

Dialogue & Trust are keys to overcoming the World's divides:

I stand here as a South Asian. Today South Asia has come to be known for all the wrong and negative reasons. But there is another story line emerging that is going to have a profound impact on our region. This emerging story is full of promise and hope for the future. The story is about India-Pakistan Peace process and the improving relations between our two countries.

Last month at a public occasion in Kashmir, our Prime Minister said, "There comes a time in the history of a people, when they are energized enough to make history. It is time to make a genuine effort to build peace and create the conditions for a historic reconciliation of hearts and minds in our region. People of South Asia have generally celebrated diversity and lived in harmony. We now need to revive those bonds and that spirit of accommodation and mutual respect even while we sit down in good faith to resolve many of our genuine differences. Security means freedom from fear – physical security, economic security, political security, cultural and social security." He further stated that he would like the border between the two parts of Kashmir respectively held by India and Pakistan, instead of being a line of contention, to become a line of peace through which ideas, goods and people can travel.

Tomorrow and the day after - Pakistan and India celebrate, 60 years of Independence. As we observe these important national days, we can look forward to ending the bitter legacy of the last 60 years and begin a new chapter in our bilateral relations.

Both countries are currently engaged in a peace process that was launched in 2003. We are trying to overcome our trust deficit accumulated over six decades due to legacy of the partition of the sub-continent in 1947, three major wars fought between our two countries, and Kashmir dispute made irresolvable due to deep-seated distrust and hatred between us.

But today we are seriously engaged in the peace process and a composite dialogue over a host of issues between us. This current peace dialogue between us has sustained over the past 5 years, despite serious provocations to disrupt it. In the context of India-Pakistan, this indeed is a remarkable and a positive development that I believe has the potential to transform tomorrow's South Asia.

In December 2003, when leaders of India-Pakistan decided to take bold steps to launch the peace process and a composite dialogue to resolve all outstanding disputes between our countries including Kashmir, they were signaling that yesterday's enemies could become partners in forging peace.

This peace process has been largely people driven and the two governments have responded to the public sentiment of wanting to end hostilities and animosity and instead have peace and friendship between our two countries. Apart from this public backing for the peace process, the national self-interests of the two countries are also converging in many spheres, which presents the possibility that we may have turned the wheel in the right direction.

The present peace process was launched in 2003, by the previous government. Despite a change of government in New Delhi in 2004, the peace process not only continues but for the first time has held several rounds of substantial discussions for the resolution of Kashmir dispute, which is very significant. Both countries for decades had refused to budge from their national stated positions on Kashmir. But both have changed their national positions, there by making discussions on Kashmir issue to move further and we can now see an emerging framework for a solution.

This change has not been dramatic but incremental because of the trust deficit of the past six decades. Some want the process to go faster and we are yet to actually come to final resolution of Kashmir or other disputes. But it is better that we are talking, putting forward our points of views and ideas at the dialogue table, as well as listening to the other side's difficulties and

sensitivities, rather than have our armies face each other eyeball to eyeball on our borders. In this dialogue process, going on at the official as well as unofficial levels, Kashmiris are participating and contributing with their views and ideas. Some of these have been accepted and turned into confidence building measures that are already put in place by the two governments.

I am deeply grateful to be a witness to the progress in this peace process especially on Kashmir. The most visible symbol of change on the ground in the last five years, is the fact that the politicians have changed their language of hate mongering against the other country, there by creating a conducive environment for improving bilateral relations.

My organization Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation or CDR, has been involved in the parallel track II civil society peace process on Kashmir. We have been able to contribute with ideas and important inputs to the official track I dialogue process. Today CDR team is in contact with all the key relevant persons in the two governments as well as dissident Kashmiri leaders. This work has been the most challenging one of my life - Work that forces me to constantly face other's pain and suffering and injustice; prompting me to look in my own heart to overcome my pride and blind spots about my country and my people who are responsible for making others suffer injustice and pain.

So how do I happen to get involved in the peace and dialogue process and help towards transforming conflicts in India and our region?

The journey for me began in 1984, when India was rocked by anti-Sikh community riots following late Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination, by her Sikh bodyguards. I was caught up in those riots and witnessed cruelty inflicted on the innocent Sikhs at the time. I was shaken by what I had seen with my naked eyes and unable to come to terms with what my Hindu brethren had inflicted on others. This made me self-critically look at myself, my country and reexamine - who I was, how did I look at retributory violence? What was my duty as member of the majority Hindu community of India towards religious minorities? What role can individuals play in mending social fabric that is torn after such momentous events in history of nations?

I realized that I could not remain a by-stander and live in peace knowing we had wronged an entire community by holding it responsible for the action of two individuals. It was wrong to hold an entire community responsible for the wrong actions or crimes of a few individuals or a small group. It was also unjust. We could not justify humiliating and killing defenseless people. I knew, once the dust settled, I could not pretend to let life go on as before without being affected by what I had seen.

Violent retribution or social discrimination is both wrong and against civilization values. As member of the majority community in my country, it was my duty to ensure that minority rights and lives were protected. If any members of my community had erred on this count than I share equal responsibility for those acts and must help in the repairing, healing and restoring relations between groups and communities and nations.

This had prompted me to reach out to the victimized Sikh community members at the time and express apology for the physical wounds and humiliations that were inflicted on them by the rioting mobs. My gestures towards some Sikhs opened up conversations with them that helped in healing hurts and life long friendships. One of these Sikhs was a young student in 1986. He had decided to migrate out of India and join militants at the time when I first met him. During the riots in Delhi, he tried to go out and help others but was picked up by the police and abused. He tried to explain his intentions, stated that his father was a judge and he was not anti-India and only wanted to help and give relief to people in distress. But he was not heard. He felt angry and humiliated at the treatment given to him and the label of 'anti-national' that was thrown at him because he was a member of the Sikh community. This humiliation was too much to take and he decided to leave India forever. While outside India he continued to seethe underneath with anger at the humiliation he suffered back home.

At our first meeting when he told me his experience of the 1984 riots, I narrated my own experience of how I had tried to save Sikh passengers on a train, on the day of the rioting and how ashamed I was of what Indians had done to the innocent Sikhs. I had apologized to this young man. Almost twenty years later he told me - that first meeting with me, my apology, and the subsequent conversations between us had helped to restore his sense of honor. At the time he was in touch with the extremists who were plotting revenge attacks. The young man broke links with them and decided to return to India after graduation and make his contribution towards rebuilding our society. Today he is helping our organization and our various initiatives including one in Kashmir.

Almost a decade later India faced another defining moment when two rounds of riots and thirteen serial blasts following demolition of a mosque by right wing Hindu groups, rocked my home city Mumbai from December 1992 till February 1993. Within three months hundreds of people were dead, thousands had lost their homes, commercial activity in the city was badly affected. The minority Muslims felt afraid, insecure. They had lost faith in the police and civil administration. Even the elite amongst them asked, "Is there a place for us in India? Would we be given equal rights and justice?" Through out those three critical months, I was on the streets, helping in the riot affected areas, keeping the lines of communication open between the people and the police authorities, so that residential areas were protected, particularly those where the minority Muslims lived.

Once the riots were quelled, I was part of a citizens initiative that helped to set up citizen-police committees as a mechanism to prevent future violent upheavals and more importantly help in bringing the estranged communities together by initiating difficult dialogue between them to heal the anger and hurt and a sense of alienation that had crept into the minority Muslim community. These committees were able to involve members of all religious communities to rebuild our city and help in improving the quality of life in their respective localities.

But following these violent events, our city was polarized and people were insecure, fearful as well as deeply angry. We decided that we would take the then police chief of our city, to the riot affected areas to meet the minority community, so that he could hear people's grievances and see what corrective steps police could take. In one area, which was the home of the chief conspirators of the serial bomb blasts, we simply could not have a break through. It was suggested that we should hold a closed door meeting with women.

So we invited some women to meet the police commissioner. They came in large numbers and told him of the members of their families who were killed, how they were harassed and how some of them were abused and humiliated by the policemen when they went to make enquiries about the arrests of their relatives. The police commissioner gave them patient hearing and then told them, "If anyone amongst my officers has abused or humiliated you, I personally apologize for their actions." This opened up space for a discussion for mending things, creating trust across the religious and citizen-police divides, and led to citizen's participation for putting our city back on its feet.

We set up citizens committees to deal with local level tensions arising out of small civic, social or religious disputes. As a result, some trouble prone areas were totally transformed when violent fights, drug peddling and school drop out rate dropped and citizens of these localities began to give attention to improve civic amenities and provide sports facilities, help their young men and school drop outs. Mumbai has stood the test last year when it faced serial train blasts due to terrorist attacks and when over a hundred people were killed. Citizens of Mumbai irrespective of their religion worked through the night in the rescue work and providing food and water to the stranded commuters through the night. We are grateful for this spirit of Mumbai-our city that is home to over 14 million people.

I would like to come back to Kashmir before I end. For several years now we have tried to bring people around a dialogue table, all those who should speak to one another but are not speaking. At one of these roundtables on Kashmir last February, several Kashmiri participants expressed their anger and apprehension that once again India-Pakistan were arriving at a Kashmir solution and would thrust it on them without including the Kashmiris in the final decision making process. One of the grievances of the Kashmiris has been that they have been denied the right to decide their own future.

Some Indian and Pakistani participants tried to explain what kind of serious difficulties both India and Pakistan would face internally, if they were to respond to some of the demands of the Kashmiris. To this a Kashmiri woman participant responded by saying, "Why are Kashmiris always expected to accommodate Indian and Pakistani national interests, considerations and suppress our own aspirations? Why do you not take us into your confidence? Tell us what your difficulties are and trust us that we would take your national interests and difficulties into consideration in our response to you, while searching for a just solution that satisfies all the three parties."

The woman's words –" Trust us that we will consider your difficulties while responding to your national interests.." - holds the key I believe, in bridging the numerous divides we have in our world today.

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