

NIRMAN Summer 2007

(Reflections by Janaka Lagoo after NIRMAN 1.3 camp)

I had been hearing stories about Nirman for days now: little anecdotes about individuals, recaps of particularly powerful discussions, and humorous events that must have been even more hilarious in person. Then, suddenly, I was sitting amongst forty-five other young adults from all over Maharashtra. They were poised, eager, and each brought diverse and unique experiences to bear. As a newcomer, I knew that my learning curve would be steeper but there was a warmth and openness that immediately radiated from this group. As introductions began, I began to reflect on my past interactions with Indian youth. Apart from my time at SEARCH, most of my interactions with my peers in India came in urban areas. I often left frustrated by the talent that seemed wasted or at least mis-directed due to high levels of apathy, complacency, and materialism. In turn, I was fully aware that many Indian youth viewed American youth as the epitome of consumer greed, close mindedness, and self-absorption. In the next few days, I was eager to debunk all of these stereotypes. Our collective goal was to engage with others in a meaningful way to begin to truly understand and tackle some of the most pressing social issues of our community and generation.

The elegance and purposefulness of the Nirman design was evident from the beginning. We would learn to listen, experience village life from the inside in order to highlight key areas of need, and then have the opportunity to discuss plans for future progress under the guidance of expert facilitators. The core of the Nirman camp and the cause of some initial skepticism was the four day stay in a local village. Though I had spent significant time in various tribal and non-tribal villages, the idea of staying with one family over an extended period of time seemed like an ideal way to truly understand the complexities of village life. However, there were apprehensions as well. For many, I think, the physical realities of food, water, toilet facilities (or the lack thereof) seemed to lead to many of our worries. It almost seemed trivial to think about these issues but ultimately the fact that such basic needs were a cause of concern underlined some of the core obstacles to village progress.

Now, a few weeks and thousands of miles, away from SEARCH and the latest Nirman, I have some time to reflect on the key lessons that I learned. One of the most challenging aspects of understanding village life was the plethora of contradictions. The act of identifying problems became almost overwhelming: poor sanitation, unemployment, unmet health needs, gender inequality, caste discrimination, addictions, outdated agricultural methods, lack of economic development, and dismal education systems to name just a few. However, a vital element of Nirman was to learn how to narrow in on identifying those problems where you can be part of the solution. This suddenly turned pressing needs into opportunities. It also set up the challenge of trying to understand the complexity of problems by recognizing that the oversimplification of a situation does not help the situation. Ultimately, from the time in the village to discussion sessions, the importance of continued learning, discovery, and focused action could not

be underestimated. We began to see that there are teachers all around us, if we will take the time to truly listen.

The lessons of Nirman are powerful and long lasting. However, there are also some inherent challenges that we all faced and I believe will continue to encounter. As young adults, we all struggle with uncertainties and insecurities. Thus, it seemed like an undercurrent to many discussions was how to balance self-improvement with community-improvement: How do you help others when you need help too? Ultimately, it seems that is unnecessary to feel that attention to self growth and attention community growth are mutually exclusive entities. When focusing on community matters, however, the key challenge that seemed to preoccupy many minds was how to prevent the depth and breadth of a problem from leading to paralysis but rather to lead to purposeful action. I believe that the very act of participating in such a venture as Nirman enables us to hold each other accountable. Though future accountability will be a challenge, we serve as witnesses to each other's progress and guides when the work seems to daunting.

Among many of its accomplishments, I believe the single most important part of Nirman was the ability to bring together a diverse, committed group of young adults. Additionally, the opportunity to interact with experts in the field provided a unique opportunity to truly turn nebulous knowledge into tangible ideas for future change. At the Nirman itself, the daily environment was one that remained continuously challenging and inspiring, while holding all to high expectations. We broke barriers and moved beyond our individual comfort zones. Ultimately, we left knowing that our time in Nirman would be only as meaningful as the creativity of our vision, the power of our will, and the purposefulness of our future actions.

Janaka Lagoo
University of North Carolina
USA