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PEACE-BUILDING IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN

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For many years, peace activists have focused their efforts on peace *between* India and Pakistan. But considering what has been going on, in the two countries, for the last several years, it appears that attention must also be directed to peace *within* India and peace *within* Pakistan. Likely, peace within each of the two nations will also help foster peace between them. We, at the Association for Communal Harmony in Asia (ACHA), initiated concrete steps in pursuit of this goal, earlier this year.

We defined peace as a dynamic, multidimensional state of interpersonal relationships *within* and *among* individuals and groups, and with the environment, which leads to optimal benefit to all concerned.

Viewed in this way, peace is not limited only to inter-national peace, but also includes personal peace, interpersonal peace, and universal peace. Thus by raising individuals who are at peace within themselves and with others around them, and who engage in environment-friendly practices, can lead to peace within each nation.

Having conceptualized peace in this way, in January and February 2011, we conducted five two-day peace camps - three in India at Varanasi (U.P.), Chandna Village (Gujarat), and Chandigarh (Union Territory), and two in Pakistan at Karachi (Sindh), and Toba Tek Singh (Punjab).

One hundred and eighteen male and female youth and adults completed these camps. They ranged in age from 17 through 48, and in education from 9th grade through Master's degree. We taught them ways to relax; deal with their worries; develop self-confidence; think independently and logically; develop empathy; communicate with others; inculcate healthy ways of relating with people, handle their own emotions as well as insults, bullying, and abuse by others; and respect and protect environment.

We drew upon our own skills and experiences to develop and impart the curriculum. Also, with the help of local volunteers, we used parts of "Choices and Self-esteem: Learning to Respect Yourself," a workbook authored by Dr. Deri Joy Ronis, which we got translated for India in Hindi, and for Pakistan in Urdu. Besides, we utilized a few Indian movie songs and the song "I've got peace in my fingers," by Susan Salidor.

Each camp ended with distribution of certificates of participation and the following ACHA Pledge of Peace and Harmony taken by the participants:

"I will not intentionally use my hands or my words to harm anyone;

I will treat my sisters and daughters with at least as much love and respect as I treat my brothers and sons;

I will treat all my neighbors as deserving of my respect, regardless of their class, caste, sect, or religion; and

I will engage in environment-friendly practices in my daily life.”

The camps were conducted in cooperation with our local partners, who assumed responsibility for selecting participants, securing venues, providing meals, and arranging for housing for out-of-town participants.

According to the feedback since received from some participants, they felt inspired by what they had learnt to bring about positive changes in themselves, and to promote peace and tolerance in their family and country. One young man wrote, “I would like to tell you that the best thing about visiting the youth camp had changed my life completely. Whatever I think or do it is done with a positive effect and I am more sensible than I should be at this age.”

Even though we could not use more sophisticated techniques, we are encouraged by the response we have received from the participants. We hope better next time. Meanwhile we will try to improve our curriculum and techniques, which move us from “We wish we could” to “Yes, we can” stage. Also we will keep looking for more people-centric and culture-transformative opportunities to pursue our mission of promoting peace in South Asia and harmony among South Asians.

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Our partners in this venture in India were People’s Vigilance Committee for Human Rights (PVCHR), Varanasi, U.P.; National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM); and Yuvasatta, Chandigarh, U.T.; and in Pakistan they were, Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER), Karachi, Sindh; and Ravi Foundation, Toba Tek Singh, Punjab.