



Mero Sathi Exchange Program

A report on Mero Sathi exchange program, 2017



Mero Sathi Cultural Exchange Program

“Asia Association Education Exchange Nepal” A.A.E.E Nepal is the sister organization of “General incorporated Association A.A.E.E. Japan”, but the mandate of A.A.E.E. Nepal is not limited to activities defined by our parent company. It has been working under the guidance of Prof. Akinori Seki, Founder and President of A.A.E.E., for conducting exchange programs and research work, A.A.E.E. envisions fostering dialogue and mutual cooperation among the youths of South and South East Asia through student exchange programs. It aims to develop social values in the youths by educating them about the diversity in our cultures to foster such understanding and cooperation. It facilitates leadership development through active engagement and participation of youths. With this background, Mr. Sharad Kumar Sharma and Mr. Kshitiz Bhattarai jointly established A.A.E.E. Nepal in the year 2016 to provide a similar platform for the Nepalese youth.

The term "Mero Sathi" can be traced back to an initiative of Japanese students to help survivors of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. Students from Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan planned to generate income by selling wristbands. They bought the required raw materials out of their own pockets and planned that the generated income would be donated to people affected by the earthquake. The raw material was ordered from Vietnam and manufactured in Japan. The name "Mero Sathi" which translates to 'My Friend' was printed on the band and was sold in Japan. The money collected from selling the wrist band was provided to 2015 earthquake survivors of Nepal as a supportive gesture. The name "Mero Sathi" was then given to the cultural exchange program organized between Nepal and Japan by A.A.E.E Japan and present founders of A.A.E.E. Nepal.



A.A.E.E JAPAN has been organizing cultural exchange programs between the students of Nepal and Japan since 2008 A.D. The exchange programs are held triennially and are continuing till date. In 2013 the present founders of A.A.E.E NEPAL, Mr. Sharad Kumar Sharma and Mr. Kshitiz Bhattarai started working with A.A.E.E JAPAN to jointly organize the exchange program, and set the foundation for what would become A.A.E.E Nepal in 2016.

The exchange program organized by A.A.E.E Nepal and Japan is an international level student exchange program where students from Japan visit Nepal for at least 10 days. They experience and learn about Nepalese culture from Nepalese students who participate in the program, who in return learn about Japanese culture. Recently, "Mero Sathi Exchange program was organized from 24th February to 5th March, 2017 in four different places of Nepal. It covered Kathmandu, Nuwakot, Pokhara and Sikles. The exchange program was attended by five Japanese participants studying in various universities of Japan and majoring in diverse areas. Similarly, five Nepalese participants from different universities and subject areas attended the exchange program. Out of five Nepalese participants, three were female participants and other two were male participants. Out of five Nepali participants who were selected for the program, two of them were granted full scholarship for the entire twelve days program.

The exchange program organized by A.A.E.E NEPAL and A.A.E.E Japan envisions creating a long-term impact among the lives of students of both the nations (Japan and Nepal). The exchange program aims to build networking opportunities between students of today who might be professionals in their respective areas of study in future. This exchange program aims to link these students and strengthen their connection so as to better enable participants from both countries can work cooperatively to create a better world. Therefore, the exchange in the exchange program A.A.E.E Nepal and Japan organizes will not be limited only to the duration of its program days but rather be a bridge that keeps future scholars, professionals and academicians in connection with each other to contribute towards a better world.



"I believe the friendships we made through this experience will be very helpful in the future. I cannot wait to see MERO SATHI (my friends) next time!" - (Japanese participant)

In the twelve days program students are introduced to several situations and activities that ascertain their cultural exchange and enhances their understanding about each other's way of life. The activities such as visit to Swayambhu Nath temple, cycling and boating in Pokhara, visit to hydro power in Nuwakot, and hiking in Sikles were a kind of activities the participants experienced. These activities are a significant part of the program as they helped participants to spend time with each other, talk about culture, tradition, education system, politics, way of being and their personal perception on various aspects of life. These activities were intended to break the ice between the participants and make them comfortable with one another so that they can share and learn from each other without being hesitant. These kinds of activities

from the beginning till the end of the program helped to maintain easy conversation flow among participants and made the environment friendly where everyone could learn and grow together.

"This trip was aimed to highlight the diversity within and between both the countries (Nepal and Japan) and endeavor to facilitate student's knowledge, understanding and skills which makes it possible to engage actively and effectively with people of both nationalities."- (Nepali participant)



Another set of activities for the participants allowed them to experience each other's culture not just through sharing of ideas but by personally experiencing them. These activities included teaching their respective traditional dances to one another in their traditional dress, performing the traditional practice of martial arts by Japanese students, role play on diverse ethnic groups by Nepalese participants. Similarly, home stay in Sikles, Kaski was an integral part of this program as participants of both countries were able to experience a typical rural life, rich in its own tradition and culture. In Sikles, participants lived together in the rural setting and closely observed the daily routine of villagers. Another activity included teaching one another to prepare the food of both cultures (Nepali and Japanese) adding a unique essence to the cultural exchange. Cuisine of any country is one of the best ways to represent its culture and through this students were able to gain insight regarding one another's lifestyles. From all these experiences, participants developed an idea among themselves regarding the differences and similarities they share with each other. Finding similarities and common interests through these activities helped them create stronger bonds while differences facilitated mutual dialogue and experience sharing among them. It was a way to create a sense of familiarity and unanimity between participants of two countries.



The other activity included interaction with the owner of a goat shelter in Nuwakot, who has been running it to sustain himself and his family. Participants interacted with him and listened to his stories. He told them of the struggles in profit generation through the goat shelter. It was a productive time for participants as they could learn about basic operation of a goat shelter in rural Nepal and brainstormed ideas on how the owner could generate more profit. Participants were further inspired by the generosity of the goat shelter owner as they witnessed him being able to run a goat shelter successfully enough to generate revenue and to utilize its resources among people in need.



"From the goat shelter owner, I learned never to give up until we reach our destination, no matter how many obstacles and difficulties we face in life."- (Nepali participant)

Another, activity was the interaction of participants with the villagers in Sikles, about the way of life, culture, and class and caste system of that place. Likewise, participants and villagers in Sikles discussed about the lack of tourism, despite Sikles being one of the beautiful places in Nepal and recommended some of the suggestions to increase tourism in Sikles. Some of the ideas that came from the participants were to create

brochures about Sikles highlighting its flora, fauna, cultural and ethnic heritages and distribute in major city areas, especially in Pokhara to increase Sikles' popularity among tourists. Similarly, participants discussed and gave suggestions to the villagers to promote local products in urban markets. Through these activities, participants of both countries were able to see and experience the rural life. These activities intended to introduce participants to the rural life to make them aware about the hardship people go through in rural setting and realize the support rural communities require to improve their standard of living. From the visit to Nuwakot and Sikles, both Nepalese and Japanese participants were able to learn about the unique culture of rural Nepal.

Another set of activity was presentation in Shamrock school, Pokhara. Here, participants (Japanese and Nepalese) presented about their country and the culture it holds to the students of Shamrock and amongst one another. Here, the presentation was not in only the form of culture exchange rather a practical session was done in the form of a game activity, in which students held a competition of eating with chopsticks. Students of Shamrock, who were only involved in sports activity with Japanese students during the time of program got more opportunities to talk and interact with both Japanese and Nepalese students. They could teach and learn from the participants of Mero Sathi team regarding Japanese culture and different cultures of Nepal as well. Another activity was the presentation competition held in Kathmandu University, in which participants of 'Mero Sathi', both the teams of Nepal and Japan, competed with nine other competitors, majoring in different subject areas. The major achievement of this competition is that the participants got to share and gain knowledge on one of the major global issues. It was an approach to contribute towards SDG by enhancing youths' understanding and awareness towards SDGs and to enhance their ability to think for the solution for achieving sustainable development goals.

Likewise, another activity was a visit to Gandaki association of deaf in Pokhara. The organization was established in 2044 BS. During the visit to organization, participants learned some sign language to better interact with the people there. According to Japanese participants, it was a novel experience for them as they have never interacted or been to any such organization in Japan.



"And, as done properly this also has the potential to be a life changing, educative event that can equip students to respond and to compare situations in manners that can teach comparison, solidarity and dignity"- (Nepali participant)

Various activities in the exchange program contributed towards knowledge sharing and culture exchange among participants of two countries. Each activity set had an aim to encourage communication among the participants about their learning and have an exchange of ideas alongside experience of the culture. But, the major achievement of the "Mero Sathi" exchange program is being able to facilitate students of two different countries to build a relationship between them that goes beyond the 10 days spent in Nepal.