

Creating Peace in Troubled Times

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During December 1992, at the height of religious conflict in India, I was there representing the Religious Youth Service (RYS) and preparing a series of events in multiple cities aimed at promoting interreligious harmony.

Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence helped stimulate the gigantic nations' march forward on its path to political independence from Great Britain in 1948. When the quest of independence was nearly achieved, less noble ambitions began to emerge and pull apart dreams of a peaceful transition.

Against Gandhi's wishes, the independence movement divided along religious lines with notable Muslim leaders demanding and receiving a separate state. Partitioning India and creating Pakistan as a Muslim state created instability for many years after.

Hindu-Muslim Conflict over Sacred Ground



In December of 1992, outside the Barbri Mosque a crowd of 150,000 Hindu demonstrators gathered in the daytime to protest. The protesters were demanding to reclaim the grounds held as sacred to Hindus and remove the 'offending' mosque. In the dark of night a large group returned to 'reclaim their heritage' and tore the old mosque down and declared that it would be replaced by something suitable to Hindu's.

The timing of events is of great significance. The destruction of the

Barbi Mosque occurred during a dangerous confluence of political and religious influences. Within Islam a radicalized political segment was emerging. Adherents called on 'Believers' to reclaim all lands formerly under Muslim rule and this included much of India.

Concurrently, the Hindu centered ideology of Hindutva was gaining political influence among Indians and its adherents sought to make India exclusively a Hindu country or at least grant Hindus privileged status. Mutual fear and mistrust between Hindu and Muslim was growing to dangerous levels. Voices of the extreme were becoming more pronounced.

On the news of the Barbri mosque's destruction a series of bloody riots ignited across India. Beyond the border, in Bangladesh and Pakistan nations with large Muslim populations, rioters were reported to have burned down seventeen Hindu Temples. Each side had grievances but those grievances were too often taken out into the streets. The deep spirituality that lay at the heart of each religion was being pushed aside and violence and hatred were filling the vacuum.

Peace and understanding in the midst of chaos

In the role of International RYS Director, I often set up training programs for college age students and working youth. These programs were aimed at preparing potential participants with communication and cross-cultural skills necessary for participation and leadership in international service. The New Delhi program was fortunate to attract compassionate youth who religiously identified as Hindu, Sikh, Roman Catholic, Muslim, Jain, Parsi, Christian and Unificationist.

Following the destruction of the Barbri Mosque the riots and spontaneous violence in Bombay (Mumbai) created a situation where people felt it was too dangerous to make unnecessary travel. We experienced

this first hand when our taxi driver refused to drive in certain areas and even where he felt 'safe' the tension was palpable. While in Bombay we made a decision to cancel our main program.

Elite police force clears Hindu extremists from mosque in pre-dawn operation

200 die in Indian temple strife



Our experience with the RYS interfaith program in New Delhi proved very different. The behavior of those that braved the troubles in the capital and came to the seminar re-opened my eyes to the valuable impact that interreligious programs can have on attitudes and actions.

While violence and threats were taking place in the New Delhi streets those participants attending the seminar made the decision to seek understanding, compassion and cooperation as the appropriate

response to fear and resentment. As my experiences in India have often reminded me, it is often the young, spiritually minded believer who can best grasp that all are valued members of one human family. That commonality is beyond any specific religious identity for it points to a Transcendent Source, a source we are all subject to.

We want to stay and share with each other



During our meetings in New Delhi we worked in small groups and shared with each other issues close to our hearts. So many of the conversations revolved around how we could become better equipped to help improve the lives of others. Each day the media covered the news of violence throughout the nation but unknown to the public were the paths these young adults and others like them had chosen. They quietly choose a path to develop into leaders who could understand and practice with a heart of service to all.

A crisis can trigger substantial personal reflection. Our meeting during a time of social turbulence provided an atmosphere where each participant could more seriously examine their lives. While the energy generated in small group discussions was at times

vibrant it was complemented by periods of quiet reflection and deep sharing.

We shared stories of our heroes and the virtues they displayed, virtues that allowed them stand out in the crowd. We examined our own strengths and weaknesses and noted areas where we wanted to develop as to become more "heroic". The more we talked, the more we saw lines of connection; in our hopes, in the things we admired, in what we held as valuable.

As our trust grew, we shared with each other the things that we felt were holding us back from being the person we were meant to be. We allowed ourselves to speak about unspoken hopes and dreams as if we were among intimate family members. With hearts full, participants found a freedom to express themselves in ways beyond conventional social strictures. Time passed quickly so when it was announced that our meeting time had passed it took us by surprise. Participants were warned that we should not linger because of the increased potential of danger facing those traveling.

The announcement met with some strong resistance as the participants were extremely comfortable with each other and showed no desire to leave. After some time had passed I asked some of the participants, "Why aren't you going home, things are dangerous out there and it is getting dark." One lady with long dark hair and large eyes looked at me with a facial expression that spoke before her words. "We are so happy to be sharing, we have so much to share and we never really get to mix together. The crazy things happening outside are not what we are about, we enjoy being together. We feel like we have discovered missing family members so it is so hard to let go!"

This said it all. The core of what they were all about. They wanted to build real friendships and they were not going to be held back by the walls that others had built. They were determined to share with all the members of their family. In my eyes this desire represented the real hope of India and the hope for establishing a lasting peace.