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## Let's Make a Difference Youth Conference – June 1 - 8, 2003

The Youth Conference 2003, "Lets Make a Difference" has come to an end exceeding expectations of participants and organisers alike by being successful in putting fire in the belly of the youth – the future of tomorrows India.

A total of 165 participants coming from over 22 cities of the country gelled perfectly to form a close knit, empathetic and socially conscious group, who apart from being capable of initiating positive changes in our society were also genuinely willing to take some resolve to make our country a more equitable and thereby a more happy place to live in.

The conference was inaugurated by Mr Chandrashekhar Prabhu, by lighting the lamp along with one representative from each of the cities. Mr Prabhu said that the idea of Moral Re-Armament: Initiatives of Change (MRA: IC) is the panacea for what all ails our country today. A country which stands as an example for its rich culture, heritage and glorious past is today in desperate need of an able top leadership. Mr Prabhu said that "The present bunch of unscrupulous and self-seeking individuals have led its confidants (the common man) to disgust and utter disappointment." Whether its public morality or private decency, a drastic change is on the anvil, considering the growing unrest among the youth.

One of the volunteers from the youth team also shared his experiences with Initiatives of Change and laid out the four absolute standards viz Absolute Purity, Absolute Honesty, Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love. A brief rendezvous with MRA: IC left the students perplexed about the validity of such an absolute conduct in ones daily life. Little did any of the participants believe then, that such a powerful and practical re-armament tool was also easy to espouse. As for the absolute standards. Being absolute, they stand at the pinnacle of Perfection. But, at least, we shall not go in the opposite direction, we shall strive towards them, and the longer and harder we strive, the closer we shall reach towards attaining them.

Every morning "Aye Maalik Tere Bande Hum...". The depth of the song, the calm and serene atmosphere, each soul singing it with his heart transformed the whole atmosphere. This was followed by some warm-up exercises to rejuvenate and start the day on a healthy note.

Quiet Time. Every morning when one sits alone in a quiet corner and reflects on his deeds, the various facets of his character, his relation with the people around him, one is sure to find something unpleasant, something that one's inner voice says is wrong. Once this realisation dawns on them, they decides to do something to redress or improve the circumstances, he has already taken a great leap forward. And then one feels at peace with himself. Realisation of a folly is the first step towards a change, an improvement. This is where the practice of Quiet Time plays a significant role. We believe that no one is an incorrigible soul. And so, through the practice of Quiet Time and voluntary sharing of thoughts at the camp, we attempted to clean the abacuses we have hitherto been. We were sitting quietly doing nothing. But here, the empty mind was a divine rather than a devil's workshop. Initially when the one sits in a quiet corner to harp on his inner most

thoughts, one is bound to get bewildered with hundreds of thoughts just gushing past ones mind, with neither of them being clear and all seeming equally profound at the first impulse. But as days pass by, the conflict between these thoughts and filtering of frivolous thoughts began to happen. The inner most thoughts, the perpetual preoccupations, the most disturbing but hidden part of ourselves started becoming clearer and gave us the courage to nail it forever. The inner voice always gives the purest form of advice, the mind prevents it from taking firmer grounding, the courage the four standards give us is partly hindered by the huge ego sitting right up our throat. But when God decides he provides, he gives us the strength to combat our fears and guides us to the centre of that thought. And that is exactly what everyone experienced with regular practice of Quiet Time.

The entire day is constructed around the theme chosen for the day. The themes were chosen keeping in mind the dilemmas facing the youth today. The themes chosen for the conference were "ABC of MRA", "How to improve Interpersonal Relationships", "Importance of a family in ones life", "Inequality in India – What can we do", "Life of Values or Valuables", "The Gandhian way of Life" and "Deeper Meaning of MRA". Eminent speakers from all over the country came to share their experiences on the above topics.

One of the days that need a special mention is the "Family session – Importance of family in ones life". In the Family Session that we had on 5th June, people poured their hearts out—they spoke of family problems, death, their weaknesses, any grudges they have been nursing for years or any vices. Everyone knows that such things happen. But most people have never seen it happen to them. Everyone has heard strangers relating such bitter experiences to others.

It all started when an ever-smiling person, Rosaline Joseph walked up the stage and narrated her touching story. From early childhood, her battles against the world started when her parents deserted her. From hiding and running with remnants of brown bread in her clothes to being a victim to the atrocities and indifference of the nuns to getting married at the age of 16 to strike another compromise with life, she has seen it all, lived it all only to become a stronger and a worldly wise person today. Rosaline's heart-rending story elicited a dual response from everyone, first that of disbelief since it was thwarting to imagine what our society has done to some of the lesser privileged and then of admiration for the lady who had lived it everyday of her life and still had "no regrets" from it. There was a palpable sense of grief and veneration in the auditorium, everyone was crying in their hearts for what the lady went through. Everyone realised the importance of relationships, how the absence of one leaves an indelible mark on oneself. The ground was set for an emotional outburst. Reconciliation, there and then, was the answer to many a soul. A sister saying to her brother, how much she loved him and how blessed she felt to have him in her life. A seemingly happy and cheerful guy apologising to his brother for all the hatred and jealousy he carried in his heart against him and how he even went to the extent of strangling him. A realisation that "we are so thankless" and "so ungrateful" towards the people who stand-by us during thick and thin, also dawned on many participants. A genuine willingness for restitution was seen when so many participants queued outside the phone booth to call up their loved ones and tell them how much they loved them. Everybody felt so fresh and light as if a heavy load, which they were carrying in their minds, was suddenly lifted-off from them.

The camp also successfully attempted to inculcate the spirit of team work through ingenious ideas of meals' services and wash ups. Everyone really had a gala time doing chores that some of them otherwise detest. One could really perceive unity in diversity at Panchgani. People came from all over the country with lives completely different from each other's. Each one was different and unique in his or her own way. And yet, everyone felt that sublime sense of oneness and similarity. That is probably the very foundation of long lasting friendships.

Interspersed with learnings were times of recreation. A whole days excursion to Mahabaleshwar, trek up to the plateau, light-hearted post-dinner sessions kept the spirits high and enthusiasm to the brim.

Asia Plateau is also a blooming ground for new talent to blossom and for old skills to get even more refined. The cultural evening was aplenty with such events where people from all parts of the country showcased their talents while some discovered the latent ones.

After all the informal education and a week of memorable experience, it was time to say good-bye to friends, who a week back were just strangers. Promises were exchanged to meet up again the next year at same time at the same rendezvous called Asia Plateau (but its so much more than just a rendezvous for people who make a new Asia Plateau wherever they go to). Serious resolutions were made to take initiatives of change to give something back to the society, either in the form of helping an underprivileged to fighting inequality to living the ideology called the "Gandhi" to just staying true to oneself. It all adds up to a better world.

Whether the people, who have undergone his training at Asia Plateau, come back to participate in another conference or not, we are convinced that they will cherish the time spent here and shall always treasure the true friends they have made here. Our only prayer to God is that they carry the new found sprit within, to the longest journey of their life.