



## First Steps & Giant Leaps

*Anisha Kinra and Seema Sridhar*

### Abstract

Over the last twelve years, youth leaders from across South Asia have been meeting, learning and training together at the Annual Conflict Transformation Workshops of Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) in New Delhi. One of the few sustained initiatives of trust-building between the young people of India and Pakistan, these Workshops led to the publication of *Closer to Ourselves: Stories from the Journey towards Peace in South Asia* in 2008 which documents the experiences of the participants. This reflection piece is part of that collection. Through their story, the authors share the experience of reaching out to “the other” and embarking on a journey of individual and collective conflict transformation.

### Author Profiles

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*"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it is – infinite."*

– William Blake (1757 - 1827)  
English engraver, illustrator & poet

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. As we walked down the hallway to attend the first session of the WISCOMP Conflict Transformation Workshop, we knew we had taken *that first step* in our quest to discover peace.

### **Problematizing peace**

We started the first session with a simple question: *What is peace?* What came forth was the idea that peace was beyond definitions. It was something amorphous that could, perhaps, only be perceived by each through her own distinctive lens.

Each expression of peace at that session was different; yet, they struck the same chord. Like different notes blending to create harmony. It was with this gentle knock on the doors of perception that we began our journey to the *other* side.

With little steps, we tread the beautiful and adventurous path of discovery towards that common underlying chord which bound all our definitions of peace; that which gave our definitions the strength of the collective and the space of the individual.

Our pursuit for peace began by *problematizing* the very notion of it. Was peace the mere absence of violence between two countries? Or did it mean something else, something more? What motivates groups of people to mutilate and slaughter one another? Why are more and more people – and not just in our two countries – taking to violence to make their voices heard? These critical questions of contemporary times marked the start of the journey we began.

Understanding peace and turmoil at the individual level and relating to one another at the human level were instrumental in our larger quest to understand conflict and envision a future bereft of it. The medium of the Conflict Transformation Workshops were aptly suited for this endeavor. We began to comprehend the complexities of our individual pursuits for peace.

We realized that we often forget the fact that nations are a collection of individuals. To create a lasting impact on the behavior of nation-states, we have to first go through transformative experiences as individuals. These individual journeys would then reflect at a higher level in the behavior of the collective.

### **Learning & unlearning**

For us, "the other" did not just mean those from across the border or from a conflict-ridden state. "The other" was more of the all-encompassing sort, including every individual present at the Workshop: a few closer to home, a few with whom we had a lot in common and a few we had no idea what to expect from.

Each passing day had something new to offer. And this was not limited to the academic sessions alone. In fact, much learning and unlearning happened outside the Workshop classroom. When we entered the Workshop session every morning, the socializing from the previous evening would have prepared us for the next day's re-learning!

### **The semantics of difference**

A part of that re-learning was exploring and discovering interfaces between the personal, the spiritual and the political. It was impossible to keep our personal experiences, our growing friendships and deepening bonds outside the conference halls. Our detachment from and indifference to the violence across the border – often conveniently shielded behind the façade of political ideologies and pseudo patriotic beliefs – was shattered. People across the border were no more anonymous identities. They now had faces, names and a place in our hearts. As boundaries blurred, “the other” not merely seemed closer, but also similar. Difference became a matter only of semantics.

The politics of ideology is simultaneously a politics of *otherization*, for our identity is defined *vis-à-vis* the other. But as we lived through the Workshop experience together – debating, talking, laughing, crying – all identities merged into one. Under that roof, in that shared space, we were not Indian or Pakistani; Hindu or Muslim; only peacemakers seeking a new struggle, a new challenge, a new journey.

Some memorable instances and interactions left a powerful impact on us and helped shape our perceptions.

### **Sharing stories**

The Workshop session on *Sustained Dialogue: A Public Peace Process* was most rejuvenating for it made us relate to one another's stories.

Participants were divided into groups in which all individuals were given a chance to narrate powerful personal experiences. This exercise enabled the simplest, most direct and remarkable means of communication! As one human being to another. Interchanging what we had learnt in our respective groups with the rest of the Workshop participants palpably broke the ice between us. As we returned to the Workshop hall after the session, the air was filled with a positive aura. With a sense of belonging and togetherness that was perceived by the organizers as well.

### **The spirit of Navratri**

One truly transformative experience was watching the musical ballet, *Ramayan* at Delhi's Sri Ram Centre. The performance was part of the *Navratri* (a nine day religious festival in the autumn) festivities, which had set the city abuzz with cultural programs and colorful *Durga badis*.

The WISCOMP regulars were playing the part of perfect hostesses by helping with the interpretation of the musical ballet. A Pakistani participant seated further away from us was being told the story by a Kashmiri Muslim. The lucidity in the flow of his narrative diverted our attention from the beautiful musical on stage!

The story of Ram – which has become a gruesome war cry in recent years – had so much more to offer with its message of peace, temperance and sacrifice. What better way of learning this than from a Kashmiri whose perceptions of identity and conflict had evolved in a milieu very different from ours! We witnessed the bonds of culture surpassing the manacles of politics around us. We witnessed the values of seamliness and grace in the face of hardship. Of warriors treating enemies with dignity and respect even in the face of defeat. All depicted in an enthralling performance on stage. There was perfect synergy between the Ramayana's on-stage story of peace and tolerance and that of the human faces among us who had surmounted great conflicts.

### **In each other's shoes**

Barriers crumbled in the Workshop session, *Theater as a Methodology for Dialogue and Conflict Transformation* as we literally stepped into each other's shoes. Small groups of participants exchanged personal experiences for a few minutes before moving on to form other, newer groups and repeat the exercise. At the end of the session, most of us knew a lot more about most others. And in a way that regular conversations would not have permitted us to know. Some revelations were stunning and some others very moving.

Before we could analyze, judge or attach value – something our social conditioning has trained us to do – we would have moved to the next set of people and their worlds. The exercise was all about discovering the common streak of humanity in all of us. Yes, we all wanted different things. Yet, that which we did *not* want were the same – violence; oppression; injustice; bad relationships; being told what to do; and so on. We seemed then to be made from the same clay, only cast in different forms.

As participants narrated personal stories, others enacted them; this effectively made us live through the experience of “the other”. Participating in these theatre exercises opened a world of new experiences. We shed our inhibitions, reached out to traces of ourselves in others as also to the unknown in ourselves, blending the common shades and differing hues all in one creative collage.

What was most wondrous about this experience was that we also got to know our fellow Indians, some of whom we had not made the effort to know. One had found peace in embracing Buddhism, another in working long hours at the office. Yet others by choosing to work with street children or writing poetry. Discovering people proved to be a fascinating journey. We had never before encountered such diversity in the pursuit of one thing universal.

### **Imagining futures**

We finally understood what our favorite musical icon meant when he sang *Imagine*. The Conflict Transformation Workshop indeed helped us create that world in our minds. It has set us on a quest to discover peace within and without and to redefine it as a state of mind rather than the state of affairs, for it is only the former which enables the latter.

The greatest challenge in this journey will be sustaining the enthusiasm, commitment and sense of purpose beyond the safe spaces that WISCOMP accorded us. There will be moments when we will want to walk away, let go, give up. What alone will sustain us in this journey is the vision of a future beyond violence, beyond boundaries.