

Shanti Dhaam: An Abode of Peace for the Deceased and the Living
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As I was eating my *Pav Bhaji* at a roadside *Lahri* (stall), I saw a woman out of the corner of my eye asking for a few rupees. She cried “Mujhe shanti dho! Mera beta mar chukka hain!” (Give me peace! My son has died!) As I later found out, her only son had died and rather than beg for herself, she needed money for his cremation. Every human deserves a proper farewell. My father handed her 300 rupees (a few dollars) to temporarily offset her troubles. But that day, I pledged to build a crematorium, a *Shanti Dhaam* in that town, Deheri, so no mother there would ever have to beg to say goodbye to her child.

Deheri is a small village on the coast of the Arabian Sea with a population of 10,000 inhabitants. With no cremation facility, the villagers have to travel to the closest town, 5-7 km away. This is not practical for the majority of the villagers who live on a few dollars a day. Located inland from the main road, Deheri is a village of stark contrasts. Most of the residents work as “pseudo-sharecroppers” on the land of wealthy *jameendaars* (landowners). As one can imagine, globalization and India’s accelerated growth has left some behind, including these poor villagers. However, they are a resilient bunch and when I visited the woman and the other villagers they explained to me their dilemma. The landowners, merchants and wealthier minorities have the means to hire funeral services to have the body embalmed and then have it transported for cremation. This inherently creates conflict, because the majority of villagers cannot afford all that goes into the funeral process. Typically, the agrarians are forced to mortgage off their jewelry or what little possessions they have in order to give their loved ones final rites. Rather than remember the positive memories of a lost spouse, parent or child; the remaining members of the family must worry about whether to pay for the next meal or for the wood required for a cremation. It is unfortunate and sad, but true. This inequality and conflict is ever-present in this small village in Western India.

My proposed project bridges that gap, acting as the peacemaker between the two groups. It has won the support of both parties: laborers and landowners, bringing the town together. The reason for the project is three-fold. Firstly, during the torrential monsoons some of the roads wash out, forcing all, regardless of caste or creed, to keep the body at home with no chance for cremation facing the onslaught of mosquitos and often no electricity. Second, both the wealthy and the destitute believe that the Crematorium would spurn further development in the village downtown. The Elders in the village hope that the space adjacent to the Crematorium will be eventually used for a Cricket *Maidan* (sports field) to prevent the youth from going down the path of alcoholism (a growing problem) and believe that the Crematorium would maintain *shanti* (peace) in the local community by supporting financial stability for the majority of Deheri’s citizens who will no longer have to pawn off of their goods to pay for funeral services. Third, the wealthy typically cremated their bodies separately from the poor because of the socioeconomic stigma attached to burying loved ones among the poor. With two *sagdi’s* (pyres), all the residents have wholeheartedly agreed to incinerate their loved ones together in the same compound because it is being constructed according to the norms and wishes of both involved parties. This project is an imperative first step to a sustainable peace between the laborers and landowners by leveraging common interests and goals to resolve a centuries-old conflict.

To prepare for the project, I fundraised on my own, raising \$4600. I visited a second time to establish the necessary contacts and lay the groundwork for the crematorium's construction. The villagers and I picked out a small patch of land on the Arabian Sea and petitioned the local mayor from the *Gram Panchayat* (Village Council) to allocate and appropriate the property for community use. This project would not be possible without the support of the most important people in this project: the people of Deheri. They will use the crematorium and they will build it. The first day, when we were discussing the proposal, they said that they wanted to build the facility themselves. The cowherd Vikram offered to let us use his *Bail Gadi* (bull cart). Dheeraj "Uncle" promised to bring 5 men to the job and the village women (including Usha ben, whose son passed away) insisted that they would feed us while we were working (I included a cost in the budget to pay for their food supplies). I am fortunate and grateful to have a receptive and supportive community backing this project. At the end of the day, this is why I believe my project is creative because it is accommodating a wide variety of religions, socioeconomic classes and age groups, and bringing them together harmoniously. The *Shanti Dhaam* (abode of peace) is innovative works towards fostering peace because it is harnessing the strongest aspect of Deheri, its people.

When complete, the Deheri Shanti Dhaam will provide a compound with a roofed crematorium, a wood store, a storage shed and the requisite supplies needed to perform the cremation service. This will allow for cremations to occur year-round. The Gram Panchayat will maintain it post-construction. A manager will be elected on a one-year term from the Panchayat to make sure that the site is operational. Modest fees will be collected from families based on income level to pay for the maintenance and upkeep of the facility. Additionally, some of these funds will be used to plant trees in the surrounding area to replenish the wood that will be used for cremation. The poor families that cannot afford to pay for cremation will be given the facilities at no cost; and the paperwork guaranteeing this has been signed and taken care of. All construction should be completed within six weeks or so (contingent on weather) and the facility will be made available to the community hopefully before the monsoon season hits (mid-July). Working with the weather may be a challenge and hence I hope to have the shelter built first, which will ensure that construction can continue during the monsoons if needed. Initially, I was hesitant in dealing with the bureaucracy, but having now established personal relationships with the people of the village I am confident that the project will be a glowing success. My Parents and my Uncle (he is a retired farmer) in the village in India have served as fantastic mentors and I will lean on them for guidance and support.

The project's impact can already be measured by the optimism of the people of Deheri. They are eagerly expecting my arrival and the start of the project. Post-completion, we will track the users of the site and I hope to visit on a bi-yearly basis to address any ongoing concerns that the villagers may have. They have my contact information and know that they can contact me to address any concerns relating to the *Shanti Dhaam*.

Ultimately, my goal is to bring the community together and provide for the general welfare of 10,000 people who severely need a place to say good-bye to their loved ones. Here in America, we always think of building schools, wells, libraries and hospitals to bring peace in developing countries. But what I have learned from my experience talking to the people of this village is that there's one thing certain for all in life, it's death. No one is absolved from it. This project is designed towards that ultimate truth where people can bid a final farewell to their loved ones: with dignity, with respect and above all with *shanti*.