

Shanti Dhaam: An Abode of Peace for the Deceased and the Living
Deheri, Gujarat, India
Princeton University
Paarth B. Shah, United States of America, Princeton University

Section I.

The primary goal of this project was to build a crematorium in the village of Deheri, Gujarat. The secondary goal was to not only provide peace for the dead but to also serve as a space where different socioeconomic groups come together as one to cremate their loved ones.

To prepare for the project, I fundraised on my own, raising \$4600 in the year's prior. This was through a combination of selling goods at high school events and pledges.

Rural India does not have a system of funeral homes and corpses are generally buried or cremated as soon as possible after death. The project was designed to accomplish three goals. It would alleviate the need to maintain the corpse inside the home during the torrential monsoon rains, by providing a shelter where the body can be burned. Two, it would spur further development in the area. And, three with two *sagdi's*, different socioeconomic groups would jointly benefit from the project (landowners and sharecroppers). While these goals were mostly accomplished, in spite of my multiple scenario anticipations, I encountered numerous difficulties in the project, far more than I was prepared for.

To prepare for the project, I immersed myself in Hindi, the national language of India as well as the regional language and local vernacular, Gujarati since most in the area speak very broken English. I read up on the culture and spoke briefly with my contacts of the region. The main component of the project was building the crematorium. However, once I landed and arrived in Deheri, I was burdened with a series of setbacks. The Indian Parliamentary Elections had just concluded (May 2014) and with it, politicians from various parties had made exorbitant promises of land and amongst all other things, two crematoriums for the village, so both socioeconomic groups did not have to share. This threw a wrench in my plans of constructing a common crematorium as now both groups held out for this government promise and pulled back from the project. Furthermore, a new GIDC (Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation) opened a few kilometers away and most of the working class in Deheri joined the factories. In doing so, most of the labor that I counted on was no longer willing or able to contribute to the project. And to top it all off, some of the worst rains in years hit South Gujarat in July 2014, leaving very little room and time to construct the project using private contractors. After days of contemplation and thinking through the options, it seemed like a waste to build a third crematorium when there was no need for it any longer. In the spirit of peace, after multiple days of discussions, I convinced the villagers to build the two Crematoriums near each other with a cricket ground. And now, both the crematoriums are complete and everyday, the village youth play ball on the ground in between. Originally, the budgets for the crematoriums was far smaller and involved the use of poor materials so I used the Davis Funds to reinforce the structures with larger rods, top-class cement and a reinforced wall so the incoming tides from the Arabian Sea will not eat away the structures. Thus, instead of Government aiding my project, I used the project to aid the Government.

With the completion of both crematoriums, the village of 10,000 will wholly benefit as one people, regardless of caste or creed. These villagers have seen their standards of living increase year over year, and many of the same villagers I met four years ago now are sending their children off to college with access to running water and electricity. Many of them now even have mobile phones and televisions. I believe that the crematoriums will add to their quality of life since they no longer will have the unburdened and added stress of arranging funeral arrangements when a loved one dies. The long-term impact of the project is simple. The Crematoriums will create a safe and easily accessible space for all residents of Deheri. As part of my Davis Expenditures, I have set aside \$1,000 for future maintenance and hope that the residents of the village will contribute in due time to sustain the project. Ultimately, I hope that the project remains well maintained but given the humid climate and saltwater only time will tell if this is possible. The onus is on the villagers to

maintain the two crematoriums and the cricket pitch. I am confident that this will be the case. At present, the Gram Panchayat (Village Council) has agreed to maintain it. A manager will be elected on a one-year term from the Panchayat to make sure that the site is operational.

Section II.

Peace is difficult to achieve. To me, peace is much more than the five letters that make it up. It represents an equanimity between people, cultures, habitats and groups of things, whatever they may be. Most importantly, peace is a calming of tension and relaxation. Peace is predicated on the willingness of two parties who find value in working with each other to find common ground. This is why it is so difficult, since it requires that *willingness* to work with one another. It is hard, but meaningful. However, in a society where we constantly hear about war, famine, destitution and inequality it is all the more imperative that the youth take the lead in impacting peace around the world. I am grateful to the Davis Projects for Peace for believing in us to actualize that change.

The Shanti Dhaam Crematorium Project contributes to peace in the village of Deheri, Gujarat because it has brought different socioeconomic groups together under a common guise. Both of the crematoriums are identical in size, shape and material. By being located near each other they result in a meeting of peoples. The shared cricket ground has increased goodwill, particularly amidst the youth. They have found inspiration in sport rather than in alcohol or drugs. Long-term, I hope that this is only the start of development in the region. Its people are hopeful and this project is the first step in realizing that potential.

After working on this project, I firmly believe that one can only help achieve peace if one has achieved peace with oneself. It took a lot of humility for me to accept the proposition that there be two crematoriums built next to each other instead of one with two pyres as I had planned. However, I realized that it was neither appropriate nor right for me, a complete stranger to dictate to the people who lived there how to live their lives. I certainly shared my thoughts and explained why I thought what I did, but I needed to ground myself in the reality of the situation. Peace is more complicated than it often seems. As I wrapped up this project, I have a far greater appreciation for those who have dedicated their lives to this ongoing process and I now feel inspired to do the same.

Quotation: "Helping others is the greatest way of helping yourself. I never thought I could make such a tangible difference, but after working with the Davis Projects for Peace and the citizens of Deheri, I am inspired and fully convinced that peace and change is possible, you just have to be willing to try".

Paarth B. Shah

Photographs

