

Conflict and Social Media: Activism of Civil Society for Peace Between India-Pakistan

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Summary

This policy brief examines the work of civil society activists struggling for peace by using social media around the world. Drawing from extensive field research, as well as the social media actions of activists and civil society members of India, Pakistan and beyond, this brief explains how the social media strategies of civil society activists can ease the risk of war and violence and improve the prospect for long-term peaceful relations between both countries. The South Asia region, including Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, has been known for intractable regional conflict. The conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir led to four wars (1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999) between these countries. Although peace efforts on the part of civil society activists have existed for many years, civil society's use of social media for peace between both the countries is a new trend. This policy brief endeavours to add new insights on civil society's use of social media to support peace. The brief also looks at how the civil society members deploy innovative strategies of communication—mixing social media and other methods—to plan, coordinate and practice actions, such as protests, talks, and marches. This policy brief attempts to enhance existing dimensions to the question of how to respond to the rising conflicts between nuclear countries India and Pakistan – an issue that can no longer remain unnoticed by members of civil society and the international community.

A. Introduction

Violence attributed to social media hate speech has intensified worldwide including in India and Pakistan. In confronting this trend, both countries need to deal with the questions of online hate speech, and the violent agenda on globally-used technological spaces. Such trends in hate speech might reflect changes in the social and political sphere as social media can increase rumours, and hate messages disseminated online could lead to violence, ranging from ethnic genocide to persecution of religious minorities. For example, a propaganda video by a Pakistani minister on Twitter which claimed to be about abuses by Indian forces in Kashmir was seen more than 200,000 times, was “liked” around 6800 times, and retweeted more than 5000 times.¹ In neighbouring India, journalist Swati Chaturvedi claimed in her book “I Am A Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP’s Digital Army” that ruling Bhartiya Janata Party maintains a vast network of workers on social media—volunteers and paid—to verbally attack journalists, political opponents and anyone who disagrees with or criticises the policies of the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party led by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. According to Swati, these trolls spread doctored and false reports and images to intensify communal tensions, especially Hindu-Muslim hostility.²

B. The Context of Civil Society Activism for Peace Between India and Pakistan

On 14 February 2019, a Pakistan-based freedom fighter group Jaish-e-Mohammad took responsibility for the suicide attack on Indian security forces in Pulwama district in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir. In the aftermath of this attack, conflict over Kashmir escalated swiftly between India and Pakistan when the Indian air force claimed the retaliation strikes on the madrassa of Jaish-e-Mohammad in Balakot town in Mansehra district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. This became a matter of pride for the armies of India and Pakistan. Pakistan’s air force countered another intrusion from Indian fighter jets, shot down a fighter plane and caught an injured Indian pilot. International commercial flights cancelled their operations from both countries which led to a disruption in physical contact of their citizens with the international community.³

The hostile environment between both South Asian nuclear neighbours was in the process of normalisation when, in August 2019, the Indian parliament scrapped Article 370 from the Indian constitution. Article 370 safeguarded special rights for the Muslim-majority region, including the right to frame its own constitution and autonomy to formulate and implement laws on all matters except defence, communications and foreign affairs. The dissolution of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir gave exclusive powers to the Central government in Delhi to legislate about the region that has been a disputed territory between India and Pakistan since 1947. This action of the Indian government infuriated Pakistan. After these incidents, tensions began to re-escalate on the government level between both

¹Ali, Haider Zaidi (@AliHZaidiPTI). 2019. “Ali Haider Zaidi Twitter post”. Twitter, August 17, 2109, 11:13 p.m. <https://twitter.com/AliHZaidiPTI>.

²Swati, Chaturvedi. “I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP’s Digital Army.” Juggernaut Books, 2016.

³M, Ilyas Khan. Abhinandan: Villagers recount dramatic capture of pilot. BBC News, Islamabad, March 2, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com>.

countries. Military mobilisation and skirmishes across the Line of Control (border line between Indian and Pakistan) increased – a dangerous sign for a direct war.⁴ Even on August 16, a ban was put on the sale of Indian movies and advertisements for India-made products on television channels in Pakistan, which could lead to a decrease in people-to-people contact on both sides.⁵

Amidst strained relations between arch-rival neighbours in South Asia, social media has been an important tool, other than the mainstream electronic and print media, to spread fake news, war instigation and hate speech between people of both countries. For instance, on 4 July 2019, a hashtag #ArrestAntiPakjournalists became the top Twitter trend in Pakistan, deepening apprehension over a shrinking civic space for dissent in the country. Shahzad Ahmad, an activist of digital rights, is quoted in a newspaper as saying,

There are organised groups who start such trends...which is a very dangerous phenomenon in our country, regarding freedom of expression and personal freedom. Responsible use of social media is now becoming impossible in our country. Now we use social media, only to abuse others and to promote fake news and to disrespect each other, which is completely wrong.⁶

Although social media has become an instrument for conflict escalation through fake information about imminent war and violence, there are people in both countries who are striving for peaceful relations between nuclear neighbours using the same forum. Peace-loving people are civil society members including—but not exclusively—women, youth, academia, political leaders, children, celebrities, students, veterans and journalists from both countries.⁷ This policy brief examines the key question: how do civil society members of India and Pakistan use social media for peace activism, and what methods of activism do they adopt to mobilise various actors for increasing people-to-people contact across the border? In light of data collection on the social media activism of civil society in India and Pakistan, and PhD field work on civil society and peacebuilding in Pakistan during 2018-2019, in this policy brief I attempt to examine methods and strategies of civil society activism and the possible impact of this activism on peace in South Asia.

C. Social Media, Civil Society and Peace

Civil society members from India and Pakistan mainly use social media initiatives, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, to devise a strategy for mobilising those actors who want peace between both countries at the time of any conflict escalation on government levels.⁸ For

⁴ Al Jazeera. "Kashmir under lockdown: All the latest updates." October 27, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com>.

⁵ Dawn News. "Crackdown launched on sale of Indian films." Islamabad August 16, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com>.

⁶ Dawn News. "ArrestAntiPakjournalists' tops Twitter trends in Pakistan." July 4, 2019.

⁷ Yuvsatta (Youth for Peace). "Promo GYPF 2017-12th Global Youth Peace Fest." Uploaded on April 15, 2017. YouTube video, 2:48 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSdzjTFNAg>.

⁸ Saif, Khalid. "The voices of peace opposing war in India and Pakistan." October 23, 2016. Al Jazeera News. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com>.

instance, Ravi Nitesh, Indian Secretary General of Aaghaz-e-Dosti (an initiative for friendship between India and Pakistan) said,

...when it was being discussed (especially on social media) that war is the only solution to (Indo-Pak) conflict, then peace loving people from both countries made contact through WhatsApp and decided to engage those people who understand the destructive impact of war... they should play their role...first on social media, then practically (e.g. protests).⁹

Social media activism of civil society members includes creation and dissemination of Facebook pages and groups, Twitter hashtags, videos on YouTube and WhatsApp groups where activists spread the message of peace among the common people of India and Pakistan. There are several Facebook and Twitter pages and groups like “India and Pakistan Friendship Lounge”, “Youth for Human Rights Pakistan”, “*Aman Ki Asha*”, and “Pakistan – India Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy” where activists share peace messages. Those messages are supported by neutral public such as artists and actors who share their thoughts through creative anti-war artwork like posters and video messages as a form of resistance to war.¹⁰ The following sections of the brief attempt to examine ten different actions, strategies, impacts of activism and key lessons for activists and social media tech companies.

1. Strategies of civil society activists for peace

The first strategy of activists of both countries is to initiate a peace campaign on social media, using mainly Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube which may sensitise and mobilise the neutral public from both countries over common issues like poverty and illiteracy. For example, a Facebook page Life in Saudi Arabia shared pictures of two children, from India and Pakistan, both selling flags of their countries for independent celebrations. The page writes: “These two countries are on the verge of a war while the majority of children in both countries cannot afford to go to schools. Two nuclear powers ready to blast each other”. This page has 2600 likes and more than 1100 shares.¹¹

The intention of the second strategy is to bring neutral public on to roads and streets to build people power in the form of demonstrations, protests, musical events, and use of arts as symbols for peace and harmony in the region. For example, after the Pulwama attack and increasing conflict between Indo-Pak militaries, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Asma Jahangir Legal Aid Cell, Bonded Labour Liberation Front, Women Action Forum and other actors led protests and demonstrations in Pakistan cities of Karachi, Lahore and

⁹Mohammad, Zubair Khan. “Increased desire for peace between Pakistan and India.” BBC Urdu, March 1, 2019. Accessed June 5, 2019 from <https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan-47400889>.

¹⁰Scroll.in. 2019. “#SayNoToWar’: Indians and Pakistanis call for peace as tension grips subcontinent.” February 28, 2019. Accessed February 19, 2020 from <https://scroll.in/article/914840/saynotowar-indians-and-pakistanis-call-for-peace-as-tension-grips-subcontinent>.

¹¹Life in Saudi Arabia. 2019. “Two nuclear powers ready to blast each other.” Facebook. August 25, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/life.in.saudi-arabia/posts/1367806866701860>.

Islamabad cities.¹² A Delhi-based Ideal Youth Health and Welfare Society founded by Vijay Kuma, a trainer of Play for Peace, and a Lahore-based youth organisation *Hum Sab Aik Hain* (“We are all one”) organised the internet video calling where participants performed songs and dialogue on culture and demanded that both governments replace conflict with harmony. This method might be more effective if extended to other major cities of both countries.

On the other side, Indian civil society members organised marches and demonstrations in all the big cities of India in favour of peace with Pakistan. They used arts, poems, paintings, and music to challenge the narratives of war on both sides, as a strategy for connecting youth of both countries. In India, on 4 March 2019, following Pulwama tensions, activists including artists and students under the banner of “Citizens Against War” came on to the street together to march for peace between India and Pakistan. The activists formed a human chain and marched from Jantar Mantar to the Indian Parliament in New Delhi.¹³

In Pakistan, youth activists organised a peace walk in Peshawar city of northwest Pakistan with the collaboration of “We Are One”, an online volunteer initiative by two youths, one from Kolkata city in India and the other one from Peshawar city in Pakistan. This initiative aimed to increase contact through social media (WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter) between young people of both countries. The activists, mostly college and university students, held a walk on the road, carrying posters with the message “Pray for peace, act for peace” to show their concern over increased tensions after the Pulwama attack.¹⁴

The locally-led approaches of activists for peace could be an important strategy to engage common people through peace messages. This strategy particularly works well if employed in local languages to make the message of tolerance, love and peace inclusive. For example, in July 2019, Syed Ali Hameed, an peace activist and founder of *Shoor* (“Awareness”) Foundation Islamabad, started a Peace Rickshaws campaign in various cities of Pakistan such as Bahawalpur, Hyderabad, Gujrat, Mardan, Peshawar, and Sukkur to counter the narratives of war and hatred in Pakistan. The messages of love and peace are painted and inscribed on rickshaws in Pakistan’s national language *Urdu* and regional languages like Pashto, Saraiki and Sindhi. Some of those messages in Urdu are:

(End disputes, embrace with love) جھگڑے مٹاو، گلے لگا

(Reduce distance, spread peace) فاصلہ گھٹاو، امن بڑھاو

(From morning to evening, speak for peace) صبح کرو شام کرو، امن کو عام کرو

¹²Rakhi, Bose. “We Don’t Want War: Pakistanis on Street Protest to Advocate Peace and Release of IAF Pilot Abhinandan.” News18 Online. March 1, 2019. Accessed December 10, 2019 from <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/we-dont-want-war-pakistanis-on-street-protest-to-advocate-peace-and-release-of-iaf-pilot-abhinandan-2052393.html>.

¹³Euro News. “People in India call for peace with Pakistan.” Uploaded on March 4, 2019. YouTube video, 0:50 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqGFBBFNRu8>

¹⁴We are one. 2019. “Pray for peace, act for peace.” Facebook. February 22, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/MYWAO/photos/a.570284336720032/659212504493881/?type=3&theater>. (For further details refer to <http://wao.co.com/>).

According to Syed Ali Hameed,

Rikshaws are the common mode of transportation in the rural centres and they travel on different routes influencing many people who read these messages. We believe, such small but significant messages of peace can influence the thinking pattern of the common people.¹⁵

2. Resisting war narratives with peace narratives by using social media

Civil society can resist war narrative with creative strategy – use of anti-war messages according to the context of conflict such as “make *chai* (“tea”) not war”. This message was widely shared and discussed on social media. On Facebook [this message](#) has been liked more than 12,000 times, commented on around 2000 times, and shared more than 5000 times.¹⁶ Tea is the most loved and common drink of Indian and Pakistani people. This message became famous when Indian pilot Abhinandan Varthaman, under the captivity of Pakistan, was shown on media holding a cup of tea. This video became so viral that [tea stalls](#) in Pakistan started to market their tea stalls through printing and displaying this message: *Aisi Chai jo dushman ko bhi dost banaye* (“A tea can make an enemy a friend”).¹⁷ The other messages of peace include “we are one”, “we don’t want war”, *jang nai aman chahty hain* (“no war we want peace”), “say no to war”, *aman zindabad jang murdabad* (“long live peace, death to war”), and “I stand against war”.¹⁸

Civil society activists might initiate a Twitter hashtag trend to mobilise the neutral public of both countries for peaceful resolution of contentious issues between both governments. For instance, on 27 February 2019, [Pakistani civil society members](#), following the Pulwama incident and the subsequent Indian air strikes inside Pakistan, started a Twitter trend [#Say-NoToWar](#) to push for a de-escalation of the conflicts over the Pulwama attacks. On 28 February, the very next day of Pakistan’s civil society action, this hash tag became the [top trend](#) among Indian people on Twitter.¹⁹

A little gesture on the part of civil society activists can win the hearts of millions of people on social media because common people on both sides of India and Pakistan neither want

¹⁵Syed Ali Hameed. 2019. “Shaoor Foundation for Education and Awareness.” Facebook. July 19, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157121134501013&set=a.10150813075791013&type=3&theater>.

¹⁶TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) World. 2019. “Make chai, not war.” Facebook. March 1, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/trtworld/videos/763443170694236/?t=0>.

¹⁷Devika Mittal. 2019. “Aman Ki Asha.” Facebook. March 13, 2019.

https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=tea%20stall%20make%20chai%20not%20war&epa=SEARCH_BOX.

¹⁸Haqooq e Khalq Movement (Movement for the Rights of People). 2019. “Peace Not War.” Facebook. March 1, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/haqooqekhalq/photos/a.457856307985708/637468306691173/?type=3&theater>

¹⁹Shiraz, Hassan (@Shirazhassan). 2019. “Shiraz Hassan Twitter post.” Twitter. February 27, 2019. 5:53 a.m. <https://twitter.com/ShirazHassan/status/1100755777403437056>.

war nor do they want to hate each other. For instance, in the aftermath of skirmishes between security forces of India and Pakistan along the Line of Control in 2015, an Indian social media activist, Mumbaikar Ram Subramaniam, started the simple hashtag, #profile-forpeace with a selfie, in which he carried a note that read “I am an Indian. I am from Mumbai. I don’t hate Pakistan. I am not alone. There are many people like me.” After this initiation, thousands of Indian and Pakistani people uploaded selfies with #profileforpeace on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.²⁰

Civil society activists might support and encourage peace gestures from the political leadership of both countries especially the ruling leaders. For example, an activist Rameez Asif started a signature campaign in February 2019 to nominate the prime minister of Pakistan for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2020 to appreciate his efforts to release the Indian pilot as a peaceful gesture and to offer dialogue with the Indian government for peaceful resolution of conflict. So far around 40,000 people have signed this online petition calling for Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan to receive a Nobel Peace Prize.²¹

3. Social media and women peace activists

Social media seems to give a voice to women to become stakeholders of peace between India and Pakistan. For example, after the Pulwama attack, women’s rights activists in Pakistan used social media actively to show their concerns for the safety of future generations faced with an increasing threat of war and violence in the South Asian region. They made speeches and raised slogans demanding that the governments of both countries follow dialogue for defusing tensions instead of war. They sent their message of peace to Indian women and pleaded for support to save future kids from war and destruction. The story about this Pakistani women’s protest published on 28 February by India Times has been shared on social media, particularly Twitter and Facebook, around 50,000 times.²²

On the other side of the border, Indian women reciprocated and sent peace messages to their counterparts in Pakistan. They raised slogans like “women for peace” and “yes to books not to bombs.” For instance, Pan-India women’s marches called for changes in the ‘environment of hate’. The march, held in over one hundred locations in more than 20 states, saw women and transgender persons marching against what they termed “politics of hate.”²³

²⁰First post India. “No more hate politics: Thousands of Indians, Pakistanis upload selfies with #profileforpeace.” October 26, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com>.

²¹Rameez, Asif. “Nomination of PM of Pakistan, Mr. Imran Ahmed Khan for the Nobel Peace Prize 2020.” February 2019. Accessed August 22, 2019 from <https://www.change.org/p/www-nobelpeaceprize-org-nomination-of-prime-minister-of-pakistan-mr-imran-ahmed-khan-for-the-nobel-peace-prize>.

²²Shweta, Sengar. “Pakistani women are sending a message of peace to Indian women and urging to say: say No to war.” India Times. February 28, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatimes.com>.

²³Express News Service. “Pan-India women’s marches calls for change in environment of hate.” April 5, 2019. Retrieved from <https://indianexpress.com>.

4. Connecting to the past: Shared values of people of India and Pakistan

There is commonality in the history, culture, and values of both countries as the sub-continent had been one country during Hindu, Muslim, and British regimes until its partition into India and Pakistan in 1947. The specific unity point for Indian Hindus and Muslims was the struggle for independence from colonial rule. There are several personalities—Hindus, Muslims, and Sikh—who have been revered both by Indians and Pakistanis equally as freedom fighters. The commemoration of the birth and death anniversaries of such personalities could be a positive step on the social front in connecting the sentiments of people on both sides. For example, on 31 July 2019, some activists from the legal community in Pakistan's Lahore city observed the 79th martyrdom day of freedom fighter Udham Singh for the first time in the history of Pakistan. Referring to such gestures, representative of Aaghaz-e-Dosti India chapter Devika Mittal said.

The two countries cannot afford to not cooperate and remain hostile. It is neither in favor of our economies nor in our dream of living in an environment without fear. In this light, it is heartening to see that India and Pakistan are cooperating in a sector which is close to people's heart such as our shared culture. India and Pakistan share a history, religion and culture.²⁴

Hindus and Muslims of Indo-Pak have spent many centuries together and have been participating in each other's marriages, funerals, cremations and festivals as part of a communal life. Civil society peaceniks might disseminate such communal exchanges of the past on social media to expose young people to their common history and life. For instance, on 9 August 2019, a Muslim couple cremated their Hindu neighbour and friend in the Indian city of Kolkata by performing his last rituals in accordance with Hindu customs and his wishes. Peaceniks picked this example of Hindu – Muslim communal harmony from "The Times of India" newspaper and circulated it on Facebook around 1000 times. On YouTube, video of this ritual has been viewed more than 4000 times.²⁵

Inclusive business—brands and media marketing—can connect people of different religions and celebrations through cultivating the sentiments of intercommunal care, empathy and goodness. For example, in 2016, an Indian business started a television commercial named *Neki Mubaarak* ("Best wishes of goodness") in the holy month of Ramzan as part of its business chain Big Bazaar. Every year more than 400 million Muslims in India and Pakistan fast in the month Ramzan. In this advertisement, a Muslim female, who is the medical doctor in the town hospital, prefers to see a Hindu patient in their home over her food preparation for breaking the fast. The Hindu family reciprocates for her dedication and next day prepares food and requests that she break the fast with them. This gesture may appeal to the emotions of millions of people in India and Pakistan. This commercial on YouTube has been viewed around 170,000, liked 4500 times, and attracted 205 comments by viewers. Amit Kekre, one of the pioneers of this campaign is quoted here as: "We are glad that

²⁴The Times of India." Amidst strained India-Pakistan relations, some positivity visible on religious, social fronts." August 1, 2019. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

²⁵Sangbad, Pratidin. 2019. "Muslim man cremates his Hindu friend's body in Asansol." Uploaded on August 9, 2019. YouTube video, 00:13 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfDjeMxGYSs>.

through Big Bazaar, we are able to spread messages of equality, harmony, beauty, peace, love, brotherhood, hope – messages that make India beautiful.”²⁶

Civil society can promote food trade which may connect people of both countries. There are many foods which are in high demand in various seasons, particularly the drinks, both in India and Pakistan. The common people of both countries can benefit and connect from the trade of food items across the border. For example, Pakistan offered a drink known as *Rooh Afza* to export to India when there was a witnessed shortage of it in Indian markets. *Rooh Afza* is produced in Pakistan and India by Hamdard Laboratories which was founded in India in 1906 by physician Hakim Mohammed Kabiruddin. At the time of the partition of India in 1947, the business was split between two brothers who now operate separate ventures in the two countries. Activists from both sides stirred a debate about this offer on social media terming it “Rooh Afza diplomacy.”²⁷

5. The role of veterans, journalists, and youth

Veterans on both sides raised their voice against hate and war. Veterans from Pakistan and India appeared on media and resisted the war in strong words. For example, an Indian retired Navy official wrote a letter of dissent to the president of India by saying “stop hatred being spread by media”.²⁸ Social media might help in increasing the contact between Indian and Pakistani school and college students to improve relationships between them. For instance, Aaghaz-e-Dosti is a joint initiative of India-based Mission Bhartiyam and Pakistan-based Catalyst of Peace. Since 2012, it has been striving towards its goal through online interactive sessions in schools and colleges called Aman Chaupals (peace debates in public space like school and community centres), discussions, seminars and peace workshops.²⁹ The members of the media also promote durable peace between India and Pakistan. For example, the journalist community from both India and Pakistan have come together in a mutual call for peace amid rapid escalation of tensions between the two countries.³⁰

²⁶Best Media Info Bureau. “Big Bazaar spreads goodness during Ramzaan.” Mumbai, India. June 24, 2016. Accessed August 21, 2019 from <https://bestmediainfo.com/2016/06/big-bazaar-spreads-goodness-during-ramzaan/> [To watch You Tube video refer to <https://youtu.be/3Zji3atjcCU>].

²⁷Sib, Kaifee & Sagah, Bano Malik. “Rooh Afza diplomacy’: Pakistan offers to quench India’s thirst during Ramadan. Arab News. May 9, 2019. Accessed June 20, 2019 from <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1494841/pakistan>.

²⁸The Logical Indian Crew. “Stop Hatred Being Spread by Media: Admiral (Retd) Ramdas Had Warned in His Letter to President Post Pulwama Attack.” The Logical Indian Online. February 28, 2019. Accessed March 14, 2019 from <https://thelogicalindian.com/get-inspired/former-navy-chief-admiral-ramdas-letter/>.

²⁹Aaghazedosti. 2013. “Aman Chaupal at Indraprastha School – Introduction.” Uploaded on August 8, 2013. YouTube video, 2:15 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdL-aw-7SVs>.

³⁰The News. “Say no to war: Journalists from India, Pakistan call for peace.” The News Pakistan, February 28, 2019. Accessed April 10, 2019 from <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/438056-journalists-from-india-pakistan-oppose-war-call-for-peace>.

6. The role of celebrities in peace

Celebrities from both countries are showing concern at rising conflict between India and Pakistan and are raising their voices against the conflict escalation. For instance, film industry stars on both sides resisted hate and war messages through social media activism and participated in peace marches in their respective countries. Indian film actor John Abraham was quoted as saying “[...] we should refrain from passing judgements. We also need to stop stereotyping (war loving) Pakistanis [...] we need to change the way we think.” This message on Facebook has been shared around ninety times, has attracted about fifty comments and been liked more than 550 times.³¹

Civil society associations can be a gateway to increase contact between the people of India and Pakistan through Indian-Pakistani marriages. For instance, an Indian celebrity news editor Neha Prakash and Pakistani software engineer Shehryar Hussain had been volunteering for the American India Foundation, an India-based non-profit organisation, when they developed a friendship and married in July 2019. About the prospect of her marriage with a Pakistani man, Neha Prakash says “I was scared that cultural and religious differences would mean we would never make it, as he’s Pakistani and I’m Indian, but I was proven very wrong.” This story has been shared on Facebook around 200 times.³²

Musicians are active members of civil society who can help in connecting people from different religions and countries. Singers in India and Pakistan can send peace signals to people of both countries. An Indian music producer and social media activist Ram Subramaniam and famous Pakistani Sufi singer and music producer Natasha Baig produced collaboratively the music of Peace National Anthem of India and Pakistan—Pak Sar Zameen – Jana Gana Mana—sung by Indian and Pakistani singers together and uploaded on YouTube. On this YouTube video, Natasha writes,

As we all know that negativity is the easiest thing that we can spread but it takes a heart to do a positive deed and that is what we have tried our best to do here. Presenting you all the #peaceanthem which consists of Pakistan's and India's National Anthems. It was such a beautiful and emotional moment for me to sing both the anthems and the best part is that they both sounds equally beautiful. #HappyIndependencedayIndiaandPakistan #Letsspreadloveandpeace.³³

7. Engagement of leaders and officials on state level

The leaders and politicians of both India and Pakistan may understand the consequences of conflict and war on South Asian politics and people. The actions of civil society activists might have put pressure on ruling leaders of India and Pakistan to exchange peace signals

³¹Naya Daur. 2019. “John Abraham Asks Indians To Stop Stereotyping Pakistanis.” Facebook, March 7, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=John%20Abraham%20Stereotyping%20Pakistanis>.

³²Alexandra, Macon. “This Indian-Pakistani Wedding Brought Bursts of Vibrant Color to the Shores of Lake Como.” Vogue online magazine. July 19, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.vogue.com>.

³³Natasha, Baig. 2017. “Peace National Anthem: Pak Sar Zameen - Jana Gana Mana - Indian and Pakistani Singers Together.” Uploaded on November 10, 2017. YouTube video. 3:17 min. <https://youtu.be/6ndWrgf1QCU?t=7>

and perhaps cooled the tempers of people on both sides in the aftermath of the Pulwama incident.

On 28 February 2019, a tweet from the official Twitter account which disseminates policy information of the government of Pakistan tweeted “Pakistan will release Indian Pilot Abhinandan tomorrow as a gesture of peace: Prime Minister Imran Khan”. This tweet received positive response from activists and people around the world. This message of peace was liked on Twitter about 29,000 times and retweeted around 8000 times.³⁴

In April 2019, the government of Pakistan announced that it would renew and reopen over 400 Hindu temples across the country and hand them over to the minority Pakistani Hindus. The Imran Khan-led Pakistan government announced that they will reclaim the temples, restore them and give them back to the Hindus, a gesture of social harmony and peace.³⁵

On June 8, 2019 prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, wrote a letter to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi to congratulate him on assuming the office of prime minister for a second term after the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) achieved victory in the 2019 national elections. In this letter, the main message from Imran Khan called for dialogue with India to resolve critical issues such as those of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, peace in the region and problems facing the people of the two countries. This news story was shared on Facebook around 200 times.³⁶ On the other side, on June 20, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar responded positively to Pakistan's offer for peace talks. This news story has been shared on Facebook—perhaps by those who want peace between the both people of both countries—more than 300 times.³⁷

In June 2019, a Hindu politician Indra Pratap Tiwari facilitated a dialogue between local Muslim and Hindu communities over land for a Muslim graveyard in Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh state. Mr. Indra Tiwari was successful in convincing the Hindu community to donate land to Muslims for the graveyard. Mr. Tiwari said, “To continue the tradition of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood in the area, this is a small gesture of peace from the side of Hindus. I hope, members of both communities will live here like brothers.”³⁸ The story of this peace gesture has been liked and shared around 2000 times on Facebook.

8. The role of diaspora and international community

The diaspora of both countries, particularly students, also uses international community peace messages and demonstrations on Facebook and Twitter. For instance, on 12 March

³⁴Govt of Pak (@pid_gov). 2019. “Govt of Pak Twitter post.” Twitter. February 28, 2019. 3:33 a. m. https://twitter.com/pid_gov/status/1101077823987613697.

³⁵The Logical Indian Crew. “Pakistan Aims to Restore 400 Hindu Temples.” The Logical Indian online. April 12, 2019. Accessed June 20, 2019 from <https://thelogicalindian.com/news/pakistan-restore-hindu-temples/>.

³⁶Syed, Irfan Raza. “PM again offers talks to India on Kashmir, terrorism.” Dawn News. June 08, 2019. Accessed August 23, 2019 from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1486781>.

³⁷Naveed, Siddiqui. “Important to build an environment of trust, Modi says in letter to PM Imran.” Dawn News. June 20, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com>.

³⁸Press Trust of India. “Uttar Pradesh: Hindus gift land for graveyard to Muslims in Faizabad.” Press Trust of India. June 26, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in>.

2019 an “Oxford South Asian Society” page on Facebook created an event titled “Filming: Indo-Pak Dialogue” to record a dialogue between Indian and Pakistani students at the University of Oxford and upload it to social media. “Indian and Pakistani students in Oxford gather together to say no to war and conflict. well done guys and girls! Brave thing to do in the times in which we live”. This photo was re-tweeted 1272 times with 6315 likes.³⁹

The United States (USA) appreciated Pakistan’s decision to release captured Indian Air Force pilot Abhinandan from their custody. In an interview, a State Department spokesperson urged the relevant authorities of both countries to exercise restraint. The USA urged both sides to take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation through direct communication and dialogue because military confrontation will exacerbate the conflict between militaries of both countries.⁴⁰ Pakistan opened the Kartarpur Corridor as a gesture to increase contact between the people of two nations.⁴¹ US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus commented on the Kartarpur Corridor: “Anything that increases people-to-people ties between India and Pakistan is something that we’re incredibly supportive of.”⁴²

International civil society organisations can help protect the local civil society members especially in Pakistan where local peacebuilders might have been facing risks due to rising extremism in society. For example, a conglomerate of 42 international civil society organisations urged US president Donald Trump to speak to Imran Khan about risks to civil society members in Pakistan during Prime Minister Khan’s visit.⁴³

9. Potential impact of civil society activism on India – Pakistan relations

In April 2019, as a goodwill gesture Pakistan initiated the process of releasing the 360 Indian fishermen who were captured by Pakistani Navy forces while crossing the water boundary in the Arabian Sea, amid simmering tensions between the two countries after the Pulwama incident. The video of this gesture has been viewed more than 5000 times and shared around 450 times on Facebook.⁴⁴

The opening of worship spaces for religious minorities which had been closed since partition in 1947 might have a positive impact on civil society efforts to increase contact between people on both sides. Such religious developments at state level, such as the opening of Gurdwara Chowa Sahib in Jhelum district Punjab, and Shawala Teja Singh temple in Sialkot

³⁹Rajdeep, Sardesai (@sardesairajdeep). 2019. “Rajdeep, Sardesai Twitter post.” Twitter. March 3,2019. 5:00 a.m. <https://twitter.com/sardesairajdeep/status/1102191938810380288>.

⁴⁰Anwar, Iqbal. Pak-India confrontation hopefully coming to an end, says Trump.” Dawn News Islamabad. March 1, 2019. Retrieved from <https://epaper.dawn.com>.

⁴¹Secunder, Kermani. “Kartarpur corridor: A road to peace between India and Pakistan?” BBC News, November 29, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com>.

⁴²Dawn News. “US welcomes increased 'people-to-people ties' between Pakistan, India through Kartarpur.” July 17,2019. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com>.

⁴³Alliance for Peacebuilding. “42 Organizations Stand with Peacebuilders at Risk in Pakistan.” July 15, 2019. Retrieved from <https://allianceforpeacebuilding.org>.

⁴⁴Press Trust of India. “Pakistan to release 360 Indian prisoners this month as goodwill gesture.” April 5, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in>.

district in Pakistan after more than 70 years, have been seen by peace activists as being positive for peace.⁴⁵

In the post-Pulwama conflict escalation, Twitter removed some content from more than 200 Twitter accounts originating from Pakistan due to violation of its terms of reference. The government also announced the creation of a new force to curtail the spread of “hate speech and violence” on social media.⁴⁶ Moreover, in May 2019, the government of Pakistan declared 10 organisations as proscribed outfits mainly in heavily populated (more than 100 million population) Punjab province of the country including the affiliates of Jaish-e-Mohammad, the group which took responsibility for the Pulwama attack (for further details refer to Introduction section).⁴⁷ On the other side, Facebook and Twitter warned far-right Indian politicians to take down those posts on fake news and hate speech within 24 hours. In April 2018, more than fifty Indian politicians faced court cases for spreading hate speech and inciting communal—Hindu-Muslim—violence in India.⁴⁸

The possible consequences of fake news about conflict dynamics on social media may increase hatred between people of India and Pakistan due to their exposure to online violent incidents – even true incidents of intercommunal violence. For example, spreading news about a Hindu mob lynching of any Muslim in India over the slaughter of beef and attacks by Muslim mobs on any Hindu member in Pakistan over blasphemy allegations can be dangerous for peace between people of India and Pakistan. The governments of both countries and social media tech companies should play a pro-active role in making and implementing laws to curb fake news and hate messages on social media.

10. Key lessons for activists and other peace actors

Members of civil society are endeavouring to improve relations between the people of India and Pakistan through nonviolent methods like marches and protests (peace walks, peace messages and peace speeches). However, they can enhance their impact by devising a more coordinated strategy for the development of people power, like mass nonviolent movements in both countries. This strategy can influence the governments of both countries and the international community to resolve conflicts, especially the Kashmir dispute, through peace dialogue and agreement.

The mainstream media, including electronic and print of both countries, might not play an effective role in normalising the relations between India and Pakistan through peace journalism, publishing balanced views about war and conflict rather than publishing biased stories on conflict. Social media, especially Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, is the possible

⁴⁵Times News Network (TNN). “Amidst strained India-Pakistan relations, some positivity visible on religious, social fronts” *The Times of India*. Aug 1, 2019. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

⁴⁶Ramsha, Jahangir. “Number of Pakistani accounts reported to Twitter drops.” May 11, 2019. *Dawn News*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com>.

⁴⁷Shakeel, Qarar. “Govt bans 10 more organisations for alleged affiliation with proscribed outfits.” *Dawn News*. May 11, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com>.

⁴⁸Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR). “Analysis of MPs/MLAs with Declared Cases Related to Hate Speech.” *ADR*. April 25, 2019. Accessed September 10 from <https://adrindia.org/content/analysis-mpsmlas-declared-cases-related-hate-speech-0>.

means of communication for civil society activists and other stakeholders of peace. But for effective and impactful activism, activists should develop unity and online exposure of the common people on both sides, especially youth. This exposure might reduce prejudice between people across the border and they can be pro-active for peace between both countries.

Activists can be pro-active in using social media and engaging different stakeholders in a dialogue for peace. Through social media, they can unite people on similar issues important to the common people of India and Pakistan such as illiteracy, poverty, adverse climate effects on people, and unemployment. The people on both sides can encourage their governments through protests and marches to work for their welfare rather than putting billions of lives in danger from nuclear war by instigating cross-border conflict.

The social media users might lack critical thinking ability to evaluate the information they confront via their online accounts. Without knowing the context and authenticity of online information, either they comment negatively, or they share in their groups and pages, intentionally or unintentionally. Such actions on online public forums like Facebook might increase hatred in people towards their perceived opponents like ethnic, religious and racial groups (see for example the Section A). The social media technology companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, should focus on improving the literacy of their users in learning about ethics, rules and understanding messages about any incident or news. The companies can play a positive role in world peace by coordinating online literacy programmes with local governments in conflict settings to educate social media users, especially young individuals, about how to screen messages on social media and how they can reject or report hate messages to the tech companies or the relevant government departments.

The Author

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