

RESPECTING THE OTHER

Towards Inter-religious Harmony

A Program conducted by
West Zone Xavier Board of Higher Education of India
West Zone Jesuit Higher Education Association of South Asia
Department of Interreligious Studies,
Of St. Xavier's College, Autonomous, Mumbai

Name of the program: Interactive Session on 'Respecting the Other' : Towards Inter-Religious Harmony

Date: 14th and 15th September, 2023

Venue: The Retreat House, Kane Road, Bandra West, Mumbai, Maharashtra.

Target Group: Under-graduate and postgraduate students from colleges and universities, from different cities including Mumbai, Nagpur, Pune, and Ahmedabad. The colleges that participated included St. Xavier's College (Mumbai), Nirmala Niketan College of Home Science (Mumbai), St. Xavier's Institute of Education (Mumbai), St. Andrew's College (Mumbai), St. Paul's Institute of Communication Education (Mumbai), St Vincent's College Of Commerce and Arts (Pune), Christ College (Pune), St Francis De Sales College (Nagpur), and St. Xavier's College (Ahmedabad)

Objectives of the Program:

1. To promote Understanding, Foster mutual understanding and respect among participants from different religious backgrounds.
2. To encourage open and constructive dialogue among participants to explore commonalities and differences in religious beliefs and practices.
3. To promote religious tolerance and the importance of respecting each other's beliefs and traditions.
4. To raise awareness about the teachings, values, and practices of various religions to dispel misconceptions and stereotypes.
5. To involve young people in the seminar to encourage them to become advocates for interfaith understanding and cooperation.

PLACE OF STAY FOR OUTSTATION PARTICIPANTS:

Bandra Retreat House, Kane Road



Format of the Program:



About the visit:

Day 1 – Visits to various Religious institutes

14 September 19, 2023

We reached '**Shree Vitthal Rukmini Mandir**' at around 10:15 am in the morning. We all assembled in the 'Ardhamandapa' which is the space outside the temple, here Dr. Radha Kumar briefed us a little about the Mandir we were in, after that we all entered inside the temple which is called as the 'Mandapa', here we took the blessings of the God.



This was followed by a beautiful explanation by Dr. Radha, she explained the different parts of the temple and gave deeper knowledge about Hinduism and the various Gods, their Vahanas and their significance. The Pujari of the Mandir explained the story of Lord Vitthal. We next went to **Jari mari Mata Mandir** which was a temple of Goddess Parvati.



We took blessings in this temple and set a course for our next destination which was **Dadar Gurudwara**. We first assembled in a room where we met the Head of the Gurudwara who explained to us how the Gurudwara and its members have tirelessly helped people each and every time no matter what the calamity.

We learned through this that in times of calamities, no religion matters, the only thing which matters is humanity and this was made explicit by the powerful and beautiful words of the Community speaker. We next had the langar which is a beautiful concept, it's a meal offered to all people no matter the gender, caste, class and religion which is free of cost and unlimited, the food was really great.

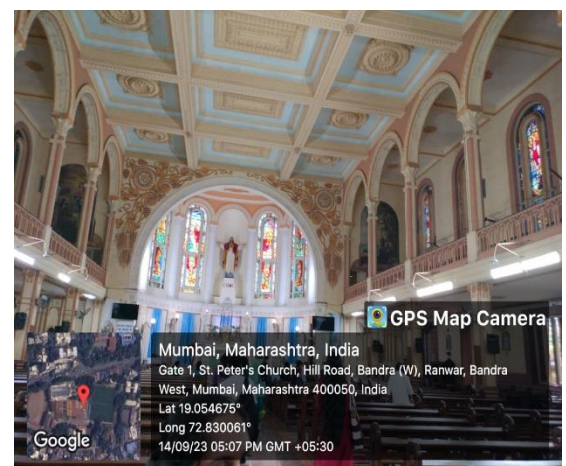


After a scrumptious langar, we headed towards **Mahim Durgah** and reached there around 2:30 in the afternoon. We were first taken to a room where the caretaker of the mosque explained the various services they do and the various programs and initiatives they are a part of. He told us all about an inter-religious program the durgah was a part of where people from different religions and communities come together for various discussions.



Amongst everything he said, the thing that stayed with the entire group for the rest of the two days was "Tolerance towards religion comes second, acceptance comes first". After a while, we were taken to another room where snacks were provided before we went to see the durgah.

A short bus ride then took us from the durgah to **St. Peter's Church in Bandra**. This holy edifice of stone was a joy to look at from an architecture enthusiast's point of view. The stained glass windows and the wall carvings were a marvel to look at. We were addressed by the church priest Fr. Luke Rodrigues SJ and were even told that the church was given a heritage grade building status. Father kept his discussions short and after a round of questions and answers, wished all the students the very best in life before we departed for our respective homes.



Day 2

Analysis of Inter-Religious Relations – Sabah Khan

The second day began with breakfast and then a talk by **Ms. Sabah Khan** on ‘**Analysis of Inter-Religious Relations**’. Ms. Khan started by asking us to reflect on the various experiences of the previous day, and share our own learnings. We were then divided into four groups, and each group was assigned with a fruit. Each group had to discuss and then present a short speech on why their own fruit should be declared the king of fruits. The members of each group quickly started listing the benefits of their own fruits, and why theirs was superior to the others. After the speeches there was an attempt to come to a consensus, but it was not successful.

Ms. Khan used this activity to demonstrate how each community tries to present themselves as better than the other, but if instead they all decided to work together, the end product would be so much better. We then had an activity where the participants were asked to name the various stereotypes and labels for the following minority groups: Muslims, Christians, Lesbians, and Dalits. The labels were listed on the board and then Ms. Khan talked about the problems with these misconceptions. How these labels prevent us from seeing each other as human beings, and cause us to put other people in boxes. This talk really helped participants to deconstruct their own assumptions about people from different backgrounds, and to view them with a clear lens.

Towards Inter-Religious Harmony – Dr. Fr. Keith D’Souza SJ

We had a break for tea and then there was a talk by **Dr. Fr. Keith D’Souza SJ** titled ‘**Towards Inter-Religious Harmony**’, followed by a group exercise. We were divided into smaller groups and given various questions to discuss relating to our own religious philosophy. Father then spoke about the different religious philosophies and the ways in which one can approach inter-religious harmony, specifically focusing on promoting change within one’s own religion. In the group exercise, we were given a chart and asked to create our own religion, depict it on the chart, and present it. Each group came up with names for their own religion, rules, principles, dress codes, rituals, etc. It was interesting to observe how differently people approached this topic and the different things that were emphasized by different groups. Some of the key themes that came across were harmony, freedom, tolerance, serving the



poor, free will, and respect. In the end, it was pointed out how, even though we have such varied perspectives on religions, there is a common desire for creating a society where there can be acceptance and love for the other.



Harmonious Notes - Radhika Sood Nayak.

Lunch was followed by a captivating music ceremony featuring the timeless poetry of Bulleh Shah. It was an incredibly enlightening and soul-stirring experience . It was a session on harmonious



Notes by Radhika Sood Nayak. She made all of us sit on the mat as it was a musical session. The inter-religious seminar was a platform where people from different faiths came together to engage in open dialogue and explore the common threads that run through our diverse belief systems. The atmosphere was charged with a spirit of unity and mutual respect. We transitioned to the music ceremony where she performed Bulleh Shah's verses in the form of soulful Sufi music. She sang various songs of Bulleh Shah such as Hatt Mullah, Bulle Noon Samjhavan. Bulleh Shah was a Sufi poet whose verses are celebrated for their universal message of love, tolerance, and spiritual awakening. Which depicts the life story of Bulle Shah and how he respected all the religions. She

also explained the meanings of the songs in between as all the Bulleh Shah songs are in Punjabi language. His poetry transcends religious boundaries and speaks directly to the human heart. As the music began, I was transported to a different realm.

The melodies were enchanting, and the lyrics, drawn from Bulleh Shah's profound verses, carried a deep spiritual resonance. She played traditional instruments like the Sitar and Ukulele creating a mesmerizing fusion of sound. The audience swayed to the rhythm, and many sang along, regardless of their native language or religious affiliation. It was a powerful reminder that the essence of Bulleh Shah's message transcends the boundaries of religion and language, touching

the core of our shared humanity. This session depicted that art knows no language and religion, especially when its music. Although the language was alien to us we were able to connect to whatever she was singing. Her voice was as smooth as Nightingale. The atmosphere was electric, filled with love, spirituality, and a profound sense of unity among people of different faiths. It was heartening to see how Bulleh Shah's poetry could bring people together, fostering understanding and appreciation for the diversity of human belief. In conclusion, attending the inter-religious seminar and the Bulleh Shah music ceremony was an enlightening and spiritually uplifting experience. It reminded me of the power of art and poetry to bridge the gaps between religions and cultures, emphasizing our shared humanity and the importance of love and tolerance. I left the event with a heart full of gratitude and a renewed sense of hope for a more harmonious world.

Celebrating Unity in Diversity - Dr. Radha Kumar

One of the highlights of the seminar was a mesmerizing dance performance that took place in the evening. The performance was a beautiful representation of unity and diversity, which resonated with the overall theme of the event. The dance performance reflected the cultural and religious diversity represented. As she started moving gracefully to the music, I was struck by the way they seamlessly blended different dance styles and traditions. The choreography was truly remarkable, showcasing the unique elements of each religious tradition while also highlighting the common threads that bind them together. The dancer moved in harmony, symbolizing the idea that despite our differences, we can coexist peacefully and respectfully.

The music accompanying the performance was equally enchanting. It seamlessly wove together melodies and rhythms from various religious backgrounds, creating a harmonious fusion of sounds that resonated deeply with the audience. It was as if the music itself was a testament to the possibility of interfaith unity. As the performance reached its climax, I could sense the emotions in the room. People from various faiths were moved by the powerful message conveyed through dance and music. It was a reminder that despite the differences in our beliefs, we all share a common humanity and a desire for peace and understanding. After the performance, there was a sense of unity and camaraderie among the seminar participants. The dance performance had succeeded in bringing people from different religious backgrounds closer together and fostering a sense of togetherness.



Overall, attending the inter-religious seminar and witnessing this beautiful dance performance was a memorable and transformative experience. It reaffirmed my belief in the power of art and dialogue to bridge divides and promote harmony among diverse communities.

Overall Feedback and Participants Reaction

The seminar was very well planned. It was a great opportunity for students from diverse backgrounds to come together and have discussions. The tours of the various religious places were very insightful. At each religious place we were welcomed and treated with such respect despite being 'outsiders'. This experience really helped us deconstruct the various barriers and misconceptions that we hold about people of different backgrounds. The seminars on the second day were very informative and also interactive. Ms.Khan made us challenge our preconceptions and the labels we have attached to the 'other'. Dr. Fr. Keith's activity was fun, but at the same time caused us to question aspects of our own beliefs that we take for granted. Mrs. Radhika Nayak's session was spectacular, and her manner of telling stories through her songs was simply beautiful.

At the end of the seminar, some students were asked to share their experience and feedback. One said that they were very grateful for the interactions they were able to have over the course of the seminar. That they were able to speak with others with no restrictions, and that everyone was very warm and made them feel comfortable. They were able to share their own opinions openly, and felt blessed to have been able to hear the opinions of others during the activities. The only downside, in their opinion, was the traffic on the first day. Another participant shared that they learnt a lot from the session and various activities, and many of their own traditional ideologies were replaced over these two days. Overall, the response was exceedingly positive.



PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

