

SAARC YOUTH CAMP 2007: The Underlying Message

The National Youth Center in Savar witnessed a sudden flurry of events after several idle years since its establishment. From December 9-13, it was the venue where young delegates of the SAARC nations came together to attend the first SAARC Youth Camp, which was organized jointly by the Bangladesh Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Foreign Ministry.

The nearly one hundred and twenty teens from all around South Asia who had been put into this huge campus after an interview had little idea about what the next few days had in store for them. On the night of the 9th was the ice-breaking session where all participants were put into one room and then divided into several small groups. For the next two hours these very confused young adults engaged themselves in a series of interactive games starting from scavenger hunt to making and breaking human knots and chains.

It was not until morning of the 10th at the opening ceremony that the agenda of this 'camp' emerged as a clear pattern to all those attending it. The event was graced by the presence of the Chief Adviser of the Bangladesh Government, Fakhruddin Ahmed whose speech explained the origin and the aims of this initiative. Recalling an extract from the 14th SAARC Summit declaration; "19. The Heads of State or Government noted the cultural and social ties among the SAARC countries, based on common history and geography, and reiterated that the future of peoples of South Asia is interlinked. They stressed the importance of people-to-people contact as a key constituent in regional connectivity... They launched the SAARC Agenda for Culture and directed that annual SAARC Festivals for cultural exchange be institutionalized... They welcomed the offer of Bangladesh to host the First SAARC Youth Camp in 2007." Hence this event was an effort to bring together the South Asian youth in a sort of Global Exchange program.

Well sitting there at the auditorium listening long speeches with technical terms like 'cultural exchange', 'integration', 'mutual benefit through enhanced connectivity', we the young spirited minds understood that all this was for the 'better' and a lot of 'good' will come out of it... but these vague terms were yet to take tangible, concrete forms in our minds. We didn't know then that the next four days were going to systematically drill

into our heads the very essence of all these words and leave us craving for more. That night was the cultural evening where tunes and dance steps from across the borders lit up the stage with distinctive colours and patterns. Every nation had brought something from their land and this was their opportunity to share it with everyone else. The final song was a popular dance number, which got all participants down on the floor moving with the same beats mixing and merging... the borders finally vanishing. It was probably our first spontaneous encounter and on that note all the socializing started and so did the fascinating conversations that went like "In your country is the education system unified?"... "Where you stay are student organizations given support?" etc. of course these are of the more 'intellectual' line the greater part of conversations was very casual!

The Documentary screening event threw much light upon cultures and histories unknown. The themes ranged from reflections on one's identity to the contributions of student organizations to simply daily life in a foreign land. The visit on the 11th, to the village of Manikganj literally took us 'Back to our Villages' a theme that was under spotlight in one of these documentaries. We traveled to a small school that welcomed us graciously and put up folk dances and songs for our entertainment. The participants enjoyed some traditional community sports like kite flying and mangsho-chor. The latter was Siddharth's idea. He claimed that this was a popular Indian sport and we found an uncanny similarity between that sport and the Bengali's all-favourite mangsho-chor. It was not only new games that we learnt about that day. All of us were taken back to our childhood days where activities and entertainment were more community based rather than individualistic like television-viewing and playing video games. The fun and the simplicity of it were subtly reminded by this little visit to this little school.

The 12th was enough-with-the-song-and-games-let's-get-down-to-business Day. The responsibility that had been given to us was to bring out a SAARC Youth Camp Declaration 2007 that discussed and provided solutions to pressing problems that the youth face at this time. At the same time its purpose was to come up with a framework for how the South Asian youth can have a concrete network that will keep them connected year round. The four committees;

Education, Culture, Environment, Media and Tech operated separately came up with different parts of the Declaration, all of which were merged together. Amidst the specific plans the general ideas that were put through were the maintenance of an official online forum, actual projects carried out in future Camps and fund raising events. It was finally in this forum that we understood the charm in 'working together', did not just lie in the song and games. It was actually 'useful' or in more technical terms 'mutually beneficial'. I for one found out that Bhutan has close to no environmental problems whatsoever. Apparently violations like over-fishing are strictly monitored and punished. Schools have paper collecting competitions, which provide incentives to recycling, and thus significantly reduce deforestation. Needless to say, in the environmental committee Bhutan was taken as a role model and several of the policies that were advocated in that section of the declaration were emulated from practices already existing in Bhutan. Similarly other committees shared policies and came up with the best that the region as a whole had to offer to best utilize the energy and enthusiasm of the youth.

The 13th was the day trip to Shangshad Bhaban the fantastic architecture of which left the participants gaping in awe and then later was the Bashundhara City shopping trip the sky-high Eid prices of which left the young shoppers in much distress. At the end of that day it was time for the closing and five days seemed to have gone by at the wink of an eye! At the end of it the complex terms that the officials used in the speeches had newfound meaning and significance. We knew what it was like to share cultures and ideas. When Anju and Samia from Bhutan and Bangladesh respectively exchanged the kameez and kira they not only looked lovely but they symbolized all that regional integration stood for: sharing heritage without losing its authenticity.

The concept of this Youth Camp was proposed by Bangladesh. This initiative will certainly give the youth reason to hope for a tomorrow where their voices and opinions will be given due importance. The inevitable result of the continuity of this effort will lead to a more positive, focused and maybe even patriotic youthful generation. The fact that the purpose of the Camp was achieved is quite evident from the deep friendships that have been created between youths across borders and the fervent desire cultivated within them to bring about a positive change. In a time when Brain Drain is a pertinent problem in this region such initiatives should be further pursued and indeed they would be investments worth making.

By Anika Moinuddin

What are you doing tonight?

THE 31st night of December is generally celebrated by two categories of people.

One type consists of people who stay out and party all night and the other of individuals who stay home. Then there are people who don't celebrate it at all! For those who are allowed to party or stay over at a friend's place, the night is all about music and booze and craziness. For people who have exams in January, it is just another long night filled with question paper books and notes. And for many who don't have exams and aren't allowed aren't allowed to go anywhere either, they can make the whole event more boring than it was than them last year.

They can switch on the TV and flip to a Hindi channel. Why you ask? Well, these channels host shows where famous Indian actors and actresses get up on stage and dance to all the tracks that were a big hit throughout the year. Seeing them dance in heavy glittery golden outfits might make one feel better.

After an hour of watching the shows, logging into msn can be a good idea. That way you can chat with people who have nothing better to do either and that way both parties can drown in their sorrows and boredom. But it's better not to stay online for so long, or people will start thinking that you really don't have anything else to do (even if it's true).

The next thing on the list could be sneaking on your neighbors. You could peep through the window and try to see what they are doing. If luck has it, then you might get to see some interesting things like a boy playing his guitar (because he's bored at home too), an aunty putting oil on her hair or a kid brushing his teeth. Or perhaps you could see something a little more interesting, if you know what I mean.

Taking a break from the detective work, you could start giving miss calls to all your friends. If



anyone happens to call you back, then pay your divine attention to the blaring music in the background. Your friend will be shouting over the noise, to know what you miss called for, but you will be cursing him/her over the other end of the line, because he is out having a good time. Then start feeling sorry for yourself.

Amidst your self pity, try having some quality time with your younger siblings or perhaps

even older ones. You could try watching movies or playing hide and seek. Sadly, in the middle of the night, the young ones would be asleep and the older one's might be asleep too or are perhaps out with friends themselves. So you could try watching a movie, or better yet, just go to sleep. Admit it; it's the best way to fight against boredom.

By Nayeema Reza

The Dhaka project- a journey

WHAT starts as a simple endeavour often ends with profound realizations. Such was the case when a group of students from Class-XI A from Scholastica visited the Dhaka Project to donate books, and ended up realizing how everyone can make a difference no matter how rich or poor.

The Dhaka Project is the brainchild of Maria Conceicao, a Portuguese Emirates flight attendant who was moved after observing the miserable lives led by many during her first stay in Dhaka. She had been taught that when she saw something was wrong, she should not only empathize but also attempt to correct it, and so began the journey of Dhaka Project, an institution striving to bring a change to the lives of the poverty-ridden.

Initially losing track and wandering in the alleys of Uttara before finally finding their way through to the institution at Gawair, Ashkona, the students of Scholastica were pleasantly surprised when they were welcomed by a large group of very small children standing neatly in lines. These underprivileged children are provided with all the basic needs which their families cannot afford, such as schooling, books, food, stationery and healthcare.

The Children's Education Development Programme of Dhaka Project takes care of these children. They have a library where the students have special book classes. The preschool has a very large collection of toys, and the kids have a room where there are costumes for drama, guitars, musical instruments and a TV with a DVD player which basically guarantees them quality time to spend. By the way, these tiny tots speak very good English at a very young age.

Under the Women's Skill Development Programme, women who did not have a source of income before are trained. They learn English, tailoring, computing and skills of beauticians. A day-care center takes care of their children while they work. One room is for the amateurs who are just beginning to learn their trades while the other contains working women who have already completed their training. With simple sewing machines, these women make beautiful frocks and fatuas which are later put up for sale, while some are even exported to Dubai.

The Men's Development Programme trains men on driving and provides them with English lessons. The institution has a fleet of rickshaws which these men can rent out to earn money.

Medical care is available for all, and there's a dental chamber set up with new chairs and modern equipment, a cookery faculty, an internet cafe and a salon. All the children attending have been vaccinated against Polio, Typhoid and Hepatitis, and adults are also taught hygiene, etiquette and general knowledge besides the basic reading and writing skills.

The best part is that Maria supports a family of 6 siblings besides looking after the Dhaka Project, and yet she has created so successful an organization that is truly making a difference in the lives of people the society chooses to ignore. The children love her- every time she arrives they keep chanting her name like a slogan and she refers to the approximately 700 children as her own children.

With more funding, the Dhaka Project could improve many more lives. For anyone who's interested, people of the Dhaka Project can be contacted at: sponsorship@dhakaproject.org or enquires@dhakaproject.org

Thanks to Scholastica and Firoz sir for organizing this memorable trip, Maria and the other members for showing us around, and the numerous children for being their cute own selves.

By Anika Tabassum