

What cultural exchanges can't accomplish

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By Murtaza Razvi

COUNTRIES behave very much like people. This is because countries don't have faces or voices of their own; but their people, including those in government, are their faces and voices. It then follows logically that what works in interpersonal relations should also work in international relations.

Cultural activities and practices lie at the root of human civilization. That is why in many cases cultural affinity often overrides differences in religion and colour and those among polities.

A common language, for instance, makes for a strong cultural bond. Take the case of the Arab world, where Arabic alone forms the single common denominator among polities, peoples and socioeconomic diversities in various countries that are otherwise very different.

Among the Arabs there are bedouins, nomads, settled tribes, urban proletariat, Semites, Negroids, Caucasians, Muslims (Shias, Sunnis, Alawites, Druze), Christians and Jews.

Then there are absolute monarchies, quasi-democratic regimes, socialist republics, popular dictatorships, tribal emirates, etc, but they all share a common language and hence a more or less common culture. Anglo-Saxon countries are another example of this. These too stand united on the basis of a common language (a history of voting in the Commonwealth will vouch for that, as would the US-UK unanimity of views on major international issues).

Where cultural affinity based on a common language and heritage does not exist, cultural exchanges have played a role in bringing different peoples closer or in bridging the gaps that exist in mutual understanding of one another's point of view. Take, for instance, the understanding brought about by cultural exchanges between western and Far Eastern cultures, including the Chinese and the Japanese. But this has only been possible after the resolution of major political conflicts on territorial disputes.

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two neighbours.

Then take the case of the former Soviet Union and the US at the height of the cold war or those of the US and Cuba/Iran/North Korea, of China and Taiwan, of the two Cypruses in the present day.

Any talk of cultural exchanges in such situations will have to preclude not only outright hostilities, but also a cessation of inflammatory and loaded rhetoric, such as 'axis of evil' or a disputed territory being called an 'integral part' by one country and 'the core issue' by another.

In other words, one would have to learn to behave in a civilized and cultured manner before cultural exchanges can mature into becoming an effective tool of conflict-resolution between any two countries. Cultural exchanges are like exchanging gifts and pleasures. You don't send a birth-

between the two countries since the 1971 war.

With such stark realities and odds defying cultural exchanges as an effective means of conflict resolution in South Asia, is it not surprising that the subject continues to be a matter for discussion at many forums like those that were held recently when peace activists from India visited Pakistan?

This by no means is an attempt to discard cultural exchanges as a conflict-resolution mechanism altogether; rather, it is a frank and honest attempt to understand the efficacy of this mechanism. It is critical to make that distinction so that we put only as many eggs in this basket as it can hold.

Cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts have become buzzwords in restrictive societies such as ours, because these offer the much needed breathing space to many of us who otherwise feel frustrated and stifled by a lack of progress in mending fences with India. We have a lot in common with India; perhaps more of us have a lot more in common with India than with most of our other neighbours. But the commonalities between Pakistan and India were never a cause of our conflict. It is other issues and differences of opinions rooted in politics and history that have torn us apart and that deserve to be addressed with a better degree of tolerance and in a spirit of understanding from both sides.

Nawaz Sharif may have been wrong in a lot of things he said and did while he was in office but he was right when he said that we needed to create a vested interest — based in trade and commerce — in both countries so that elected governments could be restrained from acting rashly and straining bilateral relations for political reasons. This was anathema to those in the establishment here and in India who saw their vested interest in perpetuating tensions and building on the differences rather than on commonalities of interest between the two countries.

Thus, in the India-Pakistan context, the notion of cultural exchanges as an effective conflict-resolution mechanism has largely remained a fancy one that is one step ahead of what needs to precede it. Cultural exchanges can only play their role effectively if we are first willing to have 'cultured' rela-

In the India-Pakistan context, the notion of cultural exchanges as an effective conflict-resolution mechanism has largely remained a fancy one — one step ahead of what needs to precede it. Cultural exchanges can only play their role effectively if we are first willing to have 'cultured' relations between us. The approach of sticking to one's stated position and the desire to be politically one-up on the other — as indeed the temptation to resort to loaded and inflammatory rhetoric — militate against building a cultured environment in which to pursue a meaningful dialogue.

day present to someone who insults you every time you run into him at a public place.

In the context of India-Pakistan relations, cultural exchanges require a more challenging evaluation. This is because there has been no great dearth of cultural exchanges, at least at the popular level, in the post-Shimla Agreement years. Indian and Pakistani actors and actresses have mingled; per-

ing two countries whose relations don't have a pattern of violence. The absence of war does not always mean peace, nor having diplomatic relations with a country means that you will be welcome in that country. Despite peace holding strong between Egypt and Israel for nearly a quarter of a century, there is no history of cultural exchanges between the

Kargil. Nor did they stop the Bollywood film industry, which has a huge following in Pakistan, from making a series of overtly anti-Pakistan films in the aftermath of the Kargil episode. Cultural contacts and exchanges between the two countries did not spur the Pakistani or Indian cultural gurus to speak up against the worst phase of relations

ences that has not been a consistent feature in India-Pakistan relations.

Cultural exchanges are welcome and, yes, it would be nice to hear Lata Mangeshkar sing live in a concert at the Alhamra in Lahore. President Musharraf would also like that to happen, but would that give way to burying the hatchet over Kashmir? One is not sure.

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In the post-colonial context such cultural exchanges have also introduced African and Islamic art forms to audiences in the West and, though to a lesser extent, to those in the world at large.

But what do you do with countries and regions marred by intense conflict, such as Palestine, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, North and South Korea, China and Taiwan, the Jaffna Peninsula, India and Pakistan? It is here that the real challenge lies for all those who feel that cultural exchanges can serve as an effective conflict-resolution mechanism.

The learning in these areas of intense conflict unfortunately has not been very encouraging. You can't send out an Israeli cultural troupe to perform on the debris of a just demolished Palestinian apartment complex, nor can you send Madonna to Baghdad to give a concert on New Year's eve. Even the trigger-happy Americans know that.

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At the popular level, Indian films have always been watched in Pakistan and form the staple entertainment diet here. Similarly, Pakistani TV plays have enthralled Indian audiences. That cultural exchanges have not taken place at the official level is a fact that hardly matters because there was no great hampering of such exchanges at the people-to-people, NGO and popular levels over the past thirty years.

The pertinent question to ask is: did these cultural exchanges bring about any real change in the way the Pakistanis and Indians have stereotyped each other? Cultural exchanges did not prevent the conflict over

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The sticking to one's guns approach and the desire to be politically one-up on the other — as indeed the temptation to resort to loaded and inflammatory rhetoric — militate against building a cultured environment in which to pursue a meaningful dialogue.

In the ambivalent love-hate relationship that exists between India and Pakistan, cultural affinity is defined by the love we both have for our combined cultural talent; the rest is the baggage of our political history based in distrust and hatred and that itself is quite hateful. Unless we are ready to unload that baggage and also show a sustained and genuine will to understand each other's positions, cultural exchanges will remain hostage to good and bad diplomatic and political relations between the two countries. Unfortunately, it is that will to show tolerance and magnanimity towards our mutual differ-