



Report from India

Encouraging Communal Harmony in India

December 2005

Karuna Center for Peacebuilding is working in cooperation with World Vision/India through offering seminars for NGO staff who work in regions of conflict. On this trip we led a workshop in North East India, a region at far remove from the rest of the country and with a very different population. The people of the NE represent a myriad of ethnic and tribal groups who have lived there for millennia, and who genetically and culturally are more related to Burmese hill tribes than to mainland Indians. These days they are over-run by Bangladeshi and Nepali migrants in search of work and safety. The conflicts are complex, inter-laced, multi-generational and international, and are also further intensified by deep poverty, environmental and resource issues and a feeling of isolation and mistreatment by the Indian government.

Our four-day workshop was very well received and there was much enthusiasm for addressing issues of conflict and intolerance as part of their obligation as development workers. The program participants represented a good number of tribal and language groups, bonded by their World Vision roles and their commitments to work for the welfare of the poor. They were very appreciative about the style and content of our workshop, as they generally avoid reflecting on the role of conflict and violence in their communities and they are not exposed to creative training events. Group members worked on designs that would bring a conflict-sensitive work to their development plans, which we believe World Vision regional directors will encourage and monitor. We look forward to seeing some of them next summer at our Training of Trainers follow-through program for peacebuilders in World Vision/India.



We then flew across the continent to Western India, to Ahmedabad, Gujarat, a large city of 6 million that suffered from ethnic riots by Hindus against Muslims in 2002 and many

times previously. We offered a workshop for new participants similar to the design of the NE program and also a separate Training of Trainers in Inter-Communal Harmony for those who had attended our introductory workshop six months ago. We felt that our returning participants had applied concepts from the first training in their field work, experimenting with conflict sensitive approaches to development with both mono-communal and bi-communal groups. Our new participants also developed work plans, and since some came from areas of India outside Gujarat, we have a sense that these seeds of communal harmony will spread to new regions sorely tested by habituated violence, deep poverty and a host of resentments and grievances.

India is so vast, so complex, so dense, such an entire civilization of 1.2 billion people. Our work is the tiniest of offerings in this ocean of suffering and impoverishment, of conflict and unmet human needs, of ethnic narratives and identities that reach back into history. It is estimated that 56% of Indians live below the poverty line, mostly as urban slum dwellers or the rural landless, which is some 600 million people! Its problems seem beyond the imagining, and yet the middle class grows steadily and the climb to reach above survival and beyond violent conflict continues to unfold. We are pleased to add our voice to this sea of humanity in whatever small way we can, and we are very encouraged by the response to our training programs and to the deep well of compassion that we touch and that is kindled as participants imagine taking responsibility for communal harmony in their communities. We are grateful to World Vision/India for this partnership and look forward to our continuation in the summer and hopefully beyond.

[For more information about Karuna's work please contact:](#)

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