

Interfaith Christmas Celebration - 2024



Interfaith Leaders and Groups Celebrate Peace in Action



Cutting and Sharing the Cake During Christmas which is an Expression of Love and Care for One Another

Rising Hatred and Divisiveness in India

India, once celebrated for its rich cultural and religious diversity, now faces growing challenges due to increasing hatred and divisiveness. The nation's secular ethos is under siege as communal tensions escalate, fueled by political polarization, misinformation, and identity-based politics. Social media platforms, once tools for connection, have been weaponized to spread propaganda and divisive rhetoric, exacerbating fears and fostering deep mistrust between communities. This climate of animosity not only threatens India's historical legacy of unity in diversity but also fuels violence, hate speech, and discrimination, particularly against marginalized groups.

The surge in divisiveness can be traced to systemic and individual factors. Political narratives centered around majoritarianism, coupled with rising unemployment, economic disparity, and unequal access to resources, have left vulnerable communities prone to scapegoating. Educational and institutional biases continue to reinforce stereotypes, further entrenching societal divides.



Religious Leaders of Different Faiths Carry Baby Jesus to the Manger – A Historic Symbol of Interfaith Peace, Acceptance, and Celebration in the Salem Diocese

In this context, even local communities, once grounded in unity and brotherhood, are beginning to fracture. In places like Udayapatty, where tensions between religious groups have surfaced, the focus has shifted from mutual support to cultivating hatred. In response, peace groups have initiated efforts, such as organizing an interfaith Christmas celebration, to counteract these divisions and restore the values of empathy, respect, and understanding that have long been integral to India's social fabric.



Relevance and Significance of Interfaith Celebrations in India

Interfaith celebrations in India hold profound relevance, especially in the current climate of rising communal tensions. India is home to a diverse array of religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and others. These celebrations serve as vital platforms for fostering mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance among different faith communities. By coming together to celebrate shared values, such as peace, love, and humanity, interfaith events create spaces for dialogue that transcend religious differences.



☪ Let us unite, for the King of Peace is born in us and among us, guiding us with love and harmony. ☪

In a country where religious identity often shapes social and political narratives, interfaith celebrations challenge the notion of division, promoting inclusivity and harmony. They provide an opportunity to dismantle stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and bridge gaps between communities that may have been driven apart by misinformation or political polarization. These events also celebrate the rich cultural heritage of India, where festivals and customs from various religions are intertwined, highlighting the nation's pluralistic ethos.



"Christ's birth teaches us divinity and simplicity, and His purpose for coming is nothing but peace," says Sr. Rajakumari, Director of Community Development Programmes, Good Shepherd Convent, Salem.

Moreover, interfaith celebrations are significant in counteracting rising extremism and intolerance. They offer a counter-narrative to hate, emphasizing unity and solidarity over division. In an era where communal violence and divisiveness threaten social cohesion, such celebrations play a crucial role in preserving India's values of unity in diversity and ensuring the long-term peace and stability of the nation.



Cutting and Sharing the Cake During Christmas which is an Expression of Love and Care for One Another



As a sign of brotherhood and respect for each other, Samayapuram Mariyamman Temple Priest, Udhayapatty, Salem, and Pastor Justin Raj, President of the Salem Christian Church Protection Committee, Salem, exchanged Christmas greetings, wishing each other happiness and peace.



As a sign of acceptance, peace, joy, and harmony, Fr. Austin Joy, Parish Priest of Our Lady of Good Health Church, Udhayapatty, and Mr. Moulavi Ziaudeen, Member of Tamil Manila Immangal Peraval, Salem, embraced each other.



Religious leaders, members of Amaithi Sangamam, and laypeople of different faiths were the driving force behind the Interfaith Christmas Celebration at the Udayapatty Parish Community Hall, working together to promote unity, peace, and harmony through this meaningful event.



Celebrations That Unite People: A Message of Peace and Harmony



Religious Leaders of Different Faiths Carry Baby Jesus to the Manger - A Historic Symbol of Interfaith Peace, Acceptance, and Celebration in the Salem Diocese

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Salem District, Tamil Nadu, are dedicated to fostering unity among people of different faiths, cultures, and backgrounds. Their mission is grounded in promoting respect for diverse beliefs and customs, striving to bridge divides and build an inclusive community where all individuals are valued, contributing to peace and harmony.

Through this work, they nurture a culture of mutual respect and collective growth, advancing the well-being of humanity and contributing to peace and harmony.

As part of their ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity, the sisters of the Good Shepherd, in collaboration with their Partners-in-Mission, joined forces with the 'Amaithi Sangamam' (Peace Collective) and the parishioners of Udayapatty in the Salem Diocese to celebrate Christmas on December 22nd at the Udayapatty Parish Community Hall. This joyous occasion brought together over 200 participants from various religious traditions, including religious leaders and followers from different faiths, uniting them in the spirit of celebration, respect, and togetherness.

The celebration featured uplifting Christmas messages from religious leaders of various faiths, cultural performances by children conveying the spirit of Christmas, the exchange of gifts, and the sharing of a communal meal.



"Christ's birth teaches us divinity and simplicity, and His purpose for coming is nothing but peace," says Sr. Rajakumari, Director of Community Development Programmes. Good Shepherd Convent, Salem.

Leaders for Peace Invited

The following are the key invitees from different faiths who shared their Christmas messages during the Christmas celebration held on December 22nd, 2024. These distinguished guests, representing various religious traditions, came together to promote the spirit of unity, peace, and goodwill. Their messages highlighted the universal values of love, compassion, and mutual respect, transcending religious boundaries. Through their participation, they underscored the importance of interfaith dialogue and cooperation in fostering a harmonious society. Their words served as a powerful reminder of the shared humanity that binds us all, regardless of faith.

The Key Invitees

- Fr. Austin Joy, Parish Priest, Our Lady of Good Health Church, Udhayapatty
- Mr. Moulavi. Ziaudeen, Member of Tamil Manila Immamgal Peravai, Salem
- Sr. Brahma Kumari Mageshwari, Director, Brahma Kumari Eswariya Vishva Vidhayalaya, Salem
- Pastor. Justin Raj, President, Salem Christian Church Protection Committee, Salem
- Mr. Samayapuram Mariyamman Temple Priest, Udyapatty, Salem
- Mr. Babu Shanavaskan, Secretary, Jamia Educational Trust, Salem
- Mr. David Raja, Secretary, Salem Christian Women Society (Part of Minority Welfare Department, Collectorate, Salem)
- Sr. Rajakumari, Director of Community Development Programmes, Good Shepherd Convent, Salem

Introductory Speech by Mr. Sam: Setting the Stage for Unity and Harmony

Building Peace is Everyone's Responsibility: Mr. Sam, Project Coordinator at GSC Salem, emphasized that while peace is not a new concept, it has become increasingly challenging to practice in today's society. With individualism taking precedence over collective well-being, society has become more divided, fostering a mindset of "I" rather than "we." This shift, Mr. Sam noted, has led to a breakdown in positive relationships and hindered efforts toward social harmony. He urged that it is the responsibility of every citizen to uphold the values enshrined in India's Constitution—values of inclusivity, non-discrimination, and unity. The universe is one, yet we create partitions among ourselves, isolating our relationships instead of sharing them to build peace. It is time to revive the tradition of peace, he said, and such celebrations provide a vital reminder of the pluralism enshrined in India's Constitution, encouraging harmony, respect, and the celebration of diversity.

Participate and Inspire: An Open Invitation!

Sr. Rajakumari, Director of Inclusive Community Development Services (ICDS), extended heartfelt Christmas wishes to everyone in the village, commending the women for their warm hospitality and the children for expressing peace and social harmony through cultural performances. She called on the community to reflect on the fragility of unity in today's world and emphasized the importance of reviving the interfaith harmony that once defined societal living. Highlighting that all religions teach love and unity, she acknowledged the challenge of living these values in daily life and urged conscious efforts to bridge divides.

Sr. Rajakumari stressed the need for understanding differences and embracing secularism to foster inclusivity. She cautioned that discrimination based on faith or identity undermines relationships and weakens community bonds. Encouraging everyone to focus on shared humanity, she reminded the gathering that true joy comes from cherishing connections, not creating barriers. By committing to these ideals, she concluded, the community can rebuild trust and strengthen the relationships essential for lasting peace and harmony.

Key Christmas Messages and Inspirations Shared

During the celebration, religious leaders from various faiths took turns to share their thoughts on Christmas, each offering a unique perspective that highlighted the universal values of peace, love, and compassion. Their messages, rooted in the teachings of their respective religions, emphasized the importance of unity, understanding, and mutual respect in today's world. These leaders spoke of the shared human longing for harmony and the need to embrace diversity, reminding everyone that the true spirit of Christmas transcends religious boundaries. Their reflections inspired the gathering to focus on kindness and collective well-being, reinforcing the message of interfaith solidarity and shared humanity.

Following are the key messages shared on the Christmas Day Celebrations, each connecting the relevance of interfaith celebrations, along with the existing ones:

- i. The act of coming together for interfaith celebration reflects the pluralism of India, as outlined in the Constitution.
- ii. Religious leaders have a key role in fostering peace and solidarity among people of different faiths.
- iii. Christmas offers a time to reflect on peace, as Christ did, emphasizing respect for all faiths.
- iv. Interfaith celebrations provide opportunities to celebrate solidarity and shared values.
- v. It is every citizen's responsibility to internalize respect for others and the unity of creation.
- vi. "Peace and Solidarity" are promoted through interfaith celebrations in various villages.
- vii. Religious leaders and interfaith groups work together to create spaces for peace and harmony.
- viii. Christmas symbolizes love and sharing, encouraging inclusion without discrimination.
- ix. Religious leaders emphasized the commonalities in all religions and the importance of unity.
- x. The spirit of Christmas transcends religious boundaries, reminding us that compassion is universal.
- xi. Interfaith celebrations honour diversity while fostering deeper understanding and connections.
- xii. Participating in these celebrations strengthens unity and cooperation in a divided world.
- xiii. These gatherings promote mutual respect, highlighting our shared desire for peace and love.
- xiv. Christmas, a time for hope and renewal, demonstrates that love and unity have no limits.
- xv. Interfaith events break down misunderstandings, building bridges of compassion and togetherness.

These messages underscore the importance of interfaith celebrations, which embody the values of inclusivity, understanding, and peace. Each message highlights how such gatherings contribute to fostering unity, respecting diversity, and embracing shared human values.

Cultural Programme for Peace

Following the inspiring Christmas messages, the children and women from the village took the stage, using the power of art to convey the deep significance of interfaith celebration. Through traditional dances, skits, and mime performances, they illustrated the core values that are central to fostering peace and unity in a diverse society. Each performance was a creative expression of love, respect, and understanding, portraying the beauty of people from different faiths coming together in harmony.

Their enactments were not just performances but reflections of the fundamental constitutional principles of India, such as secularism, equality, fraternity, and democracy. By embodying these ideals, they reinforced the importance of maintaining a society where every individual, regardless of their faith, background, or beliefs, is treated with dignity and respect. Through vivid storytelling and expressive art forms, the children and women called for unity, urging the community to rise above divisions.

The message they conveyed was clear and impactful: peace, mutual respect, and coexistence should be the guiding principles of every interaction. Their performances firmly rejected hatred, intolerance, and discriminatory practices based on religion, offering a hopeful vision of a future where love and solidarity transcend all differences.

Christmas Gift Sharing: A Celebration of Love and Compassion

Christmas is a time to embrace the spirit of sharing and caring, and this year, religious leaders came together to extend that spirit by reaching out to families in need within the church community. Among those who received thoughtful gifts were Ms. Vanakam Mary, a woman living with mental illness, and Mrs. Filominal, the sole breadwinner of her family. Both women were provided with three months' worth of groceries, offering them comfort and stability during difficult times.

This heartfelt gesture truly embodied the essence of Christmas - a celebration of love, generosity, and compassion. Just as Jesus Christ shared His love and life with humanity, these leaders mirrored that same spirit by caring for those in need, regardless of their faith. Their actions served as a powerful reminder of the universal message of unity and selfless giving that Christmas stands for.

Beyond the festive celebrations, this act of sharing also highlighted the enduring values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. By upholding principles of equality, inclusiveness, and compassion, the leaders demonstrated how the spirit of the Constitution can thrive through every day acts of kindness. Their example serves as an inspiration to all, encouraging us to practice love, generosity, and respect in our communities, transcending all boundaries.

Conclusion & Reflection

The Christmas celebration, marked by the shining stars that symbolize “showing direction to eternity,” reflects a powerful message for all of us. Just as the stars guide travellers to their destination, this celebration lights the way toward internalizing the values of peace, non-discrimination, and unity. In the midst of growing religious polarization in India, the act of celebrating together serves as a beacon of hope, reminding us that harmony and inclusivity are essential to healing our divided society.

By uniting across faiths to rejoice in the spirit of Christmas, we reaffirm our collective commitment to embracing diversity, particularly in support of marginalized communities. This celebration is more than a religious observance; it is a call to revive the timeless tradition of coming together in mutual respect, understanding, and shared joy. It is an invitation to foster meaningful connections and create sacred spaces for open dialogue, where differences are not feared but celebrated.

In these challenging times, let this interfaith Christmas celebration be a powerful reminder that our shared humanity is the greatest gift of all. As we stand together, we can build a future that transcends division, grounded in love, peace, and unity.

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