

**A Round Table Discussion of Scholars from Diverse Communities**  
On  
**‘DHARM-SAMUDAAYON KE BEECH PHAASLAA KYON?’**  
**(WHY DISTANCE BETWEEN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES?)**

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Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies, New Delhi, in collaboration with Baha'i Office of Public Affairs, New Delhi, organized a Round Table Discussion of scholars from diverse communities and various professions at Conference Room, Baha'i House of Worship (Lotus Temple), New Delhi, on 04 March 2017. The Theme of the discussion was 'Dharm-Samudaayon ke Beech Phaaslaa Kyon? (Why Distance between Religious Communities?)'. The Discussion was chaired and moderated by Dr M. D. Thomas, Founder Chairman and Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies, New Delhi.

Prof. Deepali Bhanot, Prof. Rita Bagchi, Prof. Shashi Tiwari, Prof. Amrit Kaur Basra, Prof. Lipika Sharma, Ms Mahnaz, Ms Nilakshi Rajkhowa, Prof. M. L. Das, Prof. Surendra Pathak, Dr Chand Bhardwaj, Dr Sarvjit Dudeja, Advocate Mr G. V. Rao, Mr S. N. Sahu, and Dr M. D. Thomas were the participants of the discussion. A creditable thing about the discussion was that equal participation of women and men scholars (50-50%) was ensured. In addition, the chairperson called out women and men speakers alternately to express their views.

Dr M. D. Thomas, chief organizer and chairman of the discussion, by way of dynamics of the discussion, proposed three parts – 1. Analyzing the subject or 'What are the reasons for distance between religious communities?' 2. Proposing a way out or 'Ways and means of bettering relations between religious communities?' 3. Summing up or 'the main insights of the discussion'. In order to make the discussion to the point and conclusive, the chairman also set a time limit for intervention by the participants -- 5 minutes in the first round, 2 minutes in the second round, and 1 minute in the third round.

Introducing the discussion, Dr Thomas presented two major reasons for distance between religious communities and stated that 'the fanatic understanding of one's religion' is the first reason. Most of the people, in the name of religion, become slaves of the past. They fall short of new interpretations of their religion required by the present and fail to visualize a brighter course of life for the future. The burden of the past messes up their present and future at the same time. Besides, they get glued to their own religion and consider their religion as everything. In addition, they maintain an attitude of unsociability with other religions. Therefore, they end up as fanatics with regard to religion.

Dr M. D. proceeded to discuss 'communal politics' as the second reason for distance between religions. It is obvious that politics divides communities for securing votes. Of late, politics has degenerated very much to the level of the streets. No wonder, it creates tension, crack and distance among religious communities. As a result, people come under the grip of a communal mindset. Furthermore, a large percentage of people entertain childish ideas of faith and religion and remain incapable of thinking as adults, with regard to the country and society, as well. For that reason, hatred and disparity among communities increase.

Prof. Rita Bagchi, Former Professor, Jamia Hamdard University, New Delhi, analysed the theme in hand specifically with reference to Vedic and Islamic communities. She stated that Muslims believe in one God and have reservation against the polytheism of the Vedic tradition. Further, since Muslims do not approve idol worship, they tend to have an unsociable mindset toward the Vedic community. The Vedic community also maintains a similar approach towards Muslims. Not understanding each other from within is the biggest reason for the remoteness between the two communities.

Prof. Bagchi further said that casteism is within the mainstream of the Vedic tradition and people of that stream consider Muslims to be totally separate from their caste, whereas Islam advocates unity of mankind. People of the Vedic tradition, especially a small portion from the upper caste, have vegetarian food habits, while the Muslim community is non-vegetarian. Therefore, exchange of food between these communities is uncommon. There are many misconceptions between the two communities, as well. These are some of the reasons for the considerable gap between these two communities.

Dr Chand Bharadwaj, Director, Sawan Aadhyatmik Satsang Samaj, New Delhi, said that due to the lack of friendly dialogue between communities, there is no chance for them to know each other, in the true sense. This causes gap between communities. The second reason for the aloofness among communities is the dirty politics being played by politicians in view of gaining votes. They divide communities and raise conflicts between them, for their own petty advantages. The false teachings propagated by the different contractors of religious denominations add to the havoc caused by divisive and foul politics for keeping communities hostile to one another.

Prof. Deepali Bhanot, Former Professor, Delhi University, New Delhi, said that the main reason for the distance between communities is the lack of information about the other and mutual polarization. Many people find it difficult to get out of their small realm of their own religion. Therefore, there is distance between the streams of their own community, too. Older generations fail to reach the new generation with values of religions and consequently, the youth are going away from religion, in great numbers. The lack of will to get connected to other communities is the basic reason for distance between religious communities.

Prof. M. L. Das, Principal, N. C. College of Engineering, Panipat, said that the distance, in fact, is not between religions, but between religious communities. Different cultures of the community are the real cause of discord among them. Humanity is higher than religion and the religion of humanity is the real religion. All human beings are children of the same God and as a rule, there should not be a distance among communities. Not knowing this basic lesson of life is the reason for distance between religious communities.

Prof. Lipika Sharma, Associate Professor, Galgotias University, Noida, observed that the self-acclaimed Dharm Gurus are responsible for the division among different communities. They claim to be god's incarnation and spread fanatic views. Their disciples and followers, who are swayed by them, entertain negative attitudes towards other traditions and are prone to keep away from them. In addition, nowadays, media has become highly commercialized and mostly works under the clutches of contractors of money and power. Due to such communal and fanatic elements, segregation and distance among communities breed and grow.

Dr Sarvjit Dudeja, Former Research Fellow of AIIMS, New Delhi, said that the wrong rearing of children and one-sided family teaching are responsible for distance among religious traditions. Parents fall short of knowledge of religion and they fail to inculcate in children an open frame of mind. Due to false notions about other religions, children become victims of negative thinking about them. Another reason for distance among communities is people, due to poverty and illiteracy, get caught up in their own close relations, like frog in the well, and shrink to their own communities.

Ms Mahnaz, Member of the Baha'i Office of Public Affairs, New Delhi, said that prejudice is the first reason for distance among religious communities. Most people are misinformed about other communities or they do not try to collect right information. This is the root of prejudice or preconception. In addition, people do not understand from their religion that people of all religions are the children of the same God and they bear the image of God and that they should engage in interaction and relationship. The sense of separateness is the reason for distance among different communities.

Mr G.V. Rao, Advocate, Supreme Court of India, opined that although the modern society has witnessed diverse communities coming closer to each other, due to development, economic betterment and social change, thoughts and feelings haven't grown up enough. Therefore, distance exists between diverse communities. He also said that efforts for uniting communities have not been effective enough because divisive forces in the society have been more powerful. That is why communities are perhaps increasingly distant from one another.

Prof. Amrit Kaur Basra, Professor of Delhi University, New Delhi, said that the main cause of distance between religious communities is illiteracy and favouritism. Some people impose their thoughts on others and create fear in others. Discriminating citizens on the basis of religion and favouring a certain community increase distance. Considering people as high and low or familiar and strange on the basis of caste and not confiding in other communities cause discord and distance between communities.

Mr S. N. Sahu, Joint Secretary Rajya Sabha Secretariat, said that difference in the communities is the reason for distance between religious communities. Teaching communal ideas in the educational curriculum is responsible for misunderstanding among communities. Negative impressions about other communities spread by certain anti-social elements, one-sided verdicts by judiciaries, special privileges to some people, wrong statements by political parties, misuse of social media and modern techniques, etc. are also reasons for distance among communities.

Prof. Shashi Tiwari, General Secretary, Waves India, was of the opinion that freedom of thought and special characteristics of the religious traditions are the main reasons for distance between communities. Considering one's religious tradition above other traditions is the root cause of the space between communities. Attempt by the big community as regards number or power, to intimidate or corner other communities on the basis of an imaginary fear, rather than looking after small communities, is a major reason for aloofness among communities. Taking advantage of the ignorance of common people by heads of religions, showing intolerance towards other religions, polarizing and projecting religions as different, etc are responsible for crack between communities.

Prof. Surendra Pathak, Former Head, Department of Ethical Education, IASE University, Rajasthan, said that the distance between religious communities is caused by the understanding of people in terms of colour and race as well as by the lack of proper knowledge of religion. Most people do not understand the beliefs and traditions of other religions and even the basic meaning of religion itself. Vast majority of the heads of religions teach only those things that suit them. No wonder, the grasp of religion in the followers is raw and biased. These factors accelerate distance between religious communities.

Ms Nilakshi Rajkhowa, Host of the discussion and Director, Baha'i Office of Public Affairs, New Delhi, said that the discrimination of religious communities is the real reason for distance among them. Problems related to women, children, etc. are social problems. Considering these problems as religious problems becomes an occasion for conflicting perceptions to emerge and conflict of perspectives cause gap between religious communities. Moreover, the knowledge of religious texts has hardly any effect on social life. Theory and practice remain poles apart. That is why there is a major gulf between religious communities.

Four questions arose during the first round of discussion. 'Is distance between religious communities a natural phenomenon?', in response to this first question, Dr Thomas, Chairman of the discussion, said that if distance between religious communities is natural, it is more natural 'the humans are social beings'. Human beings are interrelated because of their social character. They are born from the society and live in the society. It is the task of religion is to refine this basic social nature, and not messing it about in any way. It is the social quality that maintains the unity of humanity across the walls of religions.

‘Isn’t difference in religious traditions the basis of distance among them?’, in response to this second question Dr M. D. said that difference between religious traditions does not mean distance, not even the least. Difference is the speciality of every religion. It is not a negative element but is a positive quality. Instead of causing division, it works as an enriching factor. The obvious reality of man and woman is a telling example for unity of communities. They are complementary halves. Similarly, religious communities shall not remain cut off and isolated from each other, like islands. They shall not travel separated from each other, like parallel lines. To do so is a crime against religion, humanity and God, at the same time. Walking together is the collective and natural culture of religious communities.

‘How to incorporate universal values of religious traditions in the system of value-education’, to this third question Dr Thomas affirmed that it is the responsibility of the government to include in the educational curriculum the universal values of different traditions. The government hasn’t ever considered this issue positively, in spite of the fact that the question has come up from various platforms. This, in fact, is a matter of regret and concern for our country. All the same, it is not right to shift all the responsibility to the government and consider oneself innocent or helpless. Those who are employed in or have access to educational institutions can certainly take some time to discuss universal ethical values with the students in hand and can instil moral energy in them. For this, none needs permission from anyone. Shouldering one’s responsibility in this direction, in favour of a better country and society is the call of the hour.

‘Can distance between religious communities be reduced by prayer sessions involving all religions?’, in response to this fourth question Dr Thomas said that almost all religions of the world are present in India and for that reason India is called a ‘religious country’. But, in the name of religion, India has more superstitions, stories, rituals, pilgrimages, fasts, etc. and less ethical values in social life. Therefore, it appears that India is sick of the addiction of religion. This obsession with the externals of one’s religion creates difficulties in going along with people of other religious persuasions. Besides, most of the religions entertain the idea of ‘devvaanee’ (God’s language), which is not the language of the commons. People do not understand the text or prayer in the devvaanee. Therefore, the social utility of such collective prayer sessions is weak and does not seem to be effective in reducing distance between communities.

The second round of the discussion focussed on searching for answers to the question ‘What are the future directions?’ or ‘How can distance between communities be reduced?’ or ‘How could relationship between communities be increased?’. The main suggestions that came up from the floor are as follows: 1. Illegitimate interference from politics with religious communities to be prevented. 2. Religion to be understood within the social context. 3. Universal values of all religions to be adopted by believers of all religions. 4. Children to be initiated to the spirit of multi-faith harmony in the family itself. 5. Big communities to support small communities in a preferential way.

6. Steps to reduce poverty and illiteracy to be taken by all communities. 7. Educated and responsible people from religious communities to attempt preventing the misuse of illiterate and jobless people for spreading hatred in the name of religion. 8. Distance between communities to be reduced by translating the principles of one’s religion to action. 9. Activities to be promoted for strengthening the spirit of unity among followers of religions. 10. Stakeholders of education to be influenced for including human values of all religions in the syllabus. 11. Fake dharma-gurus who instigate hatred among people of different communities to be kept under strict surveillance. 12. Interfaith marriages to be encouraged and promoted. 13. Workshops to be organized for giving the right knowledge of religion to the youth.

14. Governmental and administrative sectors to be influenced in view of equal treatment to all communities, benefits for all and development for all. 15. Multi-faith prayers to be organized for bringing people of different faiths to come together. 16. Workshops to be organized for advancing collective engagement of people of different religions for strengthening the spirit of solidarity in the country. 17. Attempts to be made for reducing blind beliefs, superstitions and other evils in the name of religion. 18. Humanist values to be promoted. 19. General media and social media to be used for spreading positive

things. 20. A body of students from different communities to be formed for increasing harmony, synergy and relationship between religious communities. 21. New generation to be guided in one's area of operation for developing open and positive thinking as well as inter-related approach to life. 22. People of different communities to work together for making a better and harmonious country.

Dr M. D. Thomas in his concluding address affirmed that every person has and should have a 'mission' to perform in his or her life. The spirit of this mission is a sense of responsibility for one's own life and that of the society, which makes one accountable to the owner of life for the life received from him. The degree of obligation in the educated and the elite sector is more and they have the duty of giving back to the society more than what they received. They need to leave a substantial heritage for the new generation. That is the only way to justify their age and education. They need to be committed to enhancing the dignity of the humanity across the walls of their religious communities.

Dr M. D. furthered his argument by highlighting a quote from Shree Narayana Guru, a great saint poet of Kerala, 'whatever be your religion, it suffices if you are a good human being'. Being member of a certain religious stream is a small matter. It is the inspiration, understanding and energy for becoming a good person that makes religion worth the while. A good human being is close to the values of other religions as he or she is close to the values of his or her own religion. At this stage, there is no question of distance between communities.

Dr Thomas, concluded the round table discussion by presenting two lines from Mahatma Kabeer, who gave a new perspective to his life, 'Bahtaa paanee nirmalaa, bandaa gandaa hoi; Saadhu jan ramtaa bhalaa, daag na laage koi'. The flowing water is clean and the stagnant water is dirty. Therefore, every religious person and every human being shall keep going to the other, so that he or she may not get stained. Being like flowing water is the way to keep religion, life, humanity and faith clean, pure and fresh, free from all sorts of stain. Besides, the flowing water symbolizes being spotless, vibrant and dynamic from within. This is the effective way of reducing distance between religious communities.

Ms Nilakshi Rajkhowa, Collaborator and host of the discussion, welcomed the scholars at the beginning and thanked them at the end of the programme. Manifestly, the scholars present contributed several substantial insights on the theme in question and proved to be a commendable 'harmony study circle'. Ms Nilakshi insisted on the relevance of such regular discussions on various aspects of social life. The discussion lasted two and a half hours and ended with lunch.

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**Dr M.D. Thomas**  
**Founder Director, Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies**  
Floor 1, A 128, Sector 19, Dwarka, New Delhi 110075

Tel.: 09810535378 (p), 08847925378 (p), 011-45575378 (o)  
Email: mdthomas53@gmail.com (p), ihps2014@gmail.com (o)  
Website: www.mdthomas.in (p), www.ihpsindia.org (o)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mdthomas53>  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mdthomas53>  
Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/MDTHOMAS>