



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Ekta Sangathan CC

***Faiths /Traditions Represented:* Muslims and Hindus**

***Location of CC:* Ahmedabad, India**

***Key Areas of Focus:* Capacity Building for Girls, Women empowerment, Interfaith Dialogue and Interaction**

Summary:

Ekta (meaning unity in Gujarati) CC, is located in Ahmedabad, India. This CC fosters awareness and understanding of interfaith work in Ahmedabad and throughout the region by engaging young Muslim and Hindu girls in education and capacity-building programs. Ekta's work at the grassroots level has helped remove barriers, prejudices, and misconceptions between Muslims and Hindus by focusing on cultivating deeper interactions and bridge-building efforts between these two communities.

1. Can you please help me understand the current religious/cultural/political contexts in the area where your CC is working?

We are from an area in Gujarat which is colloquially referred to as mini-Pakistan. It is an area very vulnerable to communal riots and violence. 4 to 5 Lakh (400,000 - 500,000) Muslims live our area, Juhapura. This area is separated by a wall, where Muslims live on one side and Hindus on the other. There is permanent tension between Hindus and Muslims living on either side of the wall; they hate each other. In 2002, during the communal riots that plagued Gujarat, many Muslims were killed, and their houses were burnt. This is arguably the most sensitive area of Ahmedabad in terms of communalism. Ahmedabad has generally been sensitive to communalism since the time of Indian independence. There have been so many religiously motivated riots here, it is difficult to count.

Political dynamics have deeply divided our communities over the past two decades. Nasim, "In 2002, during the Gujarat riots my house was burnt down by Hindu extremists. After that difficult incident, I started working for peace among people belonging to different religions."

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed where your CC is working?

In Gujarat, Ahmedabad particularly, bridge-building between Hindus and Muslims is much needed since there is so much animosity between these groups.



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3. Can you please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is doing this year?

We have long-term ongoing projects in education and capacity-building for adolescent girls in Juhapura. We are also fighting discrimination against Muslims in educational institutions and building awareness for different government schemes for Muslims in our areas. Lastly, we are also sensitizing our community to the dangers of communalism.

4. Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?

We have primarily been working with Muslim and Hindu groups, but recently we are also engaged with Christian groups.

5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that would otherwise not interact or cooperate with each other.

Our method is simple; we provide accurate information to people in our community and dispel manufactured myths about minorities. Our work building awareness has helped Hindus and Muslims realize that it is not in their interest to fight each other. They share the same community resources. We believe that once we are able to remove the biases and prejudices, it will clear the way for bridge-building between these two communities.

6. Given the current contexts you described, what does your CC hope to achieve?

We aspire to achieve peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths in the communally charged atmosphere of Ahmedabad, and Juhapura, in particular. It will be difficult to achieve but we are trying very hard. Through economic empowerment of Muslim women, and interfaith dialogues between Hindus and Muslims we will achieve the objective of URI.

7. How do you see your CC's work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?

Earlier it was very difficult to bring Muslims and Hindus together on the same platform for any meeting in Juhapura, since it is the area in which there were many Muslims who were victims of the 2002 Gujarat riot. The distrust between these two communities runs deep. However, slowly and gradually our women's empowerment program and sensitization of different issues have increased the cooperation between Hindus and Muslims.

8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts?



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Since the Gujarat riots of 2002, we have been constantly working to undo the damage caused by religiously motivated violence. Many in our CC and community have seen the destruction of our families with our own eyes. The devastation of the 2002 riots created fear, and hope among people for the need to fight on the basis of religions. Our work of sensitizing both Hindu and Muslim community members about the futility of riots and religiously inspired violence is paying off. Now, people have started saying that it is wrong to fight on the basis of religion.

9. What are some indicators / observations you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

Interaction between individuals from Hindu and Muslim communities has increased and continues to increase as a result of our work in the area. The interaction has led to greater cooperation among them. Initially, very few people were interested in URI's mission and programmes, but now a large number of students, youth and senior persons are active participants in our programmes.

10. Do you have a specific short story you can share about your work that might inspire other CCs or teach us a lesson about interfaith?

Yes, I can share the story of my transformation from a housewife to a social worker. I am a victim of the Gujarat riot of 2002; my home was burnt down by a Hindu fundamentalist mob. After this incident I realized that I must do something to prevent religiously inspired violence. Since 2003, I am working for URI's mission and objectives.

11. How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission of URI? (Interfaith bridge-building)

Our strategy of bringing people from different backgrounds to work together has led to a greater level of interaction between Hindus and Muslims. It has removed their misconceptions towards each other. This has paved the way for even more cooperation in the future.

12. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths/cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation between these members? What are the challenges?

We have members from both the Hindu and the Muslim community, but their levels of education, professions, and age are very different. In each class, people have unique biases and prejudices that they are working to dispel. Through interaction and cooperation some of them have been able to clear the doubts and prejudices from their minds, but some



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misconceptions still remain. It will take sustained efforts to remove them completely. Fundamentalist organizations in Gujarat are working constantly to create rifts between Hindus and Muslims, still keeping the challenge of interfaith harmony a big issue as far as Ahmedabad and Juhapura is concerned.

13. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?

Being part of URI is definitely helping us in to achieve our goals and objectives.

14. How can URI better support your CC in reaching its goals?

URI's infrastructure, networks and resources can help us in reaching our goals.