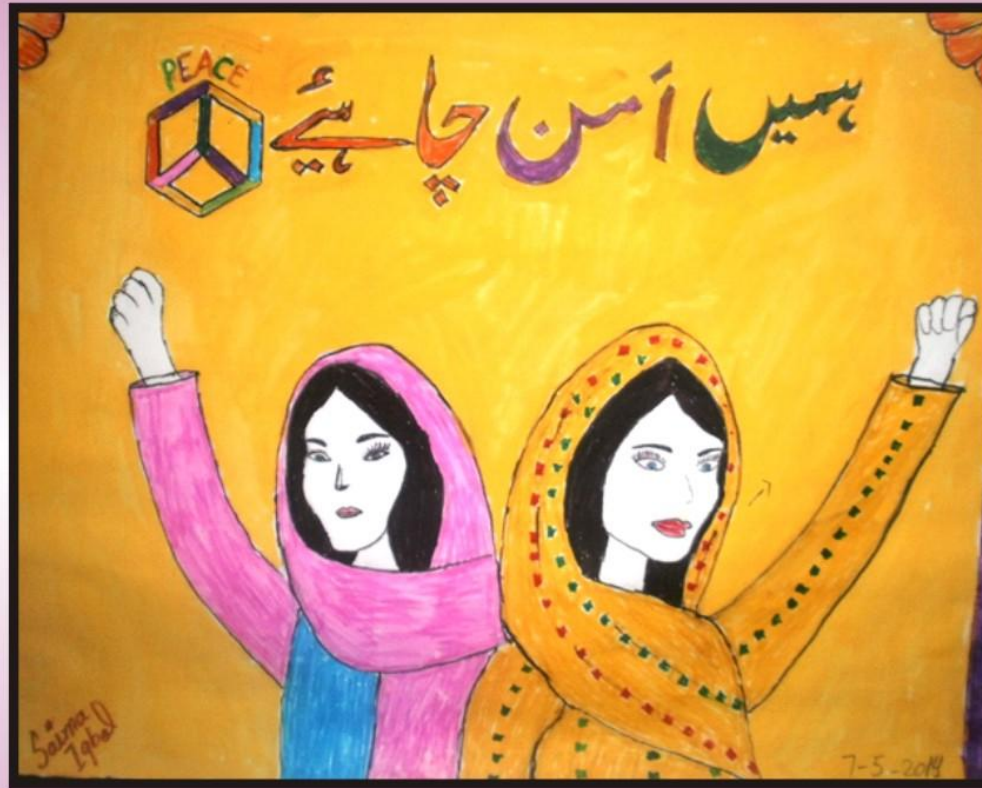


PEACE THROUGH ARTS



A PROJECT BY BEDARI
with support from
United States Institute for Peace



A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Violence, terrorism, sabotage, bombings, assassinations, radicalism, and extremism are the words that have become a part of our everyday life in Pakistan in past 15 or so years. It peaked in 2008 and 2009 when Pakistan suffered a suicide blast on almost weekly basis.

We, as conscience members of the society, could not ignore this mayhem around us. How can we stay indifferent when people are dying around us? That triggered a discussion in Bedari and resulted in the inclusion of Promotion of Peace and Tolerance as one of Bedari's objectives back in 2009.

Since then, Bedari has executed quite a few projects on peace, tolerance, inter-sectarian and inter-faith harmony, and has learnt a lot through its experiences of working with youth. 'Peace through Arts' was one such initiative. It remained quite successful in engaging over 100 youth from various backgrounds in artistic and cultural endeavors, and helped them understand, respect, and protect diversity. Youth (both male and female) from various sects of Islam and from other religions learnt to work together. That was a wonderful achievement. It helped in removing so many misconceptions about other sects/religions, and helped us all learn that we are human beings first; that humanity is the greatest religion. We wanted to share our learning and experience with our fellows/friends working on this very issue. Hence, you find this book in your hands.

I would like to appreciate all the staff including Imran Majeed, Shehla Manzoor, Avais Malik, and many other who helped with execution of the project. The mentors engaged the youth, while there were many more people from the community who helped us in identifying youth, in organizing various events, and in helping us deal with various challenges that arose. I would like to mention Safeer Ullah Khan (Communications Manager, Bedari) who remained engaged with this project right from conception till its completion. He deserves the respect and love he enjoys among the young participants. Last but not least, we are grateful to USIP for entertaining this wild idea, and providing the much needed financial support for the successful execution of the project.



Saleem Malik
Executive Director



BEDARI – A BRIEF PROFILE

Bedari is a national level non-governmental voluntary development organization in Pakistan working with women and girls for the promotion and protection of their human rights.

It started its activities around awareness raising and self-growth in 1991 with a land mark community conference on Violence against women and eventually setting up of Pakistan's first crisis center. It has developed expertise on issues of gender empowerment, addressing violence and abuse against women and girls and processes of attitudinal change.

Seeing the continuous rise of extremism, threat to the right to belief/religion, and terrorism in the society, Bedari decided to include promotion of peace and tolerance as one of its objectives in 2009.

Since then, it has run projects and campaigns to promote peace, tolerance, inter-faith and inter-sectarian harmony through various means.

'Peace through Arts' is one of our efforts to make this society tolerant and peaceful.



USIP

United States Institute of Peace was established in 1984 through a law The United States Institute of Peace Act, passed by the Congress. It was established as a publicly funded national institution chartered to "serve the American people and the federal government through the widest possible range of education and training, basic and applied

research opportunities, and peace information services on the means to promote international peace and the resolution of conflicts among the nations and peoples of the world without recourse to violence."

It aims to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflicts around the world by engaging directly in conflict zones and providing analysis, education and resources to those working for peace.

BEDARI ON PEACE AND HARMONY

Bedari started its work on peace promotion and conflict mitigation with a Peace Campaign in District Chakwal in April-May 2009. It was planned and executed right after the suicide blast in a Shia mosque, which resulted in the loss of 26 precious lives.

Bedari had already been working in district Chakwal for over a year then. There were tensions, and it was feared that a Sunni-Shia clash may erupt. Through efforts of various stakeholders (including those of Bedari), the Sunni-Shia clash was averted. Then the anger of the community took another course – Punjabi-Pakhtoon clashes. The situation remained very tense for a few weeks, but better sense prevailed, and there was no more violence in Chakwal.

Since the rise of extremist discourse in the society, it has become very dangerous to discuss the right to belief or religion openly in Pakistan. However, Bedari learnt through its experience of working with young men and women from different sectarian/religious backgrounds that if they are provided a chance to socialize with people from other religions/sects, the hatred/misconceptions about people following other religions/sects diminish.

This leads to tolerance and peace in the society. This very idea was shaped into 'Peace through Arts'. You would find the details of this project in the following pages.



THE PROJECT – PEACE THROUGH ARTS

“Peace through Arts” aimed at providing youth from various social and religious backgrounds an opportunity to interact with one another, discuss various issues pertaining to their everyday lives and express their desire for peace and prosperity through different art forms. It was a youth led project. Bedari staff was there to facilitate them.

It ensured participation of young girls, youth from religious and ethnic minorities as well as from different social/economic classes. The youth had been organized into five groups:

- Theater,
- Art/Photography,
- Music,
- Poetry
- Social Media.

The four groups created art work focusing on the importance of diversity, peace and tolerance. Theater group created a play 'Aman Di Khed'; Artists made drawings/paintings; Musicians composed songs; and Poets and Writers wrote poems and prose on peace and tolerance.

The fifth group – Social Media – was there to disseminate their products on the social media especially Facebook. A page had been created on Facebook for the purpose.



Bedari arranged mentors for each group. They were there to teach and guide the groups on the intricacies of the relevant art form. Additionally, Bedari arranged training on peace and tolerance, and institution building. The art work was shared with the community through:

- Mushaira (Poetry Recitation Sessions)
- Exhibitions and display on public transport vehicles
- Concerts - Videos on Local TV Channel
- Theater Performances
- Social Media

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of the project was to engage youth for promoting tolerance, peace and harmony among various segments of the society in district Muzaffargarh.

The project's immediate objective was:

“To mobilize and empower 100 male and female youth from different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds to work through different artistic media to promote tolerance and peace in Muzaffargarh district of Punjab”



THE PROJECT ACTIVITIES

YOUTH MOBILIZATION

The project started with youth mobilization activities. Project staff held meetings with youth at various places including schools and colleges, sports centers, and villages. The response was so overwhelming that it became really difficult to select just 100 youth. Bedari modified the project and announced open competitions for selection of 20 participants for each art form and social media group. Seeing the overwhelming response, the number of participants was increased to 125 (adding five more youth to each of the five groups). Another consideration was the possibility of drop-outs during the implementation of the project. It worked as we were left with just a little over 100 participants at the end of the project.

BASELINE SURVEY

As the selection of 125 young men and women was completed, a baseline survey was conducted to know their existing level of tolerance for diversity, and their views on various issues that affect the peace of the community.

MENTORING SESSIONS

Each group was assigned to a mentor, who was responsible for reviewing the art work already produced by the participants, and for guiding them to improve their work. Each group had 10 full-day sessions. However, the sessions were broken down into 3 hour sessions (30 sessions in total) spread over two months.



TRAINING ON PEACE

Each group was provided training on peace and conflict mitigation. Training was organized with a larger aim of making youth understand the deep-rooted concepts and ideas leading to extremism. The contents of the training were designed to:

- Make youth understand group dynamics
- Teach multiple identities for initiating healthy dialogues with people having different identities
- Make youth learn stereotypes based on religion, cast, sect and gender and using identities to break these stereotypes
- Enable youth appreciate diversity and develop acceptance for others



TRAINING ON INSTITUTION BUILDING

The groups were provided training on institution building, so that they could get themselves registered if they wished to continue working in a more organized form. The training covered the very basic elements of institution building. The subjects covered are given below:

- Structure of a Not-for-Profit Organization
- General Body
- Constitution
- Staff and Volunteers
- Rules & Regulations
- Documentation
- Governing Body
- Policies
- Registration – Relevant Law
- Income and Expenditure
- Fund Raising

As the participants were young, the focus remained on the basics. It has given them an idea of what they need to do if they want to establish a group. Theater Group seems to be ahead of all other groups in moving towards institutionalization. It is perhaps because of the fact that theater cannot be done individually. They need to work in group. The singers group is the 2nd, poets the 3rd and painters the 4th in this competition. After training, the participants seemed highly motivated to turn the groups into organizations.



GOING PUBLIC

In the second phase of the project, the messages of peace and tolerance were taken to public domain. It was done through displaying the art work of all the groups in the public spaces.

MUSHAIRA (POETRY RECITATION SESSIONS)

Three mushaira or poetry recitation sessions were organized by the poets group. Senior poets from the district were also invited to these events. As females were not forthcoming, and did not actively participate in the first Mushaira, the group decided to organize a female-exclusive Mushaira. It was successful, as more than 60 women participated in the Mushaira. The third Mushaira was not exclusive, yet it was attended by around 25 women.

SONGS

The Music Group prepared five Peace Songs. The songs were sung during various events and ceremonies. These were enjoyed by the community and received a lot of appreciation. Videos of the songs were also prepared by the participants of Theater and Music Groups jointly. The videos have been played on the local cable TV channel, and have been quite popular in the local community.



EXHIBITIONS

Art group prepared over 30 paintings, which were shared with the general public through exhibitions. Three exhibitions were held. Exhibition was a first of its kind event for Muzaffargarh. The district has no art gallery, and had never hosted any exhibition before. Bedari organized these exhibitions in rented halls of private schools/colleges.

THEATER

Theater was the most active and the most popular group. It developed a street play “Aman Di Khed”, and performed it in various communities. Over 80 performances were held in urban and rural communities. The actors became household names. The play was also video-recorded, and aired on the local cable TV channel, which popularized it even more. The theater team was requested by other NGOs from within the district and even from other districts to perform at their events. It received standing ovations at many events. The biggest achievement for the group was an invitation from Potohar Organization for Development Advocacy to perform at Regional Rural Women's Conference in Multan.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media group was divided into four groups of 5 persons each. They were assimilated into the four art groups. Five persons from social media group with each art group were assigned the task to record the activities of the relevant art group and promote them on social media. A Page titled 'Peace through Art' was created on Facebook and regularly updated. It picked up slowly. Today, it has over 1500 fans. These posts are being shared by the fans with their friends and families, and reach out to over 5,000 people.



CHALLENGES FACED

The project was definitely an interesting one, but by no means was an easy job. Bedari team faced quite a few challenges. The important ones are given below:

GENDER ISSUES

Gender issues or to be more direct, patriarchy was a key barrier. It took us really long time to convince females to join in. Joint training sessions were not possible at the initial stages. So Bedari organized separate sessions for boys and girls. However, with the passage of time, the situation improved. Though exhibitions and other events were attended by women and as well as men. Female poets refused to participate in Mushaira (Poetry Recitation Session) along with male poets. Similarly, women from the community were also reluctant to attend these sessions. The situation improved with our efforts and last Mushaira was a joint activity.

INTER-SECTARIAN AND INTER-FAITH ISSUES

At the initial stages, there were a few unpleasant incidents/situations because youth from various sectarian and religious backgrounds were working together. There were Christian, Shia, Bareilvi and Deobandi youth.

TAKING OUR MESSAGE TO PUBLIC DOMAIN

This was another challenge, as some young men and especially girls, were reluctant to showcase their art work at public places. Female members of Theater Group did not participate in the street performances. Bedari organized some indoor performances so that females could also participate. These performances were held in schools and colleges, or at various events organized by other organizations.

Similarly, the first Mushaira became an exclusively male activity. Then, Bedari decided to organize a female-only Mushaira. It helped a lot in improving the situation. The third and last Mushaira was attended by both men and women, and female poets also participated along with male poets.

SUCCESSES OF THE PROJECT

The project made quite an impact as it promoted inter-sectarian and inter-faith harmony, included girls in all the activities, and many more. Following are the details:

CONFLICT RESOLUTION WITHIN THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE PROJECT

As so many young boys and girls from various backgrounds came to work together, conflicts were bound to happen. However, it was very interesting to note that the youth managed to resolve conflicts among themselves. They formed a committee of three senior members. The three members were elected with consensus. Every participant had shown his/her confidence in the three members. This committee would receive complaints from participants, and would resolve them through dialogue with both the parties. None of the conflicts ever turned violent.

INCLUSION OF GIRLS

Bedari managed to engage a sizeable number of young women in the project activities. Each of the five groups had female representation, though it varied in each group. The Art Group had an overwhelming majority of female participants, while Music Group had only two female members. The gender segregation issue was also resolved by the end of the project as female participants willingly participated in the joint training sessions on Peace Promotion, and Institution Building. Though girls did not perform in street theater, they did perform in the indoor performances. Women actively and willingly participated in the joint Mushaira organized towards the end of the project.

INCLUSION OF MINORITIES

Bedari successfully engaged the youth from minority segments of the society. Inclusion of Shia, and Christians was a great achievement. Though minor issues did arise between youth from different sects, we were happy that these issues were resolved through dialogue. The youth from each of the five groups held meetings, and formed a committee for resolving such issues. After the formation of the committee, not a single clash got big enough to be reported to Bedari staff.

ART WORK PRODUCED

Some of the art work produced is really amazing. The best among them was the play “Aman Di Khed”, which received a lot of appreciation from the communities. People from different communities, different organizations invited the theater team to perform play for them. It was recognized even by the government officials (whose apathy towards art and youth is proverbial). District Administration had organized a Peace Festival, and they invited Bedari Theater Team to perform 'Aman Di Khed' at the festival. Similarly, Potohar Organization for Development and Advocacy invited the theater group to perform at Regional Rural Women's Conference in Multan.

GENERATED A DISCUSSION ON PEACE AND TOLERANCE TOWARDS DIVERSITY IN THE COMMUNITY

The project successfully generated a discussion in the community on the issues of peace, and tolerance towards diversity. Other organizations and district government have taken it up. The district government had already established a Peace Committee, but it was not operational.

After this project, the Committee was revived, and it started its activities. Its members visited Bedari office, and requested us to send our groups (Music and Theater) to their events. Bedari readily obliged. The theater group performed its play 'Aman Di Khed', and the singers sang the Peace Songs they had created during this project.

ENGAGED THOUSANDS OF YOUNG BOYS AND GIRLS

Though 100 young men and women were direct beneficiaries of the project, the number of indirect beneficiaries runs into thousands. The families of the direct beneficiaries also benefited from the project as their young ones got mentored in various arts, and had the opportunities to perform in public. Additionally, there were thousands of youngsters who participated in various activities arranged by the participants of the projects. Theater performances, songs, paintings, and poetry engaged thousands of people. Many more were engaged through social media. Facebook page of Peace through Arts remained very active, and received thousands of likes. It showed/proved that cultural and artistic activities are the best means to promote harmony and peace in the community

LESSONS LEARNT

Important learning from this project are listed below:

1. Artistic and cultural activities are the best way to promote harmony, peace, and tolerance towards diversity. When a theater performance, a paintings exhibition or music concert is held, it is for everyone. No one asks about the religion or sectarian association of the performers/organizers/participants. People come together, and learn that people from other religions, sects, or ethnic groups are human beings just like us.
2. Religion is a very sensitive issue, and talking directly about the right to belief/religion can be dangerous. Arts can create a good buffer, and we can address the sensitive issue indirectly.
3. Such projects should be of longer duration. It takes quite some time for the communities to break out of their traditional thinking, and start absorbing new ideas. In this project, the gender segregation was a very sensitive issue at the beginning. However, with the passage of time, the community, and the participating youth began to accept mixed gatherings. Bedari was able to organize a poetry recitation session, which was attended by men as well as men. Similarly, Bedari did not have to arrange separate trainings for male and female participants towards the end of the project.



PHOTO GALLERY



PHOTO GALLERY



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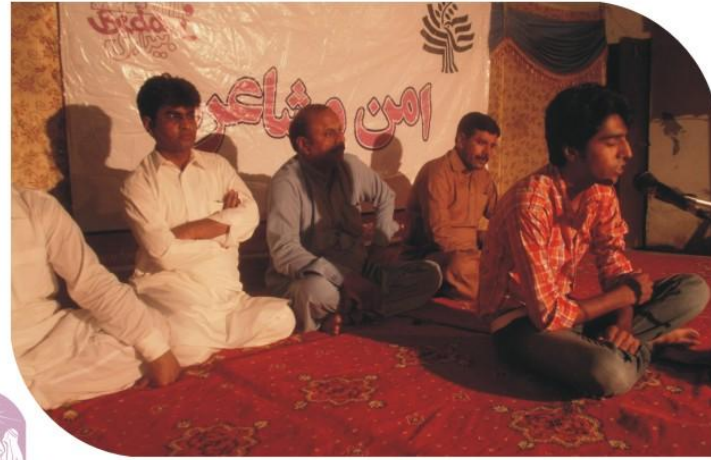


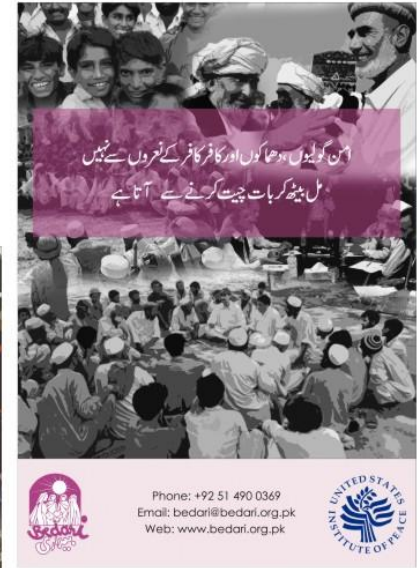
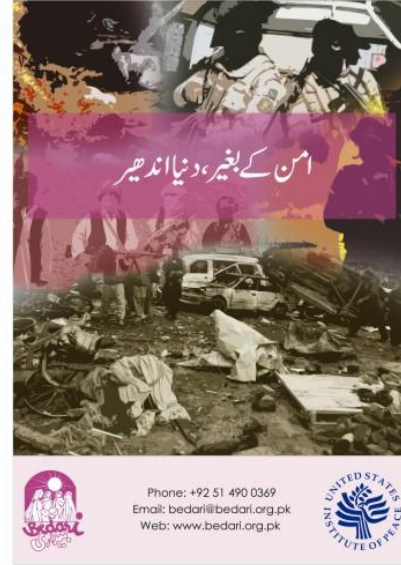
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THE POSTERS



PROFILES OF SOME PARTICIPANTS

SALMAN MAJEED (SOCIAL MEDIA, THEATER)

Salman Majeed joined social media group, and later developed interest in theater as well. He was a test case for Bedari. He was the one most actively involved with extremist anti-Shia organizations. He would be at the forefront of any anti-Shia rally chanting slogans against Shia Muslims demanding their expulsion from Pakistan, or their complete annihilation. It was considered whether we should let such an extremist be part of this project. The final decision was made in favor of including him, and taking him as a test case. He was the guy who would help us measure the success of the project.



He tells us, “Before joining extremist groups, I was very good in my studies. I passed all my exams with distinction. However, my studies suffered as I got involved with extremist groups, and started participating in anti-Shia rallies”. When asked why he joined extremist groups, he told us, “I was shown a video of how a Sunni Muslim was killed, and his dead body was dragged in the streets by Shia Muslims in a nearby town. I was enraged at the cruelty. I wanted to avenge that”.

About the change in his personality, he says, “I thought peace would prevail when everybody would convert to one sect. But here in Bedari, I learnt that diversity is something to cherish; that peace is possible without painting everyone green. It is a great lesson; I would never forget that, rather I would keep propagating it in my neighborhood and wherever I go”.

His mother had her own misgivings, “I was seriously worried about his future. He was part of extremist groups; his activities had raised many eyebrows. Even police had warned my husband about our son's activities, but we were unable to convince him to leave all that. We were worried about his studies”. She was extremely happy with Bedari's project, “you people have done what we could not do. We had tried every method – love, affection, discussion, persuasion, threats – but none worked. I had lost my son. You people have brought my son back to me. I can never thank you enough”.

AREEBA NISAR (ACTOR, PAINTER)

Areeba Nisar is a very talented girl facing really difficult situation. She is a very good athlete, painter, and actor. Though she primarily joined the theater group, she would attend the sessions of Art Group as well. She has won prizes in athletic and painting competitions.

Her father had an accident 14 years ago. Her parents and elder brothers jointly managed to keep the family afloat. However, her elder brother is against girls' education. She has her mother's support, so she somehow managed to continue her education, but had to drop her passion for athletics as her brother would not allow her to go to other cities for participating in various tournaments. She actually negotiated with her brother, who allowed her to continue her education but drop her sports related activities.

She actively participated in Peace through Arts, though again she faced serious resistance from her elder brother. As it was a local level project, and the activities did not involve traveling to other cities, she managed to stay in the project. She would regularly visit Bedari office, participate in theater activities. If there were no theater activity, you would often find her painting in some corner of the office.



SHAUKAT ALI (SINGER)

Shaukat was and still is a Na'at Khwan (a person who recited poems praising the holy prophet). He thought music was not a good thing to indulge in. He came to Bedari office to see if the Mentor for Music Group could help him improve his recitation skills. It helped, and he became a regular visitor, though he kept it a secret from his family and friends.

Slowly, he developed a liking for music, and started to sing various songs. He found that his voice was suitable for folk songs. Now it is no more a secret that Shaukat sings and sings really well. He is proud that he has a talent that he can use for the promotion of peace and tolerance in the society. He is not ashamed of his singing. He does not hide it any more.



IRFAN SAGAR (MENTOR, THEATER GROUP)

Irfan was an interesting find. He was too old to be a participant of “Peace through Arts”, but he had a passion for theater and insisted on joining the Theater Group. Bedari allowed him to be part of the Theater Group, but it was made clear that he would not be registered as a participant as he did not fall in the age bracket for the participants of 'Peace through Arts'.

As the sessions progressed, it was realized that Irfan already knew a lot, and had practical experience of theater. Later, it was discovered that he had worked with commercial theater groups for quite a few years, and had extensive knowledge and passion for theater. Soon he was made Mentor of the group. Irfan was probably the only mentor who earned it during the course of the project.

His passion has woven the theater group into a dynamic and formidable unit that has been recognized by the community. The members of Theater Group have become household names because of the street performances, repeated airings of the play on local cable TV, and invitations from different quarters to perform that play at their events.



NAZISH RASOOL (MENTOR, POETS AND WRITERS)

Initially, it seemed women in Muzaffargarh had nothing to do with poetry. As per local poets, no women had ever attended any Mushaira (Poetry Recitation Session), let alone participate and recite something of her own. Bedari refused to buy this.

As we explored more ways and means to reach females interested in poetry, we met Nazish. She is an interesting young woman, who introduces herself as a Muslim who does not belong to any sect. 'I am just a Muslim, and that is all', she would say smilingly. Nazish was selected as a Mentor. Her presence helped a lot with mobilizing women.

Though our first Mushaira was not attended by any woman, the second one was the first of its kind in Muzaffargarh – a women-only Mushaira. It was attended by around 60 women, and 13 of them recited their poetry. Suddenly, there were women who loved to listen to poems, and there were women who wrote poems and loved to recite them to the audiences.



HASNAIN ALI (SOCIAL MEDIA)

Hasnain had a very painful past. His parents were not able to meet the expenses of his education. He left his school, and started working in a small factory at night shift. He had a passion for education, and decided to get admission in a school. His parents were not happy with his decision, as they thought it was a waste of his hard-earned money. He would work overtime in the factory to provide for his family as well as for his education. His hard work paid off, and he completed his secondary education. He continued his education and work together, and did a course in Pharmacy, which helped him in securing a job in the district headquarters hospital. “Though my living standard improved, and I am still continuing my education, I had grown up to be a bitter young man”, remarks Hasnain. He says that his association with 'Peace through Arts' changed him a lot. It was for the first time in his life that he got an opportunity to socialize. He learnt that life was not easy for others as well. “I was lucky that my first experience of socializing with young people was at Bedari with the participants of 'Peace through Arts', I learnt to speak, share and respect others' views and beliefs”, contemplates Hasnain.



RUKHSAR (THEATER)

Rukhsar and her two sisters joined the theatre group with the permission of their parents. She has eight sisters and two brothers. She said in the society where girl child is always looked at as a curse, her family has always been supportive towards the girls education and all of her sisters are studying and given fairly equal opportunities to grow. “When my elder sister got engaged to this guy and he came to know about our participation in theatre group and subsequently in the street theatre, he had objected to our activities and harshly told my parents not to send us to Bedari. Our parents got very confused and tense, and stopped us from participating in the theatre group activities. All three of my sisters sat down with our parents and had dialogue with them. After having discussion and sensing our determination, they allowed us to participate. We have also taken part in the electronic version of the play.”



Note: The project has been scaled up, and is being implemented in four districts – Muzaffargarh, Multan, Bahawalpur and Lodhran. Sports have also been added to the project activities. Furthermore, self-growth trainings have also been organized for the 1367 participants in the scaled-up version of the project.



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