

Expanding Narratives Of Partition And Post-Partition- A Transformative Experience For The India-Pakistan Youth

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the coexistence process between Indian and Pakistani youth who have been engaged with the Seeds of Peace, a non-profit organization. 80 students from India and Pakistan (22 girls and 18 boys from each country) have attended summer camp in Maine since 2001, coordinated by the organization. Through this experience these youth forged deep friendships and connections with each other. Since then they have continued their interaction and engagement through emails and online coexistence sessions. In the summer of 2003 the Indian seeds crossed the, India-Pakistan border to visit their counterparts in Pakistan. Through this process these youth have brought their conflicting narratives by the other, and simultaneously, fostered friendships with the exclusive narratives around the partition and post partition conflict, confronted other. This study is an attempt to explore the dynamics of these contrasting processes: a) of defending one's own history and blaming the other and, b) of nurturing the new relationships. The following questions guided the analysis. What are the perceptions of the participants about the other in relation to the partition and post partition issues? How have these perceptions transformed through the interactive experience? How did the experience of border crossing shape their beliefs and accounts of the other?

Keywords: partition, post-partition, coexistence, narratives, conflict, patriotism, friendships, border-crossing.

“There had really been a time, not so long ago, when people sensible people, of good intention, had thought that all maps were the same, that there was a special enchantment in lines...They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other...What had they felt I wondered, when they discovered that they had created not a separation, but a yet-undiscovered irony...there had never been a moment in the four-thousand-year-old history of that map, when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta, were more closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by that line that was to set us free- our looking-glass border.” *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh Post partition generations; in India and Pakistan grow up with narratives and images of partition that clearly enforce the boundaries between *them and us*. Although partition was something of the past, it has been a constant reality for the youth in

both countries, in stories that they hear in the family, maps that they learned to skillfully draw in their geography class, textbook history they are taught in school, and images of the “enemy other” that they see through the media. These “*enemy*” images have been further reinforced by three ensuing wars between the two countries and minimal interaction among people across borders. The duality, of being Indian on one hand and anti-Pakistani on the other is a reality for most of the post-partition generation.

This has been our experience as an Indian and a Pakistani, growing up in our respective countries amidst the narratives of conflict between the two countries and then coming together in the US, five years back and confronting these narratives. In our deliberate engagement with each other on issues of the subcontinent we came to realize that we gave contrasting meanings to the same events. In our conversations with others from the region and in exploring each other’s school history curriculum, we became convinced that our socialization and education had something to do with these enemy perceptions. It has become our commitment as scholars and practitioners in education to jointly construct a new narrative of peace and coexistence through our work. In this direction we have been coordinating and facilitating dialogues between our two communities. One such initiative has been our engagement with the Seeds of Peace Program, a non-profit organization which brings together youth from regions of conflict around the world. The mission of the Seeds of Peace is to sow the seeds of peace in war torn areas “*by teaching teenagers to develop trust and empathy for one another and to equip the next generation with the tools to end violence and become the leaders of tomorrow.*”

In this paper we seek to examine the coexistence process between Indian and Pakistani youth who participated in the Seeds of Peace Program in Maine in the summer of 2001. Twenty-four high school students from India and Pakistan, twelve from each country, participated in a three-week summer camp. Each country group comprised of eight girls and four boys. Through this experience they forged deep friendships and connections with each other. Since then they have continued their interaction and engagement through emails and online coexistence sessions. The following questions guided are analysis. What are the perceptions of the participants about the other in relation to the partition and post partition issues? How have these perceptions transformed through the interactive experience? How did the experience of border crossing shape their beliefs and accounts of the other?

Methodology:

Data for this study was obtained through: a) participant observation in the coexistence sessions and in the recent border crossing by the Indian youth to Pakistan, b) participants' journals, and c) follow-up discussions on online coexistence sessions

In our role as participant observers of the co-existence sessions at the camp and our trip with the Indian youth this summer across the Indian border, we observed the sessions and kept detailed notes about the process. We also co-facilitated four sessions along with the core facilitators at the Seeds of Peace Camp. And looked at Indian and Pakistani participants' journals that they maintained about their experiences in the sessions. Additionally, we also perused through online discussions in the follow-up program.

Analysis:

A variety of analytic strategies allowed us to carry out a detailed analysis of the data in relation to our research questions. We searched participants' ideas and comments related to the India-Pakistan conflict in the notes, journals, and online mails. We used coding and categorizing techniques to understand participants' perceptions. Codes were grouped into themes (e.g., partition and Kashmir issue). We constructed matrices to compare the perceptions of Indian and Pakistani participants around these themes.

Participants' Perceptions

The youth arrived at the camp, excited to meet the other side, and anxious about what to expect. For the next three weeks they were with their "enemy" sharing bunks, meal times and free time with them. They engaged in various camp activities and coexistence sessions together and in this process began to make discoveries about each other. They were encouraged to ask questions from each other and it was interesting to see their enthusiasm when they posed questions ranging from issues of culture, religion, politics and daily life in each other's country. They shared these questions with each other and discussed them extensively in the sessions.

Some of the Indian Participants' Questions Addressed to Pakistanis:

- **Partition, Kashmir and Contemporary Politics**

According to you, who was responsible for the partition and why?

Do you believe that Kashmir belongs to you?

What do you think should be done about Kashmir?

Are your politicians as corrupt as ours?

- **Pakistani's Perceptions about Indians**

Do you actually think Indians are bad?

Do Pakistanis really hate Indians, like personally as in would not even say hello if we met?

Some of the Pakistani Participants' Questions Addressed to Indians:

- **Partition, Kashmir and Contemporary Politics**

Was partition the right thing to do? Why or why not? (honestly)

Do you really believe that India has a right to Kashmir? If so, why?

Do you think that both countries could live in peace if the Kashmir issue is solved?

Who do you think starts the fights between the two countries? Is it the politicians, Muslims or Pakistanis?

- **Indians' Perceptions about Pakistanis-**

If an Indian were given choice between making friends with a Pakistani or convincing someone that Pakistan is wrong? What would he or she do?

Do you hold grudge against Pakistanis because you have been told that Pakistan is worse than anything?

These questions reflect the participants' curiosity and assumptions about each other. In the discussions following these questions they were able to confront the other's stereotypes and assumptions about themselves. Through this process they responded to the questions posed by the other with intent to clarify and explain their views in relation to them.

Mirror Images:

In our analysis we noticed an interesting pattern of mirror images in the perceptions of the participants. Each side reciprocated the distorted image of the other. The frame of mirror images has been used in the analysis of various conflicts such as, Soviet Union and USA during the cold war period and the Israel-Palestinian conflict. In a conflict there are "reciprocal distortions" that exist in the perceptions of the two parties of each other (Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1986 p72). Using this framework we are attempting to apply it on two levels. One in which the youth *mirrored their perceptions* of each other and confronted conflicting

images of each other; and the other, where they mirrored *the process of struggle between their friendship with the enemy and their patriotism to their country.*

Confronting Conflicting Images: In discussing these issues in the coexistence sessions, the youth brought their exclusive narratives around the conflict and confronted conflicting views expressed by the other mirroring the same emotion. This exposure to contradictory images has continued to challenge the perceptions of the Indian and Pakistani youth about themselves and the other. Some of the recurring themes that we identified as emerging in the narratives were around partition, minority issue and Kashmir.

Table 1: Mirror Images

India	Pakistan
<p>PARTITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Partition was bad. ▪ Muslims in India were “told” by the British that they were not given equal treatment and education. ▪ India celebrates independence from the British. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Partition was good. ▪ Muslims in India “were” treated unequally kept backward by the British & the Hindus. ▪ Pakistan celebrates independence from the British and the Hindus.
<p>MINORITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ India is a secular state and all minorities are equal and respected. It is Pakistan that is a “theocratic state” suppressing its minorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Muslims in India are still not treated equally and they are suppressed. Muslims are persecuted in “communal riots.”

India	Pakistan
<p>KASHMIR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Militants” & “terrorists” are causing violence in Kashmir. ▪ Pakistan is completely funding and backing the “terrorists.” ▪ Kashmir is an “internal problem.” ▪ Kashmir belongs to India. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There are no “terrorists in Kashmir. They are “freedom fighters.” ▪ Pakistan supports the cause but has no control over those “freedom fighters.” ▪ Kashmir is an international issue. ▪ Kashmir “belongs to it’s people.”

Border Crossing Experience: Last year on the 12th of Aug. together with 22 Indian seeds we crossed the Wagha border (the border between India and Pakistan) on foot. For me (Meenakshi), in addition to being an academic exploration it was a personal journey of connecting to my roots since both my parents came from across the borders during the partition in 1947. I found my self in a unique role of bridging the gap between the past and future generations. The four days that we were there, we interacted with Pakistani seeds families and friends, saw the historical sites and were exposed to the distinct hospitality of the culture. We celebrated each other’s independence days with each other and learnt each other’s national anthems. Some public events were also organized and received media coverage.

After the visit we (Anila and Meenakshi) interviewed the youth from both sides about their experience. While reflecting on the experience of crossing the borders one of the India seeds said, “I know them so much better now. Earlier people might say you met two people at camp and they might be ok, now I can say completely that there are more people who think like us. I am able to say that Pakistan is not an enemy, the way it is portrayed to us. They are like us.”

Another Pakistani seed said, “I have talked to my parents about this experience and my grandparents and parents have really changed. Earlier they would not hear the word *Hindu* or *Indian*, but now they listen. They have met the [Indian seeds] and feel differently now.”

As we can see in these quotes this experience has had a profound impact on these youth and their families. In these 56 years, the negative stereotypes about each other have been reinforced through imagery, media, and narratives in both the countries. For example, for Indians, in general, their imagination about Pakistan is overshadowed by a sordid image of Pakistan as a nation supporting terrorism, and a fundamentalist Muslim society that is backward, poor, and undemocratic. These constructs were being challenged when the India seeds were exposed to rich diversity of Pakistani cultural and intellectual life.

The experience of home stays in the enemy country has somehow reintroduced the other in their consciousness in a new way. This experience has been engaging and reaffirming for the youth in strengthening their relationships across borders. This summer the Pakistani seeds are scheduled to be in Indian for a few days staying with their Indian counterparts.

Friendship and Patriotism: Through their collective coexistence experience at camp and the home stay, two contradictory dimensions are evolving. On the one hand the interactions between the two have culminated into friendships on a personal level and commitment to make a difference for peace, which they nurtured in the camp and which have continued beyond the camp experience, and on the other hand the context at home of increased tensions and a threat of war and terrorism is continuing to strengthen their exclusive frameworks of conflict.

This process of going back and forth between the two processes stretches their existing notions of patriotism and loyalty to their own ideologies. They are torn between two contradictory processes:

a) one is that of defending one's own history and blaming the other. Examples of some of the quotes illustrating this are:

“I don't understand why you are fussing so much about the Babri Masjid, let me tell you that as S said, it was NOT the government's action at all.”(Indian)

“How come you are self-sufficient when half of your country's people cannot afford to buy basic necessities. You guyz call yourselves as the biggest democracy of the world. What democracy are you talking about?” (Pakistani)

b) The other process is in the direction of sustaining friendships that were forged at the camp and during the home-stays in the summer of 2003. Some examples of this are:

“There are bound to be times when we are angry, and upset, and I know that there will be times the words " enemy" will be used, and when we really understand each other, when we are back home and when the real peace making starts, then is the time that we prove just how strong our bond of friendship is.”(Indian)

“Now I know that Seeds of Peace is the one which helped me to build a neutral and a non-biased thinking concerning India. It has made me the A of today who has the exposure about his enemy rating the blunders of both my own side and the other party. Now I have the courage to listen everyone even Indians.”(Pakistani)

“The other day I met some one and I was telling her about all my Indian friends...she left the room calling me a traitor...hmm.... These people need minds of their own. Theirs are so blocked by words and incidents they were TAUGHT to believe. It's going to be a long hard struggle opening up the closed gates.” (Pakistani)

The youth came in with strong ideas and perceptions of the other as the enemy, as reflected in their mirror images. The mirror image framework has been useful in analyzing and explaining these perceptions. The interactive experience at the camp introduced a new dynamic of friendship in their relationship of conflict, which was further strengthened by the home-stay experience of the Indian youth in Pakistan. On returning home they have continued to engage with each other through follow-up online discussions. The analysis reveals that while continuing to affirm their national rhetoric in those discussions, they are also working on nurturing and reaffirming their friendships. This new dynamic of not negating their feelings of anxiety, and rejections of the other's narrative of them, and fostering their new relationships marks their struggle in the direction of peace.

Implications: The purpose of this work is to explore what scaffolds and strategies can encourage the development of a self-reflective view of their own history and narrative, in these youth. As Selman (1995) suggests, “Children must develop the maturity to understand the world from their own and other people's point of view.” At this point the general framework is *we are right the other is always wrong*. They generally seem to think that the problem exists only with the other. Whether it is the issue of minority, or Kashmir it is the other who needs to correct its actions. Through this experiential education focusing on peace building and by promoting constant engagement between the youth from across the

conflicting zones, there is a potential that this process can foster self-reflection in these youth and develop their capacity to coordinate their view of the conflict with the other's perception of the conflict (Selman, 1995). The context of collective inquiry and joint critical exploration has the potential of introducing a powerful element in making sense of the conflict from the two opposing perspectives. The new text that they will construct jointly will push their thinking towards acknowledging and accommodating differences.

Recommendations: As we move into the future we need to be both critical and visionary in an effort to develop vital theories for new action. While extremism has been growing in both these countries there is a window of hope through which we can permeate the environment in both countries with people-to-people connections and relationships at various levels such that the peace process becomes irreversible. Some recommendations in that direction are:

- Getting these youth together to help them initiate the process of joint and critical inquiry of historical and contemporary events and creating possibilities for youth to take joint action around social issues.
- Creating regional institutions promoting joint research on teacher education, curriculum development and pedagogic tools.
- Organizing dialogues and critical discussion on issues pertaining to the region between the South Asian Diaspora especially among the new generation from the region who has crossed borders to be University campuses in the US.

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