

Culturally-Based Approaches to Peacebuilding in Pakistan

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Speakers:

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Civil society is developing a range of innovative approaches to address extremism and conflict in Pakistan. Drawing on local, cultural, and religious traditions, civil society finds positive ways of using media, art, and customs to build support for peace and human rights throughout the country.

Building Peace through Media

The custom in Pakistani tribal regions, known as Swara, involves a young girl married into a victim's family in order to resolve a dispute, typically a murder committed by the other party. Documentary filmmaking, such as those by Samar Minallah, illustrates what is viewed as a culturally sanctioned human rights violation. Documentary media has the impact of unmasking differing viewpoints; showing tribal elders defending the rights of girls and women, citing examples from the Prophet. This shows the diversity in Pakistan through documenting tribal leaders (who typically are viewed as part of the Taliban in Western media) describing how forced marriage is not Islamic or right.

Another culturally-based approach to address the issue of forced marriage of Swara are traditional songs and music. People can relate to these songs, which have a deeper impact on the audience. Presenting young children dancing and playing to customary music that celebrates women in a society actually uses the essence of a culture to help improve upon the deficiencies of that culture. Thus, using traditional folk songs and music to illustrate the value of girls and women and the fallacies of forcing them to marry as reparation for something they had no part.

Civil society activists also encourage young people to use technology and media that is not so far out of reach for them, such as cell phones and YouTube, to document their own views and culture to promote peace.

Much of the mainstream international as well as domestic media reinforce certain stereotypes and negative views of tribal regions in Pakistan and Afghanistan. As for the women in these regions, media actors concern themselves only with sensationalist stories, such as women taking off their veils and burkas. However, they overlook the victims of collateral damage, women and children. These issues, such as with the Burkas, were not as pertinent as women's need of a platform for their voice.

Another example of media and music used to build peace occurred in the bringing together of two singers, one Pashto and the other Dari, who traditionally do not get along to perform a song called 'Shinwaray Lawangeena'. This experiment of song collaboration was quite successful, as they were invited by President Hamid Karzai to perform in Afghanistan on their national day.

Building Peace through Theater and Art

The arts and theater are playing an important role in peace building in Pakistan. For instance, the Ajoka Theater promotes an egalitarian and democratic society in Pakistan. The theater group and its co-founder, Shahid Nadeem, recognize that Pakistan is struggling with peace both within itself, amongst the various communities, and externally, with its public policy directed often with regard toward India and the growing tension with the United States.

It first opposed the military dictatorship of General Zai-ul-Haq through its plays. These were banned from performance, but the plays were conducted, nevertheless, in backyards, streets, factory yards, and wherever they could find space. They also produced plays opposing fundamentalist religious laws that discriminated against religious minorities and women, such as the so-called blasphemy law that prohibited negative rhetoric against other's religion, but in reality was used as a tool of suppression and imprisonment. The play "Watch The Play and Move On" was produced at the same time this law was enacted and warned the public of exploitation of religious sentiment and the damage it can have to the society.

Cultural activism through art and theater was particularly supported in Pakistan at the time due to other forms of activism being banned and media censorship. Thus, theater provided a space for Pakistani people to voice their aspirations and views for democracy and human rights.

Culturally-based peacebuilding approaches through theater have also used satire and comedy to address issue of concern in Pakistan, such as the Burka. The Ajoka Theater has conducted a play entitled "Burka Bonanza" where the Burka was used as a metaphor for cover-ups and all the characters are dressed in different style of Burkas, whether it is a police officer, astronaut, nurse,

ministers, boys and girls. This created a debate on whether the Burka is a demonstration of faith or something with cultural origins.

Furthermore, the use of poetry from Sufism delivers a strong message of peace, dignity, and tolerance and continues the method of using parts of a culture to combat concerning aspects of that culture.

Building Peace through Tribal Customs and Politics

Working within the framework of the established culture and tradition in order find common ground is a growing strategy of culturally-based peacebuilding in Pakistan. Most prominent is the Jirga; a traditional circle of Pukhtoon locals and elders of a community, comparable to a national parliament, gathered for dispute resolution, primarily through the process of arbitration. It is also an informal educational institution. The Jirga conducts shuttle diplomacy, negotiates ceasefires, and develops new laws according to the needs of the community.

Although traditional tribal councils can be used to support the community, there is recognition for such institutions to have some aspect of accountability to the community. This is important with regard to decisions that send young girls away to be married as compensation; as such an act has clear human rights implications.

Peacebuilding and cultural activist in the Pukhtoon areas of Pakistan are working toward building on traditional and cultural institutions to promote peace. Such efforts include organized international conferences on restorative justice, nonviolent activism, and rule of law training for government officials

Conclusions

Culturally-based peacebuilding in Pakistan has shown that change has to come from the inside, often slowly, and it cannot be imposed from the outside. The universality of art, music, and humor is present in these peacebuilding practices. Whether culture is expressed through documentary media, theater performance, or traditional political institutions, the local traditions are important in solving problems within a society, such as in Pakistan. Through theater, dance, and humor all members of a society, men and women, can interact with one another and reflect on the serious issues of their community while at the same time have fun and be informed and entertained. It is precisely these aspects of culture and tradition, demonstrated through various mediums, which can be utilized in a manner to slowly transform a society toward peace.