Venue: Taj Bengal
Kolkata, India

Forum Report

Religious Diversity:
Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities for the Commonwealth

Organised and hosted by:

Australian Multicultural Foundation
The Statesman

In partnership with:
Venue: Taj Bengal
Kolkata, India

Religious Diversity:
Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities for the Commonwealth

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Attachment
A CD containing Presenters’ Papers (those available at time of printing)
Background to the Diversity Matters Forums

The First Diversity Matters Forum was held in Brisbane, October 2001. It was a bi-partisan approach between the Commonwealth Institute and the Australian Multicultural Foundation. The forum successfully concluded with a number of resolutions and a Statement of Principles, which was forwarded to the CHOGM meeting in March 2002.

More than 80 participants from Commonwealth countries took part in the three-day forum designed to promote dialogue and encourage practical solutions fostering and celebrating cultural diversity. The forum focused on issues relevant to members of the Commonwealth.

The Second Diversity Matters Forum, hosted by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit and the Commonwealth Foundation, was designed to follow up and further develop themes and ideas that were initiated by participants in the first forum. In addition, the second forum was designed to develop and implement pragmatic approaches that Commonwealth countries can take on board as they work towards promoting social cohesion through acceptance and understanding between community and religious groups.

The Third Diversity Matters Forum specifically looked at identifying multi-faith initiatives, issues and challenges for the Commonwealth with a view to recommending the establishment of a Commonwealth Multi-Faith Advisory Group. It was therefore recommended that the Australian Multicultural Foundation, in partnership with the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, the Commonwealth Foundation, The Statesman, and the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, co-ordinate a gathering of international speakers and practitioners from relevant institutions and NGOs within the Commonwealth.

Introduction

Third Diversity Matters Forum
28 February-2 March 2005, Kolkata, India

The forum was well attended by more than 80 delegates. Kolkata was a unique and special city to hold such an event given Kolkata’s diverse community. It is a city where the people come to terms with the richness of its diversity against a backdrop of modernity, urban life and mainstream life in the city. Kolkata in the minds of all delegates certainly epitomised cultural and religious diversity.

The forum provided a unique opportunity for people from across the Commonwealth to come together to discuss and share views and experiences of interfaith dialogue including trends, emerging issues and solutions. Commonwealth countries represented included Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, India, Bangladesh, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigeria and Malaysia, and non-Commonwealth countries such as Thailand.
Day One commenced with a valuable Study Tour to the Ramakrishna Mission at the Sri Ramakrishna Temple. This provided delegates with an excellent background to India’s diversity and the work of the Mission. Delegates enjoyed the hospitality of Swami Atmeswarananda. This was followed by a bus tour through the streets of Kolkata.

On the Second Day the forum was officially opened by Mr Amitav Banerji, Director/Head of the Office of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, followed by keynote addresses by Mr Salman Haidar, Former Foreign Secretary of India, and The Hon Sir James Gobbo AC CVO, Chairman of the Australian Multicultural Foundation. This set the tone for the remainder of the day and for Day Three.

The proactive role of The Statesman as a co-host under the Editorship of Mr Ravindra Kumar and the participation of the Asian News Network Editors, gave the forum enormous credibility and exposure, which meant the forum topics and outcomes were not just confined to the forum and to those attending, but rather, to a much wider audience providing feedback and commentary across countries.

The main points from the forum and its outcomes are captured in the attached Summary Report. The speakers’ papers are attached on disk, with the list of delegates and media articles.

The report will be presented to the Commonwealth Foundation and Commonwealth Secretariat for further discussion on how best to proceed with the formation of a Working Party to develop a framework for the process of establishing a Multi-Faith Advisory Group for the Commonwealth.

And finally, on behalf of the Convenors, I wish to thank all delegates for their participation and invaluable input to this historical event; thank you to Mr Ravindra Kumar and The Statesman for their support and contribution to making this event a success; to the Commonwealth Foundation for its generous financial support and invaluable partnership, in particular the former Director Mr Colin Ball, newly appointed Director Dr Mark Collins, and Mr Seth Lartey; and to Mr Richard Bourne from the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit for his commitment and ongoing support.

Forum Convenors

Mr B. (Hass) Dellal O.A.M. Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation
Mr Ravindra Kumar Editor & Managing Director, The Statesman (India)
Mr Richard Bourne Head, Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit (UK)
Religious Diversity:
Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities for the Commonwealth

Summary of Outcomes
Saturday 26th & Sunday 27th February 2005

- Overseas delegates start arriving.
- Articles on religious diversity in Kolkata appear in The Statesman, and promotional material and articles on the Forum.

Monday 28th February 2005

- Registration for delegates.
- Study Tour of Ramakrishna Mission.
- Provide delegates with an insight to Kolkata’s religion and cultural diversity.
- An opportunity for religious leaders and delegates to meet informally to discuss issues.
- A practical understanding of the work of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Tuesday 1st March 2005

Welcome and Introduction
Mr B. (Hass) Dellal OAM
Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation

- Purpose is to share / listen / network.
- Come up with practical Blueprint for the way forward for interfaith dialogue and cooperation.
- Commonwealth to take a leading role.

Official Opening
Mr Amitav Banerji
Director/Head, Office of the Commonwealth Secretary-General (UK)

- Commonwealth is a mosaic of diversity, and this is a strength, not a weakness.
- Facilitate a ‘touch of healing’ to prevent conflict and promote understanding.
- Commonwealth Secretariat committed to work with Diversity Matters process and outcomes.
- “The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity” Nelson Mandela.

Keynote Addresses
Chaired by: Mr Ravindra Kumar
Editor and Managing Director, The Statesman Ltd (India)

Keynote Address 1: Leadership and Interfaith
Mr Salman Haider
Former Foreign Secretary of India

- Diversity needs to have relevance in everyday life.
- Diversity is the central ingredient for good governance.
- Established and non established religions need to be mutually respected – minorities need their space.
• International Dimension and role for the commonwealth.
• Liberal Democracy is the way to pursue interfaith, let’s not tinker with what works.

Keynote Address 2:  *Religion and Violence*

The Hon Sir James Gobbo AC CVO
Chairman, Australian Multicultural Foundation

• Does religion precipitate most wars – no.
• All faiths preach non violence / peace.
• There must be broader mainstream dialogue between faiths to promote understanding.
• In all religions suicide is considered a grave sin.
• Too many misconceptions on the preaching of religions and specifically Islam. These can only be corrected by more dialogue.
• “Pray for Peace” is powerful.

**Plenary Address (morning session)**

*Improving understanding through interfaith relations*

Chair/Discussant: Ms Sujata Sen
Director, British Council, Eastern India

Speaker 1: Professor Desmond Cahill
Professor of Intercultural Studies, RMIT University (Australia)

Paper: “Regulating Religion in a Global Context”
• All states need to be cross cultural and understand all religions.
• All faith communities need to be cross cultural.
• Multi-faith education and dialogue with all religious leaders.
• Formation of national and regional interfaith councils.
• Articulation of a Charter of Religious Rights and Responsibilities for all faiths and individuals.
• Revamping of UN of Freedom of Religion and Speech.

Speaker 2: Mr Mir Nawaz Khan Marwat
Assistant Secretary-General, World Muslim Congress
(Pakistan)

• Live in a global village, must get over issues of mistrust and distrust.
• Religious harmony and peace must be a common theme of all religious learnings.
• Highlight and promote the common destiny and themes of all faiths. Hold frequent interfaith meetings.
• Explore common points of mutual care.
• Youth is our future.
• Promote policy of multi-faith, with understanding goes harmony.
Plenary Address (afternoon session)
Religious education: policy, challenges and opportunities

Chair/Discussant: Dr Sitaram Sharma
Deputy Secretary-General and Director Asia-Pacific, World Federation of United Nations Associations (India)

Speaker 1: Dr Antony Fernando
Director, Inter-Cultural Research Centre (Sri Lanka)

- Need to promote the many denominations of religion in our teachings.
- Claims that individual religions are the greatest are divisive.
- All religions want to bring healing to all spiritually sick individuals.
- Spirituality brings religion to life.
- Closer interfaith teachings will make humanity more united.

Speaker 2: Pastor James Movel Wuye
Joint Executive Coordinator, Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria)

- Must have pragmatic and practical solutions.
- Social policies must not protect the elite but support all religions equally.
- Need a universal curriculum for the teaching of religion and faiths.
- Constitutions of countries must not give undue preference to any one religion.
- Governments must ensure equitable teaching and access to all religions and faiths.
- There must be compliance.
- Link to life long learning and ensure interfaith education is for life!

Concurrent Sessions

Session A: Promoting interfaith dialogue: best practice

Chair/Discussant: Dr Tara Mukherjee
Chairman, European Multicultural Foundation (UK)

Speaker 1: Reverend M Anura Lasantha Perera
Treasurer, Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (Sri Lanka)

- Multi faith initiatives taken up in Sri Lanka at times of religious strife and disasters.

Speaker 2: Mr D C Vajpai
Former Director-General of Police, West Bengal
Former Commissioner of Police, Kolkata

- Initiatives to make the police station the hub for interfaith activities.
Session B: Promoting interfaith dialogue: best practice

Chair/Discussant: Mr Mahfuz Anam
Asian Media Network Editor (Bangladesh)

Speaker 1: Mrs Josie Lacey
Convener and Initiator, Women’s Interfaith Network (Australia)

- Initiatives bringing women Interfaith Leaders together to share ideas and participate in further development together. Journey of promise.

Speaker 2: Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa
Joint Executive Coordinator, Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum

- Dealing with religious motivated conflicts through sustained proactive dialogue.

The Peace Tree – A Film by Mitra Sen (Canada)
A sensitive film portraying cultural diversity and respect for religious diversity involving children who succeeded in removing religious bias of their parents.

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**Wednesday 2nd March 2005**

**Keynote Address**
Mr Colin Ball
Former Director, Commonwealth Foundation (UK)

*Commonwealth Focus on Diversity: Unstarted Business*
- What does Commonwealth do? Democracy and development. Need to add diversity to this.
- Commonwealth must take a leading role for its 1.8 billion people. Make diversity an asset.
- Create a Commonwealth Action Program on Diversity
  * Focus on people to people contact, especially youth
  * Action research on what causes division and what works
  * Feedback work in progress to Secretariat and CHOGM
- Walk the Walk and wake up the 1971 Singapore Declaration.

**Plenary Addresses**
*Religion and Cultural Diversity: Local Responsibilities*

Chair/Discussant: Dr Andrew Hall
British Deputy High Commissioner, Kolkata (India)
In his talk, Professor Toh focused on the growing movement of inter-faith dialogue that has enhanced greater understanding and respect between diverse faiths and spirituality traditions embraced by cultures and civilizations worldwide. Through dialogue, different faiths have found that they share many common values such as compassion, justice, love, forgiveness, honesty, and kindness, while being able to respectfully acknowledge differences. Drawing on local and global exemplars, Professor Toh clarified the role of inter-faith dialogue and education in creating a culture of peace, which encompasses a holistic and paradigm of six major themes: dismantling a culture of war; living with justice and compassion; promoting human rights and responsibilities; living in harmony with the earth; building intercultural solidarity; and cultivating inner peace. Faith institutions and civil society movements have, for example, been promoting education and action for non-violence resolution of conflicts, as well as local/global justice. Professor Toh also noted the increasing concern of faiths in protecting human rights, and strengthening mutual respect of diverse cultures. Furthermore, many faiths teach their followers to live sustainably as well as to deepen their spirituality. In conclusion, Professor Toh emphasized the importance of participatory and creative strategies in educating and inter-faith dialogue for building a culture of peace.

Speaker 1: Professor Toh Swee-Hin
Director, Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University (Australia)

**Plenary Addresses**

*Religious vilification and discrimination in multi-faith societies*

Chair/Discussant: Mr Felix Soh
Asian Media Network Editor (Singapore)

Speaker 1: Mr Ian Lacey
Legal Advisor/Consultant, Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia

- Vilification has a major impact on the quality of life of people.
- Look at the British Bill that is currently before the Parliament as a possible role model.

Speaker 2: The Venerable Canon Samuel D John
National Council of Welfare and Social Development (Malaysia)

- Balancing Act Discrimination Law.
- Need a pragmatic approach and stance.
- Malaysia has rules based on: Land and place of worship / language / education / media / proselytization / marriage / conversion.
**Concurrent Sessions**

Session A:  
*Religious diversity, young people and women of the Commonwealth*

Chair/Discussant:  
Mr Soo Ewe Jin  
Asian Media Network Editor (Malaysia)

Speaker 1:  
Mrs Josie Lacey  
Interfaith Advisor, Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Council of Australia  
Convenor and Initiator, Women’s Interfaith Network

Special religious experiences where women have a unique capacity. Women have a unique capacity to create new life and nurture life. It is through this special role that women have a profound impact on the culture of any community which is consistent in all religions, faiths and societies. There needs to be a continuation on how women can participate more fully in the ritual, prayer, ceremony and study of religious diversity. By meeting regularly and sharing experiences and traditions many barriers can be overcome.

Speaker 2:  
Ms Sanjana Joshi  
Fellow, Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies (India)

Sanjana focussed on religious diversity and the role women can play in religious and community life. She emphasised the ‘inclusivity’ principle - the need for women to contribute to consultation in the policy formation process. This, Joshi suggested is important in that women have a positive influence in the creation of social norms. She also identified a tension between multiculturalism and feminism: the ‘caveat’ in multiculturalism is that it can promote policies that are inimical to women’s rights. She asserted that there is a need to discriminate between the organic aspects of culture and those which no longer serve the common good, thus dismissing the cultural relativists’ view that in subscribing to an ethic of pluralism one cannot make any such distinction as this would involve the imposition of one set of cultural standards over another. For Joshi, discriminatory aspects must be relegated in favour of the adoption of universal human rights.

**Additional Paper**

Felicity Rawlings-Sanai (MISGM) presented an abridged version of a paper 'The Challenge of Religious Revitalisation to Educating for Shared Values and Interfaith Understanding' by Professor Gary Bouma, UNESCO Chair in Intercultural and Interreligious Relations – Asia Pacific, Monash University. Bouma’s opening remarks emphasised the positive aspects of religious diversity, pointing to it as a ‘resource’ rather than ‘a disease to be overcome’. Religious diversity was defined in terms of its manifestation within religious groups as much as between them. His paper then outlined some of the emerging features of ‘religious revitalisation’: the involvement of the aspiring middle class, the growing conservatism and a shift from disengagement to engagement with the world. Bouma observed the problems that religious revitalisation poses for education in values and religious education: their
dismissal of the values of inclusion, fairness, openness, tolerance and diversity presents a ‘huge challenge’. Bouma then pointed to the need for curricular materials about different religious beliefs and practices which avoids a ‘comparative religions’ approach which evaluates one religion against another. Students should have access to more detailed knowledge about religion and religious groups in their relevant contexts.

Session B: *Religion and the arts*

Chair/Discussant: Mr Pana Janviroj
Asian Media Network Editor (Thailand)

Speaker 1: Dr Mark Manolopoulos
Research Associate, Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology, Monash University (Australia)

Can art and the pursuit of leisure lead to peace? Arts can help lead to understanding. We are moving to a more recreational world. Before we play we need to be fed and sheltered. Take play and pleasure seriously.

Speaker 2: Reverend Canon John Ovenden
St Georges Chapel Windsor Castle
Chaplain of Cumberland Lodge Windsor (Great Britain)

No such thing as art, only artists. Art is 90% living. Spirituality is living. God can be perceived through the creative spirit, hence we all need to be open to the creative spirit of all diverse cultures. Expose every part of human identity as both creative and creators.

**Plenary Address**

*Leadership and Interfaith initiatives for the Commonwealth – Multifaith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth*

Chair/Speaker 1: Mr Ravindra Kumar
Editor and Managing Director, The Statesman Ltd (India)

- The forum has raised some important leadership initiatives for the Commonwealth.
- The forum has provided a number of practical directions that will challenge the Commonwealth.

Speaker 2: Mr Richard Bourne
Head, Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London (UK)

- Multi Faith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth.
- One role will be to unite and provide a healing touch.
- Promote virtues of diversity with a common voice.
- What will it do? Depends on resources and support.
- Is there backing from Interfaith Groups?
Speaker 3: Mr B. (Hass) Dellal OAM
Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation

- The role of faith, social cohesion and security.
- Work with what we have, don’t create something new.
- Take up the offer to work with Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Highlight local initiatives, learn from and share them.

Discussion on Multi-Faith Advisory Council
- Take into consideration continent representation and participants from this forum. Its respect must be earned.
- Committee to select representatives.
- How will the message of this Forum be disseminated to all participants. The Statesman will help co-ordinate so long as participants provide details.
- Can it have a monitoring role and be a Forum to listen?
- Commonwealth Foundation and local national Councils to interact and expand dialogue.
- We need to have further consultation and research into the concept but this will require time and resources.
- Bring media to all future meetings and gatherings.
- There must be follow up to this Forum.
- Have a newsletter from this Forum.
- There must be a sequential process in the pursuit of this.
- A Multi-Faith Advisory Group set up by selection not election.
- Needs to maintain independence.
- Now need to research the Multi-Faith Advisory Group.

Some Observations
- Some common themes with the globalising world:
- Move from knowing what to do to actually doing is the difference between the cautious and courageous.
- Education is the common currency for the future.
- Nothing unites people like a crisis and we all seek belonging.
- We live in a commercial / communication / knowledge access / diverse world, all searching for hope, happiness, and opportunity.
- Must deliver a blended approach that facilitates behavioural actions, not a cognitive approach to just talk.
- 20 / 60 / 20 rule applies always.
- We all now have to manage our moment of truth.

A Way Forward – Outcomes, Actions and Recommendations from both days
Mr David Stewart, David Stewart Corporate Pty Ltd (Australia)

Our Practical Pragmatic Actions
- Facilitate a mechanism to pursue the creation of a Commonwealth Multi-Faith Advisory Group/Forum for dialogue
  * Support creation of a Multi-Faith Advisory Group.
  * Organizing Committee to convene a Working Party to formulate a framework for process.
- Fourth Diversity Matters Forum in South Africa in 2007. Possible themes:
  * Media and Diversity in the Commonwealth
* Justice and Diversity in the Commonwealth
* Young People and Diversity in the Commonwealth
- Invitation from Monash University.
- We show leadership: “One Message Many Voices”.

**Actions & Outcomes**
- Future forums aim to have more youth participation and focus.
Appendix One
Forum Program
Venue:
Taj Bengal
Kolkata, India

Religious Diversity:
Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities for the Commonwealth

Organised and hosted by:

Australian Multicultural Foundation
The Statesman
CPSU
Commonwealth Foundation

In partnership with:

MONASH
Institute for the Study of Global Movements

British Deputy High Commission, Kolkata
Third Diversity Matters Forum

28th February to 2nd March 2005
Kolkata, India

Organised by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, The Statesman, the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, the Commonwealth Foundation, and the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements. This event is a sequel and follow-up to the first Diversity Matters Forum (held in Brisbane in October 2001), and the second Diversity Matters Forum (held in London in March 2003).

Programme

Day One
Registration and Optional Study Tour

Monday 28th February 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00 am to 12:00 noon</td>
<td>Registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00 pm</td>
<td>Study Tour Participants to meet in foyer of Taj Bengal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30 pm</td>
<td>Study Tour Participants depart for a tour of Kolkata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:00 pm</td>
<td>Study Tour arrives at Ramakrishna Mission</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visit the Ramakrishna Mission at Belur, on the banks of the Ganges River, where several multi-faith initiatives have been undertaken over the past century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00 pm</td>
<td>Study Tour Participants depart Ramakrishna Mission for a tour of food and shopping malls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00 pm</td>
<td>Study Tour Participants return to Taj Bengal</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Please note: lunch and dinner will not be provided by the forum on this day and is the responsibility of each participant)
Day Two
Tuesday 1st March 2005

8:00 am  Registration

8:30 am  Welcome and Introduction
Mr B. (Hass) Dellal O.A.M.
Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation
(Australia)
(to provide a background to the forum and its aims)

Official Opening
Mr Amitav Banerji
Director/Head, Office of the Commonwealth Secretary-General
(UK)

9:00 am  Keynote Addresses

Chair:  Mr Ravindra Kumar
Editor and Managing Director, The Statesman Ltd
(India)

Keynote Address 1:
Leadership and Interfaith
Mr Salman Haidar
Former Foreign Secretary of India (India)

Keynote Address 2:
Religion and Violence
The Hon Sir James Gobbo A.C. C.V.O.
Chairman, Australian Multicultural Foundation (Australia)

10:15 am  Morning Tea

10:45 am  Plenary Address

Improving understanding through interfaith relations

Chair/Discussant:  Ms Sujata Sen
Director, British Council, Eastern India
(India)

Speaker 1
Professor Desmond Cahill
Professor of Intercultural Studies, RMIT University (Australia)
Paper:  Regulating Religion in a Global Context

Speaker 2
Mr Mir Nawaz Khan Marwat
Assistant Secretary General, World Muslim Congress
(Pakistan)

11:45 am  Discussion with Speakers

12:00 pm  Lunch

1:00 pm  Plenary Address

Religious education: policy, challenges and opportunities

Chair/Discussant: Dr Sitaram Sharma
   Deputy Secretary-General and Director, Asia-Pacific World Federation of United Nations Associations

Speaker 1
Dr Antony Fernando
Director, Inter-Cultural Research Centre (Sri Lanka)

Speaker 2
Pastor James Movel Wuye
Joint Executive Coordinator, Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria)

2:15 pm  Discussion with Speakers

2:30 pm  Afternoon Tea

3:00 pm  Concurrent Sessions

Session A: Promoting interfaith dialogue: best practice

Chair/Discussant: Dr Tara Mukherjee
   Chairman, European Multicultural Foundation (UK)

Speaker 1
Reverend M. Anura Lasantha Perera
Treasurer, Inter-Religious Peace Foundation (Sri Lanka)

Speaker 2
Mr D C Vajpai
Former Director-General of Police, West Bengal Former Commissioner of Police, Kolkata (India)

Session B: Promoting interfaith dialogue: best practice
Chair/Discussant: Mr Mahfuz Anam
Asian Media Network
Editor (Bangladesh)

Speaker 1
Mrs Josie Lacey
Interfaith Advisor, Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (APERO)
Convenor and Initiator, Women’s Interfaith Network (Australia)

Speaker 2
Imam Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa
Joint Executive Coordinator, Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria)

4:15 pm Close of Day Two

7:00 pm Conference Dinner at Taj Bengal Hotel
Day Three  
Wednesday 2\textsuperscript{nd} March 2005

9:00 am  \textbf{Summary of Day Two}

9:15 am  \textbf{Keynote Address}  
\textit{Commonwealth Focus on Diversity: Unstarted Business}
Mr Colin Ball  
Former Director, Commonwealth Foundation (UK)

9:45 am  \textbf{Morning Tea}

10:15 am  \textbf{Plenary Addresses}  
\textit{Religion and cultural diversity: local responsibilities}

\textbf{Chair/Discussant:} Dr Andrew Hall  
British Deputy High Commissioner, Kolkata (India)

\textbf{Speaker 1}  
Professor Toh Swee-Hin  
Director, Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University (Australia)

\textbf{Speaker 2}  
Professor Bhagwan Josh  
Professor of Contemporary History, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (India)

11:15 am  \textbf{Discussion with Speakers}

11:30 am  \textbf{Plenary Addresses}  
\textit{Religious vilification and discrimination in multi-faith societies}

\textbf{Chair/Discussant:} Mr Felix Soh  
Asian Media Network Editor (Singapore)

\textbf{Speaker 1}  
Mr Ian Lacey  
Legal Advisor/Consultant, Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (Australia)

\textbf{Speaker 2}  
The Venerable Canon Samuel D John  
National Council of Welfare and Social Development (Malaysia)

12:30 pm  \textbf{Discussion with Speaker}
12:45 pm  Lunch

1:45 pm  Concurrent Sessions

Session A:  Religious diversity, young people and women of the Commonwealth

Chair/Discussant:  Mr Soo Ewe Jin
Asian Media Network
Editor (Malaysia)

Speaker 1
Mrs Josie Lacey
Interfaith Advisor, Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (APERO)
Convenor and Initiator, Women’s Interfaith Network
(Australia)

Speaker 2
Ms Sanjana Joshi
Fellow, Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies
(India)

Session B:  Religion and the arts

Chair/Discussant:  Mr Pana Janviroj
Asian Media Network
Editor (Thailand)

Speaker 1
Dr Mark Manolopoulos
Research Associate, Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology, Monash University
(Australia)

Speaker 2
Reverend Canon John Ovenden
St Georges Chapel Windsor Castle
Chaplain of Cumberland Lodge Windsor (Great Britain)

3:00 pm  Afternoon Tea

3:30 pm  Plenary Address

Leadership and Interfaith Initiatives for the Commonwealth – Multifaith Advisory Council for the Commonwealth

Chair/Discussant:  Mr Ravindra Kumar
Speaker 1
Mr Richard Bourne
Head of Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London (UK)

Speaker 2
Mr B. (Hass) Dellal O.A.M.
Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation (Australia)

4:30 pm both days  A Way Forward - Outcomes and Recommendations from both days
Mr David Stewart
David Stewart Corporate Pty Ltd (Australia)

5:15 pm  Close of Forum
Appendix Two
Lists of participants
### Speakers and Chairs Contact List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title/Position</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr Mahfuz Anam</td>
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<td><a href="mailto:dseditor@gononet.com">dseditor@gononet.com</a></td>
<td>Asian Media Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Joint Executive Coordinator Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria)</td>
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<td>Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
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Appendix Three
Media Coverage
Kolkata's diverse communities are the parts without which the city is not a whole. In many ways a miniature of the Indian multicultural experience, the communities themselves - many with distinct corporate identities - are easy meat for those in the business of attaching labels on peoples. In a series of in-depth pieces beginning today, The Statesman attempts to cut through the platitudes and panegyrics to present a picture of these communities in contemporary times.

TODAY: Sikhs - Laptop at the gurdwara.

See Page 1.

AN ODE TO JOY: Students of the Khalsa School, Barranagar, Kolkata. - Rajib De
Laptop at the gurdwara

It is 4 a.m. on a Sunday morning and Ranvir Singham lives the nightshift on Carman Street like everyone else. But the 24-year-old man-about-town isn’t scoring home in concert with his sleep. He alights from his taxi, instead, at the Sri Guru Singh Sabha gurdwara. To all, talks, meditations.

Ranvir works as a security guard and native to parts. Like many other Kolkata Sikhs, his faith is strong. And his religious identity is an important year of the events that take him there. Like many city boys from the community who shun the idea of discarding the turban at least once, Ranvir spends days arguing with his parents on the issue. He says, “When I was younger, I wanted to get rid of my turban but my parents taught me to respect it. She told me, you can wear a turban because everybody respects a Sikh — the Y in the turban is a suffix of respect.”

The turban of one of the most visible symbols of Sikh identity and an overwhelming majority of men wear it with pride. There are some who say they don’t feel the need to wear a turban to feel Sikh. Says Harmeet Johar, a student at a college where the number of Sikh students is on the rise. “I’m not ready to wear a turban. Maybe I’ll do it when I grow up.”

What experience of having gone against the wishes of the family? “People are more accepting now, while not having conceded to them, hasn’t led them to be ostracised. That’s one of the great things, fundamentalists don’t go way,” he adds.

An estimated 2,000 Sikhs call Kolkata home. They come from all over — Himachal, Punjab and Bihar — but the reason was always the same: better livelihood and a secure future. If there was ever a community that subscribed to the pull-yourself-up-from-the-bootstraps motto, this is it.

Among the early migrants to the city were those who managed to escape the “Grand Turbanate: Way To Socialism”. One of them was Gurmukh Singh Pulia. He recounts his arrival: “I came here penniless in 1958, I was in the automobile trade in Bursa and wanted to continue doing the same here. There were already Sikhs in Kolkata who had arrived looking for opportunity after Partition. They were mostly taxi drivers and they extended all the help they could to a fellow Sikh trying to make it. I remember offering a driver the fare but he refused and asked me, a complete stranger, as a fellow refugee.”

Gurmukh Singh is a well-established hot dog today. With his three brothers, he is the proprietor of the ‘Bursa’ in Kolkata. But his children, nephews and nieces have all migrated overseas. He says, “My kids left after the death of Indira Gandhi... they didn’t want a repetition of the situation that had to pack up with in Bursa.” So, what will be done with his hotel? “Maybe, we’ll give it away to the gurdwara.”

You keep coming back to it — the gurdwara. For the Sikh or “Bhaseen”, the gurdwara imparts knowledge and spiritual silence and functions as a community centre, a meeting place and worry travellers’ place of rest. Remember Ranvir, your namaste-bhara? Well, he sometimes carries his work to the gurdwara. “I take my laptop there so I can just be with myself. No one has stopped me and I never asked anyone whether it was allowed.”

At the Sri Guru Singh Sabha gurdwara near Kolkata’s pilgrim gate food and shelter for Rs 30. Gurinder Singh, a postgraduate student from Punjab is a tourist. He says: “I’ve spent three days here. I prefer staying in a gurdwara as it is cheap. But I follow all the rules. Though I pay Rs 30, I also do work in the kitchen.” The Sikhs have their very own take on that old advertisement — ‘join the army, see the world.’

Gurdwaras are also responsible for establishing the foothold of Khalsa schools in Kolkata, which seem to make a huge effort to secularise and are insisting that they want their children to be an integral part of the mainstream while retaining their cultural-religious identity. The Khalsa higher secondary school in Patna has started in 1934. According to Principal Harvinder Kaur, temporary headmistress, “All our children are well behaved — we emphasise on the importance of preserving the culture. We do have separate timings for boys and girls but only because of the space constraint. There are only 15 classrooms for 1,400 students.”

Asked how many Sikh students study here, she replies, “less than 25 per cent.” The rest are students from UP and, surprisingly, many Bangladeshi Muslims. The separate timings for boys and girls is apparently a major factor in attracting Muslim parents who can’t seem to find any girls’ school.

Rajesh Singh, a postgraduate student makes the point. "It was 1969 to meet the growing needs of the Sikhs population in the city. Some 2,500 students study here and Sikhs make up only 25 per cent of the students. Ranjeet Singh Lodhavani, a Punjabi language journalist associated with the school, points out: “The Sikhs are not only the gurdwara, they also provide knowledge and spiritual silence and serve as a community centre. A meeting place and worry travellers’ place of rest.” Remember Ranvir, your namaste-bhara? Well, he sometimes carries his work to the gurdwara. “I take my laptop there so I can just be with myself. No one has stopped me and I never asked anyone whether it was allowed.”

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FEELS LIKE HOME: Mother and son offer prayers at the historic gurdwara in Burra Bosar.

As a community centre, a place of worship and a source of community life for Sikhs, gurdwaras play a vital role in the community. They provide a space where Sikhs can come together to offer their prayers, learn about their heritage, and engage in community service.

When I was a teenager
I wanted to get rid of my turban but mom eventually taught me to respect it. She told me not to be ashamed because everybody respects a Sikh - the 'ji' in Sardar is a suffix of respect.

At the Bara Sikh Sangat Gurdwara, Howrah.

Sikhs as a community don't know the meaning of inertia - the vibration of their traditions, their strong kinship bonds and their refusal to become ghastly while maintaining their distinct cultural identity. This is why the Bara Sikh Sangat Gurdwara, which is located in the Howrah district, is a place where Sikhs come together to offer their prayers, learn about their heritage, and engage in community service.

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Kolkata's diverse communities are the parts without which the city is not a whole. In many ways a miniature of the Indian multicultural experience, the communities themselves — many with distinct corporate identities — are easy meat for those in the business of attaching labels on peoples. In the second of a series of in-depth pieces, The Statesman attempts to cut through the platitudes and panegyrics to present a picture of these communities in contemporary times.

TODAY: Christians — Language, my dear.

See Page 9
You've got to have faith

Mr B Hass Dellar

"The challenge lies in the differences and not in commonalities. This platform will give us an opportunity to see what some of the Commonwealth countries are doing and how we can collaborate on it," said Mr B Hass Dellar, executive director of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, who was in the city to participate in the 3rd Diversity Ministers Forum that took off on 28 February. Mr Dellar has worked extensively throughout Australia and internationally on multicultural affairs and has spearheaded a number of community-centric initiatives.

The Diversity Forum has been designed to initiate dialogue and explore relevant issues in diversity for the Commonwealth. According to Mr Dellar: "The 53 member nations of the Commonwealth have a rich multi-cultural and religious heritage. There are also inequality and racial, cultural and ethnic differences. The forum will give us an opportunity to cross these barriers."

The first conference produced a statement of principles on how to manage diversity. The second looked at some specific issues and the outcome was a recommendation to look at the issues of multi-faith and how do we share multi-faith? Hence a third conference to discuss religious diversity, global challenges and local responsibilities for the Commonwealth.

Mr Dellar added: "Religion is important because people have faith and common values. It is a core of humanity. Now, the question is why we cannot use faith as a tool to advance the ideals and core values of diversity. Religious and faith leaders have big influence. They advise people. They are in a position to bring people with them. It is also a mechanism to advocate good work."

On people drawn from many cultures, how well does it work? "I can tell you in the case of Australia, it has worked very well. We have a multi-cultural policy which provides social justice, opportunities, equity, and freedom of religion, culture and speech. On one hand, it gives an opportunity for productive diversity and on the other citizens have obligations as well. They have to be committed to the country, respect the laws of the land, respect ethnicity and participate. It promotes commitment as one people. In Australia, we have policies from the top which are not socially engineered. It was a great responsive to diversity. You've got to recognise people for what they are. Though developed much earlier, the policy was launched in 1989." About 90 per cent of the world communities are made up of people of varied, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. In many of the Asian, African and Latin American countries there has been movement of population, spread of religions, colonisations, labour migrations and influx of refugees.

Under such circumstances, what is the status of democratic pluralism? Is there a country in the world which practises democratic pluralism honestly enough? "We have some very fascinating developments in India. I couldn't think of a better country in the world which has practiced diversity and democratic pluralism so well. It has been overlooked worldwide. People have only looked at it as a large country with a large population. Worldwide, a fear is also surfacing. Look at Europe where there are anti-diversity policies. In Switzerland, they call people who migrate foreigners. It needs a whole system of educational programmes, responsibilities and obligations."

Under the circumstances, what is the best way to promote diversity? "Oneness is produced through civic-nass. Sporting, cultural, social and economic activities are key issues. Respecting each other's ability and individuality is important, so is intermarriage from one generation to the other. Positive elements in faith — philosophical and psychological — needs to be encouraged. September 11 and the recent tsunami in South Asia proved that there is a unique reservoir of understanding. Religious leaders came out to comfort people and instill confidence. It is vital to build up social capital in a country," he signed off.

Debjani Chattopadhyay
Clash of civilisations comes last

KOLKATA, Feb 28. — Kolkata hosted all participants of the Diversity Matters conference. The first day found them eager to explore the city with all its historic sights and the multitude of markets and shopping malls.

Ms Josie Lasey, honorary secretary of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry said: "On arriving, I headed for Nahoum and Sons to meet David Nahoum and later I visited the two synagogues in the city. It is sad to find the Jewish community shrivelling. I was fascinated by Tagore's house and the different handicrafts exhibitions that are on. I have no idea why people eurent the city with pollution and noise. It is a great city." It is said that Kolkata makes a tourist feel at home and the priest was driven home by Sir James Gobbo, chairman of the Australian Multicultural Foundation. "I accompanied my wife to Raj Bhavan to look at its decor and furniture. Believe me or not, the furniture here are remarkably similar to those at the Government House in Melbourne. Sometime back, the Government House in Kolkata sold off a part of its furniture which was bought at an auction and transferred to Melbourne."

As for Venerable Canon Samuel D'Jehn, "Organised tours are great way to visit tourist spots but I love to be among ordinary people. On my own, I've visited the National Library and may visit the Biria Planetarium, zoo and old houses in north Kolkata. If possible, I'll visit Bishop's College, for my mentor was a student there." For most, it was Ramkrishna Mission and Mother Teresa's house that were on mind. Around 30 participants have already arrived and the rest are expected on Tuesday. When the focus shifted from the city to the notion of diversity, here's what some of them had to say:

According to Sir James Gobbo, chairman of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, in Kolkata for the Diversity Matters Forum, religion isn't the main driver of violence. Religion is often combined with other interests in contemporary clashes — territorial, economic, political. More wars have been caused by secular, non-religious forces than by religious forces, including the worst wars in the history of mankind: World War I and World War II.

On the current debate about Islam, there isn't any fundamental conflict between Islam and Christianity, or Islam and Hinduism. Sir James sees a number of groups in West Asia, conducting independence campaigns or having grievances about Israel, using Islam as a powerful weapon. There is no confrontation between Muslims and others at Australia, neither is there any obvious conflict in India. Kolkata, for instance, doesn't validate Saadat Hasan's thesis of a clash of civilisations.

Before holding his current position as chairman of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, Sir James has been a lawyer, a Queen's Counsel, a Judge of the Supreme Court in Australia, and Governor of the state of Victoria. The Australian Multicultural Foundation received its initial funding from the government when it was set up as part of bicentenary celebrations in 1988, but works now in an independent body. The leader of the government and the Opposition, and some leading citizens constitute its membership.

Sir James Gobbo
Australia, Sir James feels. Australians are excited about immigration, although this is also a function of the fact that the economy is booming, and unemployment is at its lowest in 22 years. This could change in different circumstances, as antagonism to immigration stems mostly from opposed immigration, got going for a while. It had a degree of success, sent a few people to Parliament, but has since disappeared. Its strength were regions thought to have been neglected by the government, and a vote for it was as much an economic vote against the neglect of these areas as a racially-motivated one.

As part of an official statement of multiracial policy that Sir James had helped formulate, new settlers can retain their languages and cultures. They are, however, expected to become good Australians, although there is no formal declaration or test underlying such a commitment. This is in contrast to Europe where, according to him, they would laugh if you asked whether workers staying for a long time in the country..."
"Oasis of peace"

Tender minds

After a home education and volunteering at a centre for the physically and mentally challenged children, Gunjan Threthewai was wondering about what she could really do for a living.

"I was doing nothing much with my life as I am physically handicapped, then someone recommended that I do a course in Montessori education," says Gunjan. She completed her diploma from the Indian Montessori Centre, Kolkata. But Gunjan was still unsure of finding a job. She said: "I know that I can't work because of the 'door system'. Children sit on the benches at most Montessori schools but that would be impossible for me." The only option that the determined woman had was to open her own school, with an infrastructure that would be viable to her everyday needs.

The first branch of Innocent Smile Montessori School opened down on 15 January 1998 when Gunjan was just 21 years old. Ten years later the committed educator is all set to open a second branch of the school at Hindu Park. She said: "We have 100 plus students between two and six years of age but with the growing number of children, there is a space constraint. The second school will be bigger." Admissions to the second branch of the Montessori school will begin in a month's time.

KOLKATA, Feb. 28.— "Belur Math is an oasis of peace as it respects the faith, feelings and sentiments of every people." This is what Canon John Overton said after visiting the Sri Ramakrishna Temple of Belur Math this afternoon.

Canon Overton has come from the UK to participate in the third Diversity Matters, a Commonwealth's focus on religious diversity. He felt that to strengthen world peace people belonging to different religions and cultures should try to understand and respect the feelings and sentiments of each other.

Participants who have come from different Commonwealth nations for the Diversity Matters meet, visited Belur Math this afternoon. Swami Atmajnanananda took them around the Math complex where they visited the Sri Ramakrishna Temple, Sri Sarada Temple and the room where Swami Vivekananda passed away on 4 July 1862.

Ms Josie Lecuy, honorary secretary, Executive Council of Australian Jesuit, said: "The area is so peaceful and people here are so organised. It is really amazing." She had attended the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of the E Mother in Sydney last year, visitors were then taken to Ramakrishna Museum where s club used by Sri Ramakrishna Sarada Devi, Swami Vivekananda and some of his disciples are preserved.

These include the long coat worn by Swami in the West, Sister vedika's table and an organ of St. Xavier. For Mohammad Ash from Nigeria, "Visiting the museum is a fascinating experience. More and more students come here to the museum and see the unity of different religions enriched human civilization." Diversity Matters, page
English as a passport to a better life, an active church, an inclusive worldview despite having been excluded for years by the mainstream – that’s what has kept Kolkata’s Christians a vibrant community. Today, the community’s in pole position to take advantage of the outsourcing and information technology boom, DEBJANI CHATTOPADHYAY reports

There was a time when most Bengali-speaking Christians found employment only as domestic help. And they were often barred from entering the kitchen in conservative Bengali households. Today, thanks to their familiarity with the English language, the BPO boom has made them some of Kolkata’s most sought-after employees. "A large number of Christians are working in call centres including myself," says Andre Naito, who also ticks off the names of various friends employed by leading BPOs. The church and social organisations have quietly, but very diligently, worked to help this come to pass.

Education, medical aid and job opportunities have helped the community overcome enormous odds.

Says Dr Leonord Gomes, who at 84 has been a witness to the transformation: "The key to moving ahead lies in education. And, a working knowledge of the English language is essential. Unless they can learn the language, they cannot avail the opportunities and move ahead."

Park yourself at St Teresa’s Church near Maidan on a Sunday morning, and you can witness the almost organic bond among the Christians of Kolkata, their corporate identity easily discernible. Everyone who walks in is wearing clean, well-starched, ironed clothes and the hair is neatly combed away from the forehead. That’s when the Hindi film-created caricatures begin to collapse. Sure, there’s a Mary and a Rose – the former 28 and the latter 35 – and some do wear Western dresses (who doesn’t nowadays, and a shorter the better!) but mostly, they dress "Indian" – saris and salwar kameezes dominate. Both Mary and Rose work with a software company in Salt Lake’s tech city.

"Every Sunday, if the sun shines, we are here," said Mary, looking at Rose and exchanging a smile. It helps that their boyfriends are regular church-goers too. The church is an integral part of the Kolkata Christian way of life; a certain pick-me-up for the downhearted across the Western world that worries about declining church attendance, especially among the young. There’s a fairly good turn-out of the young crowd for Sunday mass and for church-sponsored community service.

Unlike, say, Hindus who mostly visit temples for special occasions, the Christian community turns out in force each Sunday – church records are meticulously kept and you can’t miss it. Sundays before the potter drops in to find out what’s up? A Church Supper Book is maintained for each family in the parish and there are no less than 22 parishes in the Kolkata diocese. St Teresa’s happens to be the largest not only in the city but in the country as well.

Apart from the Anglo-Indian community (the Anglo-Indians are another part of this society), Kolkata’s Christians speak, in the main, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam. It’s a community of the third generation. There’s also a small Goan Christian community in the city. Says Dr. Gomes, who spent 35 years teaching commerce at St Xavier’s College: "About 400 years ago, the..."
language, my dear

Portuguese were in Kolkata for trade. A number of Portuguese priests had also come with them. That was the time when many Indian took to Christianity. The priests influenced local people, gave them incentives and told them that if they followed Christ they would be saved not only in this generation but also in their next few generations. Castes prejudice within Hindu society did lead many into the more flexible Christian church.

There are about 2,010,13,440 Christians in the city according to 2001 figures from the St. Teresa's Church handbook. Of these, approximately 1,13,000 are Catholics. Among the non-Anglo Indian Christians, seven out of ten are Bengali-speaking, says Father Onson Wills, parish priest of St. Teresa's Church. An amiable soul, he provides a potted history, as it were, of the denominational divide among Kolkata Christians. "The predominant group consists of the Roman Catholics. The others are Protestants who are further subdivided into Church of North India, Baptists, Methodists, Assembly of God Church, Seventh Day Adventists and so on. But people belonging to these denominations are gradually diminishing."

Conversion has been a contentious issue in recent public discourse, with Christian missionaries being accused of offering "allurements" to add numbers to their flock. In Kolkata, according to Father Onson, it is "quite widespread" among non-Catholics. "It's a question of who has a better offer in terms of financial aid, medical aid, children's schooling, housing and so on." He is not, however, aware of any forced conversions. "I can speak for Catholics when I say that we are not allowed to encourage, are certainly not proscribed by the Church. And the person marrying a Christian, whether male or female, doesn't have to convert to Christianity. "Inter-religious marriages are a growing trend and are quite natural," adds Father Onson.

While not exactly questioned as the Meher community has become for various reasons, there are Christian pockets in Kolkata. Bengali-speaking Christians are predominant in Salt Lake, Madan and Entally while some Malayali and Tamil-speaking families live in Park Circus. Then there's Bow Street - better known as Bow Barracks - where the residential mix is of Christians of every denomination, speaking a variety of languages.

Many Kolkata Christians have gravitated towards the hotel and hospitality industry, again a sector where English-proficiency is in demand. Of course, as city folklore has it, there are no better cooks than the "Daco Christian". Except most of them have taken off for West Asia, Singapore and Bangkok and some are star chefs. Sudhakar Mary Vaz, on the other hand, has been an au pair all her life. She lives in Motijheel and many from the community of her generation are engaged as au pairs in different city households for decades. "I enjoy my work. But I want to educate my daughter so that she can take up a good job in an office." Now you know what's cooking.
Religious Diversity: Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities for the Commonwealth

The First Diversity Matters Forum was held in Brisbane, October 2001. It was a tripartisan approach between the Commonwealth Institute and the Australian Multicultural Foundation. The forum successfully concluded with a number of resolutions and a Statement of Principles, which was forwarded to the Commonwealth meeting in March 2002.

The second Diversity Matters Forum was designed to follow up on the first forum and further develop themes and issues that were initiated by participants in the first forum. In addition, the second forum was designed to develop and implement pragmatic approaches that Commonwealth countries can take on board as they work towards promoting social cohesion through acceptance and understanding between community and religious groups.

The third forum with specific reference to religious diversity will build on the achievements of the first forum and will focus on the role of faith-based organisations and community leaders in promoting social cohesion in diverse societies.

Programme

- Monday, 25 February 2002
  - Welcome and Opening
  - Roundtable Discussions
  - Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Commonwealth Institute
  - Commonwealth Secretariat

- Tuesday, 26 February 2002
  - Opening Session
  - Religious Diversity and the Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Roundtable Discussions
  - Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Commonwealth Institute
  - Commonwealth Secretariat

- Wednesday, 27 February 2002
  - Roundtable Discussions
  - Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Commonwealth Institute
  - Commonwealth Secretariat

- Thursday, 28 February 2002
  - Roundtable Discussions
  - Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Commonwealth Institute
  - Commonwealth Secretariat

- Friday, 1 March 2002
  - Roundtable Discussions
  - Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Commonwealth Institute
  - Commonwealth Secretariat

- Saturday, 2 March 2002
  - Roundtable Discussions
  - Australian Multicultural Foundation
  - Commonwealth Institute
  - Commonwealth Secretariat

Registration fee for Canadian participants: $65 (GST incl.)

Limited places available for Indian students (University of New South Wales, Macquarie University, and University of Sydney). Please register early.
Harmony is here
with Ramakrishna

"We have a lot of
religious activities
occurring in Australia,
and there's a lot
of interest," Mr Ian
Lacey, legal advisor
to the Federal
Interfaith Council,
said. This week
the council convened
in Sydney to discuss
issues, he added.

Mr Lacey, a passenger of
the council, added: "I
think we can't
ignore the need to
participate in the three-day

Mr Ian Lacey
conference on Religious
Diversity: Global
Challenges and Local
Responsibilities for the
Community". He is scheduled
to deliver a keynote speech on
interfaith initiatives.

"We seek to build the
people's understanding of
religious diversity as a threat to
the nation's harmony," he said.

Harmony is a concept of
the Indian philosophy
where a day in March is observed
as Harmony Day. "But the
day also needs to be
remembered," Mr Lacey said.
A 5-year term was awarded
in a case involving violence
against religious practices in
Western Australia.

"This was an ideal
day for us," Mr Lacey
knew that
Sri Ramakrishna was
a great exponent of
religious tolerance, but
he thought it was
important for people
to be more acquainted
with the sages' sayings.
"And now, we
point the people to
the wisdom of such
income," he added.

The delegates to Religious Diversity: Global Challenges and Local Responsibilities
for the Community were joined at Tel Bundel on Monday — The Statesman

Tirthankar Misra
KOLKATA, March 1. — When religion travels to Greece, it becomes a philosophy. When it reaches Italy, it becomes an institution. When it moves to England, it becomes a culture and when it is transported to the USA, it becomes an enterprise. This was how Pastor James Movel Wuye, joint executive coordinator, Interfaith Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum, Nigeria, sought to dispel some of the seriousness that deliberations on religious and cultural diversity invariably entail.

The pastor wanted to be taken seriously though, when he said the truly blessed are those who speak less, and he didn't want to inflict a long lecture on "religious education: policy, challenges and opportunities" at the Third Diversity Matters Forum today.

Pastor Wuye underscored the need for reorienting religious education methodology, since the youth were exposed to a pernicious gospel preached by politicians who have introduced a licentious culture driven by the doctrine of "making it big by hook or by crook".

His recipe for religious education included constitutional guarantees for religious freedom, no government favour to a particular religion and review of school curriculum by a panel of respected scholars for injecting spiritual content.

On the other hand, Dr. Anthony Fernando, director, Inter-Cultural Research Centre, Sri Lanka, explained that people embraced one religion by virtue of being born into a religious-cultural group, while they were intellectually driven to the spiritual element of a religion.

The inherit ed religion often sowed the seeds of hate and intolerance towards other religions because it was a product of a closed myth. The spiritual element of religions included the best human values, and hence there couldn't be any conflict in the essence of all religious faiths, Dr. Fernando said. However, a "mysterious force" within man compelled him to stick to his clan identity that militated against religious harmony, he added.

Dr. Sitaram Sharma, deputy secretary-general and director, Asia-Pacific World Federation of United Nations Association, who chaired the session, said religious education needed to foster moral values for sustainable development and peace.
Building the right bridge

KOLKATA, March 1. — When ethnic conflicts rage in Sri Lanka or communal frenzy grips Kolkata, though seldom, what kind of dialogue should religious activists and administrators engage in?

Reverend M. Asura Laminika Perera of the Inter-Racial Peace Foundation, Sri Lanka, and Maj DC Bajpai, former director-general of police, West Bengal, gave insights into the question at the Third Diversity Matters today.

For Dr Perera a key question was if religious leaders can unite and exchange their views why then people in general can't replicate their example.

He spoke at length on the initiatives taken by multi-religious groups in Sri Lanka in trying to douse the flames of 20 years of ethnic conflict and then mentally and physically rehabilitating the victims of the conflict that took a toll of 40,000 lives in the country two months ago.

They organised meditations and a ban on land mines, even though they have so far failed to make the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government sign a treaty on the ban.

On the other hand, Mr Bajpai drew applause from the delegates for the initiatives taken by Kolkata Police for the past seven years to organise police-public relationship through blood donation camps, football matches and citizens' committees.

This was a unique way to engage in dialogues with diverse religious and cultural groups even without using an iota of religion, Mr Bajpai said.

He said the Kolkata Police looks after the law and order for about 4.5 million people of whom 3.5 million are Hindus, about 1 million Muslims, 1.5 million Sikhs and 10,000 Buddhists. Since 1997 there have been a number of incidents of communal violence in the city and the force was charged with intelligence failure in foreseeing the developments.

This led the force to organise police-people interactions and the results, he claimed, have been highly encouraging.

The highlight of the session, chaired by Dr Tarek Mukherjee, chairman, Europa Multicultural Foundation, UK, was an unscheduled screening of a documentary — Peace Tree by Mr Miri Sen from Canada.

The film is a sensitive portrayal of cultural diversity perpetuated by children who succeed in removing the religious biases of their parents.
WIN some, win all

Mrs Josie Lacey is the convener and initiator of the Women's Interfaith Network (WIN), Australia. Her presentation at the 3rd Diversity Matters Forum is on the initiatives of WIN towards promoting inter-religious understanding among women of different faiths in Australia.

WIN is a gathering of women of diverse religious faiths (Baha’i, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Judaism) who meet and work to promote harmony, understanding and respect among the followers of various world religions.

Mrs Lacey said: “We launched WIN on 22 March 2001 at the Jubilee Hall, Parliament House, Sydney. The organisation was started because women felt the need to be heard in a predominantly patriarchal society.”

Though the convener is admittedly excited about the presence of two matriarchal societies in India, she does not deny that Australian men have, in fact, been supportive to the cause of WIN. “Not long ago, we organised a forum to celebrate the spirit of women and 50 per cent of the audience consisted of men.”

WIN emphasises on developing mutual respect among its members by building personal relationships and discussions. Mrs Lacey said: “We vote by consensus and there has never been any disparity in five years!”

She was also in the steering committee of Journey of Promise (2003/2004) and is looking forward to presenting a video clip from the programme at the Diversity Matters Forum. She said: “Journey of Promise was a government-funded educational programme where 10 students from Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities went on a retreat and shared ideas and beliefs with each other. The girls from the three Abrahamic faiths were astounded at the similarities of their religion and how well they got along.”

What seems essential is that these girls went on to engage in similar programmes, keeping the faith meaningful and accountable. Mrs Lacey was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 1992.

Religious doesn't mean being “irrational”, is the key to understanding religious con-
It's about a level-playing field

Tara Kumar Mukherjee had gone to play cricket in England, but fell in love with an English lady, married her and stayed on. That was around 1948. BK Nehru, the Indian High Commissioner posted at India House in London wanted to involve Mukherjee in creating an Indian organisation to facilitate greater unity among Indians staying in Britain. That's how Confederation of Indian Organisations — the largest Indian organisation in western Europe — came about, with Mukherjee at the helm.

While a list of the international rights and advocacy groups this gentleman — whose heart still beats for Kolkata, where he went to school and college — heads or is on the board of would take up half a-column of this newspaper, his job as the chair of the European Multicultural Foundation is a 24-hour engagement, if not a passion. The pan-European umbrella organisation that upholds the cause of minorities and immigrants in Europe and fosters the acceptance of diversity and the values of mutual respect, recently stalled the inclusion of a Christian clause (recommended by the Pope, no less) during the drafting of the New European Constitution.

Talking of the state of ethnic minorities in the new multicultural Britain, Mukherjee says: “There is discrimination at all levels: jobs, child poverty, social security. All the EMF wants is to create a level playing field.” Conceding that overt racism has been largely eradicated in the UK, “thanks to the efforts made by successive governments”, Mukherjee points out the rise of “face curtain racism, now developed into a fine art. You can’t take them to court for that.” But is not Britain increasingly opening up to such migrants and asylum-seekers anyway? Mukherjee answers, citing statistics. “If you convert the contribution made by economic migrants, it far exceeds what’s euphemistically called overseas aid. Every year immigrants add £2.5 billion to the British economy, in terms of taxes. We are not a liability but an asset, not a problem but an opportunity.” A member of the Labour Party, Mukherjee has openly contested views held by Jack Straw and David Blunkett vis-à-vis race-related policies in the UK.
Dilemmas in diversity

Mr Antonia Doreen Dijbros
and Mr Richard Bourne

The distinguished participants had several issues on their minds at the end of the Third Diversity Matters Forum being held in Kolkata. Said Mr Richard Bourne, Head of Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, University of London: "Foreigners mean the countries we have in the world today where faith is in conflict. Sometimes, faith is also mixed up with ethnicity." For Mr Colin Ball, former director of the Commonwealth Foundation, "There is a need to treat the issue of cultural diversity seriously and proactively. At the moment, we are taking it for granted, while thinking that cultural understanding has just happened." And Mr Anthony Basset, director and head of the society-general, Commonwealth Secretariat Ltd., "Holding inter-faith dialogues is the crying need of the day. Faith can be the worst form of exploitation. The Commonwealth is committed to the management and harnessing of diversity at all levels of development."

Mr Bourne sighted examples from Northern Ireland, where the issue is not just with Catholics and Protestants but among people who are Irish and British. There is also a gap of misunderstanding between people with faith and people who take materialism. What is happening is what inter-faith initiatives can do to reduce conflict. I want to dwell on the possibility of an inter-faith advisory council for the Commonwealth, which could stimulate the initiatives. But so far, have the several initiatives taken been really effective? Mr Colin Ball thinks that, "The insecure world we live in today is evidence of the fact that we have been following the laissez-faire approach in issues of diversity leading to misunderstanding and conflict. It is incumbent upon all of us to take proactive steps. We need to go out and do things. At the level of the Commonwealth, for every contact we have, we need to go beyond that. A hundred million pounds are invested for specific action programmes for inter-cultural activities. These should bring together different faiths, different religious and different people. And the work should be done at the level of the people, involving political leaders, media and higher business people. The ordinary villager has little contact with people outside and hence they are easy prey to violence. There is so much insecurity because of ignorance and this has to be overcome by action. Communication through information technology and travelling is limited to a privileged few. We are spending too much for military purposes but spending nothing at all for people to interact. The talk and actions need to be conveyed at different levels."

Coming to the issue of practising diversity, Mr Richard Bourne feels that, "Diversity, under the democratic model, has been successful in some countries. There is a fairly easy relationship in parts of India and the UK. But suddenly when there was a problem in the past, the system was not able to solve it. The problem is not as easy as we think. When one side has imposed its belief on the other. In the USA, there are Christian fundamentalists who say the world was created in certain days and force their opinion on others, even teaching children in schools. Likewise, there are problems in South Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. I am very much in favour of diversity in faith and opinion. It is truly a positive value and the conference will bring it out once again. Religious will remain a strong force of human life which will be mainstreamed through travel and interaction."

Mr Ball too is of the opinion that, "Diversity is a strength and people move forward through inter-cultural contact. Faith is important because global networks of faith are important and we should appreciate that culture is very much shaped by religion. In this context the ethnic, social and gender aspects of diversity should be remembered. It is an extremely complicated matrix and often I feel myself, do we really understand it in different situations?" He strongly feels that democracy, development and diversity cannot be wished. "The question is the foundation stage. You cannot have democracy and development without diversity."

Mr. Antonia Dijbros pointed out that, "There has to be a multifaceted approach where diversity is concerned. Inter-faith is one aspect. We have to deal with poverty and sustainable development. A vast majority of conflicts are not inter-state but intra-state and the underlying causes are more or less the same everywhere — economic, religious and cultural. The media can play a very important role. For more information and details than many are aware of, technology has made it easy and they cannot put aside this management of diversity, play a constructive role in educating the public and help create a tolerant society."
Diversity across religious divide

KOLKATA, March 1. -- Does religion trigger terrorism and hatred or can it be a potent tool even in this "most secure" of countries to promote peace and development? Experts, religious activists and scholars tackled these questions today on the second day of the three-day session of Third Diversity Forum, a Commonwealth forum on religious diversity.

And the organizers -- the Australian Multicultural Foundation, the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit, the Commonwealth Foundation, The Statesman and the Mowah Institute for the Study of Global Movements -- couldn't have found a better place to deliberate on such weighty issues, as Kolkata was hailed by the delegates as a city that epitomises cultural and religious diversity.

Mr. B.H. Dhillon, executive director, Australian Multicultural Foundation, said globalization and technological exchanges need to be accompanied by removal of prejud-

Imam Mohammed Nnamo Ashita, joint executive coordinator, Imamate Mediation Centre of Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum (Nigeria), at the Diversity Forum in Kolkata on Tuesday. -- The Statesman

ices, misconceptions and intolerance which alone can make development meaningful.

Sir Mathi Gobbo, chairman, Australian Multicultural Foundation, sought to dispel the notion that religion begets terrorism and violence. Condemning the use of religion to justify acts of terror, he said that young minds should not be poisoned.

Mr. Salman Haidar, former foreign secretary of India, based his arguments on leadership and interfaith with his personal experiences as he grew through the uncertainty and periods of the partition.

The Muslims who decided to live in India in 1947, Mr. Haidar said, were not sure what kind of place the country of their ancestors would be. But it was the crucial role played by Jawaharlal Nehru and the framers of the Constitution that established the tradition of religious and cultural diversity.

"Of course, there were anxious moments when Punjab was in turmoil during the Pakistan movement and there were turbulent times in the Northeast and Kasachstan. But the maturity of political leadership gave the country a solid foundation," Mr. Haidar said.

Mr. Radhika Ramas, Editor, The Statesman, who chaired the first session, summed up to say how Liberal leadership based religious values while religion can be turned into a source of peace.

More reports on Kolkata Plus III
Charity work, an ‘English’ education, Moulin Rouge, jazz, puffs and pastries... The Anglo-Indian community has been a Kolkata fixture for long. Now, the community reinvents itself for a new age.

DEBUJAN CHATTOPADHYAY reports

New old-world charm
Integration is the key issue. The biggest challenge to the community is to excel and further integrate themselves with the local people. Nationality should come first and then the community.

— Marie J. Briscoe

Kolkata kids

Kolkata, the cultural capital of India, is known for its rich history, diverse population, and vibrant culture. The city is a melting pot of different communities, each with its own unique identity. Among these communities, the Anglo-Indian community stands out. The Anglo-Indian community is a blend of British and Indian people and has a long history in India. Their families can be traced back to the British colonial era, and they have been an integral part of Indian society for over a century.

The Anglo-Indian community is known for their contributions to Indian society. They have held prominent positions in various fields such as politics, business, and education. The community has a unique culture that is a blend of British and Indian traditions. They are known for their love for music, dance, and sports. The Anglo-Indian community has been a part of Kolkata's rich cultural heritage and has made significant contributions to the city's development.

Despite their contributions, the Anglo-Indian community faces several challenges. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of integration with the local people. Many Anglo-Indians face discrimination and are often excluded from the mainstream society. This has led to a sense of alienation within the community.

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to promote integration and unity among the different communities in Kolkata. This movement aims to bridge the gap between the Anglo-Indian community and the local people. The movement seeks to promote a sense of belonging and acceptance for all.

Overall, the Anglo-Indian community is an integral part of Kolkata's rich cultural tapestry. Their contributions to the city's development are significant, and their role in promoting unity and integration is crucial. With the right support and initiatives, the Anglo-Indian community can continue to thrive and make valuable contributions to Kolkata and India as a whole.

"Kolkata kids" refers to the children born to Anglo-Indian parents in India. These children face unique challenges due to their mixed heritage and are often subjected to discrimination and social exclusion. However, they are also a part of the vibrant culture of Kolkata, and their experiences can offer valuable insights into the complex dynamics of the city's social structure.
19th when Anglicanism were once again entrenched into the Army and in other police positions. However, when the Telegraph arrived in 1857 and the British Army began to retreat east, non-anglican officers occupied up to those departments as well as in quarters, shipping and education.

Despite the efforts to combat the spread of Anglicanism, the resulting situation was one of mutual coexistence. The Anglicans of Anglo-Indian descent were often encountered in various roles, including in areas of commerce and industry. The presence of Anglicans in India is a testament to the enduring influence of Western culture and its impact on Indian society.

As the Anglican community expanded, it became more integrated into the local context. Many Anglicans adopted local customs and traditions, while others maintained their Anglican identity. This dual identity allowed them to navigate the complexities of living in a multicultural society.

In conclusion, the Anglican presence in India is a reflection of the unique social and cultural landscape of the time. The Anglican community played a significant role in shaping the identity of the Anglo-Indian population, and their impact is still felt today.

A forward-thinking approach to education and cultural exchange is crucial for the future of the Anglican community in India. By fostering a deeper understanding of local traditions and cultures, the Anglican community can continue to contribute positively to the development of the nation.

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*Image: Photograph of St. John's College, Bangalore.*

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*Image: Photograph of St. John's College, Bangalore.*

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*Image: Photograph of St. John's College, Bangalore.*
Beyond private domain

Manipulation of the religious mind is nothing new but readjustment of “global” realities and fundamentalist or liberalist interpretation of the phenomenon in their own way is the main challenge for religions and nation states, believes Prof. Desmond Cahill, professor of inter cultural Studies at the Melbourne Institute of Technology, one of the delegates to the Forum.

Whether or not the recent devastation is a result of “God’s wrath” over an “eroding humanity” is beyond empirical knowledge but it has definitely resulted in a resurgence of faith, believes Prof. Cahill. Accommodation and adjustments are what a global citizen will have to constantly make.

Whether large-scale immigration across the globe or persecution of Arabs after 9/11 or a sudden upsurge in immigrant population in Australia or migration of Indian IT pros all over the world — it’s a “divergence of multiplicities”, believes Prof. Cahill.

The common ground lies somewhere in reforming social, political and economic institutions through inter-faith dialogue, believes Prof. Toh Swee-Him, director of the Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University, Australia.

The Al-Qaeda subverts the crux of Islamic and Western values and cultures in a world struggle for power. So do cults like Scientology. Westerners tend to manipulate the vulnerable psyche. On the other end is the French example of Loiich or extreme liberalism that has resulted in banning of headscarves or turban in schools, says Prof. Cahill. Understanding the fact that being religious doesn’t mean being “irrational”, is the key to understanding religious conflicts, he says. Benefits of globalisation reach a select few as another problem area, says Prof. Swee-Him. Similarly, he says, can be attained only by speaking against religious bigotry. That can also mean taking risks but that’s how it comes to focus.

Religions cannot be made to stand by in particular to each other because it encourages fundamentalism, believes deputy secretary, World Federation of United Nations Association. That faith no longer is a private domain but is very much a part of our socio-economic life and so defines it in such terms is a challenge that this forum that continues till tomorrow throws up for all to ponder upon.
Towards a middle-class & moderation

The majority community has not made a serious effort to find out about them or what their religion is all about, they feel. But against the odds, Kolkata’s Muslims are slowly making a move towards change, shattering stereotypes in the process. RAKHI CHAKRAVARTHY reports.

SAIRA FATIMA TANVEER

It is a small school, modestly located in the north of Kolkata. But it is not the size of the school that counts, it is the quality of education that matters. The school is run by a group of Muslim families who have been working together for quite some time. They have come together to provide a good education to their children.

The school has a strong sense of community and a focus on character building. The teachers are dedicated and the students are motivated. The school has a good record of academic success and has produced many successful graduates.

The school is also involved in various community service activities. They have a number of programmes that focus on helping the less fortunate in the community. The school also has a strong emphasis on sports and extracurricular activities. The students are encouraged to participate in sports and other activities that help to develop their skills and talents.

In conclusion, the school is doing a great job of providing a good education to its students. The students are motivated and the teachers are dedicated. The school is also involved in various community service activities. It is a credit to the Muslim community in Kolkata.
SADIA FATIMA TASNEEM
wants to be a doctor. So, like
does not succumb to the
appeal of some. She, in red and white,
lives in Karlakata. Karlakata is
her home. She dreams of
making a tug of war in her
life. Of being a doctor within
one year. Ama, was also a
computer programmer while South
Jatia. She was to join the lawyer's Bank.
Can they? One wonders. After all,
the stereotype of Muslim women holds
the position allocated to her role has
women. She is the popular
perception.

Looking at the head of the nurse
next to her, a commerce student,
says: "Why not? Without the support
of our parents, could we have come
up?" My father and mother are
computer professionals and I spend most of my time
with them. Her friend echoed her view.

These are voices of conviction.
Determination. Voices of the future,
really, of the Muslim community.
Slowly, a little wistful maybe,
muslims in this city are making efforts
to break out of the stereotype and more out of the idea. For a community
mired in financial challenges and
plagued by poverty and lack of education among other things, this is a
brave task.

And systematic propaganda painting Muslims as the Others in the psyche of this majority community makes the task even more
difficult. Ask Dr. Muhammad Ikbal Abid
Sidiqui, noted scholar and anthropologist.

It is the image of a Muslim-dominated,
more slender, especially belligerent society,
a complex substructure driven by polygamy and misogyny that together
form the popular perception of Indian Muslim societies in the minds of the majority of India, said
scholar Dr. Ismail Nadiri.

To all this, now the tug of war has
also been added. Muslims are not
under the microscope any more,
perceived as terrorists. So, despite
being a minority community, they have
been able to make advances," said Dr.
Nadiri.

But, as stakeholder, Muslims don't
accept their prominence in the local
intelligence. "Even though 26
per cent of the population are Muslim,
their share in government services is
greatly lower than the percentage. In fact, many Muslims, like medicine, lack
representation in government services,"
said Ms. Abrar, staat. staircase
editor of a city guide.

The occupational structure of the community, such that a majority are
employed in the service sector and are
also influential in the political and
cultural sphere. The community
leadership makes it happen. There
is no pressure group to present
the problems of the community," says
management and management consultant
Ms. Abrar.

It is a vicious circle. After Partition,
the large chunk of the Muslim
population left for Pakistan, Kashmir,
or Lahore. "The community suffered a
major setback and no leadership has
emerged since then. Gradually, the
community became largely dominated
by traders and shopkeepers whose
education was not a priority," said
Ms. Abrar.

But that is changing. After 1971,
when Urdu-speaking Muslims were
repatriated from East Pakistan, they
finally realized that Pakistan was an
domination and not the paradise they
had
thought it to be," said Mr. Malibabadi. "This gave them mental stability and instilled in them a determination to face the situation. They put up their homes here and became part of the soil," said Mr. Malibabadi. A middle class and an upper middle class are emerging. They are giving their children the best of education in English medium schools, he said. What needs to be done is for other communities to apply to the Muslim community too. Where there's a middle class, even if conservative, there is hope for moderation and a pathways towards peace.

"Not only are they discriminated from the social systems but also there is domination against Muslims," said Ms. Shabgad. And, those of the community who have refused to severe ties to their previous homes. They are not the risk of being burdened and a burden. For example, during the 1992 riots in Kashmir, the Three/orchur in Dargas was not utilized. A senior Muslim IPS officer was deputed there for rehabilitation of the affected victims. Since the population there comprised 60 percent Muslims, he had to live with the communal ting, for the rest of his service and languished in administrative posts. It turned out a surprise that they were not given the due recognition for their fields. Muslims have been caught in.

According to Muhammad Ashraf Ali, Akbar Ali, Hashim Ali and others, "The community suffers from an insecurity complex. Some those who are educated have been denied scope for better future. Naturally, the rest feel discontented. Above all, wherever Muslims have progressed, they have been stumped. In many Muslim states, even those who can afford to, venture to set up institutions. And, asking foreigners to do it is not even possible. There is a plethora of NGOs and institutions working with foreign aid. If a Muslim institution gets foreign aid, immediately it would be under the scanner. And, many enough would be linked with terrorist groups or compromised." said Mr. Sidhaqti.

And, things are complicated. "With the 17th amendment and development all around, Muslims have also realized the need to separate the shell," said Mr. Shafi. There is a conscious effort to look at professional avenues like banking, IT sector, media or the hotel industry, for instance.

"A need is required of the Muslims to be exploited with the hands and their knowledge and say things high and say. And, the majority community has not made a serious effort to find out about Muslims or what their religion is all about," Mr. Shafi added.

Anybody listening to that, you need to read, every last word in the city of Muslim..."