, West Bengal representing different communities with different cultures and belief systems, etc. There have been incidents of tribals vs non-tribals conflicts in the past on a number of occasions, however once these conflictsarenomore, thepeoplegoback totheirusual businessandlive inharmony.Duringfestivalsespecially,Irememberatimewhereournon- tribal neighbours used to serve our family with sweets and most of the tribals too used to take part in bursting crackers during Diwali.

Comingfrom such amulti-cultural place, when Ifirstleftmyhometownto be enrolled in a residential school in Tamil Nadu, I received a lot of questionsif I were an Indian. I alsostruggled withgettingmyclassmates pronouncemynamecorrectly.Thiscontinuedwhen Iwasdoingmypost-graduate studies inBangalore.Apart from a few,majority of the students have not heard about Meghalaya. I realised then that Northeast India hardly figured in our Geography textbook and even if it were, nothing much was written about it except for a couple of names like Sohra (Cherrapunji) which holds the record for receiving the highest rainfall in the world.

In my post-graduates tudies(Bachelor of Divinity),I had the opportunity to study not just Christian theology or Greek and Hebrew languages or Church history and so on, but also other religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and so on. By the end of my BDcourse, myinterest to work as amissionarywas no longer there. I no longer believe that to preach people about Christ is to eventually get them to be converted to Christianity. Further, my field exposure experience during the 4 years course redirected my passion towards social justice upon witnessing the stark injustice and socio-economic inequalities that the marginalized communities like the Dalits,Adivasis, and Tribals face.

In my understanding, the religious beliefs of any person and community should not be an issue as long as they are living according to the ideals of love, peace, justice, equality, fraternity, and so on.

Once back in my home town, I realized that pluralism is something that the church does not emphasize in its teachings, while oneness and Christian unity is given emphasis from time to time. With time, even the society was gradually moving towards polarization. At the church level, it was

Christians and ‘others’, at the society level, it was Tribal and ‘dkhars’ (meaning non-tribals). It also dawned on me that despite being Tribals, thoseofus who wereChristians bybirth,have little connection with most ofourculturalpracticesthatbindthetribalstogether.Weweretaughtthat once we’ve become Christians, we no longer participate in any of the cultural practices.Those who do are not considered to be true Christians.

I viewed the disconnect of faith and culture as tragic because as a communitywehadbecomedivisive.Thesenseofdifferencebroughtina sense of insecurity of the ‘other’. And in all of this, political and religious enthusiasts see an opportunity to feed into. While we are busy fighting among ourselves on the basis of religion, culture, ethnicity, and so on, suchgroupsareachievingtheirpoliticalagenda,andothercrucialmatters ofthestatethatthepeopleoughttobemoreconcernedaboutescapeour attention.

Crucial issues that the state is facing such as unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, social disparities, illegal migration, illegal mining, political instability, smuggling, land disputes, corruption, etc. demand strategic action that can come only when the people are not fighting against each other but against structures that divide them and exploit the natural resources, structures that violate human and environmental rights for economic gain ofthe few, structures that are devoid of values and ideals based on unity, love, justice, and co-existence.

The current context(s) of our world today is undoubtedly marked by crises of various kinds affecting peaceful co-existence among people and communities and also in relation with mother nature. The challenge before us,therefore, is to not only overcome our differences but to celebrate them in there making of a broken world/society/civilization. This calls us to reflect on what it means to be a human society where empathy and just peace (justice with peace) guides our intentions and actions.

I leave us with two questions to ponder and reflect: how do we hold our individual identity in one hand and our collective plurality in the other, without compromising or sacrificing either? And how can our individual identities complement/support/inform each other as we work towards becoming a more ‘humane’ society today?

Dakerlin Mukhim – Presentation Transcript & Main Points

A very good morning to each one of you. I would like to share my presentation in the form of a reflective one, one that has made me in the first place decide on the choice of topic.

So, I will just read an abstract, which I also sent to the organizers by email. And from there I would also like to go back to my own life, especially sharing about my own perceptions of especially the concept of plurality and in relation to where I come from, the tribe, the tribal context and so on. And also, Christianity, especially because I come from a place where Christianity the majority religion. So, a reflection on all these aspects.

In my perception, the most pressing challenges of the present situation are not limited to one or two, but a combination of many. Be the climate crisis and resource struggle, threat to democracy and constitutional values, social and gender justice and growing attacks on caste, religious and ethnic minorities, social and political unrest, and so on. Against this background, there is a need for organized efforts that seek to address

these challenges. We are to survive as a community and an ecosystem. To do so, we would need to have a collective understanding and comprehension of the issues first. Here is where intersectionality as a social framework becomes essential, as it enables us to see the connectedness of the different issues and challenges.

What follows from this is a broader perspective that would equip and enrich us to formulate a stronger strategy or set of strategies for social transformation. The concept of pluralities, therefore, is the area that I want to focus on. When the basis of collective perspectives is formed on the pluralistic voices and visions, it would enhance our approaches as we seek justice in a comprehensive way. THE PARABLE OF the BLIND MEN Approaching an elephant to learn and imagine what it is by touching it is something that becomes very relatable to pluralities. Each blind man touches a part of the elephant's body and then describe the elephant based on their experience. Since each person has touched a different part of the elephant, the descriptions of the elephant are different from each other. The implication from this parable is that humans tend to claim absolute truth based on the limited experience and ignore other people's experiences, which are equally true.

So, this is the presentation that or the subject that I would like to focus on and something that I enjoy doing even as a child, is to have these questions. Questions about life, questions about God, the universe. I remember as a kid, I asked my mother, who created God, and my mother said that you should not ask such a question.

So, at a very young age, I also, coming from the northeast, coming from Meghalaya, I had the opportunity to study in Tamil Nadu, which is, again, something very new to me as a child. And I remember we were among a class of people of different communities. And the struggle that I often face is that people could not pronounce my name. People keep asking if I'm from India, and I had to keep telling them that, yes, I'm an Indian, and Meghalaya is very much part of India. And even as I used to narrate this experience, I also am aware that most of my northeast friends face similar kind of experiences.

The fact that we look different, we speak different languages, dialects, have different food habits, different cultures, different ways of celebrating culture, different ways of even worshiping God, worshipping nature is always something that is no longer a surprising factor because we have always faced these kind of experiences.

And I remember I used to ask, as a person coming from the Northeast, I don't know much about my history. I don't know much about, you know, what was going on. And then as I went on further for my studies, I realized that much of the textbook is about the rest of India and less about Northeast. Even when I say Northeast, I also understand that people who are from Kashmir, Jammu, and even Lakshadweep and Andaman and Nicobar, they are also you know, experiencing similar plight where many do not know what is happening in those islands. Back in the Northeast, we don't know much.

So, I started to, you know, ask these questions. And in my journey also, because I come from a Christian tradition, I have seen that there is a lot of disconnect between culture and religion. At some point, I remember there was this harvest festival which we all celebrate in the Northeast and also in the rest of India, and to which we were not allowed to participate because we were Christians. We are Christians. And I was, like, really surprised. Why is this the reason? And I was told that, you know, when you become Christian, you leave everything. So even though most of the people back home in my state have this gratitude, sense of gratitude towards the missionaries, towards even the British government then for many changes that they brought to our places.

One of the missionaries by the name of Thomas Jones also created or founded the Kasi Alphabet. And we owe a lot to them. And even as we have the sense of gratitude, there is in another way a sense of loss.

Because I am so disconnected from the so called, the cultural practices, beliefs that make up, or that is the beauty of, you know, every society.

So, these were some of the challenges, the questions that I took along with me. And when I attended or I took a course on theology. And it was at that point where I had wanted to work as a missionary. And I was told that it's good if you study theology, you would get a broader perspective. And so, I came for theological studies. And it was then that my eyes were open to so many realities. And I also questioned that the fact that we as a church still practice missions, which I do not say is bad, if we understood the purpose for which we do missions, but when we do mission just for the purpose of conversion, especially asking the tribals or asking the local communities to leave away, do away with all those cultural practices and become a Christian, that is where I had a problem.

And so, I changed my track from there and I became more passionate about justice issues. And it was only until the year 2015 when I was introduced to this, an ecumenical initiative started by the World Council of Churches, which was an accompaniment program to Palestine. And I also, coming from, you know, a Protestant church, a mainline church, we have a certain ideology, a certain way of, you know, feeling a sense of attachment with Israel and looking at others as nothing. And when I learned about what was happening in Palestine then I wanted to sign myself up for this program.

And as I read a lot, I learned a lot. I began to see that most of what is happening in Israel, Palestine today is also because of an ideology, which we call it the Zionist ideology. And in the midst of all of this, of course, I did not get a visa then. And I ended up working with the Student Christian movement of India since that time. And a lot of the work then has been on trying to conscientize, especially young people on issues that relate to faith, issues of justice, and especially the fact that there is a lot of disconnect from what we believe and the injustices and how we respond to injustices.

This led me also to look at pluralism as something of a strength, especially through my work, when I got a chance and many opportunities to network, to collaborate with different organizations, different faith civil society organizations. And our core concern that brings us together is only for the cause of justice. And it is here then that I took a very strong stand to say that my faith should not stop me from standing with various others who are different in their own way of thinking, of seeing the world, of understanding different ideologies and philosophies, as long as we are on the same understanding of wanting what is just for our communities, wanting what is just for the climate, wanting what is just for every individual or every living being and non-living being on this earth, and fighting for just practices and just lifestyles. And I began to critique also what is happening in the Northeast especially.

We have a rich resource of biodiversity. But then now most of our places are occupied by the military, by the army, of course, Meghalaya. There is no longer this AFSPA in Meghalaya, the army forces, Armed Forces, Special Powers act, but it is still there in places like Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal, Manipur. And recently, as I hope you are all aware, the crisis that is happening and still is in Manipur is also because of so many issues related with land, with identity, and also with the protection, the sense of security and protection that comes with your tribal identity or even non tribal identity.

And these are the factors that you know that provide the context and how we view others, how we view ourselves, how do we understand self. We also have in the Northeast and also in particular the state where I come from, a view where we have a distrust of the other and we one as a tribe, even though, you know, we have many, I would say, good practices such as our relation with Mother Nature, dependence on, you know, the earth and the natural resources, even the choice of food. We have so many herbs that we do not need to take medicines. When we fall sick. Our mothers just tell us, okay, have this herb or mix this and this and you will be fine.

But then today, when I look back and reflect back, most of those have also become extinct because of, of course, the industrialized projects, industrial projects, development projects that have come to our places. And also, the fact that people have lost touch because we have beeninfluenced, of course, by, you know, the technology advancement and wanting to come up in life and why not? So yes, that's important. But at the same time, we have a lot of disconnect with nature.

Even though we used to be the ones who used to take care of nature, to nurture, to live in harmony with nature, and we have the tribal religion, which also has a lot of worship around, nature worship around, you know, even animals for that reason. And I see this disconnect too, because when Christianity came and people became Christians, they felt we have achieved a level of enlightenment.

Maybe to a certain extent, because we got the opportunity to, you know, educate ourselves in terms of, you know, schooling and so on, so forth. But then on the other hand, we have also lost, lost touch with what was used to be ours.

And I wanted to share here about one incident, I don't know if some or most of you are aware, but of a woman who was 95 years old and she passed away recently in 2020, who stood against limestone mining in Meghalaya, and she was offered 1.5 crores a year just to lease her land. And by the Uranium Mining Corporation of India to lease her land for 30 years. So, 30 into 1.5, 45 crores she was offered. And this woman stood her ground and said no. And her testimony showed the fact that we, the tribals, look at our connect with land as something that is very inherent to our identity. And she says, I don't want to sell off my freedom. And so, the concept of freedom in relation to belonging to, you know, a particular place, having land especially to depend on is something very, very strong.

And also, in other parts of the Northeast, most of the tribes do not want to live off their places and, of course, sell, sell, sell it off. So there has been a lot of movements against, you know, decisions by the state government to, you know, allow people from outside our region to come and buy land. So, at the same time, even though I see that, yes, it is important for us to stay together as community and protect what is ours, I also feel like there is a need for us to open up and also interact with people and communities who are, you know, from different parts of India, from different parts of the world.

And although there is that hesitant hesitancy on the part of the tribals to trust people from outside the communities, I feel like we live in times where we cannot exist independently. We live in times where we need to stand together. For example, if I did not come out of my state and did my studies amongst various people from India, meeting them for the first time, people from the south, people from the north, people from Central India, Mid India, and also even people from abroad, perhaps my perspective would still be limited. I feel like there is a need to own what's ours and at the same time to really open ourselves up also to learn or to hear what are the others experience.

And there is a lot because even as we share our own, we also learn that people from other communities have their own challenges. And this is where I see the intersection of our struggles. Yes, I struggle on the basis of, you know, ethnic ethnicity. Others struggle on the basis of caste identities, caste discrimination. Others struggle on the basis of being a religious minority. Others struggle on the basis of many other factors, gender even, or class or race for that matter. And I see us coming together, forming a very strong connect, especially when it comes to justice issues.

What are the justice issues that are very current in our own context, in particular to India? What are the, you know, the justice issues around the world? Earlier, Abhay and others have also mentioned, made a mention of the reality of wars and conflicts. And it is. It is not something that we do not know.

This morning, I came across a video of this one person who was just talking about being numb because he had gotten an injection. And then there was another person asking him, maybe because you got that injection, that's why you feel numb. And it is very, very natural. And he said, no, I feel numb all over the body. And he went on to say that even today I think everybody feels numb because nobody is reacting anymore. Nobody is responding to what is happening in our society. There is war, there is so many, you know, violence, organized violence, and yet nobody is reacting anymore. We are only reacting when to find out if there is this particular ingredient in the food that we eat or what comes next on social media and so on, so forth.

So yeah, I think there is a lot of things that are going on, but we have not processed it all. And I personally feel like I have not processed what happened in Manipur since last year. There have been tribal conflicts for the past many years. But what happened in Manipur last year is something that will take a long time for the people of Manipur to really recover, to really heal. I have my own friends who come from there, and I recently had a conversation asking them, where do we go from here? What do you think? And she is like darker. You should understand that.

So, she identifies herself as a Kuki. And she said, you have to understand that it is not just the Kukis here who are, you know, being oppressed or who are being chased out or who is suffering the brunt of what of the conflict. Even the Meteis are also suffering. But we are not able to see the bigger picture. Even the Meteis are also having, you know, the fear or lack of sense of security, because of which they want, you know, to get the ST status, to get the protection and so on, so forth.

It is only time and it is only when we start talking about it, perhaps there would be a glimmer of hope that, you know, things will be good. And yes, I am not from there. And many times, I always think that just because I am not from there doesn't make me less reactive because I know that if I were from there, I wouldn't be sitting here at this time. My mind would be occupied with what is happening to my family. Where do we go from here? Do. Where do we live? And most of the Kukis and also Meteis are now displaced and they are across other places in. In India, but not in their places.

And these are some of at least my very, very urgent concerns, concerns as a tribal and in addition to many other concerns that we face. Also, the fact that I work with students and the younger generation, the experience that Abhay this morning on stressed people, you know, young people, whenever I interact with them, they. They always give you a sense that we don't know what to do next.

We are just caught up in this race, you know, there is no time. Academics is just packed and where do we go after this? There's no job and where is the security? And yet social media keeps us occupied, entertained, and we keep swiping and, you know, scrolling and, you know, watching reels, laughing away as if we and our world is still okay and reality is still okay. And yeah, and I still think that even as we come across and we join together in listening to each other, I also feel like we also need more young people in our midst because I feel then we would have a more, how should I say, a community of different representations.

And I feel like that would enrich our discourses perhaps for the future. And I would end here. And I welcome any comments and questions. Thank you. Thank you.

Here are 5 key points summarized from the transcript:

1. The speaker discusses the importance of pluralism and intersectionality as frameworks for understanding and addressing complex social challenges.

2. She reflects on her personal experiences as someone from Northeast India, highlighting issues of cultural identity, religious conversion, and disconnection from traditional practices.

3. The speaker emphasizes the need for balance between preserving tribal identity and resources while also opening up to interactions with other communities and perspectives.

4. She discusses current issues in Northeast India, particularly the conflict in Manipur, and the challenges of displacement and reconciliation.

5. The speaker expresses concern about young people's struggles with stress, uncertainty about the future, and disconnection from real-world issues due to social media distraction.

Dakerlin Mukhim – Discussion Summary & Main Points

Coming from the speaker's personal experiences the discussion revolved around **complex issues of identity, colonization, cultural preservation, and the search for peace** in the context of tribal societies, particularly in Northeast India. The participants explored**the impact of Christianity** and other forms of **colonization on indigenous cultures**, while also examining ways to integrate traditional practices and beliefs into contemporary life. The discussion also touched upon the **complexities of inter-community relations** and the challenges posed by **climate change** and the loss of **traditional knowledge,**whilst also **addressing the (negative) potential for reinforcing tribalism in this process**.

The Impact of Colonization and the Loss of Cultural Identity

The discussion began with a focus on the legacy of colonization and its multifaceted effects on tribal communities. One speaker noted that **Christianity has acted as a form of colonization, leading to the rejection of rich tribal traditions and spiritual practices**1. This process has caused a significant loss of cultural identity for many, with individuals being pressured to abandon their ancestral beliefs and customs in favour of a new religious framework.

The influence of Hinduism was also acknowledged as a cultural force. Speakers noted that the appropriation of territory, the change of beliefs, and the transformation of ritual practices are all part of a larger history of cultural and political domination. The discussion underscored that **colonization was not a singular event, but a continuous process with multiple layers and sources**. This has resulted in multiple occupations, conflicts, losses of identity and reformations of identity making it not an easy issue to tackle.

Reclaiming and Integrating Lost Traditions

Despite the losses experienced, there is a strong push for the rediscovery and integration of traditional cultural elements. Several participants mention a growing movement, particularly among those studying theology, to explore how to integrate lost aspects of their culture into their Christian faith. This involves **re-examining traditional literature, participating in cultural festivals and dances, and reinterpreting indigenous concepts within a theological framework**.

One speaker gave the example of rediscovering the concept of *tiprio*, which means "no man, no God" in their language, as a way to promote ideas of justice. It is also mentioned that there is a rediscovery of folk literature of the Northeast. These efforts reflect a desire to move beyond a strictly Westernized understanding of theology and embrace the richness of their own cultural heritage. This also challenges the view that indigenous cultures are "wrong" and instead acknowledges their value.

The Complexities of Peace and Inter-Community Relations

The conversation explored the difficulties of establishing peace in a region marked by historical conflicts and divisions. Inter-community relations are often strained, with tensions between different tribal groups. Speakers mentioned that while some local communities are able to live in coexistence as they did before the conflict, others have completely stopped talking. One person pointed out that **peace means different things to different communities, depending on how each group defines their rights and historical claims**. This shows the complexities of inter-community dynamics, where historical grievances and questions of identity can easily impede the path towards peace.

The Role of Christianity and the Need for Local Understanding

The discussion highlights that while Christianity has been a colonizing force, there is also an increasing effort within the church to address past mistakes and embrace indigenous cultures. One speaker mentioned the Second Vatican Council and the document *Nostra Aetate* as a guiding principle that emphasizes the importance of respecting indigenous cultures, rather than forcing them to be baptized.

The issue is not with the high teachings of the church, but with the lack of understanding and implementation at the local level. Local priests may not be aware of the full scope of their religious teachings.

There is a call for local church leaders to take responsibility for the misunderstandings of the past. By better understanding their own texts, and by embracing the principles of integration and respect outlined in the papal encyclicals, they can avoid repeating past mistakes.

The Challenges of Fragmentation and Homogenization

The discussion exploredthe tension between the need to preserve the unique characteristics of individual cultures and the need to come together to face larger collective issues. The danger is that rediscovering culture could reinforce tribalism, fragmenting the region further. This could lead to a trap where the state views the Northeast as a single homogenous region, failing to recognize or appreciate its diversity. There is the additional tension between rediscovering specific cultural practices and addressing collective issues. One needs to navigate between the dangers of homogenization and the dangers of fragmentation.

The Loss of Traditional Knowledge and the Impact of Climate Change

The discussion touchedupon the loss of traditional knowledge, particularly with regard to understanding the natural world. Oe instance, in Meghalaya, there is a detailed traditional understanding of rain, with different types of rain being recognized and named.

However, climate change has disrupted these traditional patterns, leading to a disconnect between indigenous knowledge and contemporary reality. **The impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures and water shortages, have added new layers of challenges to the region**. This has also negatively impacted traditional farming and cultural practices, such as festivals that use to be celebrated at specific times of the year.

The Need for a Broader Perspective and a New Approach

One of the most important points in the discussion was the need to step aside from immediate conflicts and find new ways of approaching long-standing problems. This idea is inspired by the philosophies of Roy Bhaskar, who emphasizes that "it is not a war between war and peace, but peaceful dissolution of war by peace". The importance of love and peace is highlighted as the only way to address the struggle between hate and war. The concept of "miasma," a confluence of horrible things, is also brought up, with the suggestion that the best way to deal with it is to walk away, start afresh, and create a new framework of ideas. The suggestion is to approach situations not with the strategy being handed to us, but to take a new perspective and new strategy.

The Need to Avoid Extremes and Maintain Balance

It was emphasised that while it is important to reclaim and celebrate cultural identity, there is a danger of going too far and being seen as asserting oneself excessively. As people begin to reclaim aspects of their cultures, they risk being seen as "overboard". There is a need for balance, to be

mindful of the challenges that come with embracing and reclaiming the past. One speaker notedthat some sections of society might see those who re-embrace cultural traditions as using this to justify their own actions.

The legacy of colonization: Christianity have acted as colonizing forces, resulting in the loss of cultural identity and the suppression of traditional practices.

Reclaiming cultural identity: There is a movement to rediscover and integrate lost aspects of culture into contemporary life, including re-examining literature and participating in cultural festivals.

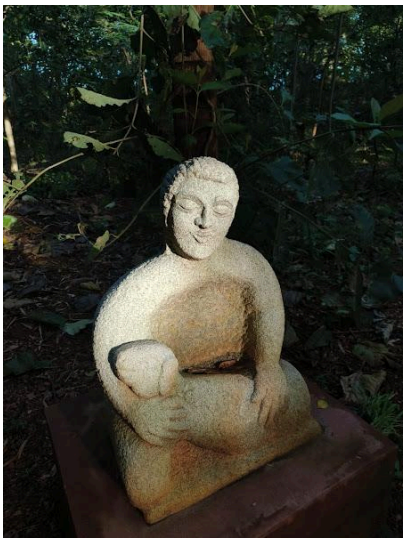
Complexities of peace: Inter-community relations are strained, and peace is defined differently by different groups, depending on their historical claims and concepts of rights.

Therole of the Church: There is a push within the Christian church to acknowledge past mistakes and embrace indigenous cultures, while noting that much of the problem lies at the local levels.

Fragmentation vs. homogenization: There is a tension between the need to preserve cultural differences and the need to come together to address collective issues.

Loss of traditional knowledge: Climate change and other factors have disrupted traditional knowledge, such as understanding of rainfall.

Maintaining balance: While reclaiming culture is important, there is also a need to avoid extremism and be mindful of the challenges that come with re-embracing the past.



Gandhi, Non-violence and Charkha

Sanjeev Kulkarni

Sanjeev Kulkarni began his presentation by actually demonstrating on a portable charkha the spinning of yarn, as he spoke about the role of the charkha, and Gandh's role in promoting it across the country during the freedom struggle.

In this presentation Sanjeev Kulkarni discussed Mahatma Gandhi's promotion of the charkha (spinning wheel) as a symbol of self-sufficiency, nonviolence, and social equality. It detailed Gandhi's efforts to improve the charkha's design and integrate spinning into his ashram's daily life. The speaker connects Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence to his personal experiments with brahmacharya (celibacy) and advocates for the charkha's continued relevance in addressing modern societal issues like violence, lifestyle disorders, and climate change. The speaker also emphasized the charkha's potential to foster community and economic self-reliance. Finally, the talk highlights the charkha as a form of productive meditation and a constructive alternative to destructive behaviours.

Gandhi and the Charkha

The speaker explained that Gandhi learned about the charkha as a means of supplementary income for families, and after searching for one, he was shown a charkha by a Dalit widow named Kamala Ben Majuna. Gandhi then brought her to his ashram where he learned to spin and made it a compulsory daily activity for all ashram residents.
Recognizing the need for portability, in 1925, Gandhi announced an all-India competition to design a portable charkha, offering a prize of 5,000 rupees, but no good model was submitted. In 1928 or 1929, he launched another competition, increasing the prize to 1 lakh rupees. Eventually, a portable "box charkha" was developed by a group of people from the Gandhi Ashram, who therefore did not receive the prize money. A subsidized charkha costs around 2,500 rupees, while a better-quality one made in Mysore costs 7,000 rupees. These charkhas are being purchased by groups in various locations, including Bangalore, Tamil Nadu, and Bihar, as well as individuals throughout the state.

Nonviolence

The presentation emphasized that understanding nonviolence requires considering both what it meant to Gandhi and what it means today. Gandhi's nonviolence was not merely an academic concept, but a deeply personal practice. For Gandhi, **truth (Satya) was the goal, and nonviolence (ahimsa) was the method, with the journey towards truth being dharma**. Satyagraha, a key aspect of Gandhi's life, is founded on nonviolence, which emphasizes mutual exploration of truth based on love and persuasion, not force. In a nonviolent approach, an individual seeks to convince their opponent through love and patience, recognizing that the opponent may hold a different perspective. The speaker states that nonviolence has a positive connotation, and that it is synonymous with love. Satyagraha is a constructive action that requires stamina and endurance.

Gandhi's Vows

Gandhi's ashramites had to take eleven vows on a daily basis, which included satya, ahimsa, brahmacharya, asateya, aparigraha, sharira shrama, aswad, sarvatra bhayavarjana, sarva dharma samantva, swadeshi, and sparshabhavana. The first five vows (satya, ahimsa, brahmacharya, asateya, and aparigraha) come from ashtanga yoga. The other six vows were added by Gandhi and were relevant to the struggles of the time. The vow of aswad encourages control of the senses, while sharira shrama emphasizes body labour. Ultimately, all of these vows can be seen as different aspects of nonviolence.

Gandhi's Actions and Experiments

The presenter asserts that Gandhi was more about action than theory and philosophizing . The presenter notes that Gandhi's life was dedicated to action, not philosophical contemplation, and that he saw **truth as something to be discovered through action**. The presentation addressed Gandhi's controversial sex experiments, which he conducted in his late 70s. Gandhi slept naked with two young, naked women on either side as an experiment to transcend gender. The goal was to explore his ability to remain nonviolent and beyond gender, offering a sense of safety to the women. This experiment, conducted with public knowledge, aimed to demonstrate that Gandhi could be completely nonviolent in the presence of women. The speaker emphasized that today, women need to feel safe around men and that the kind of nonviolent atmosphere Gandhi was working towards is greatly needed today.

Beyond Gender

The concept of a "non-gender" or "beyond-gender" person is introduced to encourage an environment where there is no aggression from males, nor attraction from females. The speaker mentions that the hormone oxytocin, previously thought to be present only in women, is found in men as well, and is referred to as the "love hormone". **The presenter argues that people need to become non-gender persons in public life to create a safe and healthy society**, allowing women to feel safe and secure, free from sexual aggression. The presentation shares that in many cultures, people are addressed with respect, which helps remove sexual anger.

Work as Visible Love

The presentation discusses Khalil Gibran's quote that "work is love made visible," connecting it to Gandhi's view of nonviolence. Since nonviolence is love, and work is love made visible, then work is nonviolence made visible, and therefore, **the charkha is "love made visible"**. The charkha is described as eco-friendly, humanized technology, and an instrument of equality in action. The charkha is an activity that anyone can do regardless of age, gender, social status, education, or political power. Gandhi insisted on the use of the charkha, even while in prison, stating he could do without food, but not his spinning wheel. He had two lakh charkhas made and distributed across the country.

Charkha and Social Change

Gandhi made it compulsory for Congress members to either pay a subscription fee or provide 2,000 yards of yarn spun on the charkha as a subscription fee, and that leaders had to spin daily and give an account. The charkha embodies simplicity and teaches humility. It is a form of spiritual education and digital detox, offering concentration, stamina, and pride.

If a person spins for one hour per day, they can make enough fabric for their own shirt in a year, and if 500 people spin for an hour a day, 10 rural families would not have to migrate to urban areas. It is also a productive meditation. The speaker states that although sitting meditation is wonderful, spinning is better since it produces a material product. A handmade handkerchief or shirt from the charkha can be a very meaningful gift. The charkha is seen as a unifying force and is attracting interest in other countries as a hobby.

While not a major source of income, it is something that all people can do. The charkha provides a potential answer to lifestyle disorders and social evils, and symbolizes the fight against climate change and global warming. Finally, the speaker mentions the tragedy of farmer suicides, particularly among cotton farmers, and hopes that the charkha can help re-establish a healthy relationship between people and artisans. The charkha helps people to see their connection to the farmers, carpenters, weavers, and tailors who make their clothing.

Sanjeev Kulkarni – Discussion Summary

After the presentation by Sanjeev, the discussion revolved around several interconnected themes, primarily focusing on Indian philosophy, the concepts of nonviolence (ahimsa), and the complex relationship between figures like Gandhi and Ambedkar. It also touches upon yoga, religious traditions, and the importance of intention in ethical considerations.

The speakers explore the similarities and differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar's approaches to social reform, highlighting their shared commitment to non-violence despite their contrasting methods. The conversation also touches upon the concept of violence, the interpretation of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, and the implications of celibacy on population growth. Finally, the discussion includes personal anecdotes and reflections on the complexities of these historical and philosophical issues.

Core Principles and Traditions:

The discussion begins with an exploration of core tenets of Jainism and their relationship to yoga traditions. The initial focus is on the five vows of Jainism – *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (non-attachment) - described as *mahavatas*, which are the great vows in Jainism. These vows are linked to yoga traditions and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which are presented as a synthesis of various existing traditions, including those of Jaina and Buddhist philosophy. The discussion makes it clear that these concepts are not unique to any one tradition but are a part of a broader Indian philosophical heritage. The concept of *ashtanga yoga*, which means eight-limbed yoga, is also introduced as a unification of different traditions. The first limb of which is yama, and the first principle of yama is ahimsa.

The Interplay of Yoga, Buddhism and Jainism

The discussion highlights how yoga has been influenced by both Buddhism and Jainism. The speaker emphasizes that these practices are deeply rooted in Indian culture. The speaker recounts a personal anecdote, sharing that when they were in the UK, they were asked about the Gita, but at that time they did not know anything about it. They were then motivated to study the Gita and the "Life of India." The speaker mentions Edwin Arnold’s “Light of Asia" in this context, suggesting that these traditions share a common vision and mission.

Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Complex Relationship

A significant portion of the conversation centred around the relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar, often viewed as adversaries. The discussion challenges this perception by arguing that while they had differing approaches, their ultimate goal was the same. Ambedkar sought to transform society first, while Gandhi focused on transforming the political atmosphere first. The conversation notes that many who identify with Ambedkar tend to stop at his philosophy without exploring his subsequent interest in and conversion to Buddhism.

Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, six weeks before his death, is seen as a significant event which brought the teachings of the Buddha back to India. The participant argues that both Gandhi and Ambedkar, at their core, embodied the principle of non-violence, ahimsa, at their root. The discussion suggests that the real tragedy is that the followers of Ambedkar tend to focus solely on Ambedkar, and do not explore the commonalities with Buddhist thought and its principle of ahimsa.

It is noted that there is a need to bring the philosophies of Gandhi and Ambedkar together to realize the shared goals of social justice and non-violence. The conversation makes it clear that there is a need to reconcile their approaches and to bridge the gap between them.

The Misappropriation of Traditions

The discussion critiques how certain figures, like Baba Ramdev, have appropriated and misinterpreted yoga traditions, advocating for violence, while associating themselves with figures known for violent acts. The speaker points out that Patanjali's yoga, at its base, is centred on ahimsa, whereas Baba Ramdev's practices are not. The central government is also criticized for supporting Ramdev's approach. This is seen as a perversion of the true essence of yoga.

The Nuances of Non-Violence and Intent

The discussion delves into the concept of non-violence, questioning whether Gandhi's methods, such as his hunger strikes, were themselves a form of violence. It acknowledges that Gandhi's actions, although intended for a larger cause, could be viewed as coercive, specifically as an imposition on the poor. The conversation also looks at the ethical dimension of non-violence in the context of Gandhi's controversial experiments with celibacy. The question is raised whether Gandhi took consent from those involved in his experiments, especially the young girls, and if these acts were an imposition, even with consent.

The discussion then explores the definition of violence, drawing on Buddhist notions, emphasizing the significance of intent. It is suggested that violence extends beyond physical harm to encompass any act that violates a person's dignity or self-respect. The Dalai Lama is referenced, as someone who defines violence based on intention, differentiating between use of force with wrong intentions vs. for the greater good. The etymological meaning of "violence" is explored, suggesting that it is connected to "violation". The conversation argues that Gandhi did demonstrate violence through the use of language, which is also viewed as a violation. It is suggested that language can also be violent.

Contrasting Zen and Purpose

The discussion also contrasts the concept of non-violence in Indian traditions with the idea of purposelessness in Zen Buddhism. The point is made that, unlike the traditions that focus on a purposeful outcome, Zen is considered to be about being free from purpose. The attractiveness of Zen is described as stemming from its lack of focus on outcomes, even enlightenment.

Ambedkar's Intellectual Journey and hid Rejection of Hinduism

The discussion also looked at Ambedkar's intellectual journey and his engagement with various religions. The speaker says that Ambedkar studied religions, particularly Buddhism, while in America, leading him to reject Hinduism in 1935, and not just after that date as many believe. It's also noted that In 1936, Ambedkar quoted from the Maha Parinibbana Sutta in a meeting with the Mahar community, demonstrating his familiarity with Buddhism. It is also mentioned that Ambedkar referenced Sikhism in his writings.

The Importance of Continued Dialogue

The dialogue concludes with an acknowledgement that many complex issues still need to be addressed, specifically the relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar and the ethical implications of Gandhi's experiments. These issues remain significant and require further discussion. It is suggested that the relationship between Gandhi and Ambedkar went off the rails and that the opportunity for reconciliation was lost.

The impact of Gandhi's movement is highlighted, citing the example of families who lived the reality of the movement through practices like spinning cotton. One participant shares a story about their aunt whose wedding sari was made from cotton spun by her grandfather in jail, which highlights that these practices were a real way of life, and not just symbolic. A participant also shares a concern about the health aspects of spinning and whether it leads to back pain.

The Impact of Celibacy

The discussion then touched on the practice of celibacy (brahmacharya) in various religious traditions, such as in the Catholic church, Buddhism and Jainism. The potential population impact is considered, if celibate individuals had married and had children. The view is offered that if all the celibate monks, nuns, and priests had married, the population of the world would be even greater, by as much as 10 billion people. However, one person in the discussion also suggests that there would be more peace in the world.

Final Thoughts

The conversation concludes with the acknowledgment that further dialogue is needed, especially around the complex issues raised. It also leaves the question of women's education open.

Indian Thought and Practical Approach to Contemporary Life

Vivek Dhareshwar

This lecture by Vivek Dhareshwar, explores the intersection of environmental crisis, decolonization, and Indian philosophical traditions. Dhareshwar argues that the environmental crisis is not merely ecological, but a crisis of "form of life," rooted in inherited colonial concepts like sovereignty. He proposes that re-examining Indian traditions, specifically the concept of *dharma* as "responsibility without ownership," offers alternative frameworks for understanding and addressing this crisis. He critiques existing environmental discourse for its focus on factual data over a deeper examination of underlying conceptual structures. Ultimately, he advocates for a decolonial approach that prioritizes self-knowledge and the reshaping of life based on ethical considerations.

The speaker begins by describing his intellectual formation, starting with his involvement in study groups during his youth in Bangalore. These groups, which he refers to as "formative," were part of a larger movement that included other groups in Bombay and Delhi. He mentions Jay Machi as a well-known Marxist thinker who was influential in the early years of JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University).

His early intellectual development was rooted in these Marxist groups, but as time went on, he and others began to question their initial beliefs. Some members of these groups went to Europe to pursue their studies further, while the speaker went to JNU for two years before pursuing his PhD in the US. He was influenced by thinkers like James and Donna Haraway, particularly in the area of cultural studies and environmentalism. After completing his studies, he returned to India and worked at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Kolkata for several years. He and others then established their own research centre in Bangalore, which ran for 10 to 15 years. Due to the difficulty of sustaining a private research centre in India, it eventually had to close. He then taught at a design school for some years, before becoming independent and teaching through his website, Indian Slate, which is inspired by Gandhi's term.

The speaker notes that although his academic work is not primarily focused on environmentalism, his concern has always been with **decolonization and the concept of practical knowledge**. He argues that in India, practical knowledge is a dominant form of learning and that understanding it is essential to understanding Indian social structures. He believes that the common understanding of decolonization in India is shallow, merely equating it with anti-British sentiment, when it should be approached with a deeper understanding. He feels that most Indians, whether liberal or leftist, share a limited view of decolonization that does not consider alternative conceptions of living a coherent practical life.

Gandhi's insight about cognitive enslavement is central to his understanding of decolonization, which he says requires a process of working through the conception of practical knowledge to understand its implications. The speaker describes a **disjunction between experience and epistemic concerns**, which he says is evident in how environmental crises are discussed. He observes that many sophisticated thinkers and writers, including Donna Haraway and Tad Delay, focus on narrating factoids about environmental problems but fail to address the underlying conceptual structures involved in creating these crises. He cites Delay's argument that discussions about solutions like buying electric cars or adopting slow fashion are forms of denial that do not address the massive scale of the environmental problem. He also mentions Ajay Singh Chowari's book, "The Exhausted of the Earth", which argues that the environmental crisis is primarily a political problem. While

acknowledging the political and economic exploitation of environmental issues, he argues that the problem is deeper than this. **The speaker believes that the environmental crisis is not merely an environmental problem but a crisis in the form of life**.

He elaborates on the idea that the way we discuss the environmental crisis is detached from any real conceptual framework, simply pointing to a series of facts and figures without questioning the conceptual structures that have produced these problems. He suggests that **the focus should shift from just accumulating data about the crisis to understanding the concepts and forms of life that have led to it**. He contends that many of the concepts that shape contemporary thinking are inherited from colonial history and have caused great harm. He gives the examples of the concepts of sovereignty, history, and subject, and he asks the question if partition would have happened if we had not bought into the concept of sovereignty. He highlights the need to understand these concepts rather than simply accept them, saying that we have no alternative but to struggle with them. He stresses that the current discourses on environmental crisis do not pay attention to how we should reshape our lives and that they think we have no other concepts other than these inherited ones, which he believes is wrong.

He expresses an interest in exploring what Indian traditions can offer to provide resources for thinking about the crisis in a different light. He also mentions that, conceptually, we do not have a grip on the idea of dharma, nor how to organize our life and be in opposition to the concepts of sovereignty, rights, and history. He says that decolonization is a double burden because we have to think about decolonization while confronting our environmental problems. The speaker also critiques Donna Haraway's work, noting that her approach of using science fiction models is utopian and that she fails to recognize that we already have traditions of kindred-making in Indian social systems. He says that we have not thought about using those resources for thinking about our contemporary lives.

He uses Gandhi's concept of dharma as assimilation, illustrating his point with examples of villagers helping a pilot and providing water to a traveller during a drought. He emphasizes that the villagers did not see helping the pilot or providing water as an optional action, but as part of their duty and how they understand themselves. The speaker says that the villagers' actions were not a calculated act of charity, but rather an expression of an ethos they had internalized and that they could not think of themselves as human without performing such actions.

To explain further, the speaker uses the example of a singer, Koshiki Chakawati, who describes her relationship with the Raga as "responsibility without ownership," which he finds to be a fantastic characterization. This concept of responsibility without ownership can be applied to any context where you can think of dharma. He then contrasts that concept with the notion of sovereignty and rights that we have inherited. He concludes that given the scale of disaster that we now confront, we must accept it and form a new form of life that is ethical. He also states that this is our responsibility since we have inherited horrendous notions like sovereignty that continue to generate violence. He suggests that taking decolonization seriously means recognizing the consequences of living with certain conceptual structures and then asking if these are concepts, we want to live with or if we should reach for different ones. He acknowledges that reaching to the past is problematic due to conflicting relationships with the past but insists that it is essential to debate these concepts and seek a life form free of harmful concepts. He believes that accessing our languages is a way of

tapping into concepts that make sense to us and that can help us shape a different form of life. He argues that being colonial is to be at odds with one's own form of life.

Finally, the speaker refers to his thesis, which he calls "detours", where he describes his intellectual trajectory as a detour, a forced and voluntary experience where he thought that the excitement was in the metropolis. He cites the thinker, Edward……., who used the idea of a return, but he says that the return is not simply a physical one, but something deeper that we need to execute as intellectuals, so we can pay attention to disguises in a much deeper sense.

In summary, the speaker advocates for a deeper understanding of decolonization by focusing on practical knowledge and challenging the dominance of colonial concepts. He critiques the existing discourses on environmental crisis, arguing that they focus too much on surface-level issues while ignoring the need to reshape our form of life. He suggests drawing from Indian traditions to find resources for rethinking our relationship with the world and ourselves.

Vivek Dhareshwar – Discussion Summary

Introduction

The discussion mainly focussed on the need for a decolonized approach to intellectual thought, advocating for the recognition of Indian concepts and traditions as alternatives to Western frameworks. Participants debated the limitations of Western-centric epistemologies, particularly in understanding Indian concepts like dharma and swaraj, and explored how to integrate these alternative perspectives into contemporary life. The conversation also grappled with the challenges of language, the role of the state, and the complexities of Gandhi's philosophy regarding the state and non-violence. Finally, the discussion highlights the global adoption of Indian philosophical concepts, such as non-violence and dharma, within contemporary international discourse.

Discussion

The discussion revolved around the themes of critical modernity, critical tradition, decolonization, and the relevance of Indian intellectual traditions in contemporary life. It also explored the limitations of Western concepts, the importance of alternative perspectives, and the challenges of translating and applying traditional knowledge in a modern context.

One of the participants introduced the idea of **critical modernity** and **critical tradition**, suggesting that the creative space exists between the two. They argued that tradition, as seen in India, is marked by issues like caste, patriarchy, and superstition. Even figures like Gandhi are seen as examples of critical tradition and critical modernity. The speaker notes that borrowing ideas from the West is not inherently wrong, but that critical modernity has not been adequately considered.

Another participant responded, agreeing that there is a need for a deeper conception of decolonization. They connect critical modernity with a Marxist critique of imperialism. They also note that some thinkers, like Ashish Nandy, have pointed out that the interpretation of colonialism

itself can be racist. The participant stressed that the issue is not about borrowing from the West, but about the way structures are formed.

They acknowledge that the West has significantly influenced intellectual and political movements, both positively and negatively, and that the West has influenced ideas such as anarchism and Marxism. However, the participant argues that India has not been considered as an alternative to the West. If the West is seen as an alternative to India, then logically, India should also be considered an alternative to the West. The speaker adds that this has nothing to do with being anti-science, but rather with the lack of conceptual thinking about practical life in India. They mention Gandhi and Tagore as examples of thinkers who have explored such alternatives. They see that there are concepts to be explored, and that there is a need to consider the alternative that India presents to the West.
The discussion shifts to the limitations of Indology, with one participant stating that **Indology prevents thinking about alternatives**.

The conversation then touches upon specific Indian concepts, such as "*pratibhijna*", recognition, and remembering, which are seen as ways to reconnect with the social and the more-than-human. They emphasize the concept of remembering and re-attaching oneself to the social and the more-than-human, which they say has been ruptured at some stage.

This idea relates to knowing what you have always known, and finding your place in the larger world. The participants pondered over what Indian concepts could replace or supplant Western ideas such as sovereignty, history and subject. Dharma and kin-making are mentioned as potential examples. However, it's noted that concepts like sovereignty and state occupy the entire field of political possibilities, whereas dharma and kin-making are seen as examples that are not part of a larger body of work that captures the full range of political, social, and moral life. They question what root concepts could match the conceptual power of sovereignty, state, citizenship, and history.

The conversation also addresses the challenge of implementing these recovered knowledges in contemporary life. It acknowledges that colonialism has caused trauma and altered people's desires, with many seeking Western lifestyles. The question is posed: How to integrate these resuscitated knowledges into the fabric of modern life? They give the example of Buddhism having a complete corpus of how to live well, and ask how that can be taken to people in practical terms.

In response, one participant explains that practical life can be organized in a way that draws people to an ethical way of living. They make the point that the philosophical life in India was not an elite pursuit, but was intended to be a part of everyone's life. The speaker also addresses a question about the relationship between caste and kin-making. They argue that the idea of caste as a meta-social term is a colonial construct and that the way the idea of caste was used by the "orientalist" was incorrect.

They add that in Indian traditions, people used many different ways to talk about the ideas, such as "what is your sampradaya?" but never a meta-social term. They see these as traditional pursuits, similar to the schools of thought in ancient Greece. They claim that intellectual traditions in India were organized to make insights accessible to everyone. They use the example of musicians and their pursuit of "rag" music as an example of what can be done in other domains.

They also bring up the idea that the concept of the state is not as central to Indian culture as it is to European culture. According to them, in India, people used to take care of their own needs rather than relying on a centralized authority. They point out that the colonial state introduced a kind of parasitism where people expect the state to do everything. They argue for a need to return to the idea that people should be responsible for their own well-being. The speaker mentions both Gandhi and Tagore as proponents of the idea that the state is not essential for Indian life. Gandhi's view of the state is described as a soulless force. He did not think the state should be a force that regulates people's lives.
A participant adds to this by saying that despite Gandhi's critique of the state, he also engaged with it, thus showing an inconsistency. It is noted that he did not completely detach from the state in practical terms, and that he sometimes supported political figures like Nehru. There seems to be a gap between his stated ideals and his practical actions. The participant also notes that although Gandhi critiqued violence, he did not give it up entirely.

They add that they have taught Gandhi and engaged with his ideas many times and the idea of his ambivalent relationship with the state has come up often. They mention that they teach partition literature and engage with the question of the nation state as a violent formation, referencing Ashish Nandy's essay. They argue that Gandhi's complex relationship with the state is something that people have to consider.

Another speaker emphasizes that although the historical questions are important, today, the goal is to construct a conceptual structure. There are historical inconsistencies and questions regarding Gandhi's actions, including why he didn't oppose certain issues. The participant acknowledges that one can still argue that the state is necessary, but that such thinking can be a slippery slope leading to justifications for things like nuclear weapons. They question when the state, sovereignty, and nation became central to European thought, suggesting that these concepts can be questioned. They note that in the Indian subcontinent, the nation state has been disastrous, so there is a need to think of alternatives. They also note that, unlike Europe, the Indian subcontinent has not done anything to overcome national barriers.

The discussion shifts to the relationship between conceptual structures and language. One participant raises the point that conceptual structures are mediated by the language in which they are articulated. They argue that even when discussing Indian concepts in English, the meaning is filtered through a different knowledge system. For example, the concept of "pratibhijna" is described as a direct recognition of what one already is, unmediated by language. They then question how to explain concepts such as dharma in a language that is not its own. They suggest that using English changes the way the word is used.

They then question where the language to break through these concepts might come from, given that even Indian languages have been colonized. They note that the discourse of decolonization itself often comes from the West and is expressed in English. They ask whether it is necessary to invent a new language or to use the existing language in new ways to challenge concepts such as sovereignty. They ask whether we can use the current language as a kind of guerilla force to ambush the current constructs. Another participant agrees, saying that the language in which intuitions are formed makes a significant difference. They note that if concepts are generated in an Indian language, they might not make sense to those who have no access to it. They add that the way to revitalize the language is to use it, and that when issues begin to be generated in Indian languages,

people will turn to that language and then English will be seen as inadequate. They argue that these Indian languages are still alive and are waiting for a generation of insights. They note the problem is not the deficiency of the language but rather how people are currently thinking about using those languages. They suggest we need to bring the philosophical and social insights from those languages, at which point they will no longer be seen as deficient.

Finally, a participant adds that Indian thought processes move from experience to epistemology, while Western thought often moves from epistemology to experience. They mention that the Upanishads and Vedas were based on the experiences of the rishis.

They argue that Indian thought has been adopted globally, referencing the terminology used in the United Nations and the Earth Charter, such as non-violence, truth, non-possession, and dharma. They add that Gandhi's concepts of swadeshi, sarvodaya, and swaraj are present in international documents. They describe swadeshi as localism and neighbourliness, sarvodaya as the welfare of all, and swaraj as self-rule and ethics. They argue that the erosion of ethics and lack of swaraj have led to ecological crises. They add that the international community has adopted these Indian ideas, and it is time to create a new epistemology based on these experiences.

DAY 3

Theme: Pluralism, Self & Social Transformation *(cont'd from Day 2)*

Feminism and Spirituality for Another World

Joycia Thorat

Joycia Thorat's presentation connects **feminist spirituality** with the pursuit of a more just and equitable world. She argues that **feminist leadership**, grounded in values of care and cooperation, offers a crucial alternative to the destructive forces of toxic masculinity and patriarchal structures. Drawing on her extensive grassroots work with women's groups in India, Thorat highlights the transformative potential of women's leadership in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and building a more sustainable and peaceful society. Her presentation emphasizes the intersection of feminist thought, spiritual practices, and social justice movements, advocating for an inclusive and equitable future where marginalized communities are empowered. She critiques the shortcomings of traditional religious institutions in upholding feminist ideals, contrasting them with the revolutionary message of a feminist interpretation of Jesus's teachings.

The presentation began with the speaker, Joycia Thorat, introducing herself and her topic: **feminism and spirituality for another world**. She expressed happiness to be present and gratitude for the opportunity to engage in stimulating discussions with other attendees. She notes her background as a grassroots worker with communities for 25 years, initially with university students and now with women, listening to their daily struggles, and working as a gender focal point.

She has also been part of the World Council of Churches, rethinking how the church can serve, acknowledging past damages alongside its attempts to do good. She also has a special interest in the Roma community. She states that her presentation will take the audience through a paper she has written, beginning with the hopeful belief that another world, one that is sustainable and just, is possible.

She emphasized that realizing this hope requires consistent, conscious, collective, and systematic efforts. She quotes Francis of Assisi: “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and the courage to see that they do not remain the same.” She asserts that the world is broken and can be healed through love in action, specifically anger and courage, and that it is necessary to hold onto hope while working strategically with the spiritual qualities of anger and courage. **The world has become numb, normalizing death and destruction caused by climate change and war, and reducing people and the planet to statistics, numbers, and profit**.

She then addressed the question of feminism and spirituality for another world. She defines feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. She also frames it as a spirituality and a way of life advancing ideals of liberty, freedom, tolerance, and progress, stating that feminism is about all genders having equal opportunities and rights. **Feminist spirituality understands that there is a fundamental connection between the spiritual growth of an individual and the quest for social justice**.

Spirituality involves recognizing a feeling or belief that something greater than oneself is part of the cosmic and the divine. This belief fosters a sense of inclusivity and reverence for all in the cosmos. **Spirituality rests on three pillars: relationships, which encompass inner and outer connections;**

values, which guide decisions and actions; and purpose. Feminism and spirituality for another world, she feels, explores the intersection between feminist thought, spiritual practices, and the pursuit of a more just and equitable world.

Feminist spirituality objects to images of God as authoritarian, parental, or disciplinarian, instead emphasizing attributes such as nurturing, acceptance, love, care, and creativity.

This paradigm shift is necessary for today's hurting world and, for the speaker, it entails feminist leadership. She argues that feminist leadership can be an alternate way of leading the world toward peaceful, sustainable, democratic, and pluralistic spaces, contrasting this with the current "macho masculinity" leadership that has led to death, destruction, war, violence, and an unjust, unsustainable world, pointing to right-wing male leaders of countries as examples. These factors of toxic masculinity have led to a world of violence, greed, despotism, climate injustice, and exclusion. She noted however, that not all men fit into this category and not all women are exceptional.

She emphasized that leadership plays an important role in bringing social justice in our polarized world, and quotes Vandana Shiva who notes that despite advances in science, technology, and finance, the world has not achieved inclusivity, equality, fairness, and peace for all.

Diverse leaders from various backgrounds and genders are needed in civil society, health, religion, arts, culture, politics, education, and business to make the world a better place. **Gender diverse leadership brings distinct value, and sustainable development goals embody an ambitious vision for transforming the world, leaving no one behind. A feminist spiritual thought of another world requires feminist leadership to achieve this**.

Women leaders have historically been at the forefront of transformative change, making significant contributions at the grassroots, regional, and international levels. In governance, women leaders bring nuanced perspectives, fostering inclusivity, and dismantling systemic barriers. The journey from grassroots activism to international platforms represents bridge-building, which echoes interconnectedness.

Women leaders are dedicated to peace, justice, and a sustainable world. Women have been leading families and communities for years, but have been excluded from key decision-making positions. They reflect ethics, loyalty, decisiveness, and leadership. Women’s social movement leaders are gifted and hardworking, often prioritizing their cause over personal recognition.

The speaker cites a feminist historian who says that most women try to save the world, experiencing burnout at a young age, while men become leaders benefiting from women's hard work. While women's historical achievements are evident, they are often underplayed or unrecorded in historical resources. **Therefore, it is important to invest in and nurture women for social transformation.** Empowering women is significant for creating a more peaceful and just world. Women’s leadership is continuously explored by scholars and debated due to its importance in the social sciences and humanities. Women have the potential to shape societies, address systemic issues, promote inclusivity, and build resilient institutions. **Women’s leadership emphasizes collaborative efforts and a shared responsibility to nurture a world with just peace and spirituality**.

Women are leading efforts to disrupt the capitalist economy, political practices, environmental destruction, the orchestration of war, and global governance. She reiterates that a paradigm shift is required to create a new world order and that feminist leadership is critical. Feminists lead advocacy by disrupting unjust systems. Questioning unequal structures and challenging power relations are fundamental for transformation. She quotes a Canadian theologian who said that Jesus was a feminist who challenged unequal power structures. Jesus feminists counter unequal power structures, patriarchy, fascism, religious hierarchies, and systems that perpetuate war, conflict, exclusion, poverty, and deny the dignity of life. The speaker states that Jesus is her personal guru and model, and that all who counter unequal power structures and promote holistic transformation are Jesus feminists, regardless of their religion.

However, her personal experience with the church has been that it has not understood the true Christ and his spirituality. The church, she says, uses the brand name of Jesus to make money but does not stand with the Jesus who was a friend of the poor, lepers, and drunkards, and who took the side of women. **The church oppresses women and hesitates to ordain them or give them leadership positions, and it is rife with hierarchy and corruption, which can sometimes be worse than political corruption**. Feminist leadership within the church is often rejected, and prophetic leaders are condemned. Jesus was crucified for rebelling against the powerful and speaking truth, and his resurrection is compared to liberation by a feminist theologian.

She notes that most of the time, the church is entirely opposite to feminist spirituality for another world, with the exception of progressive Christian ideology. Feminist spiritual principles embody qualities like nurturing, cooperation, and reciprocity to create a caring and inclusive world. **It includes decolonizing spirituality by recognizing and honouring marginalized indigenous spiritual traditions. Intersectional feminism integrates spirituality with social justice movements, challenging patriarchal structures, including those within spiritual institutions. It also envisions an alternative future using feminist spiritual perspectives to create a more equitable world.**

Ecofeminism connects the exploitation of women and the natural world, highlighting the importance of environmental sustainability and social justice. Goddess spirituality reclaims and revaluates feminine divine imagery, challenging patriarchal notions of divinity.

Her experience at the grassroots confirms that community women's leadership has contributed to building a new world order, especially in the context of sustainable development goals. Civil society organizations, especially women's groups and leaders, have taken initiatives to contribute to SDGs and a sustainable world and just peace.
Women's groups in the community and their allies ensure policies and programs are in place along with the local government and ensure the SDGs are being implemented. They are also involved in gathering data, giving feedback to the government, analysing results, and submitting inputs for follow-up action. They advocate for an adequate system of accountability and transparency, and they interact with policymakers, influencing them to work on proposed agendas**.** Their work complements the work of government and reaches the most excluded people. Through continuous dialogue and discussion, policymakers are sensitized to designing policies and bringing changes to existing frameworks.

Because women consistently provide their time to ensure that there is no hunger or poverty and that the environment is preserved, their unpaid caregiving should be viewed as a significant

contribution to SDGs and exemplary leadership. Women are often exploited and uncompensated for their work at the community level, even though it contributes to SDGs in many ways, such as household chores, care work, agriculture, and the smooth operation of society. **In addition, they work in their communities to promote harmony, generate revenue, safeguard the environment, guarantee food security, and tend to the needs of the weak.** COVID-19 further deteriorated the situation for women, along with a rise in domestic violence.

Women are also discriminated against and are poorer than men due to less education and fewer opportunities. **Political participation for women is much lower than for men, even in areas with policies designed to empower them. Women and girls do not have the same educational opportunities as men and are often engaged in care work, which keeps them poor. Programs for education to liberate women and girls and provide education that helps them prosper and become leaders are critical**. Michelle Obama's statement that no country can progress without tapping into the potential of women highlights this issue. Women's groups at the grassroots prevent conflict and encourage communities to work collectively for a sustainable and peaceful society, one that is inclusive and ensures no one is left behind.

The speaker says her experience at the grassroots has impressed upon her the values of caring and sharing led by women, which together with caring men, is capable of building a new world. She notes that when community and collective engagement become disintegrated, it leads to individualism, mistrust, exclusion, poverty, and violence. Continuous effort to knit communities together through spiritual and practical daily resource-sharing experiences, along with sufficient time for relaxation, creativity, and local culture and art, will add value to women. She says **a feminist approach in every sphere of life will improve the quality of life, and that feminist leadership can construct this "another world" through spiritual and theological reflections**.

Finally, she notes that in the Indian context, vulnerable sections like LGBTQIA people, people with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS, the sick, vulnerable, Dalits, and tribals form a "rainbow violation." They should be given leadership roles because a coming together of all such marginalized people will be transformative, adding that inclusive and embracing feminist leadership by them is the best solution for the world today.

Joycia Thorat - Discussion Summary

The discussion centred on feminism, spirituality, and their roles in creating a more equitable and sustainable world. It incorporates insights from grassroots experiences, spiritual traditions, and literary works.

Intersectional Feminism and Spirituality

The discussion began with the concept of intersectional feminism, which integrates spirituality with social justice movements. This approach seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures and oppressive systems within spiritual institutions. It aims to envision a future where feminist spiritual perspectives contribute to a more equitable world.

- Eco-feminism is also highlighted, which connects the exploitation of women and the natural world, stressing the importance of environmental sustainability and social justice.
- The idea of reclaiming and revaluing feminine divine imagery is presented as a challenge to patriarchal notions of divinity.

Grassroots Women's Leadership

The discussion highlighted the contributions of grassroots women leaders in building a new world order, particularly within the context of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Women's community leadership has been crucial in:

- Contributing to SDGs.
- Ensuring policies and programs are in place alongside local governments.
- Gathering data, providing feedback to the government, and analysing the impact of government work.
- Submitting inputs to government officials for follow-up action.
- Advocating for accountability and transparency for all actors involved in achieving sustainable development goals.
- Interacting and engaging with policymakers to influence their work on proposed agendas.
- Ensuring that efforts reach the most excluded and difficult-to-reach populations.
- Sensitizing policymakers to design policies that align with SDGs.

The unpaid caregiving work of women, such as household chores, care work, and agriculture, is recognized as a significant contribution to SDGs. Women also promote harmony, generate revenue, safeguard the environment, and ensure that everyone has adequate food. COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation of women, with increased domestic violence and further economic disadvantages. Women are poorer than men due to less education and fewer opportunities. Although there are programs to empower women, their political participation remains low. Education is critical to liberate women and enable them to become leaders. The overall contributions of women's groups at the grassroots level prevent conflicts and foster communities that work towards a sustainable and peaceful society.

The values of caring and sharing, often led by women, along with men who also care for the community, are seen as capable of building a new world. Community engagement, democratic processes, and collective work protect the environment and well-being. Individualism, mistrust, exclusion, and violence arise when community and collective engagement disintegrate. The discussion emphasized the need to knit communities together through indigenous spiritual and resource sharing practices. Sufficient time for relaxation, creativity, and entertainment, using local culture and art, is also considered essential. A feminist approach in every aspect of life is needed to improve the quality of life.

Feminine Principle
The discussion shifted towards the concept of the feminine principle, defining it not as a biological phenomenon but as a way of being.

- It emphasizes the importance of using the feminine principle to understand both the learnings of grassroots communities and from spiritual traditions.
- It also emphasizes the importance of moving towards non-duality, moving past separations, and finding balance between multiplicity and shared unity.
- The goal is to move away from binary frameworks like good and bad and virtue and sin and embrace non-binary approaches.
- The discussion stresses the need to engage with the feminine principle from various perspectives, including spirituality and grassroots community, as a principle and not a biological phenomenon.

Literary Perspectives
A literary text, "Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, is introduced as an example of feminist utopia.

(Link to Sultana's Dream: https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/sultana/dream/dream.html)

- The story presents a world where women rule, and men are confined to the indoors.
- It describes how women utilize technology for peaceful purposes and develop solar power and wind power.
- Universities are run by women scientists, with a focus on appropriate technology.
- The story critiques the military-industrial complex, advocating for resources to be spent on things that matter.
- The author's utopian world is a clean and aesthetic country of gardens where people live on fruit.
- Women are educated and work for only two hours a day, and they enjoy a harmonious life.
- The narrative also features the removal of child marriage and prioritizes a minimum age of 21 for women to marry.
- The religion practiced in "Lady Land" is focused on peace and love. There is no other religion and everyone is taught that it's their duty to love one another.
- Trains are not used because they are too fast and can cause accidents, and people travel via balloons.
- The story also features artificial rain technology that harnesses the energy of nature non-violently.
- "Sultana's Dream" is not a rejection of technology or science but a view of it used for the best possible ends. It is an alternative model of being based on a woman-centred world.
- The story includes a reversal of gender roles, with men doing housework and child rearing, in smoke-free, solar powered kitchens.

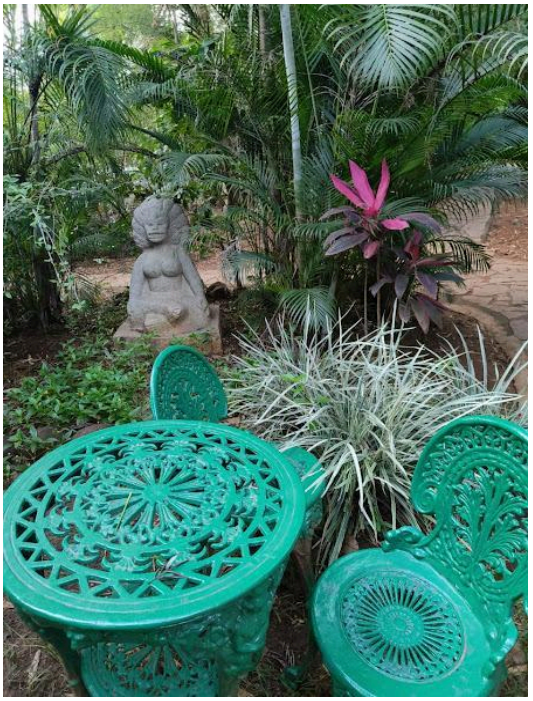
Real-World Utopia Attempts
An attempt to create a real-world utopia, called Rojava, is discussed.

- The experiment is being carried out by the Kurdish people in the struggle against Syria, Iran, and Iraq.
- The project is inspired by the ideas of their leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned and in isolation for 20 plus years.
- Öcalan's work integrates Marxist values with an emphasis on ecology and "genealogy".
- He believes that all revolutions are doomed to fail unless they become feminist revolutions.
- The two core principles of this project are ecology and genealogy.
- The project is attempting to create local democracy based on ecological principles and feminism.
- Abdullah Öcalan's writings are recommended as inspiring.

The Importance of Literature

The discussion concludes with a focus on the role of literature in inspiring change. It emphasizes how literature can transform people and encourages the integration of fictional narratives into real-world change. The value of fiction in inspiring change is highlighted as well as comparing its value to academic texts.

In summary, the discussion encompasses various aspects of feminism, spirituality, and their impact on creating a better world. It underscores the importance of grassroots leadership, feminine principles, literature, and real-world experiments in achieving a more equitable and sustainable future.



Theme: Dharma, Art, Culture *(Still Day 3 – fresh theme)*

Acting in Our Social and Physical Environments: A Christian Perspective

Fr. Rayappa Kasi

The presentation focused on **Pope Francis's encyclicals**, particularly *Laudato si,'* which emphasizes **integral ecology**. The speaker connected the Pope's teachings on environmental stewardship with **human relationships and inner resources**, arguing that addressing climate change and social issues requires a shift from self-interest to **empathy and compassion**.

Biblical references were extensively used to support this view of interconnectedness between humanity, nature, and spirituality, promoting a holistic approach to solving global problems. The lecture also explored the concept of **non-duality**, contrasting it with the detrimental effects of a fragmented worldview.

Throughout the presentation Fr. Rayappa used a PowerPoint Presentation with quotations and illustrations based on the papal encyclicals.

The links to the encyclicals and the PowerPoint are here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/12BJccDxtNm2rM3LPIQji0ys5gd_5WraL/view?usp=sharing

https://drive.google.com/file/d/12451Al5VVohKRaLP6VfAx2DV84letvgm/view?usp=sharing

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/120o9pwzwbC_8eMQvO_jmzDTZliDRgHyZ/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=101603032578610574541&rtpof=true&sd=true

Fr. Rayappa's presentation titled "Acting in our social and physical environment" is a plural environment design, which is framed within a Christian perspective. The presentation contrasts the church's previous focus on philosophy with its current emphasis on observable reality, experiences, and concrete issues such as ecology and the environment. The presenter notes a shift away from traditional concepts like heaven and hell towards a focus on the present reality. Two key documents are referenced: one on human relationships, which emphasizes fraternity and social friendship, and another on the physical environment, which draws from a 12th-century text by St. Francis of Assisi, "Be praised to you." The presenter emphasized that these documents represent the teachings of the Christian church today and are readily available, encouraging the audience to read them in their original form to fully appreciate their message.

The document on social environment is centred on the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable illustrates the concepts of bystanders versus upstanders. In the parable, a man is robbed and left for dead. A priest and a Levite, both considered bystanders, pass him by without helping. However, a Samaritan, who was considered a lower class, becomes the upstander. The Samaritan helps the

injured man, using his own resources, such as oil and wine, to tend to his wounds, puts him on his animal, and takes him to an inn for care, paying for his stay. This story highlights the innate resources within individuals to tackle problems and the idea that solutions are available within ourselves. The actions of the good Samaritan are described as not seeking external resources but rather relying on internal resources of empathy and compassion.

This story also stresses the interconnectedness of the human and physical environment, showing that animals and institutions (such as economy, technology, and politics) also play a role in this interconnectedness. This story is presented as a comprehensive depiction of human activity and institutional interactions with the human family. The story and Pope Francis' development of its themes are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The presenter notes that during the pandemic, many structures that were thought to be powerful and problem-solving, like religion, politics, the economy, and technology, were exposed as ineffective. Religious institutions were in lockdown, political systems were unable to act decisively, the economy could not prevent suffering, and technology and medicine were insufficient to stop the spread of disease or cure it. In contrast, it was the ordinary people such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and store workers, who responded to the crisis by risking their lives to serve others. The speaker notes that this revealed a key insight: "no one is saved alone." The emphasis is on the power of human empathy, compassion, and mercy, which are considered innate resources within each individual.

The concept of human ecology is then introduced, which is described as the resources humans have within themselves. It is contrasted with the idea that resources are primarily found outside of us. The speaker argues that focusing on internal resources and human connection is essential. The presenter describes the concept that love creates bonds and expands existence. Human beings are social, with their relationships extending beyond humans to include abiotic factors such as soil and water. The human need for connection and the experience of the true beauty of life through relationships is highlighted. The importance of bonding, communion, and fraternity is emphasized, contrasting it with self-sufficiency and isolation, which are likened to death. The goal of life is described as knowing God through love and not through thought, with the essence of everything existing within each person.

There are seven spheres of human ecology discussed:

- **Plant-based food:** Drawing from the Bible, the presentation states that God created humans to eat herbs, fruits, nuts, and vegetables. The church is said to be recommending plant-based food to combat climate change. The reduction of methane production and famine, and improvements to one’s health, are the benefits of this diet.
- **Sustainable economic systems:** The presentation mentions the words "keep it" from Genesis 2:15 as the basis for sustainable development.
- **Empathy, compassion, and love:** These are described as inner resources that are not found in technology, economy, politics, or religion.
- **Healthy recovering ecosystems:** This sphere emphasizes stewardship and kinship with animals and plants, highlighting that we are impoverished without them.
- **Equitable sustainable use of resources:** This point is drawn from Genesis 2:17 and social and economic justice from chapter 2:2-3.

- **Lower human population:** The speaker notes that this is a sensitive issue for the Catholic Church but does not elaborate due to its controversial nature.

The concept of *zeitgeist*, or the "spirit of the age," is brought up, referring to the shared aspirations and goals of humanity, which is seen in the worldwide focus on sustainable development. This focus on sustainability, it is argued, is supported by the Bible's call to "build it and keep it," implying both cultivation and care. The presenter emphasizes the importance of ethical and moral development, referring to righteousness and dharma as the highest growths that can be cultivated in the human ecosystem. If these are not cultivated, the external world will be destroyed. The presentation suggests that when technology disregards ethical principles it becomes a threat, and that technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its power.

The presentation then considers the moral conditions of an authentic human ecology, referencing Pope John Paul II. The family is noted to be the fundamental structure for learning about truth, goodness, love, and what it means to be a person. The importance of relationships and community is emphasized in creating a dignified life. Humanity is seen as capable of creating both good and bad worlds. When humans fail to cooperate with God and instead seek to dominate nature, it leads to a rebellion on the part of nature. The presenter quotes John, who describes how God has cared for nature, but cannot save it from humans. The discussion turns to the idea of fraternity and social friendship, which are described as more than just administrative equality. It's a call for love that transcends borders, creating a basis for social cohesion within cities and countries. It is not, however, a false universalism that leads one to neglect their own people, but a social friendship that recognizes room for everyone.

The idea of choosing to be a Good Samaritan, an upstander, rather than an indifferent bystander, is presented as a daily choice that everyone faces. The discussion then shifts to the physical environment, outlining seven goals, which include: ecological spirituality, ecological education, and ecological lifestyle. The presentation contrasts common good with self-interest. The idea is that nature operates for the common good of the ecosystem, whereas humans often act out of self-interest, which is destroying the world. The presenter urges that humans learn from nature's wisdom. The speaker then emphasizes the importance of producers, consumers, and decomposers, all using the same resources within an ecosystem. There are also three types of relationships mentioned: mutualism, where both benefit; commonism, where only one benefits; and parasitism, where one benefits at the expense of the other. The presentation concludes that education is the solution to understanding and improving these relationships.

The talk stresses the concept of ecological lifestyle, which involves adaptation, and notes that humans often struggle to adapt to behavioural changes. The speaker also notes that what is often perceived as a problem is actually an opportunity to flourish and become more complex. The most adaptable, not necessarily the strongest or most intelligent, is the one that survives. Integral ecology is introduced as the solution for how we can interact with nature. This model contrasts the business-as-usual approach, which fragments reality by separating economy, society, and ecology. Integral ecology views environment as the larger system of which society and economy are a part, such that destroying the environment will lead to the collapse of society and the economy. This model moves away from Cartesian dualism towards an integrated understanding.

The Church's role is not only to remind everyone of their duty to care for nature, but also to protect mankind from self-destruction. The presentation states that every act of cruelty towards any creature is contrary to human dignity and that nothing is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love and boundless affection. The presenter notes that we are so closely linked to the world around us, we feel the degradation of the soil as a physical ailment and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. To address this, there must be a balance in relationships between oneself, God, fellow humans, and all of creation. All the world's religions teach the importance of these three relationships. The presentation concludes that human life grows, matures, and is sanctified more when one is in relationship with God, others, and all creatures, going out from oneself to live in communion.

Rayappa Khasi Discussion Summary

The discussion began with a thank you for the teaching method used, which involved exploring big frames and seeing how different traditions support these ideas. This approach was appreciated as a way to organize thoughts and convey them as a group trying to grow an initiative. The participant expressed gratitude for a quick look into the Mundaka Upanishad, noting the absence of some speakers who were meant to cover other traditions of the region, including the Shakta tradition, which is considered very important.

The speaker draws attention to the phrase "survival of the fittest" in the context of power dynamics. They question how oppressed communities, who are far from being the fittest, can survive. This is linked to current events like the conflict in Israel and Palestine, where the powerless often cannot survive in war zones. The response emphasizes that fragmenting problems into issues like caste, feminism, farmers, or tribal problems is not helpful. It is argued that all these are fundamentally human problems and should be addressed as such.

A document based on fraternity and social friendship is highlighted as a model for how the world community should extend support. The need for an integrated approach is stressed, where politics, religions, economy, and technology are infused with a human ecology perspective. It is argued that resources are available to solve these problems, but actions like war distract from this. The speaker argues that empathy is a vital resource for solutions.
It is noted that economic issues often determine social and cultural problems. In India, the support of large corporations by the government is seen as problematic, with environmental issues being ignored.

It's pointed out that religious authorities are often afraid to condemn climate issues because they are linked to the current economic model of development. It is noted that despite the Pope's encyclical on environmental issues, many religious leaders are not making climate a major issue. There is a sense that economic considerations are prioritized over everything else. It was also mentioned that the Indian government proposed two bills, one regarding environmental impact assessment and the other a farm bill, both of which faced significant resistance. Development projects in the northeastern part of India are taking a toll on biodiversity. The need for international laws to enforce environmental protection is highlighted. India's good record on environmental preservation is noted, with many national parks and sanctuaries, though concerns are raised about the present situation.

The discussion turned to the exceptional nature of the Pope's statements on climate change. While other religious leaders have made positive statements, the Pope is seen as having very explicitly identified climate change as a contemporary crisis and urged followers to take decisive action. This is compared to other religious leaders and their focus on climate change, with the Pope's approach being seen as a contemporary example for leaders of other faiths to emulate. The discussion references a controversial paper on the historical roots of the ecological crisis, which attributes the crisis largely to Christianity's anthropocentric view that nature is for the benefit of humans to ascend to heaven.
This logic is seen as being encoded into technology, economy, and science, allowing for the exploitation of nature. The question is raised about whether the Pope's encyclical can undo the foundational damage of anthropocentrism and whether a theological revision has been made, where humans are no longer seen as separate from or above nature.

In response to the question, the speaker references, paragraph 67 of the document, which addresses the charge that Judeo-Christian thinking encourages the exploitation of nature by granting humans dominion over the earth. It is argued that this is not the correct interpretation of the Bible, and that Christians have at times misinterpreted the scriptures. The idea that being created in God's image and having dominion over the earth does not justify absolute domination over other creatures is highlighted.

Biblical texts are to be read in context, with an understanding that they call for humans to till and keep the garden of the world. Tilling is seen as cultivation, while keeping means caring and protecting, thus implying a relationship of mutual responsibility. Communities can take what they need from the earth, but they also have a duty to protect it for future generations. The earth is seen as belonging to the Lord, and any claim to absolute ownership is rejected. There is recognition that some organizations within India are working with a Christian perspective, engaging with contemporary issues while also critiquing traditional Christianity.

The discussion then shifts to the dichotomy between the bystander and the upstander, a classic concept that applies across humanity, not just within a religious framework. The question of what makes someone act and what produces resistance to acting is explored, especially when someone is confronted with something that goes against their values or knowledge. It is questioned what restrains people from acting in the face of wrongdoing, and whether religion has resolved this.

While religions preach intervention when one sees wrongdoing, the restraint that prevents people from acting at the right moment is seen as a major issue. It is suggested that even educated and conscious individuals often fall into this pattern of restraint. The discussion mentions the resistance to the ideological hold that faith can have over people, and how faith can sometimes turn humans into obedient beings who follow laws laid down by authority. It is argued that sometimes violence might be necessary to correct a wrong situation, even if it goes against religious interpretations of violence.

The conversation references the work of Jean Paul Sartre, who made a distinction between political violence and liberation violence, arguing that sometimes action with a tinge of violence may be necessary to correct a system. The question is raised about how to tackle the crucial moment when one must stand up and act, but an invisible force pulls one back. The bystander mentality, which is described as the "DNA of our times," is seen as problematic, as it implies that inaction supports

atrocities. The speaker argues that when something bad happens, people usually seek remedies from external sources, such as religion or institutions, rather than recognizing the resources available within them, referring to "human ecology," compassion and empathy.

The example of Manipur is given, where the bishops did not visit their suffering people, despite having the resources to do so. The speaker highlights that political figures offered solidarity, but religious leaders did not. The importance of ecological education, spirituality, and lifestyle is stressed to awaken people to their resources.

The interpretation of "dominion" in Genesis is further discussed. While Genesis 1:28 says to have dominion over the earth, Genesis 1:29 suggests that all the plants are given for food, potentially implying vegetarianism. It is suggested that "stewardship" might be a better word than dominion. It is further noted that initially only the dog and cat family were meat eaters, along with humans, who added meat later. It is mentioned that the Prophet Isaiah speaks of a time when a wolf will lie with a lamb, a lion will eat grass, and that this is a vision of utopia. It is suggested that mutations can change animals from vegetarian to non-vegetarian and vice versa, and that the Pope has invited the Christian community to embrace plant-based food.

The discussion touches on the scepticism of the institutional church living up to its ideals given its many scandals. There is a question of how much this ideal can be trusted as a solution to global problems. The importance of engaging with people in positions of power in the economy and politics is recognized, rather than simply advocating for everyone to be nice to each other. The practicalities of transitions, such as energy transition, which require extraction, are acknowledged. The discussion emphasizes the need for a sense of humility and realism, accepting that there are many contradictions and trade-offs to navigate. A "zeitgeist," or spirit of the age, where everyone works together to solve the current problems, is presented as a possible solution, but that awakening has yet to happen. There is an observation of a shift in society to a “spectacle society,” where people tend to watch rather than intervene.

A recent report about dolphins having plastic DNA molecules is shared, underscoring the extent of the environmental crisis. The discussion also notes that many lynchings have occurred in public spaces with many bystanders, highlighting the passivity of contemporary society. This inaction is contrasted with the immediate action of the Good Samaritan, who had few resources but used his empathy to help the wounded.

The discussion ends on a positive note. There is a recognition of the need to keep hope alive. A story is shared about a black fungus found in Chernobyl that is feeding on gamma radiation, as a sign that nature may heal itself.

Reinterpreting Religion and Addressing Challenges to Individual and Social Transformation through a Buddhist Perspective

Mrigendra Pratap

Mrigendra Pratap's presentation discusses the application of Buddhist principles to address challenges of individual and social transformation. He draws from personal experiences with Hinduism and Islam, highlighting misconceptions stemming from religious differences. Pratap then explores key Buddhist teachings**,** such as interconnectedness, mindfulness, and the middle path, suggesting their universal applicability across faiths. **He advocates for critical thinking, ethical living, and a balanced approach to integrating science and spirituality.** Finally, he proposes Buddhist principles as a model for interfaith dialogue and building a more harmonious world, emphasizing respectful exploration rather than outright adoption.

The presenter begins by expressing gratitude to the organizing team for their support in allowing the presentation of their paper. The subject of the talk is **interactive reason and addressing challenges for individual and social transformation within a Buddhist perspective**. The presenter draws from personal experiences as well as Buddhist philosophy as a student and teacher of Pali studies and as a practitioner.

The presenter explains that their personal experiences with Hinduism and Islam shaped their understanding. Growing up in a Hindu family in the 1980s, the presenter was deeply influenced by village culture and religious practices and learned many values from Hinduism. The presenter also had interactions with Muslim neighbours.

The presenter is currently a member of the Buddhist order, having accepted Buddhism as a religion in 2016.

The presenter notes some problems with Hindu tradition. One example is violence against women, which was common in their village in the 1980s. Men would justify violence by citing religious texts that suggested that women were deserving of punishment or control.

The presenter also experienced misconceptions regarding Islam, including historical misunderstandings, biased sentiments, cultural misunderstandings, and stereotyping. The presenter notes that these types of misconceptions can arise when people do not understand their own religion. The presenter's education and involvement in social movements broadened their understanding. Religious divisions can create issues such as classism, gender inequality, and blind faith. They also state that as societies evolve, it becomes essential to interpret religious teachings to meet contemporary needs. The past two decades have seen a resurgence of fundamentalism and blind faith, leading to increased social divisions and the blaming of other religions.

The presenter proposes that **Buddhist philosophy provides a framework for engaging with other religions in a more compassionate and wise manner**. By revisiting the historical Buddha's life and teachings, people can gain insight into how religious thought can contribute to personal and social transformation. This deep engagement is essential for addressing contemporary challenges and promoting unity and understanding. Lessons from the Buddha's life can be learned, including how the Buddha approached criticism from other religious leaders, as well as issues related to caste, gender, dogma, violence, intolerance, and blind faith.

The Buddha emphasized compassion, understanding, and dialogue rather than condemnation and encouraged open and thoughtful discussion. The Buddha also focused on personal experiences and understanding rather than blind adherence to dogma. This approach allowed him to connect with

people from various backgrounds and faiths, demonstrating that transformation is a result of individual experience and exploration rather than simply following tradition. The presenter states that the Buddha's process of engagement with society, including the idea of gradual teaching, is very important.

The presenter discusses several points on how Buddhist teachings can help people understand other religions and how those religions can benefit from Buddhist thought, especially in the modern era.

The first teaching is the concept of **Brahma Viharas** (sublime states) and mindfulness. Brahma Viharas include four key practices: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and peace. These teachings sustain religious bonds and are accessible to people of all faiths, as well as those without religious aspirations.

Mindfulness, a central meditation practice, helps individuals become aware of their thoughts, feelings, and surroundings, promoting clarity and insight. This awareness leads to a deeper understanding of oneself and others, reducing negative emotions. These teachings are universally appealing due to their secular and practical nature. Many people practice these concepts without identifying as Buddhist. The cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, and mindfulness can foster a more peaceful, inclusive, and harmonious society. These teachings have gained popularity among Buddhist followers of other religions and even non-religious individuals. These practices provide practical tools for managing stress, building emotional resilience, and developing empathy, contributing to personal and societal well-being.

The presenter notes that the promotion of these values more widely could bridge gaps that divide communities by focusing on shared human experiences and could create a stronger sense of humility and peace in society, without specific religious frameworks.

The second important teaching discussed is the **interconnectedness of all things**, also known as dependent origination. This concept is tied to the teaching of dependent co-arising, which states that all phenomena arise in dependence on multiple causes and conditions and that nothing exists independently. This realization was the pivotal moment of the Buddha's enlightenment.

Dependent origination explains how the cycles of rebirth are perpetuated through ignorance and continued action. Understanding this allows one to break free from the cycle and attain liberation, or nirvana. The recognition of interdependence leads to the understanding that all beings are interconnected, and their actions impact each other. This concept promotes the idea that peace and harmony are not just ethical choices, but necessary because if actions contribute to the suffering of others, people ultimately harm themselves. The presenter states that this principle provides a framework for social justice, inclusion, and equality that transcends religious boundaries.

Other religions could benefit from incorporating the idea of interdependence into their teachings, moving away from ideas of division or superiority. By promoting this principle, society could move towards a more compassionate and peaceful system. This teaching provides a practical path to address divisions related to race, gender, caste, and religion. It illuminates the nature of existence and offers an ethical basis for building a just and harmonious society.

Another important aspect of Buddhist teaching is the **encouragement of critical thinking and self-reflection**. Unlike some religions that may recite dogma, Buddhism encourages critical thinking and self-reflection as essential components of spiritual growth. The Buddha taught his followers not to accept teachings blindly, but to test them against their own experiences. This allows individuals from all religions to challenge unproductive or harmful beliefs. In a modern context, where religious extremism and fundamentalism are on the rise, critical thinking can serve as a model for other faiths. Religious communities can embrace Buddhism's flexibility and openness to interpretation and reform to address contemporary issues more effectively.

The presenter then discusses the idea of **reinterpreting and reconstructing religion in light of science and human values**. Scientific advancements have challenged traditional religious beliefs, but Buddhism has demonstrated a unique capacity to interpret its teachings in light of emerging knowledge. For instance, the Buddha's teachings on the nature of reality align with modern scientific findings, particularly in physics and cosmology. This adaptability sets Buddhism apart, allowing it to remain relevant without losing its essence.

Other religions can also benefit from this by recognizing that religious interpretations should not be confused with scientific understanding. The reconstruction of beliefs, such as those seen in modern Buddhist movements, serves as an example for other faiths. By embracing change while maintaining core values, religions can address contemporary challenges while preserving their spiritual foundations.

The presenter also highlights the importance of balancing reason and science with spiritual values. The interpretation of religion should not reject spiritual values in favour of science alone. While science advances technology, it can also foster materialism and selfishness. Buddhism offers a counterbalance by promoting interconnectedness and ethical behavior. Modern interpretations of Buddhism must focus on human behavior, recognizing that a purely scientific world overlooks the spiritual dimension. Science may explain the world, but compassion and mindfulness guide lives. By integrating both, people can create a balanced and human approach to life.

Another teaching of the Buddha is the **middle path**, which encourages balance and the avoidance of extremes. In today's world, where religious extremism often leads to conflict, the middle path offers a peaceful and moderate approach to resolving disputes. It can serve as a framework for other religions to address extremism within their traditions and foster coexistence and mutual respect. The media often emphasizes the importance of finding common ground and avoiding harmful extremes.

The presenter also discusses the importance of **promoting ethical living across faiths**. Ethical guidelines, such as abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and intoxication, are not limited to Buddhism. They can be viewed as universal principles that promote peaceful and harmonious living. As modern society grapples with issues like violence, corruption, and environmental degradation, ethical standards from religion can serve as a model for social well-being. Although many religious traditions value ethical living, the simplicity and universality of Buddhist precepts make them easily applicable across faiths.

The presentation also focuses on **Buddhism's social model and engagement**. In contemporary times, Buddhism has evolved through the concept of socially engaged Buddhism, which addresses

social, political, economic, and ecological issues. This movement encourages Buddhists to apply their teachings to real-world problems such as inequality, environmental degradation, and social injustice. Other leaders could benefit from focusing on practical solutions to societal issues rather than solely on doctrine or ritualistic practices. This demonstrates how religion can be a force for societal transformation. By adopting a socially engaged perspective, other faiths can address the fundamental challenges of our time while maintaining their spiritual foundations. The presenter mentions the social Buddhist movements in Buddhist countries, including India, and how they may differ in their interpretations.

Another key idea presented is that **Buddhism's non-dogmatic approach is a model for interfaith dialogue**. Buddhism does not claim to possess the exclusive truth and remains open to learning from and relating with others. This open-mindedness can serve as a model for how other religions might approach dialogue, fostering mutual understanding rather than division.

The presenter then states that **the ideal Buddhist is one who is connected to rational enlightenment while simultaneously dedicated to the welfare of all beings**. This path involves cultivating compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness, which benefit the individual and contribute to societal well-being. This ideal can inspire others to integrate similar principles into their practices. By adopting a Bodhisattva mindset, individuals can pursue their spiritual goals while actively addressing social issues such as poverty and inequality. This approach fosters a sense of connectedness and responsibility. The importance of achieving balance between self-development and social responsibility is emphasized. Compassion and altruism are key aspects of active engagement in the world to relieve the suffering of others. Religious teachings across various traditions would evolve to emphasize personal ethics, ethical behavior and social harmony.

In conclusion, the presenter summarizes that Indian Buddhism offers unique perspectives that can help people understand and engage with other religions in both modern and contemporary contexts. The emphasis on compassion, mindfulness, interconnectedness, critical thinking, and the middle path provide practical solutions for navigating religious differences. The openness to interpretation and engagement with modern science can assist other religions in addressing contemporary challenges. By adopting some Buddhist approaches, other faiths can promote peace, tolerance, and understanding.

However, it is emphasized that while Indian Buddhism offers valuable secular and scientific teachings, it is not suggested that other faiths adopt these teachings wholesale. Instead, it is a respectful invitation to explore ideas, recognizing that other traditions may already possess similar principles within their frameworks. Indian Buddhism simply provides an additional path for reflection and dialogue in the shared pursuit of a better world.

Mrigendra Pratap - Discussion Summary

The discussion began with a question about the **Buddha's teachings on interfaith dialogue**. The questioner noted that during the Buddha's time, there were no major religions like Islam or Christianity, and the Buddha primarily debated with those of the Vedic traditions. The questioner is interested in knowing if the Buddha had any direct teachings on interacting with different faiths, given that the concept of interfaith dialogue is relatively modern. They also expressed concern about a sense of superiority among some Buddhists and how this might affect interfaith discussions. The questioner suggests that the concept of "skillful means" could be expanded to understand other religions as valid paths, just as the Buddha used different teachings at different times based on the capacity of his audience. Perhaps religious founders like Jesus and Muhammad also used skillful means adapted to their times and audiences, and if this is accepted, it could lead to interreligious harmony.

In response, the presenter stated that his paper did not claim Buddhist superiority. The paper highlighted basic Buddhist teachings and suggested that other faiths could find value in them. The speaker agrees that interfaith dialogue is a modern concept, and while the Buddha engaged in debates and answered questions from people of different backgrounds, there was no direct interfaith dialogue as understood today.

The discussion then shifts to skillful means. The speaker explains that the Buddha's teaching methods were gradual, and he taught different things based on people's understanding. The example of the Buddha first teaching his old friends the four noble truths and later teaching a merchant's son about generosity and ethics before the four noble truths is used to illustrate this point. The speaker emphasized that skillful means is also a key concept in Mahayana Buddhism.

A participant then introduced a verse from the Kalama Suta, which urges people not to believe something simply because they heard it, or it is in religious books, or because it is taught by elders. Instead, one should believe in something after observation and analysis, and if it agrees with reason and benefits everyone, they should accept it. This participant suggests that this teaching should apply to all religions. The participant also says that a Tamil poet expanded on this concept, stating that the first enlightenment is having the power to accept or reject anything. The idea that our

consciousness is always scanning information for threats is also mentioned. Another participant wanted to know about the Four Noble Truths.

The discussion turned to the concept of suffering in Buddhism. The speaker questioned why Buddhism focuses so much on suffering, pointing out that suffering is a natural part of life and a resource for growth and evolution.

The first noble truth, it is explained, doesn't state that everything is suffering, but that all compounded phenomena are marked by suffering, like water is marked by wetness. It is mentioned that understanding suffering involves recognizing both physical pain and the mental anguish associated with it, and that when suffering is understood, the mental anguish decreases. The first path on the eight-fold path, right vision, includes the awareness of suffering, which is crucial for progress.

The discussion addressed the social implications of Buddhism, noting that during the Buddha's time, the social structure was not favourable to women, but he opened his order to women. This is considered extraordinary for that time. Women from various backgrounds joined the order and became enlightened. It is noted that while Buddhism was initially progressive, issues for women arose later in some traditions. It is noted that the Mahayana tradition has better conditions for women. The disappearance of the order of nuns in some countries, like Sri Lanka, and their struggle to be accepted again is mentioned. There was some resistance to women entering the order, and it is claimed that the Buddha said that the ordination of women would shorten the life of the dharma.

The discussion then moved to the issue of violence in Buddhist countries. The point is made that in Sri Lanka, there has been extreme violence against the Tamil minority, despite the country being known for pacifism. The idea is presented that enforced pacifism can lead to suppressed violence that erupts in brutal forms. The speaker noted that there is a new theory that this is part of a natural tendency of the human personality.

A historian is mentioned who was attacked by a Buddhist party for her views on this topic. The question of whether the duality of enlightenment and violence is reflected in Buddhist teachings is posed. It is noted that in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, soldiers often seek the blessing of monks before going to fight. It is argued that these actions are not in line with the Buddha’s teachings.

The discussion also covered the relationship between religion and culture. It is said that it is not possible to say that if one is culturally Buddhist, they are following the Buddha’s teachings, and there are problems in Buddhist countries. The actions of some monks in committing violence are criticized, and socially engaged Buddhist movements are cited. The idea of separation in Buddhism is discussed, and the point is made that Buddhist teachings do not emphasize the separation of self.

The lay-oriented movement is discussed, which argues that one does not need to be a monk to follow the Buddha’s teachings, and that commitment is more important than lifestyle. The influence of Sinhala nationalism on Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka is discussed, and the idea is introduced that entering a monastic order involves renouncing worldly pursuits, including the nation state, which complicates the involvement of monks in nationalistic violence. The distortion that occurs when monks incite violence is raised.

A comment is made about the need to act in the face of injustice, highlighting the distinction between individual limitations and the ability to act. The importance of acting from one's own location rather than an abstract global framework is emphasized, along with the need for self-transformation as a precondition for collective action. The idea of not blurring the line between self and collective is also introduced. It is also argued that a misreading of some quotes from Marx has led to the idea that he did not care about religion when he was in fact arguing for individual action and self-discovery and that is found in many traditions.
The idea is proposed that self-critical inquiry is not unique to Buddhism and that many religious and spiritual traditions emphasize critical thinking and the importance of experience. The practice of "*shravana mana*" which is critical thinking, and "*anubhava*" which is going by one's own experience is also discussed.

The discussion briefly touches on leadership and institutions, and the point is made that effective movements need to both have a charismatic leader and be built on institutions that will survive the leaders.

The discussion ends with a question to a younger participant about solutions to social problems, particularly regarding Manipur. It is noted that it is a complex issue with a long history, and that the role of the state is critical to understanding the situation. The need to listen to the communities involved is stressed.

Celebration of Pluralism from an Islamic/Religious Perspective

Behzad Fatmi

This presentation by Behzad Fatmi discussed pluralism from an Islamic perspective, emphasizing the importance of interfaith dialogue and celebrating diversity as divinely intended. He highlighted the work of his organization, Indialogue Foundation, which promotes interfaith understanding and humanitarian relief, inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen. Fatmi contrasts a "civil Islam," which advocates for peace and social justice through positive action, with "political Islam," which he views as potentially authoritarian and violent. The presentation uses examples from various countries to illustrate the practical application of these principles and the positive impact of interfaith cooperation. Finally, the core values of the Hizmet movement, a global social movement, are outlined, reflecting the principles of respect, peace, and social justice.

The presenter started by reading a summary of his presentation shared with the organizing committee. **The core idea is that pluralism is rooted in both secular and religious traditions**. In a globalized world, no single culture, religion, or ideology can remain isolated. Therefore, a pluralistic worldview is necessary for peace and progress.

He explains that from a secular perspective, it's about acknowledging that no single entity can thrive in isolation. From a religious viewpoint, the idea is connected to the concept of God. While most religions believe in an all-powerful God, people fail to acknowledge that God created us differently. Diversity, therefore, is divinely intended and should be celebrated.

Fatmi then shared an experience from the Indialogue Foundation during the COVID-19 pandemic. They noticed religious people from various faiths actively helping others, inspired by their respective beliefs. This led to an event called "Love Thy Neighbour," which brought together a Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Bahai, all engaged in humanitarian relief work. This demonstrated how different faiths can inspire service to humanity.

He emphasized a key point that emerged from discussions: **the importance of interpretation and reinterpretation of religious texts**. As a Muslim, he believes the Quran is a divine revelation, but it must be interpreted by humans. Multiple interpretations are necessary for understanding the text, and denying this, is incorrect. This has been true since the Prophet's time, with different opinions and interpretations arising. The division between Sunni and Shia Islam and the various schools of jurisprudence within Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi, and Maliki) all highlight the diversity of interpretation. He also mentions recent Quran translations by Dr. Zafruul Islam Khan in India and Tahir Kadri in Pakistan, underscoring the ongoing process of interpretation. He concludes that all religions are subject to ongoing interpretation, and no religion is closed to it.

Fatmi addresses the issue of separating Sufism from mainstream Islam. He argues that **Sufism is a part of Islam, a kind of interpretation within its larger umbrella**. It is problematic to associate Sufism with peace and mainstream Islam with violence, as some might. Radical Muslims and Islamophobes share a common view that Islam is a violent religion, which is a position to avoid.

He then introduces Fetullah Gulen, a Turkish Islamic scholar living in the US since 1999, who has written extensively on Sufism but does not identify as a Sufi. **Gulen believes that some Sufis withdraw from the world to avoid sin and get closer to God**, a view Fatmi says is a form of spiritual selfishness. Gulen suggests that people should not withdraw from the world, but instead engage

with it while trying to stay away from sin. He describes the Islamic concept of *taqwa*, which is often seen as avoiding sin, but which Gulen interprets as being engaged in the world and working to solve its problems, while staying away from sin.

Fatmi notes that all religions have faults and are subject to criticism. However, we must not discount or discard all people of faith. Billions of people in the world are religious, and we must find ways to cooperate with them peacefully. He cites the example of Turkey after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, when the Kemalist government discriminated against practicing Muslims. This harshness led to a backlash, the rise of an Islamist regime, which exploits the fear of conservative people of faith, stating that they will be discriminated against if they do not stay in power. Fatmi says it is crucial to foster an equal relationship between people of faith and atheists.

Fatmi introduces the organization he runs, the Indialogue Foundation, based in New Delhi. It is affiliated with the Hizmet/Gulen movement, a transnational civil society organization active in 150 countries, which focuses on education, dialogue, and humanitarian relief.

He also presented a PowerPoint presentation about the organisation and its vision and goals:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/120AJICclL19Qr43scUSJlXGRI1n9XNBZ/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=101603032578610574541&rtpof=true&sd=true

The Indialogue Foundation was established in 2005 to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue, community cohesion, proactive citizenship, and universal values like love, compassion, and tolerance through academic, cultural, and social programs. They are primarily inspired by Fetullah Gulen, whose movement works in education, interfaith dialogue, and humanitarian relief, and is a prolific author of over 80 books. They also draw inspiration from figures like Gandhi, Mandela, and Tagore.

Fatmi discussed Gulen's thought on dialogue, which is not a pragmatic strategy but rather a religious duty rooted in Islamic sources like the Quran and Sunnah. **Gulen advocates for dialogue because of Islam, not despite it**. He refers to the Quranic verse about being made into races and tribes to know one another, not to dominate each other. Gulen's worldview is God-centric and human-centric, seeing humans as the greatest manifestation of God's names and attributes. He says our shared humanity is our basic commonality. Loving the creation is a reflection of loving the creator. A person who embodies this approach is a *gul insan*, a person of heart, who opens their hearts to everyone, tries to be compatible, avoids vicious competition, and shows love to other people's philosophies, turning a blind eye to their wrongdoings and responding to bad behavior with kindness.

He describes the importance of accepting being a victim rather than an oppressor, from a faith-based perspective. **Diversity is divinely intended**, referencing another Quranic verse that states if God had willed, everyone would have believed. This diversity includes race, religion, nation, and lifestyle, and is a route to understanding. Dialogue is necessary to live together. Gulen advises to be a prosecutor towards oneself and an advocate for others, which is conducive to dialogue. He also highlights *hush guru*, which is emphatic acceptance: accepting people as they are without judgment, let alone trying to convert them. Interfaith dialogue should not be a tool for conversion.

Fatmi says that we must not judge a whole person based on one attribute we dislike, and instead we must limit our dislike to the attribute that generated the bad action, and not hate the person. He also stresses *musbet*, which is positive action: proactive action, not a reaction to someone else's actions. This requires positive thinking about others. The related concept of *hnuzan* signifies thinking positively about God's designs and decrees, and thinking well of God's creatures, avoiding negative thoughts and feelings. **Gulen is against using dialogue to convert people or to create a melting pot, and instead encourages people to be themselves and find common ground.**

Fatmi moves to applying these principles in real life, discussing how the Hizmet movement is faith-inspired but faith-neutral in its activities. It is Islamically inspired but open to people of all faiths, cultures, and languages, serving people in need, not just a particular community. The movement has attracted support from diverse backgrounds because of its inclusive character. Gulen's teachings and advocacy mean that even those not directly involved in dialogue activities tend to have a dialogic approach.

He notes that Hizmet runs a school in a Hindu-dominated village in Bangalore, where the students are naturally Hindu. The society that they serve in their institutions reflects the nature of the society they serve. Gulen argues that dialogue is too important to be left to dialogue practitioners alone. All members of the movement, whether working in education, dialogue, or humanitarian relief, are expected to be dialogic in their personal and professional lives. All organizations should use dialogue in pursuing their main objectives.

He provides an example from their schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, established during the war in the 1990s. Despite the war, these schools opened and served children from all the fighting communities, including Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians. The children interacted peacefully, demonstrating that if left alone, they would get along with each other. These schools are considered "peace islands." Similar schools were established in the Philippines and in northern Iraq, demonstrating the real-world application of pluralism.

The presentation includes videos about Fetullah Gulen receiving a peace award, the core values of the Hizmet movement, and a differentiation between civil Islam and political Islam.

Here are the links to the videos:

Who Is Fethullah Gulen?

https://youtu.be/CFN1MmXTYFs?si=_NZdA8engAOTNunI

Core Values of the Hizmet Movement:

https://youtu.be/dXdCDJ5Ob7c?si=tZu04yLfXeuyoDU0

Civil vs Political Islam in 2 Minutes:

https://youtu.be/PKLD0NJQKJA?si=ateItROzL5ksEKmw

The video about Hizmet's core values emphasizes:

- Respect for human rights
- Social justice and equal opportunity
- Respect for the rule of law
- Peaceful and positive action
- Empowerment of women
- Ethical action
- Respect for diversity and pluralism
- Voluntary participation and altruism
- Consultation and shared wisdom
- Civic nature and independence
- Civic engagement and contribution to society
- Protection of the environment
- A holistic view toward humanity and the unity of the mind and the heart

The final video discussed the difference between political and civil Islam. Political Islam prioritizes the implementation of Islamic law through political power, often adopting a revolutionary and anti-western stance. Civil Islam focuses on the individual's connection with God and serving humanity, embracing universal values such as human rights and peace. **Civil Islam embraces democracy whereas political Islam is inherently authoritarian.** Political Islam, while not always violent, is often used to justify violence. Civil Islam is rooted in the early days of Islam, while political Islam is a more modern, post-colonial phenomenon.

The presentation concludes by highlighting the contrast between civil and political Islam, reiterating the Hizmet movement's belief in civil Islam, and inviting questions.

Behzad Fatmi - Discussion Summary

The discussion begins with an inquiry about the speaker's work in Afghanistan, given the political instability there. The speaker explains that their organization, which operates schools internationally, had to navigate significant challenges in Afghanistan, particularly with the rise of the Taliban. Initially, international teachers, including some from India, were withdrawn from the

schools due to increasing instability, even before the Taliban takeover. The schools continued with Afghan teachers and administrators, but many had to be shut down after the Taliban came to power. Currently, only a few schools remain operational in Afghanistan, staffed by local teachers and administrators. The speaker also mentions that similar issues led to school closures in Somalia, compounded by financial difficulties during the pandemic.

The conversation shifts to the origins and philosophy of the speaker's organization. The movement was started in the 1960s in Turkey by **Fethullah Gülen**, an 86-year-old scholar who now resides in the US. Gülen, who was a licensed imam, was concerned about the broader social issues of the time. He was inspired by another scholar, Said Nursi, who identified three major problems of humanity: illiteracy, conflict, and poverty. Gülen's proposed solutions were to invest in education to combat illiteracy, engage in interfaith and intercultural dialogue to resolve conflicts, and promote humanitarian relief and ethical wealth creation to counter poverty.

Gülen encouraged Turkish businessmen to establish schools, dialogue organizations, and humanitarian relief groups. This led to the expansion of the movement into the newly formed republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. The movement emphasizes earning wealth with the intention of giving back to society, and it has attracted support from businessmen around the world, including in India.

The discussion then turns to the political situation in Turkey and the controversy surrounding Fethullah Gülen. The speaker asserts that the **2016 coup attempt** in Turkey was a **false flag operation** engineered by the Turkish government to blame Gülen and his movement. The speaker suggests that President Erdogan had multiple motivations for this: first, he had ambitions to establish a new Ottoman Empire by 2023 and declare himself the caliph. For this, he needed to be seen as the undisputed leader of the Muslim world, which meant marginalizing any equally or more respected figure, such as Gülen. Second, the Turkish government wanted the speaker's organization to do its propaganda, and they denied this request. Finally, Gülen and the movement were critical of the corruption of Erdogan's family.

The speaker elaborates on the erosion of democracy in Turkey under Erdogan. Initially, Erdogan was seen as a pro-democracy leader who balanced Islam and democracy. However, he later showed authoritarian tendencies and became involved in corruption scandals.

The Turkish currency has significantly devalued, and the country faces major economic issues including high unemployment and inflation. The speaker also mentions the persecution of Kurdish leaders like Abdullah Öcalan and Selahattin Demirtaş, who were imprisoned for armed rebellion and for participating in democratic politics, respectively. The Turkish state has a history of persecuting Kurdish people.

The discussion explores the complex relationship between Sufism and mainstream Islam. The speaker personally identifies as a Muslim and a believer in Sufism, but prefers not to be called a Sufi instead of a Muslim. To him, Sufism is a part of Islam, and drawing distinctions between them is akin to drawing a distinction between Prophet Muhammad and Rumi. The speaker asserts that the teachings and values of Sufism were promoted and lived by Prophet Muhammad. The speaker believes that the Prophet's life should be the primary point of reference and inspiration. The

speaker clarifies their position by noting that there are different schools of thought within Islam, such as the Hanafi school, but that being a Muslim is a primary identity.

The conversation moves to the role of the speaker's movement in India. The speaker explains that their approach is to engage with as many people, groups, and communities as possible and to bring them together on common concerns. Instead of directly confronting political issues, they try to engage people from different communities in positive activities. For example, in 2018, they organized "friendship dinners" during Ramadan, bringing people from diverse backgrounds together to discuss issues such as the importance of educating girls. This event led to the establishment of a hostel for girls from smaller towns and villages in Delhi. They have also recently worked on rejuvenating a pond in Rajasthan, involving people from multiple communities in the project.

The speaker acknowledges that they are sometimes seen as shying away from direct political confrontation, but the speaker says that they do not shy away from engaging with right-wing groups, such as the RSS, in their programs. The speaker notes that they prioritize positive community-building efforts and are a small organization that may not be able to take on such political issues. They believe that building positive relationships and showing positive examples is a better strategy for creating change. However, the speaker says that they may become more assertive in the future as their organization grows.

The speaker describes the movement’s relationship with other Muslim organizations in India. They engage in intrafaith dialogue with different groups like Jamat-e-Islami, Darul Uloom Deoband, and Nadwatul Ulama. While some groups initially had reservations, their relationship has improved, and they now engage with these organizations on various issues. The organization runs schools and hostels for students where young people learn about their movement and ideology voluntarily.

Regarding the Quran, the speaker recommends a recent publication by Dr. Zafarul Islam Khan, which includes a comprehensive commentary.

Finally, the discussion addresses allegations that the movement is a cult, which are found in online books and counter-propaganda. The speaker asserts that the movement is not a cult because its values are not outside mainstream Islam. The speaker adds that Fethullah Gülen does not claim to be a prophet, nor does he propose an alternative book to the Quran. He is advocating for an interpretation of the Quran that is compatible with democracy, science, and human rights.

The speaker notes that the movement faces opposition from both the Kemalist and Islamist groups in Turkey, which are both opposed to the movement’s vision of civil Islam. The speaker says that the accusation that the organization is a cult is as ludicrous as calling its members terrorists.

The Cynical Politics of Negating the Possibility of Subversion in Culture

Sadanand Menon

Today, I want to start with a topic that's always around us: context. We hear so much noise about conflicts happening in different places. Two weeks ago, Arundhati Roy received the Harold Pointer

Prize for Writing in Delhi. She quoted a poem by Rafeef Ziadah [1], who has been performing it in various places. This poem reflects what's happening in the world today.

Thank you to Fireflies and Kalpavriksh for inviting me to this event. I'm not here to talk about religion for long. While religions have many uplifting thoughts, organized religion often helps maintain control and suppress people's cultures. When we talk about people's culture as personal faith and shared beliefs, it can humanize relationships and conflicts. However, organized religion usually plays a negative role.

Instead of focusing on religion, I want to discuss culture and its potential for change. Nowadays, there's a sense that culture has lost its power. Alongside this is an alarming rise in majoritarianism, nationalism, violence, and economic inequality. These issues collectively point towards a form of emerging fascism.

"Now, as long as people's culture we understand as personal faith, certain kind of ritual practices, certain kind of shared beliefs and so on, they have lots of possibilities of humanizing context, humanizing relationships, humanizing, let's say, conflicts, if you want to call it that, Small conflicts, big conflict. But there are possibilities.

However, organized religion has, in my understanding of the history of that, has almost always played a negative role. So, I'm not going to be talking about here, and my focus is going to be on the idea of a larger idea of culture, and within that the possibility of subversion, and within that a completely new phenomenon which one has been seeing nowadays, which sort of asserts that culture seems to have lost that potency.

So that's what I'm going to be addressing, along with the increasing sense of dismay at the alarming levels of politically assertive majoritarianism, virulent nationalism, toxic violence of lynchings and bulldozers, hostile takeover of institutions, demonstrative chauvinism, galloping obscurantism, a celebratory gush of hate speech, the widening economic chasm between the upper 15% and the rest of the country, and a general regression into coarse behaviour in daily life linked to food, dress, worship, relationships and love.

Cumulatively, if you want, you can define it as incipient fascism. One has also been frequently hearing a ready description of our times as a within quotation "collapse of culture"? This is. This is an expression that I have been trying to understand. The outstanding 20th century art critic John Berger, I'm sure many of you are familiar with him, used the phrase, "a period of cultural disintegration". That's what he described late 20th century European society as, a period of cultural disintegration. And I always wondered about this. Is culture a solid, monolithic material edifice that disintegrates, collapses, and simply ceases to be like the twin towers of the World Trade Centre it which people can visualize."

Can culture collapse like buildings or is it something more fluid that changes form but never truly disappears?

Finding the right image to explain complex concepts can be challenging. My friend Chandralekha struggled to visualize time for her dance production until she heard someone describe it as *kala sarpa*, the serpent of time. This helped her complete her work.

Recently, at an air show in Chennai, a policewoman's announcements made me see culture as a bundle of opposites. She warned people to hold onto their children and belongings tightly while enjoying the event. This made me realize that culture is full of contradictions.

“A lady officer was in stern flow on the PA system with a set of homilies in Tamil. Someone philosophical seemed to have written the script for her as she intoned “it's wonderful to see so many families on the beach with children, but please remember children are slippery. Please hold on to them tightly so that you don't lose them.” Then again after some time. “the waters on the shore are very inviting, but please don't step into it because it's very deep and dangerous.” Then again after some time “all you ladies are wearing nice expensive jewellery but please cover it up with your pallu's and dupattas lest it attract unwanted attention. Please do not let your phones, your watches and your purses out of your sight. And the final if you spot any suspicious looking person, please report to us at once.”

The haze of confused thoughts that I was huddling through lifted instantly when I heard this set of oxymorons. It was just the trigger I needed. The policewoman made it made me clearly see culture now as a bundle of conjoined opposites swirling around us. Children ornament purses are good as long as they are attached to the personal pronoun in someone else's hand. They constitute a cultural collapse. The person next to you in the festival crowd is good as long as he is not suspicious looking, whatever that means. But a different colour, language, religion, dress turns him instantly dangerous and worth being called out.”

Many legal cases in India involve cultural issues, like the Babri Masjid case or inter-religious relationships. Often, these cases are used to manipulate the law for political purposes. Julian Assange recently spoke about how laws can be misused, calling it lawfare.

“In most cases the trope is similar and predictable and FIR is filed claiming hurt sentiments or claims of being offended on religious or cultural grounds. A case is registered, a so-called inquiry is initiated, arrests are made and an obliging lower judiciary and off late even the higher judiciary is readily available to put the seal of legality over all this.

Yet we all know that the legal framework evoked is both tenuous and spurious. The legal invocations can often be atrocious. Just to illustrate the Indian Criminal procedure code of 1898 now it has been renamed. The Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Samhita of 2024 was revised and published in 1973 by the Orient Longman. The original version of the present Orient Black Swan.

Not yet out of college, I was given a retainer to copy edit the revised manuscript. It was a task that provided me considerable amusement even as it struck terror in the heart. One of the articles of law deleted in the revised version is a law on a criminal type in India.

Described as a scoundrel. It said A scoundrel is one who sleeps by day and wakes by night, one who rouse about and no one knows from whence he came and whether he went. This was a law in the Indian Criminal procedure code till 1973 by which any constable in any police station could arrest you and put in jail for 15 days, no questions asked. You don't need UAPA and all those fancy things. Scoundrel thing is good enough.

The same law, slightly reverted, has now come into the Vagrant Act. It's which is in the new Samhita. It's very much there, the Vagrancy Act. If you are caught out without a reason given whatever that

reason might be, you say you go into a late-night show but you don't have a stub of your ticket. You had it, you're a vagrant, you can be put in jail 15 days anyway. So now this can easily apply to most of us and don't be surprised if it makes its way back soon into our newly confected and Hindi law books."

I have problems with the idea of cultural collapse because culture isn't a solid structure that can just fall apart.

"It surely is not like the buildings in Joshi math experiencing a devastating crumble with an earthquake. Nor can culture be imagined, imagined as cracking up and being affected by the subsidence of loose soil at the base, as in Wayanad recently. One perhaps needs to understand culture, like water or air, as a unified fabric that forms, moulds, transforms, mutates, inverts, insinuates, immerses, infuriates, and so on, but never collapses. Or, as Antonio Gramsci proposed, " culture is a continuous form of coercion and consent, in short, the very form of hegemony."

Culture is also a source of subversion and dissent, which is why it's under attack from those in power. The state wants to control culture and reduce it to something uniform and marketable. But true culture is always evolving and resisting such control.

"Terry Eagleton, the great literary critic, famously said, from pig farming to Picasso, everything is culture. But if pig farmers go bankrupt or Picasso's paintings are vandalized, culture doesn't collapse. Instead, I would say it merely becomes a sign of the emergence of a new culture. One, of course, understands the spirit in which such formulations are. Such formulations happen, like what Amartya Sen said in a TV interview recently. Last year. In fact, he talked of " a reduction of the idea of India, a distortion of India, of life, of life here having become within quotation precarious and within quotation barbaric, with a horrendous potential for nastiness."

Exactly in the same vein, another very important public intellectual who lives nearby, Ganesh Devi. He also used the same T word at a talk at Manthan in Hyderabad, where he talked about being, "terrified of present-day India." At the Kolkata Literary Festival last year, dancer Mallika Sarabhai spoke of the within quotation complete destruction of the ideals in the country. On an earlier occasion, after a spate of lynchings of Muslim men, she had said "How shall I describe the depravity of spirit that leads us into becoming lynch mobs condoned in indifference and silence by all of us? What culture are we harping on preserving? What Sanskriti? If this be our culture, may it perish at once. If this be your Sanskriti, may Apocalypse come right now." There are also delectable ironies like the denial of permission to the street theatre group Jana Natya Manch to perform at the Jamia Millia University campus in the very amphitheatre named after Safdar Hashmi. I mean, the most interesting Kafka situation."

In conclusion, we shouldn't view culture as collapsing but rather recognize that it's constantly under pressure and changing form. It's essential to understand this dynamic nature of culture and resist attempts to freeze or commodify it.

Talking about past cultural riches only highlights the current oppression in society. Mentioning past glory and cultural uniqueness, including religious uniqueness of the majority, often becomes a way to bash minorities. Social theorists, especially structural anthropologists, say that every society creates cultural outlets to relieve tension from oppressed groups. Festivals and carnivals let these

groups express their culture and blow off steam. Though controlled, these events provide fun and break the daily routine. They also introduce experiences of negativity and otherness, which can be powerful social tools.

“My favourite philosopher Walter Benjamin articulated this with remarkable clarity. In his thesis on the philosophy of history, he said, there is no document. I'm repeating. There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

These festivals bring together people who usually don't fit into mainstream society. You’ll find mendicants, quacks, soothsayers, con men, acrobats, wrestlers, snake charmers, dealers in aphrodisiacs, prostitutes, pickpockets, the drunk and demented, transgenders, performers, magicians, and balladeers. For them, culture means survival and a chance for social acceptance. For others not bound by middle-class morality, these events allow a break from normal rules.

Our melas (fairs), utsavs (festivals), purams (temple festivals), jatras (pilgrimages), perunals (feasts), urs (Muslim festivals), leelas (plays), etc., show society's repressed side. This side returns regularly to challenge established culture. The Tamil writer Perumal Murugan faced backlash for his novel until the Madras High Court intervened.

Currently, there is an unfiltered expression of hatred and violence from majority community leaders on social media. Religious figures who should pursue higher ideals now openly display hatred and call for violence against minorities. When they do this, they often escape punishment and receive public praise.

In contrast, those accused of being Maoists or Naxalites face severe state action even if they have retreated from violence. Over 150 alleged Naxalites have been killed in staged encounters in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra without much outcry.

Religious figures calling for violence often get bail and public support. Some even get elected to positions of power. Meanwhile, activists like Stan Swami and GN Sai Baba face imprisonment or worse.

Historically, mainstream religious practices have created fearsome 'others' like demons or monsters to ostracize different communities such as forest dwellers or slaves. This exclusion has been part of our cultural baggage for over 2000 years.

During British rule in the late 19th century, tensions between communities were exploited for control. An inflammatory poster printed in 1897 depicted a cow with 84 deities being attacked by a demon-like figure representing Muslims. This led to protests and court cases.

Recent academic debates discuss how threats are embodied in the figure of the monster to justify exclusion and control. Categories like terrorist or anti-national are used to normalize such exclusion.

“So, what is this romance we have with culture, with all its violence and injustice and inequality and savagery? And why do we lament at any sign of its so-called collapse? Why don't we realize that culture too is one of the repressive arms of the potentially absolutist state and can be invoked at will in a multinational multiethnic society like ours as an instrument to keep people divided and distracted. The state does not hesitate to posture as if all positive cultural manifestations are a direct consequence of its own beneficence. But it has only managed to generate a spurious set of

premises of bogus cultural nationalism which are in reality manifestly anti people and conspire to discredit healthy cultural diversity in favour of a uniform and homogenized mode of being.

The older Indian elite still lives with the fantasy that we are a culturally versatile society. The army and the paramilitary can convert teenagers in Kashmir into pincushions with their pellet guns and blow out their eyes. There is no national uproar. Yet we are convinced we are cultured. In Benghavayal, near Tiruchi in Tamil Nadu, human faeces can be dumped into an overhead water tank supplying drinking water to the Dalit village. None of us will lose our sleep. Couple of months ago, the Madras High Court hauled the Tamil Nadu police over the coals for not getting anywhere with the investigation even 18 months after this criminal act. Yet we will hold our heads high and boast of our superior culture. I don't think there is any society in the world today which absorbs this sort of brutalization so easily."

Michel Foucault warned about the insidious nature of power that grows relentlessly and remorselessly. Power is gained through knowledge and vice versa. This idea fuels cancel culture today.

Yet something happened last year, and it has been repeated subsequently, which for me encapsulates this entire problematic:

"A young Brahmin corporate honcho of a multinational corporation, traveling business class on an international flight, got up midway and pissed on another passenger across the aisle. Your friend. Okay? Later. Later, this young multimillionaire's father defended him, saying he has been brought up with good Brahmin Samskara. He will never do anything like this. For those who collect such precious moments of sociological joy, this should be a familiar line. For hardly a few months prior to that, exactly the same was said of a bunch of convicted rapists and murderers who were prematurely released by the Gujarat High Court. We were assured that these were good Brahmins and that a highly cultured Brahmin will never do anything of the sort.

Please note that all of them are being certified as having been brought up as good Brahmins, not as good citizens compared to all the other listings I made earlier. For me, it is this incident that becomes a totem of our times. We are very happy having become a culture that derives pleasure in pissing on people. But you will ask, doesn't it mean collapse of culture? I beg to differ. For me, this is culture, and this is the crisis confronting us all. Earlier signals of cultural subversion have now become the various signs of cultural oppression and assault."

We need new insights and tools to address this crisis of culture. Meetings like this one aim to find positive directions forward. Thank you.

Endnotes:

1. https://www.google.com/search?q=Rafiya+palesrtinian+poet&sca_esv=26ee9b68140196fe&sxsrf=ADLYWIJbUweW5CkXqKwfYMFwWLlzEhWQjg%3A1730436804969&ei=xF4kZ8zoOvySseMP2Pzn4Q8&ved=0ahUKEwjM2sO4q7qJAxV8SWwGHVj-OfwQ4dUDCA8&uact=5&oq=Rafiya+palesrtinian+poet&gs_lp=Egxnd3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAiGFJhZml5YSBwYWxlc3J0aW5pYW4gcG9ldDIHECEYoAEYCjIHECEYoAEYCkjzblC1BlirVHABeAGQAQCYAfABoAHHE6oBBjAuMTEuM7gBA8gBAPgBAZgCDqAC_BLCAgoQABiwAxjWBBhHwgIHEC4YgAQYDcICCBAAGAUYDRgewgIIEAAYCBgNGB7CAgYQABgNGB7CAgsQABiABBiGAxiKBcICFhAuGIAEGA0YlwUY3AQY3gQY4ATYAQHCA

gcQABiABBgNwgIJEAAYgAQYChgNwgIKEAAYBRgKGA0YHsICChAAGAgYChgNGB7CAggQABiABBiiBMICChAhGKABGMMEGAqYAwCIBgGQBgS6BgYIARABGBSSBwYxLjEwLjOgB9de&sclient=gws-wiz-serp#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:0c40e6b6,vid:aKucPh9xHtM,st:0

Key Points from the Presentation:

1. The speaker argues against the notion of "cultural collapse", suggesting instead that culture is fluid and constantly transforming. What may appear as collapse is often the emergence of a new culture.

2. The speaker critiques organized religion and its role in suppressing cultural subversion, while emphasizing the importance of people's personal faith and cultural practices.

3. The transcript discusses the current political climate in India, highlighting concerns about majoritarianism, nationalism, and the erosion of institutions and constitutional values.

4. The speaker explores how culture can be weaponized by ruling elites and used as a tool for division and control, rather than as a unifying force.

5. The talk concludes by discussing how traditional ideas of cultural subversion have been co-opted by oppressive regimes, creating a crisis that requires new tools and insights to address.

Sadanand Menon – Discussion Summary & Main Points

The discussion began with a reflection on the power of propaganda, sparked by a clip from Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* which the presenter showed at the start of the discussion session.

Chaplin was inspired to make the film after viewing Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, a Nazi propaganda film that is nonetheless considered a masterpiece of documentary filmmaking.

This prompted a conversation about the nature of propaganda and its impact, and how even something created with artistic skill can have a sinister purpose.

The following is a detailed summary of the discussion:

1. The Absorption of Critique and Marginalization by Dominant Systems

One of the key themes of the discussion is how dominant systems, particularly capitalism, have the capacity to absorb and neutralize critique. The speaker uses the metaphor of an "absorbathon," a creature from the TV series *Doctor Who*, that eats and absorbs everything. This metaphor is used to

illustrate the way that capitalism can take in any critique and turn it into a commodity, thus undermining the very criticism that was levelled against it.

This capacity for absorption extends to the academic world, where the study of marginalized groups can become a well-funded area of research, inadvertently domesticating the very issues it seeks to address. The more marginalized a group, the more funding it may attract, which can be seen as a kind of co-option of genuine struggle. The speakers acknowledge that they are part of the system that they are critiquing, and that this makes any attempts to resist all the more complicated and difficult.

The discussion notes that even critiques of older scholarship get absorbed into the system. For example, the critique of subaltern studies as being dominated by Brahmin scholars from Bengal. This leads to a search for the “latest” or “edgiest” topics, creating a kind of academic fashion that, it is argued, can be easily commodified and defuse the radical potential of critical inquiry. This demonstrates that any point of resistance, even within academic circles, can be assimilated and neutralized by the powerful systems that the work seeks to challenge.

2. The Need for Sustained Cultural Resistance

The participants spoke of the various forms of resistance, moving beyond the idea of individual action and looking at collective possibilities. The speakers considered the limitations of street protests, referencing a specific incident in Bombay in 1996 where the garlanding of an Ambedkar statue with slippers led to violence and deaths. Thepresenter, Sadanand, had suggested at that time to reframe the event as an honour from those who make and deal with such materials, and even to reciprocate the action by garlanding a figure of power with slippers. The goal was to transform the meaning of an action meant to be an insult and turn it into a sign of pride and strength. This would be an example of a cultural strategy of resistance that can counter oppressive actions, however, the speaker also notes that they would likely not be seen as having the right to speak for the community today.

The conversation highlights the need for strategies that can endure, rather than simply flashpoints of protest that eventually die down. There is a question of how to make resistance a sustained, collective practice.

The discussion also looks at the role of culture in both domination and resistance. The example of a new cultural centre in Bombay is given, which is inaccessible to most people due to high ticket prices and its focus on Western forms of entertainment. This is presented as an example of how culture can be used to reinforce existing power structures, as well as to appropriate it.

3. The Role of Spirituality and Mysticism

The group also explored the role of spirituality as a potential site of resistance and as a deeply felt human experience. While acknowledging that religious institutions can be captured by orthodoxy and authoritarianism, the participants also recognized the existence of genuine spiritual needs.

There was a discussion about the rise of mysticism and the "marketed spirituality" that is becoming increasingly prevalent. This includes godmen of different faiths, fake discourses, and false promises.

The participants suggest that it is important to distinguish between this kind of commodified spirituality and the genuine spiritual quest for something beyond the material world and the rational.

One speaker suggested that there was a need to re-engage with the terrain of spirituality, which has been ceded to the right and to reclaim this aspect of human experience. This is presented as an important part of any pushback against authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. It is noted that people may seek something beyond rationality to respond to suffering and that spirituality can be a legitimate path for those seeking deeper meaning. The discussion also suggests that the search for spirituality is something that can be found outside of established religions and that there is a need for genuine spirituality to compete with marketed spirituality.

It is suggested that people find satisfaction in simple acts of faith such as sitting by the Ganges. These acts can be meaningful and not aimed at external validation or a promise of liberation.

4. The Limitations of the Internet as a Tool for Liberation

The discussants considered the role of the internet as a potential tool for resistance, but are cautious of the idea that it has democratized access to knowledge and power. It is argued that the internet is controlled by those in power (corporations and government agencies) and that they can clamp down on access when necessary.

The examples of Kashmir and Manipur are given, where internet access has been restricted. It is argued that the internet is not a truly democratic space and that control over digital space is often in the hands of the powerful.

A speaker makes the distinction between social media and access to knowledge through the internet. The speaker argues that knowledge has been made more accessible through the internet, but that it is still important to be critical about how that knowledge is used.

5. The Importance of the Law and its Potential Misuse

The discussion highlights the importance of the law in shaping the lives of citizens and how it is deeply embedded in everyday experiences. It acknowledges that the law can be used as a tool for control by those in power. The law is not just a "straw man," but something that has real consequences for people's lives. The law is a central feature of the modern state and it determines what people can do.

The point is made that the law can be misused, as was predicted by Ambedkar, if it falls into the wrong hands. The discussion brings up the example of the Bhima Koregaon case, where people were arrested under anti-terror laws. It is argued that people do not need to be terrorists to be arrested, and that the law can be easily manipulated.

A major theme throughout the discussion was the way that people’s rights can be taken away and how, in the face of that, it is difficult to sustain forms of resistance. The speakers also discussed how people can become complacent in their own identities and comfortable corners, which can leave

the constitution vulnerable to being hijacked. The example of the Rajan case from Kerala is brought up as an example of a successful, sustained protest, which is rare.

6. Cultural Responses and Humour

The discussion considers various forms of cultural resistance. The example of the "pink *chaddi* campaign" is used as an example of a cultural act that can disrupt the status quo, flabbergasting those in power. The pink *chaddi*(panty) campaign was a response to violence against women in Mangalore.

The use of digital humour and memes is also discussed as a cultural response that has empowered many people. It is suggested that humour can be a powerful tool to challenge power, even though its impact may be fleeting.

The concept of "subvertising," which involves destroying corporate advertising, is introduced as a more direct form of cultural action. This can be seen as a more disruptive way of fighting back, and involves direct confrontation.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of power and resistance, recognizing that critiques and acts of resistance can be easily absorbed by the very systems they seek to challenge. It emphasizes the importance of sustained cultural resistance, while acknowledging the need to be critical of the tools and spaces that are often presented as sites of liberation, like the internet. The discussion calls for an awareness of the power of the law and how easily it can be misused and acknowledges that spirituality may also be an important area for contestation and for the search for meaning in a world that is increasingly dominated by powerful social and economic forces.

Five Main Points that emerged from the Discussion:

1. The presentation discussed the relationship between culture, capitalism, and state control, highlighting how critical thought and marginalized voices often get absorbed and commodified by academia and capitalism.

2. There was a debate about the role of spirituality and religion in society, with some arguing it's an important aspect of human experience that shouldn't be ceded to fundamentalists.

3. The speaker expressed scepticism about the democratizing power of the internet, arguing that it's ultimately controlled by corporations and governments.

4. The importance of law in shaping society was emphasized, with concerns raised about how laws can be misused by those in power.

5. The discussion touched on various forms of cultural resistance and activism, from digital humour to public campaigns, while questioning how to sustain such efforts long-term.

DAY 4

Theme: Dharma, Art, Culture*(Theme cont'd on Day 4)*

Partition as Memory and Metaphor: Continuities

Dr. Maya Joshi

I will discuss how literature has responded to partition's impact. Rather than delving into political history, I will explore how literature reflects the human experience of partition and its ongoing influence.

“This is not going to be a discussion about politics or history with capital P or capital H, because that is a wormhole. We don't want to go down. You know, there is no end to theories on why partition happened, what could have stopped it, and that's not why we are here. It has happened. People responded to it in inhuman and human ways, and we are the legatees of it. You know, we're living in an India which has been shaped by it irreversibly. So how do we move ahead? And literature, as a profoundly humane and humanizing response to any kind of suffering, also provides a profound reflection, mirror, resistance to, you know, everything that the partition represents.”

Let me relate a personal memory:

“The year is roughly 1978 to 1980. The place is Patiala, not just the place of the peg, but also the site of one of the oldest universities. There is a man called Mann Singh. Imagine a flowing beard, you know, salt and pepper. He works as a gardener and a guard on campus. He's a Mali, and he is a night watchman. And he's given to some rather flamboyant displays of loyalty and protectiveness, particularly towards a particular family, which is actually our family, and the story comes from there.

We lived in an isolated house. Mann Singh, once my father was away, would take out his kirpan, and he kind of walked around with it, you know, and he told my mother, you know, this kind of very Sikh narrative of protectiveness.

And he also liked to tell gruesome stories about the partition to my brothers, who were older. I was about 8, and I wasn't really allowed to listen, but enough got into my consciousness for me to have blocked it out, you know, because it sounded like the kind of violence you might read about it in epics, right? Bits of it. So, one bit that I remembered was, you know, ripping apart pregnant women's bellies so that the foetus of the other, you know, the demonized other, never sees the light of day.

… You know, I could hear my brothers talking about it, but I was also told, oh, he exaggerates and so on. I think everybody was protective. One day, about three decades later, I found myself with goosebumps just talking about it to my students teaching partition literature, trying to tell them that the violence they were reading about was not imaginary, that I had, you know, known somebody who had not only witnessed it, had participated in it, because he would say things like, uno nebi mare hum, nabi mare, you know, and he was haunted by it because 30 years on, you know, after the partition, he was still remembering it. And he had a sense of this kind of an ancient mariner feel him, you know...”

Partition literature often uses metaphors of madness and elemental forces to convey the scale and incomprehensibility of the violence. Examples include classic films like *Garm Hawa* and stories by writers such as Saadat Hasan Manto and Bhisham Sahni.

“So, it's called the mortal dawn. And it has inspired at least one anthology called Mortal Dawn, implying that this is a dawn which is, you know, not a happy one, right? It's mottled with dag. Dag is blood of your own fellow human beings. This mottled dawn cast a long shadow on the life of the subcontinent, one that persists today.”

The partition of India coincided with independence, casting a long shadow over the subcontinent. The event began in the mind and remains a collective memory with significant geopolitical

consequences. Millions were killed or displaced, with many women disappearing or being raped. Official figures often underestimate these casualties.

“Partition began in the mind, and I think that's an important point that some of us would be interested in. And it remains in our collective body politic as a metaphor, as it became a lived reality with concrete geopolitical ramifications at a particular historical juncture. We all know the story of Radcliffe, who had never been to India, a lawyer who comes in and he is given this task and he just draws a line and goes back. He never returns. Right? He dared not return. He (burned) all his notes.”

The chaos and suffering were largely due to errors of commission (the act itself) and omission (lack of government support). Bureaucratic apathy also contributed to the violence. Writers have used various metaphors to capture the brutality and madness of partition, such as Manto's Toba Tek Singh and Gulzar's poem of the same name.

“The literature of the Partition responds to this phenomenon in diverse ways. It bears witness to the unspeakable horror of the violence that was unleashed. It mourns the loss of a civilizational ideal. Now I know that Sadanand is sharpening his knives on that one, protests against the illogic of it. I put ill in brackets, you know, the logic of something and the illogic of something and asserts human resilience and humane values against overwhelming evidence of their demise. I think that last point is where hope lies, that there is repeated reference to humans, you know, being able to somehow respond from and tap into their humanity. And this question has been haunting us for the last two days. What does it mean to be human?”

While partition literature mourns the loss of a civilizational ideal, it also asserts human resilience against overwhelming odds. This presentation aims to deepen our discussion on how we remember and move forward from this profound historical event.

To Waris Shah

by Amrita Pritam

Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu (1948)

Speak from the depths of the grave to Waris Shah I Sayand add a new page of the saga of love today.
Once wept a daughter of Punjab, your pen unleashed a million cries a million daughters weep today, to you Waris Shah they turn their eyes.
Awake, decry your Punjab, O sufferer with those suffering!
Corpses entomb the fields today the Chenab is flowing with blood.
Mingled with poison by some are the waters of five rivers, and this torrent of pollution, unceasingly covers our earth.
And heavy with venom were the winds, that blew through the forests transmuting into a snake,
The reed of each musical branch.
With sting afters ting did the serpents suppress the voice of people.
A moment so brief and the limbs of Punjab turned blue Threads snapped from their shuttle sand rent the songs at their throats
Silenced was the spinning wheel’s hum, severed from their gatherings, the women.

Branches heavy with swings, cracked from peepul trees boats laden with trappings loosened from anchors to sink.
Despoilers of beauty and love, each man now turned a Kedu1where can we seek for another like Waris Shah today?
Only you can speak from the grave, to Waris Shah I say add another page to your epic of love today.

Translated by Amrita Pritam

The epic of love needs another page today. Lamentation is crucial as a first step towards acknowledging the trauma of partition, which psychiatrists argue hasn't been properly mourned.

"Fikr Taunsvi was from Taunsa and he wrote a searing memoire of his days in Lahore before moving during the Partition. It's called Chatha Dhariya, the sixth river.

So, Punjab is named after the five rivers that flow through it. Chatha Darya, the sixth river is a river of blood that, you know, the Partition unleashed. It's also the river of migration, you know, people imagined as moving, you know, and it's really very powerful. Having to teach this has been quite challenging, and for students…"

Partition literature often uses non-human agents to depict dehumanization. For example, Peshawar Express tells the story of a traumatized train witnessing massacres during partition. The breakdown of state apparatus and guards feeding lynch mobs highlight civilization's decline from a cosmopolitan centre to a divided state.

"There was a scrupulous maths to this, by the way. You know, equal numbers had to be killed. When you talk about scruples, there is a scrupulosity with which revenge was taken. And there is a story here about a sick man whose child is killed and he says, I'm going to kill 10 Muslims tonight. And he randomly kills and then he breaks down completely. So crazy stuff like that that we have to reckon with.

But then there was other memories. Our neighbour was a Sikh lady and she went to Nankana Sahib on a pilgrimage. So, this is the 70s Pakistan had opened. You know, there are Sikh pilgrimage sites, a reminder of the old shared culture. Nankana Sahib is one of the most holy places for Sardars. And she came back from it full of joy and happiness. Her experience had no residue of bitterness. She said shopkeepers refused to take money from us. She came, with a suitcase full of exquisite fabrics that she'd been gifted by Karachi, you know, by basically shopkeepers in Pakistan. The moment they heard that they were from India, they embraced them. And there was this other narrative of love that I also remember from the same period. Okay, so I'm still trying to reconcile these two."

The plant world also reflects partition's impact. In Tale of a Tulsi Plant by Syed Waliullah, an abandoned house in Bangladesh taken over by refugees features a dying Tulsi plant symbolizing the past Hindu family. This plant becomes an agent for rehumanizing dehumanized individuals.

"And the many things that happen with that plant. There's one guy who has a chest infection and he's seeing it as a healing herb. There is a fundamentalist Muslim who say, no, this is a Hindu plant, we must destroy it. So, it becomes a very powerful way of reflecting on man-made categories and

the absurdity of these categories. This guy's, you know, he's secretly watering it, the one who has a chest cough and he miraculously his cough disappears.

And of course it's not a unified narrative. All these four men come from different locations. So, you know, the idea of a homogenized Muslim identity is also being fractured. There's one guy who's leftist in orientation, so he's not happy with this hate speech. There is one fundamentalist, there is the Tulsi plant guy. So, what literature does is to break, you know, mono narratives of any kind. Right. And I think writers do that in whichever culture they are. They give you multiple perspectives. They don't see human beings as belonging to groups. They are able to see diversity within groups and they are able to notice the subtleties and what is working there is the imagination.

You are told that the young man who is moved by the Tulsi plant is a poet at heart. He is given to romantic imagination and therefore he imagines this whole image of this Bengali woman watering her plant every morning. So, the imagination as a humanizing faculty, that's the larger point I want to make, which I think also links to what Sadanand was talking about, that the loss of the imagination would be the ultimate loss because the incapacity to imagine the other, the incapacity to, you know, to enter into the life of spiritual experience. Essentially, all religions tell us to, you know, wear the shoes of the other, right? And literature does that quite naturally because you forget yourself and you enter another life."

The power of imagination in literature helps break mono-narratives and fosters empathy. Teaching such literature in Delhi can alter narratives about partition among students carrying memories of bitterness.

Partition is conceptualized differently across languages. In English, it has multiple connotations; in Hindustani, *batwara* suggests legalistic distribution; in Bangla, *bhanga bhongo* implies amputation. These linguistic differences shape our understanding profoundly.

I also wish to touch upon recent efforts to memorialize partition through museums and oral history projects. I share my personal experiences and reflections on teaching partition literature, highlighting how it continues to shape our understanding of identity and humanity.

Themes include trauma and memory, highlighting the modalities and motivations behind memorialization. Delhi University's partition project faces criticism for its right-wing structuring, while efforts like the Partition Museum in Amritsar are better conceptualized. Memorialization risks trivialization when reduced to tourist activities.

"In 2014 at LSR, we did something really extraordinary, which is unthinkable today. We had 22 people come from Pakistan and stay nearby and we did a two-day workshop on Partition. Farooq Khan from LUMS, (Lahore University of Management Sciences) brought 20 of his students. They do a lot of oral archives, right. So, they shared their work, we shared our work.

We had Urvashi Butalia come in and speak for two days. These young people, 20 years old, average, met each other, hung out with each other, ate, you know, went shopping and felt completely at home. These Lahoris were thrilled that they were recognized as Lahoris by the shopkeepers of Delhi immediately and in a nice way, not in a hostile manner.

This is after one week of a showdown where LOC firing had broken out. Their visas were almost denied. We used our contacts in the Indian High Commission to get them visas. It was, you know, and many parents were very nervous, but they were brave enough to take the Delhi, Lahore bus and come despite all of this television war that was going on. You know, the moustachioed generals on both sides declaring war on each other."

The rescue narrative during partition inflicted another layer of violence on women who had married their abductors but were forced back to their original families. Stories like Lajwanti by Rajendra Singh Bedi explore this issue beautifully.

"So, the nation state, the patriarchal, benevolent, patriarchal nation state, said all these women who have been abducted need to be brought back to their families. Now, many of these women had married their abductors and had families with them and didn't want to come back. So ironically enough, another layer of violence was inflicted in the name of saving these women from their abductors. And feminists have brought attention to that fact because they were once again displaced from, you know, families that they had set up. And I think that since we're talking about gender, that needs to be pointed out."

Manik Bandyopadhyay's story *Upai*, translated as Final Solution, depicts a young mother at Calcutta railway station who kills her would-be rapist in an act of redemptive violence. This raises ethical questions about violence as a weapon for the marginalized.

"Mallika, this young woman, young mother, comes in on the Calcutta railway station. Another rescuer, Pramatha, who is hiding, who's disguised as a relief worker is actually a pimp. He's a vulture who comes every day to the station to see which family is the most hard up. And then he gets these women into prostitution. He runs a prostitution ring. She agrees for the sake of her child who is dying. And then when he wants to rape her, she can't take it anymore. That insult is what triggers her. And she actually, like Kali, kills him. She strangles him with the sari that he's gifted to her, and she hits him with this wine bottle that, you know, he's planning to drink to before he can, you know, rape her. And that has been often seen as a sign of, as an example of redemptive violence. I'm putting it out there because we've been talking a lot about ahimsa.

So, this is a woman at the edge of precarity. Right. And the evocation of the Kali, you know, image is very powerful here. Can we think about violence ever, you know, in as a weapon of the absolutely marginalized, who have no way to go. So, what might the repercussions of this be? This is an ethical question that partition literature also shows up, throws up for us."

In conclusion, literature offers multiple perspectives and fosters sensitivity and reflection, essential for understanding complex historical events like partition.

To summarise the key points:

1. The partition of India in 1947 was a traumatic event that continues to impact the subcontinent's psyche, inspiring literature that explores themes of violence, loss, dehumanization, and shared cultural heritage.

2. Partition literature often uses metaphors of madness, elemental forces, and non-human narrators to convey the scale and incomprehensibility of the violence and displacement that occurred.

3. Writers across languages and borders have used partition literature to question nationalist narratives, highlight shared cultural traditions, and explore what it means to be human in the face of such inhumanity.

4. Recent efforts to memorialize the partition through museums and oral history projects face challenges in avoiding trivialization or political bias.

5. The transcript discusses how partition literature can be used pedagogically to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and encourage reflection on complex issues of identity, violence, and human resilience.

Maya Joshi – Discussion Summary and Main Points

After Maya's presentation, the discussion revolved around the theme of partition, exploring its multifaceted nature through literature, psychology, history, and personal narratives. The speakers delved into the idea of partition not just as a geographical event, but also as a psychological and societal phenomenon that continues to manifest in various forms.

1. Partition as a Reflection of Inner Conflict and the "Pain Body"

The discussion began with the notion that partition, in its various forms (biographical, geographical, religious, psychological), reflects a deeper, internal conflict. The concept of the "pain body," was introduced suggesting that each individual carries a reservoir of pain, and this collective pain influences how we interact with the world.

This internal conflict is likened to the conflict between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. The sympathetic nervous system is associated with fight-or-flight responses, while the parasympathetic system is linked to empathy and compassion. It was argued that the dominance of the sympathetic nervous system leads to conflict and violence, which are then mirrored in the external world.

The roots of partition and division are not solely external but also deeply embedded in the human psyche. The speakers suggest that addressing this internal conflict through self-reflection and imagination is necessary to transcend external divisions. This perspective is supported by the mention of Viktor Frankl's work on finding meaning, which is cited as an example of exploring the inner psyche for solutions.

2. Literature as a Lens for Understanding Partition and its Aftermath

The speakers extensively discussed the role of literature in exploring the complexities of partition. The discussion brought up the discourse of madness in literature, highlighting the idea that those who refuse to accept the partition may be perceived as mad. This is illustrated through the character of Bishan Singh in Toba Tek Singh, who protests the partition with his body and is seen as catatonic. Many stories demonstrate how the concept of sanity and insanity was impacted by the partition.

The literature also serves as a means to examine the human cost of partition and to find glimmers of hope amidst the violence. Stories are shared to show that even in the darkest times, acts of kindness and compassion existed across communities. For example, 40% of people interviewed by Ashish Nandi said that they were helped by people from the other side.

The use of metaphors and non-human forms in literature, such as the dog in Manto’s "The Dog of Tithwal," is highlighted as a means of conveying the absurdity and incomprehensibility of the partition for the average person. These stories critique grand narratives and showcase the bewilderment of ordinary individuals who were caught in the midst of the violence.

The discussion also touched on the idea that partition is an ongoing process and continues to manifest in contemporary issues, like the displacement of Muslims in India, which is compared to a border crossing. Literature, in this context, becomes a tool for sensitization and interfaith dialogue, which could be integrated into workshops.

These examples highlight the significance of literature as a powerful medium for understanding the human experience of partition. It also suggests that literature provides valuable lessons for navigating contemporary social issues related to conflict and division. The speakers suggest that stories can elicit empathy and promote understanding where facts and figures may not.

3. The Role of Memory, Documentation, and Imagination in Addressing the Legacy of Partition

The speakers emphasized the importance of memory and documentation in ensuring that the lessons of partition are not forgotten. This is tied to the idea that "those who forget history are condemned to repeat it". The role of literature as a warning for the future is also emphasized.

The discussion stressed on the significance of imagination in confronting the monolithic narratives that can lead to division. The loss of imagination is seen as a component of fascism, while literature and art are viewed as powerful tools to challenge this strategy.

The role of empathy and imagining the pain of the other is also discussed as crucial for promoting understanding and compassion. These aspects are further linked to practices such as Buddhism and the potential role of compassion.

However, questions are raised about the ethics of compelling the remembrance of traumatic events like partition. The potential psychological impact of revisiting painful memories on both the storytellers and the recorders is acknowledged. A need to carefully monitor the process of memorializing and remembering is also discussed.

This key point underscores the complex relationship between memory, history, and imagination in addressing the ongoing consequences of partition. The speakers emphasize the need for a balanced approach that honours the past while also acknowledging the potential harm of revisiting traumatic events and the necessity of cultivating imagination and empathy to move beyond past conflicts.

4. The Complexity of Identity, Nationalism, and the Origins of Division

The conversation also explored the complex relationship between national identity, religious identity, and the origins of partition. There was the tension between the idea of a unified cultural landscape and the sudden drawing of borders. It is essentialto acknowledge the complex history and social structures, including the idea of different communities with different social practices living in harmony, before conflict.

The discussion emphasized that communal divisions did not appear overnight but had a history that predates the partition. Communalization had already begun in the 19th century, with examples of the separate use of water facilities by Hindus and Muslims.

The idea of multiple competing nationalisms prior to partition was mentioned such as Muslim nationalism, Khalistan, Dravidian nationalism, and Dalitstan.

The partition was not simply a result of a sudden drawing of lines but was the culmination of a complex historical process involving multiple forms of identity and competing nationalisms. This analysis challenges simplistic understandings of the partition as a purely religious conflict, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the underlying socio-political dynamics.

5. Partition as an Ongoing Process and the Need for Continued Dialogue

The discussion highlighted the view of partition as an ongoing process and not a singular event. Contemporary issues such as the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India were cited as examples of the continuing legacy of partition and the marginalization of communities.

The speakers also brought up the fact that the study of the partition is not uniform across India. There has been a historical focus on the border regions of Punjab and Bengal, with less attention given to the eastern side of the Bengal border and the experiences of different regions in India. South India, for example, has a different relationship to the partition than North India.

The discussion highlighted the act that the effects of partition have not faded over time but continue to shape contemporary social and political dynamics. The speakers call for more inclusive and comprehensive approaches to understanding and addressing the continuing effects of partition.

In conclusion, the discussion provided a comprehensive and multi-faceted view of partition. It stressed the importance of understanding partition not just as a historical event but also as a reflection of the human condition with lasting psychological, social, and political ramifications. The speakers called for a continued examination of these issues using a blend of historical analysis, literary exploration, and personal narratives to promote understanding, empathy, and healing.

5 key points:

1. The discussion focused on partition literature and its role in exploring themes of identity, violence, madness, and the human impact of political divisions.

2. Speakers highlighted how partition narratives often reveal the absurdity of borders and the complexity of human relationships across religious and cultural lines.

3. There was debate about whether partition was imposed externally or fell on fertile ground of existing divisions, with some arguing communal tensions had deeper historical roots.

4. The importance of imagination and literature in fostering empathy and understanding across divides was emphasized, as well as the ongoing nature of partition's effects.

5. Questions were raised about the ethics and impact of remembering traumatic events, and how younger generations relate to partition history, especially in regions less directly affected.

Theme: Strategy & Way Forward*(Still Day 4 – fresh theme)*

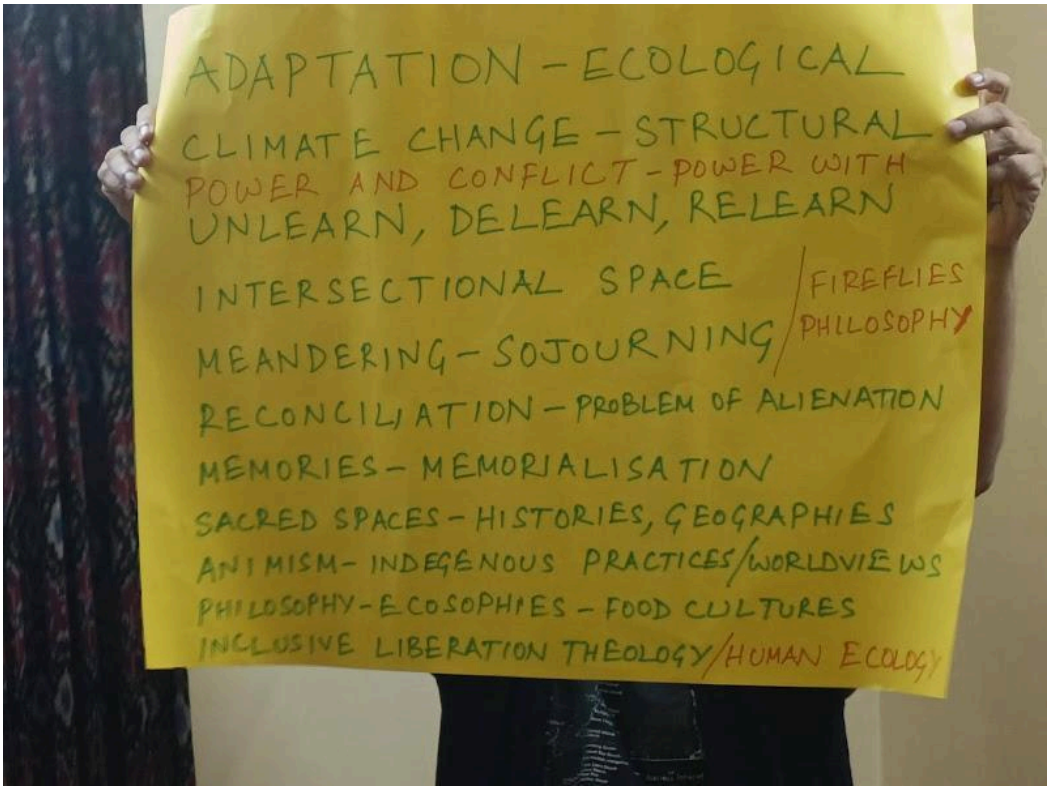
Strategy Discussion Summary and Main Points

The last session of the conference was earmarked to discuss strategic issues going forward, and the participants were divided into three break-out groups, and all the groups were asked to discuss a set of questions within the framework of the experience of this conference and ideas for future such meetings.

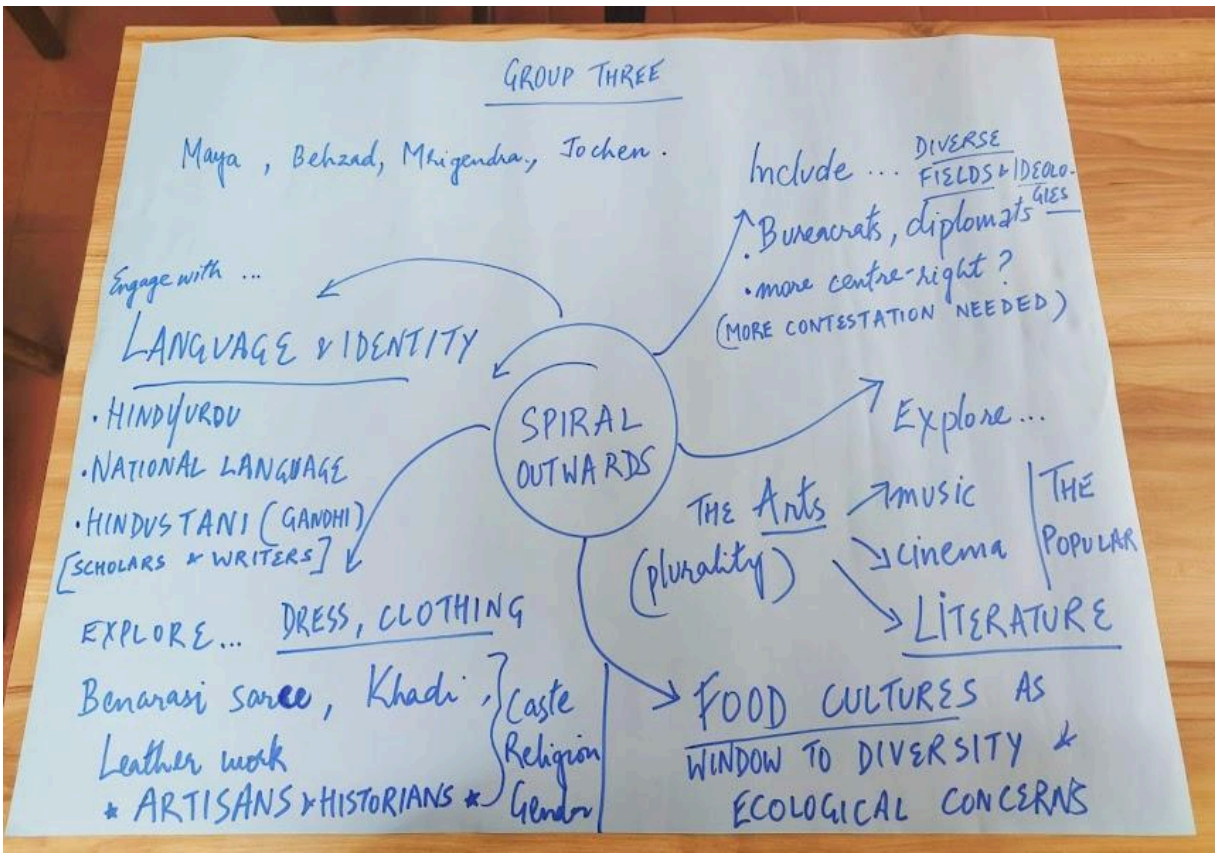
The three groups discussed strategies for future meetings focused on plurality, faith, and democracy. **Key themes** included improving meeting structure, broadening participation to include diverse viewpoints, connecting with grassroots communities, and exploring various thematic areas like ecology, history, religion, arts, and language. **The goal** was to create more focused, impactful meetings that generate actionable knowledge and extend beyond the participants' immediate circles. **Concrete suggestions** for future meetings were offered, aiming for a balance between internal support and external engagement.

The participants then met together in a plenary session to present their observations, which they had also encapsulated in charts drawn by them. Group 1 did not present any chart, the charts of Groups 2 and 3 are reproduced below:

Group 2:



Group 3:



*Since all the three groups were tasked with discussing all the key issues, there was understandably some repetition in the presentations. The following summary for the sake of better understandability and future reference has been presented thematically***.**

1. **Structure and Format of Future Meetings**

There was significant discussion about how to structure future meetings to be more focused and impactful. Some key suggestions included:

Focusing on one main theme rather than multiple broad topics. For example, instead of covering plurality, faith, and democracy all together, future meetings could focus more narrowly on a single theme like climate change or contemporary violence.

Starting with a **clear theoretical proposition or "keynote" idea**, then having other presentations build on and engage with that central concept. This could allow for more focused and sustained interaction.

Incorporating more aesthetic and creative elements to spark imagination and avoid dry academic presentations. This could include integrating arts, music, and hands-on activities.

Finding ways to **build towards clearer conclusions and new knowledge**, rather than just presenting disparate ideas without synthesis.

Considering how to **sustain momentum and ideas after meetings end**, through follow-up activities, publications, or integration into participants' ongoing work. The discussion highlighted a concern that while important themes are discussed and papers are presented, there is often a sense of disconnect, with an inability to make sense of how everything ties together. There's a desire to structure meetings in a way that allows for a greater level of clarity at the conclusion than when the meeting started.

2. **Expanding Participation and Perspectives**

Multiple groups emphasized the need to expand participation beyond like-minded individuals to include more diverse perspectives. Suggestions included:

Inviting people with different ideological standpoints, including those who may support the current government but are open to dialogue. This could include diplomats, bureaucrats, and others who engage with power structures.

Including **artists, musicians, writers**, and others who can bring creative perspectives.

Engaging with **popular culture and media** to connect with broader audiences.

Bringing in **practitioners of various traditions** to share hands-on knowledge and experiences.

Inviting **scholars** who can provide historical context on various issues.

The goal would be to move beyond an **"echo chamber"** and have more challenging conversations that could lead to new insights and progress. Some participants expressed a desire to have people who are contesting our positions and not just those who are broadly in agreement.

3. **Connecting to Grassroots and Building Constituencies**

There was discussion about how to ensure the ideas from these meetings reach and impact broader audiences:

Finding ways to **build constituencies** and connect with common people at the grassroots level.

Having **younger participants** who are already working in communities to help ideas percolate to the grassroots.

Considering how to **feed ideas into ongoing activities** of various organizations represented at the meeting.

Using social media and other platforms strategically, while being aware of their limitations and risks. Some participants noted that social media is largely controlled by those whose ideas they are trying to oppose, so there's a need to find alternative ways to disseminate ideas. The idea of working at the grassroots level and building constituencies with common people was also mentioned.

4. **Key Thematic Areas for Future Exploration**

Participants suggested a number of thematic areas that could be fruitful for future meetings and discussions:

Ecology and Climate Change:
* Exploring ecological adaptation and urgent responses to climate change.
* Examining structural measures needed to address climate issues.
* Taking a "human ecology" approach rather than just sustainable development.

History, Culture and Memory:

Addressing the lack of historical knowledge around contemporary events, especially in marginalized areas.

Exploring personal, community, and cultural memories versus institutionalized memorialization, examining sacred spaces and geographies from different perspectives.

Faith and Religion:

Looking at interfaith as well as intra-faith dialogues and differences.

Exploring marginalized spiritual traditions like animism and indigenous philosophies.

Examining liberation theology and other progressive religious movements.

Arts and Culture:

Using music, cinema, and literature to explore pluralities and bring in popular perspectives.

Examining food cultures as windows into diversity and ecological concerns.

Looking at dress and clothing as sites of identity and cultural exchange.

Language and Identity:

Exploring the politics of language, including debates around national languages.

Examining the communalization and politicization of languages like Hindi and Urdu.

Looking at composite linguistic traditions that cross religious/cultural lines.

Power and Conflict:

Examining different conceptions of power beyond just state capture.

Looking at examples of movements that pursue change without seeking traditional power.

Exploring constructive approaches to conflict and contestation.

5. **Specific Suggestions for Future Meetings**

Participants offered a number of concrete suggestions for activities and approaches at future gatherings:

Inviting artisans to demonstrate and teach traditional crafts and skills.

Organizing mini-concerts or performances of traditional music/arts.

Screening films and having discussions with filmmakers/scholars.

Inviting practitioners of various spiritual traditions to share practices.

Organizing hands-on activities like spinning khadi.

Having cooking demonstrations and discussions of food traditions.

Inviting families with mixed religious/cultural backgrounds to share experiences.

Bringing in retired bureaucrats/diplomats to share insider perspectives.

Organizing field visits to relevant sites/communities. The discussions emphasized the importance of incorporating lived experiences and engaging with the senses, such as through food, clothing and crafts, as ways to explore identity, culture and diversity.

6. **Reflections on Current Meeting**

While focused on future directions, participants also reflected on the value of the current gathering:

Appreciation for the **quality of discussions** and learning that occurred.

Recognition of the meeting as a **space for "hand-holding"** and mutual support during difficult times.

Acknowledgment that the gathering helped participants feel **stronger and more energized**.

Gratitude for the **engagement of the funders** who attended the full meeting4. The meeting was viewed as a way to refortify and recharge, providing a sense of community and shared experience.

7. **Next Steps and Follow-Up**

To build on the meeting, some concrete next steps were suggested:

Participants to **send names/contacts of potential invitees** for future meetings.

Presenters to **write up summaries of their talks** (1000-1800 words) for circulation.

Organizers to **synthesize ideas and shape a way forward** that weaves together different threads.

Feeding ideas from this meeting into upcoming gatherings of related networks/organizations.

Conclusion

This final session demonstrated the richness of dialogue and ideas generated over the course of the meeting. While acknowledging the value of gathering like-minded individuals for mutual support and idea-sharing, there was a strong push to expand future convenings to include more diverse voices and perspectives. Participants see potential for these gatherings to generate new knowledge and approaches to address pressing societal challenges, but recognize the need for more focused and action-oriented structures.

The discussions reflected a desire to bridge intellectual/academic discourse with grassroots realities and cultural practices. There is interest in exploring how traditional knowledge, artistic expression, and lived experiences can inform approaches to contemporary issues of plurality, faith, and democracy. At the same time, participants want to ensure these conversations connect to real-world power structures and decision-making processes.

Moving forward, the organizers face the challenge of synthesizing the many ideas and suggestions into a coherent plan of action. However, the energy and commitment demonstrated by participants suggest strong potential for impactful future gatherings that can contribute to positive social change.

By expanding the circle of voices included, focusing discussions more tightly, and creating clear pathways to action, these meetings can play an important role in fostering pluralism, interfaith understanding, and democratic values in challenging times.

DOCUMENTATION

Links to the Recorded Audio Files (.mp3)

The link below allows the reader to access this folder on the Google Drive cloud storage. The folder has sub-folders, one for each of the presenters. Access to the top-level folder will allow the reader to access the sub-folders and files, for viewing/listening purposes only.

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10z1eY9WBxoZq5jpKIVgy5P8pLPGCkzU1?usp=sharing

Link to the Photo Gallery

Although many of the images from the Photo Gallery are already embedded in the report, this link will take the viewer to all the photographs taken by the various participants at various moments of their stay at Fireflies.

https://photos.app.goo.gl/rDWaaNRfDD8C93cX8