



Birmingham Faith Fest

25th June 2011



Programme

- Hindu 'Shree Laxmi Nayan Mandir'.
- Buffet Vegetarian Lunch.
- Birmingham Central Mosque.
- The Sikh 'Gurdwara Nishkam Sewak Jatha'.
- "Langar" Meal.
- A Multi-Cultural Shopping Area Visited!



Shree Laxmi Nayan Mandir

A group of 35 Torquay and Plymouth young people and adults from a mixture of faiths and cultures had 'an amazing experience and great day out' at TIFFY's Faith Fest in Birmingham. Chaz Singh from Plymouth kindly made the arrangements with the Birmingham places of worship. We managed to pack a lot into the visit, starting off at the Hindu Mandir. Interestingly, a redundant Methodist Church had been transformed into the Mandir and Community Centre in 1984.

We were welcomed by our hosts in the Mandir Hall and then served 'amazing' refreshments.

Hinduism allows a lot of freedom of thought, faith and worship and while not insisting on a fixed set of doctrines, is united in 'the eternal laws of nature'. One participant said, 'I love the fact that they welcome different perspectives and religions as legitimate faith in God.' Another appreciated the Hindus 'welcoming everyone as equal and respecting their beliefs'. Hinduism came across as 'a peaceful religion which brings joy and colour.' Refreshed, and having removed our shoes, we moved upstairs to the Temple itself with the shrine of the Murti (sacred images). The Supreme God is worshipped through His many representatives who help Hindus develop and express their relationship to God.



The Murti illustrated are....

Far right: Laxmi (consort of Vishnu and Goddess of Wealth) and Narayan (a form of Vishnu).

Left top: Shakti (consort of Shiva) – often addressed as Mataji, or Mother Nature.

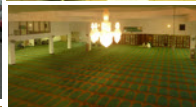
Left bottom: Kali is the ferocious form of Shakti.

As we listened to explanations of Hindu beliefs and practice, the ringing of the bell signalled the constant arrival and departure of worshippers – some elderly, others parents with young children. They brought gifts of food and money for their chosen Murti. It was most moving and a privilege to witness such sincerity and devotion.



Birmingham Central Mosque

This is the 2nd purpose built mosque in the UK. Opened in 1975, it is the focal point for the Birmingham Muslim Community. The Main Hall accommodates 2,800 worshippers, with a Ladies' Gallery for 400. It offers a variety of public services. The young people described the building as 'vast, powerful, yet plain inside', 'grand and impressive', 'great architecture' with 'a beautiful carpet and chandelier.' The mosque's atmosphere was 'calm and peaceful', 'welcoming and open to all visitors', 'the decorations made it special', 'the silent praying made it quiet and relaxing and there was a feeling of fellowship.'



A young Muslim introduced us to the building as well as the beliefs and practices of Islam e.g. prayer times and procedures – see the photo of prayer times on the mosque wall. He answered our challenging questions in a very balanced and clear way, so the party gained a lot of insight into Islam. This host 'was really good'. We were interested to see posters setting out Muslim opposition to any act of terrorism in the name of Islam (see photo). After light refreshments we left and one student commented on 'the need for more understanding between Muslims and other faiths.' It was becoming evident to a member of the group that 'all religions emphasise the message of peace, love, service and sharing and we need to promote and embrace it.' In addition we saw how people from different religions and none were 'getting on well together and were able to accept each other'. This was a new experience for some of the group. It was impressive how 'each place put great importance on welcoming us and wanted to engage with other communities and religions'.

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Photographed and Designed by Dr Y. Mubashar





Sikh 'Gurdwara Nishkam Sewak Jatha'

It was mid-afternoon when we arrived at the Gurdwara in the Handsworth district of Birmingham. The Gurdwara was beautified externally by its dome and fountains and described by a student as 'the most outstanding building I have ever seen'.

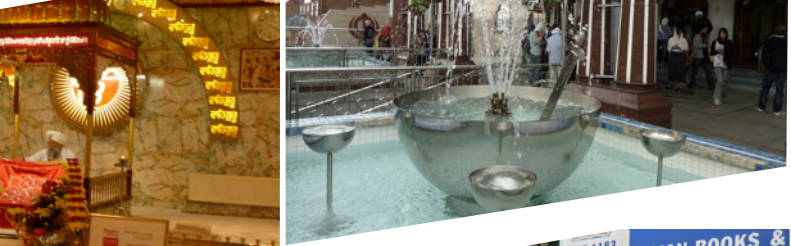
It was bustling with activity with families purposefully moving around. There was a feeling of fellowship and community. We made our way to one of the 'Langar Halls' (open kitchens) where we were welcomed and given a brief introduction to Sikhism by a young Sikh and our questions answered. We were allowed to enter the 'darbar sahib' (main worship hall) where, heads covered, we sat in lines listening to the reading of the Sikh sacred book the 'Guru Granth Sahib', watching worshippers presenting their offerings of food and money and then sharing in 'parshad' (a sweet which has been blessed as a gift from God). The room was dazzlingly bright and set the scene for devotions. A treat awaited us when we were allowed to visit the small room beneath the dome. Looking up into the dome we saw a stupendous sight of crystal glass shimmering in all directions – a real work of art and inspiration. All visitors to gurdwaras are offered food and we returned to the Langar Hall to be served a delicious meal.

The 'community togetherness and sharing' made an impression on us.

One student said, 'I felt like I was part of them.' The whole day's inter-faith experience was encapsulated in the story of the craftsman who had offered to decorate the dome of the Gurdwara. He had worked for 9 months and refused to be paid for his work. He said that he did the work as part of his service to God and the community. And then we discovered he was a Muslim! The craftsman himself, was surprised by the result of his endeavours and declared that he had not worked alone, but with God.

Sunder Braganza, a Community Development Worker from Plymouth commented: 'The trip enabled all the young people to experience different Religions and Cultures first hand and this will be with them throughout their lives. This influx of knowledge and experience should make them better individuals.'

Councillor Chaz Singh said, 'An experience that will last a life-time! Each individual has gained a better understanding of the value of other people's Faith. Unless we address the fears religion can cause, we will never be able to live together. Thanks to **TIFFY, FATA HE and TOFFY** who made this possible.'



The Impact of this Inter-Faith Experience

We returned to Devon, weary but inspired by such a memorable day. Various reflections sum up the impact of the Faith Fest:

- 'Learning about different faiths and cultures leads to respect and harmony and there can be no better feeling than fellowship.'
- 'I learned loads about the faiths and it was an amazing experience.'
- 'Everyone really respected other people's faith.'
- 'People in the group from different faiths talked to each other and I felt happy to ask questions about people's religions.'
- 'The trip was a successful inter-faith experience because we were all inspired.'
- 'It was a well-planned and worthwhile experience for our souls.'
- 'Everyone was inspired to be better people, yet not converted.'

The visit came to a close with a contrasting opportunity to shop in a street with fascinating multi-cultural produce and goods on sale. Mangoes from Pakistan were purchased to take home as a special treat!

The coach stop on the way home provided time to exchange views on our 'once in a life-time experience.'



A Multicultural Shopping Experience