

## Sanskrit lessons for aspiring Islamic scholars



*K K Yatheendran teaches Sanskrit at Academy of Sharia and Advanced Studies*

**Thrissur (Kerala):** An Islamic institution in Kerala is setting a fine example of inter-cultural understanding in the cultural capital of the state by teaching Sanskrit. The Academy of Sharia and Advanced Studies (ASAS), an Islamic institution which trains students to become scholars and *madrassa* teachers, provides graduation in Islamic Sharia along with a degree in Arts under Calicut University. Along with this, students are taught Sanskrit, Indian tradition and other major world languages. ASAS is run by Malik Deenar Islamic Complex (MIC), situated in Thrissur.

K K Yatheendran, a disciple of renowned Sanskrit scholar K P Narayana Pisharody, is teaching Sanskrit at ASAS. Principal of the institution Ustad Muhammad Faizy Onampilly said students will be learning Kalidasa's epic poems like Raghuvamsa and Kumarasambhava. Students are selected for a residential eight-year course, during which they gain an in-depth knowledge of Islam alongside regular school and university education. The classes start at 6am and end by 5pm.

Such an attempt to learn the language, culture and philosophy of another community is a rare phenomenon. "We are training students to become Islamic scholars and teachers and we want them to have a perspective suitable for a multi-cultural society. When they learn a language in depth, the culture and philosophy of India, their perspectives will be moulded in the right manner. At the same time, they will stick to Sharia. Through a multi-lingual approach, we can develop the wisdom to understand different cultures among students," said Faizy, a Sanskrit scholar who holds an MA in Vedanta.

Yatheendran felt that the process was not an extraordinary one. "Sanskrit is taught in a traditional manner. They start with 'Siddharoopam' and progress to grammar and literature. It is the same like teaching in any other institution. As a teacher, my duty is to teach and the more students I have, the happier I am. There are some exemplary similarities between Sanskrit and Arabic when it comes to grammar. As students here are learning Arabic, it is easy for them to learn Sanskrit too," he said.

## **Muslim group participates in Gujarat flood relief work, cleans up temples and mosques**

In the flood-hit town of Dhanera in Banaskantha (Gujarat), 64 people have lost their lives to floods recently. Considered as a Hindu-dominated town, some 3,500 Muslims from Dhanera, Deesa, Palanpur and nearby villages gathered under the banner of an Islamic organisation, Jamiat ul-Ulama-i Hind, to aid the town, cleaning places of worship and residence alike, after waters started receding slowly.



The Jamiat claims that the town was submerged under 10 feet of flood waters that coursed its way through thousands of homes, leaving behind a trail of destruction. The volunteers from the Jamiat cleaned some major temples in Dhanera like Ganapati, Hanuman, Satimata, Lilashah and Ashapura Mata temples in the first two days itself with the help of locals, sending out a very positive message of communal amity. Mahmood Madani has expressed optimism that it will strengthen feeling of brotherhood and national unity.



Different local units of Jamiat have arranged 25 vehicles containing food grains, ration, bed, blanket and water etc. So far more than 700 patients have been provided with medical assistance.

## **Help Sought For Stranded Sikh from Mosque Loud Speaker**

Setting an example of communal harmony, Muslims in Tral, in south Kashmir, rescued an elderly Sikh man when a cloudburst triggered flash floods in a local stream submerging vast areas recently. Janak Singh, a retired government employee was stranded in a stream at Rathsuna village when water level suddenly increased. He called out for help after water surrounded him from all sides. As soon the news about the stranded Janak Singh reached his native village, a Muslim boy there announced it on a mosque loudspeaker. Soon, a large number of people came out their houses and rushed to Rathsuna to rescue Janak Singh. Finally, he was safely taken out from the gushing waters after several attempts.

The same day, a number of youth from Sikh community did a commendable job too when they came out to help Muslim neighbours in Nagbal village, which was hit by the flash floods.

## Interfaith Meeting Supports Organ Donation



Misplaced religious beliefs often come in the way of a family's decision to donate organs and save lives. While proponents say a lot of these barriers are breaking down, several myths continue to surround death and the afterlife that deter people from donating organs.

Recently, *The Times of India*, in collaboration with the Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, invited leaders from various religious communities to dispel some of the misconceptions.

"There are many forms of charity but the biggest of all is donating organs," said Rajyogini Kamlesh from the Brahma Kumaris. "There is no spiritual hindrance in donating organs. If religion doesn't come in the way of donating worldly possession, why would it object to organ donation?" she said.

Swami Durgananda from Ramkrishna Math and Mission said organ donation was not a new concept as Indian scriptures have mentioned several instances of this. He cited Rishi Dadhichi, a saint who sacrificed his limbs and bones for moral accomplishment and to triumph over vice.

Christianity thinks no differently. Father Stephen Fernandes, a professor of Moral Theology said, "Pope John Paul II affirmed that every transplant has its source in a decision of great ethical value. The nobility of the act lies in the decision to offer without reward a part of one's own body for the wellbeing of another person," he said.

Maria Khan, a member of Centre for Peace and Spirituality, said the Quran regards saving a life as having saved the mankind. "Organ donation is a unique way of honouring the sanctity of life. This is why it is undoubtedly an Islamic act," she said.

Judaism that had reservations in the past about organ donation has evolved with rabbis world over now talking in its favour. "Every Jewish child is taught about *tikkun olam*, which means heal the world. We can take it a step forward by continuing good deeds after we are dead," said Hannah Akiv Judah, speaking from the Jewish point of view.

## Moving Towards Oneness

### *A Report on an Interfaith Get-Together at HMI*



Interfaith dialogue is today a pressing necessity in order to overcome deep-rooted negative images about other religions and their adherents and to resolve inter-communal conflicts (in which distorted, supremacist and exclusivist interpretations of religion often have a major role to play). Such dialogue is also essential in order to bring people of different faith backgrounds to work together to address common social concerns (such as, for instance, the ecological crisis or the perceived crisis of values) that affect all religious communities. Further, by affording an opportunity to benefit from the wisdom contained in other religious traditions and to be inspired by people of other faiths, interfaith sharing can help individuals in their own spiritual journeys.

Interfaith dialogue and inter-communal harmony are a major focus of the Henry Martyn Institute, which has been engaged in this field for several decades. Recently (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> August), the institute organized a three-day interfaith programme, which brought together several people from various faith communities. The theme of the



get-together was 'Explore-Experience-Evolve Towards Oneness'. Participants shared with each other some basic tenets of their respective religions, highlighting particularly teachings about the Oneness of God or Ultimate Reality and the oneness of creation, including humanity.

In his presentation, Prof. C.S.R. Prabhu spoke about the concept of oneness from the perspective of the tradition of Non-Dualism in Hinduism, according to which the individual soul is one with the God, which can be realized by overcoming attachments and negative tendencies so that one finally realizes oneness with everything.

Shri Kasturchand Manicklal Jhabak spoke about teachings related to oneness in the Jain tradition, such as living and letting others live, forgiveness and inner reform. He suggested that just as the countries of the world have got together to form a United Nations, there should be a united platform for the different religions.

In his presentation, Dr. Packiam Samuel, Director of the Henry Martyn Institute, reflected on the theme of interfaith harmony from the Christian tradition. He spoke about how the Christian scriptures are interpreted diversely, from different standpoints, and underscored the need for contextual exegesis. In this regard, he highlighted selected incidents mentioned in the Bible that can be interpreted to underscore respect for religious pluralism.

Dhammapala Bhante, a Theravada Buddhist monk, explained that from the perspective of the Buddhist tradition, the starting point or basis of oneness is universal suffering. He stressed that one must first work on one's own self, developing awareness of one's mind and body, for which Buddhism stresses meditation. A person who is suitably transformed through meditative practices can become a force for great good in the world, reflecting compassion through his very being and in all his actions.

Dr. Syed Naqi Mehdi spoke about on the notion of the Oneness of God in Islam and respect for religious pluralism as reflected in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (such as the Medina Declaration, that guaranteed the rights of inhabitants of Medina irrespective of religion, and the Hudaibiyyah peace treaty between the Prophet and his Meccan opponents).

The Oneness of God and of the equality of all human beings is a basic teaching of the Sikh Gurus, Dr. Raminder Kaur stressed in her presentation. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy scripture, contains verses by saints from different religious and caste backgrounds, including Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, this reflecting the central teaching of the Gurus of the oneness of all humanity and the oneness of the teachings of the realized spiritual masters from different traditions.

The programme afforded ample opportunity for participants to get to know each other and to have lively conversations at lunch-time and some fun-filled moments over a cup of tea. Participants felt that such programmes were really the need of the hour.

Religious differences will remain: we cannot wish them away. But what we can do is to learn to accept and live with them and even to learn and benefit from them while working together with people of diverse religious backgrounds for the common social good, recognizing this is mandated by the One God, the God of us all.

## **Society needs humanism: Muslim woman who married paralysed Dalit man**



Meharunnisa and Pramod

He is a Hindu Dalit, paralysed below the waist and wheelchair-bound for 10 years. She is from an orthodox Muslim family. They met and fell in love on Facebook. Despite the odds, Pramod, 36, and Meharunnisa, 30, registered their marriage recently at his home at Poonjar in Kerala's Kottayam district.

Meharunnisa says: "We healthy persons should fill with joy the lives of the physically disabled ones."

Pramod was a cable TV operator. In 2007, he fell into a small water body near his house. The injuries left him paralysed below the waist. After doing the rounds at a number of hospitals, he returned home in a wheelchair. In the meantime, Pramod's parents Mangattukunnel Balakrishnan and Saraswati were diagnosed with cancer. Balakrishnan, a BSNL employee, died in 2013. Saraswati became the lone support for Pramod. The family survived on a meagre pension.

Pramod said, "I would frequent social networking sites on my phone. I met Meharunnisa on Facebook two years ago. At the outset, I told her about my condition and other family matters, which should have made any woman keep away from me."

Meharunnisa said that as they became closer, she sought the opinion of friends. "Most of them dissuaded me. They told me my life would be spoiled. But I always felt it would be a great thing to contribute to the happiness of others. When Pramod spoke about his mother's disease, I decided I should step into their lives," she said.

The two were married in May 2017. It was a simple ceremony at Pramod's house. The marriage was registered under the Special Marriage Act.

## **Muslim women blend yoga with Quranic recitation**

A Vadodara-based foundation has found a unique way to promote yoga, especially amongst Muslim women by blending it with Quranic recitation.

Around 50 Muslim women gathered to attend a yoga session that was organised by the Tadbeer Foundation recently.

"Generally, women from our community stay away from doing yoga believing that it belongs to a particular faith. But yoga is an age-old technique practiced since thousands of years and it is not a legacy of any one religion. Through Islamic yoga we are trying to blend the ancient practice with Islamic chanting," said Naasheta Bhaisaheb of the foundation.

"Islamic yoga is totally a new concept in which Quranic recitation is blended with yogic postures whereby physical benefits of yogic postures is enhanced by the spiritual effect of recitation," she said.

The yoga session that was conducted by international yoga expert Shabanaben Lalawala from Mumbai targeted common problems faced by women including back pain, hip pain and osteoarthritis of knees apart from frozen shoulders.

"In this session, we focused on five 'asanas'. From next session onwards, we will be focusing on problems related to diabetes, thyroid and so on," she added.

"I am a very good believer of Islam but there is a myth that only Hindus can practice yoga. Since last four years I practice yoga for which I get private yoga practitioner. But the Islamic yoga that we did on Sunday was meant for physical, mental as well as spiritual upliftment and added more to what I was practising so far," said Fatema Lokhandwala, 43, a masters in medical microbiology.

"I am practising yoga since last five years but Islamic yoga was a new concept for me. There is a taboo because of which some don't practice yoga. Anybody can practise yoga for its health benefits," said 41 year-old Shahina Chasmawalla, 41-year-old.

## Hindu youth's heart beats in Muslim man



*Amit Hadpati (L),*

*Sohail Vora*

**AHMEDABAD (Gujarat):** The heart of a brain dead Hindu youth from Surat was recently transplanted to a Muslim man at a private hospital in the city. Amit Hadpati, a 21-year-old farm labourer from Surat, was declared brain dead by Surat Civil Hospital. His heart, however, was successfully transplanted to 31-year-old Sohail Vora, a Muslim teacher at a *madrassa*, in a surgery that lasted about five hours. Hadpati following a road accident that caused severe brain injury. The family of poor farm labourers, however, decided to donate his heart to Vora, a resident of Anand, who suffered from heart failure. Dr Dhiren Shah, director and chief of heart transplant at the hospital, said, "Vora had a pace-maker that had given him multiple shocks for dangerously fast heart rates. He was in a bad condition and in urgent need for heart transplant to save his life." Shah said, "The donor family was happy and willing to donate the heart of their family member to save the life of another."

Amit's heart now beats in Sohail. Dr Shah said he had performed three such operations and even his first operation was that of a Muslim's heart transplanted into a Hindu. "The heart knows no boundaries. Sohail is now stable."

## **Bengal: Healing the wounds of communal clash**

Heart-warming tales of communal harmony have started emerging from pockets of Basirhat, in West Bengal, which found itself in the middle of a communal flare-up recently. Muslims have offered to pay for the repair of damage caused to a village temple even as Hindus of a nearby market have kept their shops shuttered in solidarity with Muslim traders whose establishments have borne the wrath of mob violence. And at Khanpara, a Muslim-majority neighbourhood in the heart of Basirhat, members of both communities have come together to set up a resistance group after seeing how mobs from outside tried to foment trouble in their locality.

"About 80% of Khanpara's 200-odd families are Muslims. So, when trouble erupted on July 3, our primary concern was the insecurity that the neighbourhood's Hindu families might feel. The first thing we did was to dispel this fear by calling a meeting of club members, where youths from both communities gathered. We apportioned responsibility among both Hindus and Muslims to verify and dispel the wild rumours that were being floated," recounted Sk Aslam Hossain.

Initially, when trouble mongers ruled in the absence of adequate police force, there were rumours that temples were being damaged by Muslims and mosques being set ablaze by Hindus. "Every time we heard some disturbing news, we called up an acquaintance living in the neighbourhood where the incident had allegedly occurred and checked its veracity. Almost all the 'news' turned out to be fake. Rumours were being deliberately spread to incite communal tension," Abhishek Pal said.

The Mayer Ichchhe Kali temple near Moyelakhola Mayer Bazaar in the adjoining neighbourhood was one that was actually damaged. "When the Haji Saheb of Dargah Sharif in Sonpukur learned about it, he immediately sent word that funds from the dargah's corpus would be released for repairs," a villager said.

Hindus of a nearby market have returned this favour. Some shops owned by Muslims were ransacked and torched during the mob frenzy. Peace has returned

now but shops owned by Hindus, too, remain shut as the owners have decided to restart business only when the Muslim owners are able to reopen their shops after getting them repaired.

The social activist group continues its vigil at Khanpara. Every night, 15 young men – both Muslims and Hindus – walk shoulder to shoulder, guarding the locality so that every household can sleep in peace. "It is peaceful now but we are wary of trouble mongers who can cause mischief by attacking a household in the area. We will continue to be on guard," said Mirza Ghalib, owner of a welding shop.

Social commentators say such home-grown initiatives can be much more effective than mere administrative efforts at maintaining peace. "It is always much better when this awareness comes from within," said Faruq Ahmed, editor of Udar Akash, a magazine focusing on inter-communal relations.



## West Bengal: Muslim neighbours help Hindu family carry body to crematorium



A Hindu family at a remote village in West Bengal's Nadia district had no money to take the body of their father to the crematorium for the last rites but their Muslim neighbours came to their help.

Akali Sardar (80) of Palashipara Dhawapara village near Tehatta in Nadia district had died. His family had no money to take the body to the burning *ghat* about 26 km away. Around 210 families reside in Palashipara Dhawapara village, majority of them Muslims. When the villagers heard the Sardar family's problem, an announcement was made over the loud speaker asking the people to help them. The Muslims neighbours of Sardar family rushed to help them. They handed over money his two sons Khakon and Swapan and to his wife Shanti. Not only that, they carried the body to the burning *ghat* and waited till all the rituals were completed.

A local, Golam Hossain Sheikh, said, "Akali and I had grown up together. The family was in great distress due to lack of money. They were unable to take the body to burning *ghat*. We helped them. Being neighbour, if we don't stretch our hand, who will do?"

Khakon, son of Akali said, "We had no money to take our father's body to the burning *ghat*. But our Muslim neighbours helped us to take the body to burning ghat at Kaliganj Ramnagar in Nadia, about 26 km away."

Shanti, wife of Akali, also expressed her gratitude to her Muslim neighbours. She said, "Our Muslim neighbours rescued us from our problem. We will never forget the help."

Hearing the matter, the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Tehatta 2, Abhijit Chowdhury, congratulated the villagers for helping the family of Akali Sardar. The BDO said, "The Muslims of the area have established an instance of communal harmony."

## Hyderabad: Temple committee member cleans up Muslim Sufi shrine for Bonalu



The Akkanna Madanna temple in Hyderabad's Old City stands as an interesting example of universal brotherhood and Hyderabad's composite culture. The Bonalu festivities are incomplete at the Akkanna Madanna temple if the temple committee doesn't make an offering at a small *dargah* or Muslim Sufi shrine located in front of the historic temple. As a practice, the *dargah* is painted and lit up with fairy lights by the temple authorities during Bonalu. The temple authorities also offer a *chadar* or sheet at the *dargah*.

Temple committee joint secretary P. Kranti Kumar said, "We give the *dargah* a coat of green paint when the temple is getting painted. During the 10-day Bonalu celebrations, we offer a *chadar*. The *dargah* is located exactly opposite the temple, so we take care of it. Occasionally, a Muslim woman comes and cleans up the place; rest of the time we do it ourselves."

The committee has asked its personnel who take care of the cleanliness of temple premises to ensure that surroundings of the shrine are kept clean too. "They do it regularly without fail. It is as much of a devotional duty for them to clean the *dargah* as it is to clean the temple," said Mr Kranti Kumar.

A couple of days ago home minister Nayani Narasimha Reddy offered a *chadar* at the shrine on behalf of the temple committee.

## Had it not been for Muslims, we would have died: Saints injured in Utkal Express derailment



MEERUT (UP): "I remember my head bumping into the seat in front of me, throwing me at least two feet forward. I was in pain and could hear screams from all directions. Honestly, if it hadn't been for Muslims in the area who rushed to the spot and pulled us out of the train's coach, we might not have survived," said Bhagwan Das Maharaj, a saint with a saffron cloth tied around his neck. He was travelling with six other ascetics who had boarded the Utkal Express from Morana in Madhya Pradesh and were going to Haridwar to take a holy dip in Ganga.

"They brought us water, *khaats* and arranged for a private doctor for us. We will never forget this gesture," he added. Three saints from the group were injured and were rushed to Lala Lajpat Rai Memorial (LLRM) Medical College in Meerut for treatment.

"We believe in God and we saw His power soon after the accident. There are times when people politicize Hindu-Muslim ties, but there has always been love between the two communities," said Morni Das, another saint.

Soon after 14 coaches of Haridwar-bound Kalinga Utkal Express derailed near Khatauli in Muzaffarnagar, government and private hospitals in Meerut were put on alert and emergency wards were set up for the accident victims. "There were many women and children in our coach. All of us were chit-chatting and suddenly our coach overturned. Initially, we didn't realize what had happened," said another saint Hakim Das.