

Interfaith Dialogue and Community Cohesion in Leicester

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Over the past many years, the role and contributions of the faith communities and inter-faith organisations in promoting community cohesion are increasingly being recognized by Government at various levels. There has been a well-established understanding at policy level that inter-faith activity can play a valuable role in promoting positive relations, developing leadership at grass roots, creating opportunities for people from different background to work together and promoting community cohesion.

The UK Government announced in 2007 that inter-faith relations were vital in building a more cohesive and strong society, to develop a shared sense of belonging and promote community cohesion. It also included the specific commitment to develop an inter-faith strategy (Face to Face and Side by Side, CLG 2007)

Government at various levels has engaged with inter-faith initiatives, organisation and structures that have made contributions to public life. Over the past ten years, the Government has promoted inter-faith work, to increase social cohesion through dialogue and social action.

This paper is an attempt to analyse the role of Leicester Council of Faiths (inter faith dialogue) in promoting community cohesion in Leicester and will also try to identify ways in which it can play more a meaningful role for in the future.

The Concept of Community Cohesion

The concept of Community Cohesion has become very important for policy makers over the last ten years. The term Community Cohesion was invented in response to the riots in northern towns of England in 2001. The term was used first by the Community Cohesion Review team which was set up to examine the causes of the riots.

It was argued by the investigating team that two principle communities (White and Asian, which were the main focus of the report) were living parallel lives, had no contact, lacked shared experiences and shared values. The fear of difference created a situation in which many communities lived in ignorance and fear of each other. It was also indicated that no serious work had been done to break down the barriers

between the communities, to promote interaction, mutual trust and understanding. (Cantle; 2001; 51)

The term, Community Cohesion was used to signify that major structural change, changing attitude and values were required to repair the fracture between communities. The term was also used to justify that its purpose was not just to tackle inequalities but also to promote diversity, encourage citizenship, empower communities and create a sense of belonging. (Cantle; 2001; 51)

The term Community Cohesion seems to have Canadian origin and has been developed from the concept of Social Cohesion. Social cohesion focuses more on general aspects of community relations such as social capital, attachment to a place or area, economic inequalities, access to public services, social order and common values. It ignores divisions based on ethnicity and faith.

In the UK, however, the concept has evolved to signify the local context and very much focus to develop good relations and shared values across ethnic divisions, to tackle the 'Fear of Difference,' to create social environments where diversity of people is appreciated and valued, where people and communities can live face to face and side by side with strong and positive relationships. (CLG; 2002 and 2004).

The community cohesion strategy was proposed to counter the growth of 'Parallel Lives', to develop understanding and meaningful interactions between different communities. Otherwise, the fear of difference and ignorance can easily be exploited by racists and extremists by spreading myths and false information and by demonising minority communities.

The strategy of community cohesion also aims to develop an environment where people of different background have a common vision and sense of belonging, similar life opportunities, strong and positive relationship and can live 'face to face and side by side'. (Face to Face and Side by Side, CLG, 2008)

The study will evaluate the inter-faith strategy and explore the role of interfaith activities for community cohesion.

Policy Context

Samuel Huntington's argued in 1997, that the rivalry of superpower would be replaced by the clash of civilizations including division between the West and the Muslim world. (Huntington, 2002).

Since the publication of this book, the issue of faith has become more challenging and it has been widely recognised that it has a very important role in framing people's identity and influencing their values, attitude and behaviour.

It is very important to mention that the term 'Community Cohesion' was used by the Community Cohesion Review Team, to emphasise that the changing of attitudes and values were crucial in repairing the fracture between communities (Community Cohesion Review Team 2001).

Before that the focus of social cohesion had been on tackling the structural inequalities caused by difference of gender, ethnicity, culture relative wealth and social class.

Social Identity Theory is based on the assumption that we have a natural tendency to place ourselves in one group and socially categorise people in relation to that group. However, Contact Theory explains the impact of cross- cultural or inter-group contact. It suggests the way in which attitude to others is shaped by that contact and by lack of that contact.

The research in this field suggests that meaningful contacts between people of different background can help to break- down barriers and prejudices.

The Face to Face consultation highlights the importance of relationships between people of different faith and belief.

It also aims to create more local opportunities for both face to face dialogue (which support a greater understanding of shared values as well as appreciation of distinctiveness) and side by side collaborative actions (where people come together and share their time energy and skills to improve their local neighborhood)

(Face to face Side by Side 2007 CLG).

It has been confirmed by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion that inter-faith interaction has an important role to play in building integration and community cohesion. (Commission on integration and Cohesion; 2007)

It has been argued by many scholars that faith traditions have played a very significant role in various parts of the world rebuilding solidarity in a fragmented society. Faith communities are considered important repositories of resources to develop the social capital through their networks, values and skills. (Cantle; 2000; 66)

This is further explained by three type of social capital; Bonding, bridging and linking. According to Putnam,' bonding social capital constitutes kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging capital provides a sociological WD-40'. (Putnam; 2000; p 70)

However, strong bonding capital, if not balanced by strong bridging and linking social capital can be seen as divisive and isolationist. Bourdieu argues that social capital like any other capital can be used positively or negatively. It can increase solidarity but it can also be undermined. (Bourdieu; 2001; p17)

It can therefore be argued that inter-faith organisations can play a very important role in tackling fear of difference, building positive relations between different faith communities, breaking down barriers to build social capital and to promote community cohesion through dialogue and social action.

Background of Leicester

Leicester is a very diverse city and likely to become the first city in England where the majority is composed of a combination of minority populations.

In the 2011 census, the official population of Leicester is round 3 lakhs. However, since 2001 there have been two new waves of immigration. Between 2002-04, many people of Somali origin settled in the city and since 2005 a large community has come from Poland and countries of the former Eastern Europe. Also recently, small groups have come to the city from Iraq, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Kosovo, Iran and African and Middle Eastern countries.

In terms of faiths, 44.7 percent of people in Leicester identified themselves as Christian; 14.7 percent as Hindu; 11 percent as Muslim; 4.2 percent as Sikh; Baha'is Jews, Jains are around 2 percent when added together; 17.2 percent identified themselves as having no faith

and 7 percent did not indicate whether or not they have a religion. (2001 Census, Information services, Leicester City Council)

It is also interesting to know that in terms of ethnic background as Leicester has a large and diverse ethnic minority. Leicester City Council estimates that 60 percent of Leicester population is ethnically white and 40 percent have an ethnic minority background. Out of this ethnic minority more than 30 percent have an Asian background, predominantly of Indian origin, and there are much smaller groups from Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The black population in Leicester has either African or Caribbean origin, including recently arrived Somali refugees and Polish community. (2011 Census, Source Leicester City Council).

Leicester is unique amongst English cities in that its predominant ethnic minority community is of Indian origin. 75 percent of this community is Hindu and 25 percent Muslim. While in other English cities (outside London) minority ethnic communities come predominantly either from Pakistan or Bangladesh and Muslim in Faith. Leicester has the highest concentration of Hindus outside London. Leicester also reflects the complex relationship between faith and ethnicity as the Indian community include Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain faith groups while the Muslim community includes members from Asia, Africa and East / Central Europe.

Leicester has one of the highest rates of attendance at faith based activities in England. There are around 240 Faith groups across 14 different faiths. There are more than 100 churches, 2 Jewish synagogues, 30 Muslim mosques, 22 Hindu temples, 7 Sikh gurdwaras, 1 Jain temple and 1 Buddhist monastery. (Places of Worship in the City of Leicester, Leicester Council of Faiths 2015)

The socio-economic picture of Leicester is rather complicated. Leicester is the 20th most deprived local authority region and some wards in the city are among the most deprived areas in the country. Though, people of Indian origin are doing well, people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin have considerable levels of deprivation. The employment rate for people of Indian origin is estimated to be 68.5 percent while it is only 42.4 percent for the people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin. The unemployment rate is more than 75 percent in the Somali community for both men and women. Also the majority of the poorest areas of Leicester

are largely white working class areas on the periphery of the city. (Annual Labour Force Survey 2013)

There are notable health inequalities in Leicester. The indicators of health reflect that the pattern is worse on average in Leicester when compared to England and the East Midlands. (Department of Health, Survey 2014)

Leicester Council of Faiths and Inter-Faith work

The term inter-faith defines the relationship between religions and the people who belong to them and highlights the importance of dialogue between members of different faiths. The term can also be understood with reference to the efforts to promote dialogue co-operation and understanding among individuals members of different faiths.

Leicester Council of Faiths was established in 1986 and represents, on a faith community basis, the eight principal faiths in the city: Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs.

Leicester Council of Faiths is recognised and supported by the City Council with which it has an excellent working relationship. It carries out a wide range of activities to promote meaningful dialogue between people of different backgrounds, to develop strong inter-faith relations between different faith communities, to promote leadership among faith communities for social action, to build community cohesion, organise events, seminars, conferences, public lectures, and offer trainings.

It has very strong partnerships with faith communities, voluntary and community sector, public service agencies and local government. It also provides advice to a wide range of public bodies on faith issues.

The Council of Faith has been successful in developing networks, relationships and partnership which have played a very important role in maintaining peace and good relations, building social capital and promote community cohesion in Leicester. The following are just a few examples:

- Faith leaders meeting when Mrs Indira Gandhi was assassinated.
- Meeting of Hindu and Muslim Community after demolition of Babri Mosque.
- A Day of grief and Prayer for Bosnia held on 10 October 1993.

- Common prayer meeting after 9/11 and 7/7 in 2003 and 2005 respectively.
- Common prayer meeting for victims of war during Iraq War 2004
- Common prayer meeting for victims of Haiti earthquake in 2010
- Faith and Immigration'- seminar in 1988 in Partnership with Leicester Racial Equality Council
- Organisation of Holocaust Memorial day event each year in partnership with the Leicester City Council and other organisations.
- East Midland Regional Conference in 1994 in partnership with Regional government
- Public Lecture every year in partnership with different faith communities.
- Peace Visit every year in partnership with English heritage
- Partnership with Equality and Diversity Forum
- Partnership with Regional Equality and Diversity Forum
- Membership of Local Strategic Partnership
- Membership of Regional Faith Forum
- Membership of National Interfaith Network UK
- Involvement with SCARE
- Engagement with Leicestershire Constabulary
- Involvement with Voluntary Action Leicestershire
- Partnership working with Leicester City NHS (Primary Care Trust)
- Partnership working with Faith Organisations
- The Council of Faiths has been a resource to other inter-faith group and has hosted dialogue sessions for representatives of Birmingham Council of Faiths, Inter-Faith Forum for Luton and Inter-Faith Council for Middleborough.
- In August 2001 and July 2003 respectively, the Council of Faiths organised two conferences. The first was on the theme 'The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain and explored the Parekh Report. The second conference was focused on 'The Future of Multi-faith Britain.'
- Muslim- Christian Dialogue Group – A range of subject have been discussed such as racism, asylum, conversion, law and order, crime, education, health and international issues such as Danish Cartoons and their effect upon Leicester.
- Muslim-Christian Women's Group- Besides, offering fun and friendship, serious contentious issues have also been discussed in the meetings.
- Hindu- Christians Forum- The group was established in 2002. The members of the group meet regularly at various temples and

churches in Leicester. It is the only such group in the country. The issues such as mission and conversion, caste, class, reincarnation and resurrection, the nature of God, the meaning behind festivals, the place of icons and images have been part of these dialogues and meetings.

- Hindu- Muslim Group- The group has played a very important role in developing mutual understanding between the Hindu and Muslim communities. The members of the group met when there has been tension between these large communities for example at the time of the clash in Gujarat in 2003 and after Mumbai attack 26/11 in 2008.
- Sikh–Christian Group- There has been a very active partnership between Sikhs and Christians for bilateral dialogue.
- Prayer Vigil for the Victim of Tunisia attack 2015
- Prayer vigil for the victim of Paris 2015

It can be argued that the Council of Faith has played significant role in promoting community cohesion in Leicester. The presence of Council of Faiths has been able to reduce tension, fear and ignorance and to enhance social cohesion at grass roots. It has been successful in bringing people together from different backgrounds through networking, collaborations, partnership, training, organising and participating in cross faith/ cultural/ social events, and providing a source of joint leadership and representation.

Community Cohesion in Leicester – Impact of inter faith work

Though, it is difficult to measure a sense of community cohesion, anecdotal reports and some other indicators suggest that there are good community relations and high levels of acceptance of each other among the people of Leicester.

The report recently published by the Policy Research Centre has suggested that Leicester has been able to manage its ethnic and cultural diversity. The faith communities and inter-faith work have played a valuable role in making Leicester a city of Inter-faith and intercultural harmony at international level. (Muslims in Leicester; 2010; Open Society Institute)

Research conducted in Leicester identified 443 social projects run by faith organizations. More than half of the city's faith groups are engaged in some kind of social action. Faith groups operate in some of the most

deprived area of Leicester. Volunteering within the faith communities is very extensive. (Embracing the present planning for future, 2004, Riaz)

Another survey conducted in 2008 has indicated that 84 percent of Leicester residents thought that Leicester was a place where people from different background get on well together and that they live in a city with good community relations. (The Diversity of Leicester, Leicester City Council 2008)

A sense of belonging to the local area is another indicator of community cohesion. The result of the general survey conducted in 2003 and the resident's survey conducted in 2005 have indicated that the sense of belonging of people in Leicester was higher among the ethnic minority population compared to other cities. (The Diversity of Leicester, Leicester City Council 2008)

Another way to indicate the sense of community cohesion in Leicester is the importance of the cultural activities and the level of people's participation. Leicester is also famous for its Diwali celebrations, the biggest outside India, Christmas festivals, Id celebrations and Nagar Kirtan. Leicester Comedy Festival and the Caribbean Carnival are also very important cultural events. More than five millions people participate every year in these events. (Leicester City Council 2014)

Participation in the democratic process is another measure of community cohesion. At present 17 out of 54 Councilors for the city including the previous Lord Mayor, are of ethnic minority background. (Electoral Service, Leicester City Council)

Minority communities play an active role in civic and political engagements and anecdotal evidence indicates that people of Leicester have greater trust in local authority and in the central government. (Muslims in Leicester; 2010)

Conclusion

Despite many challenge and limitations, it can be concluded that inter-faith initiatives and work in Leicester have played a very important role in managing its ethnic and cultural diversity. The Council of Faiths has made a significant contribution in promoting greater understanding and dialogue between people of different faiths, developing harmonious relations between different faith communities and building community cohesion. The work of Leicester Council of Faiths has been supported

by many other inter-faith initiatives in the city. The Council of Faith is often visited by national international and partners to exchange good practice.