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Volunteering at the Lotus of Bahá

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'Here is a challenge, particularly for UK youth ...'

I have recently returned from a trip that including a nine-day pilgrimage and two-and-a-half weeks with a Bahá'í family in New Delhi. An account of my pilgrimage will soon be on the Net (<http://www.alan-wood-hurst.ic24.net>) so here I only report my experiences in India. [Note: link no longer working as at 20030627.]



When my plans were being made, I had a very different idea of service to what actually happened. Being the only Bahá'í in my family, with 4 grandchildren to help look after, any idea of a travel teaching trip abroad is out of the question. However, all the family know of the requirement for me to go on pilgrimage, they knew that I had applied six years ago and were fully supportive of me accepting when the dates came through. Having 18 months before my selected date gave me plenty of time to prepare the family for my time away to be somewhat longer than nine days. I had in mind some travel teaching, but phrased it for the family as “practical service to follow up the spiritual experience of pilgrimage”. The fact that my offer of accommodation was made by someone who used to live near us and was known to the family was a great help. We had some laughs at my desire to “stop at New Delhi on the way home”, since from Tel Aviv to New Delhi is just about in the opposite direction to home!

So the family agreed and my flights were booked. I took appropriate materials for giving talks at public meetings and firesides, being involved with travel teaching in India, and helping teachers with children's classes. It had been explained to me that any spare time could be spent helping at the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár but we had not discussed the nature of help required there.

It was a valuable experience to be involved in a very large Bahá'í community. There are over a thousand Bahá'ís in Delhi, although most of them don't get to many meetings; even so, to have over a hundred at a Nineteen Day Feast was very interesting. It means that the way Feasts and other meetings are conducted is quite different to what I am used to in UK. The challenges involved were a good indication of what we will face in due course when we have entry by troops here. One way in which they are aiming to meet these challenges is by having a good study circle programme using the Ruhi Institute books, and some people are just completing book 7. This underlines the need in UK for as many people as possible

to attend study circles before we have to meet the challenges of large meetings. My



materials for talks were not used, since a good translator into Hindi was not readily available and the people who

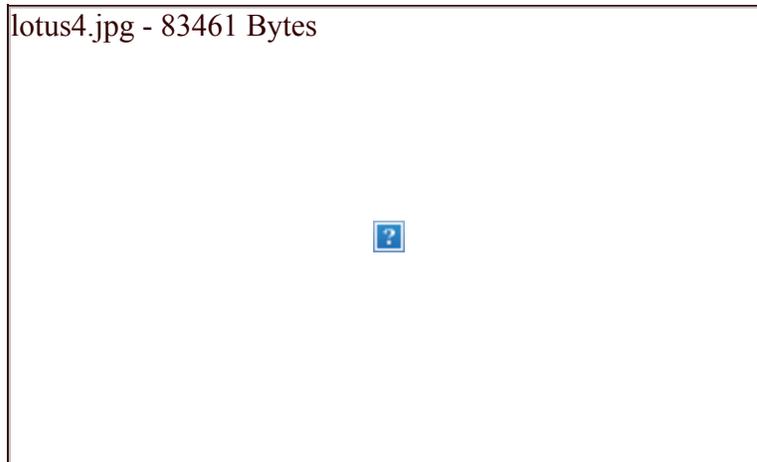


A morals class at the Temple

would benefit from my talks did not have a sufficient command of English. I did help with a children's class once, when the teacher did not turn up, but progress was slow since the older children had to translate into Hindi for the younger children. The Delhi community has a large property called Bahá'í House with two buildings and extensive lawns, which

serves as both a National Haziratu'l-Quds and a local Bahá'í Centre. It is surrounded by a high wall and there is a guard on duty at the gate, so it is quite safe for the children to play outside unsupervised. All Feasts and Holy Day meetings start early and are followed by dinner, which is prepared by groups of families on a voluntary rota basis. Most of the year the weather is suitable for the dinner to be served outside, which means that there is plenty of space for socialising, even when Bahá'ís from other parts of India, and invited guests, bring the total for a Holy Day celebration to over 200.

My hostess took me to the Temple, which is known locally as the Lotus Temple, and introduced me to some of the staff. I got some idea of what was to come when we had to make our way through hordes of people coming and going along the approach path. In the library it was much quieter, with half a dozen people browsing the books and leaflets, which are available in just about any language of the world. In due course I had a briefing



Volunteers relaxing on the Temple steps

by the organiser of the volunteers, who was in no doubt that I would be able to cope with any visitor questions, but would I at my age be able to stand up all day? (There was an alternative of service in the library.) I assured her that 9 days of walking and climbing steps on pilgrimage had made me fit for anything, so I was allocated a rota like most of the other volunteers. For my 5 days of service I started by having breakfast and briefing/deepening with the volunteers between 8.15 and 9.15 am. Then we were at our posts by the time the first visitors arrived. The Temple is open from 9.30 am to 5.30 pm in the winter months, every day except Monday. There were about 15 volunteers on duty, divided into three groups.

At the entrance one normally opens the door to let a group of people in, then closes it quietly before another explains to the next group (normally in Hindi and English, but sometimes in another language if there is a party from the country of one of the volunteers) about the silence required inside, no photographs, and information available on the way out.

During peak times the door needs to be held open and the explanation repeated continuously to the moving queue. At 4 times of day there is a short service, about 12 minutes, and further explanation is needed so that people only enter if they have that time available, since although visitors are allowed in during the service, they are expected to find seats quickly and the exit door is shut until the service has finished. A 3rd volunteer has a counter to click for every person who enters, while a 4th is needed at busy times to organise the visitors into a single line as they approach. From time to time a large school party arrives, having had explanations in a briefing hall in advance, and a 5th volunteer obtains the number of people from the teacher in charge and opens a separate door for them to enter.

Since there are many different Indian languages, and not all Indians understand Hindi, plus the fact that at busy times one cannot ensure that everybody is listening as they walk past, there is often a requirement to help maintain silence in the Temple, especially by the elderly and the younger visitors. Putting one's hands together at face level and giving a slight bow usually gets immediate attention and then a finger on closed lips is understood. Volunteers inside spread themselves around, with at least one by the entrance, and keep vigilant for the source of any noise. When the visitors are sparse, and during services, it is appropriate for some of them to have a turn at sitting on the marble benches. On one occasion, during a service, a baby would not stop crying out, despite his mother's efforts; as there was an empty bench behind, and he was held over her shoulder, I sat down behind him and just gave him a big smile, to which he responded with a smile and stopped crying for the remaining few minutes of the service.



Visitors at the Temple entrance

The third group of volunteers, holding leaflets, form a row a short distance from the exit door. As people come out they are invited, in Hindi & English, to take information. Those who approach us are asked "language?", and normally accept a Hindi or English leaflet. Often there are family groups requiring Bengali, so I carried leaflets in those three languages. Other volunteers had learnt to recognise about a dozen Indian languages and held some of each. A rack by the door contained further supplies and occasionally a coach would have arrived with many people requiring a particular language, then one volunteer would get a large quantity for them. Anyone from another country not understanding English is directed to the library for their leaflet. Quite often visitors ask for more information than is in the leaflet and volunteers answer all sorts of questions for a short time; to be fair on the other visitors exiting, anyone requiring very detailed answers is directed to the library or the exhibition and information centre, where postcards and books etc. may be purchased.

Volunteers have an hour for lunch and two 15-minute tea breaks, on a rota. One gets quite used to the hot, sweet, milky tea, which is served in a small staff area under the approach steps. Meals are served in the accommodation block, which is at the far side of the gardens. The gate into the gardens is closed at 5.30 pm, but by the time the last of them have walked through the gardens it is nearly 6 pm, getting dark and the Temple lights are on. Some of the volunteers choose to have their own service before going back for dinner at 6.30 pm.

The acoustics in the Temple are amazing! When speaking, chanting or singing at the microphones, it is necessary to leave gaps between words and enunciate very clearly, for the echoes of sounds take up to 2 seconds to die away. I participated in the volunteers' service once, but normally went quickly to get my transport home before it got completely dark. At the main gate there are rickshas waiting, which are small 3-wheeler open-sided vehicles powered by motor cycle engines. You are advised to negotiate the fare in advance and I normally travelled the 12 minute journey for 20 rupees (30 pence!).

Bahá'ís who volunteer for at least a month have meals and accommodation provided in 2 modern blocks, sharing from 2 to 4 per room. The maximum time is 3 months. They come from all over the world and are mainly youth, some of whom have only recently declared. The deepening sessions help them to answer questions by visitors and improve their knowledge of English but, whereas they are very dedicated and manage extremely well, visitors from an English-speaking country were often very pleased to find someone whose first language was English, and I was the only one there.

So here is a challenge, particularly for UK youth, but for anyone over 18 with a month or two to spare; apply to be a volunteer at the Indian Temple, you will be giving a great service to the Cause and will benefit yourself by the spiritual atmosphere of the Temple.

The average number of visitors per day for October was over 21,000 and CNN recently did a thirty-minute programme on the Temple in which they said that it is now the top tourist attraction of the whole world!

If you think that you could volunteer, send for further information to: The Bahá'í House of Worship Bahapur, New Delhi – 110 019, India. Or, if you just want information on the Temple itself, it can be found at: <http://www.bahaindia.org>.

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