

INTERNATIONAL INTERFAITH YOUTH PROJECT

(22 December 2001 – 07 January 2002),

co-ordinated by **South Asia Co-ordinating Council** (SACC) of
the **International Association for Religious Freedom** (IARF)

The whole team of Internationals consisting of young people from Canada (3), England (2), Hungary (1), Japan (2), South Africa (1) and United States of America (1) met in Ahmedabad with other 9 youths from the rest of India. We were all united by our commitment to this project, which would stretch over 3 weeks.

This project was organised by the *South Asia Co-ordinating Council* (SACC) in conjunction with the *International Association for Religious Freedom* (IARF), after an earthquake hit the region early last year (26 January 2001). Two villages would be the main benefactors, viz. Kajarada and Nana Dahisara. Both these communities are spiritually connected by their religious nature. Kajarada, had a mosque that was damaged in the disaster and Nana Dahisara was struck by the earthquake as well. The village's (Nana Dahisara) temples were also damaged, therefore we had to build a new one. That was where all of us came in, as 26 young people from different parts of the world with different cultural, religious and social backgrounds.

Over the duration of the project, we worked with these two different communities in building and restoring their places of worship. The activities would be split in two equally; we worked four days in Kajarada and four days in Nana Dahisara.

We renovated a mosque in Kajarada, by:

- Removing sand, broken tiles and bricks from one place to another;
- Chipping off the old bits of concrete on the walls and tiles on the floor;
- My most favourite; demolishing the cracked and old walls, which we saw as breaking down religious and cultural divide amongst us and creating "the dream".

In Nana Dahisara, the work we did was probably the hardest and also the most challenging than the previous village. We helped to build a temple by:

- Some of us brought mixture of ingredients (e.g., sands, stones and cement);
- Mixed the cement;
- Filled all the holes on the site with cement;
- Removed rubble and dirt from the site in preparation for building the foundation base;
- And then, helped build the walls of the temple, "walls of religious freedom".

Some of the days, we would comeback from work and go to local emailing service, in a factory, which took a long process to communicate across the world. But was very much useful under the circumstances, through that service we contacted our families, friends and loved ones. It proved quite very efficient, as I received good and bad news on that time and could also communicate with all people I have not spoken to for ages.

The work we did for some of us symbolised different things. Things like:

- **Unity** of all the people from all over the world;
- **Spirituality** of different religions meeting in one place;
- **Breaking down** the walls (**barriers**) that divide us in terms of language, culture and religion;
- **Sharing and Educating** each other about our different cultures and religions and social backgrounds;

And much more...

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The project's success would also be attributed to the success of the different committees we had set-up as bodies that would make sure that all the objectives and expectations of the project were realised at the end of the duration of the project. The different committees consisted of the *news* (which I was part of), *sports*, *interfaith*, *cultural and entertainment*, *sightseeing*, *health*, *food*, and *etc.* All these committees had roles to play, in terms of organising everything that fell under their portfolio. For example, the Interfaith committee had organised daily programs like the *sunrise ceremony* (designed so that we would reflect on previous days events and thank god for waking up to see another day, some would meditate, some would read the bible.) and *worship* (by the different religions represented, and also invited religions).

On Christmas Eve midnight going to Christmas, we attended a (Catholic) Christmas mass, which was held in a school class. And progressed outside, to place baby Jesus in his cradle but unfortunately we could not stay longer as it was too late and everyone was tired from the work we did. I must say, everyone seemed to have enjoyed the mass and was quite an experience for others (as it must have been the first time attending a catholic mass).

All of the events and daily tasks/activities we took part in throughout the project were recorded in two weekly editions of newspaper, made by the news team after a lot of staying up later in order to catch the deadline (set by our editor-in-chief, Rebekah). The newspaper was named the *Morbi Gazette*, after a long and tough decision made by the News team.

Emergency services were available to us anytime one of us needed to use it, like telecommunications, health or security. In the case of health, it proved much useful as the heat and the dust affected some of the guys. We had a breakout of throat infections and mild cases of stomach-aches throughout the project but gladly we had 24hr access to a doctor and water for the hot days and nights. Mosquitoes were no threat as our rooms were well looked after by the hotel staff. Food was a challenge for me to come from a meat eating country to a vegetarian state. I found that for most of my trip to India, I experimented a lot with the food as I had never eaten it before but I enjoyed every bit of the meal. As on one occasion, I ended up entering into a rice-eating contest, which I won, of course. It was a challenge that I took up with both hands, and also drank as much water as I could have ever drank in my country in one day (up to 3 litres of water daily).

The project was not only about work but also play, as on our off days we would either play cricket, soccer, or charades. We also had time for sight-seeing ventures, which came to me as a surprise, going to places like the *Ashram (Ahmedabad)*, *Palitana (Jain) temples (Ahmedabad)* and everyday country side trips (on our way to work). In Delhi, we took a 5 and a half trip to Agra to see the *Taj Mahal* and on our way back we went to *Mathurra, where Lord Krishna (Hindu god) was born*. On my last day in India, my Canadian friend and I decided to go to the *Red fort* that was beautiful with its historical structure and also once prestigious.

Our final day at the Dariyalal resort was filled with celebrations at the same time reflections about the project and what it meant to all of us coming to do the work in the two villages. Valedictory ceremony was made thank our efforts at having participated in such a project and many dignitaries and guests attended the function. Including the Chairman of the SACC, *Dr Mumtaz Ali Khan*, which was quite an honour for me to meet a humble person like him. We got a chance to say good bye to the locals for the last time and hoped that we would meet again. Certificates and memorabilia were given out to all the people who participated in the program. But I am certain that the memories and experiences in India would be enough to

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reflect on a memorable occasion like helping, not one but two communities rebuild their social circumstances and also building a network of the interfaith community as well.

In the whole trip there were many memorable moments and lessons learnt, but if I were to be asked to choose one I wouldn't be able to choose. Our stay in the Dariyalal Hotel/Resort was a great experience I could have ever had wished for; making friends, sharing cultural and religious experiences, playing together, taking care of each other like brothers and sisters and also educating each other about different religions. Also communication was a barrier but at the end proved to be something that got us closer into one unit, as everyone tried to learn my name and clicks in our language. If there was a common term used by everyone, it was "main mabhunga" meaning "boss" or someone who "wears the pants" coming from township language. In this case the "main mabhunga" was our chef at the hotel (Dariyalal resort) and whenever we needed anything (like special dish), he would get write onto it with the food committee's assistance.

There are many good things that we took away from the project, as in most of our discussions about different issues related to religious freedom, culture and interfaith we all had opinions and suggestions about ways to go forward from there. The consensus was that we all need to educate our communities about different religions, in order to enlighten them about similarities amongst religions. We would do this by organising different events (like, workshops, projects and aimed at uniting the interfaith community. Also attending different interfaith conferences, meetings and report back to the communities. All of this would need commitment from various religious communities and involvement from individuals.

The last part I would save for all the people who had made the trip possible for me, attending this project and also giving me moral support along the difficult times. Many thanks go to: Fr. Pierre Goldie [Priest: St. Anthony Catholic Church (Langa)], for being my spiritual guide and also my religious leader, and for his support as well. Clayton Lillienfeldt and his organisation [Co-ordinator: HIV/AIDS office of the Anglican Church (Cape Town)], for his encouragement and vision. IARF/SACC and their two wonderful co-ordinators (Raghubhai and Akram) for organising a successful project and putting together a wonderful group that I could not have chosen any better myself, also for putting financial backing behind the project which has taught many cultures and religions a lot. James [Youth co-ordinator: Archdiocese Youth Commission (Cape Town)] and the AYC for their continued support of all youth groups and young people in Cape Town, this would surely not have been possible without your support and belief in me. My family for making sacrifices for me throughout my life and their valued support. IARF Youth who participated in the project and making it as memorable for me as surely for their "neighbour" as well. Zithembe crew for letting me use their resources and making them stay up late after work, and also for their support. Ramola and the two facilitators (James and Rebekah) for giving up your time and spending sleepless nights for making sure that everything ran smoothly throughout the project, taking care of all of us from across the world. Last but not least, the greatest friend (Toni) for making it possible for me to go, by helping me and offering tips, giving me moral backing for my trip, self-motivation and encouragement and being a positive role-model to many. Everyone, who I have not mentioned, is also acknowledged in a great way for playing a role in my development and investing in future development of communities as well.

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