



An interfaith Round Table on 'Disability'...

Theme: Faith Journey Together Towards 'Inclusive Communities'

India is a cradle of most of the world faiths and religions. The land of India is 'spiritually vibrant' and 'religiously assertive'. Most Indians are adherents of different faiths and religions. Indians are also known for their compassionate love for the needy and neglected ones in society. However, one also experiences a paradox that there are Indians who consider the sufferings of people and their exclusion from society as a curse or punishment of God. They justify such perspectives on the basis of their interpretation of selected passages of scriptures and certain theologies/philosophies that such scriptural text interpretations give rise to.

Yet a discerning reading of the scriptures of different religions reveals that God is the creator of all including human communities. Therefore conscientious religious communities consider that they are responsible for all creatures. Hence many activities are initiated by faith-based organizations (FBOs) as a faith response in caring for those of God's creation who need special attention. .

One such group that needs special attention is that of the disabled. In India, according to the 2001 Indian census an estimated 2.1% of the Indian population has one disability or another. The 2011 World Disability Report estimates that people with disabilities make up 15% of the population¹. If this percentage is used as a guide, then there are probably 181 million people with disabilities living in India. Disability and poverty are connected in a vicious cycle. In 2004-2005 it was estimated that more than 300 million people live in poverty in India² and the World Bank report estimates that people with disabilities make up 20% of the poorest³. Poor people are more at risk of acquiring a disability because of lack of access to good nutrition, health care, sanitation, as well as safe living and working conditions. Once this occurs, they face barriers to the education, employment, and public services that can help them escape poverty.

The present societal systems, religious beliefs and physical structures in general obstruct or even deny persons with disabilities (PWDs) access to rightful opportunities, facilities, development and participation in society. Thus they remain socially isolated and excluded in the midst of support extended by the Government policies and programmes. Some of our traditional faith responses uproot them from their families and communities and bring them to isolated homes and hostels in order to uplift them with education and skills.

¹ World Disability report

²The World Bank. Perspectives on poverty in India. Stylized facts from Survey data. 2011.

³Elwan A. Poverty and disability: a survey of the literature, social protection unit, human development network. 1999.
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/280658-1172608138489/PovertyDisabElwan.pdf>

In such a context FBOs have much deeper role to play in terms of ...

- (i) Ensuring and establishing compassionate care and facilities for the marginalized in society as a faith response;
- (ii) Advocating and working for the establishment of God's justice for all who are stigmatized and excluded, like the disabled in society (In most cases, the FBOs are considered as the 'Just-moral and Just-ethical consciences of societies' that promote and defend the rights of every excluded community) and
- (iii) Dignified inclusion of the marginalized and excluded as partners and co-equals in the society.

Now, it is a time for the faith communities to come together to re-read our scriptures, re-examine our faith activities and re-visit our approaches in terms of affirming and establishing 'Inclusive Household of God' where all God-created people live in God's love and harmony.

In 2014, during the centenary year, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) included Disability Concerns as part of its official programmatic thrust by affirming their constitutional status in the life of the NCCI as a 'Standing Forum' named 'Indian Disability Ecumenical Accompaniment' (IDEA). Responding to the imperative call of the gospel to give expression to the reign of God in society, the NCCI called its members and all Indian faith communities to contemplate on and work towards 'Just and inclusive Communities' through its 28th Quadrennial Assembly in 2016.

Therefore, IDEA is planning to encourage and partner with the members of NCCI, faith communities and other social and political actors and stakeholders for working towards realizing 'Just and Inclusive Communities'. As part of its initiative, IDEA is suggesting 'interfaith conversations on disability' aiming to bring different faith leaders to come together to converse on disability and to identify possible ways of working individually and collectively towards inclusion.

Thus the NCCI - IDEA deems it urgent to initiate an interfaith conversation, joining the likeminded organizations in India and around the globe suggesting an Interfaith Roundtable on Disability in Nagpur, India from 7 -9 August 2017.

Aims and Objectives:

- To invite different faith communities, to engage in conversing on 'disability' from their own faith and theological perspectives and experiences.
- To suggest and facilitate 'faith-alliance building' among the faith communities at leadership and religious adherents' level to serve PWDs and strengthen advocacy and policy development initiatives.

Suggested Programme Framework:

- Listening to Scriptures: “ What do our ‘holy books’ say about disability?”
- Examining our Religious Traditions: “How do our faiths treat PWDs? Are our ‘holy shrines’ accessible and inclusive?”
- Government Interventions: “What are the policies and programmes of the governments that ensure inclusion?”
- Common and collective Action Plan.

Suggested Participants

30 - 40 participants including PWDs with gender and generational sensitivity from the following are suggested:

- Clerics and theologians from different faith traditions
- Students of Religion and Philosophy from different faith traditions.
- Interested faith practitioners different faith and religious traditions
- Faith-based youth movements

Methodology:

Input, Interactive and Dialogical Session, Panel and Group Discussion.

Expected Outcome

- Sensitization and conscientisation of faith leaders and adherents of different faith / religious communities on ‘Disability’.
- An Inter-faith Disability Coalition initiated locally by forming a core-group with follow-up measures.
- Faith-based actions towards ensuring accessibility to the holy-shrines and participation in worship.

Venue and Dates:

Nagpur, India, 7th to 9th August 2017.

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