

Zuva*

Journal of Cross-Border Conversations

South Asian Solidarity Collective | April-May 2023 . 1 (1)



*intertwined lifelines

Zuva: Journal of Cross-Border Conversations

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Mission Statement

'ZUVA: Journal of Cross-Border Conversations' provides a forum for the people of Pakistan and India to voice their diverse perspectives, and their concerns and aspirations for peace and progress in the region. It is an effort to strengthen meaningful democratic exchange and peoples' solidarities in their common struggles against authoritarianism. By standing united against the forces that stoke hate and divide us, we may together assert the right to equitable development, justice and dignity for all.

The Journal is being launched at a juncture when our states have made a virtue of rupturing all vital connections—diplomatic, economic and social—while justifying this myopic politics by promoting hyper-masculine, state-centric nationalism and jingoistic militarism. This is at a time when ascendant socio-political extremisms of various kinds have increased the volatility of regional geo-politics and made war a real policy option for elite decision makers globally.

Our focus is on alternative perspectives and constituencies that challenge state-centric narratives, which form the hard nut of the Pakistan-India imbroglio. Invariably, any such engagements require focussing on the multiple interdependencies of the South Asian region as a whole. For too long, Pakistan-India hostility has been a stumbling block to the progress of regional cooperation in South Asia. Recent challenges like the pandemic, increasing economic precarity, deepening inequality, growing social disaffection and destabilizing geo-political developments have all emphasized the importance of softer borders which encourage cooperation at all levels of society. However, the region's great power (India) is bent on creating a South Asia in which it alone walks tall on the world stage.

This journal is beginning only in form, for it is inspired by the values and work of the three decades old Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFDP) which set the benchmark for people-to-people exchanges that pulled down divisive walls and created a new people-centric understanding of the interlinked issues of peace and democracy by highlighting our common concerns and futures. Its distinguishing feature was that it went beyond the mutuality of goodwill and dared to build a political conversation and arrive at a common understanding including on Kashmir, as a political dispute, the resolution of which must involve the people of Kashmir on both sides of the border.

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Since then there have been myriad such initiatives and this journal will draw upon their imagined pathways and resources to reach out to constituencies such as youth, gender, caste and ethnic communities. The e-publication will be an open access trimester journal with a cross-border editorial board and a Pakistan-India collegiate of guest editors. Fraternal publications will be encouraged to republish the journal's material with acknowledgement and the journal too will reprint select published material.

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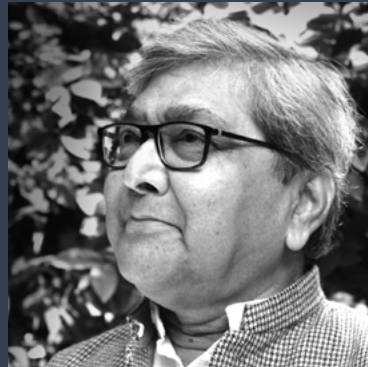
The Interview

Anuradha Bhasin in Conversation with Tapan Bose

Amidst the unending stalemate between India and Pakistan, the precarious economic and political situation in Pakistan, the down-sliding of democracy in India and the shifting geo-political dynamics, Tapan Bose, co-chairperson of Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD), maintains that the space for peace and cooperation between the two countries has not diminished and is even more necessary today than in the 1990s when PIPFPD was founded.

Senior journalist, Anuradha Bhasin, speaks to Mr Bose about the prospects for India-Pakistan peace and why PIPFPD's vision and strategy continue to be relevant. Distinguishing between backchannel diplomacy and a statist peace on one side, and people-centric peace on the other, Bose avers that it is peoples' peace that can ensure and sustain 'real peace'.

When people meet across the borders, free of state manipulation, they meet as communities who do not want wars and hostility. This idea is the essence of PIPFPD. Bose argues that PIPFPD's major contribution was to shift the narrative from hostility and jingoism to pacifism and peace, and that role is most important today.



Anuradha: How do you see the situation between India and Pakistan today, especially in the light of political and economic crisis in Pakistan and the rise of Hindu majoritarianism in India?

Tapan: The situation in both India and Pakistan is pretty bad. India is seemingly doing well economically but the political situation is worrying, precisely, as you mentioned, because of Hindu majoritarianism. That is the politics of the ruling party, and that is what is producing an extremely difficult situation. The minorities are under a lot of pressure. They are being persecuted, particularly India's largest minority—the Muslim community—which constitutes nearly 14 per cent of the population. It's not a small minority. And yet, because the BJP wants to promote a religious cultural nationalism and wants to redefine this country as a Hindu nation, they're saying that people who practice any other religion will have to accept Hinduism if they want to live in India.

In Pakistan also the political situation is very volatile. The economic crisis has deepened, and because of that, the political situation has worsened. One could argue there is a small improvement, in the sense that the army, which in Pakistan used to control everything, is no longer that interventionist. But it's a chaotic situation. When I talk to friends in Pakistan they speak of prices of basic food items going up, so much that poor people are almost starving in Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, etc. The price rise is unimaginable. And that is leading to a kind of very unstable social and political situation.

Anuradha: Amidst this scenario, what are the prospects for peace between the two countries and the region today? Do you think there is scope for engagement and peace between India and Pakistan?

Tapan: Presently, India and Pakistan are not holding any formal talks but they are holding, what they call, backchannel talks. I am told the Indian National Security Advisor has been meeting his Pakistani counterpart, quite regularly. But we in the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) have a different perspective on peace and peace building. The kind of peace that the states or the governments or the parties in power try to make through their official dialogue at the state level is not a real peace. It is a statist peace resulting in a zero-sum game. We have seen this many times, it doesn't work.

At best, it may lead to a ceasefire, or sustain it. There will be an opening up of trade and exchanges. But, as we have seen many times, whenever a problem arises, and something goes wrong, then our two states promptly shut down normalizing.

The real peace has to be at the people's level. At present though, efforts are there to manipulate the sentiments of peoples of India and Pakistan, to make people hostile towards the people of the other country. That is where the problem lies. We know that in India, hostility has increased, or been stoked among sections of the people. That is the core of the problem, and that is where we need to work, if we really want to build peace. Peacemaking has to be done at the people's level.

People do not want war. People do not want killings, arson, looting and rape. They want to live peacefully with each other. When we talk one on one, there really is no hatred for the other. At the people's level, when the political situation is not manipulated to stoke tensions, we talk as friends, as belonging to a community of people who say they want to live in peace.

The kind of peacebuilding which has to be done requires that large numbers of people go across the borders and build up their personal contacts. That is the kind of work that PIPFPD and other peace organizations did earlier, and they have to do it again. Unfortunately, the states disallow people-to-people interaction. They control the movement across the border. You have to have visas to go across the border and meet.

Anuradha: You say that the biggest hurdle in making peace people-centric is that the movement of peoples on both side is controlled by the states. Getting visas, for instance, is a big issue. So what can peace groups do to change these dynamics?

Tapan: I believe that though the states control the visa system, the authorities cannot completely refuse to give us visas. The problem is that even the peace groups under the present circumstances are hesitant. When you talk to them, whether here or in Bombay and Calcutta, the immediate response is that visas will be a problem.

“ *When we talk one on one, there really is no hatred for the other. At the people’s level, when the political situation is not manipulated to stoke tensions, we talk as friends, as belonging to a community of people who say they want to live in peace. The kind of peacebuilding which has to be done requires that large numbers of people go across the borders and build up their personal contacts. That is the kind of work that PIPFPD and other peace organizations did earlier, and they have to do it again.* ”

Yes, visas are a problem. But if we go on badgering them, if we insistently go on asking for visas in large numbers, and if we keep on saying, “look we want to go, so that we can go and talk to people, to our friends in your country, and you have to give us this visa”, I’m quite sure that the Pakistan High Commission will have to respond. We need to file hundreds and thousands of applications for visas from all over the country. This will compel the Pakistan High Commission to talk to their government and apprise them of the extraordinary situation. It will pressure the government at a higher level to take a call.

That is what we are not doing. We are pulling back, fearing a backlash. If we say, let’s begin with small groups, that’s okay. But smaller groups will not break the logjam. We need to have much larger groups.

Anuradha: When we talk about peace between the two countries, we sometimes lose sight of the geo-political reality. So let me bring the elephant in the room. How do the prospects of peace between India and Pakistan look when we bring in China and the larger geo-political world?

Tapan: Clearly, China is a factor. The governments of India and China are at loggerheads. There are many reasons. One being that the present regime in India is very pro-America, it has joined Quad, an anti-Chinese alliance. Why do we need to be a part of a military alliance against China? And let us take a closer look at the elephant in the room—there is political tension on one side and massive economic integration on the other, and these two things needs to be balanced out.

Our trade with Hong Kong and other Chinese ports is not affected at all. But there are other initiatives, like China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, which the Indian government has said that we do not want to be a part of. Complicating that antagonistic position is India-China trade, which is so large. India is importing so many things from China and the Chinese also are exporting both raw material as well as finished products. Consequently, if you look at the composite picture - political hostility, and economic integration, the elephant in the room becomes very different.

“ *Of course, some people can be bought and they are being bought, even in the Valley. But that is not going to change anything for the better. Instead, violence has increased and more and more Kashmiri youth are taking to the gun and dying. There is no backup today for the young militant who joins any militant movement for training, for arms and all that. They are very easily exposed and they’re therefore very easily identified and being killed. It is in fact a very sad situation because what is happening is that angry young Muslim boys in Kashmir are sacrificing their lives. This is the ‘achievement’ of the abrogation of Article 370.* ”

If we turn to the Pakistan-China relationship, Pakistan is a lot more dependent on China than India is. There is Chinese investment in India but it is not something that negatively impacts the Indian economy. Pakistan, on the other hand, is very dependent on China. Therefore, the current geo-political situation will certainly have an impact on peace initiatives at the government-to-government level.

China cleverly keeps stoking the fire on the Kashmir dispute at every international forum. Also, China supports Pakistan on deflecting international accusations of the state’s support to terrorism, and exclusion of notorious individuals in the declaratory list of ‘terrorists’. On these issues, China supports Pakistan, primarily to needle India. All this is happening at the state-to-state level. But then, as I have been emphasizing, we need to raise these issues at the people-to-people level.

These issues have to be brought out and discussed openly in a people's forum. We cannot allow a few bureaucrats and diplomats to decide the future of billions of people of the subcontinent.

Anuradha: Are you saying that the peoples' peace movement in the subcontinent needs to talk about the Chinese equation? Does that mean that at some level we need to engage within a trilateral framework and bring in China with India and Pakistan?

Tapan:Yes!

“ *So once again, we need a two-pronged strategy [on Kashmir]. One is quiet diplomacy by some international groups—to talk to Indian leaders and Pakistani leaders and bring them together. We also need public expression of larger support for the people of Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian population, the so-called silent majority. The people who are not out on the streets, who are against Hindutva, but they're not talking. That is where organizations like PIPFPD have to focus.* ”

Anuradha: Why do you think peace is important between India and Pakistan? How does it impact South Asia as a whole?

Tapan: If the hostility between India and Pakistan continues like this, what is happening to Pakistan today will deepen. I would argue that India-Pakistan hostility has in many ways aggravated the economic crisis in Pakistan. India today is recognized as one of the top five economies in the world. Pakistan's industries account for a small segment of its economy, which is largely informal. This informal economy comprises of the labour of masses of people who are doing small things, earning what they can and therefore surviving in some way or the other.

Normalization of the India-Pakistan relationship will be a key to the economic stability of Pakistan. There is need to galvanize India-Pakistan trade, India-Pakistan economic exchange, India-Pakistan knowledge exchange, India-Pakistan power-electricity sharing, etc. India is in a position to help Pakistan in so many ways. Improvement in the India-Pakistan relationship would mean substantial real economic support to Pakistan, formally and informally. When that happens, you'll see a much more stable political situation in South Asia. That will contribute directly to building of a more peaceful relationship in a foundational way.

Anuradha: Let's bring Kashmir into the India-Pakistan tangle and especially when the positions of both India and Pakistan are very contested and rigid.

Tapan: Both India and Pakistan claim the entire *riyasat* of the former princely state of Jammu & Kashmir. The PIPFPD position has from the beginning been that Kashmir is not real estate. It has to be resolved by talking to the peoples of all regions of the state and bringing them together. Something has to be worked out on the basis of what the people of all the communities decide. Maybe the northern areas may not want to join India, may not want to become a part of the valley. There are groups in Jammu who clamoured for separation from J&K, and others who do not want that. The point is that all this should be discussed in an open forum by the people involved without pressure and manipulation. Currently, this is not happening.

Kashmir is an unresolved issue. It concerns the aspirations of the people of Kashmir including of its different communities who have different aspirations. Instead, what is happening is that right from the beginning, both the states have been playing a zero-zone game. Each claims the entire territory as the property of Pakistan and property of India. So long as that position remains, it is difficult to resolve it. The only way it can be resolved is with third-party mediation.

“ *At the people's level, all these exchanges helped to generate awareness among the people of each other's perceptions and mutual concerns on core issues. That is an important role that PIPFPD played. But I think the greatest achievement of PIPFPD is that there is no real appetite for war in the country, there is no real enmity among the people of the two countries driving us towards conflict.* ”

Anuradha: Who do you think can play a role in third-party mediation?

Tapan: Well, America has been playing this role every now and then. It has put pressure on both India and Pakistan at different points of time to reduce tension, to hold back and also to talk to each other. The American pressure perhaps has been the most, but I also think that we should bring China into this dialogue because China is our contiguous neighbour. China has borders with Ladakh and parts of the northern areas. So, bringing in China should not be seen as an added complication if the Indian state says, let China tell us what is their position, let us discuss with China.

It is not impossible to resolve the Kashmir imbroglio. Yet, the opening of the can of worms cannot be done by either party (India and Pakistan) because we are completely blocked at the level of the two states discussing Kashmir.

Anuradha: After Article 370 revocation, the Kashmir issue has become more complicated. How has this changed the peace equation between India and Pakistan?

Tapan: At a certain level, it has brought about a lot of change and is threatening to disrupt the lives of people with more changes. It is primarily Kashmiri Muslims who are the main target of these measures. But it hasn't really fundamentally changed the situation. For instance, it hasn't made the Ladakhis forget what they wanted. Already, they are saying it was a mistake. In the valley, people in Kashmir are not at all happy but they are silent. Today, if they withdraw the army and other paramilitary forces, even for a day, there will be a complete change. There is no acceptance of what has happened—either in the Valley, in Leh, Kargil or in Jammu. Even the Jammuites are unhappy. They were expecting that BJP will not let them down but that has not happened.

Of course, some people can be bought and they are being bought, even in the Valley. But that is not going to change anything for the better. Instead, violence has increased and more and more Kashmiri youth are taking to the gun and dying. There is no backup today for the young militant who joins any militant movement for training, for arms and all that. They are very easily exposed and they're therefore very easily identified and being killed. It is in fact a very sad situation because what is happening is that angry young Muslim boys in Kashmir are sacrificing their lives. This is the 'achievement' of the abrogation of Article 370.

“ *PIPFPD worked directly and indirectly (managing the fallout from Mumbai 2008), doing the hard work of bringing awareness and spreading the message of peace on both sides of the border. It made an impact. This is why, even today when there is sabre-rattling, it is mostly at the governmental level not at the people's level. That is something we can be very proud of.* ”

Anuradha: Do you think revocation of Article 370 and subsequent developments in Kashmir are going to complicate the peace process between India and Pakistan?

Tapan: At a formal level, Pakistan is saying you have to return to status quo, which the government of India will not want to do at all. This reading down of Article 370 and Kashmir's special autonomy has been on the RSS-Hindu right's ideological agenda right from 1947. So there is a deadlock. Pakistan is frontally attacking India's move on Kashmir, while India is taking refuge behind very questionable so-called legal changes in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. But because the



Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee with President Pervez Musharraf in Agra / Source: Telegraph India

BJP government has so assertively taken these steps in accordance with their ideological agenda on Kashmir, it cannot admit that they have done something fundamentally wrong.

So once again, we need a two-pronged strategy [on Kashmir]. One is quiet diplomacy by some international groups—to talk to Indian leaders and Pakistani leaders and bring them together. We also need public expression of larger support for the people of Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian population, the so-called silent majority. The people who are not out on the streets, who are against Hindutva, but they're not talking. That is where organizations like PIPFPD have to focus on.

Anuradha: What kind of role can PIPFPD play? What is the actual role PIPFPD has played, what has been its contribution to promoting peace?

Tapan: PIPFPD has been around for 30 years and through our eight joint conventions, we have been able to bring large numbers of Pakistanis and Indians from different walks of life together and openly discuss 'political' issues such as Kashmir, fundamentalism and disarmament. PIPFPD also facilitated the promotion of trade between India and Pakistan. At the people's level, all these exchanges helped to generate awareness among the people of each other's perceptions and mutual concerns on core issues. That is an important role that PIPFPD played. But I think the greatest achievement of PIPFPD is that there is no real appetite for war in the country, there is no real enmity among the people of the two countries driving us towards conflict.

In 1993, the reason for starting PIPFPD was not just the belligerent attitude of the states. Of course, hostility between India and Pakistan at the governmental level

had reached its peak, but even people were echoing the same position. Some of the political groups, not affiliated to BJP, were spewing venom against Pakistan. It was that situation, which to me was so frightening. This is why we felt the need to act, to make a difference.

For instance, if you look at Mumbai 2008, when the terrorist attack took place, there was no cry from Mumbai for a war with Pakistan. In fact PIPFPD volunteers went out on the streets, organized group meetings, peace meetings, holding hands and creating human chains for peace. PIPFPD worked directly and indirectly (managing the fallout from Mumbai 2008), doing the hard work of bringing awareness and spreading the message of peace on both sides of the border. It made an impact. This is why, even today when there is sabre-rattling, it is mostly at the governmental level not at the people's level. That is something we can be very proud of.

Anuradha: Given the situation today, especially with majoritarian politics in India in which the distinction between Pakistani - Muslim - terrorist gets blurred, does it not make the challenges facing PIPFPD more difficult?

Tapan: Challenges today are not more difficult than what we faced in the 1990s. In 1993, when we first went to Pakistan, we were a small group of 15 people – altogether 25 people from both sides who met in Lahore to talk of peace. We were ridiculed. From that situation to today, it is a long process of evolution. My concern is that today, PIPFPD members have become silent. We are not visible anywhere. For example, there has not been a single meeting on Kashmir convened by PIPFPD members or a single meeting on religious fundamentalism and extremism. These are core issues of the PIPFPD agenda. Why are the chapters of the Forum quiet. Are we afraid? It is a sad reflection on an organization which dared do so much, and so openly at the public level.

Anuradha: Is the silence similar on the Pakistani side and why?

Tapan: On the Pakistan side too there is silence. There are two reasons for that. One is because we are doing nothing significant. The India-Pakistan peace groups and India chapter of PIPFPD have organized online 'Guftugu', cultural programs and poetry readings. Pakistani chapters are participating in those activities, but other than that, Pakistanis are quiet.

The situation between both countries is so sensitive, and Muslims in India are under so much pressure. In this situation, when PIPFPD India chapter is silent, it would be difficult for PIPFPD Pakistan chapter to say something. It will not be that easy to organize meetings or rallies on issues of peace. There is also a problem, as one of my friends in Pakistan said, "Tapan, if we organize, if we give a call for a meeting on Kashmir, there will be huge support, but it will be the wrong kind of politics and we will be identified in the minds of people on both sides with the statist position."

Anuradha: Could you tell us something about PIPFPD's journey in the last three decades, some of the many people who shared its vision and what were the moments of real impact in peacebuilding.

Tapan: The most impactful moment in the building of the peace movement was the Delhi Convention in 1995. It was the first, and nearly 170 Pakistanis came to participate in it. They came despite being criticized most vocally and brutally in their country. Pakistan's newspaper 'Jung' in an editorial denounced them as people who are going to give Kashmir away so as to get a visa. In India, I remember senior journalists and policy commentators mocked me personally— "Look, he wants to bring over a hundred people to cross over." In Delhi, Pakistanis and Indians sat down and we talked, and the dynamics changed. Newspapers which were so negative, on both sides of the border, came around and started praising us. PIPFPD captured the imagination of people on both sides of the border inspiring multiple offshoots, of women, youth and soldiers' peace groups.

“ My request to the younger leadership is that they need to look at the history of the organization, look at the real strength of the PIPFPD – that is, its openness. Its commitment to discuss everything openly. PIPFPD's main strength is that it is an open forum and that is quite unique in this country. This is the heritage of the PIPFPD. ”

It was 25 people who initiated the idea of PIPFPD which grew into a fluid movement. In India, the founders were very senior people—former ministers, a cabinet secretary, chief secretaries of states, chiefs of armed forces, justices, academics, filmmakers, journalists, musicians, actors, authors, artists, trade union leaders and activists. We did not invite any political party, but members of trade union organizations, CITU and AITUC and others, were actively involved. The fact that these kind of people and organizations were attracted to the Forum is a mark of its success and achievement. For those who joined the program of PIPFPD, and endorsed the resolutions including on Kashmir and demilitarization. Our Kashmir resolution completely rejects the positions of both the states of India and Pakistan. People supported it. Nirmal Mukherjee, former cabinet secretary of India, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Ramdas, former Planning Commission Member Dr Syeda Hameed, academic Rajni Kothari and former judges supported it.

On the Pakistan side too there were very senior and respected persons—Dr. Mubashir Hassan, a former science minister of Pakistan and a very well-known teacher; retired principal of engineering college of Lahore, I.A. Rahman; a stalwart of the human rights movement and an eminent journalist, psychiatrist Dr. Haroon;

poet Kishwar Naheed, Justice Dorab Patel, women's rights activists Anees Haroon and Nighat Syed Khan, labour activist Karamat Ali, and artists Sheema Kirmani and Madeeha Gohar became leading members.

I was in my 40s in those days. Now I'm in my late 70s. So, we have all aged. Younger leadership has come up on both sides. My request to the younger leadership is that they need to look at the history of the organization, look at the real strength of the PIPFPD—that is, its openness. Its commitment to discuss everything openly. PIPFPD's main strength is that it is an open forum and that is quite unique in this country. This is the heritage of the PIPFPD.

Anuradha: How do you envision the future of PIPFPD, and of India and Pakistan?

Tapan: The future of India and Pakistan is more important than the future of PIPFPD. PIPFPD is a means to achieve the objective of intervening in what is a very difficult situation between India and Pakistan. If it were not so, there was no reason for the PIPFPD's existence. PIPFPD 's members have to remember that we are not second or third track rungs of diplomacy. We are people's track. We as citizens of both India and Pakistan, we are exercising our right to discuss, to question, and to make suggestions as to how the situation between our countries can improve. The Forum is not two forums but a joint forum of the people of both India and Pakistan. We don't celebrate nation. We love our country, our culture and language and with that respect and love for own countries, tradition and heritage, we want to move forward.

Articles



The crisis in Pakistan and its regional implications

By Anjum Altaf



Pakistan is now engulfed simultaneously in three crises—political, economic, and social—and, as the Indian minister of External Affairs has rightly [noted](#), a country needs to fix all of them to move forward. This is good advice except for the fact that in the case of Pakistan they may no longer be fixable. Understanding the reasons for that predicament would help clarify the nature of the crises and thereby provide a guide to what to expect both inside the country and in the region.

First, politics. The point has been reached where rival political parties now scramble to attain power not to govern or enhance their popularity but to get to be the one to appoint the next Chief of Army Staff (COAS) which clearly conveys who rules the country.

Second, economics. The head of the International Monetary Fund has to [educate](#) the government that subsidies are intended for the poor, not the rich. Surely, one would expect a government to know that. How does one explain the perverse priorities if the government is of the people and for the people?

Third, social. In the [Grade-4 English textbook](#) (repeat English textbook) introduced under the Single National Curriculum in 2021, Critical Thinking is introduced with the following questions (p. 6):

Why was Hazrat Abu Bakar (ra) given the title of 'Siddique'?

Why is Hazrat Usman (ra) called the 'holder of two lights'?

At what age did Hazrat Ali (ra) accept Islam?

Analytical Reading is introduced with the following exercise (p. 7):

Read about the four caliphs of Islam. Note down some of their personality traits in your notebook.

And Creative Writing is promoted with the following assignment (p. 12): Write a paragraph about Hazrat Muhammad (pbuh) in your notebook.

These cannot be attributed to incompetence or lack of awareness given that a number of the authors of these textbooks claim diplomas in Early Childhood Education from the Harvard School of Education and were supervised by bosses who have degrees from the same university. The three crises are interlinked. The country is ruled by a breed of know-it-all soldiers who fail to do their own jobs competently. The politicians are focused entirely on survival by remaining subservient to the soldiers, shifting loyalties as needed, and enriching themselves all the while. And both use school education to cripple the ability of the majority of citizens to question the status quo. The remaining few can be intimidated by other means.

Those who find this characterization too harsh should consider that they are quite accepting of the idea that sectors of the economy, land and water, for example, can be controlled

by mafias. They are also accepting of the idea that cities can be controlled by mafias as Karachi was at one time by the Muhajir Qaumi Movement and perhaps Mumbai was by the Shiv Sena. Why then balk at the possibility that an entire country could suffer the same fate? Recall the Supreme Court [judgment](#) that opened with a reference to Mario Puzo's *Godfather* and, referring to a Prime Minister, included the following quote from Balzac: "Behind every great fortune there is a crime."

The doubters would benefit from the insight of St. Augustine who, in the fourth century, [observed](#). "What are robber gangs, except little kingdoms? If their wickedness prospers, so that they set up fixed abodes, occupy cities and subjugate whole populations, they then can take the name of kingdom with impunity." The impunity is courtesy of the absence of accountability from below which may well be because social democracy has never taken root

The differences between Imran Khan and the army began last year over the appointment of the ISI chief / Source: India Today



in South Asia, a fact of which Dr Ambedkar was acutely [aware](#) right from the outset.

Not surprisingly, the intensity of the problems has been compounding while the competence to deal with them has been declining. By way of example, consider the logic in the [farewell address](#) of the last Chief of Army Staff (COAS) who, as ruler of the land, was the brains behind the hybrid experiment that is now unravelling the system. A major portion of the address was about politics in which, among other things, he said that he often wondered that the Indian army carried out the most human rights violations in the world but “their people seldom make them the target of criticism... In contrast to that, our army which day and night remains busy in serving the nation [sic], is often made the subject of criticism.”

Ergo, the desideratum: Why can't Pakistanis be more like the Indians who never criticize their army no matter what it does?

At the same time, he conceded that “[A] major reason for this [the criticism] is the army's interference in politics for the last 70 years which is unconstitutional. This is why in February last year the army, after great deliberation, decided that it would never interfere in any political matter. I assure you we are strictly adamant on this and will remain so.” Having conceded that, he nevertheless remained equally adamant that “former East Pakistan was a political failure and not a military one.” While the COAS was engaged in this mishmash of self-criticism for unconstitutional actions, the government

was seeing him off with profuse thanks and rushing through a bill making any criticism of the army a crime punishable with five years of imprisonment.

Politics and economics are linked in debilitating ways. In order to legitimise its outsized role, the army is continuously engaged in stoking low-level unrest (recall Kargil) on the borders keeping relations with all neighbours tense, including with Afghanistan where it aided a group to power. There is unrest inside the country as well resulting from the militant forces nurtured to serve as proxies in the external interventions. These have only been minimally restrained by the knife of blacklisting held to the country's throat by the International Financial Action Task Force.

The economic fallout is that there is no international tourism nor much foreign direct investment which has left exports stagnant and with no alternative to the continuous borrowing that has now culminated in the debt crisis. Meanwhile, lavish lifestyles remains unchecked. The gap could be sustained as long as the country was able to leverage its strategic and nuisance values, a great ride while it lasted. Now the biggest source of foreign exchange is the export of human beings increasingly desperate to leave the country by any possible means, no matter how dangerous.

The linkage between ideology and economics is equally problematic. The very national narrative crafted to justify a security state stands in the way of repealing the suspension of the import of essentials food items from India despite the most punishing infla-

tion. Anyone suggesting a rethink is anti-national and un-Islamic. Once the competition to prove who is the most national or religious of them all is entered, there is no upper-bound to the jingoism. We witnessed that in the 1946 elections on reserved Muslim seats in the Punjab, a campaign that prompted Professor Ralph Russell to observe: “It hardly needs to be said that if appeal to sentiments of this kind helped to mobilize the mass support without which Pakistan could not have been won, it also strengthened the religious (or pseudo-religious) fanaticism which Jinnah had opposed.” India is discovering that with a lag with the proliferation of soft Hindutva.

Not surprisingly, no one can change school textbooks in Pakistan. After a year of coming to power, all the new government has been able to do is change the [name](#) of the Single National Curriculum to the National Curriculum of Pakistan. Meanwhile, there is fierce competition to up the ante. The Punjab government has made [Quran education](#) compulsory up to Grade 12 while the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government has made [hijab](#) mandatory for female students and teachers.

A unique feature has been bestowed on Pakistani politics by the army's self-serving narrative of being forced to step in to save the country from corrupt and incompetent politicians whose demonization has extended to banishing them on pain of imprisonment. Over time, most political clans have secured permanent abodes abroad taking with them the bulk of their capital assets. Individuals permanently residing overseas and pursuing

their professions there fly in to become ministers and fly back when relieved of their positions; clerics settled abroad are invited when street power is to be bolstered. Wall posters materialize out of the blue depicting them as popular personalities and disappear when the job is done. Leaders continuously shuttle to foreign capitals for important meetings and fresh directions. Loyalty is at a premium leading to the Rajapaksa syndrome when the need of the time is competence. Some qualified individuals are ruled out because of their independence, others because of their religious affiliations.

The outcome of this is a parachute leadership unique in the region. It is not rooted in the country where it has to sink or swim with the citizens. Rather, it operates with a mindset in which it can decamp at a moment's notice when the going gets tough. Thus there is minimum interest in delivering anything to citizens and maximum interest in the ruthless extraction of surplus—subsidies are directed consciously to that effect.

The bottom-line of these interlocking crises is a dynamic in which no resolution seems possible. The country will continue its slide into anarchy till circumstances force a replacement of the prevailing dispensation with another. Progressive forces having been decimated over the years, the only alternatives with sizable followings are the fundamentalist groups. When the change would occur and how it would pan out is difficult to predict given the deeply held belief that whatever happens is fated to be. But one thing is quite certain: Given the indoctrination

on which fundamentalist groups have been nurtured, it would not lead to a healthier attitude towards India, or Bangladesh for that matter.

Things do not appear any more hopeful on the other side of the fence where ideology rather than pragmatism rules the day in ‘fixing’ both external and internal issues. In such a circumstance, any thought that the Indian government would consider helping Pakistan overcome its crises is delusional as made clear by the recent [statement](#) of the external affairs minister in which, however, he laid the onus for the government’s stance squarely on the people: “I would have a pulse (on) what do my people feel about it. And I think you know the answer.” Whether the majority of the people do so or not, the driving passion of the government in power remains the desire to punish the enemy even at the cost of creating strife within the country and slowing down its economy.

There are two big lessons to be learnt from this unfolding of the arc of history on both sides of the border. First, contrary to what we took away from the Enlightenment, reason and material interests are not the principal determinants of human behaviour—psychic motivations are of equal, if not greater importance. Second, particular psychic urges are easy to arouse and manipulate—hence the spectacular rise of religious nationalism first in Pakistan and now in India. Pratap Bhanu Mehta

has [termed](#) the phenomenon in India as the “the warped psyche of a great civilization at its insecure worst.” With the ‘enemy’ on its knees, the urge to go for the kill is irresistible.

The implication of these unfolding forces is that there is no hope for an improvement in regional relations based on an initiative of the ruling groups. Nor are appeals to their reason or good sense likely to yield fruit. We are living in the political equivalent of what were termed the Dark Ages in Europe (although that characterization is now [contested](#)). In Europe, some semblance of knowledge was kept alive by monks secluded in their monasteries. We have to do the same in South Asia to keep the candle of hope alive. Citizens who subscribe to a shared humanity (and who wouldn’t in this age of climate catastrophe) now need to be aggressively proactive to build and nurture individual relationships in the belief that there are many on both sides who desire an amicable and peaceful future.

Mutual awareness has atrophied to a frightening extent—Javed Akhtar [reported](#) on return from his controversial visit to Lahore that he met people in Pakistan who were surprised to learn of the existence of non-Muslim Punjabis. This when Lahore and Amritsar are just thirty kilometres apart. Such lack of knowledge is surely not one-sided. The stakes are high and time is fleeting.

South Asian crisis: Is IMF the only saviour?

By Sushil Khanna



As the spectre of the pandemic receded and economies around the world opened once again, much of South Asia was engulfed in a severe debt and balance of payments (BOP) crisis. The most dramatic was the case of Sri Lanka. Unable to repay its creditors, Sri Lanka was shut out of all foreign financing. The supply of essential imports like fuel, food and even domestic transport of farm produce collapsed, leading to hoarding and a steep jump in prices of essentials, ranging from 40 to 200 per cent. The crisis paralysed the economy, shutting schools and offices and, as anger mounted, people invaded the President’s palace, and the top leadership fled the country.

Pakistan faced a similar situation of imminent debt default a few months later and the crisis reached its peak in March 2023 as the value of rupee collapsed and prices started rising at the rate of 40 per cent per month. First signs of economic distress emerged soon after Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government was defeated in a parliamentary vote, and a new government took over. As Pakistan had not fulfilled its part of the bargain with the International Monetary Fund as per the 2019 bailout, there was little to hope of an early repeat bailout. High inflation, a weakening currency, and dangerously low foreign exchange reserves, along with the high cost of doing business, intensified the grim economic outlook. Moody’s Investor Service, in its latest report, warned of a possible default of US \$7 billion in repayments due in the coming months.

Pakistan’s rupee depreciated to a record low of Rs 287 per USD (from Rs 140 per USD in 2019), following the delay in the negotiations over the conditions for concluding the agreement with the IMF to unlock a US \$6.5 billion loan. To avoid debt default, Pakistan sought commitments for new loans from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. “We have received an indication from Saudi Arabia about

getting something”, the Pakistan Minister of State for Finance said at the end of March. Pakistan has to repay debts of about US \$3 billion by June. Meanwhile, the State Bank of Pakistan raised the key interest rate by 100 bps to an all-time high level of 21 per cent on 4 April (after a 300 bps hike in March), aiming to tackle record inflation and stabilize the economy. Pakistan’s economic crisis could deepen if the International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout is delayed further. Total foreign reserves stand at US \$9.82 billion, with the State Bank of Pakistan holding only US \$4.24 billion, which is enough to pay for just three weeks of imports.

What has happened in Sri Lanka and Pakistan is not so exceptional in the region. Seemingly, the war in Ukraine and the subsequent spike in petroleum and food prices were the immediate causes of the crisis that propelled India’s neighbours—Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to approach the IMF for assistance under its Extended Fund Facility (EFF) so as to shore up their fast-depleting foreign exchange reserves.

What is the basic reason and structural weakness that has plunged the South Asian region into crisis? Could India, being the region’s largest economy, play the important role of assisting its neighbours?

Indeed, a distinguishing characteristic and weakness of South Asia has been the very low economic integration and trade and investment flows amongst member countries. Despite the historical reality that till the middle of the 20th century, South Asia was an integrated market under British control,

it is surprising to see the low trade, fragmentation, and limited economic relations in South Asia today..

On one hand, countries in South Asia share close geographical proximity with the existence of bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements (SAPTA / WTO); while on the other, it is one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Intra-regional trade in South Asia accounts for barely 5 per cent of the region’s global trade.¹ This makes South Asia one of the most disconnected regions in the world, especially when compared with other regions such as East Asia and the Pacific, where intra-regional trade accounts for approximately 50 per cent of the total trade, and Sub-Saharan Africa, where intra-regional trade has improved over the years to 22 per cent. Intra-regional trade in the South Asian region (including Myanmar) amounted to only 5.6 per cent in 2017.

In fact, all South Asian countries trade on better terms with distant economies than with their own neighbors. This can be shown through an index of trade restrictiveness.² Based on global trade data, such an index generates an implicit tariff that measures a country’s tariff and non-tariff barriers on imports. In India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, the indexes are two to nine times higher for imports from the South Asia region than for imports from the rest of the world! In other words, instead of lowering duties and barriers to their South Asian neighbours, the SAARC countries discriminate against their immediate neighbours in favour of western imports.

The responsibility for this low integration lies with the ‘big brother’ India. Initially it was India’s import substitution and industrialization strategy launched in the late 1950s that disrupted historical trade flows and movement of people and services in the region. Rail and road connections too were disrupted as neighbours became enemies. Even after India opened up to the world in the 1990s, it remained wary of its immediate neighbours. Protectionist policies, high logistics costs and, above all, lack of political will and a trust deficit inhibited South Asian integration. What is more, India with contiguous land borders with almost all the countries of the region, hampered closer economic ties amongst them

by discouraging overland movement of trucks and containers. Thus, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh’s efforts to boost intra-regional trade were made impossible as the goods needed to pass through Indian territory.

With India turning its back on economic integration, and even occasionally harassing neighbours by imposing blockades, the field was left open for other rivals. China stepped up its economic engagement and offered concessional trade credit to sweeten its entry into the South Asian market. Some like Pakistan had a long strategic and dependent relationship with China, but other South Asian countries too turned to China. In 2018, China’s



Source: Arun Sankar/AFP via Getty Images

trade with SAARC counties (other than India) is approximately double that of India's.³

Despite the 2006 South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), there has been little progress. In SAFTA, about 40 per cent of India's imports have been on the 'sensitive list' where duties are not lowered. In addition, India has launched the world's second largest anti-dumping investigations and imposed restrictions indiscriminately against all trade partners. Though the largest number of such investigations are against Chinese imports, even South Asian neighbours have faced anti-dumping duties restrictions. Anti-dumping tariffs and restrictions have been imposed on imports of jute goods from Nepal and Bangladesh, on float glass and car batteries from Bangladesh, and on Vanaspati from Nepal and Sri Lanka. Similarly, other countries which already have a large trade deficit with India have imposed duties and restrictions. Since 2019, Pakistan has banned Indian imports. All this has pushed South Asian neighbours to trade with China and ASEAN countries.

Another surprising feature of SAARC economies is the similarity of weaknesses in their economic structures. All SAARC countries have been poor exporters of manufactured goods and services, although India with its expanding service exports is partly filling up the persisting deficit in goods. All the countries of South Asia have continuous and large trade deficits. Pakistan has the largest trade deficits with imports being twice its exports, but others too run large deficits. So how do they finance their imports?

Unable to provide jobs for the teeming millions, South Asian countries provide for the largest outward migration of poorly educated workers, mainly to the Gulf oil producing countries, including nurses, construction labour and domestic workers. Thus, India accounts for about 5 million migrant workers (not including skilled software personnel), Pakistan for 3.3 million, Bangladesh for 2.1 million, Sri Lanka for 0.7 million, and Nepal for 0.5 million (not counting migrants to India across the open border).

South Asian economies receive large remittances from these poor workers who slave to feed their families



back home. India is the world's largest recipient of remittances at US \$90–100 billion a year. But Pakistan and Bangladesh too are amongst the top 10 countries in the world. This partly fills the gap created in their balance of payments by poor export capacity and large trade deficits (see *Table 1: South Asia - Key indicators from Balance of Payments Accounts 2021*).

In the case of India, remittances in 2021 filled in the entire trade deficit. In case of Nepal and Bhutan, the

trade deficit was largely with India and financed with Indian aid (grants and credits). The remaining three—namely Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—had current account deficits as large 3.5–3.8 per cent of GDP. That is because all three have incurred large interest payments on account of government and private sector international borrowings that are often as large as 40 per cent of their export earnings. This fact explains their large current account deficits despite large remittances. What is more, none of them, unlike India, were able to attract significant foreign investment. Hence, borrowing was from global financial markets or bilateral and multilateral assistance.

Crisis in Sri Lanka and Pakistan

Both Pakistan and Sri Lanka have been beneficiaries of China's aid as loan and credit to finance infrastructure investment which is part of the 'Belt and Road' projects. Repayment of these loans became due as several of these

projects were commissioned. These repayments coincided with the global hike in energy prices.

As economies opened up after the COVID lockdown, the war in Ukraine pushed up prices of oil and gas, which form a significant proportion of imports for all South Asian countries. Current account deficits widened for all countries. They needed to be financed or imports needed to be restricted, which the countries found difficult to do.

But what caused the total breakdown in Sri Lanka and Pakistan? It is argued that both countries were limited in their response because of their own respective political economies. In both these countries, it is the elite capture of policies and the breakdown of governance that were key factors.

Pakistan, for two decades or more, has been unable to manage its balance of payments, especially after the 1998 nuclear bomb explosion. As the West imposed sanctions and official aid dried up, a panic-stricken government froze all foreign currency accounts held by

Table 1: South Asia - Key indicators from Balance of Payments Accounts 2021

| Item | Bangladesh | Bhutan | India | Nepal | Pakistan | Sri Lanka |
|------------------------------|------------|--------|-------|---------|----------|-----------|
| Trade balance* (\$ bn) | -26.6 | -0.53 | -79.2 | -12.1 | -31.11 | -6.5 |
| (% of GDP) | (6.4) | (20.8) | (2.5) | (33.4) | (8.9) | (7.4) |
| Remittances (\$ bn) | 22.2 | 0.7 | 89.3 | 8.2 | 31.3 | 5.5 |
| (% of GDP) | (5.3) | (2.9) | (2.8) | (22.7) | (9.0) | (6.2) |
| Current Acc. Balance (\$ bn) | -15.01 | -0.32 | -33.4 | -5.3 | -12.26 | -3.3 |
| (% of GDP) | (3.8) | (12.0) | (1.1) | (14.80) | (3.5) | (3.7) |

Source: World Bank: World Development Indicators
*Trade in Goods and Services

non-resident Pakistanis (NRPs). These NRP foreign currency accounts had remained insensitive to changes in economic fundamentals. However, poor decisions by the government in relation to the freeze on these accounts, compounded by shrinkage of official flows consequent on the undermining of the 'rentier' value of Pakistan in the region's geo-politics, produced a sharp fall in foreign currency inflows and precipitated the financial crisis. Even today, Pakistan finds it difficult to attract deposits and investments from its non-resident citizens. According to media reports, Pakistan faces capital flight through illegal channels.

Since the beginning of the new millennium and especially after the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001,

Pakistan once again began to receive foreign assistance (reminiscent of cold war days), not so much bilateral aid, but support from the IMF and the World Bank. Pakistan has lurched from one bailout to another with occasional episodes of large assistance from Saudi Arabia and China. Since 1954, the IMF has been forced to support Pakistan 24 times. The recent crisis was triggered by the fact that the war in Ukraine coincided with the political instability when Imran Khan was replaced by Shahbaz Sharif as prime minister of the country.

Aggravating the crisis were unsustainable subsidies on power and fuel, which the politics of the country made difficult to reduce. It precipitated the suspension of the 2019 IMF bailout programme. Deepening the crisis,

Pakistan's tax collection has been low by South Asian standards, with governments able to collect only 10 per cent of GDP. The Pakistani elite, like their other South Asian compatriots are adept at avoiding taxes. Moreover, the government has been reducing tax rates to attract investments. Pakistan's saving and investment rate has also been amongst the lowest at 14 per cent of GDP, compared to 30 per cent for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India.

For years, Pakistan has lived beyond its means with large external sector imbalances—namely large trade and current account deficits which required it to constantly borrow from friends and commercial financial markets. It has failed to attract foreign investments and faces capital flight with rich Pakistanis buying property and assets in Gulf economies. Unable to meet its debt obligations, Pakistan would repeatedly approach the IMF for support. Even before one IMF bailout was over, the country approached the IMF for enhanced support.

Pakistan's external debt exceeds US \$124 billion, amounting to about 40 per cent of its GDP. What is more, 30 per cent of its external debt is owed to China, which too has been generous in granting loans to bag construction contracts for its companies, but it has become shy about deferring repayments. Most recently, China has agreed to defer a US \$2 billion loan repayment and provided US \$700 million as emergency assistance.

The case of Sri Lanka is curious. After the civil war in 2009, the Rajapaksa family consolidated their hold on the government and embarked on

a rapid growth strategy. The country embarked mainly on a bilaterally financed infrastructure investment program. Alongside these borrowings for investments in ports, energy, and transport, the Sri Lankan government also borrowed by issuing international sovereign bonds (ISBs). Some US \$17 billion worth of ISBs were issued from 2007 to 2019 which carried high interest rates, often as high as 8–9 per cent in dollar terms.

On being elected as the President in November 2019, the Gotabaya Rajapaksa administration, instead of tightening the belt, slashed direct taxes. Personal income tax exemption was raised from Rs 5 lakh per annum to Rs 30 lakh per annum. Similarly, corporate tax was reduced from 30 to 24 per cent, agro-based companies (tea plantations) and IT companies were exempt from tax. Value added tax (VAT) was reduced from 15 to 8 per cent. Furthermore, in the name of simplifying the tax system, the government eliminated the Nation Building Tax, the Economic Service Charge and the Debt Repayment Levy. In a bid to boost Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the government removed all restrictions under the Strategic Development Projects Act, and firms executing projects deemed strategically important were granted tax exemptions for up to 25 years (many were Chinese funded projects).

By 2020, largely because of these populist measures to please the rich and the corporate elite, Sri Lanka's tax-to-GDP ratio fell to a historic low of 8.1 per cent, and is now among the lowest in the world. These cuts even alarmed



Protestors gathered outside President Ranil Wickremesingh's house | Source: ANI news

the IMF, which generally favours tax reduction, as they sharply increased budget deficits and excess demand, leading to a sharp increase in imports. The COVID lockdown and disruptions further reduced revenue collection and required the government to increase social expenditure

Following reckless borrowing, the country's external debt rose to US \$58 billion or 65 per cent of its current GDP from 29 per cent of its GDP in 2019. The share of ISBs in total debt tripled to 36 per cent in 2022 from 12 per cent in 2019. What is more, the 36 per cent debt on ISBs accounted for 70 per cent of the interest payment. Soon, Sri Lanka was forced to default on its commercial debt and all short-term funding evaporated. This debt default, announced in April 2022 amid foreign currency shortages, triggered blackouts and street protests, which forced the Rajapaksa brothers to flee the country. This resulted in shutting off of all foreign loans accompanied by capital flight from the stock market as well as illegal capital flight by Sri Lankan nationals, both residents and non-residents.

Endnotes

1. S. Kathuria (Ed.) 2018. *A glass half full: The promise of regional trade in South Asia*. World Bank Publications.

2. Ibid.

3. Editor's note: Officially the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises of eight countries, including later entrant Afghanistan.

India provided short term loans of about US \$1 billion to buy Indian commodities, including petroleum products, and supported Sri Lanka's application for IMF-EFF assistance. China, like Pakistan, dragged its feet, delaying the IMF agreement.

The crisis in South Asia points to the high cost the region has paid due to political differences and suspicion resulting in the failure to see the gains from closer economic integration. India, as the largest economy, had an opportunity to help develop its neighbours who would have provided a growing market for its goods, several fold larger than the current paltry total of US \$30 billion. A unified and integrated South Asia would carry greater heft and long-term resilience, facing climate change to security and economic challenges together. Rather than look to western markets and funds for development, nations in South Asia need to look towards their immediate neighbours.

Pak-India peace conundrum: Six 'negative' reasons wherein lies the way forward

By Mani Shankar Aiyar



Let me first set out the reasons adduced for not engaging with Pakistan before setting out my rationale for an "uninterrupted and uninterrupted" dialogue with Pakistan to find a via media towards peace and tranquillity between the two countries.

First, it is said that the *raison d'être* of the armed forces and intelligence services in Pakistan is hostility towards India. Accordingly, they have a vested interest in continuing and continuous hostility with India to ensure their dominance in determining the Pakistani policy towards India.

Second, it is argued that, owing to the dominance over the Pakistan polity of the armed forces and the intelligence services, the opinion of the people in general is of no consequence since the army and intelligence services are well equipped to thwart any goodwill on the part of the people of Pakistan from the path of reconciliation.

Third, it is maintained that the Pakistan establishment deliberately hosts and encourages a number of terrorist organizations, such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Hizbul Mujahedeen, to undertake terrorist attacks against India, such as the murderous attempt on Parliament and parliamentarians in 2001 and the horrific Mumbai attack against innocent civilians, including visiting foreigners, on 26 November 2008.

Fourth, that whatever traces of goodwill towards India that might be found in certain segments of Pakistani civil society and even the Pakistani establishment, other sections of these segments are so deeply prejudiced against India that the goodwill of the few can never dominate over the hostility of the many.

Fifth, that Kashmir is not the 'core issue' but just an excuse to persist in hostility towards India. So, even an attempted resolution of the issue

will not end hostility as the root causes of Pakistani hostility are embedded in the deep, communal prejudices that led to the birth of that country.

Sixth, the ‘unholy nexus’ established against India by Pakistan and China together, who have their own respective deep-seated reasons to bring down our country. Before setting out an equal number of my reasons for advocating engagement with Pakistan, let me concede that I accept the thrust of many of the arguments against engaging with our neighbour.

However, I find many of the seeds for my contrary view as lying in the very six reasons against dialogue that I have set out above.

First, if the armed forces and intelligence services do in fact have a vested interest in continuing hostility with India, it has to be explained why such progress as has been made in India-Pakistan relations has mostly taken place when Pakistan has been under military rule. Thus, for example, the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 that has survived several decades, of hostility and even several wars, was made possible only when Field Marshall Ayub Khan ended civil political rule in Pakistan in 1958 and overcame squabbling among Pakistani politicians over the terms of the treaty.

Ayub Khan also offered through the Indian High Commissioner, Rajeshwar Dayal, to negotiate a deal, based on the South Tyrol precedent, of accepting the de facto ground reality in Kashmir while putting off to future generations a de jure settlement.

Under General Zia-ul-Haq, not only did the Pakistan President visit India unreciprocated five or six times but he was on the verge of settling the Siachen issue when his plane was blown up in an air accident by ‘a case of exploding mangoes’.

Also, under another Pakistani military dictator, General Pervez Musharaff, a ‘four-point’ formula for resolving the Kashmir issue without any exchange of territory or population was almost signed, but for a domestic dispute in Pakistan between the judiciary and executive that had nothing to do with negotiations on the backchannel of the “four point” formula.

In contrast, it was under civilian rule that ‘tribal raiders’, backed by the Pakistan armed forces, were sent into Kashmir in October 1947. Further, it was at the instance of Foreign Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto that ‘Operation Gibraltar’ was launched in August 1965, followed by the war in September. It was also Bhutto who betrayed the underlying understanding reached at Shimla in 1972 between the two Prime Ministers. And it was under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto that terrorism as a form of ‘proxy war’ was rekindled in the 1990s. As Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi once remarked, it is easier to do business with a strong government under military rule than with a weak government under civilian rule. Civilian rule in Pakistan is always fractious; military rule provides a single point, stable, negotiating process.

Second, as the goodwill among the generality of the people is our single biggest asset in that country, we need to cultivate it by affording extended

people-to-people contact through a generous system of visas, trade, cultural contacts and, above all, Bollywood. Instead, we have made the ordinary Pakistani our target for expressing displeasure at the Pakistan establishment by denying visas to the lakhs of Pakistanis who have relatives and friends in India and who desire to visit our country for business purposes. In doing so, we extinguish the persistent goodwill that prevails among the people of Pakistan, especially and including the people of the three minority provinces: Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, without excluding the majority province of Pakistani Punjab. Why alienate our single biggest asset as a mean of wreaking revenge on those Pakistanis, especially in the establishment, who have prejudices against and are hostile to our country?

Third, it is precisely hostility in India-Pakistan relations that lies at the root of the Pakistan-based terrorist attacks on India and the cross-border firing by the Pakistani armed forces. When-

ever such hostility diminishes, so too does the incentive for terrorist attacks and cross-border firing. Equally, when hostility is aggravated, so too are terrorist activities and cross-border firing enhanced. If, therefore, we want to seek a reduction and elimination in such hostile action by non-state actors, backed by the Pakistan establishment and the armed forces, we need to understand that hectoring Pakistan and breaking off all engagement with the country’s establishment and people, also removes all constraints on non-state actors and hostile cross-border firing. It is not by baring our teeth but by smiling across the border while engaging with Pakistan as honourable interlocutors that hostility and its consequences—terrorism and cross-border firing—might be reduced.

Moreover, it is precisely because non-state terrorists recognize that through terrorism they can bring a stop to all serious engagement between the two countries that they invariably resort



Mani Shankar Aiyar with Khurshid Kasuri | Source: Author

to terrorism as soon as there are signs of India and Pakistan engaging with each other. We only surrender to terrorism when we break off engagement in retaliation. Retaliation reduces engagement to a game of snakes-and-ladders, where all the ladders we climb together are extinguished in a single snake-swallow taking us back to the starting point. To break off engagement is to set us back to 'GO', obliging us to start all over again.

Fourth, to snap off engagement the minute there is a setback is tantamount to betrayal of Indians and Pakistanis of goodwill who wish to put the past behind us as we move towards the 'sunlit uplands' of the future. When talks are broken off, it is a victory for all those of ill will in both countries who prefer hostility to reconciliation. Thus far, all initiatives at starting a dialogue have invariably stalled. That is what makes it imperative that we insulate the dialogue process from inevitable diurnal setbacks to render the dialogue 'uninterrupted and uninterrupted'. The preferred expression in most circles is 'sustained'. It is immaterial which of the two expressions is adopted so long as the process is continued until the negotiators arrive at a consensus solution. This might perhaps be best achieved on a secret backchannel, as was the case with the 'four-point' formula arrived at out of public view. On the other hand, a degree of openness might make it easier to 'sell' solutions that gradually gather greater acceptability. Secrecy or openness is not the main issue, sustainability is.

Fifth, while both sides have agreed since at least the Shimla Agreement of 1972 that Kashmir is an issue that

requires mutual interaction, it has never been, in the Indian view, the 'sole' core issue. The cessation of cross-border terrorism by non-state actors, as well as the concomitant cessation of all official cover to terrorism is as much a core issue as is the broader question of the future of Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, both the core issues are intertwined which is why settling Kashmir, perhaps by some version of the 'four-point' formula, might set at rest the most contentious issue, thereby opening the door to the simultaneous or successive solution to other matters in contestation such as Siachen and Sir Creek, as well as trade and other business opportunities. Meanwhile, keeping people-to-people contacts consistently open would greatly facilitate negotiation on political and economic cooperation.

Sixth, it is precisely because China now is no longer across the 'fractured Himalaya' but on the river Indus at about the same location as Alexander was in 326 BC that we need to coordinate issues of peace and tranquillity with both countries. It is only when we create a peaceful neighbourhood that our credibility to mediate disputes in other parts of the world will rise. So long as we show ourselves incapable of settling issues that divide us from Pakistan and China in our neighbourhood, thus long does the threat to our national security last and is reinforced. Also, our hostility in our neighbourhood diminishes rather than enhances the global role we aspire to. Peace is thus in our national interest, as much as it is in Pakistan's and China's.

Centering girls, not age: Shifting the child marriage law discourse

By Madhu Mehra



The issue of child marriage and the law is not new to South Asia given the region's shared cultural, colonial and historical past. What makes it a troubling subject in contemporary discourse is less to do with the persistence of underage marriage, and more with the overwhelming centrality of law and the shift towards punitive responses. Even as a consensus on the necessity of a law exists, the legal models being promoted to address underage marriage must be questioned. In the wake of renewed global, regional and national attention towards fulfillment of the SDG-5 target of eliminating child marriage, developments in India and elsewhere lean towards legal models that empower the criminal justice system against youth, adolescents and



Child marriage in Assam | Source: India Today

communities, especially from marginalized populations. What should have been an opportunity to explore innovative approaches to enhance life chances of girls within contexts of poverty and insecurity, both key drivers of child and early marriage, has turned into a discourse promoting strict laws to deter and delay marriage till the legal minimum age.

The primary law in India, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006, stipulates minimum age of marriage as 18 for women and 21 for men; allows judicial injunctions to prevent impending underage marriage from taking place; permits prosecution of adults promoting these marriages; and mandates appointment of state functionaries to raise awareness and implement the law. As a general rule, with few exceptions, child marriages that occur are treated as valid if the underage party does not annul the marriage. In effect, the minor party has the right to repudiate the marriage within two years of attaining majority, and the right to financial support and the rights of children are protected.

Even as legal solutions to child marriage are prioritized, very little investment has been made towards monitoring the implementation of this law. Accordingly, the debate rarely dwells on ways to activate and improve the machinery tasked with implementation; and instead limits itself to critiquing statutory aspects. That child marriage is held as 'voidable' though valid has long been critiqued by some, interpreting this to mean that the state condones or tacitly approves of child marriage. This growing consensus has

led to state amendments in Karnataka (2017) and Haryana (2021) that have changed the status of child marriage from being 'voidable' to void ab initio, or lacking legal effect.

A new proposal to tackle early marriage through raising the minimum marriage age for women was tabled in 2020, and became the basis of an amendment bill presented in Parliament in December 2021¹, which subsequently has been referred to a parliamentary committee for review. The bill raises the minimum age of marriage for women from 18 to 21 years, to delay motherhood and address maternal mortality. If parity in minimum ages of marriage for men and women was a concern, it ought to correspond to the age of majority at 18 years for both, in recognition of the right of young adults to make personal decisions.

Meanwhile, the executive authority in the state of Assam carried out sudden mass arrests in February 2023 to crack down on child marriage, as a way of tackling high prevalence rates. The arrests and detention of husbands and family members, including for marriages that took place several years ago, were made by invoking not just the PCMA, but also the Protection of Children from Child Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, which sets the age of consent at 18 years, on par with the minimum age of marriage for women. The prosecutions that follow as a result, are for grave offences of child sexual abuse. Not surprisingly, this action has traumatized the affected girls and women, and it is the marginalized and poor, who are most affected.²

The shift towards more stringent laws is not limited to India. Bangladesh amended its Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) of 2017 to criminalize acts relating to underage marriages, while holding the marriage as valid. The criminalization extends equally to adults and the minor party involved in the child marriage, making no distinction between the two. Judicial sanction to avoid criminalization is available under exceptional circumstances that include parental consent, special circumstances and the best interests of the child, without extending statutory protection to the minor's right to be heard in the proceedings. In Nepal, legislative changes increased the minimum age of marriage to 20 years, while treating all underage marriages as void ab initio. The age of sexual consent is at 18 years, and has led to adolescents

who married each other between the ages of 18 and 20, being prosecuted as adults for self-arranged marriages.³

At the global level too, what has found favour is the statutory model that denies legal validity to underage marriages, regardless of the maturity, circumstance or context of the parties. Termed as the 'no-exception' law, it is viewed as the best way to eliminate child marriage. In using 'age' of marriage as the singular factor determining legal validity, this model discounts the lived realities of girls across diverse contexts, and most worryingly, the voice of the underage person in matters affecting her life. Somewhat similarly, the framing of child marriage within the UN OHCHR has expanded to conflate distinct categories of 'child, early and forced marriages and unions' (CWFMU). According to the OHCHR, "a child marriage is considered to be a



Child marriage protests in Assam | Source: Author

form of forced marriage, given that one and/or both parties have not expressed full, free and informed consent.” By discounting consent of older adolescents in both marriage and unions, the framing is inconsistent with the principles of Child Rights Convention (CRC) of evolving capacities, decriminalization of adolescent sexuality and the right to be heard.

The joint General Recommendation 31 of CEDAW and General Comment 18 of CRC on harmful practices exemplifies the contemporary pressures that drive policy shifts. Originally adopted in 2014⁴, the joint recommendation prohibited marriages below 18 years, while allowing for exceptions for those between 16–18 years, as follows: “As a matter of respecting the child’s evolving capacities and autonomy in making decisions that affect her or his life, in exceptional circumstances a marriage of a mature, capable child below the age of 18 may be allowed provided that the child is at least 16 years old and that such decisions are made by a judge based on legitimate exceptional grounds defined by law and on the evidence of maturity without deference to cultures and traditions.” Subsequently, following advocacy around the SDGs and the growing momentum to promote a no-exception legal model on child marriage, the CEDAW and CRC jointly voted to expunge the specific text relating to the exception in 2019, without as much as a clarification or a consultative review process.⁵

Ironically, a discourse founded on protection of child rights has taken a trajectory that overlooks evolving capacities of adolescents and their

right to be heard. This is troubling if one were to consider the data from National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) in India. Although child marriage persists, it has gradually declined from 27 per cent of girls in the age group of 20–24 years married below the age of 18 years in NHFS-4 (2015–16), to 23 per cent in NHFS-5 (2019–2021). The mean age of marriage of girls has correspondingly risen. Contrary to popular assumptions, child marriage is not the cause, but the consequence of girls dropping out of schools. The NHFS-4 lists lack of interest in education, high cost of education as well as burden of unpaid housework as the main causes of early drop out. Smaller studies add lack of hygienic toilets, unavailability of sanitary napkins, sexual harassment and apprehensions of premarital sexual activity.

The decline in early marriage prevalence rates is aided by an expansion of middle-class population, and the availability of affordable quality education, higher standard of living and employment opportunities to them. The national data shows that in India, the prevalence of early marriage is observed in older adolescents belonging to resource deprived, largely rural communities. Since poverty is highest among the socially marginalized groups, the girls within these communities are at highest risk.

Further, consider the findings of a series of three studies undertaken by Partners for Law in Development in India on how the law works within social realities. An analysis of case-law related to child marriage prosecutions (2008–2017)⁶ showed that 65 per cent

of the cases involve parents using the law against self-arranged marriages by their daughters, often invoking offences of kidnapping and rape, while the remaining 35 per cent mostly involve nullification of arranged marriages that have broken down, as a civil remedy. The law is selectively used by parents against daughters who marry against their wishes, to prosecute for offences attracting sentences upto 10 years. This is enabled by POCSO which sets age of consent at 18 years, and resultantly criminalizes adolescent sexuality. A multistate qualitative study⁷ of girls in romantic relationships shows that girls often elope as a last resort, to escape forced marriage, domestic violence or conflict, or parental wrath on discovery of romantic relationship. Under these circumstances, the law serves to re-victimize them. For girls seeking to prevent or exit a forced marriage, access to law is risk-laden and unfruitful according to the study based on accounts of 13 community organizations that work with adolescent girls across six states.⁸ Going to the police not only risks having their plans revealed to parents, it also places girls and social workers at risk, and criminalizes the girls’ parents. Instead, frontline workers prefer to mediate with the backing of the district administration, child welfare committees, and the police to secure long term goals for girls seeking to prevent a marriage, or nullify one.

These findings on how the law works underscore research gaps, without which an informed, evidence-based, contextually relevant policy discussion is not possible. The focus of most of the policy discourse is normative standard

setting, its articulation in the text of the statute, without attention to ways to minimize harmful consequences of the law. The age of marriage debate is blinkered to the intersectional concerns of adolescent sexuality, age of consent, and in some countries, criminalization of non-marital sex. As a result, the proposals for strict child marriage laws tend to empower the state, law enforcement and the relatively more powerful. When the landscape of underage marriage is varied and heterogeneous, a flat ‘no-exception’ law will infantilize older adolescents, by denying them the right to be heard. Proposals to increase the minimum age of marriage beyond the age of majority into early adulthood, renders young women more vulnerable to community and parental controls.

Law cannot be a primary agent of change, and certainly not when it shuts out the agency and voices of the girls it intends to respond to. The spike in child marriages following closure of schools and job losses in wake of the COVID pandemic in India was reportedly one of the highest in Karnataka, which has a no-exception law.⁹ Even a law with differentiated responses, that factors in the wishes of the minor, among other things, can only complement not substitute girl-centred programmes, that must be the main pathway for change. Interventions ranging from education access to vocational training, livelihoods and safety for girls and women, must be part of the solution. The gaps in delivery of quality welfare benefits contribute to the prevalence of child marriage. This gap cannot be short circuited by criminalization responses that define it in terms of an individual

offence. The goal in contemporary times cannot be one seeking to delay

marriage, but one which builds sufficient capacities in girls and women to decide if, when and whom to marry.

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Child, early and forced marriage and unions in Pakistan: Complexities of legal reform

By Sheena Hadi



There is now irrefutable evidence that child marriages have a detrimental impact on development outcomes for girls, their children and families, and the community at large. The scale of this impact is often measured in terms of potential GDP lost to a nation or poor maternal health statistics, but ultimately, ending child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) is a simple question of protecting and fulfilling the human rights of girls. The debate on how to address the complex challenge of CEFMU has been a long and tenuous one with legal reforms often shaping the crux of the agenda. On one hand, child rights and women's activists, as well as advocates in the human rights field, have argued that country laws must uphold that children (broadly defined as under 18 years of age) cannot give consent to make decisions regarding their marital partner and other associated reproductive health decisions. Supporting this perspective, a number of international organizations, including the United Nations, have established global development indicators and streamed significant quantities of funding aid towards organizations and activists whose agenda has been to end CEFMU through legal reforms focused on the minimum age of marriage.

On the other hand, there is a novel, emerging critical conversation on the impact of legal reform in the sphere of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) which suggests that legal reforms penalizing CEFMU practices, are not playing the kind of favorable role that was anticipated. The polarization of this debate can best be witnessed in Pakistan, which has a long history of placing importance on criminalization, perhaps as a vestige of a long colonial past where penal codes were implemented ruthlessly to maintain control over indigenous populations in South Asia. For decades, women's rights groups have advocated for a change in the law on child marriage, which currently allows girls to be married

at 16 years versus boys who can marry by 18 years of age. The problem is no doubt significant, as Pakistan ranks sixth highest in the world for cases of child marriage. While estimating the actual number of underage marriages in Pakistan is impossible, largely due to inadequate birth registration data, it is currently estimated by the UNICEF that approximately 19 million girls are married before they turn 18.

Much like the rest of the world, drivers of child marriage are largely related to poverty, deeply entrenched social norms and customs, and a lack of educational and vocational opportunities for girls. Often overlooked motives also include the curtailment of girls' mobility and the control of their sexuality out of fear of family honour getting tainted, as well as the benefit to the household of increased unpaid labor that is acquired with a young bride. As a result, rather than the determining focus being age, girls are often married when they are deemed 'mature', which

means they are capable of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the household they will be married into. Also, the onset of menstruation often is understood as a physical marker of maturity.

In 2013, the province of Sindh responded to advocacy pressure and passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013, which raised the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 years. While the change was celebrated by women's and child rights groups alike, there was a sense that implementation of the law had not been adequately considered. Ten years on, the fear that legal change would not positively impact the lives of girls has proven correct. In fact, it is estimated that there has been a 1.3 per cent increase in the age of underage marriages in Sindh since the law was reformed. The lack of substantive change in practice is not altogether surprising. As mentioned, birth registration is low in the province, and information about laws and access to legal justice is limited.

Moreover, there is an added layer of complexity to legal reform in Pakistan, due to the role of Shariah (Islamic law) in the country, which states that girls are allowed to be married once they have reached puberty. Finally, Sindh, like the rest of the nation, also has a number of entrenched cultural practices such as *wata sata* (the exchange of children from two households, often a brother-sister pair, in marriage). These centuries-old practices served as a means to protect land inheritance and familial ties, and settle community disputes.

As a result, Sindh has witnessed a lack of awareness about the law itself, with most community decision makers, particularly those residing in agrarian, rural areas of the province, having little to no information about the legal implications of child marriage. Moreover, in many cases where the law has been applied, minors have also been arrested as perpetrators along with decision makers. While data is sparse, and most cases undocumented, reports have been shared of misuse of the law by families that aim to prevent girls from marrying out of their own volition.

The approach to curbing CEFMU in India seems to have taken on a similar tenor to that of Pakistan, with perhaps an even greater belief that raising legal age will decrease harmful community practices. In both countries, there is a minimal effort to actually speak with girls and engage with communities to better understand how legal reforms can be shaped to be accessible and beneficial. Moreover, there are also similar trends in the negative implica-

tions of who the law impacts and how it is being used in many cases to perpetuate greater harm. The instances of mass arrests in Assam, which largely target minority and already vulnerable communities, provide further evidence that law has the potential to be used by the state to control, particularly when they pertain to women and their bodies.

While Sindh has thus far let the changes in marriage law remain mostly dormant, there is little doubt that if activated, the girls that would be targeted first would be the most marginalized and likely belonging to minority Christian and Hindu communities that tend to be poor and without access to basic services. Historically, these are the communities that have also faced forced conversions in marriage, where girls have been coerced to convert to Islam against their will in order to marry Muslim boys. Moreover, the use of the law to curtail social behavior, creates a trend for making aggressive law enforcement more palatable when scaled. This has been seen in Pakistan in cases of arrests for adultery and fornication.

Thus, a significant case can be made for the benefit of cross border sharing and learning both in order to understand how to better address the problem of CEFMU in similar socio-cultural settings, but also to stay vigilant regarding the myriad ways in which vulnerable populations of girls can be further marginalized and persecuted.

It is estimated that globally, approximately 100 million girls today are not protected by any national law against CEFMU. While implementation of the



Pakistani civil society activists rally for protection of Hindu girls at a protest in Hyderabad, Pakistan
Source: VOA news / AP photo

law is flawed in many cases, there is still a need for law to set parameters and boundaries for a society and to support the realizing of human rights for all citizens. Moreover, laws are also critical to harmonize discrepancies between religious and customary laws where blatant contradictions exist. Thus, setting a minimum age for marriage, like other social practices, and advocating for individuals to be at least 18 years of age before entering a marital union, can be beneficial. However, as can be witnessed globally with most practices that have deep socio-cultural roots, legal reforms will not end harmful practices, particularly when they involve controlling women's bodies. This is evidenced in the 20,000 illegal child marriages taking place daily around the world.

Thus, legal reforms can only begin to take effect when there are adequate intersectional policies and practices that are put into place that are structured to both eliminate the drivers of CEFMU while also creating prospects for girls, and ultimately, resituating marriage as a choice and not an obligation. Already, there is ample evidence to suggest that investment in girls through education and vocational training helps in delaying marriage, particularly when looking at the most

vulnerable and marginalized communities. However, building schools and enrolling girls is only the tip of the iceberg. Girls need accessible transport to schools, ensured safety within school environments, and access to quality education, including comprehensive sexuality education. Moreover, gender discrimination within schools which limits girls access to opportunities needs to be rooted out, and facilities need to provide fresh water and sanitation so that girls do not need to miss school while menstruating. Communities need to be sensitized and harmful norms shifted to allow girls to have an opportunity to thrive.

In the end, laws in isolation cannot lift the social barriers to opportunity and provide the space needed for girls to find their voice and make choices, which is what will ultimately lead to meaningful change. The challenge now lies in envisioning legal reform which is based on a paradigm of empowerment, gender justice and the fulfillment of human rights, as opposed to one that seeks to punish alone.

Expressions





THE SIEGE
A Year Since Abrogation

August 2020

Jammu & Kashmir Solidarity Group

HOPE

*The harbingers of revolution are
not born.*

*They are made.
They are shaped in the bone melting
desert of tyranny.*

*They are apprenticed under the
shadow of weapons.*

*They bloom when trampled under the
boots of cruelty.*

*Every time the oppressive regime
aims to tame their flight, they see
the gates to a new horizon*

*Where they fly with freedom,
Spreading the message of revolution
and arming people with the best weapon
against an oppressive regime,*

HOPE.

- Farzan Dar

[Excerpts from Counting Days (@countingdaysk) archives, Day 278]

Kashmir: Counting Days

Solidarity Politics on Kashmir – One year and a daily counting - a poster campaign of imagining Jammu & Kashmir, after 5 August, 2019. It marked the end to the fiction of civil society's tactical correctness on Kashmir, epitomised in the discomfort over the term 'occupation' and the acceptability of the phrase 'militarisation'.

A fresh bold transparency and accountability inspired an outpouring of creative expression from young artists, poets, scholars and activists on both sides of the border. Defying the avalanche of abusive trolling by bigots and the apprehensive of 'seditious embroilment' by implication, myriad posters created a gallery of speaking truth to power, and of solidarity and empathy with Kashmiris for whom the brute exercise of executive power in revocation of Art 370, put an end to all political ambiguity

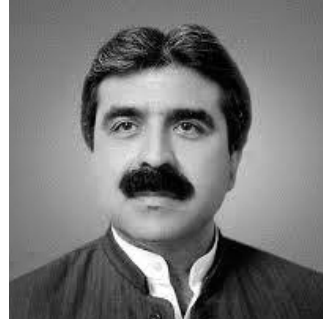


ANGAI (the Echo)

By Abaseen Yousafzai

Translated in english
by Anita Weiss

انگی



"زه گلاب خان د نهو کالو یمه
خور پلو شه می د پینځه کالو ده
مونږ په سوات کښی د کبل کلي یو
تمبو کښی ناست یو اوس د بل کلي یو

لالا می غره کښی چاپه څت حلال کرو
چی لا تر اوسه ئی غل نه دے معلوم

کاکامی کرفیو کښی فوخیانو وویشت
جامی ئی سوی وی د جزو لمبو
سینه ئی توله وه غار غار په گولو

د پلار می بنکله د پولسو دکان وه
د دکان خواته ئی چاودنه وشوه
رینسی رینسی وجود ئی کورته راوړو
په جنازه کښی ئی پینځه تنه وو
او څلوپښتمه ئی بیاهم ونه شوه
ځکه چی جنگ وو بمباریاتی کېدی

مور رانه هم په داسی حال جدا شوه
چی آخري دیدار مو هم ونه شو
کفن دفن ته هم حاجت رانه غے
په کور د بره نسه میزانیسل راغلل
د سترگو رب کښی لوتی لوتی شو تول
د کلي خلق چی نزدی رسېدل
د مور او نیامی هېڅ درک هم نه وو
هرڅه لمبه لمبه ایبره ایبره وو

زمونږه سکول چا ظالمانو وړان کرو
د جوماته دېوال هم ونړېده
اخر بیو ته مو ځان ورسوو
بیو د ځان سره تمبو ته بوتلو

"I am Gulab Khan, a nine year old
While my sister Palwasha is five
We are from Kabal in Swat, but now sitting in a
tent far from our village.
My elder brother was stabbed to death far
away on a hill,
Until now nobody knows about the murderer.
My uncle was shot dead over violation of
curfew,
His clothes burnt while his chest riddled with
bullets.
My dad ran a sweetshop in the village,
He lost his life in an a nearby explosion,
Only five persons showed up at his funeral.
None appeared over his mourning ceremony
because of war and armed conflict.

Similar was the fate of our mom.
We couldn't have a chance to have a glimpse of
her face
No pre-burial ceremony was held, a missile hit
our living room
In a moment our home was reduced to rubble
Before long our neighbours reached for rescue,
Our mom and grandma had perished.
There was fire all around, everything was
reduced to ashes,
Some bigots exploded our school too,
A part of the mosque wall was broken down.
We hurriedly walked to our aunt
She took us along to this tent.
Have a look at the tattered mat
For us this tent is village, hujra and mosque.

اوس دا تمبو دے او دا زور پـــــــوزے دے
دغه مو کور کله حجره جومات دي"

اے تورو سکڼو سپڼو سرو قامونو
دغه هم ستاسو د نیکه بچي دي
دوي ته لار و بنایي چي چرته لار شي
چي تاسو نن داسي خاموشه ناست یئ
که دوي هم دغسي وحشیان رالوئ شو
په غزېدلو پښو به خوب و نه کریئ

O! Black and White people of the world, listen!
These are grandkids of your
grandparents

Come and guide them over to the right track
If you remain silent and don't do anything
And if they grow up violent,
Then you won't ever have a sound sleep."

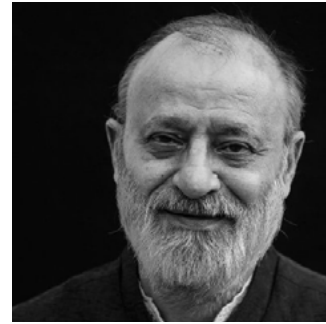


गवाही (Testimony)

By Gauhar Raza

Translated in english

by Rituparna Sengupta



गवाही दो
के तुम उस दौर से गुज़रे हो जब
दौर-ए-खिज़ाँ था

गवाही दो
कि बहते वक्रत के धारे बहुत संगीन थे तब
बहाओ तेज़ था, और तैरना मुश्किल था बेहद

गवाही दो
कि तुम उस दौर से गुज़रे हो जब
हुक्काम ने खुद को खुदा समझा

गवाही दो कि
तुम मौजूद थे जब
इस वतन के पासबानों ने,
अंधेरी रात में यलगाार बोला था
हर एक शहरी को
सफ़रआर किया था

गवाही दो
अंधेरी रात थी और मुल्क में डाका पड़ा था
सफ़े जब बिछ चुकीं हर जेब ख़ाली हो चुकी तब
ग़रीबों के लबों से रोटियाँ तक छीन ली थीं

गवाही दो
जुनूँ को सरबरहना
घरों में बस्तियों में घूमता देखा है तुमने

गवाही दो
कि नफ़रत साथ थी उसके

गवाही दो
इसी नफ़रत ने उनके घर जलाए
जो अपने हक़ की खातिर शाहराहों पर खड़े थे

गवाही दो
वो सहमे लोग देखे हैं कि जिन के घर जले थे

Testify
That you have lived through
the barren Fall

Testify
That the flow of time
was treacherous then,
Strong was the tide
and hard to swim against

Testify
That you have lived through times
When the sovereign believed
themselves divine

Testify
That you were present when
the sentries of this realm
in the dead of the night
had launched attack
and ordered each townsman
to stand in line

Testify
Dark was the night when
the land was plundered
The formation complete,
each pocket was emptied
And the very bread was snatched from
hungry lips

Testify
That you have seen inflamed passions
raging through homes and towns
unchecked

Testify
That they came charged with hatred

Testify
This very hate burnt down the homes
Of those who came out on the highway,
seeking for their rights

Testify
That you have seen the terrorised
whose homes were torched

गवाही दो
दुकानों, दरसगाहों और घरों की
राख पैरों से लिपट कर रो रही थी

गवाही दो
कि शाहों कि अदालत नफ़रतों से भर चुकी है
अदालत मुजरिमों के कटघरे में
खड़ी है हाथ बाँधे
सही इल्ज़ाम है इन मुन्सिफ़ों पर,
किताबों और कलम को बेच डाला
मुंसिफ़ी को बेच डाला

गवाही दो
यह सब सस्ता बिका था

गवाही दो
कि अब इंसाफ़ जनता की अदालत में खड़ा है

गवाही दो
यक़ीन रखो
कि इस दौरे खिज़ाँ में भी
तुमहारी हर गवाही दर्ज होगी
तुमहारी हर गवाही पर यहाँ इंसाफ़ होगा
तुमहारी हर गवाही से ग़रेबां चाक हैं जितने, सिलेंगे
तुमहारी हर गवाही से बहारें अपने पैरहन की ज़ेबाइश करेगी
तुमहारी हर गवाही अगली नस्लों के लिए
राहों में उजियारा बेखेरे गी

गवाही दो कि तुम पर क़र्ज़ है ये
गवाही दो कि तुम पर फ़र्ज़ है ये

Testify
That the ashes of
shops, universities, and homes
clung to your feet, in tears

Testify :
The Shah's courts are brimming with hatred,
In the prisoner's dock, the court
Stands handcuffed
These judges are rightly accused of
selling their books, their pens,
selling their judgement

Testify
That it was all sold cheap

Testify
That justice today
stands in the people's tribunal

Testify,
Have faith -
That even in this sterile season
Each word of yours
will be recorded,
Each word of yours
will meet with justice,
Each word of yours
will mend a torn collar,
Each word of yours
will adorn Spring's finery,
Each word of yours
will illuminate the way
for generations to come

Testify, for you owe this debt
Testify, for this is your duty



Blogs

3

People for Peace

By Aekta Kapoor



High visa walls, hostile diplomatic exchanges and a jingoistic political climate have failed to halt peoples' instinctive desire and determination to innovate ways and means to reach out across the militarized India-Pakistan border, reviving pilgrimage corridors, rekindling nostalgic tastes of remembered cultures and founding new links of a younger generation's shared futures.

Pilgrimages

On 4 March this year, 102 Rotary Club members from Delhi, Chandigarh, Parwanoo and Shimla in India crossed the border to the Kartarpur Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in the Punjab province of Pakistan. They were joyfully welcomed by 112 fellow Rotarians who had driven down from Lahore and Islamabad. The meeting at Kartarpur was the fourth in a series of such solidarity exchanges taking place since 2022. The Gurdwara is considered the second-most important shrine of the Sikh community and lies less than three kilometres from the border.

A historic treaty signed in November 2019 between the two nations allows visa-free access for Indian pilgrims to visit the shrine in Pakistan. After a long pause due to the pandemic, when the Kartarpur Corridor re-opened in November 2021, the [first Rotary visit](#) last year had only three travellers from India. "Many people from India backed out at the last minute from the Kartarpur visit in February 2022 due to the political climate," said Anil Ghai, a Delhi-based businessman whose family migrated to India from Chakwal, Pakistan, at the time of partition. He now spearheads Indo-Pak peace initiatives from Rotary India, and initiated Rotary's Twin Sister Club project, which 'twins' Rotary clubs on both sides of the border. Since 2022 there has been a steady growth in demand with the number of applicants swelling to 150 this year.

Further enthusiasm has been generated by the goal of establishing an [Indus Peace Park](#) near the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib. Rotarians from Lahore donated PKR 72,000 to the Gurdwara committee. Steadily, the Kartarpur visits have gathered enthusiastic momentum. "Seeing

hundreds of Indians and Pakistanis meeting with brotherhood and affection at Kartarpur was a phenomenal experience,” says Rotary’s Anil Ghai. “They all want peace and normal relationships. We are all the same, except maybe for the religion—we share the same language, culture, food, traditions.” Earlier, Ghai had facilitated a visit by four Lahore members of the Rotary Inner Wheel, the women’s division of Rotary, for a conference in Anand, Gujarat, in November 2022.

Mission youth

Particularly striking is the energy and enthusiasm of youth on both sides of the border and in the South Asian diaspora space of initiating and innovating efforts to come together in friendship and solidarity. Indeed it is youth activism which is filling the relative vacuum of the past decade of people-to-people exchanges. Powered by the internet

and social media, these individuals and collectives have found creative ways to enable people-to-people connections even in troubled times—through a shared culture of music, dialogue, art, comedy and a discussion forum of ideas

One of the more notable names in this regard is Ravi Nitesh, co-founder of *Aaghaz-e-Dosti*, a youth-led initiative that was founded over a decade ago. Seeking to involve schoolchildren in the Indo-Pak peace process, they launched an annual ‘peace calendar’ competition inviting entries from schools on both sides of the border. Children were asked to send in paintings on the topic of peace. “We used to get around 60 to 70 entries in the first few years,” says Nitesh, a Delhi-based petroleum engineer who sponsors the printing costs from his personal funds or with the help of friends. “In the past few years, this number has gone up to 300 to 600

entries per year. The idea is growing.” Besides the peace calendar, they host greeting-card exchanges between students of both countries.

Aaghaz-e-Dosti also initiated the *Aman Chaupal* informal sessions in schools in India by visiting journalists, academics or other eminent personalities from Pakistan, and vice versa. “Not just kids but the teachers too were also influenced,” says Nitesh. “They would ask candid questions, there would be laughter. It opened minds.” The school initiative has paused with the pandemic.

Aaghaz-e-Dosti is continuing to mobilize youth in sustaining the peace and solidarity momentum through iconic peace vigils and peace marches. Eminent journalist and peace activist, Kuldip Nayar, was the moving spirit behind the annual August 14/15 midnight candlelight vigil of activists at Wagah Border between Lahore and Amritsar, before his death in 2018. He had reportedly urged the youth to take forward the ritual mission practiced since 1982. Aaghaz-e-Dosti took on the mission and converted it into a peace march starting from Delhi to Wagah. Nayar flagged off the first such march beginning in Delhi. “It was his last public appearance. He passed away on 23 August 2018 after we returned to Delhi,” said Nitesh.

Since then, with the peace vigil at Wagah Border sustained by the Punjab-based group Hind Pak Dosti Manch, Aaghaz-e-Dosti took the peace march to the Ferozepur Border in 2022, and plans to keep doing so for the next five years.

“People in these border areas, who are not exposed to the vitriol on television and social media, want peace. Those who live in metro cities and are fed misinformation every day from various sources are more inclined to keep the hostility between countries going,” he says. “We can’t change the adults’ way of thinking. So, we focus on school kids with the hope that the next generation will strive for peace.”

Art for peace

The world of art recognizes no borders and has been active in bringing together artists and curators from India, Pakistan and the wider region. One of the pioneers in this informal peace movement is *Khoj*, the Delhi-based autonomous non-profit contemporary arts organization. Since 1997, their art residencies have helped create a network of emerging and established artists from across South Asia.

One of the beneficiaries of Khoj’s far-sighted vision is Lahore-born artist Masooma Syed, who met her husband, Kerala-born sculptor Sumedh Rajendran, at a Khoj residency in 2003. While art brought them **together**, visas and politics kept them apart. Eventually, in the face of legal and social barriers, Syed gave up the quest to live with Rajendran in his Delhi home and the couple set up homes in Kathmandu and Colombo instead.

Syed, who teaches at art schools in Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, used her experience of living and working across South Asia to design a course on ‘Material Culture in South Asia’ for the cultural studies program at National



Aaghaz-e-Dosti Calendar from 2021 and 2022

College of Arts, Lahore. She also curated an ambitious show titled *Ta'oos Chaman* ('peacock garden') bringing together interdisciplinary artists and scholars from across South Asia to collaborate on areas of mutual interest. Showcased online on Lahore Biennale Festival's virtual museum, Syed's show was created in collaboration with the British Council to mark Pakistan's 75th anniversary, and was built around the theme of post-colonial identity and parallel histories in artistic practices in South Asia.

The title is borrowed from the Urdu short story *Ta'oos Chaman ki Maina* by late Indian scholar and writer Naiyer Masud. "The peacock garden here refers to South Asia," says Syed, who finds the digital medium to be liberating for South Asian artists otherwise constrained by physical borders. The show featured artists such as performer Kapila Venu from Kerala, India; Priyanka Tulachan from Pokhara, Nepal; Ayaz Jokhio from Sindh, Pakistan; Sadia Marium from Chittagong, Bangladesh; Sivasubramaniam Kajendran from Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and several others. Syed gives credit to festivals such as the Lahore Biennale and the Faiz Festival for creating avenues for Indians to visit Pakistan and provide opportunities for cultural diplomacy.

It is another matter that the recently held Faiz Festival 2023 grabbed news headlines across India and Pakistan for an irrelevant comment made by Indian lyricist Javed Akhtar rather than the many performances, talks and activities that underscored the shared artistic and cultural heritage of India and Pakistan.

Shared communitarian cultures

The clout of shared communitarian cultures have been effectively leveraged by Punjabis all over the world to transcend divisive nationalities. One such shared cultural space is Majha House, a cultural centre in Amritsar, India, for Punjabis from all over the world. Founded by publisher and activist Preeti Gill, the centre is established on her 40-year-old family property and serves as a platform for exhibitions, performances and talks. The events at Majha House are a combination of literature, film, music and poetry that celebrate the shared language and cultural roots of Punjabis across borders.

"Majha House is an effort to put Punjab centre-stage," Gill said at eShe magazine's Indo-Pak Peace Summit Led by Women 2021. "Partition is still like a living thing in Amritsar. They haven't forgotten Partition, it's still there, the stories are still there, the people are still there."

Partition is, in fact, the key point of shared history that has been the theme of several initiatives on both sides of the border. Ten years ago, physicist Guneeta Singh Bhalla founded the 1947 Partition Archive, a charitable trust in India run by volunteers dedicated to institutionalizing the people's history of Partition through documentation, storytelling and exhibitions. The platform has chronicled over 10,000 oral histories of survivors and witnesses in hundreds of towns and villages, spread across 14 countries. These stories are chronicled in the book titled *10,000 Memories*, which includes over a thousand photographs from both sides of the border.

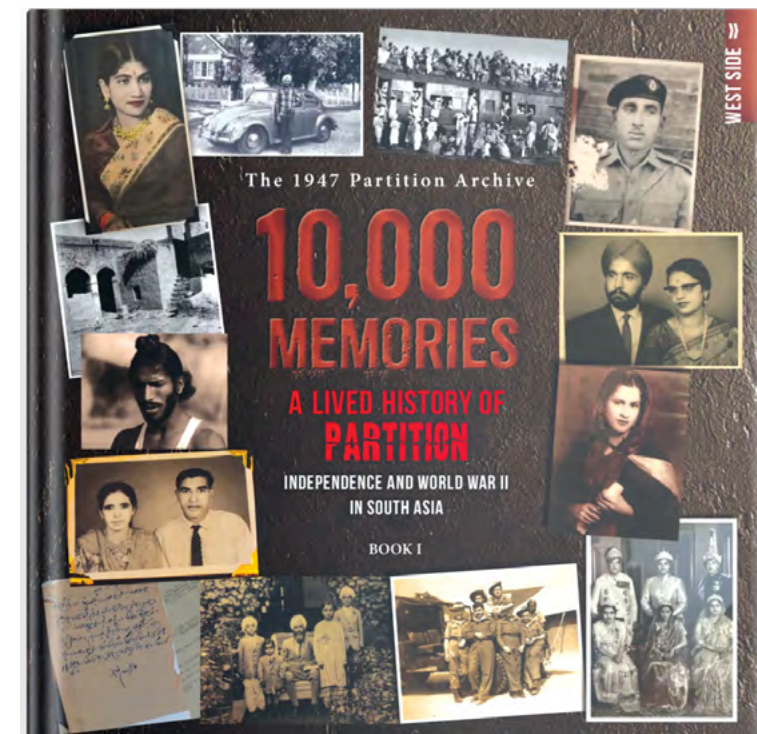
A commitment to a people's history also forms the basis of the work behind *Project Dastaan*, a unique youth-led peacebuilding initiative that uses technology to help partition refugees and immigrants from India and Pakistan revisit the land of their birth. The young team finds the exact locations and memories that these survivors seek to revisit and recreates them through bespoke 360-degree virtual-reality experiences. They have also created an animated virtual-reality documentary *A Child of Empire* to help viewers experience a migrant's state of mind, and a three-part film series *The Lost Migration* about lesser known [artition narratives.

Pop culture

Films have of course always been a powerful way to bring Indians and Pakistanis together. From Bollywood films

to Pakistani television serials, nothing unites the subcontinent more than a visual treat of drama, emotion, colour, music and dance.

Sometimes, there is a larger peace agenda behind these productions. Shailja Kejriwal, chief creative officer, special projects, Zee Entertainment, was the first Indian producer to commission films by Pakistani filmmakers for mainstream television in India. The shows were part of *Zeal for Unity*, Zee's apolitical platform to promote Indo-Pak solidarity. Launched at Wagah border in 2017, the initiative initially brought together 12 celebrated directors including Mehreen Jabbar and Sabiha Sumar from Pakistan and Aparna Sen and Ketan Mehta from India. "The most common response from the Indian audiences was love. Everyone said, '*Hum kitne similar hain*' (we are so similar)," said Kejriwal.



Another film-based initiative by the international non-profit Seeds of Hope titled *Kitnay Duur Kitnay Paas* brought together 42 young filmmakers from India and Pakistan supported by three mentors. Eight cross-border teams produced eight digital stories. Each film was shot on both sides and tied together with themes of shared culture, history and tradition.

Besides films, music is another great unifier and social media has inadvertently played a major role in bringing music lovers of the two nations together. Take the case of Coke Studio Pakistan. Even more popular in India than the Indian edition, the music show has taken Pakistani talent to millions in the subcontinent and created a cosy corner in YouTube for cross-border fan exchanges.

Its Season 14 megahit Pasoori by Ali Sethi and Shae Gill, garnered a staggering 532 million views on YouTube in a year of release, and was the unofficial anthem outside the Melbourne Cricket Ground after the India-Pakistan cricket match at the ICC T20 World Cup in October 2022. On their part, Pakistani YouTubers like Mian Adnan have

helped popularize the television show *Indian Idol* in Pakistan, spotlighting their favourite performances and episodes.

The internet has opened several avenues for peaceniks to get together and for culture lovers to learn more about the richness and diversity of South Asia as a whole. Facebook groups such as India-Pakistan Heritage Club and Instagram accounts like Brown History curate news and stories from across the subcontinent, and create room for dialogue. Peoples networks like Southasia Peace Action Network (SAPAN), of which this writer is a founder member, are creating safe spaces for discussion and activism across the region. Sapan has undertaken an online petition '*Milne Do*' campaigning for easing of visa restrictions in the subcontinent.

In multiple fora, and in diverse forms the people of India and Pakistan are reaching out and connecting with each other. As the Rotarian Ghai stated, "No matter what the governments say, the common people know that peace is beneficial for all of us."

Peace is a process, not an event; We're running a marathon, not a sprint!

By Beena Sarwar

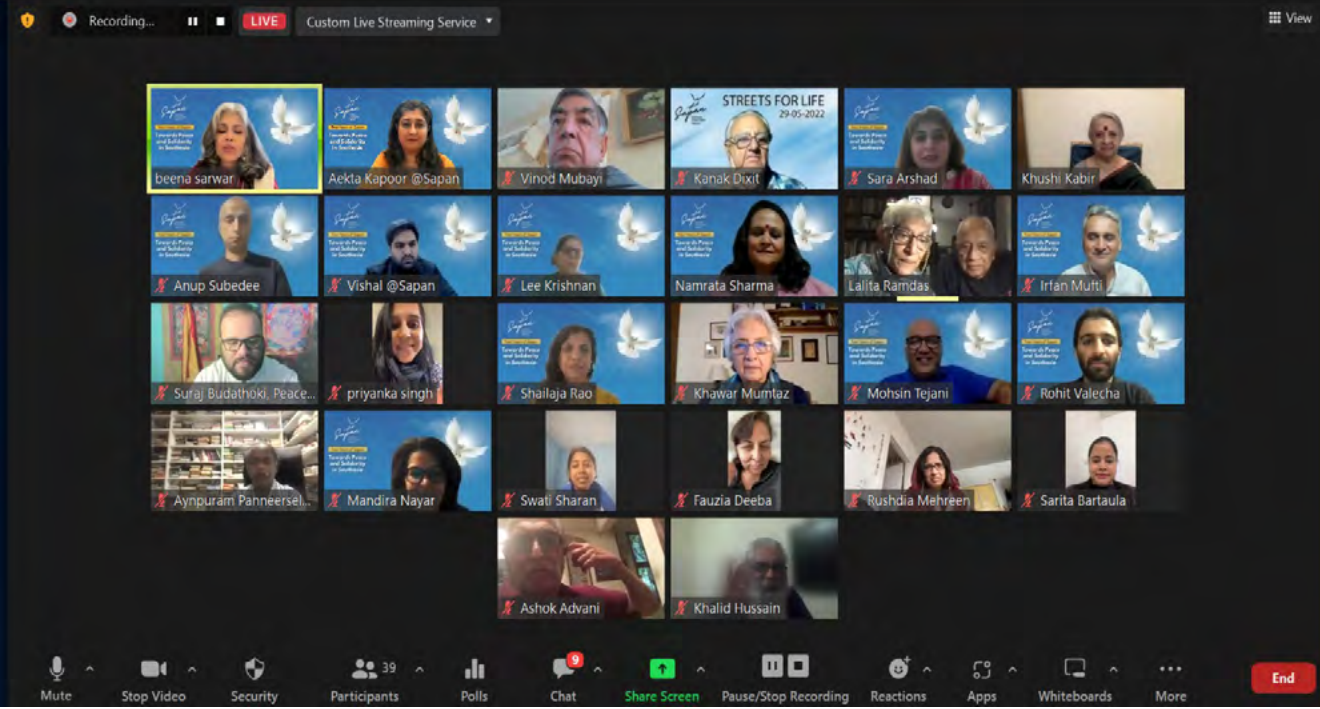


In March 2021, some 80 friends and comrades met to discuss the felt urgency of moving the needle on this seemingly intractable conflict between two nuclear-armed neighbours Pakistan and India whose tensions hang a shadow over the whole region and prevent it from prospering.

Like many of us there, I have been involved in peace building activities for decades—since the first meeting of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy in 1995, traveling to New Delhi with mentors like Dr. Mubashir Hasan, Asma Jahangir and I.A. Rehman. I still remember the time when an Indian participant proposed that the name of the new forum should begin with 'Pakistan' and not 'India'. Since then, I have been part of several regional initiatives: founding editor of Himal Southasian (<https://www.himalmag.com>), board member of Panos South Asia, besides participating in media and human rights seminars convened by networks like South Asia Forum for Human Rights (SAFHR).

Thus, it was not unexpected that In 2010, I was invited to take editorial lead on Aman Ki Asha (Hope for Peace), a multimedia platform launched by the largest media groups of either country, the Jang Group in Pakistan and the Times of India. This brought my journalism and activism together, and over the next few years I saw first-hand the power of corporate branding and marketing.





Discussion held by SAPAN during COVID / Source: SAPAN

Overnight, billboards came up in Mumbai announcing 'LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR' barely a year after the horrific Mumbai attacks. Over the next few years, Aman Ki Asha mainstreamed peace in a way that had never been done before. What had been 'siloe'd' activities of left-liberal intellectual circles, gushed out onto the streets. This coincided with the rise of social media and multiple unauthorized Aman Ki Asha accounts cropped up on Facebook.

The marketing sections of both media groups collaboratively put together a brand logo, and got musical giants like Rahat Fateh Ali Khan and Shankar Mahadevan to sing Gulzar's iconic poem 'Nazr mein rehte ho jab tum nazar nahi aatey' (You are in my sight even when you are out of sight). They also got Gulzar to recite the verse 'Ankhon ko visa nahi lagta, Sapno ke sarhad koi nahi' (Eyes don't need a visa, dreams have no frontiers).

Cross border Legends like Amitabh Bachchan and Zia Mohyeddin came

together for poetry recitals, and popular music groups like Indian Ocean and Strings performed mega-concerts together. There were *mushairas*, including an all-woman one in Karachi, where the incapacitated Mehdi Hasan was brought on a wheelchair to meet the Indian participants. But political constraints after 2014 stifled the growing Aman ki Asha constituency.

By then I had moved to the Boston area and was interacting with Southasians in the diaspora, while retaining contacts with those back in the region. It was at the time of the COVID pandemic that in March 2021, we friends and comrades at an online meeting discussed the importance of initiating a South Asian Peace Action Network.

An India-Pakistan bilateral focus was not getting us where we wanted. We thought, if France and Germany can come together in the European Union, why can't India and Pakistan come together in a Southasian Union or Federation? It was a very participatory affair, veteran peace activist Kuldip

Nayar's granddaughter compiled the overall report, a law student in Shimla designed the logo, the editor of a women's magazine in Delhi built the website southasiapeace.com that another volunteer in Ghaziabad funded.

SAPAN began holding discussions on the last Sunday of every month after a series of curated events themed 'Imagine! Neighbours in Peace'. Our first event was planned around #KhelneDo, and the campaign for visas in South Asia #MilneDo, but the COVID crisis obliged us to re-pivot and convert it at the last minute to a meeting highlighting 'Cross-border empathy and cooperation in the time of Covid'.

We carried this theme forward in our next event on the last Sunday of May 2021, titled 'South Asian solidarity in the time of Covid: Sharing grief, inspiration, hope and strategies' where we discussed the common challenges posed by the pandemic and adopted a declaration calling on

Southasian societies to collaborate to tackle the crisis and plan responses to similar challenges.

We also agreed to write 'Southasia' as one word in a bid to restore "some of the historical unity of our common living space, without wishing any violence on the existing nation states," following the lead of [Himal Southasian](#). By August 2021, we did a soft launch of the [SAPAN News](#) syndicated service, a voluntary media outlet.

By moving forward in collaboration with various old and new partners, building bridges in the region and among diaspora, connecting individuals and organizations, and amplifying voices calling for peace, we hope to build momentum towards a better future, if not for us then for our coming generations.



'To kaisa laga aapko humara Pakistan'

By Malini Subramaniam



When I received a WhatsApp message inviting me to a conference in Pakistan, I was convinced it was spam. Nevertheless, I responded – you think Indians will be given visas to visit your country? The invitation was to attend the 4th Asma Jahangir Conference on Crisis of Constitutionalism in South Asia.

I think for many Indians, visiting Pakistan is a dream, like visiting a distant cousin who could be hated and loved at the same time. Loved due to the past connect and hated owing to the propaganda that has been successfully generated. There are more rumours around this distant cousin than factual narration, especially as one watches prime-time television following a major incident—Pulwama Attack! Attack on Parliament! Attack on Taj Hotel in Mumbai! An incident and the entire country is painted rogue.

An acquaintance with whom I shared news of my prospective visit reacted, “you are a journalist from Bastar region. You’ve had your share of brute state force, do you want a repeat?” I admit my heart pounded at the thought of effigies burning and men shouting at my gate, with police jeeps hovering around my house, as if evidence had become manifest to back their accusation that I was ‘anti-national’, ‘anti-development’ and a ‘Maoist sympathiser’. But the thought of meeting a distant cousin in that distant land overcame my misgivings.

As a child I was not cradled with poignant stories of life on the other side of the border. But back in the 1980s, while working in Lakhat, a village in Gujarat’s Kutch district 40 km from Pakistan, a villager’s comment stayed with me, “1947 sudhi ame bhai hata, aena pachhi dushman” (we were brothers until 1947, after which we became enemies).



The Punjabi family I had married into, had moved to Delhi after partition. The stories of my mother-in-law from her village Farooka in Sargodha district stayed with me. The village Sarpanch had helped Hindus migrate to India safely. Would there be descendants to meet up with?

After much scrutiny, the Pakistan Consulate finally granted a visa for five days to Lahore city. Request for a visit to Sargodha, 200 kilometres away, was tersely dismissed. Along with three other ‘delegates’, we crossed over at Wagah after some questioning from Indian intelligence.

“Where are you from?” One Intelligence officer asked. Worried that Bastar would raise unnecessary alarm, I said Raipur. “What a woman Asma was”, he said, as he peered at my papers. “She used to cross over quite frequently.

She would ask to be taken to a room with no cctvs, ‘I need to smoke’, she’d say”, he laughed. How much larger-than-life the remarkable Asma Jahangir was, struck me when I entered the conference hall in the marquee pavilion which seated 5,000 people! Flashing on various screens was Asma’s exemplary human rights work in Pakistan and abroad and videos of Asma fighting it out in her younger days with the authorities. Also, a large photograph of an unabashed Asma blowing smoke from her cigarette.

Asma’s two daughters, Munizae Jahangir and Sulema Jahangir, were holding up the mantle of their mother’s fiercely defiant legacy of freedom of expression and the struggle for rights and justice. Alongside stellar dignitaries, ministers, Justices and Ambassadors were full throated human rights groups from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkwah

(KP). Climate Change and human rights activist Baba Jan from Gilgit Baltistan emotionally spoke of the disenfranchisement of the people of his region. By the second day of the conference, the hall was loud with slogans against the army. Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's closing address was repeatedly interrupted by slogans seeking the release of jailed activists. Anxious moments followed when it was learnt that cases were filed against Pashtun activist and parliamentarian Manzoor Pashteen for criticizing the army. Munizae Jahangir was unfazed. "Aise conference me itna to banta hi ha" (such things are par for the course in a conference like this). Controversy dogged the conference, but it also established it as a platform for free speech and free expression.

My session, 'Media under Siege in India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan' was as vibrant. Hamid Mir, a well known journalist from Pakistan, spoke about how journalism and journalists were under attack. Alongside personal attacks declaring him to be 'anti-Pakistan', his programme was banned from the channel. "Journalism continues to be under attack regardless of which government is in power", he said. His comments resonated with me, given the continuing attack on journalists, even as governments changed hands in Chhattisgarh and India. Experiences of 'organized trolling' targeted at journalists as an orchestrated strategy to attack freedom of expression, were shared across South Asia. In addition, government efforts to control the media through various draconian laws was a common thread linking the South Asian countries.

As Pakistan struggled with the draconian PECA (Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act), Indian media especially the progressive Digital Media has to contend with the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics code) Rules, 2021 enabling the ruling dispensation to discipline digital news platforms and OTT video content providers.

Even as we were discussing the grim situation of freedom of the press in South Asia, came the shocking news of the killing of veteran Pakistan Journalist, Arshad Sharif in Nairobi, Kenya. Although his death was officially stated to be 'a case of 'mistaken identity', claiming that his car was shot at mistaking it to be another car involved in a case of child abduction, there was much concern and outrage in Pakistan media as 49-year-old Sharif was a known critic of the Pakistani establishment. Since August 2021, he had been living in exile, following multiple charges, including sedition, pressed against him. Under pressure, an independent probe was initiated by the Pakistan Prime Minister and the Kenyan Police. The results have yet to be made public. However, according to reports, the 'targeted killing' of Sharif is not being ruled out. It was a harsh reminder of the serious threat to independent media in Pakistan. For us across the border, the brutal death of Sharif was reminiscent of the killing of Danish Siddique, an Indian photographer in Afghanistan in 2021. His family continues to struggle to get nearer the truth of his fateful attack by the Taliban.

Out of the conference hall as we sauntered off to have tea, a couple of young lawyers congratulated me on India's

win over Pakistan in the T-20 match, gushing over Virat Kohli's fighting style. In their statements, I found sheer joy of the game and praise for the players, not how an Indian or a Pakistani competitively played. My thoughts trailed back home where I suspected the joy would have been celebrated doubly for having won over 'rival' Pakistan.

Finding me distracted, the young students asked if I was missing home due to Diwali. "Ma'am we celebrated with our Indian friends before the college closed", they said displaying pictures on their smart phone where the Diwali [celebration](#) appeared to be played with colours.

With only a day left before our visas ran out, I rushed to the celebrated Anarkali Bazaar and was guided to Jalandhar

Motichoor House in Islampura, the place where motichoor laddus originated. A fellow customer stepped forward and asked the shopkeeper to pack half a kilo for us on his behalf. "Itna to banta hai hamare padosiyon ke liye" (At least this much I need to do for my neighbours), he said.

We rushed to the Lahore Fort passing by the Government College Lahore, where my mother-in-law's father had studied. As the light faded, we wished to take one look of the fort from the terrace that was barred from entry. The supervisor agreed "to let our guests from the neighbourhood" have a quick look. Before we left, he pressed us to have some tea or a cold drink. "I must return the hospitality showered on me by my Indian Hindu friend when I visited them in Punjab", he explained.

Hindu Family from Sindh at immigration section / Source: Author



Initially, his friend's mother was upset, he recollected, as he overheard her saying, "*maas machhi khane wale ko ghar kaise le aaya?*" (how could you bring a meat-eater into our house?). He turned to reassure her. "*Bibiji, aapke haathon ka banaya prasad ki tarah khaunga*" (I will eat the food made by you like a holy offering). Touched, she spread a *dari* and cooked him a vegetarian meal, "*jiska swad abhi tak hai*" (the taste of which I still have). That was ten years back. I wondered if he would find the same hospitality today, amidst growing enmity towards the neighbour.

When I wanted to visit the nearest market, a man guided us to the colourfully painted 'passenger tempos' and insisting on paying the fare to the auto driver—*itna to banta hai hamare padosiyon ke liye*.

At the border, the guards on the Pakistan side smiled and asked how the visit was and clearly our expressions showed that all five of us were delighted. "If people feel happy visiting us, what are these for", he said spreading his arms to the huge grilled gates. '*Ye sab hatne chahiye*' (all this should be removed), he said.

On the Indian side, at the immigration section, the officer observed "*is baar aapka Diwali galat jagah par ho gaya*" (this time you celebrated Diwali in the wrong place). Not at all, I wanted to scream, I could not have spent it better than with my distant cousin whose warmth was brimming at every step I took.

Waiting patiently, we saw a huddled group of family members, including children and women clad in sarees with a *ghunghat* drawn over their faces. They were Hindu families from Sindh. "We are heading for a family wedding in Gujarat", a man explained. He had visited Gujarat to meet his extended family two years back. Now there was a wedding, and he was taking his son and his family there. Asked if he and others wish to opt for Indian citizenship now that India has opened up citizenship for Hindus from our neighbouring countries, he shook his head, "*yaha theek hai aisa koi dikkat nahin*" (things are fine here, we don't have any problems as such). In turn, after listening to what brought us to Pakistan, he asked, "*To kaisa laga aapko humara Pakistan*".

South Asian women marching through the ages:

Aurat March Pakistan 2023

By Tahira Abdullah



It is time to recall the immortal words of our friend and fellow activist Mumtaz Begum's iconic feminist poem-turned-marching-anthem across a swathe of South Asia: "*Darya ki qasam, maujon ki qasam, yeh taana-baana badlay ga*" (we affirm on oath, by the river, by the waves, change will come).

Who would have imagined that across Pakistan, the innocuous Urdu slogan "*Mera Jism Meri Marzi*" (MJMM) (my body, my choice) would inexplicably be transformed into a national matchstick after the initial Aurat (women's) March on International Women's Day (IWD), 8 March 2018. Six years on, and six marches later, the furore against the march simply refuses to die down. In fact, it escalated violently in March 2023.



Lest we forget, let us reiterate yet again—especially for the newer generations—that South Asian women have been marching through the ages, irrespective of class, caste, religion, race, ethnicity, culture, language or geography. We were weaned on stories of our foremothers' bravery and courage, particularly facing the brutal law enforcement agencies (LEAs) of the British Raj. We recall, with justifiable pride, our grandmothers and mothers striving for freedom, independence and liberation from colonial subjugation.

Today, we are simply carrying on our ancestors' long tradition of marching—for our fundamental human rights, democracy, equality, justice, peace, freedom from economic exploitation, and to smash the remnants of cruel patriarchy, often cloaked in the façade of religion, culture or tradition.

In Pakistan, for several decades, women's rights defenders and activists have been marching on 8 March to observe International Women's Day, and, since 1983, on 12 February every year—Pakistani Women's Day. This marks the brutal crackdown in Lahore on a small group of unarmed women, members of the feminist platform Women's Action Forum (WAF), and the Punjab Women Lawyers Association (PWLA). They were peacefully protesting against the draconian 'Evidence

law' proposed to be promulgated by Pakistan's third military dictator, President General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88).

Since 2018, the traditional IWD marches and rallies held annually in many cities across all federal provinces, and in the federal capital Islamabad, have been transformed into the Aurat March (AM), organized by a younger, more radical cohort of women, men and non-binary-transpersons. Their slogans, posters, placards, banners, songs, dances, skits are more daring, outspoken, bold and 'in your face' than even those of the past four decades of our modern feminist movement—which too were 'shocking' and 'unacceptable' at the time, both for the unelected regimes, as well as the orthodox conservative majority.

Naturally, there has been a huge backlash against the Aurat Marches. Not just from the expected quarters, but also from a number of otherwise progressive women and men—including a few prominent self-avowed feminists, literati, entertainment celebrities and media personalities. The 'miltabishment' too continues to feel particularly threatened by some of the slogans, which are not confined to gender issues but are wide-ranging, in line with the feminist view that "we are half of humanity" and "all issues are women's issues". Obviously, this acts as a red rag to the patriarchal bull.

The backlash to AM 2018 has led to violent and escalating repercussions, starting the very next year in 2019, when municipal and district authorities warned AM organizers against chanting the "provocative" MJMM slogan. Naturally, this warning was flouted during AM marches and rallies organized in large and small cities countrywide. We chanted it in unison, even louder and even more frequently!

At the IWD 2020 march in Islamabad (pre-COVID pandemic), a violent mob comprising of workers of the prominent religio-political parties (elected politicians as well as unelected militant wings), joined by extremist groups, physically attacked the unarmed AM participants on the road, with sticks, stones and shoes. A few women got hurt, requiring first aid, stitches and bandages. There was a stampede. In line with their own retrogressive ideology, most of the uniformed personnel on duty acted as silent spectators, with many blaming the victims rather than the attackers.

Nevertheless, after a brief pause, and negotiations with local authorities, the march resumed and continued on to its destination—D Chowk near Parliament, where a massive peaceful rally was successfully held, with fiery speeches and a substantive programme.

In 2021, with undiminished resolve and with health protocols in place, the Aurat March was held in a few cities, despite the COVID pandemic and intermittent lockdowns. This time some members of the Islamabad Aurat Azaadi March (AAM) organizing committee faced a particularly dangerous aftermath, in the form of court cases filed in various cities, by unknown "private citizens", alleging that the AAM constituted "blasphemy" against the majority religion and its sacred pillars. In the past, many such accusations—the overwhelming vast majority of which turned out to be false, baseless and unfounded—have provoked extra-judicial killings by frenzied vigilante mobs during court trials.

The AAM backlash was hugely traumatic, continuing for many months in different cities. Eventually, the media frenzy died down, but the damage was done. AAM organizers in particular, and members, supporters, participants of the march in general, had been called anti-state, anti-majority religion, agnostics, atheists and worthy of being eliminated in this de facto theocratic state.

Against such a backdrop, the 2022 Islamabad Aurat Azaadi March was called off by the original organizing committee, but a small group of feminist activists got together informally to



Source: She the People, Women March Pakistan



Source: Akhtar Soomro/ Reuters

organize an Aurat March to mark IWD on 8 March. The story of what transpired can be [read here](#).

This year, IWD 2023 was destined to be the worst for the Islamabad Aurat March as forewarned by the refusal of official permit/permission (NOC) and police protection during the preparations for the March process as [detailed elsewhere](#).

What actually transpired on IWD 8 March 2023 in Islamabad is a sordid saga. The police first put up concrete obstructions and blockades using large shipping containers. Barbed wire fencing was erected in a wide circle around all roads leading to the ground outside the National Press Club (NPC), in order to prevent participants from reaching the Aurat March starting venue.

Defiant unarmed marching young women were turned upon by the

police who resorted to unwarranted, unprovoked verbal abuse and also unleashed physical violence, including *lathi* (baton) charge. Women and NB-transpersons were manhandled. Also, in what appeared to be a pre-planned tactic, the uniformed forces managed to incite a scuffle between a few NB-transpersons and a small section of the media, who were present in huge numbers to cover the event.

Obviously, this gratuitous violence against a women's peaceful rally went viral on the media—print, electronic, social—both nationally and internationally. It prodded the powerful to “take notice” (sic). The Inspector-General of Police (IGP) immediately suspended those responsible, especially uniformed officers caught live on camera. The federal Interior Minister made a conciliatory statement live on national television, although stopping

short of an actual apology, and, ridiculing our demands for his resignation and the termination of the services of the IGP and his senior subordinates.

The AM was eventually resumed, and reached its destination at D Chowk, where the planned rally was held. But the violent fracas had left a bitter taste and unsettling questions. Who ordered the police to turn on the marchers? What did those at the helm of power hope to achieve? This shameful episode is reminiscent of the tribulations of all those who bravely struggled for democracy, before us and with us, throughout those four dark eras of military dictatorships, spanning a total of 34 out of Pakistan's 75 years.

An appropriate comment capturing the spirit of the Aurat March 2023 is that of Shehzil Malik, an artist-illustrator whose posters depict women's self-assertion:

“My posters show Pakistani women as strong, opinionated, loud. Aurat March unites women across Pakistan, marching to demand our social and economic rights, an end to discrimination and gender-based violence. We women are

now taking charge of our own destiny and paving the way for our daughters. I want these posters to portray [strong] women unlike the representation we usually see of pretty, docile, subservient, sweet women. We mean business. We are bold.”

We know that women and NB-transpersons, like elephants, have long memories. Depending on the nature and extent of the wrong done to us, or to those we hold dear, we might possibly forgive, but we seldom forget. Hence, as South Asian feminists, we hereby pledge never to forget the perpetration and perpetrators of patriarchy, sexism, chauvinism and misogyny. We do this in the name of all the lost victims and all the brave survivors. We will continue to honour their memory. We will continue to speak out in our ongoing struggle for peace, gender equality and justice for all: *“tu bolaygi, moonh kholaygi, tab hee toh zamaana badlayga”* (change will come only if and when you speak up as women).

Civic Resilience in Post-Pandemic Times

By Vijayan M J



Being placed as the chief functionary of a Forum, in whose name organizing programmes in India has become not only difficult but impossible, is no fun. Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace & Democracy (PIPFPD) has become one such entity, in whose name organizing a programme or endorsing a signature campaign has become risky and even scary. Friends in civil society offered friendly advice, asking us to endorse campaigns as individuals! The politics of hatred, patronised by the power to silence, has made sure that Pakistan and equally Kashmir, have become bad words that civil society must keep away from.

However, as always, we South Asians find new courage and purpose in our commitments. The story of civic resilience during the multiple waves of the pandemic is one such that shines a silver lining amidst dark clouds.

Social analysis has taken an interesting turn with the new found temporal binary of pre-COVID and post-COVID segregation. In countries like India, where pre-COVID days witnessed people's extreme resentment against government policies and action—farmer's protest, students' agitation, and women-led anti-CAA/NRC movement—the pandemic was indeed a blessing in disguise for authoritarian regimes. The fact that a health emergency allowed the curbing of people-to-people interactions, political dialogue and mobilization, couldn't have come at a more fortuitous time for despots. Social distance instead of physical distance, complete lockdown instead of regulated movements, panic centralization instead of collective decision-making—all became easy tools for dealing with the pandemic more as a law and order crisis than a public health one.

What followed was the non-resistant conversion of a democracy into a complete police state. The systemic steps included water cannons and lathi charges; indiscriminate spraying of anti-viral pesticides on masses of migrants; enforced emergency lockdowns and public punishing of violators. Journalists and activists were arrested, protest sites were clamped down upon and people were herded for vaccinations.



Source: Covid Truths

These measures, clubbed with the natural fear of the virus and the ensuing death, silenced the people's will to dissent, like never before. No amount of state terror could have done what the virus and the counter-measures could do. In hindsight, much of it was brutal punitive action weaponized against dissenters and aimed at creating long-term public fear.

Clubbed with authoritarian repression against civil society organizations and curbs on media, the state measures at curtailing the spread of the pandemic became an alibi for further anti-people actions. Gripped by the fear of the virus and the terror about the absolute powers that the state accrued during the health emergency, the people at large and much of civil society in particular, surrendered to their fate.

With the health emergency getting worse by the day, and the government's continuing inaction to respond to people's distress, social movements and people's collectives resorted to online action as there was no opportunity left for physical interaction. These ranged from appeals and coordination, that is, provision of help during a medical emergency, coordinating the rescue of stranded migrant workers and organizing food for those who could not have survived otherwise. PIPFPD joined hands with Eidhi Foundation and others in extending humanitarian help during the distress days. The Forum issued statements and appeals to get arrested fishers released from Indian and Pakistani jails, while making efforts for joint relief operations on both sides.

People stepped up compassionate actions to compensate for the state, which abandoned them during the crisis. A huge number of civic actions were aimed at medical solidarity, food solidarity and travel solidarity for those in crisis. Many others stepped up efforts for online meetings and coordinated action.

Such groups that believed in collective actions and making a collective future accelerated the number of online gatherings, brainstorming consultations and political strategizing sessions. PIPFPD too took the leap by organizing the *Guftugu* (conversations) monthly series. There was a celebration of the independence days of India and Pakistan together online and the commemoration of the memorial of martyrs on Shaheed Diwas (Martyrs day). Also, advocacy interventions targeted the issue of fish-workers' arrests. Such programmes were not just occasions for brainstorming, but important opportunities for connecting and virtually seeing each other and singing together during a crisis. They instilled the faith that people were together in difficult times.

During the early stages of the pandemic, PIPFPD also carried out a very important political campaign in its history: the 'Counting Days' campaign. The campaign was initiated in the aftermath of 5 August 2019, when Indian Administered Jammu & Kashmir was ripped of its constitutional authority and the state was partitioned into two union territories of J&K and Ladakh.

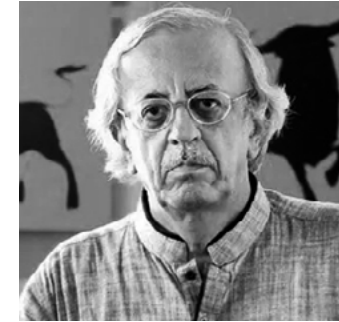
As the pandemic subsided and lives returned to a semblance of normalcy after almost 24 months, efforts to seek

truth, accountability and justice for what had happened to people during the pandemic and lockdown were initiated too. PIPFPD India joined hands with more than 200 civil society organizations to organize the 'Public Inquiry Committee and People's Commission' process (PC-PIC) in India, to look into the varied aspects of Death, Debt and Distress caused during the pandemic and lockdown. Holding the authorities accountable took a new turn with the most marginalized and historically oppressed communities joining the process to hold people's inquiries and public hearings into the why, what and who of the pandemic governance. It is indeed a strong political message that the forest workers, fisherfolk, mining affected communities, the handloom weavers, the waste pickers and the domestic workers, have all joined such a process of collective rectification, setting new norms of accountability.

New forms and creative means of resistance are a must in the post-pandemic global order. Only new ways of community engagement and people's mobilization towards strengthening dissent can defeat the growing power of authoritarianism and majoritarianism, being unleashed in India and South Asia. People ought to be strengthened for this. Women and youth need space, energy and a bolstering of ideas in the process, so as to lead strategic and decisive struggles. The organized and formal civil society needs to pave the way for such a process, rather than be deterred by archaic government regulations and control. It may well be civil society's moment in history to come out of the shadows and make a bright new beginning.

Lives in turmoil after being caught at sea

By Jatin Desai



When someone is in need, they try to reach you, try to call you, and sometimes they do that repeatedly. But if you don't respond, that person might think you are not there for them anymore. This becomes all the more important when someone is in prison, and more difficult if the prison is in a different country. This has been the situation of Pakistani and Indian fishworkers who find themselves imprisoned in a foreign country.

The arrest of the fishworkers, the impact on their families and their own state of helplessness in the face of the immense uncertainty surrounding them—all this leaves me personally shattered. The least I can do is respond to their calls, empathize and extend them support. Their family members need the support of others to raise these concerns at a larger level, so that these fishworkers can be released and repatriated to their home countries. Not only are the fishworkers being held hostage without any substantial charges against them, but some have died in prisons and their bodies have taken two to three months to be repatriated.

Fishworkers in Indian and Pakistani prisons

In the latest count, there are 654 Indian fishermen in prison in Karachi and 83 Pakistani fishermen in Gujarat in India. Of the Indian fishermen, 631 have completed their sentences and the required obligation of establishing nationality. Similarly, several Pakistani fishermen in India have completed their sentences and verified their nationality. Although the bilateral Agreement on Consular Access (2008) Sec. V states, "Both Governments agree to release and repatriate persons within one month of confirmation of their national status and completion of sentences", both governments have shown no intention of implementing this section. Interestingly, both governments have promptly implemented other sections of the Agreement.

On 8 August 2022, a visiting delegation of women from the fishing community of Gujarat and Diu, whose husbands and sons are in Pakistan's prisons, met the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar along with Jatin Desai, Jivanbhai Jungi and Lalubhai Patel (BJP MP from Diu). Despite some assurances, there has been no action.

Impact on their families

There is no communication between the imprisoned fishworkers and their family members. Although prisoners legally have a right to communicate with their family members, the tense relations between the two countries make that impossible. Before the pandemic, imprisoned fishworkers communicated with their families through letters but that practice has yet to resume. Online communication between prisoners and their family members could be an easy option.

The arrest of fishworkers not only destroys their lives, but also those of their family members as they are usually the primary wage earners. It is all the more frustrating when they get to know that all the formalities have been completed but no action is being taken for their release. With no institutional mechanism for their return in place, return and repatriation entirely depend on the political will of the governments.

Fishworkers and logistics in the sea

Fishworkers, generally, do not cross the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) intentionally. They stray into the other nation's waters mainly due to gusty winds or heavy currents. Once arrested, they lose around two years of their lives. The Gujarat government gives an allowance of Rs 300 per day to the families of arrested fishworkers for the period spent in prison in Pakistan.

Only first-time arrested fishworkers are entitled, and not the families of those arrested for the second or third time. It is noteworthy that these fishworkers are obliged to take these extreme risks, because of the government's no accountability policy for the depletion of the coast and fisheries resources in the Gujarat sea.

Fishworkers will go where the fish is and the fish is in the deep waters due to the industrialization on the coast. Comparatively fewer Pakistani fishworkers stray into Indian waters because their coastal waters are far less polluted. Most Pakistani fishworkers get caught near Sir Creek where the border is not demarcated.

Apart from the Agreement on Consular Access, there is the United

Nations Convention on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). India and Pakistan are parties to the convention. UNCLOS states that arrested crew and vessels need to be promptly released after "posting a reasonable bond or other security".

India and Pakistan need to see the issue of fishworkers' arrest from a humanitarian perspective. Both countries always use the word "inadvertently" in their communication. If fishworkers cross the border inadvertently, why should they and their families suffer for it? We urge both governments to implement signed agreements and conventions with all seriousness and compassion towards the fishing community.

The article was penned in the month of March 2023. Subsequent to this 220 prisoners were released (198 from Pakistan and the rest from India) and more releases are scheduled in the month of June and July 2023. The release of fisherpeople comes as a result of an active campaign by the National Commission of Human Rights (NCHR, Pakistan) orchestrated by Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD), National Fishworkers Forum (NFF), Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF), Legal Aid Society, Eidhi foundation and others.



Far from home: Fisheries Department officials interrogate arrested Pakistani fishermen at Okha Port, in Kutch district of Gujarat
Source: PTI

Borderless Forum: Activity Bulletins & Briefs



AIDWA Poster

Benazir Bhutto: South Asian feminist icon

Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was claimed as a South Asian Feminist Icon by the organizers of All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) 13th national conference in Thiruvananthapuram Kerala. Across the state, AIDWA the women's wing of CPI-M, has put up huge portraits celebrating significant women, and Benazir Bhutto is one among them announcing the 6 January 2023 Conference at a prominent square set up at Palayam opposite the city's famous martyrs' column and adjacent to the British-era market Connemara.

The red coloured Poster mentions that Bhutto was the first women prime minister of Pakistan, who was honoured with nine honorary doctorates, including one from Harvard University.

The poster stirred a hornet's nest with the state's BJP leaders slamming the left party for celebrating a Prime Minister from Pakistan who is accused of inciting cross border 'proxy war' against India.

4

Close Encounter with a South Asian rockstar – Prof. Taimur Rahman

By Samaa



Samaa with Taimur and Rashid Rahman | Source: Author

Initially, when I came to Delhi in the hope of increasing my exposure to different ideas and spaces, I was at a loss, because I realized how far behind I was from my peers who had spent a lot more of their time engrossed in books and conversations about difficult topics. I was able to bridge the gap in my understanding through my involvement with the progressive left leaning student union—Student's Federation of India.

But the one person who transformed my understanding of inequality, gender, class and caste politics, was someone I had never met—Dr Taimur Rahman, a Pakistani University professor, Marxist political activist and a musician. I heard about him through friends in SFI when during the COVID lockdown, our interactions shrank to our computer

screens and I was hungry for knowledge of Marxism, feminism and a caste understanding of our society. My colleague made me a playlist on Youtube of some of Dr Rahman's videos in Urdu. I had no trouble understanding them as having lived in Hyderabad, I was familiar with the language and his articulation was designed to be comprehensible. Dr Taimur Rahman has for many years made easy-to-understand videos on Youtube explaining Marxist theory, feminist theory, philosophy, history and contemporary challenges. I think there would be few Indian students who are involved in progressive politics who have not heard of Dr Rahman. He is one of the first 'experts' a student in India—or at least in Delhi—is directed to if they wish to easily understand theory. Dr Rahman's videos in Urdu draw hundreds of students who are not comfortable with English.

Moreover, Dr Rahman is part of many of the facebook groups such as "Bollywood Marxist Musings" and even responds on the memes or videos that my comrades make. He accepts criticism and suggestions on his ideas from his viewers who largely still remain students from Pakistan but quite a few are also from India.

During the 4th Memorial AJC 2022, when I managed to accompany my mother, a journalist, to Lahore, as luck would have it, at a chance intimate dinner at Dr Rahman's father's home, he walked in. He made me feel comfortable and was full of questions of student politics back home. We spoke of cultural activism, caste and feminism. It was one of the most enriching and memorable conversations I've ever had. On my return to Delhi, my friends wanted to hear every detail of our conversation.

I know the movement of peoples between the two countries is extremely difficult. But the interaction between Dr Rahman and his many student followers in India shows that there is yearning for a more free flowing engagement and discussion between curious minds in both the countries.



India has lost 600 to 1,000 sq. km of land to China



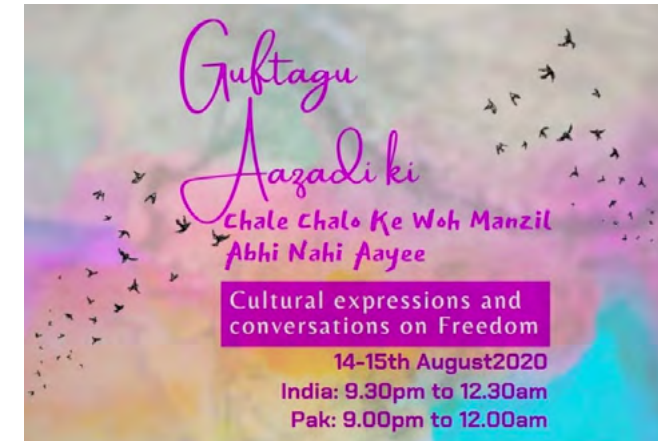
Ajay Shukla at PIPFPD meeting on 'China's Transgressions and Rising Militancy on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border'
Source: Author

At a meeting organized by PIPFPD on 'China's Transgressions and Rising Militancy on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border' in Pune in February 2023, Col. Ajai Shukla (retd.), an accomplished defence strategist, said "India has lost around 600 to 1,000 square kilometres of land to China after the 2020 invasions by the People's Liberation Army. The Indian government's curious stand denying any such loss has happened has only helped China."

Reflecting on the meanings of Indian Prime Minister's insistence that no such incursion has happened, it effectively means, he emphasised, that "China has only claimed what was theirs. China will cash on the latter meaning." He also added that Xi Jinping, President, People's Republic of China, knew that the 'muscular Hinduism' of Prime Minister Narendra Modi will not allow him to admit to any loss of territory. Moreover, while China is now engaging in talks with India, there is no discussion on giving back territory.

Other speakers present were senior journalist Jatin Desai, social activist Ramesh Awasthi, Trustee of Gandhi Bhavan Anwar Rajan, and journalist Milind Champanerkar who is also the President of the Pune Chapter of PIPFPD.

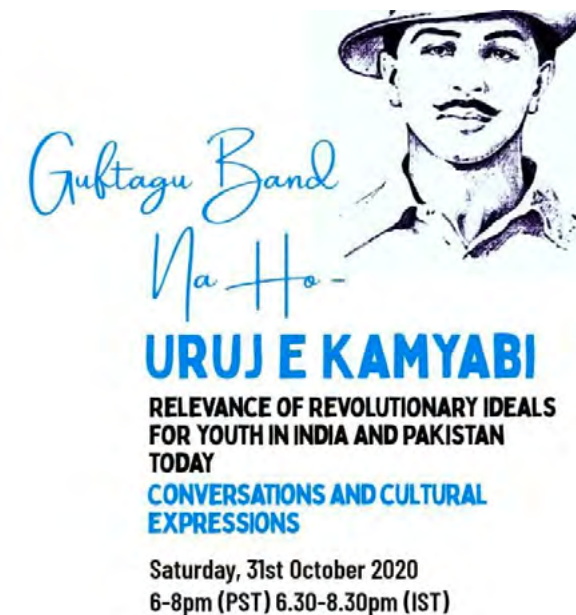
Guftagu



Guftagu Aazadi Ki
Chale Chalo Ke Woh
Manzil Abhi Nahi Aayee

Curated by
Syeda Hameed

Performances
Priya Kanungo
Ruth Zothanpuli
Rene Singh
Khalid Ahmed



Guftagu Band Na Ho
Uruj E Kamyabi

Curated by
Syeda Hameed

Speakers
Naghma Iqtidar
Banojyotsna Lahiri
Ammar Rasheed
Sunaina Arya
Madhuresh Kumar

Cultural Expressions
Azhar Shan
Hussian Haidri
Sibte Hasan and group
Vedi Sinha

Guftagu Band Na Ho
URUJ-E KAMYABI
Relevance of Revolutionary Ideals for youth in India and Pakistan today
Conversation & Cultural Expressions
Saturday, 31st October 2020
6-8pm (PST) 6.30-8.30pm (IST)

Speakers

Naghma Iqtedar, Sunaina Arya, Ammar Rasheed, Banojyotsna Lahiri, Madhuresh Kumar

Cultural Expressions

Azhar Shan, Hussain Haidry, Sibte Hasan & Group, Vedi Sinha

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Cultural Expressions
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Hussain Haidri
Sibte Hasan and group
Vedi Sinha

Afghanistan Crisis and the Region:
Civil Society Perspectives
October 4, 2021 6:30 to 8:00 pm (IST)

Moderator:
Hina Jilani (Lahore)

Afrasiab Khattak (Peshawar), Mahboub Seraj (Kabul), Judge Najla Ayoubi (Los Angeles), Pushpa Pathak (ex Kabul, New Delhi), Jawed Naqvi (New Delhi)

Zoom Meeting ID: 980 4337 3833
Passcode: 101010

Afghanistan Crisis and the Region
Civil Society Perspectives

Moderator
Hina Jilani

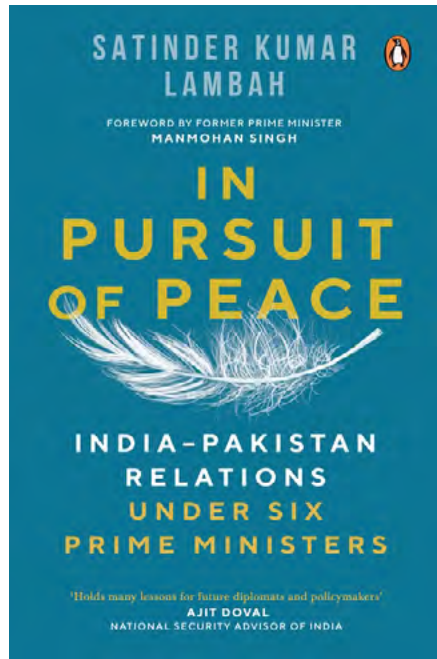
Speakers
Afrasiab Khattak
Mahboub Seraj
Judge Najla Ayoubi
Pushpa Pathak
Jawed Naqvi

From the Shelves



A Pakistan Perspective on Indian diplomacy in pursuit of peace

By Imtiaz Alam



Satinder Kumar Lambah, *"In Pursuit of Peace: Under Six Prime Ministers"*, Penguin India Viking, 2023; 384p. (INR 799)

Ambassador Satinder Kumar Lambah's memoirs about India-Pakistan relations under six prime ministers of India are quite revealing in terms of chronically detailed reminiscences of three decades of directly or indirectly handling India's policy towards Pakistan, which he perceives to be a problematic offshoot of a partition based on the 'unviable' basis of religion. Disappointingly, his memoirs are full of derogatory remarks towards an adversary not worthy of engagement on an equal footing, and whose conduct, he claims, is consistently deceitful. Despite this limiting perspective, Lambah portrays his diplomatic maneuverings, "in pursuit of peace", from the standpoint of a big brother.

A diplomat par excellence that Ambassador Lambah undoubtedly was, he presented himself as a peacemaker, but rarely deviated from his line of duty to South Block, which continued to match and counter-match its equally stubborn counterpart in Pakistan's Foreign Office. In a revealing off-the-cuff remark at a reception hosted by the South Asian Free Media Foundation (SAFMA) in Lahore, then Foreign Minister of India, Natwar Singh, while eulogizing the capacity of the babus of the Pakistan Foreign Office to keep alive the Kashmir dispute on the

international stage, remarked that diplomats from both foreign offices are equally competent, so much so that they could serve in one or the other foreign office equally well. Quite cynically, the Lahoris applauded the absurdity of maintaining the zero-sum game of diplomatic logjam driven by an animosity-by-rotation.

Not surprisingly, in his meticulous memoirs, there is not a single critical observation regarding the governments he faithfully served, except in a reference to Prime Minister I. K. Gujral, whose doctrine of non-reciprocity with neighbours, he believed, was "soft on Pakistan". His view even on the unnecessarily protracted Siachen dispute remained unyielding as reflected in the observation that "the subsequent discussions between Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto were bereft of strategic content, with the focus narrowed to just a Siachen settlement on mutual force withdrawal from recorded actual ground positions (AGPLs) and establishment of a jointly demilitarized zone (DMZ)". Neither does Lambah mention any Pakistani initiative without alluding to it some mischievous intention, nor does he appreciate peace overtures emanating from across the border, with the honourable exception of that of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

He seems enamoured with the bold, but behind the scene initiatives taken by successive military rulers: F. M. Ayub Khan, Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and Gen. Pervez Musharraf. There appears to be a consensus among former Indian High Commissioners to Islamabad that India must engage with the Pakistani army. All those warrior generals

who perpetually played the anti-India card and initiated adventurous wars are viewed as eager to mend fences with New Delhi, despite evidence of their scuttling the efforts of various prime ministers to find a *détente* with India. Pressed hard by the military establishment whose national security paradigm revolved around "India's eternal threat to Pakistan's national security", the civilian leaders proved not powerful enough to assert their will on an issue that had a direct bearing on the sustainability of a fragile democracy. It must be mentioned that the India-Pakistan conflict reinforced military authoritarianism in Pakistan, while undermining civilian authority and democratic institutions. It also promoted religious exclusivism and extremism in both countries.

Ambassador Lambah neither shows sensitivity towards the civilian leadership's dilemma nor does he attach any significance to the vibrant civil society of Pakistan which has been consistently fighting martial rule and the warmongers. For Pakistan's misguided patriots, Lambah's memoirs will be quite exasperating to read, about how successive military dictators, notwithstanding their policy fixation on the "eternal enemy" card, tried to conclude at the same time a No War/Peace and Cooperation treaty with India. It should be an eye-opener for Pakistani hawks who drum up anti-India chauvinism at the behest of their masters.

Being a displaced child of the bloody partition and a migrant from a "migrant state", Lambah selectively picks up references to prove his argument against the creation of Pakistan on the

“unviable” basis of religion. But he conveniently ignores the minority question that remains tumultuous in all three countries of the subcontinent, especially with the rise of fundamentalism in Pakistan and Hindu majoritarian nationalism in India.

Political scientist Mohammad Waseem in his book *Political Conflict in Pakistan* (2022) writes, “Pakistan got out of India. But India did not get out of Pakistan. That has made all the difference. The genesis of the first major conflict in Pakistan can be traced to the mandatory requirement for Pakistan to de-Indianize itself ... It became an unconscious and instinctive commitment to living with the new ‘other’, mainly across, but also within, the border ... (subsequently) the rise of religion as a marker and shaper of the national identity first in Pakistan and a generation or two later in India.” Was partition, then, a “closure” or a “rupture”, ponders Ranabir Samaddar in *Partition Reshaping States and Minds*, reminding that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru thought “Plan of partition offered a way out and we took it.” But, Sanjay Chaturvedi in *The Excess of Geopolitics: Partition of British India* questions “whether the partition is a solution to the conflict or a breeding ground of the conflict itself.”

In India, partition is seen as “The Great Divide” of Indian civilization. Distinguished historians like Romila Thapar have questioned this assumption of a monolithic nation or an Aryan ‘race’ or civilization in *The Penguin History of Early India* (2003). Despite the violence of partition (which the Congress Party leadership shares responsibility

for because it rejected the loose federalist scheme propounded by the Cabinet Mission Plan), the menace of the two-nation theory continues to haunt all three (former) parts of British India, especially with the rise of majoritarian communalism. Regarding Pakistan’s evolution toward a “military state”, which was premised on a self-serving “eternal-enemy threat” from India, various independent scholars attribute it to the “over-developed” state structure of Pakistan. It was reinforced by India’s rejectionist view about the creation and survival of Pakistan and its persistent insistence on the Nehruvian version of a Monroe Doctrine in its sphere of influence in South Asia. If India felt threatened by Pakistan’s alliance with the US, let us not forget, Pakistan suffered dismemberment and sought countervailing strategic alignments.

The high point of diplomacy between India and Pakistan was during the regimes of the brutal military dictator Gen. Zia-ul-Haq—the architect of the Afghan and Kashmir jihads—and that of PM Indira Gandhi. They nearly signed a Friendship Treaty/No War Pact, which eventually foundered on Gandhi’s insistence on bilateralism in Article IV, and non-grant of foreign bases in Article V (2). Lambah disdains understanding the logic of Pakistan’s justification for joining US military blocks, that is, a medium-sized country living next to a huge but hostile neighbour seeking safety in global alliances directed at the Soviet Union, a country close to India. Seemingly that same logic has prodded India to join US-led QUAD against China. Also, Lambah conveniently ignores Home Minister

L K Advani’s offer of military bases to the US following 9/11. Faced with a bigger neighbour and the potential or perceived threat from a militarily more powerful India, Pakistani leaders from PM Liaquat Ali Khan onwards sought to counter the military imbalance in favour of India by joining US-led military blocks. As Lambah correctly asserts, the Cold War between the two superpowers further pushed the subcontinent into opposite camps.

Since the 1950s and the change in international alignments, India’s policy towards Pakistan and Kashmir changed qualitatively. Notwithstanding India’s recourse to the UN, and the constitutional inclusion of Article 370 assuring special autonomy, there was a sea change in Indian National Congress’s position on Kashmir. Ambassador Lambah is partially correct in observing that in the early 1950s Pakistan rarely referred to the UN resolutions on Kashmir. But what democratic reason does Lambah have to defend the Indian Republic’s annexationist position on the right to self-determination of the divided and subjugated Kashmiris living on both sides of the LoC. On Kashmir, India became a status quo power and Pakistan took an irredentist position. Both consider it a territorial dispute and not an issue of a disenfranchised people. Importantly, although India continues to declare Jammu & Kashmir as an integral part of India and asks Pakistan to vacate “POK”, the government has involved Pakistan in prolonged talks based on various kinds of give and take propositions, beyond its stated official positions. So has Pakistan. Invariably, this is done behind the backs of the Kashmiri people.

Lambah informs us with choreographed details of behind-the-scene diplomacy and numerous backchannels. What he conveniently forgets is the peace mission undertaken by the real man of peace R. K. Mishra who came as the personal emissary of PM Vajpayee to discuss normalization with PM Nawaz Sharif, over the heads of the Ministries of External Affairs. It culminated in the Lahore Declaration, despite the infiltration into Kargil by Gen. Musharraf, behind the back of his PM. According to Mishra, even the PAF maps of the Kashmir region were directly provided to PM Vajpayee as he wanted to keep his initiative secret from the bureaucratic establishment. It was an out-of-the-box initiative in the spirit of Vajpayee’s dictum: *Insaniyat, Jamhooriyat and Kashmiriyat*.

Retreating from the Kargil Heights, General Musharraf had lost no time in staging a military coup against his benefactor Nawaz Sharif, and then turned to gamble on peace overtures with India. Whatever misgivings Vajpayee may have had over regime change, it did not deter him from resuming the R. K. Mishra led back-channel diplomacy. The General, however, appeared not overly keen to engage with Mishra (who complained of visa delays). Arguably, this disruption in this backchannel communication may have contributed to a seasoned Indian politician being taken by surprise when the Agra summit resulted in a fiasco. Subsequently, Vajpayee used the occasion of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad to restart the reconciliation process, but this time Vajpayee got Musharraf to commit to ending “cross-border terrorism”.

Under PM Manmohan Singh, Lambah and Tariq Aziz played a pivotal role in almost reaching a settlement based on Gen. Pervez Musharraf's 4-point formula. The proposed accord would have rendered the LoC just a line on the map with Kashmiris allowed maximum autonomy. A joint mechanism would be set up between the two sides of Jammu & Kashmir, and military forces withdrawn from urban areas. It seems an idle question now, but one wonders, why both countries do not go back to the Musharraf-Manmohan accord?

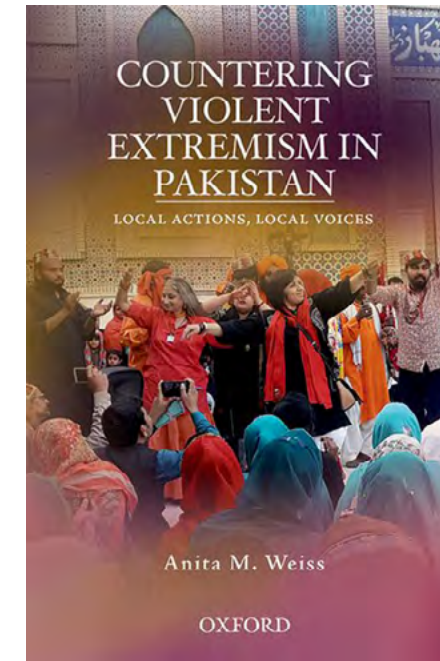
What is worth mentioning is that while Congress PMs from Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi to Manmohan Singh worked through MEA, the Bharatiya Janata Party PMs bypassed the MEA and reached out directly to interlocutors in Pakistan. Vajpayee largely relied on R. K. Mishra and Brajesh Mishra. After PM Narendra Modi took over, Lambah was reportedly quite upset when before he could proceed to Islamabad, he found that he had been bypassed, and Indian businessman Sajjan Jindal had met PM Nawaz Sharif, as Modi's trusted emissary in Muree on 28 April 2017. Modi's singular style

of bold initiative, had been evidenced when he paid a surprise visit to Lahore to meet his counterpart Nawaz Sharif at his Jati Umra farmhouse in December 2015. But the terrorist attack on the Pathankot airbase in 2016 disrupted the process. However, Mr Sharif's prompt action in registering cases on the charges of terrorism, enabled both PMs to allow joint investigation of the terrorist attack. But prospects for normalization of relations were again scuttled by the forces inimical to peace.

The beleaguered history of bilateral diplomacy between India and Pakistan is full of ups and downs—from wars to peace and long spells of no-peace/no-war intervals. The fundamental challenge remains—the imperative to get over the hangover of a toxic partition and shed all shades of enmity, strive to live as peaceful neighbours and find out-of-the-box solutions to their perennial and temporary conflicts. Peace is not an option; it is a neighbourhood compulsion of states sharing the common heritage of our subcontinent.

Debunking Myths and Demystifying Stereotypes about Extremism in Pakistan

By Rita Manchanda



Anita Weiss, *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan, Local Action Local Voices*, Oxford University Press, 2020, 293p. (INR 1,150)

Who was this man who so enthralled the youth overcrowding the Lahore Avari Hotel's marquee pavilion, with his fiery oration about the violation of his people and land by religiously driven extremists, the firepower of dollar propelled drones and extrajudicial killings which had turned the Pakhtun belt into a 'state of exception' in Pakistan? The chorus of enthusiastic sloganeering of his mass fan entourage, and the mesmerizing spell he cast, all but eclipsed the entry of Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto and almost denied attention to the star speaker concluding the Asma Jahangir Fourth Memorial Conference in October 2022.

We, a handful of South Asians, had managed to get visas to participate in that red letter calendar event of rambunctious democracy in Pakistan. Who was this Pakistani *topi-cap* wearing leader, the young parliamentarian Manzoor Pashteen (29)? Unbridled by the punitive action which invariably followed, he boldly chastised the army's violations of his peoples' right to life and dignity, condemned the violence of the Taliban and other *jihadi* groups, and reclaimed nonviolence as integral to the peace loving cultural tradition of Pakhtuns!

Manzoor Pashteen is co-founder of the inspirational *Pashtun Tahafuz Movement* (PTM), a social movement that through the traditional trope of *jalsas* and rallies has captured the imagination of traumatized and violence fatigued Pakhtun youth. PTM seeks to reclaim Pakhtun cultural traditions and re-envision a peace loving path to counter the inevitability of radicalization of youth in the blowback of the 'war on terror' in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Troubling questions asked themselves. *Isn't Pakistan a state and society tolerant and supportive of extremism? Isn't terrorism in Pakistan a manifestation of a society moving towards radicalism?* Could there be an alternative reading of the Pakistan narrative which for many of us, Madiha Afzal had framed in her book *Pakistan under Siege* (2018). It had problematized the paradox of Pakistan, a state and society which evidences tolerance and support of extremism despite the huge costs involved for its people.

It is that alternative script that Anita Weiss makes legible in *Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan, Local Action Local Voices*, as she sidesteps the foundations of why and how extremism got embedded in Pakistan, to focus on "the laudatory efforts of Pakistanis who want their culture back ... to live collectively in a future without violence ... to recapture local identities or create syncretic ones" (3). Through Weiss' quiet listening to local voices and visibilizing cultures of resistance, she maps local group action rejecting violence and the working of war traumatized communities claiming their own cultural identity.

The book opens up myriad enactments of cultures of resistance and social action which hold out the potential for transformative futures, countering the past violent extremism in Pakistan.

Weiss' book overturns misperceptions about the invariability of the normalization of violence in Pakistani society and demystifies cultural stereotypes which naturalize responsiveness to religious extremism in Pakistan. It foregrounds multi-layered cultural and communitarian forms of resistance. Indigenous cultural identities are reclaimed to mobilize solidarities of popular resistance against oppression and violence. The book captures representative examples of 'sparks of hope' of individuals sacrificing their lives to counter violent extremism. Weiss' narrative shows "what they [local people] are doing and how they are doing." It is a subversive peoples' history, an aspirational complement to the ineffectiveness and violence reinforcing securitized strategies of the Pakistan state countering extremism.

Weiss structures the book's representative sample of cultures of resistance around a typology of six categories for grouping people's actions—poetry as resistance, music and performance, art reclaiming identity and meaning, religious leaders mobilizing to counter extremism, innovative educational curriculum of the Bacha Khan Educational Trust schools and the Zoya Science schools that encourage critical thinking and emphasize peace, and individual and collective interventions to wrest back cultural spaces in the public sphere.

Central to this pushback of Pakistan relentlessly rolling towards radicalism, is the reclaiming by Pakhtuns of their own cultural identity, in stark contrast to the portrayal of the stereotyped warrior projected by British colonialists and neo-imperialists. As the celebrated *rabab* musician Ghulab Afridi questions, "Where did the idea come from that the Pakhtun cannot live without his *banduk* (gun) ... we cannot live without music and dancing" (81). Afridi, through his own performances and tutelage of young musicians, has culturally recreated the iconic significance of the *rabab*, and its ubiquitous presence in the Pakhtun *hujra* (space for male visitors).

Weiss evocatively draws us into the cultural milieu of the works of Pashto and Sindhi contemporary poets who are inspired by the Sufi tradition of opposition against oppression, and promotion of tolerance and love. In Pashto poetry, familiar metaphors have been forcibly displaced by the material reality of a war ravaged landscape of bombs and everyday death and destruction, as evoked in Rahmat Shah Sail's poignant verses from *Peshawar* (24).

While voicing the grief of traumatized Pakhtun communities, the poet urges that the endlessness of the violence cannot be halted, "Until you realize who is bombing us, the mud houses will continue to be set on fire" (30). Poets like Abdul Rahim Roghani boldly upbraid the Imam's jihad rousing sermons and dollar corruption for embroiling the peace loving Pakhtuns in religiously motivated violence.

Weiss draws upon critical scholars of cultures of resistance, and quotes Bar-

bara Harlow's statement that "writing poetry enables people to process the violence around them and empowers them to stand up against violence." Pashto, Sindhi and Baluch poetic traditions not only express resistance to subjugation and oppression but, importantly, also manifest as 'arenas of struggle'.

This resonates with the role of Pashto poetry in the Pakhtun belt, arousing sensitivities and mobilizing solidarities. It is amplified as an 'arena of struggle' by the prevailing culture of oral traditions and the *mushaira* (poetic recitation) which provides a public voice, that social media further enhances. Weiss emphasizes that what distinguishes Pashto poetry is its relentlessness in upholding *Pashtunwali* (values and mores), and the mobilization of the cultural identity of the Pakhtun as tolerant and progressive. Anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance is embodied in portraying oneself rather than being distortedly portrayed by others.

As in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, local actors in Sindh and southern Punjab too, are grasping their indigenous cultural identity and through distinct actions reinterpreting their history and culture transformatively, thus affecting the dynamism of contemporary society. *Rang dey Karachi* guerrilla art movement sought to reclaim meaning by painting images of peace over the slogans of violence and hate. Small groups created a popular online comic series, CFXComics *Paasbaan* (the guardian) which critiqued religious extremism. It invited readers to interactively choose the ending encouraging people to feel they have choices. The graphic

designer was a young 9th grade student of Aitchison college, Lahore who was driven by his own near experience of slipping into radical extremism. In 1996, inspired by his Islamic Studies teacher to fight jihad in Kashmir, he was shocked by how easy it was to dehumanize those he wanted to fight.

Whereas for KP the transformative 'blowback' moment of the war on terror was the massacre of students at an army public school in Peshawar, the resistance culture was sparked off by General Zia-ul-Haq's oppressive Islamization drive. Weiss compares the contemporary local effulgence of secular music and performance with the Palestinian culture of resistance, in which music is a significant tool to preserve and construct identity and resist Israeli occupation.

In Sindh, music and performance, periodically attacked as un-Islamic, was reclaimed via the determined cultural performances of Sheema Kirmani, whose iconic theatre and dance troupe, *Tehrik I Niswan* embodied the 'cultural conscience' of the people. For instance, within days of an extremist attack on the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine, Kirmani defiantly danced her resistance to fundamentalism there along with activists from Women's Action Forum Hyderabad. Popular Sindhi folk poet and YouTube rock musician Sail Samejo reclaimed the authentic Sindh cultural identity from its distorted representation as violent and extremist, drawing 30,000 to the *Lahooti mela* in Hyderabad, a site for music, dance and discussions that showed that Pakistan is not a threat to the world.

In Punjab, Ajoka theatre inspired by the vision of its founder director (late) Madeeha Gauhar, performs resistance plays, seemingly historical ones like the one centering on Dara Shikoh that emphasizes the multiplicity of Islam's history positing a liberal Sufi poet at one end and a religious zealot at the other. *Burqavaganza* is a metaphor about the process of Talibanization and questions blasphemy laws and gender issues. Ajoka is political theatre, committed to peace between India and Pakistan, and critical of Pakistan's efforts to assume a false identity as Arabs, "as if we have no indigenous roots with this land", states Shahid Nadeem, producer of Ajoka, and Gauhar's partner.

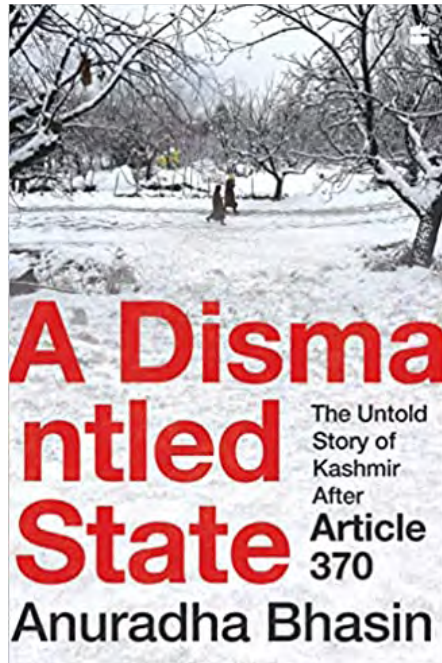
In Lahore, academic and musician Taimur Rahman's *Laal Band* gave live performances in government schools to inspire children to stay on in schools and build Pakistan's future.

Activist actions to reclaim identity and create cultural space for dialogue are not without huge risks from state and non-state forces. In April 2015, Sabeen Mahmud, the founder of the discussion forum 'The Second Floor' was gunned down on her way home after a discussion on the 'Missing' in Balochistan. Raza Khan, the Pakistan co-coordinator of *Aaghaz-e-Dosti* (an Indo-Pak school exchange programme) was disappeared and released eight months later. Manzoor Pashteen is variously accused of being an agent of Afghanistan, or a RAW agent. Within hours of his talk at the AJMC, an FIR was filed against him for speaking against the army.

Weiss' alternative narrative of local voices and action should be read within Pakistan, India and the global community to dispel distorted stereotypes and dangerous myths. It shows the path to peace. If I have a grievance against Weiss' book, it is the absence of the local voices and local actions of the PIPFPD.

Breaking the silence! The Kashmir story by fellow 'Kashmiri' writers

By Seema Kazi



Anuradha Bhasin, *"A Dismantled State: The Untold Story of Kashmir after Article 370"*, Harper Collins, 2023, 382p. (INR 699)

On 5 August 2019, India's central government revoked Article 370 in the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) comprising the regions of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, splitting and downgrading the state into two centrally-administered Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The government claimed the revocation would usher in an era of peace and development—a narrative echoed in mainstream Indian media and endorsed by most political parties. In contrast to the celebratory mainland narratives, J&K's 13.6 million residents were subject to an enforced silence prior to and after the revocation. They were not party to a decision taken in their name and on their behalf.

Using her particular location as a journalist in J&K, Anuradha Bhasin's book contests government and mainstream media narratives by presenting an insider's overview of post-August 2019 J&K where she finds herself 'at a crossroads', her Kashmiri identity and existence in tatters, a 'sense of disempowerment - as a citizen', fed and enhanced by 'an ever-growing void of belongingness' (xii).

The book begins with a description of Kashmir's descent into a climate of fear, panic and chaos prior to the revocation fuelled by an extraordinary

military mobilization and security build-up across Kashmir and the sense of shock, humiliation and disenfranchisement experienced by J&K residents in its wake. Bhasin documents the arbitrary detention of eminent Kashmiri Muslim civil society members in Srinagar including leading lawyers, mainstream and local Kashmiri Muslim politicians, and a few thousand cases of ordinary 'lesser mortals'—teenagers and minor children, all of whom were subject to punitive repression, torture and prolonged extra-legal detention in August 2019 (67–81).

In a section on the state's assault against civilians, Bhasin documents the cruelty, tragedy and suffering of ordinary Kashmiri Muslims such as twenty-eight year old Faiyaz Meer, a detainee in Uttar Pradesh's Bareilly jail, whose working class family overcame "huge financial constraints to meet him ... At the mulaqat, the jail security guard was adamant and insisted that they only speak to him in Hindi for twenty minutes. The father knew only Kashmiri. For twenty minutes, Faiyaz's father faced him, speechless. Only the sound of sobs shaking the father's body broke the silence" (67). Faiyaz's story, the author maintains, exemplifies a policy 'to impose collective punishment on an entire population' (74).

The absence of Kashmiri voices through a blanket communications blockade paralleled what Bhasin terms as 'the invisibilisation of bodies' of Kashmiri militants killed in encounters with security forces through secret burials. Encounter killings, the silencing of civil society institutions through raids and arrests, the dismissal of state employees for alleged 'terror' links,

the occupation of civilian buildings by security forces, the myth of gender discrimination in Article 370 (among the stated reasons for its revocation) are highlighted. The stories contest and contradict official and mainstream media reports of 'the situation is under control' and 'a happy Valley'.

Bhasin offers a ringside view of the stifling and eventual destruction of J&K's media, including The Kashmir Times of which she is the Executive Editor. She describes her own efforts as a Kashmiri citizen-journalist to challenge the media restrictions and censorship in the wake of the revocation that had the effect of 'invisibilising an entire population and making their narratives inaudible' (101). Also foregrounded is the militarization, curfew-like conditions, restrictions on journalists' mobility, the surveillance of news content, and an all-pervasive climate of fear of the 'known and unknown', all of which greatly diminish journalists' capacity to file stories. Bhasin further documents cases of attack, interrogation and detention of media personnel, and the criminalization of individual journalists for researching or filing particular stories deemed anti-national due to which the "media disappeared into a black hole amidst a frozen situation" (151). The government's J&K media policy, she concludes, "wants to turn journalism into an extended arm of the government's public relations department ... the independence of the media ... is being cast aside and buried" (168). Summing up the unstated fear of independent journalists and media institutions, Bhasin notes: "there are worries that ... the Kashmir story may never be told" (180).

Turning to the intersection between the COVID lockdown in 2020 and the already existing post-August 2019 lockdown across Kashmir, Bhasin aptly terms it as ‘a lockdown within a lockdown’. The silencing of Kashmiri voices through brute force is highlighted as is the government’s instrumental use of COVID restrictions to advance its agenda in Kashmir. J&K’s crucial domicile clause, related to jobs for permanent residents of the erstwhile state, was struck down a week into the lockdown. With local Kashmiri opposition muted and rendered invisible throughout 2020, “the government brought in twenty-six land-related laws ... marginalizing the locals in terms of landholdings [and] also signaling that they could be deprived of their land, assets and businesses” (103). New land laws facilitated, among others, the wanton destruction of forest land in Kashmir, the acquisition of local land by armed forces, the eviction of indigenous communities from their traditional dwellings and pastures, the appropriation of agricultural land for commercial and industrial use, and illegal sand mining in complete disregard for Kashmir’s fragile ecology.

With regard to land rights, the author provides valuable insights to readers unfamiliar with the political history of Kashmir’s land reforms in the 1950s. In a poignant interview, octogenarian Krishan Dev Sethi, a colleague and contemporary of Sheikh Abdullah, reveals that Kashmir’s land reforms would not have been possible without Article 370 and that their “motive was to ... undo the injustices of the past ... signaling an ... end to feudalism by offering land to the tillers” (30). It was to create “a model

of governance that was opposed to exploitative feudalism and to maintain the state’s distinct identity” (25) symbolized by Kashmir’s distinctive red and white flag representing the J&K Constituent Assembly’s “vision opposed to exploitative structures and in solidarity with the working class” (26). Sethi’s words affirm with powerful clarity the radical transformative agenda of Article 370 and what is now at stake for all J&K residents irrespective of geography, ethnicity or political affiliation.

Bhasin provides a critical overview of J&K’s politics. She writes of the District Development Council elections that were tailored to suit ruling party interests and the Delimitation Commission’s unstated remit of “emaciating the political significance of Srinagar and turning Jammu into a symbolic site of victory.” Bhasin’s point regarding J&K’s political emasculation is profoundly important for J&K residents and all those who care for peace, justice and liberty in Kashmir: The political power of Kashmir’s leaders was illusory and expendable. “The BJP simply removed a layer of pretence” on 5 August 2019. “The road is set for fulfilling the RSS-BJP’s prime mission in Kashmir – changing its demography and taking control of its land” (214).

Notwithstanding the culmination of a script crafted by various regimes whose final act was the reading down of Article 370, Bhasin’s book conveys a sense of the tenuous nature of the August 2019 denouement. She notes that even as the August 2019 move drastically redefined the relationship between Kashmir and India, there is growing realization across J&K that the

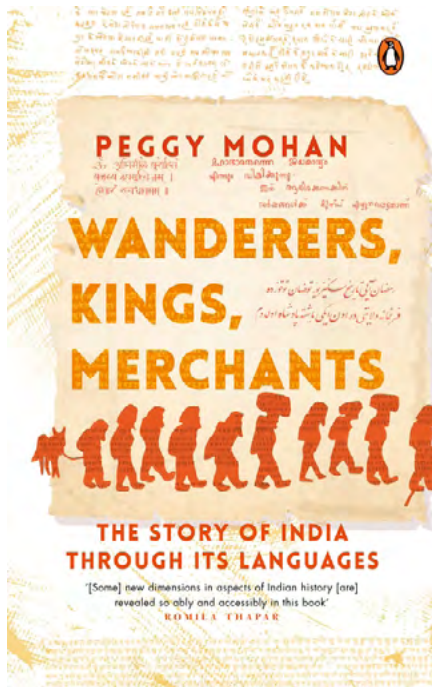
new political compact is synonymous with disempowerment and dispossession. “India” Bhasin writes, “is trying to manage the outbreak of anger within Kashmir by maintaining its military hold on the region and tightening its grip on the expression of dissent ... By unilaterally integrating Kashmir ... India has ended up pitching its tent on a potential minefield that is waiting to explode” (238).

The book’s concluding paragraph situates J&K’s enduring disjuncture between local aspiration and the Indian state’s compulsion within a wider global perspective: “Today, Kashmir finds itself not only sapped of hope but also stands at the cusp of doom. What filters in some optimism are the crucial lessons from history: that things never remain static forever and that global economic and political discourses dictated by greater powers have the potential to change the fate of a far-off insignificant region” (297).

Bhasin’s book is a journalist’s overview of the Kashmir story. It is a first in terms of the narration of the Kashmir story post 5 August 2019 by someone from

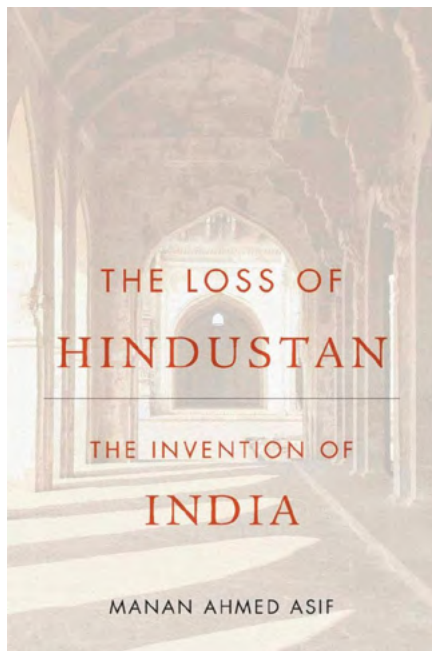
J&K. It contests official narratives of peace, development and normality in Kashmir and renders vivid the regions’ political disempowerment, economic subjugation, social fragmentation, and by extension the emasculation of Kashmir’s distinctive identity. A section on cultural domination and assimilation such as the renaming public places, the removal of public holidays commemorating eminent political Kashmiri Muslim leaders such as Sheikh Abdullah, the introduction of the Hindi language in schools, etc. would deepen the analysis. It would also illuminate that the post-revocation project is as much epistemological and cultural as it is political: the erasure of a people’s sense of self, belonging, history, collectivity and identity through domination and assimilation. The manuscript could have been better edited for a tighter, sharper read. Notwithstanding these minor aberrations, Anuradha Bhasin’s book marks a breaking of the silence—a beginning of the Kashmir story to be taken forward by fellow Kashmiri writers.

Browsing Among Books



Peggy Mohan

"Wanderers, Kings, Merchants: The Story of India through Its Languages" Viking, Penguin Books, 2021. (INR 599)



Manan Ahmed Asif

"The Loss Of Hindustan: The Invention Of India", Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2020; Karachi, Folio Books 2023.

From The Reels



Ghosts in the patriarchal shell: The discreet adventures in *Joyland*

Subhajit Chatterjee



In the recent past, a number of stylish and provocative cultural works have been generated by Pakistani artists, ranging from the music of Grammy winner Arooj Aftab or Ali Sethi of Coke studio fame, the queer art of Salman Toor, to the exploration of sexual identities in TV shows such as *Sort Of* (Bilal Baig, 2021), and Zindagi TV's irreverent vigilante

drama *Churails* (Asim Abbasi, 2020). The most recent addition to the list is Saim Sadiq's independent feature *Joyland* (2022), which gained unprecedented critical attention due to its acquisition of awards at Cannes and subsequently other international film festivals. The film has also had overtly enthusiastic receptions at festival circuits in Indian cities of Kolkata and Delhi. Being the first Pakistani feature to receive such critical accolades abroad, its home reception is equally intriguing. The film had evidently been cleared for release by Pakistan's Censor Board, selected as the official entry for Oscar nominations and then banned by the government just before its release, eventually succumbing to media pressure to re-review and allowing public screening of a censored version. However, it remains banned in the Punjab region where the film's story is set. While governments and political factions in South Asian countries keep cracking down on seemingly unpalatable content, it might be worthwhile as film scholars to explore the official and popular interpretative logic in contrast to the critical aspirations of the films themselves.

As *Joyland's* acquisition of the prestigious Queer Palm award at Cannes and dominant international news or reviews seem to suggest, the film is both celebrated and denounced for its 'daring' take on sexual identity and cultural norms in the conservative South Asian subcontinent. However, there seems to be more to *Joyland* than what appears in its popular 'queer reception' or wavering home response. One may argue, that owing to its unique design, the film belongs to a more radically

in-between, intersectional space as a narrative and aesthetic object. It definitely belongs to the tradition of Pakistan's cultural resistance to a 'military-fundamentalist' complex, but also has certain critical vibes that could enrich new aesthetic and political languages being explored by contemporary experimental filmmakers in India or Bangladesh.

In the opening scene of *Joyland*, the central protagonist, Haider (Ali Junejo) appears shrouded in a white cape to spook his array of nieces in a game of

hide and seek. His ghostly appearance, underscored by dreamlike fluid camera movements interspersed with jarring cuts, affects the children and spectators alike. Quite strategically, the spectral cloak is lifted to reveal a stark and tangible family scenario where Haider has to drive his pregnant sister-in-law, Nucchi (Sarrwat Gilani) to the hospital for an emergency delivery of her fourth girl child. Breathtakingly shot on location in Lahore, the film uses this metaphor of 'spectral selves' to explore disparate layers of struggle imbricated in the patriarchal social



Poster of the movie "Joyland"

network of modern-day Pakistan. Framed as a generic melodrama, the film examines the everyday conflicts within a middle-class Punjabi Muslim family residing in a dingy and congested area of Lahore. On the surface, it is a story of two brothers with contrasting social and sexual identities and their respective conjugal relations. While the hypermasculine, aggressive elder brother (Sohail Sameer) represents the rigid patriarchal ethos of the household, the nervous younger one who is unemployed and helps out with domestic chores seems to be more sensitive towards the feminine world within. But Haider soon finds work as a trainee dancer under a transwoman, Biba (portrayed by transgender actress Alina Khan who played a similar role in Sadiq's debut short *Darling* (2016) that inspired *Joyland*), who manages a troupe at a disreputable dance theatre, and becomes romantically involved with his new manager. Haider's new engagements necessitates his wife Mumtaz to forego her stable job as a beautician to take care of domestic chores. As Haider's conjugal as well as extra-marital affairs undergo several crises, the story spirals towards the suicide of his vibrant wife, a tragic predicament brilliantly portrayed by Rasti Farooq in her debut feature.

The 'controversial' themes of transgender identities and romance not only have a global appeal currently, but are often addressed by popular Indian melodramas as well, in order to appeal to wider audiences—examples include *Chandigarh Kare Ashiqui* (Hindi, 2021) and *Super Deluxe* (Tamil, 2018). On the other hand, more committed queer-themed documentaries as well as

fictional works—like Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada* (Bengali, 2012)—in South Asia have a wide presence in film festival circuits but often use explicitly interventional and didactic narrative frameworks. *Joyland's* uniqueness as a film lies in its affective, yet self-consciously obtruse approach to the narration and staging of its central dramatic conflicts. Instead of privileging identification by enticing the spectator's liberal avatar or promising a didactic elaboration of victimhood, the film uses shifting styles and narratorial technique that renders dramatic situations ambiguous and undercuts audience expectations at crucial points. The *mélange* of styles allows the dramatic conflicts to reverberate and effectively bewilder the audience rather than pose any definite narrative resolution.

In fact, the earlier part of the film that explores the claustrophobic and congested habitation bustling with children and the handicapped patriarch (Salman Peerzada) rekindles the memory of neorealist classics like Vittorio De Sica's *Il Tetto* (The Roof, 1956) where a passionate, newly-wed couple escape the husband's demoralized, congested family to search for a conjugal space. Such explicit desires for modern spaces have had a run in Indian 'middle-cinema' since the 1970s (Basu Chatterjee, Sai Paranjape et al.) where neorealist impulses often framed the melodramatic themes of conjugal yearning. *Joyland*, however, emphasizes the unavailability of such a liberal narrative trope, through its ambiguous framing of the couple's intimate life. The urban by-lanes and workspaces of a middle-class Lahore



Snapshot from the movie "Joyland"

seem to offer more surreptitious and symbolic release for their interiorized dilemmas than erstwhile European and South Asian cities could have offered.

On the other hand, a subtle blending of classic arthouse conventions with an otherwise realist *mise-en-scène* allows the narrative to render central dramatic actions and their motivations somewhat obscure. It remains unclear whether their companionate marriage has attained a sexual consummation or a liberal compromise, as suggested by their amicable yet dispassionate conversations and mysteriously tight framings of their lonely bedtime postures, which are dispersed through the film. Such ambiguity is enhanced

by Haider's ensuing affair with his transgender boss and Mumtaz's flip-pant, camaraderie with her empathetic sister-in-law. It is important to note how Mumtaz's facial expressions and confessional bouts to Nucchi or Haider both have obscure, cryptic tones that are not easy to decipher. In the face of Haider's recent escapades and long absences, it is not clear whether she is explicitly aware of Haider's fantasies or identifies her exact misgivings in their own relationship.

The failure of Haider's sexual liaisons seems to stem from his inability to coordinate his erotic and sexual identifications and also to grasp the norms and mandates for a transgender affair.

Haider's isolation is one of an erotic desire that matches or complements virtually no one in the vicinity, while Mumtaz's erotic imaginaries of freedom seem to be rooted in her ability to maintain her cryptic individuality, self-dependence and therefore her voyeuristic gaze.

Joyland turns out to be a drama of appearances and reality indeed, but in this case the substratum beneath appearances turns out to be somewhat complex and illusory. As evident, this is not a straightforward story of romantic misfortunes or sexual identity crisis but rather of incompatible symbolic structures that are deeply entwined in a staunchly patriarchal familial network. However, these unique, discordant structures seem to have in common the fateful victimization of their feminine incarnations. The narrative structure of the film stresses upon the ways in which the masculine aspect of individuals can have recourse to decisive articulation while feminine expression may have to encounter layers of discursive negotiation. This is why the film's sudden shift of gear from possibilities of a transgender coupling towards a crisis of feminine subjectivities at large becomes so critically significant. Mumtaz's pregnancy is precisely such a crucial point of narrative reversal that bewilders the couple as well as the spectator. It appears almost like a hazard, to coincide with the failure of Haider's discreet adventures, and seeking to neutralize the couple's spectral selves. Mumtaz's ambivalent response to her own pregnancy, her seemingly unmotivated attempts to escape and the consequent hysterical burst into a

runaround game with the children at the birthday ceremony, exposes the ghostly 'other' residing at her core.

The strategic and aesthetically compelling admixture of a locally situated melodrama with such spectral effects allows the film to explore deeper contractual structures of the self in relation to patriarchal frameworks and to femininity as a fundamental state of all being. Like the eponymous amusement park at Lahore that the in-laws visit, '*Joyland*' refers to a privately built space of adventure with selves and their fluidity. It testifies towards all those discreet negotiations social beings make to retain their spectral cores.

Joyland has a stylized narrative that aims at exploring the deeper structures of patriarchal exploitation as well as the subjective mechanisms that may render them bearable. It wishes to talk about ordinary familial networks and the operative psycho-sexual contracts that sustain modern subjects in a rigidly conservative social milieu, albeit painfully. A singularly queer labelling of the film may allow governmental forces to discern cultural incompatibility and provocation to a 'sacrosanct' public culture. As PVR pictures acquire Indian distribution rights of *Joyland* and the Indian Censor Board delays its certification process for public release, we have to wait and observe which reading strategy manifests itself in the official discourse and commercial branding.

Kaleidoscope



PIFFPD conventions

In September 1994, a few Indian and Pakistani social activists and professionals gathered together in Lahore, and came out with a statement stating their intention to set up a forum through which interaction could be established between the common people of the two countries. This led to the formation of the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIFFPD).

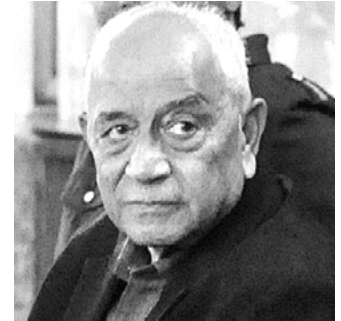
From 1995 onwards, the Forum continued to hold joint conventions once a year, alternately in cities in Pakistan and India, bringing together human rights activists, cultural workers, trade unionists, feminist rights groups, lawyers and teachers, businessmen, etc., representing a wide spectrum of civil society from the two countries.



From the Archives

PIFFPD And Me: A personal saga

By Ramu Ramdas



I, Ramu, am nearing ninety—slowing down somewhat—and finding it difficult to concentrate or type. Locating materials and photographs and references is no longer that easy! But my wife and partner, Lolly and I agreed that it was critical to recall and recount some of our experiences—especially the interface of the personal and the political—which led us to our association with PIPFPD. Indeed, it is these intersections that have led us to make the unorthodox choices we have—especially in terms of the post-retirement period from 1993 to the present—nearly three decades.

Nirmal Deshpande, Admiral Ramdas and other peace activist in dialogue with Gen. Parvez Musharraf



Rewind to late 1993

I retired after three years in the hotspot, as Naval Chief, in September 1993 and was looking forward to a time to unwind and figure out our next steps— where to live and ways to supplement the [then] meagre pension of a retiring chief! We had no roof over our head and like the pioneers of yore, were on our way to make a home on a piece of land granted to me for the award of a Vir Chakra for my deeds in the 1971 War. It was located in Alibag Taluka on the west coast, 100 km south of Bombay.

A Call, Come Join PIPFPD!

A meeting of minds: A convergence of ideas?

In the midst of the chaos and upheaval of saying farewell to the service that

had been our life, anchor, umbrella and protection for over 45 years, I got a phone call from an unexpected quarter. It was the late Shri Nirmal Mukarji, the former Cabinet Secretary, who wanted to meet me to discuss a totally unexpected request. He wasted no time getting to the point.

“Ramdas – I need your help. I am deeply concerned at the state of affairs in the country, especially with regard to our relationship with our neighbours, in particular Pakistan.” He asked me to consider joining a group of people from several sectors to discuss the ways in which civil society groups and citizens could play a constructive role in creating a climate where we would try to rebuild our relationship with Pakistan—our closest and largest neighbour in South Asia. He was clear that there was no way our region or our individual countries and our people

could move forward if we did not mend fences with our neighbour Pakistan, to try and heal the wounds of partition, and work collaboratively with our neighbours in a spirit of ‘jointmanship’.

Nirmal da was insistent that he wanted me to work with him to create and build a Pak-India Forum and bring in like-minded people who believed in a vision of building a united and strong South Asia. Our task would be to build a groundswell of support for peace and democracy between our two nations and lay the foundations of a peoples’ movement which would also interact with policy makers.

Nirmal Da had clearly done his homework about the imperative for better ‘neighbourhood management’. Certain aspects of my personal background and professional contribution might have led him to approach me.

An Indian Ocean Panchayat

Shortly before I stepped down as Head of the Indian Navy in 1993, we organized and conducted an International Maritime Conference to address issues pertaining to the Indian Ocean Region. In addition to countries from all the littoral states of the Indian Ocean, including Pakistan, there were delegates from China, USA and France as well. The outcome of an intensive and stimulating three days was a broad consensus on working together in a spirit of cooperation to solve mutual problems in the maritime sphere—be it piracy, terrorism, merchant shipping, fisher folk and fishing rights, or maritime boundaries.

It has always been my view that we must maintain good relations with all our neighbours. Especially after fighting three and a half [Kargil] wars against Pakistan, it is time for us to take stock and seriously reflect on what we have gained or achieved. So there was a natural convergence of ideas and interests and it was with a sense of anticipation and challenge that I accepted his invitation to be part of PIPFPD. The basic objectives of our Forum were to build



Photo of Lalita Ramdas from Srinagar Convention

awareness and create a favourable atmosphere in both India and Pakistan—to be better neighbours and friends, and to help in the process of demilitarization, de-nuclearization, and find peaceful solutions to several vexing problems.

Priorities for a Pak-India dialogue

Our primary goal and effort was to build a movement which would connect people from India and Pakistan—a popular initiative which would allow people to meet, talk, get to know each other and build bridges of friendship. In turn, we would reaffirm and re-emphasise the underlying theme of



Mr Ramu Ramdas, Dr Mubashir and Mr I. A. Rehman at the Fifth Joint Convention in Bangalore

inter-dependencies and inter-linkages through which our futures remain connected.

One of the major tasks we set for ourselves was to find a solution to the Kashmir question, based on involving the people of Jammu and Kashmir in choosing their political future.

What is an Admiral doing in a Pak-India Forum?

If my decision to get involved with Indo-Pak issues post retirement raised questions about my intentions and bonafides among the uniformed and retired fraternity, the scepticism among several in civil society was no less! My motivation as a former head of a service, for getting involved in the relatively unfamiliar territory of civil and human rights, democracy, and Pak-India relations was questioned and even viewed with suspicion

Friends and colleagues asked why I chose to focus my post-retirement efforts on an area of work which was off the beaten track, fraught with problems, politically risky, and unlikely to yield any positive results.

Here are a few headings and lenses through which I propose to identify and introspect some of the influences that have been responsible for my life choices.

• *“Admiral, do you hate Pakistan?”*

Let me begin by recounting the conversation with Rahul Gandhi as Lolly and I walked [with me in wheel chair!] and

talked during the Bharat Jodo Yatra on 3 November 2022 somewhere outside Hyderabad.

“Admiral, after your being in action against Pakistan during the Bangladesh war, did you come out of it hating Pakistan? Is that what happens when you fight a war?”, he asked

Taken aback, I said quite spontaneously, “No not at all. When we go to war, we are doing a job ordered by the government of the day, a political decision. But after the war is over, there is no such thing as carrying forward a permanent grudge or anger or nurturing a feeling of hatred for the country or the people”.



Mr. Ramu Ramdas at fifth Joint Convention in Bangalore

He nodded his head thoughtfully and said, “That is how it should be. We should be mending fences, talking to each other, resolving problems through dialogue and mutual understanding. We need to find solutions for the Kashmir question in which people participate – only then can we move forward.”

I then said—far from them being enemies—we actually have a close family connection. He looked disbelievingly at me and turned to my wife. She smiled and confirmed that we had a Pakistani son-in-law. He turned back to me and said, “But after your retirement?”

Lolly responded. “No, Rahul, actually he was serving and coming up for consideration for the top job!” Rahul was surprised.

“Impossible! how could that happen?”

“Sir, it was because we had open minds and honest leadership with no bigotry or blind prejudice,” I said to him.

• *Partition: Mayhem and madness in Delhi: 1945–48*

My Tamil/Malayali parents were migrants, moving from Palghat to Chennai to Matunga—where I was born in 1933—and to Delhi in 1939. We kids grew up in middle class government colonies—eating chaat, playing cricket, speaking a mixture of Hindustani and Punjabi. I had heard of the horrors of the build up to Partition, the mass migration of huge populations of both Hindus and Muslims, the brutal killings and rapes and the building up of animosity and hate of a level which was unprecedented.

As a fourteen year old, returning from school, I literally ran into an angry slogan shouting mob outside our government quarters in Bengali Market in Delhi. They had found out that my father had given shelter to his colleague and friend, Ghulam Mohammed and his family. They were demanding they be handed over to them. My father, a

slight, balding figure, stood firm at the entrance of our house. They would have to take him first before he would allow them to take his friend and guest. His quiet non-confrontational manner seemed to have stopped them. They turned and left not daring to risk killing a civil servant, and a Hindu at that! The lesson remained imprinted on my brain: follow your conscience and pursue the truth without fear of religious fanaticism. The adoption of the Constitution in 1950 reinforced these values.

• *1971 Indo-Pak War: Birth of Bangladesh*

Among many defining experiences in my 45 years in uniform, the 1971 war with Pakistan left a powerful impact on me in many ways.

1. The roots of communal prejudice run deep, in or out of uniform: Our ship was getting ready to move to the East and we stared at the prospect of serious conflict ahead of us. While going through the list of the crew, the person scrutinizing names and records stopped at the name of my personal steward—Mohar Ali. It was suggested it might be better not to have him on board for this mission. I told him to get out of my office. Ali cared for me night and day during the operations, and till today continues to be a friend of the family.

2. Beasts in uniform: It was a chance encounter with a group of teenagers on our way into the Chittagong Naval Base that produced a kind of shock that has haunted me these past 50 years. Five to six young men implored me and the Naval forces to hand over a

particular Pakistani army officer, notorious for his treatment of Bangladeshi women and girls. Facile explanations about the Geneva Conventions made no difference to calming the emotionally charged and outraged young men. They would have made a swift end to him. Wars the world over turn us into beasts, and every occupying force has behaved in exactly the same manner. So how can we talk of peace, while training for war?

• *1993: Retirement and the move to the gaon*

Learning about rural realities in Ali-bagh, leading a struggle against a government cum corporate land grab mafia, and the joy of transforming a totally barren land into a green and productive paradise was its own compensation. Importantly, it was an opportunity to engage with the tough questions of peace in the region; to travel to Pakistan and other South Asian countries to argue against going nuclear; and work to build a strong and positive relationship with our neighbours, Pakistan in particular. Equally critical was the growing awareness about our own internal conflicts and contradictions and to see the challenges and threats to our constitution, to democracy and to our fragile Republic.

Life lessons and rethinking

The cycles of communal violence, Nellie 1983, Delhi 1984, the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992, Gujarat 2002, and then the revocation of Art 370 in 2019, are events which are etched deeply in my conscience. Subsequently,

the CAA and such allied laws are deeply worrying as far as the harmony and dignity of millions of minorities are concerned. The amazing Farmers' Movement showed us the strength of peoples' power, but also showed us how easy it was to undermine. Above all was the persisting contradiction of seeing abject poverty and growing wealth continue to exist side by side. At the same time, we continue to spend grotesque amounts on weapons and armaments. Increasingly, we are trampling the basic rights and freedoms of our citizens by ever more draconian laws. It is with dismay that we watch the muzzling of the media—and the capitulation of the pillars of democracy—the judiciary, the Election Commission, intelligence and enforcement agencies, etc.

I have worn the uniform in the service of my country with pride and honour. However, since I hung up my boots, my conscience tells me the future security of our people cannot be guaranteed by weapons and bombs, stoking fires both internal and external, and fomenting hatred and division between communities and faiths.

Looking back: The highs and lows of PIPFPD

- Eight Joint Conventions were momentous affairs, when nearly 200 Pakistanis and Indians criss-crossed the border at Wagah and were able to drive, take the train or fly to Delhi, Lahore, Calcutta, Peshawar, Bangalore, Karachi and Allahabad.
- As a part of our aim of building bridges with Pakistan, the late Nir-

mala Didi Deshpande, initiated a unique idea of Indians and Pakistani service veterans coming on exchange visits to discuss ideas and ways in which they could contribute to peace and better relations in our region. Thus was born India-Pakistani Soldiers Initiative for Peace (IPSI).

- My meetings and dialogue with Gen. Musharraf, and the special interest displayed by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to hear my impressions and at least discuss what might be done.
- Agra Summit 2000, so near and yet so far

In the last decade of the nineties and the millennium, it was a heady feeling that Indians and Pakistanis could walk across Wagah, fly into Lahore and back from Karachi. We were full of hope, dreams and idealism that we would not go to war again.

Even ten years ago we could not have imagined the kind of deadlock we are facing today. But despite the intransigence of the regimes on both sides—there are a million hopes and silent mutinies happening all round us. People are not willing to give up on Indo-Pak *dosti*. They are defying the bigots and are working together on common dreams, threats and shared aspirations. I have found joy in online conversations, new networks such

as the activities of SAPAN and other groups which are creating new energies and fora.

I want to close with a memorable quote from a friend and comrade. When I was about to begin my military career, a wise old retired Marine Colonel, a veteran of the carnage at Tarawa, gave me some advice. Paraphrased here, he said:

So you want to be a career soldier? Good for you. But remember that the longer you stay in uniform, the less you will really understand about the country you protect.

Democracy is the antithesis of the military life: it's chaotic, dishonest, disorganized, and at the same time glorious, exhilarating and free, which you are not.

After a while, if you stay in, you'll be tempted to say,

"Look, you civilians, we've got a better way. We're better organized. We're patriotic, and we know what it is to sacrifice. Be like us."

And you'll be Dead Wrong, son. If you're a career soldier, you may defend democracy, but you won't understand it or be part of it. What's more, you'll always be a stranger to your own society. That's the sacrifice you'll be making.

- Col Robert Killebrew, US Army (retd.)

Walking back into time: Struggling against broken societies and broken relations

By Anees Haroon



In 1997 when the Bharatiya Janata Party came into power we were in Delhi. I had gone shopping in Old Delhi, in the the shops behind Shahi Qila, where most of the shopkeepers were Muslims. I asked them why did they vote for the BJP. They said “we were disappointed with Congress. They just made promises to get Muslim votes and did nothing for us. So we want to try out the BJP, which has offered us a lot.”

I shared my doubts about whether they would do anything for them. They coolly replied, “It doesn’t matter. We will see them for one term. If they don’t deliver on their promises, we can vote them out, as India has regular general elections.”

I was apprehensive, particularly in view of our experience with General Zia-ul-Haq and his partners the Jamat-e-Islami in the 1980s. That lethal combination of political Islamization irrevocably tore up our social fabric and undermined our polity which since then has been on a rollercoaster of self-damage. The BJP’s bulldozer of Hindutva politics is a replay of that grim scenario with even wider consequences.

On top of that, both countries are playing with the myths of destroying each other. Of course, this is nothing new, but the Hindutva politics of Narendra Modi has put fuel into the fire. Actually, warmongering suits both the governments. Why else should poor countries spend a huge amount on military expenses? What was the need for going nuclear? No matter which country uses the nuclear bomb first, both will bear the brunt of devastation. There is no other solution but peaceful negotiations. When are we going to learn this basic lesson?

Perhaps if General Musharraf had been allowed to have his way, the Agra summit in July 2001 would not have failed. PIPFPD was holding a

parallel meeting in Delhi at the time, to generate pressure in support of a peace agreement. We were utterly disappointed at the Agra summit’s collapse. Our concerned Indian friends sent us off to Udaipur and Chittorgarh in Rajasthan, to relax. These beautiful historical places are worth seeing and I wish that Pakistanis would get visas for sightseeing.

Why not? It is ironic, that those who can afford to travel, can go anywhere in the world, but to see our own sub-continent, a visa is denied to them. Leave sightseeing aside, many divided families on both sides have lost their near and dear ones and could not participate in their last rituals to lighten their grief. I lost a couple of dear cousins during COVID and suffered alone. It was terrible? How long will this senseless unreasonableness go on?

We at PIPFPD have long been advocating people-to-people contacts. But for nearly a decade now our governments have scuttled all efforts for Pakistanis and Indians to meet. As for PIPFPD’s flagship Pak-India Joint Conventions, the last such gathering took place in Allahabad in 2011. Subsequently, a PIPFPD seminar on *Understanding Pakistan Today* was convened in Delhi in 2013. Although the COVID pandemic saw PIPFPD initiate a series of popular guftagu online conversations, there can be no substitute for a frank and free face-to-face exchange at this particularly difficult juncture in relations

I think the only option is to hold a gathering in a friendly South Asian country which creates no hindrance and where we can freely travel. For in this bleak scenario, PIPFPD needs to play a leading role to break the logjam towards

Welcoming Pakistani delegates and PIPFPD leaders for the joint convention, 2012



normalizing relations. For instance, there is genuine concern about the situation in Kashmir since the status of the state was changed on 5 August 2019 by the BJP government. Article 370 of the Indian constitution, granting special status/autonomy to the state of Jammu & Kashmir was revoked. Reports of suppression of freedom of speech, restrictions on mobility, the widespread use of draconian laws to arrest activists and the atrocities unleashed on them, have produced fear and hatred, further alienating the masses. Such developments can only increase the unrest and violence within Kashmir and tension between Pakistan and India. For instance, the Pulwama incident led to dangerous escalation of violence and derailed the possibility of the proposed joint convention of PIPFPD in 2019/20.

Peace activists on both sides of the border are well aware of the double mindedness and lack of political will of both our governments to come up with a sincere policy towards peacefully resolving critical issues. It is the common people of Pakistan and India who are suffering from their failure to start a meaningful dialogue, even on a basic humanitarian issue of releasing each other's imprisoned fisherfolk.

More often than not, their boats drift or they unknowingly sail into each others waters. But they can be held for years and even denied routine consular access.

Recently, as a member of the National Commission of Human Rights of Pakistan, I visited Karachi jail and found mostly fishermen from Gujarat who had been languishing there for several years. They are there because both our governments are not fulfilling the agreement to repatriate them once their sentences are finished. Moreover, there is delay in accepting them as citizens. Surely such humanitarian issues can be resolved with some sensibility. It is tragic and shameful to list them in the category of 'Terrorist'.

Since both countries claim to be democratic, they should support PIPFPD, s role of strengthening people-to-people exchanges. This is the only way forward towards peaceful negotiations to resolve age-old conflicts lingering since 1947. That's the only way to peace and development.

Reclaiming a historical moment of transcendence towards peace

By Syeda Hameed



This strained light, this night-bitten dawn

This is not the dawn we yearned for.

This is not the dawn for which we set out hoping that in the sky's wilderness we would reach the final destination of the stars.

The earthen lamp shrugs its head in despair; the night is as oppressive as ever.

The time for the liberation of heart and mind has not come as yet.

Continue your arduous journey; this is not your destination.

- Faiz Ahmed Faiz

Thirty years ago, some people in India and Pakistan found themselves in agreement that nearly five decades of strained relations between their two countries had only served to inflict severe damage on both peoples. Economic as well as social indicators provide telling evidence that we had fallen far behind some other countries which were no better placed than ourselves to begin with. Since our respective ruling elites seemed unwilling to move out of set moulds, we felt that the only available course was for the people to assert themselves in favour of peace and friendship.

It was then that PIPFPD came into existence.



Official flags of India and Pakistan at the Wagha border.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Lahore Declaration 1994

At a time when the governments of India and Pakistan are intensifying mutual confrontation, with government and political leaders openly talking about the inevitability of a conflict and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, the situation in the sub-continent is on the brink of war. In a climate of hysteria, forces of bigotry and religious intolerance threaten the fabric of civil society on the sub-continent. In such a bellicose atmosphere democratic rights of the people are imperilled. There is therefore an urgent need for saner voices to prevail.

A group of concerned citizens from India and Pakistan, from different walks of life, have been engaged in a process to initiate a people-to-people dialogue on the critical issues of Peace and Democracy. As a follow-up to this, a group of 25 persons from the two countries met in Lahore on September 2, 1994 and after consultation came to the conclusion that the crisis in their relations was being deliberately maintained by the ruling elites in utter disregard of the common interest and aspirations of the people of the two countries.



Source: AP Photo/BK Bangash/AP Photo/BK Bangash

It Was Agreed:

1. That war and attempts to create war hysteria should be outlawed.
2. That a process of de-nuclearization and reversal of the arms race should be started.
3. That Kashmir not merely being a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, a peaceful democratic solution of it involving the peoples of Jammu and Kashmir is the only way out.
4. That religious intolerance must be curbed as these tendencies create social strife, undermine democracy and increase the persecution and oppression of disadvantaged sections of society.
5. And finally that the group constitute a convening committee for setting up a Peoples Forum for Peace and Democracy.

It was decided to hold a larger representative convention to which should be invited from India and Pakistan representatives of the human rights movement, workers' organisations, peasant movement, women's movement, environment movement and other mass organisations, cultural workers, professionals and academics. Efforts should be made to involve persons well known for their commitment to peace, equity and social justice, communal amity, democracy and people's solidarity in the sub-continent.

The above statement was endorsed by the following participants:

India

Nirmal Mukarji, Rajni Kothari, K.G. Kannabiran, Prof. Dinesh Mohan, Gautam Navlakha,
Kamal Mitra Chenoy, Teesta Setalvad, Tapan K. Bose, Amrita Chachhi

Pakistan

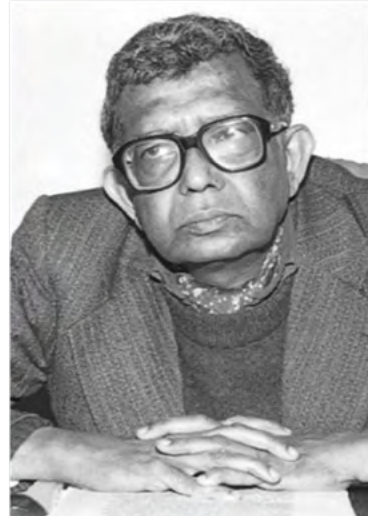
Khaled Ahmed, Prof. Haroon Ahmad, Karamat Ali, Dr. Mubarak Ali, Prof. Mehdi Hasan,
Shahid Kardar, Madeeha Gohar, Nighat Saeed Khan, Hussain Naqi, I. A. Rehman, B.M. Kutti, Anees Haroon, Iftikharul Haq, Prof. Rashid Ahmad, Dr. Mubashir Hasan.



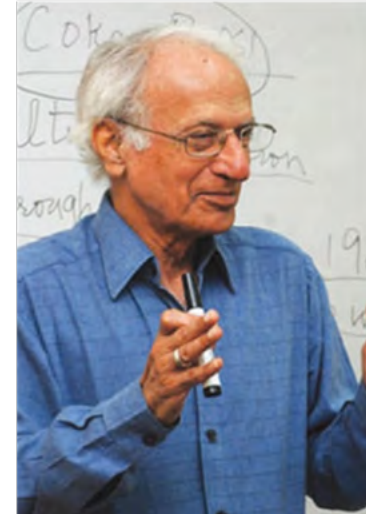
Nirmal Mukarji



K G Kannabiran



Rajni Kothari



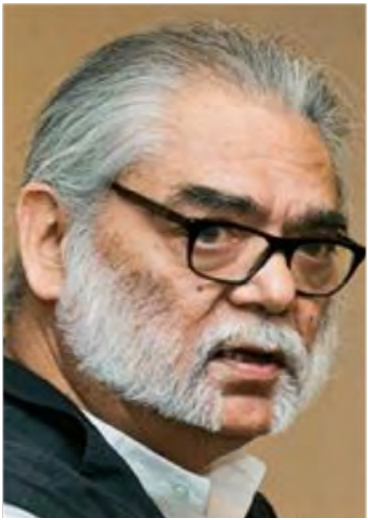
Prof. Mehdi Hasan



Madeeha Gohar



Shahid Kardar



Dinesh Mohan



Teesta Setalvad



Gautam Navlakha



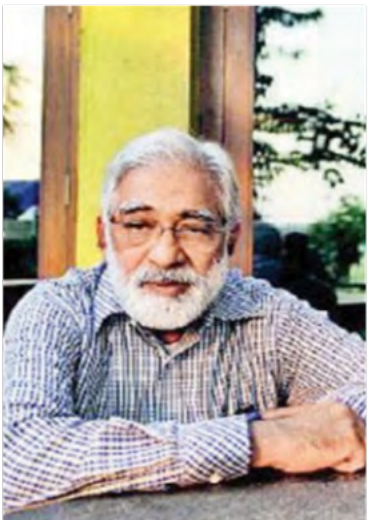
B M Kutty



Nighat Saeed Khan



I A Rehman



Karamat Ali



Kamal Mitra Chenoy



Mubarak Ali



Mubashir Hasan



Hussian Naqi



Anees Haroon

Formed in 1994 by eminent intellectuals, academics and activists from both sides, the Pakistan-India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD) was the first and largest people-to-people organization between the two countries. It was an outcome of a meeting of a group of 24 people from India and Pakistan who met that year in Lahore. During a time of severe animosity between the two rival countries, and the growing threat of nuclearization in South Asia, the group felt the need to set up a Forum to promote not only peace but also democracy in their respective countries. The first step was a meeting in Lahore in September 1994 where the People's Forum was formally set up. It was agreed there that the political issues that had bedeviled relations between the two countries should receive prime attention. Further, it was felt that the voices of the people would

carry to the decision-makers only if there was a responsive democracy in both countries. Consequently, Peace and Democracy became inter-linked in the objectives.

Over 200 Pakistani and Indian delegates participated in the groundbreaking First Joint Convention in New Delhi, 1995. For the first time, Indians and Pakistanis sat together to freely discuss the contentious issues of Kashmir, demilitarization, and the politics of religious intolerance. PIPFPD's formulation about Kashmir became part of public discourse: that Kashmir should not be viewed merely as a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan but as a matter of the lives and aspirations of the Kashmiri people, who must be involved in any discussion about their future.

Two large conventions were held quickly: Delhi in February 1995 was followed by Lahore the following November. The four hundred or so participants in these conventions in both countries came to unanimous conclusions on many contentious issues.

- There should be no resort to war. Force levels should be reduced on both sides by 25 per cent over three years, simultaneously curtailing military spending. Both sides should step back from the nuclear brink.
- Kashmir is not merely a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, but concerns the lives and aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir on both sides of the line of control. What is required is a peaceful democratic solution which involves the aforesaid people.
- Both countries must reduce the oppressive role of the police and the military in dealing with democratic movements and protect the common citizens.
- Trade relations must be formally recognised and enhanced.
- Both Governments must lift visa restrictions so that citizens of the two countries can travel freely.

We all knew that this was only a beginning. The two conventions helped to spread the message of peace and democracy in both countries. Country chapters and regional groups on both sides got busy organizing local meetings and received highly encouraging responses. The Forum then planned a larger and longer Convention in Cal-

cutta from 28–31 December 1996, to be attended by up to 200 delegates from each country. We hoped that the Convention would generate further support for the Forum's objectives, and influence the policies of the two governments towards peace and democracy.

Since 1995, PIPFPD has organized eight joint conventions, four in each country's major cities. The group has also facilitated the exchange of peace activists between the two countries and has organized meetings, seminars and workshops to promote peace and friendship among the people of India and Pakistan. Discussions at the Joint Conventions revolve around issues ranging from 'war, de-militarization, peace and peace dividends', to 'Democratic solution to the Kashmir problem', 'Democratic governance' and 'Religious intolerance in India and Pakistan'. 'Globalization and regional cooperation' was added at the 5th Joint Convention in 2000 at Bangalore.

I recall the statement made by the artist Krishan Khanna at the Inaugural Session of the Convention in 1995, which encapsulates the *raison d'être* of PIPFPD:

Quite apart from the fact that I was born and brought up in what is now Pakistan and spent my formative years there, and since I don't suffer from amnesia nor has my emotional umbilical cord snapped, for me and the likes of me, the most natural desire is to frequent old haunts, to meet friends with whom I spent the first twenty-one years of my life.



Political amputations, whatever their historic reasons, do not block out the forces of memory nor do they succeed in disinheriting the past, at least not for those unfortunates who suffered the trauma and are still alive. Future generations will not know any of this and may be spared the pain of memory and if I may add, also be the losers of a great humanist past. But quite apart from my case and that of the many like me who were displaced, I as an artist feel that, given one lifetime, I should be free to roam and tread the earth, unimpeded by fortuitous political lines. And treading begins in areas nearer to where one is. No matter what others might say, I and my kind would feel cultural affinities in this enormous area of the globe. To be sure, there are difference which would make the interaction so much more interesting and real.

The point is that even such differences would be understood with the background of a common historic past. This is not so when one steps into continents the cultural traditions of which are rich but alien.

Artists from this part of the world have ventured and made small inroads in the West. Yes, these have been individual faces, but that is about all. Artists in this subcontinent are now thinking about this situation. Without cultural agreements between governments, artists manage to exhibit their work. There is an exchange of sorts, why can't it be allowed to amplify and if anyone needs to be reminded at this point, art and cultural dialogue is basic and not peripheral.

Those who are involved in values which abide are not armed men. We have seen what armed men achieve and it is time, high time, for the voices of civilization and sanity to be heard. The easiest thing is to be sceptical and to go on singing the hymn of hate. Where has it got us or anyone? It is a perpetuation of misery that is wanted then: three cheers for the secular bomb."

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world", said the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in his classic essay *In Defence of Poetry*. So I conclude with two such legislators, one from Pakistan and the other from India who make their poetic statement before peoples of this region; the statement captures the work of PIPFPD.

*Tumhare des mein aaya hoon doston
ab ke
Na saaz o nagma ki mehfil na shayari
ke liye
Agar tumhari ana hi ka hai sawaal to
phir
Chalo mein haath badhaata hoon dosti
ke liye*

Ahmed Faraz, Pakistan

*Tumhara haath badha hai jo dosti ke
liye
Mere liye hai voh ek yaar e ghamgusaar
ka haath
Woh haath shaakh e gul e gulshan e
tamanna hai
Mehak raha hai mere haath mein
bahaar ka haath*

Ali Sardar Jafri, India

Remembrance Walk



Dr Mubashir Hasan, Mr Nirmal Mukarji, Mr I. A. Rehman and Mr Tapan Bose during an informal discussion between the Indian delegates to the two-day Pakistan-India peace and democracy conference and local journalists. The discussion was organized at the Lahore Press Club on Sunday evening / Source: Dawn



Photo of Mr Karamat Ali, Ms Rita Manchanda and Ms Nirmala Deshpande



Photo of Mr Sumanta, Mr Tapan Bose, Mr Kamal Mitra Chenoy, Mr Dinesh Mohan and Mr I. A. Rehman



Mr I. A. Rehman at the Fifth Joint Convention in Bangalore



Photo from the Fifth Joint Convention in Bangalore



Mr Ramu Ramdas at the Fifth Joint Convention in Bangalore



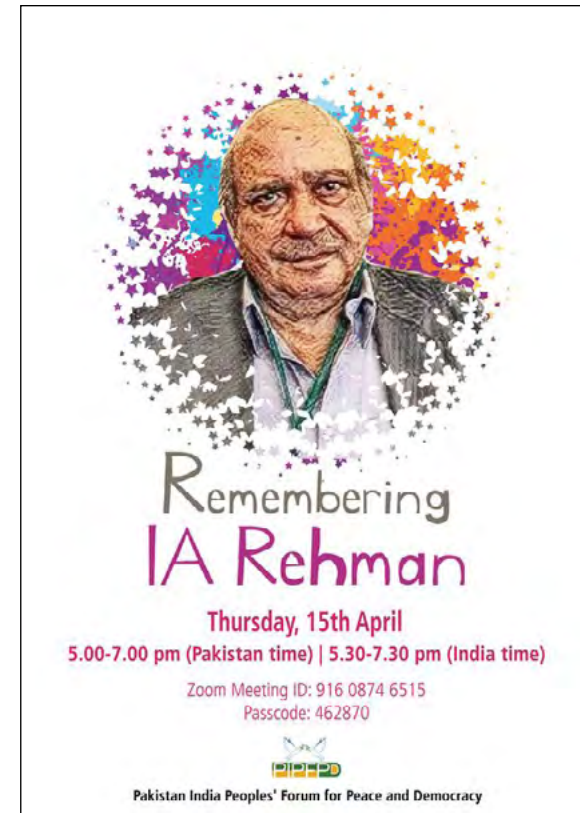
Mr Ramu Ramdas, Dr Mubashir and Mr I. A. Rehman at the Fifth Joint Convention in Bangalore



A memorial for Dr Mubashir Hasan and E Deenadayalan organized by PIPFPD



A memorial for Asma Jahangir organized by PIPFPD



A memorial for IA Rehman organized by PIPFPD

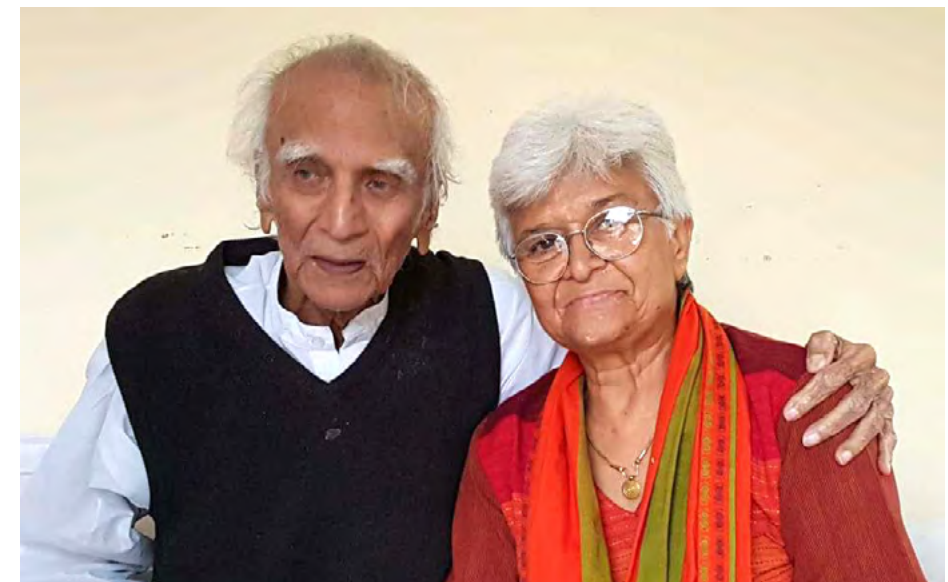


Photo of Dr Mubashir Hasan with Ms Kamla Bhasin

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South Asian Solidarity Collective

*Zuwa**

Journal of Cross-Border Conversations

*intertwined lifelines