

Let's Make a Difference Youth Conference – June 1 - 8, 2006

Around tea time on June 1st 2006, the otherwise quiet campus of Asia Plateau bubbled with over 170 faces of young people who came from far and wide, from different parts of the country to attend the annual youth conference organised by MRA-IofC (India). This conference as usual brought people of diverse backgrounds together for a meaningful dialogue, to share and learn from each other and stand united to form a common voice representing the youth of India. The program started at 4pm with the lighting of the lamp by representatives from different corners of India.

The hallmark of the inaugural session was a prolific speech by Mr. RD Mathur, a pioneer with MRA-IofC work in India. He challenged the youth to come together and take things in their hands or else be held responsible for the present state of affairs in society. Mr Rajiv Agarwal, the chief conference coordinator, invited one and all to join the crusade against corruption prevalent in present day society. Thenceforth the participants were taken on a comprehensive tour of the various buildings and locales of Asia Plateau to introduce them to the ideals of teamwork, motivation and drive that have been the hallmark of this movement.

After a sumptuous dinner all the participants and coordinators were formally introduced to each other. With this the first day came to an end at 9:30pm, as per the time table.

The second day began with the hustle-bustle of the coordinators waking up everyone at 5.30am. The participants then gathered in the foyer for the morning prayers and exercises. One of the most important learning's at Asia Plateau is the practice of listening to one's inner voice and if called upon, sharing the same with others. This was a routine exercise on all the days of the conference. The Asia Plateau news before the plenary session always reported the lighter side of incidents during the conference.

The first formal session of the day was the ABC's of MRA. This provided an opportunity for the participants to get introduced to the four moral principles of MRA IofC i.e. Absolute honesty, Absolute purity, Absolute unselfishness and Absolute love.

Mr. Viral Mazumdar, the youth initiatives director for MRA-IofC (India), with his oratory skills and deep conviction in these principles was able to pass on the ideas in a very lucid manner. Young minds questioned and challenged various aspects of this ideology throughout the session with their comments and views. This led to a healthy discussion, which showed no signs of ending, until someone pointed out it was time for lunch.

A juice break mid-morning acted as a breather between these intensive learning and sharing sessions during the program. Just after lunch on the second day, all participants and coordinators gathered in the auditorium for the traditional group photograph. This tradition which is normally carried out in bright sunlight outdoors, for the perfect picture, had to be relocated due to an early onset of monsoon in Panchgani this year.

Tea at 4:00pm and two hours of free time daily, following that, was a permanent feature during the conference. A time of silence for 30 minutes preceded dinner each evening. As always, the dinner and lunch menus were a mixed bag of traditional as well as contemporary cuisines.

The ice breaking games on this day post dinner provided the much needed dash of fun and frolic to the otherwise formal events of the day.

The much awaited third day was the picnic, which seemed like an act of heroism to the wet and drenched environs of Mahabaleshwar. By evening when the participants returned they were drained of their energies to the last bit. However the movie 'Keepers of the Flame', which explores the story of the industrious Tata family from India, seemed to have moved their hearts and infused a deep sense of patriotism and vision in them.

Mr. Riyaaz Amlani, the first guest speaker on day four, was introduced as Mr. Beans to the crowd. He spoke of his experiences and his story of success at the young age of 30. Mr. Amlani runs one of the most successful coffee chain's in India currently. The group discussions in smaller groups following his talk provided a platform for the participants to share their thoughts on his speech and debate on the merits and demerits of ethics in business.

The interactions with Mr. Fuad Lokhandwala, was the highlight of the first half of day five. He spoke of his initiatives and commitment to provide hygienic and state of the art public toilets in India. He also shared how an American TV host's jibe "Indians can build nuke bombs but they can't build decent public toilets." was instrumental in prodding him on to raise the bar as far as public sanitation in India was concerned.

After this session, a film by Ms. Dilnaz Boga, a young journalist from Mumbai was screened. 'Invisible Kashmir - the other side of paradise' explored the effect, violence had, on the psyche of children growing up in conflict zones. A discussion with the film-maker followed during which participants came up with their concerns and understanding of the people of Kashmir.

Later the same evening a theatrical performance by a group of artists from Jharkhand, Eastern India, enthralled the audience and exposed them to the question of poverty prevalent in India.

The focus of the sixth day was the session on family values which as always was a tear jerker. People shared their stories of family conflicts, while many others listened in. Long queues outside the telephone booth, during and after this session were evidence to the immense inner turmoil most people experienced during this session.

The Shavasana session after lunch provided the much needed peace and rest to the over worked minds of the participants. "Shavasana" is the yogic practice of relaxation of body and mind in the position of lying on the back.

A trek to the table land plateau in the evening was the first opportunity for the participants to venture through the jungles and catch a bird's eye glimpse of the centre. Post dinner a musical group from Baramati presented a melodious performance with their old Hindi film music numbers and Marathi folk songs.

During the course of the conference a survey was conducted, the results of this survey were published and discussed during an open and informal forum on the morning of 7th June. The results, highlighted the state of mind of young people in India. It threw up interesting statistics and led to a facilitated debate on the issues in question.

A dance party was organised later in the day for the participants to shed their inhibitions and show-off their dancing skills. A formal candle-lit dinner for the participants, courtesy the coordinating team, followed. An evening of cultural presentations gave young men and women the chance to showcase their talents. Two fashion parades by the participants and the coordinators provided a grand finale to the evening.

The multi-faith prayer next morning encompassed readings from scriptures of all the major religions. The distribution of certificates and a memento marked the culmination of this eight day residential conference. Participants were saddened with the thought of having to leave Asia Plateau and their new found friends. With a promise to come back next year, they bid their goodbyes and headed back to their cities with a new found happiness.
