

## **Cultural Diplomacy and Pakistan—India Relations**

**Yaqoob Khan Bangash**

*IT University, Lahore, Pakistan.*

**Salima Hashmi**

*NCA, University, Lahore, Pakistan*

### **ABSTRACT**

Cultural diplomacy has long existed as a tool of international affairs. However, only recently have academics begun to assess its nature and impact. As compared to the ‘hard power’ of military might, the ‘soft power’ of cultural diplomacy has often been deeper, lasting, and persuasive. In the India—Pakistan context the potential of achieving peace through cultural diplomacy is great. India and Pakistan are connected through a shared history and culture, and despite the seven decades of hostility several joint initiatives have proven the strength of these connections. This paper traces several ways in which India and Pakistan have managed to keep connected, mainly through people-to-people contacts and initiatives, and posits several ways in which they can be developed further to usher in peace and stability in the South Asian region.

**Key Words:** **India, Pakistan, Cultural Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, Soft Power**

### **Introduction**

‘For the future of both peoples and both countries is inextricably linked together, and to the extent that we base our future policies on the last will and testament of Mahatma Gandhi—that without communal amity and without Indo-Pakistan accord there can be neither freedom nor progress for either—to that extent in the future happiness and prosperity of this subcontinent is assured.’ Excerpt from Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s editorial, *Pakistan Times*, February 6, 1948.

In most of world history the only ‘power’ recognised has been ‘hard’ power, i.e. military might. Empires have risen and fallen, cultures have come and gone, and whole civilisations have disappeared, mainly due to military conquests. Hence, seldom has any other ‘power’ been recognised as having any significant effect comparable to the sheer might of force. However, there does exist another kind of power, a more sublime force, subtler in its appearance, but at times more effective and lasting than brute force—and that is soft power. Acclaimed scholar Joseph Nye (Nye 2002, p. 8) coined the term ‘soft power’ in 2002 to mean ‘the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas, as opposed to ‘hard power’, which conquers or coerces through military might.’ Nye argued that with the decline of ‘hard’ power in world diplomacy, the importance of ‘soft power’ would increase especially due to its non-invasive and sublime approach. Therefore, while ‘soft power’ might be blunted it does have a significant and lasting effect, Nye noted.

As part of 'soft power,' cultural diplomacy has a central place. Cultural diplomacy is a very old concept and has always been a part of statecraft. The sending of gifts—like paintings and ornaments, court performers, horses, and the like, has always been used in diplomacy. In fact, soft power's manifestations like marriage alliances have long been an important element of diplomacy. So in the nineteenth century Queen-Empress Victoria married off most of her children into various European royal households, so that on the eve of the First World War the kings of England, Germany and Russia were cousins (Cadbury, 2017). Similarly, the 'special relationship' of the United States and the United Kingdom was cemented in the late nineteenth century mainly through marriages, leading to an almost smooth transition from one Western super power to another (McKercher, 2017). More recently, the power of elements like Hollywood movies in furthering American culture and thought, have been instrumental (Fraser, 2005).

Cultural or soft power diplomacy has only recently been keenly studied and analysed by academics. For a long time its utility was simply dismissed earlier by scholars like Ninkovich (1985, p.1), who termed it as a 'minor cog in the gearbox of diplomacy.' There is also no agreed definition for the term, creating further confusion over its breath, reach and usability (See, Fox, 1999). However, one of the most simple and wide ranging definitions has been provided by Cummings (2003, p.1), who has defined cultural diplomacy as an 'exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.' Bound et al, further include mass appeal things like sport, popular culture and science, and argue that while earlier such exchanges were limited to the elite, now culture is both created and disseminated by the masses, thus increasing its range and potency (Bound, 2007, p.16).

Cultural diplomacy is now an important tool in International Relations. Wendy Luers, President Emeritus of the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (2001) noted that 'The power of culture can often be underestimated as a diplomatic tool, but cultural exchange cannot only serve as a universal ice-breaker, it can also tear down walls and build bridges between the most hardened of enemies. It may not turn foes into instant friends, but it does allow nations to find the points of commonality that transcend politics.' Similarly, a US Government report has recently described cultural diplomacy as the 'linchpin' of public diplomacy (US Department of State, 2005). Hence, the importance and use of the 'soft power' of cultural diplomacy cannot be underestimated in the world today.

While an element of cultural diplomacy is done at the official level, through diplomats, official exchanges, government sponsored educational, artistic, and other initiatives, a critical and emerging sub genre of the field is 'people to people' contact at the non-governmental level. Studies have often shown that these contacts are more long term, more deeply entrenched and do not suffer as much as a result of bad relations between countries. This is because for a large part official attempts at cultural diplomacy seldom occur separated from official relations. Hence, these people to people contacts at the unofficial level become critical

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bridges, especially in times of conflict and sour relations. Thus, Nicholas Cull (2010) emphasises that ‘public diplomacy is everyone’s business,’ and that role of ‘citizen diplomats’ must not be undermined.

In the India and Pakistan context, the importance and role of cultural and public diplomacy is critical. Both these states have been at loggerheads since their inception, and the reality of four wars, deep seated suspicions, and now a primarily hawkish media has made the task of official public and cultural diplomacy harder. With unfriendly official relations, people to people contacts then are the main vehicle for not only exchanges, but at times even just contact. In this endeavour the role of poets, writers, artists, musicians and other cultural practitioners has been central. Behera (2000, p. 18) has therefore rightly noted: ‘The void created as a result of hostility and dispute between the people of India and Pakistan is bridged by an increasing level of unofficial diplomacy. In this regard, music, cricket, theatre and people to people contacts have contributed immensely.’ Kermani (2010, p. 277) has further articulated that perhaps cultural diplomacy between the people of India and Pakistan is the only possible way word, considering the deep chills official contacts suffer. Therefore, according to Kermani (2010, p. 277) since ‘India and Pakistan share the same history, language and since centuries shared the same culture and thus it is an important tool which can be used for the improvement of the relations. Culture is the only medium that can help India and Pakistan to come together as culture overcomes barriers of language and geography.’ Thus, Akhter (2016, p. 211) also argues, ‘Although the cultural diplomacy at the government level is most of the time marred by issues at border and hitches at the political level, the people-to-people efforts to improve cultural relations have remained a continuous process.’

Pakistan and India have never [even when determined to] managed to split, sever or disconnect their population from one another. The political separation in 1947 with all its accompanying traumas is unlike the Korean model, for precisely the reasons stated above, and has been softened, deflected, subverted by more than individual family contacts. The gesture made by Faiz Ahmad Faiz who flew from Lahore at the height of Indo- Pak tension to attend Gandhi’s funeral was symptomatic of a deep realization, almost prophetic in nature, that the work of cultural activist would always be cut out for them.

The late 19th century engineer and historian of Lahore, Rai Bahadur Kanhaiya Lal (1884) described the thirteen ‘sorrows’ experienced by the people of Lahore over a period of 900 years, beginning with the attack in the 11th century by Mahmud Ghaznavi, and concluding with the looting of the city by Raja Heera Singh’s forces at the time of Maharaja Sher Singh’s arrival in Lahore to take over after Ranjeet Singh’s death. The sufferings of the populace is what engages this particular historian, but that may be the reason that historians and those in the creative fields configure their frames of reference far wider than those dealing with the immediate. Thus the truncations in 1947, while final in terms of migrations and territories, have not happened in the same manner in literature or the performing and visual arts.

The membrane of rhetoric which has defined nationhood in both India and Pakistan has not been enough to come in between shared stories languages, music and image- making. Often times a distinct ‘history’ has been evolving in relation to these areas of human interaction, which has been more or less present over seventy years. It may appear episodic, but intact it begins to present patterns of occurrence, which are persistent.

## **Historical Background**

At their inception, Pakistan and India not only shared a common land and history, they also shared several common cultures. In addition to the Urdu/Hindi literary culture common to North India, the great provinces of the Punjab and Bengal were split in two. Bengal was the first province where the British firmly established themselves and Calcutta was the second city of the British Empire for over a century, and the Punjab was the last province to be added to the British Indian Empire and shared borders with Afghanistan and Central Asia. The migrations of 1947-8 also resulted in India hosting a large number of West Punjabi, Sindhi and Eastern Bengali migrants, while Pakistan became home to a large number of migrants from the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, East Punjab and West Bengal. These migrations ensured that family relations and people to people contacts never ceased in the India-Pakistan equation (Siddiqi, 2008).

## **Literary Interactions**

Both Pakistan and Northern India share a common literary heritage (Jalal, 2013). Iqbal is a national poet in both countries, and in both, people like Ghalib, Meer, Hali and others, are shared literary heritages. This shared cultural milieu has enabled a close contact between the literary circles of both sides and has led to a steady stream of mutual publications, and shared writings in journals in Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Gujrati, Sindh and Bengali, over the last seven decades. Translations of short stories and poetry are also appearing constantly (Mansab, 2018). Because of poor enforcement of copyright laws writers have not benefited hugely, but lately the situation has improved because of internet access and authors are now benefitting from commissioned writings and simultaneously publishing in both countries, especially in English. Recent publication include writings by Mohsin Hamid, Muhamad Hanif, Haroon Khalid, and Khursheed Kasuri, to name a few (Mazumdar, 2016). It goes without saying that writers in Urdu, Sindhi etc like Faiz, Qasmi, Quratul Ain Haider, Manto, Kaifi Azmi, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander, Javed Akhtar and Sheikh Ayaz etc. enjoy huge audiences in both countries.

In music, the connections have been equally strong. Classical music maestros have common audiences ranging from Ustad Vilayat Khan and Bare Ghulam Ali to Amanat Ali, Fateh Ali, Roshan Ara begum and Ustad Salamat Ali. These ‘gharanas’ of classical music were split in 1947, but their styles and legacies have

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continued to be shared. The ‘Patiala gharana’ has performers on both sides as indeed do many others.

Ghazal singing has been a popular forum for shared audiences, from the likes of Begum Akhtar to Iqbal Bano and Farida Khanum. Ghulam Ali continues to be a singer in demand in both countries. The late genius Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan embodied the soul of Sufi music and now Rahat Fateh Ali has inherited his mantle spread on both sides of the Radcliffe line. These streams are constant and while performers have been thwarted by visa policies, their audiences have continuously grown via the electronic media and through the diaspora (See, Qureshi, 1986).

More often than not, these connections have had a positive impact on official relations. For example, during Indira Gandhi’s premiership, Faiz Ahmad Faiz met her, ostensibly on a courtesy visit. Yet there was a sub text as Faiz was pleading the case of Pakistani fishermen [for the first time] who were in Indian custody. It was possibly his only attempt to move into an arena which was ‘off the record’. According to family lore, she was not unsympathetic! Hence, the power of such connections is potent.

### **Cinema**

In terms of cinema the links between India and Pakistan have been the strongest and continued to hold fast despite the ups and downs in their relationship. After independence Pakistani films were shown in India and vice versa, and even after the formal ban on Indian films in 1952 in West Pakistan and in 1962 in East Pakistan, Indian films were largely shown in Pakistan till 1965 (Ganti, 2012). Even after the 1965 war, Pakistanis did not stop watching Indian films, except that the medium now changed from the silver screen to video cassettes using the VCR’s. In fact, with the advent of the VCR, Bollywood films permeated even the most remote and rural parts of Pakistan as now access to a cinema—still a luxury in small towns and non-existent in villages—did not matter. In terms of films, what is even more fascinating that till the 1980’s in India and 1990’s in Pakistan there were no overtly anti-other movies made in either country, decades after officialdom, educational materials and public rhetoric had begun to spew hatred against the other. The power of Bollywood in connecting the two countries is such that even when the armies of India and Pakistan were eye ball to eye ball in Siachin in the 1980’s, the Pakistani dictator, General Zia ul Haq, still watched films of his favourite actress Hema Malini—the Dream Girl had transcended all boundaries (Butt, 2017).

The impact of Bollywood and now recently Pakistani television dramas, can also be seen in terms of language. Consciously or unconsciously, Bollywood has kept northern India and Pakistan speaking the same language. Even when the Government of India has attempted to impose ‘Shudh’ Hindi, with Sanskritised words, and the Government of Pakistan has promoted Urdu with more Arabic infused words, the lingua franca remains Hindustani—intelligible to people on

both sides of the border. Therefore while Pakistanis may not easily understand the news bulletin of Doordarshan, or Indians completely grasp some items on the state-run Pakistan Television, films and dramas on both sides have kept the linguistic connection strong.

## **Television**

While the cinema in both countries faced the heat of political climate in the form of censorship and banning, television served as an alternative mode for connection on both sides of border. After the 1965 war, when movies on both sides were banned from screening in the other country, television—as an emerging medium, became the main vehicle of information, contact and then more recently exchange.

In the 1980's both India and Pakistan installed powerful boosters along the border so that people concentrated along it could have access to Doordarshan and Pakistan Television, the state networks of the respective sides. While the governmental approach was that this would enable people on the other side to learn and get influenced by their official news reports [especially conflicting reports on conditions in Kashmir], in reality people watched more of the television dramas and others programmes than the usually concocted news stories. Hence, while Pakistani dramas became very popular along the Radcliffe line in India, people in Pakistan were glued to their television sets to watch the weekly 'Chitrahar' and the Hindi movies on Friday and Saturday nights. Hence, the state television networks, on both sides, became the creative connections for the people along the border.

More recently, Pakistani dramas are widely shown on Indian networks and there is even a dedicated channel by the Zee Network, Zindagi, for the telecast of Pakistani dramas. Similarly, not only are Indian networks widely watched in Pakistan, Pakistani channels also carry several Indian dramas as part of their regular programming. Joint production of television serials and the like has also picked up in recent years (See, Sulehria, 2018).

## **Music**

Pakistan and India also have a strong connection in terms of north Indian music. After partition when classical music was on the decline in Pakistan, partly due to state neglect, the All Pakistan Music Conference emerged in 1959 which has since developed strong links with India. Every year musicians cross the border and participate in its events and it still remains a common avenue for interaction and simply a place to listen to good music (See, Massey, 2004).

In more recent years, initiatives like Coke Studio in Pakistan, and Sur in India have linked a younger generation of music lovers across the border. Participants at all these shows hail from both sides of the border, and despite the erratic visa regime, these events exhibit that this is a connection which needs to be tapped

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further since music has a far greater commercial potential and needs to be harnessed as an agent for peace (Gupta, 2016).

More recently a new project has been launched in March 2016 called ‘Dosti Music Project’ project [funded by the US Embassy in Islamabad] which connects musicians, students and the like from Pakistan, India and the United States. This tripartite connection has created synergies which are slowing but deeply connecting the younger generation of musicians from both India and Pakistan, together with the diaspora in the US and beyond.

### **Art**

In 1986 a well-known Indian artist at the Delhi Triennial exclaimed: ‘There is no modern art in Pakistan!’ This was to be expected since unlike words and music there are fewer alternate avenues for art to travel across the barbed wire of the border. The lack of a counterpart of the Mayo School of Arts in Lahore [later the National College of Arts] in India meant that there were no existing or natural links between the two countries in art. Publications were also sparse and seldom exchanged. The rare occasion where there was any exposure carried a tremendous sense of discovery and surprise. Again, the diasporic connections were stronger in this case, as joint work by Pakistani and Indian artists began to pick up in the West.

However, connections have mushroomed in recent years, with Professor Rashid Rana collaborating with Mumbai based artist Shilpa Gupta at the Venice Biennale in 2015 as a recent example (Stolfi, 2015). Both Pakistan and India had been previously poorly represented in Venice and this joint effort brought both artists great accolades. In fact, Rashid Rana is now among the top 10 Indian artists.

Also recent is the collaboration between Indian illustrator and designer Shilo Shiv Suleman and Nida Mushtaq on the ‘Fearless’ campaign. This campaign, which was started by Suleman in the aftermath of the Delhi gang rape in 2012, has now been brought to Pakistan with unique street art aimed at empowering women splashed throughout three cities in Pakistan (Baines, 2015). The issues of women—especially concerning rape etc—are the same in both India and Pakistan and this project is bringing out the common concerns and strategies between women activists in India and Pakistan.

Another campaign has been the ‘Aar Paar’ initiative, which was launched in the 1990’s at a time of high conflict between the two countries. In this project works were printed out in Karachi and Bombay and displayed in several locations like paan shops, taxicabs, busses etc. Important artists like Rashid Rana, Shilpa Gupta and Huma Mulji participated in this endeavour. In January 2016, an exhibition under the theme of partition, titled ‘This Night’s Bitter Dawn’ was organized at the Delhi Art Fair, where 25 artists from Pakistan and 12 from India participated.

## **Educational Linkages**

One of the most important avenues of these connections has been contact between different educational institutions. MoU's have been signed by private academic institutions like the Art School at Beaconhouse National University and the Srishti School of Technology in Bangalore to do collaborative projects. Further, 'Routes 2 Roots' joins schoolchildren in both countries, and to date almost 10,000 children from dozens of schools have interacted across borders through this programme. In February 2015, several of these interactions were also showcased at the National Art Gallery in Islamabad exhibiting the shared stories and interactions of these students. Aitchison College, Lahore Grammar School, National College of Arts, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, also have firm links with academic institutes and art communities in India.

Beyond art schools, academic linkages between Pakistani and Indian universities have also increased. In Spring 2018, Professor Ali Usman Qasmi from LUMS, Lahore, and Professor Pallavi Raghavan from O.P. Jindal University, Sonapat, Haryana, co-taught a course on South Asian history. This course connected students from across the Radcliffe line through skype, whatsapp and facebook, thereby even foregoing the need for physical presence and the hassle of visas. The students from LUMS did come to Delhi to meet their counterparts in May 2018, but the connections had already been made and a deeper understanding of shared history achieved. Kaur (2018) therefore properly notes: 'Actual borders may hold us back ideologically and physically, and rigid textbooks may propel us towards a very specific (read: nationalistic) outrage, but in moving the classroom into a virtual, borderless space, Raghavan and Qasmi managed to create the right conditions to discuss a borderless history.'

## **Fashion**

Indian and Pakistani fashion experts have also often teamed up and exhibited their products on a common platform. For example, in August 2015 a joint event called 'Shan-e-Pakistan' was held in New Delhi where both Pakistani and Indian designers showcased their creations, while the Sabri qawwals mesmerized the crowds with their world famous qawwali. This event was huge success and was appreciated by even the governments of both sides.

## **Sports**

Sports, particularly cricket and hockey, have also played a very important role in further deepening cultural ties between the both countries.

In cricketing world, Pakistan and Indian cricket teams' 'on field' interactions are commonly described as 'the greatest cricketing rivalry on earth.' Columnist Marquise (2004) noted: 'In both countries a special stigma is attached to failure against the sub-continent rival, while success is doubly rewarded. In the eyes of



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the more ardent cricket nationalists, the inescapable vagaries of luck and form are always suspected. On either side of the border, there is a tendency to respond to defeat with allegations of betrayal.’ Underscoring the importance of an India-Pakistan match, Appadurai (Sen, 2015, p. 282) has also assessed that ‘Cricket matches between India and Pakistan are think disguised national wars. Cricket is not so much a release valve for popular hostility between the two populations as it is a complex arena for re-enacting the curious mixture of animosity and fraternity that characterises the relations between these two previously united nation states.’ Hence, while cricket is still a game, between India and Pakistan it assumes a character which is larger than life and an expression of national identity, pride and power.

Precisely due to its importance in both India and Pakistan, the political stakeholders of both countries have used cricket on several occasions, as a tool of political diplomacy. A phrase, ‘cricket diplomacy’ has been coined to describe the role of cricket in bringing about reconciliation and reducing hostilities which often surface between India and Pakistan (Khan, 2005).

Pakistan President, Zia ul-Haq, after watching a bilateral series in Lahore in 1978 said that the friendship generated by the cricket should bring the two countries closer, even in politics. In 1987, when tensions were running high between the both countries, Zia-ul-Haq was invited by the Indian Cricket Board to watch a bilateral cricket match. The match was played under the banner of ‘cricket for peace’ and is often recalled as a major diplomatic initiative which proved critical in defusing tensions along the border (Naess-Holm, 2007). Echoing the sentiment, in 2004, Indian Prime Minister, Vajpayee’s message to his cricket team, which was visiting Pakistan, was: ‘Khel Nahi, Dil bhi Jeetiye’ [Win not only matches, but hearts too].

One can argue that cricket and nationalism run hand in hand in India and Pakistan. Cricketers in both countries are treated as celebrities by their fans which have often put these sportsmen at the receiving end of scorn. For example, in March 2016, Pakistan’s former T20 team captain came under fire in Pakistan for giving a statement which was interpreted by his local fans as though he was loved more in India than in his own country.

Star cricketers from both countries are often invited to attend different political and cultural events, including the launch of movies, as public speakers and hosts. Undoubtedly, cricket as a sport has a lot of potential as a peace builder and can act as a catalyst in creating more cooperation and interaction between the both countries.

### **The Way Forward**

There is no argument against peace between India and Pakistan. Both are nuclear-armed countries and any conflict between them will be disastrous for the whole world, let alone the region. The two countries are so deeply connected through history, culture, civilisation, and the indelible link of geography, that many of their

problems are the same and therefore they cannot escape each other. Issues like climate change, water shortage, population increase, and the basic considerations of poverty alleviation, health, sanitation and education, all link the countries together. Hence, peace is the only way forward. However, since official dialogue has now been stalled for a few years with little chance of revival in the near future, a few non-governmental cultural diplomacy options to sustain and continue the conversation between the two countries can be positive.

- 1) **Creation of Web and Mobile Applications:** Keeping in view the spread, ease of access, and popularity of technology in recent years, we recommend that apps be designed which inform our target group [school children between 10-13 years] but also others, about each other. These could be aimed at focusing on issues of shared history, and on addressing stereotypes. Creatively designed apps will lead to more engagement, a lessening of stereotypes, and reflection. They will also facilitate more knowledge about the 'other.'
- 2) **Linking Artists:** As argued above, the connection between artists of both countries has proved to be the most long lasting and stable connection. Even when cricketing ties were impossible, visual artists, musicians, and actors, were crossing borders. If such interactions are further strengthened and promoted, a strong connection and a peace constituency can be created.
- 3) **Creating a Common Arts curriculum:** Almost every school in India and Pakistan has an art class, but most of these, except in the upper class schools, are limited to drawing and rudimentary art knowledge. If these classes are used to know and learn more about the art culture of both countries and artistic works are subsequently created, it could be a strong medium for contact and interaction.
- 4) **School Exchanges:** Exchange programmes are time-tested means of increasing interaction and promoting peace. It is suggested that schools across the border should connect and lead exchanges, if not during term time, during the holidays. These exchanges should be in our target group with the special proviso that the students stay with host families [where one family on either side hosts a student from the other side]. This will engender a deepening of mutual understanding and create long lasting linkages.
- 5) **University Linkages:** At the moment there are only a couple of links between Indian and Pakistani universities. We recommend that beginning with the Arts departments, Indian and Pakistani universities should partner and collaborate, especially in international fora. While eventually the cooperation should expand to other areas of the social sciences and humanities, and even science, beginning with art, which is considered 'less controversial', might prove to be a good starting point. Furthermore, international collaboration will prevent country grandstanding, and present a common front of India and Pakistan abroad.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that easing of hostilities is accompanied by the blossoming of collaborations and sharing may suggest a way of working backwards into patterns of conflicts and dissonance. Small initiatives have a way of magically transforming groups and communities, drawing them into the ‘spirit of creative innovation’. Spaces and forums such as museums can be interments of ‘soft power.’ They can encourage joint investigations into history objects, stories of making showing and telling. These may not be the proverbial ‘magic bullets’ but are pre-cursors of investments, and promote a sense of well-being and an aura of growth.

The creative process is like water which always finds a way to flow. Hence, the process never stops. Conversations can be interrupted but not the artistic process. Therefore there is a great need, as well as potential, in fostering greater linkages between India and Pakistan, based on the recommendations above, which will certainly have a positive impact on relations between the two countries.

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### **Biographical Note**

**Dr Yaqoob Khan Bangash** is Director, Centre for Governance and Policy, IT University, Lahore, Pakistan.

**Salima Hashmi** is Former Principal, National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, Pakistan.

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