Dealing with Religious Militancy: 
Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue

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Introduction

Nepal witnessed unprecedented religious militancy in the capital city of Kathmandu and some parts of Nepal during August-September 2004. The militancy upset the delicate balance of communal harmony, and religious tolerance between Hindu and Muslim which has been prevailing since the time of King Ratna Malla's reign in the late 15th century. The sudden and unexpected explosion of militancy was the outcome of the killing of 12 innocent Nepali workers who had left their homeland in search of job in the Gulf countries. They were mercilessly shot dead by a terrorist group called itself as Ansar al-Sunna in Iraq on the pretext of supporting American troops in Iraq. As a result of this violence, 227 manpower companies were vandalized, six private houses owned or rented by the local Muslim or company were damaged. Two major Mosques of Kathmandu and two schools run by them were torched, 26 vehicles were destroyed causing the damage of more than a billion Rupees. Even two leading publication Houses - Kantipur and Space Time were vandalized. Saudi, Qatar, Gulf and Pakistani Airlines were also not spared forcing them to close
their office for a couple of days. Sahara Airlines of India which was supposed to start its service with effect from 1st September was also affected by this mob. September 1, 2004 (9/1) was a black day in the history of Nepal. This incidence has shaken the foundation of Nepalese heritage of religious tolerance, harmony and co-existence. A deep wound has been inflicted in the mind of the victims. The ugly incident has sent a message to the people of Nepal that their business has been put on the back burner. To bring back Nepal’s communal harmony in the original form, efforts are being made to support those ordinary citizens in their efforts to find peace and security. Human Rights activities and distinguished persons from the civil society staged a Peace March in Kathmandu demanding restraint, peace and communal harmony. This included Hindu Priests, Muslim Mulas, Christian, Clergy and Buddhist Monks. Such thing had not taken place even when the Taliban destroyed the Statue of Bamiyan Buddha in Afghanistan. The actual violence that erupted after the merciless murder of 12 Nepalese labourers was the result of sudden reaction towards these Iraqi Muslim terrorists. King Gyanendra granted audience to the leaders of Muslim community and obtained detailed information. They submitted 41 still photographs and video clips of the attacks on the mosque. The King conveyed deep sympathy to them and said that he was deeply hurt by the communal riots that have taken place for the first time in the capital city of Kathmandu in the history of Nepal. Similarly, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba appealed to all Nepalese to stay away from provocative activities aimed at any particular community. He implored Nepalese, most of whom are Hindus, not to descend into religious violence.

According to the census of 2001, 4.2% of population of Nepal is Muslim out of a little over 23 Million. In 1981, the percentage of Muslim population was 2.7. Under the
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The root causes of all these problems mentioned above is the existing socio-economic and cultural structure of the constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal (1990) all are treated equally. Article 19 of the Constitution dealing with Right to Religion says “Every person shall have the freedom to profess and practice its own religion as handed down to him from ancient times having due regard to traditional practices; provided that no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another”. It adds, “Every religious denomination shall have the right to maintain its independent existence and for this purpose to manage and protect its religious places and trusts”.

As a part of the strategy to control damage by this incident inside and outside the country, a high-level committee was set up under the chairmanship of the ex-justice of the Supreme Court to investigate into the incident of September 1 and submit report to the Government. Similarly, a high-level ministerial delegation went to Gulf countries under the leadership of very senior cabinet minister Dr. Mohammed Mohsin, who is the only Muslim Minister and Chief Spokesman of the Government holding important portfolio of Communication and Information. It is estimated that more than five hundred thousand Nepalese in the Gulf countries are working and sending their remittance to the country amounting to more than one billion dollars every year. It is a major source of income of the government to maintain its economy which has been shattered by Maoist insurgency in Nepal since 1996. During his one week visit to the Gulf countries, Dr. Moshin, a Muslim himself and a Royal nominee assured the host countries about Nepal’s commitment to maintain communal harmony and boost morale of the Nepalese laborers working there. Reports received from the Gulf Countries revealed that the diplomatic offence of the Government was a success.
society that is exploitative and undemocratic in nature. The underlying factors of the major contradiction of society are: Unfair Socio-Economic and Cultural Relation; Lack of ownership and Unfair distribution of Natural Resources; Unfair and non people oriented Development, Landlessness; Social Discrimination in the form of Caste, Religion, Gender and Geography; Bad Governance; Corruption; Nepotism; Favoritism; Undemocratic Practice; Lack of Transparency Accountability and Social Responsibility; and Lack of employment opportunity. In addition, there are a number of factors which are influencing the ongoing religious militancy both in national and international levels. They are all very important components. We need support of all religious sects and communities to deal with the peaceful solution of the growing religious militancy in our country, region and beyond.

Religious Perspectives

The present day Nepal, not only in the territorial sense, is not the outcome of one, two or three decades. It has centuries of history. Its life style is shaped by ancient philosophies with their roots in Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim religions that prevailed in Central, South, Southeast and East Asia. The society governed primarily by Hindu and Muslim principles is most hierarchical, caste ridden, complex and discriminatory. Most of the Cultural milieu in Nepal is determined within these religious fundamentals, the manifestation of which is a society with many layers of socially privileged and under privileged. Communalism, religious fundamentalism and intolerance pose a great threat to human civilization. They often imposed violence on our beautiful earth, and destroyed our precious civilization. Addressing a World Conference on Religion at Chicago on September 11, 1893, Swami Vivekananda rightly said, "Ignorance, intolerance and
fundamentalism are not religion but enemies of religion. The main code of conduct of all religion should be goodwill, not quarrels or conflicts, assimilation not destruction, and peace and goodwill not division or dismemberment. The essence of all religions is to become good person.” Thus, those who work against this tenet of religion should be discouraged and their so-called religious organization should be banned. Swami Vivekananda is more relevant today than 111 years ago. We should under no circumstances allow the evil forces of communalism and fundamentalism to raise its head to destroy our human civilization. If such forces succeed there will be a clash of civilization as indicated by great social scientist Samuel Huntington.

**Nepal for Religious Harmony**

Nepal has been maintaining religious harmony for centuries. Historical facts reveal that it never had to encounter any ethnic group due to religion. It has been possible to vouchsafe this mission and retain sustainable harmony amongst the various religions in the country largely because of the existence of organizations like the World Hindu Federation (WHF), World Federation of the Buddhist, World Islamic Council and the World Council of Christianity. The mission of the World religious is to maintain religious harmony in the world. Religious harmony is the only panacea for global peace. We firmly believe that the core message of all-religion is to maintain peace, fraternity and communal harmony among the nations of the world. We would, therefore, like to share our sincere experience with the rest of the world regarding religious harmony and we also look forward to learn of innovative mechanism, which would enable us to achieve complete religious tolerance and harmony. Religious organization should build stronger solidarity, which alone would enable
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us to combat against forces creating conflict. We would like to extend our best wishes for the success of this conference and we keenly look forward towards the positive result in convincing the misguided elements of fanaticism so that we can maintain peace and security in South Asia and the world in general.

Principle of Communal Harmony

According to Mr. Hulas Chand Golcha, President of Anavrat Samiti and disciple of Acharya Mahapragya, following principles will be helpful to maintain religious harmony and to curb religious militancy.

The Principle

- There are many Religious beliefs in the world. It is impossible to merge them, but it is possible to bring them closer and thread them like beads in a rosary or a chaplet creating a strong communal bond for the betterment of the humanity. A garden looks beautiful when it contains variety of flowerbeds. Similarly, the garden of Faith looks beautiful when there are many Religions blossoming in it.

- Everyone wants bliss and harmony in one's own heart. Development of one's own religion is good thing; therefore, we should not indulge in such act that disturbs this right of others. It is necessary for the religious leaders to come forward to imbibe this notion into the minds of their followers. This will certainly create such communal harmony that will foster peaceful atmosphere and help the development of human race in the positive direction.

- Religion is the institution for propagating the teachings and philosophy laid down by the Holy Scriptures of a Faith. It is like the 'skin' which protects the pulp of the fruit and Dharma or Faith or Mazhab is like its 'pulp'.

[It take the liberty to use the term 'Dharma' for this hence forward]
- **Dharma** is the way of spiritual development. Essence of **Dharma**, if understood properly, finds more unison and less differentiation between different faiths. **Dharma** can't be blamed for religious disharmony, because its tenets don't teach hatred and violence.

- The economics of a commune or a village is an interwoven fabric and its members are economically dependent on each other in such a way that they hardly take notice of each other's faith or religion while making a deal. When a Hindu buys a thing, he does not bother whether it is made or sold by a Muslim. A Muslim would not mind if his field are tilled by a Hindu or a Christian. A Christian would not mind if his car is driven by a Hindu and so on.

- However, we can not deny the stigmas that exist in matters of social intercourse. But in spite of that, communal harmony is the essence of development. People of different faiths live together not only with harmony, but also with love and affection until some fanatic creates bad taste. With further incitement, they start fighting and killing each other. It is a shame that one unknown person's fault brings misfortune to hundreds and thousands. The religion then becomes "opium" as named by world's renowned economists and philosophers like Karl Marx. This drastically reduces their income and at times leads them to abject poverty. Because of this intoxication, they do not realize what a damage they have inflicted upon their own livelihood. Actually, people fight unnecessarily for the 'skin' losing the taste of the real 'pulp'.

- **Acharya Mahapragya** reminds the disgruntled people, the essence of life and real **Dharma**. But at the same time, he warns that only sermons can not change the hearts of the people, a training of Non-Violence or **Ahimsa** has to be given as an effective tool. After decades of research of the ancient scriptures, he has invented **Preksha Dhyan**, a type of Yoga and Meditation, which not only fosters Spiritual Development and Positive Thinking and but also helps redress several diseases like Cardiac Blockages, Diabetes, Back Pain, Depression, Mental Tension etc. He assures that Life-style changes and Positive Thinking achieved by this process can enhance our longevity. People of different Faiths and Religions from all over the world throng to him for this training.
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- For long lasting solution to such sudden sparks of disharmony, a proper philosophy has to be inculcated in the minds of the young people, who will shape the future of a Nation. He has also devised a moral educational course called *Jeewan Vigyan*, which gives the training to students in schools without reference to any Religion. Several State Governments in India have introduced *Jeewan Vigyan* in their States and now several hundred thousand schools are giving lessons to their pupils teaching Human Values. Naturally, Communal Harmony is its by-product.

Nepal is the birthplace of Lord Buddha and it is a place where both Buddha and the Lord Pashupati Nath co-exist since time immemorial. I feel that Interfaith International Dialogue must be held time and again in different countries to see no groups, terrorist in nature, utilize any religion as their weapon to fulfill their sectarian demands. The UN too must remain ever vigilant against different terrorist groups using some particular religion as their tool for their propaganda.

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Dialogue among world religion is in the very nature of all religions. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions, accept the same sources for them, and including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. Regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood and freedom are all values exalted by all religions. Most of these values are accorded the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, (peace be upon them), as well as in the messages of Buddha, Confucius and the Hindu prophets. So, religion is a system of belief that
embraces all races and all beliefs, a road that brings everyone together in brotherhood.

We believe that interfaith dialogue is a must today, and the first step in establishing it, is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones.

Conclusion

We are all affected by growing scale of violence in and around our countries and region. It seems this will engulf all countries one day if not today. Thus, this International Conference on Religious Militancy and Security in South Asia should send a strong message to international community so that we can save the succeeding generation from the lunatic frenzies of religious militancy and fundamentalism as well as anarchists who are bent upon destroying our precious civilization in any country whatsoever.

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