



**RAJIV GANDHI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF
LAW, PUNJAB**

**CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDY IN
INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW**

In collaboration with

**TEMPLE OF UNDERSTANDING, INDIA
FOUNDATION**

presents

**Interfaith Dialogue -
The Right to Dignified Disposal
of Dead Bodies in the times of
COVID-19: International
Perspective**

ON THURSDAY, AUGUST 06 2020 | 3.30 PM (IST)

ONWARDS

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**COMMEMORATING THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF
HIROSHIMA ATTACK**

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS

CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDY IN INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW

Centre for Advanced Study in International Humanitarian Law (CASH) is an esteemed research centre of Rajiv Gandhi National University of Law, which is dedicated to research in the field of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). It aims to ensure that future leaders and opinion-makers understand the practical relevance of the subject of IHL and have a thorough knowledge of its basic principles. Whenever there are serious and large-scale violations of IHL, the law itself tends to get the blame. Such violations should, of course, rouse the international community to action however, it is important to find out exactly where the problem lies rather than rushing headlong into changing the rules, especially as this is nowadays an extremely arduous, costly and unpredictable process. Therefore, the first and foremost function is to sensitize teachers, researchers, and students about the provisions of the IHL so that they may choose IHL as a field in their future research endeavours.

TEMPLE OF UNDERSTANDING

In 1960, Juliet Hollister (1916-2000) created the *Temple of Understanding (TOU)* after a realization that the world was in grave danger unless the gifts, wisdom, and insights of religious traditions could be recognized and cultivated to promote positive social change. She is the first woman to have founded an interfaith organization. Eleanor Roosevelt was among the first to endorse the concept. In the late 1950's, Juliet travelled the globe, bearing letters of introduction from the former First Lady, in order to gather support from the world's religious and political leaders.

“May this greatly needed Temple of Understanding come into realization soon, for our world surely needs the inspiration and leadership of such a ‘Spiritual United Nations’.”

That year, Juliet met with luminaries such as Egyptian President Nasser, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Pope John XXIII, and Albert Schweitzer –who responded to her request for a meeting with, “Come at once and I will send a canoe.”

ABOUT THE EVENT

The event will be a stimulating discussion amongst scholars from different faiths on ‘The Right to Dignified Disposal of Dead Bodies’ in the unprecedented times of COVID-19. Exploring the concerns affecting the disposal of dead bodies and the profound impact it may have on the bereaved families whose loved ones are cremated against their faith or beliefs to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

KEY THEME

These are not ordinary times. The pandemic has affected not only the way we live, but also our deaths. India is inching towards the 15,00,000 mark in terms of the total number of COVID-19 cases and with the rising number of deaths, there are already concerns about bodies piling up in hospitals and mortuaries. With many health facilities, frontline health care and death care workers becoming overwhelmed, it may lead to undermining the process of proper handling of bodies of persons confirmed or believed to have died due to COVID-19. Non-availability of grounds for burials, non-functioning electric furnaces for cremation only add to these concerns.

Dignified treatment forms the core of the obligations under international human rights and humanitarian laws – the proper disposal of dead bodies being a crucial aspect of this. Both as a treaty and as custom, it has been ensured that the dead are honourably interred as per their religious beliefs and rites. International law reserves high respect for the dead and also imposes general obligations for the location, identification, and burial of bodies as important humanitarian acts. These international obligations are complementary to, and inform, the rights and obligations concerning dead persons and their families set out in applicable national legislation.

The Indian Constitution under Article 21 envisages the right to life and liberty to the people. This encompasses the right to live with human dignity. Moreover, on better understanding, the right is extended to provide dignified treatment and disposal of the dead bodies – also applicable to COVID-19 patients. The right calls upon the state to fulfill its obligation to provide decent disposal of the dead as per their religious belief. Proper planning and preparation for mass casualties becomes necessary to prevent a situation that gives rise to

ABOUT THE EVENT

mass graves or mass cremations with few records and little understanding of who died and where the body was taken. The impact on families who do not know what happened to their loved ones could be devastating. While the authorities in India are grappling with the necessary measures to prevent the further spread of the virus, the ICRC calls on them to adopt or incorporate international guidelines that allow both cremation and burial and permit the observance of religious rites and ceremonies as safely as possible.

With India being home to nine major religions, this dialogue intends to dig deep into the inter-faith beliefs fundamental to the burial or cremation of the dead and identify key concerns in relation to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will make it possible to chalk out a plan to minimise any hindrance to performing the last rites.

The dignity of a human body must remain preserved even after death. This discussion is an endeavour to explore possibilities that will help develop good practice to cope with the present scenario and to learn from each other best practices that should be adopted to tide over this grim crisis.

OBJECTIVES OF THE EVENT

- Spread awareness and knowledge about the rituals and rites of the dead from different faiths.
- Stress on the existing obligation under national and international laws for dignified disposal of the dead.
- Develop consensus on good practices for the disposal of the dead keeping in mind the guidelines of Government of India and International standards.
- Identify gaps in policy formulation and approach meaningful implementation for the management of the dead in India.
- Lead a more informed approach for handling of the dead and pace India towards responsive governance interfaith.

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Dr. Shernaz Cama, Zoroastrian

An Associate Professor at Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University. Dr. Cama is Founder and Honorary Director of the UNESCO Parzor Project for the preservation and promotion of Parsi Zoroastrian Culture and Heritage since 1999.



Dr. Mohinder Singh, Sikh

Professor and Director of the National Institute of Punjab Studies, New Delhi. Dr. Singh is Professor of Eminence in the Dept. of Punjab Historical Studies, Punjabi University, Patiala, and Director, National Institute of Punjab Studies and Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi.

Rabbi Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, Jew

Head of the Jewish Community in New Delhi. Rabbi Malekar is Secretary of the Judah Hyam Synagogue, New Delhi. In addition to being a scholar of Judaism, a noted human rights activist, and a retired Dpt. Registrar (Law) with the NHRC, India.



Dr. A. K. Merchant, Baha'i

Dr. Merchant is the General Secretary, Temple of Understanding India Foundation. National Trustee, Lotus Temple & Baha'i Community of India, and Chairman, the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Delhi. Active participant at the Parliament of World's Religions held in Chicago (1993), Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004), Melbourne (2009), Salt Lake City (2015), Toronto (2018).

Swami Swantamananda, Hindu

He heads Delhi center of the Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Swantamananda is a senior monk, well known Administrator, and spiritual mentor of the Ramakrishnan Order. He is passionately involved in interfaith dialogue and deeply committed to peace initiatives all over the globe.



ABOUT THE SPEAKERS



Venerable Geshe Dorji Damdul, Buddhist

He is Director of Tibet House, New Delhi, Cultural Centre of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In 2003, the Office of H.H. the Dalai Lama sent him to Cambridge University, England for Proficiency English Studies. He was a visiting fellow at Girton College, Cambridge University.

Acharya Vivek Muni Maharaj, Jain

He is President of the International Mahavir Jain Mission, New Delhi. He took diksha from His Holiness Acharya Sushil Kumarji Maharaj and became a Jain Monk. His blogs appear in The Speaking Tree of the Times of India. He is also an active participant in numerous Interfaith Conferences



Fr. Felix Jones, Christian

A Catholic Priest serving the Archdiocese of Delhi. Fr. Felix is also the Executive Secretary cum Treasurer of VIVAT International-India. He regularly organizes Interfaith events and interreligious prayer services to address some of the contemporary issues.

Dr. Khwaja Iftikhar Ahmed, Islam

Dr Ahmed is Convener of India First, a group of Muslim intellectuals, and Founder President of the Interfaith Harmony Foundation of India. He is also the Secretary General, Society for Promotion of Indian Education and Culture.



Dr. M. Elif Gunce Eskikoy, Forensic Specialist, ICRC

As the forensic specialist at ICRC, Dr. Elif is currently the Coordinator for International Centre for Humanitarian Forensics at GFSU, Gujarat. She has earlier been responsible for ICRC's forensic programmes in Nigeria, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Timor Leste, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands.

PATRON – IN – CHIEF

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(Vice-Chancellor, RGNUL)**

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(Registrar, RGNUL)**

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