Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Understanding of Peace among School-Level Students, Teachers, and Religious Leaders in Kathmandu, Nepal

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Project Abstract

The project aims at the school-level students and teachers of Kathmandu, Nepal, in conceptualizing the ideas of interfaith dialogue and celebrating ethnic diversity in and outside the schools as a way to promote sustainable peace in the post-conflict, secular Nepal.

Partnering Institutions in Kathmandu, Nepal

1). Motherland Academy
2). Holy Vision International School
3). Unique Boarding High School
4). Inter-Religious Council Nepal (IRCN).

Background and Context

The major conflicts in the world today are mostly driven by misinterpretations of ethnic, cultural, and religious differences. Even the conflicts with political ends sometimes have religious and ethnic roots. The major political conflicts in South Asia—the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka, and Maoist insurgency in Nepal—are triggered by ethnic and religious hatred among the conflicting parties. The recent political events in Nepal, however, suggest that there is a chance for reconciliation between the Maoist insurgents and the government of Nepal under the U.N. peacekeeping mission, officially ending a decade-long armed conflict that claimed the lives of more than 13,000 people.

The demands of Maoists and other ethnic/religious groups have led to various structural adjustments in the interim constitution of Nepal, which include scrapping the status of the Hindu King as the head of state and declaring Nepal a secular state. However, Hindu fundamentalists have been showing strong reactions and protests against the secular Nepal. There have also been increased incidents of ethnic and religious violence in Nepal over the past few years. The ongoing communal violence between the so-called "hilly" and "terai" people in South-East Nepal and the attacks on Nepali Muslims following the murder of twelve Nepali workers in Iraq by Islamic militants in 2004 are some of the worst cases of religiously-motivated communal violence in Nepal. The post-conflict scenario of peace in Nepal is overshadowed by the current incidents of religious and ethnic conflicts.

The 2001 census of Nepal shows that more than 60% of the total population of Nepal falls under the youth category, "indicating a high number of young people in Nepal's population composition" (Aryal and Adhikary 335). As the youth are more prone to escalate conflicts through their direct involvement in the communal violence than their adult counterparts, educating youth early towards understanding religious differences and celebrating diversity is essential. However, the only people who are employing on interfaith dialogue in order to bridge the ideological gaps that divide the adversary groups are civil and religious leaders. This state of affairs ignores the possible contribution that the youth could make in bringing people of various faiths, cultures, and ethnicities together.

Nepal has an estimated population of 27 million with 81% Hindus, 11% Buddhists (mostly ethnic Tibetan), 4.2% Muslims, 0.45% Christians, and 4% Kirat (indigenous animist religion) and others. Although the constitution of Nepal "provides for freedom of religion and permits the practice of all religions, the Government [has] no formal policy on interfaith understanding." (U.S. Department of State, online). The only interfaith organization, Inter-Religious Council Nepal (IRCN), has been active in bringing together "civil society and religious leaders" and "encouraging and challenging other religious communities to be vocal and active to bring peace in the country" (Rokaya 5). However, no true efforts have been made to address the interfaith and religious understanding of peace in the younger generation. My proposed project will, therefore, focus on interfaith dialogue and the promotion of religious tolerance among school-level students, teachers, and religious leaders.

Project Description

My project aims at training 15 "Interfaith Student Leaders" from three different schools in Kathmandu, Nepal, for the period of three months. The project will have two main phases. In the first

phase, the religious leaders of different faiths (Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Sikhism, etc.) will be brought together to share their experiences of "Interfaith Understanding of Peace through Religious Lens." In coordination with the Inter-Religious Council Nepal (IRCN), the principal focus of the discussion sessions will be to raise interfaith consciousness among the religious leaders and their roles in educating youths in promoting religious harmony in Nepal.

The second phase will include school-level students (a total of 15) of grades 8 and 9 (aged 15 and 16) from the three selected schools of Kathmandu. From each school, a proportionate number of students with diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds will be selected as "Interfaith Student Leaders." Upon being selected, they will then be provided with a year-long scholarship. The selection procedure will be based on a take-home essay where the students will present their ideas on religious tolerance in Nepal. Furthermore, to guide these students and to participate in interfaith dialogue with the religious leaders, five teachers will receive a monthly stipend for three months. The religious leaders, selected teachers, and the Interfaith Student Leaders will then interact with the two-fold goal of (a) better understanding one another's unique view point, and (b) promoting the importance of interfaith activities at the school and the community level. In return, the Interfaith Student Leaders will conduct various interfaith-related activities at their respective schools and community in coordination with the school administration.

Throughout the project, the Interfaith Student Leaders will visit various religious congregations and meet with the religious leaders in an attempt to understand religious diversity in Kathmandu. The students will be encouraged to explore some of the grievances among religious groups and to come up with possible solutions. Midway through the project, the Interfaith Student Leaders are expected to come with their own ideas of promoting interfaith understanding of peace and reconciliation through a specific community event.

Project Outcomes

The project, by no means, promotes any particular religion or ethnicity. Rather, it simply offers a way to better understand different religious beliefs, and guides people of different faiths to interact in a peaceful environment. At the end of the project, the Interfaith Student Leaders will organize an interfaith consciousness raising/discussion session where the students will share their experiences and understanding of interfaith in the presence of religious leaders, media, teachers, and parents. The project also aims at exploring the possibilities of creating interfaith activities as inter-school activities in the future.

The project anticipates that the Interfaith Student Leaders will share their interfaith experiences with other students at their respective schools. The project also expects the teachers, especially in Social Studies, to gain essential interfaith knowledge and become sensitive to ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity while teaching their classes. The final outcome of the project will be a 30-minute long DVD, documenting all the progress, successes, and failures of the interfaith project. The DVD will then be used for educational purposes at the schools in Kathmandu. Most importantly, the project aims at raising interfaith consciousness among the teachers and students whose roles are crucial in creating and maintaining local awareness and understanding of peace in the wake of post-Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

My Capacity to Undertake Project

This project builds on my own interest of promoting interfaith activities in Nepal after my graduation from Dickinson College. I, along with six other Dickinson Students, conducted a research on interfaith activities in Harrisburg during the fall of 2005 as part of New American Religious Diversity class in affiliation with Harvard University's Pluralism Project. Our research, *Harmony in Harrisburg*, concluded that there is a lack of youth participation in such interfaith activities. My proposed project in Nepal is, therefore, intended to be a continuation of the interfaith peace-building effort that began in Harrisburg. As the project will be conducted in my hometown of Kathmandu, my familiarity with its people, place, and native language will provide an easy access in working with the local community. My own prior teaching experience of Social Studies in Nepal should also prove helpful in conducting interfaith classes in coordination with the Social Studies Department of the selected schools.