



Exchange for Change: A Study of Micro-level Conflict Resolution Initiatives between Pakistani and Indian School Students

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Abstract

The past 65 years of Pakistan and India's history have been plagued with wars, hostile visa policies and minimal people-to-people contact. Sources of information about the 'other' for a large section of the population have been limited to Bollywood and news channels, resulting in stereotypical views and misconceptions on both sides. Amidst strained relations, The Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP) in collaboration with Routes2Roots (R2R) reached out to thousands of students across the border to engage them in a sustained dialogue through the Exchange-for-Change (EFC) Program. Here, the author shares field experiences of working with schools in Pakistan and India over the past two years, highlighting the challenges faced and the successes achieved by micro-level initiatives.

Author Profile

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I was introduced to Exchange-for-Change (EFC) program the very first day I stepped into The Citizens Archive of Pakistan's (CAP) office for my training. Over the next two years, it was to become one of CAP's leading projects and one that challenged my own sensibilities, introducing me to an alternate identity and narrative. EFC, as the name suggests, started off as a novel pilot project attempting to initiate cross-border communication channels between the youth of Pakistan and India. As a cultural and educational exchange program, it sought to be the first step towards bringing change and addressing the intergenerational conflict, deeply rooted in these countries' relations. CAP, an organization which holds its expertise in heritage and culture preservation as well as developing educational tools and programs, collaborated with a Delhi based cultural non-profit organization, Routes2Roots (R2R), for this initiative. Over the years, R2R has focused on connecting people across borders, especially those in Pakistan and India, two countries that share a history and culture, and presently a geography that binds them together. Both organizations, although miles apart, felt strongly about the need to initiate dialogue between the two countries—not through the government, but through the people, especially the young minds, which are rapidly forming opinions informed by biased curriculum, media and the violent partition narrative entrenched in the very fabric of the society.

The project was launched in December 2010 and over the next sixteen months, 2500 students in Karachi, Lahore, Delhi and Mumbai, engaged in a sustained dialogue through exchange of letters, photographs and oral histories. These children belonged to different income groups, schools ranging from low-income, middle-income to high-income on both sides of the border. At the end of the project, CAP and R2R also arranged for a small nineteen member delegation comprising of teachers, students and organization members to cross over the Wagah Border for a week-long visit to Delhi and Lahore. The project was so successful that requests for other such initiatives began to pour in from educational institutions in India and Pakistan before the project was even completed. This led to the launch of Exchange-for-Change 2012-2013 whereby 3500 students are currently being linked through written and visual mediums across six cities: Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Delhi, Mumbai and Chandigarh.

However, the success of this project was by no means guaranteed when we took the first few steps back in 2010. I recall approaching schools in Lahore marred by my own preconceived notions—the low and middle-income would be the hardest to approach, the high-income the easiest. I could not have been more wrong. As I walked into some of the most esteemed educational institutions in Lahore, I instantly sensed an air of hostility; I was unwelcome in these schools. Sitting in the principals' offices with the senior management in place, I was more than once accused of challenging the Two-Nation Theory by suggesting such a program. India and Pakistan did not share anything in common and the bloody partition of 1947 was a testimony to it. My pleas and cries went unheard. I wanted to explain that the idea behind the project was simply to allow students to communicate with one another, to be able to become

Pakistan's ambassadors and represent their country, to become tolerant enough to appreciate differences and celebrate similarities across nations, and particularly with a country we held a shared past with. However, for them such ideas amounted to questioning state identity, and by stressing upon any similarities, I was simply misinforming the children. "Haven't you seen how they have already penetrated our homes and TV lounges? My children don't watch anything but Star Plus. They have succeeded in infiltrating our minds and you are trying to build upon that."

As I quietly admitted defeat and picked up my bag to leave, I stifled my urge to ask the Principal how "they" had forced her to have Indian channels playing in her home and why she could simply not turn them off, and show "them" the way out of her TV lounge. As I closed the door behind me, I heard the topic lingering over, "Projects like these should run with other countries. Why not with China? We could learn far more from them!" It was after such negative experiences in the very first month of working with CAP that I realized how potent the image of India as an enemy country was. My personal experience on the other hand had been different. I completed my university education in Canada amongst several Indian friends, giving me a chance to interact with the 'other' early on in life. The Pakistanis and Indians clicked automatically; far away from home, we missed the same food, the same Bollywood music and movies. We had differences of course; as they ate their vegetarian meals, I would fill my stomach with chicken and meat. But amidst slight differences, there was a sense of familiarity and belonging. My own father had migrated from Batala near Gurdaspur, India, while many of my friends' ancestors were from Lahore or nearby cities. We shared a connection that I could not share with students from other cultures. However, during my three years of study, it never once crossed my mind that such a bond could in any way question my national identity or challenge the Two-Nation Theory, two interchangeable terms in Pakistan.

The hostility with which the project was received in some of the elite intellectual circles of the society, brought to light another reality. Pakistan, a state formed 65 years ago, was still struggling to find its identity. Unlike India, which is a much larger state, where Pakistan is almost irrelevant to the masses in the south, partition defines Pakistan and Pakistanis on a day-to-day basis. It is an event that is constantly played and re-played in various realms and mainstream discourse. For the schools I had interacted with, to stress upon any similarity with India was tantamount to questioning whether the creation of Pakistan had been a mistake, a question too frightful to be raised.

Fortunately, after weeks of vigorous field research, we finally found a responsive set of schools that in fact expressed enthusiasm about the program. It is not that they did not have questions or apprehensions but it was refreshing to see them understand the need for such communication, for allowing students to get to know their neighbours and form their own independent and informed opinions. Like CAP and R2R, they too hoped that such an exchange would enable a clearer understanding of the shared history, culture and lifestyles, in turn leading to a positive change in restructuring cultural misconceptions and intergenerational conflict. However, with the educational institutions now on board, we faced another daunting problem. Bulk mail was not allowed between India and Pakistan and no courier service wanted to help facilitate the program. I remember shrieking in my office, "The whole project will fall apart!" The team visited every leading courier company around Lahore, speaking to the

managers and calling up the head offices but to no avail. It was only then that we came across TCS, a prominent courier service. They agreed to come up with an alternative plan for us. After some negotiation, we mutually decided to send the mail via Dubai, a neutral point of exchange. It was ironic; despite being neighbouring countries we had to communicate with each other through a third party, located further away.

Consent of partner schools and a concrete logistical plan firmly under our belt, we finally entered the classrooms for our first set of workshops in January 2011. In the chilly winter breeze, we introduced the students and teachers to the project. I asked them to name their neighbouring countries and to say something about each one of them. "Afghanistan has Pathans!" "Iran has oil!" "China makes just about everything!" And India? I probed them. A few students snickered, some front-row one's answered "A huge population!" "Cars!" "Katrina Kaif!" while others felt that Pakistan's enemy country either had nothing or all the evils of the world. Later, I asked the class if they felt that Pakistanis and Indians shared anything in common and was taken aback with the number of heads that shook vehemently. Taking inspiration from this, the team decided to play a video that had been created by Indian students. The clip showed various Indian historical monuments from the Taj Mahal to the Red Fort, festivals, brides, *mithai* (sweetmeats) and weddings, snapshots of school life with students immersed in sports and other extra-curricular activities and a range of food items, from *gulab jamans* to *masala dosa* and *biryani*. Upon probing the students once more if Pakistanis and Indians shared anything in common, a number of hands shot up, each child desperate to list as many similarities as they could. "Ma'am the *henna* the bride had on her hands, the clothes she wore, some of the food they eat is just like ours! I love *rasmalai* too!" And the list went on and on...

It was perhaps in that moment that I saw a flicker of hope. Outside, when I entered an auto rickshaw, the anti-India campaign was in full force. It asked citizens what Pakistan's relationship with India was and the answer in big bold letters was - hatred and revenge.

Here, inside a hall tightly packed with 500 students, I saw some of that hate sentiment but I also saw the quest to learn, the flexibility of mind, the happiness at sharing similar tastes, clothes, hobbies and lifestyles with those across the border. There was much confusion and misconception in the young minds. It was difficult for them to understand that India did not equate to Hindus. They were shocked to learn that India in fact had more Muslims than Pakistan and had one of the largest number of mosques in the world. They also had trouble understanding that just as their grandparents had tragic memories of partition, those on the other side went through the same pain. They too were uprooted from their homes, snatched away from their friends, and massacred. So together we decided to get answers to some of our questions by talking to the Indians themselves. Slowly the team sensed increased excitement in the room and by the time the first letter writing activity was coming to an end, the students were fighting for more time—they had too many questions, too many things to tell and it was absolutely essential for each one of them to draw either their favorite cartoons, the Pakistani flag or a historical monument. They wanted to show their new friends that they too were talented!

Back at the office as the team sifted through these letters, we found different undertones. Some of the negativity had seeped in, "We like the Muslims in India but not the Hindus." one of them

read. Others had requests, "We want the people of India to accept Islam." and "Pakistan is friendly with India but India does not help Pakistan. Please help us grow big like you." Many had also asked questions, "I love mangoes, do you like them too?" "What is your favorite color?" "Can you please come to Pakistan? We are nice people I promise."

As we received letters from India, we saw the same trend. While hate messages came through in the shape of comments like "You are terrorists, stay away from us," other students were inquisitive. "Do you wear *ghaghras* (long Skirt) too?" one child asked. Another expressed her confusion, her questions and her innocence in the form of a poem:

*Why are we separated,
And for each other why do have hatred,
What is the reason,
That we don't meet every season,
Why do people forget,
That each one of us takes a breath,
Why that half an hour way,
Becomes the way to death,
Where is the faith lost,
And to meet each other we pay a great cost,
After all we laugh the same way,
We smile the same way,
We love the same way,
Just that border can't make us away,
After all we live the same way.*

Over the next few months, the students continued to interact with one another, writing letters, sharing photographs and speaking to their grandparents about the early years of India and Pakistan. Just about two months after the project had started, one of the students who at first had shown much reluctance to be a part of the project, came up to me and said, "Ma'am I didn't know they were just like us. You know they also celebrate Eid and like Atif Aslam!"

The feedback forms we had the students fill out before and after the various phases also showed a marked change in perception and knowledge levels about the 'other'. For instance, the baseline survey from one of the partnering schools had shown that only 38% students believed that India and Pakistan could be friends while a dismal 5.1% of the students felt that they shared something in common with Indians. By the end of the project however, 62% referred to their Indian counterparts as friends while an overwhelming 67% of the student population said that the program has showed them that Indians and Pakistanis had many similarities.

The connection they had developed was perhaps most evident when a select group of students crossed the Wagah border to meet the friends they had been interacting with over the year. The response was astounding! We were welcomed with garlands, music and dance shows and a grand tea in each school we visited. The students, who just a year ago felt that the 'other' was a complete alien, were now performing *bhangra* with each other, and were inseparable from one another. When the Indian students visited Lahore, the response was no different. CAP arranged an exhibition in Lahore and Karachi where all the letters, photographs and videos from the

program were showcased for the public. At the exhibition in Lahore not only did the Indian students immediately click with their Pakistani friends, but were also instantly at ease with students from other schools and colleges as well.

The Indian students on their visit to Lahore were at first petrified that they would find no vegetarian food in Pakistan but they enjoyed sitting by the famous Badshahi Mosque at the renowned *Cuckoos Cafe*, eating *palaak paneer*, *daal makhni* and mixed vegetables. They toured the city, spending hours at Lahore Fort, Jahangir's Tomb, Government College and Liberty Market. For months afterwards, we got Facebook requests from not just the students who had visited Lahore or been a part of the project but also from students of other schools. One such message read "Thank you for teaching us about your country. It has changed my views about Pakistan completely. I will never look at it the same way." I do not think I would look at India the same way again either. Although I was privileged with prior exposure, which had already challenged many of my own stereotypes, EFC was an eye-opener in many regards. I witnessed firsthand the kind of hatred and negative labeling that was breeding in these children. Without knowing the 'other' they had already formed rigid opinions. For them to fathom any similarities or a common ground with the 'other' was unimaginable. It was also revealing to see that such sentiments cut across age, gender and class.

The visits I made over two years to India sent another burst of knowledge through me. I toured Delhi, Mumbai and Chandigarh with the CAP team, engaging with students and teachers. While we were welcomed warmly in every city, there was a different narrative dominant in each one of them. While Delhi and Chandigarh had the partition narrative deeply etched in the memories of the teachers and in the discourse of the young ones, Mumbai was in a sense removed from it. The thousands of migrants that had poured in from Pakistan had settled in Delhi and surrounding areas. Though Mumbai too housed several refugees, the numbers differed greatly. It was perhaps because of this that the students were so unaware of where Lahore was and what partition had meant for millions of people. Instead, the memories of the Mumbai Attacks of 2008 were vivid in their minds. They threw questions at us regarding terrorism, women's rights and democracy in Pakistan. There was a sense of hostility amongst the taxi drivers and the population in general. Four years was not sufficient time to overcome the anger and hurt created by the attacks. But the ability to communicate, to be able to ask questions and express feelings was a step towards healing. Giving the Indian students a chance to speak to common Pakistanis became part of the healing process.

As we got ready to leave the school, hundreds of students surrounded us, each wanting to shake our hands and give us a hug. That was the kind of love we brought back to Pakistan. "Please call us to Pakistan," they yelled after us. "Please come, visit us again in India, we will show you around," said the others. Presently visa policies and trade barriers are being relaxed. Pakistan has recently granted India the Most Favoured Nation status. These are good steps but no one can guarantee the sustainability of such measures. The common people are helpless in front of government policies, which ease or harden as per their own prerogative. However, through micro-level initiatives such as Exchange-for-Change, room is created to start a dialogue, which is both uninterrupted and uninteruptable.