



Review Paper

Civil Society and Confidence Building Measures: Navigating India-Pakistan Relationship

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>The study is significant as the role of civil society has been instrumental in promoting dialogue and understanding between different communities, which often organize cultural exchange and joint events to foster goodwill and confidence building. Civil Society advocates for a sustained dialogue, emphasizing the significance of communication in reducing tensions and building trust. The political relationship between India and Pakistan is at a new low, and the role of civil society has become more crucial to redeveloping mutual trust and confidence. The engagement of civil society between both countries has dwindled, exacerbating the fragility of the relationship. Historically, several civil society organizations tried to narrow down the differences between both countries but hardly garnered any success. Civil society’s efforts are crucial even though they face challenges due to political dynamics and the influence of state actors due to prevailing mistrust and sporadic violence. Long-lasting peace needs some political space to increase comprehensive and people-to-people dialogue through track-II diplomacy, including governmental and non-governmental agencies. Looking into it, this article emphasizes the significance of civil society in confidence-building between both countries. Further, the article articulates the role of civil societies in several sectors and highlights their effects in maintaining peace and harmony.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 02-06-2024 ▪ Accepted: 09-07-2024 ▪ Published: 03-08-2024 ▪ IJCRM:3(4); 2024: 214-220 ▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes <p>How to Cite this Manuscript</p> <p>Avanish Kumar. Civil Society and Confidence Building Measures: Navigating India-Pakistan Relationship. International Journal of Contemporary Research in Multidisciplinary.2024; 3(4): 214-220.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between India and Pakistan is getting worse with each passing day, with a series of tensions, conflicts, cross-border terrorism, ceasefire violations, and so on. Hence, the role of Track II diplomacy through civil society remained effective in building long-lasting peace. Civil societies, from time to time, have taken a series of initiatives such as people-to-people contact, plays, conferences, dramas, conferences, workshops, etc, to mitigate tensions. Many organizations has taken many initiatives such as trade expositions, cultural festivals & track II diplomacy (informal contact among non-governmental

organization (NGO) informal and unofficial contacts), Pakistan-India joint business (enhancing commerce), The Ottawa & Chaophraya dialogues and South Asian voices (finding solutions to obstinate military and political problems), Exchange for change (for students), Regional young leaders forum (Young adults to work together on media and public project), Hindi-Pak Dosti Manch (A Podium to meet and interact; launched in 1994 by Kuldip Nayyar & Hans Raj Hans), Pakistan-India peoples forum for peace & development (PIPFPD – focus area are Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), strengthening democracy, religious

tolerance, and denuclearization), Aman Ki Asha (Initiative of Times of India group & Jang Group in 2010 to enhance peace through people-to-people interaction), Aaghaz-e-Dosti (a campaign started in 2012 through people-to-people interaction and to start friendship bonds through various initiatives undertaken such as Aman Chaupals, peace workshops, letter exchanges, greeting card exchanges, virtual peacebuilding courses & peace calendars), Women's initiative for peace in South Asia (WIPSA - founded in 1999 after the aftermath of the Kargil conflict. The famous journey from India to Pakistan was undertaken by some women in 2000 to meet and spread the message of love through discussion and meetings).

However, in the recent past, the relationship between India and Pakistan has reached the lowest level. Civil society started campaigning in the 1980s between both countries for normalization and peace. Despite this, they remained susceptible and vulnerable to each other. The civil society campaign incorporates a mix of officials, retired military, retired diplomats, and many political leaders. The talks have mainly remained semi-official in nature. So, the talk is considered as 'Track II diplomacy.' In the 1990s, after the nuclear test, civil society appeared full-fledged and started campaigning against nuclear tests. After back-to-back nuclear tests in May 1998 by both countries, the anxiety has not only increased in the international community but also among civil societies (Nizami, 2017).

In the recent past, civil society engagement has significantly decreased and remained dwindled, exacerbating fragile relations between both countries, especially after the Pulwama attack in 2019. Trade relations remained in limbo, and the border region remained fragile and vulnerable to terror attacks. This also shaped and shifted both countries' domestic and foreign policy priorities (Kathuria, 2024). Here, the role of civil societies has significantly increased.

1. Significance of civil societies in confidence-building measures

The significance of civil society-led CBMs includes 'changing perception and building trust' as these organizations play a substantial role. It remained inclusive and included engagement with the various stakeholders of the society who tried to change the perception of considering each other as an 'enemy,' which helped them narrow the trust gap between both countries. A major initiative between both countries, such as the "Milne Do," "Heart to Heart," or "Youth Exchange Programme" campaign, has changed the stereotypical images of people residing on both sides (Akhtar, 2013). The awareness of 'peace' development is important as it avoids any form of tension or conflict because peace is the fundamental principle that must be inculcated in the minds of conflicting parties or states. Various civil society organizations (CSOs), from time to time, have also worked through the Track II channel to create a platform for positive interaction among media houses, business classes, and political leaders. These platforms helped share the vision of peace and understand the cost of animosity and mistrust. CSOs such as Aman Ki Asha (AKA), South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA), Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and

Transparency (PILDAT), and PIPFPD have continuously stressed the easing or liberalization of the visa norms for business, health-related, and religious tourism. Further, civil society is also a platform for discussion on resolving bilateral tensions, as many CSOs have created a platform for societal interactions, which helped them negotiate on several contentious or conflicting issues, including political, social, economic, and international. PIPFPD has made suggestions in the past on Kashmir issues. Similarly, AKA has offered suggestions to avoid conflict on Sir Creek and Siachen issues. Both significant initiatives undertaken by the organization reflect the broader segments that build consensus and resolve tensions. Civil societies also helped in changing discourses. When it comes to India & Pakistan, one of the major challenges has remained persistent for a long time and is tough to evade, i.e., deeply rooted mindsets of lack of trust, stereotypes, old perceptions, and hostility. The CSOs working for the India-Pakistan peace process have set a platform to bring new ideas, fresh negotiations, and discussions to help avoid distrust and animosity between both. It paved the way for shared mutual consensus, futuristic vision, and sustainable peace. Engaging with multiple stakeholders in civil society paves the way for a common platform for both sides where multiple stakeholders can engage with each other. This stakeholder includes the media house, academician, parliamentarian, former foreign services officials, artists, and retired army personnel. CSOs like SAFMA have engaged the media and political bodies, and AKA has engaged business communities, academicians, etc (Akhtar, 2013).

2. Civil societies working for India & Pakistan peace process

In India and Pakistan, many civil society-led organizations are working continuously to enhance the peacebuilding process and cooperation. Some of the organizations that have worked are as follows:

India-Pakistan Friendship Society

This organization was established in 1987 by Kewal Singh, a former Indian Foreign Secretary. It was considered as the first 'citizen dialogue' initiative between both countries. Some prominent forum members included I. K. Gujral (who later became Prime minister in 1997), Bhai Mohan Singh, Soli Sorabjee, and Khushwant Singh. The purpose of the organization was to enhance exchanges and to create more understanding among the people. An attempt was also made to facilitate cultural exchange between both countries and de-escalate the tensions. It also promoted a friendly atmosphere for people-to-people contacts and cultural exchange programs (Ahmad, 2014).

Romancing the Border (RTB)

RTB is an initiative of citizens from both countries to have a message of peace by influencing the people's emotions, opinions, and behavior. The initiatives aimed to highlight the similarities between citizens of both countries as they have a similar origin. It provided an opportunity for people from across

the border to know and befriend each other and discuss the reason behind the mutual hatred. In 2012, two students from the University of Hong Kong, Shirin, and Rehman, natives of India and Pakistan, respectively, came out with the people-to-people movement on social media through causal discussions. RTB received an overwhelming response, cutting across borders for taking the initiative for the peace process between both. It attempted peace in South Asia by publishing "Romancing the Border Fortnightly Testimonials," initiating various innovative campaigns like video greetings, smile for peace, photo booth campaign, and sharing peace & smiles across the border. It also received support and appreciation from AKA (Tere, 2014).

Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT)

It was an independent think-tank formed in 2001 by a group of Pakistani residents and non-residents to discuss political and public policy within the country. The main focus of the think-tank has remained on domestic matters, but with time, it has taken up the issues of conflicting trade and water between both countries. They started an informal discussion by publishing various research from India and Pakistan on different bilateral and regional trade dimensions. This includes the status of India's most-favored nation (MFN), trade agreements like SAFTA, and water conflicting issues. It further comes out with background papers related to various policy issues and composite dialogues. From 2004 onwards, the think-tank started facilitating parliamentary exchanges, and in 2011, it paved the way for parliamentary dialogues between both countries. Many issues were discussed during this period, including water, visa norms, LoC CBMs, trade and investment, and people-to-people dialogue (Akhtar, 2013).

Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP)

It was formed in 1999 to increase women's role in peacebuilding and negotiations and to act as agents of social change. It focuses on the people-oriented discourse with a security perspective for both men and women. It emphasizes skill development through an educational program, which will likely be helpful in peace activism. It also started training programs in conflict transformation and emphasized peace advocacy across the border, e.g., in Jammu & Kashmir, it started a peacebuilding process called "Athwass" which means handshake or warm greetings in the local Kashmiri language. The organization also organized a series of workshops to include women and mid-career professionals who can play an effective role in the peace process across the border (Ahmad, 2013).

Women Initiative for Peace in South Asia

It was created in 2000 to aim for peace in South Asian countries. It facilitates the platform for communication and interaction between women groups of both countries. In the same year, in the wake of the Kargil crisis, the "Women Peace Bus" comprised various women's groups that visited Pakistan under WIPSA. The women leading the initiative were Nirmala Deshpande and Asma

Jahangir, from India and Pakistan, respectively (Boquérat & Asbeck, 2009). According to Manjri Sewak, "The idea of a 'women's bus for peace' germinated in 1999 at a time when the guns were booming in Kashmir; war rhetoric and political jingoism had reached a deafening pitch; and stringent visa regimes had made contact between the people of the two nations extremely challenging" (Sewak, 2004).

Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy

It is a people-to-people forum established in 1994 by various eminent intellectuals, academicians, and activists from both countries to promote dialogue. The forum is based in Delhi. From the Indian side, it is headed by Tapan Bose, and from the Pakistani side, it is headed by Dr Syeda Hameed. One of the major activities being led by the organization is to organize a convention between both countries by delegates from each country on an alternate basis. The 1994 declaration underlined the main principles of this forum. It mentions that "politics of confrontation between India and Pakistan has failed to achieve benefits of any kind for the people of both countries" (Sarwar, 2011). PIPFPD has also promoted the intra-Kashmir interaction since 1995, tracing back to the first convention held in New Delhi in 1995. In the first convention, the forum came out with a "Joint paper position on Jammu and Kashmir" by emphasizing the inclusion of people or representatives of Kashmiris in the dialogue process. It considered Kashmir issues as not just a territorial dispute but rather the matters of the lives and aspirations of the Kashmiri people by emphasizing the urgency of inclusion of Kashmiri people in any discussion. It insisted that the government should come to an understanding on an "unconditional no-war pact" and identify the importance of "a peaceful democratic solution" to the Kashmir issues.

The last convention, i.e., eight conventions, traced back to 2011, was held at Allahabad, where around 700-800 people attended. The major aim of the joint conventions was to articulate a plan of action for promoting peace among both nations through people-to-people initiatives. The discussion in the convention revolves around major issues such as "war, demilitarization, peace, and peace dividends." Apart from that, a wide range of discussions also took place on concerns such as Kashmir issues, democratic governance, minority issues, and the eradication of religious intolerance. The convention also discussed globalization and regional cooperation (Akhtar, 2013).

South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA)

It is an association that functions among all eight members of the SAARC. The outcome of the July 2, 2000, SAMFA held in Islamabad was establishing a mainstream body to promote peace in the region. The conference came out with a program entitled "Media Development, Freedom and Peace in South Asia," which has two-fold aims:

1. Freedom of Media/Press
2. Promotion of peaceful dialogue and an environment free from terror and extremism.

Its objectives are to make the media community aware and more responsible and also promote unbiased information across the South Asian Region. SAFMA also launched several initiatives, including the South Asian Policy Analysis (SAPNA) network, South Asian Media Net, Free Media Foundation, and South Asian Parliament (Akhtar, 2013). The previous SAFMA conference was held in January 2013, which was started in Amritsar and ended in Lahore with the aim of “South Asian Vision and Union.” The secretary-general of SAFMA stated, “Ever since start, the focus of the SAFMA has been to stress peacebuilding and regional cooperation in the South Asian Nations. And this time, the conference’s theme is South Asian Vision and Union” (HT Correspondent, 2013).

Aman Ki Asha Peace Initiative

The initiative was initiated on January 1, 2010, by the “Times of India Group and Pakistan’s Jang Group.” The objective was to enhance peace and harmony between both countries. It was considered as the most substantial peace initiative as the two biggest media groups commanded it. It has engaged civil societies in a more significant way from both sides. The strategy of the organization to push the process of peace can be visualized in three manners:

1. Assistance in the settlement of all conflicts fairly and equitably through dialogue
2. The economic partnership is the most viable method for creating an environment of peace and dialogue process
3. Promotion of cultural exchanges through people-to-people contact.

The AKA initiatives have gained some success either by giving the people of the two countries a chance to raise their voices or by bringing the business communities of both countries together at the multi-forum. It has tried to tackle many contentious issues between both countries transparently and effectively by setting up a platform for open and rigorous discussion on issues like the Siachen, Sir Creek, and Kashmir conflicts.

In May 2010, one of the major initiatives undertaken by AKA initiatives was “Partners for Peace and Progress,” a two-day business conference. Leading businessmen from both countries met each other in New Delhi. From the Indian side, some of the businessmen who were part of the event were N. R. Narayana Murthy, Chandrejeet Banerjee, and Som Mittal. Some of the businessmen from Pakistan were Shahid Jawed Burki and Dr. Ishrat Hussain. Another economic conference between the two countries was held in May 2012 in Lahore. This time, the conference’s theme was “The Power of the Subcontinent.”

AKA has also addressed some contentious issues between both countries to bring peace. One such seminar was held in April 2010 entitled “A Common Destiny,” which was joined by several academicians, former foreign services officers, and retired army personnel, including Amitabh Matto, Prem Shankar Jha, Salman Jha, Dr. Mubashir Hasan, IA Rehman, and others. Many issues were discussed during the seminar, such as water sharing, terrorism issues in J&K, simplifying visa norms, and promoting trade and investment among both nations. The event

also emphasized the continuation of bilateral talks to resolve the conflicting issues. Another conference took place in New Delhi on 2-3 December 2012. The major agenda of the conference was to find a solution to contentious issues like Sir Creek, Siachen, terrorism, etc. Further, it has initiated measures, such as the “Milne do” campaign in July 2010, to enhance cultural cooperation and people-to-people interaction by simplifying visa restrictions. Another initiative was a conference held in July 2010 on water issues titled “Water is life.” At a humanitarian level, it has initiated the “Heart to Heart” program to save the lives of children from both Pakistan and India. Issues of detention of fishermen were also brought up in the discussion (Akhtar, 2013).

Aaghaz-e-Dosti

It was initiated in 2012 by Mission Bhartiya to encourage volunteers to stimulate the peace message between both countries through peace education. The founder of the organization was Ravi Nitesh. It emphasized fostering relations between both countries. Recently, it launched the 8th Indo-Pak Peace Calendar in New Delhi on January 11, 2020. The calendar had a collection of selected paintings from 12 renowned people, including Ela Gandhi, T.C.A Raghvan, Swati Parashar, Fr. Joseph Kalathil S.J., Jayesh Patel, Azra Talat Sayeed, Farhatullah Babar, Bushra Gohar, and Nida Kirmani. The organization has provided training to more than ten thousand students through Aman Chaupals (peace sessions), connecting classes in India and Pakistan through video conferencing, and the interaction of the students (Aaghaz-e-Dosti Peace Calendar, 2020).

4. Role of civil societies in various sectors

Civil society plays an important role in various sectors like water, security, human rights and women, J&K, defense, trade and business, youth, cultures and arts, education, etc. Some of the major initiatives in this field by CSOs are discussed below:

Culture and Arts

Culture plays a dominant role in creating mutual understanding about different nations, their traditions, and overall democracy. It also helps increase mutual understanding and build contacts among people. Apart from all the cultural diplomacy, both nations have succeeded in making the cultural sector as promising as possible, even indirectly, by building a robust peace platform. In this regard, some initiatives have been undertaken, like Aman-ki-Asha, Joint exhibitions and galleries, the Lahore Literacy Festival, the Jaipur Literature Festival, Tehrik-e-Niswan, and Ajoka Theatre.

Within the cultural sector, India and Pakistan perceive each other very differently. For success to take place, both Indians and Pakistanis have to change and modify their perceptions, which requires more patience. Some of the things that can be brought together by the ‘collaboration’ of both virtues equally, like Pakistan-based Ajoka theatre, which actually depends upon their Indian partners, as Indians also take considerable interest in Pakistani performing arts. The next observation was on the

limited 'funding system.' For example, most ongoing measures receive funds from third-party or international agencies. 'Presence and Publicity' also play an important role. Media fronts like the Jang group and the Times of India have significantly influenced publishing cross-border efforts for the general public. However, when it came to 'evaluation,' the two above media houses conducted independent surveys after the launch of AKA. After the evaluation, it was observed that 87 percent of Pakistanis and 74 percent of Indians believed that the campaign had built greater awareness about the basic important issues in India-Pakistan relations (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

Human Rights & Women

Human rights play a complementary role in building understanding among both these states. One outstanding example of women's initiative at times of bilateral tension and relative calm refers to the WIPSA, under which a multi-track 'women's bus for peace' was organized in 1999-2000, not much longer than the post-Kargil conflict (Sewak, 2004). Some of the other notable initiatives were the Delhi Police Group (DPG), Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR), Feminist Publishing, Sangat (Jagori), Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, and WISCOMP (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

Jammu & Kashmir (J&K)

Despite the Track II initiatives taken by some of the major organizations, such as the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation, the Jinnah Institute, the Delhi Police group, and Pugwash in the United States, these all made efforts to reinforce the free movement of trade and people from both sides. Still, unfortunately, despite the efforts taken, there were obstacles in terms of incentives, capacity, and longevity. Some notable initiatives were the Delhi Police Group, Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation, Kashmir Institute for International Relations (KIIR), and J&K Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry. CBMs might have short-term effects in the short run but can unpredictably have some positive effects concerning the operationalization of civil society in the long run. It was observed that 'Trade Optimism' has been a new lesson learned. According to one of the Indus Research Foundation and Centre for Peace Development and Reforms studies, 60 percent of traders from both nations were interested in ascertaining CBMs, which would further accelerate trade and tourism. It was proposed as a recommendation that 'Indirect support for third-party actors' like Delhi-based think tanks and in Islamabad might prove beneficial in initiating intra-Kashmir dialogues (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

Security and Defense

To relieve tensions between India and Pakistan, security and defense have always been an issue of concern for the two nations. However, despite uncertainties, various steps have been taken by the organizations, such as track II dialogues, workshops, efforts in terms of technology, and the exchange of military officials. Some notable initiatives included the Chaophraya Dialogue (2008), Ottawa Dialogue (2009), South Asian Voices (2013),

and regional workshops on counteracting terrorism efficiently. Other initiatives include the Neemrana Dialogue (1991), the Pugwash Conference (1995), efforts by the Balusa group, the exchanges based by the Jinnah Institute and the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation, the dialogues in the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), Youth workshops at the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, etc. (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

Trade and Business

Regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) failed to enhance regional trade because of the tensions between India and Pakistan (Mediratta, 2016). Notable initiatives taken by several organizations about trade and business include the Chambers of Commerce, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), the Karachi Chamber of Commerce (KCC), and the Pakistan Chamber of Commerce (PCC) expedited inter-organizational trade conglomerates. In 2004, the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), Trade Fora, and these efforts encompassed the Indo-Pakistan Trade Forum, the India-Pakistan Business Council, the Pakistan Business Council, and the Atlantic Council's India-Pakistan Trade and Business Forum that was sponsored by the US Department (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015). The recommendations, such as "Convening Women and Midsized Business Owners," by leading diaspora experts, propose training and best practices for tranquil and proficient market entry of women and middle business owners. The 'Virtual Banking System' could be incorporated, given the technological advancements in recent years. Business leaders should directly have an access point across the border in terms of financial aspects. The other was the 'Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Punjab,' which has not been widely studied (Jain & Bimal, 2014). All the Think Tanks should work on the functioning of all the SEZs, as they would help in augmented investment and association with the communities (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

Water

Since the beginning, water issues (either the Indus Water Treaty or the Tulbul Navigation Project) have remained a major debatable topic between India and Pakistan. Political negotiation has remained futile so far. As part of Track II diplomacy, the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and CDR, from India and Pakistan, respectively, remained continuously active in water-focused dialogues, establishing the task force and academic workshops on persisting challenges. The Atlantic Council and Stimson Centre (ACSC), an organization based in Washington, has also remained active while bringing experts from both countries to explore ways of tackling conflictual issues. On these issues, some experts remained dismissive of unofficial engagement by stating that the efforts tended by the organizations have little resonance as they are full of English-speaking elites who are completely unaware of ground realities. As far as civil societies are concerned, it has hardly achieved

these seven decades-old conflicts. The failure of civil society on this policy front is mainly because water tends to be deeply tangled in government policy, like that of trade and security. A slight policy change changes the narrative across borders (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

Youth and Education

Civil society played an effective role in the youth exchange program between India and Pakistan, and this youth exchange program would likely offer an opportunity in the future for positive changes in the relationship between both countries. Initiatives such as ‘Exchange for change’ have connected over 11,000 students aged between 10 to 15 years from both sides. It took place through letter exchange, photographs, and audio narratives. Some students even visited one-to-one countries as a part of the program. The other organization, “Seeds of Peace,” a United States-based NGO, brought students together in the form of summer camps and taught them about peacebuilding. In South Asia, it has continuously focused on India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan since 2001. A notable initiative undertaken for the youth was in 2004, on the occasion of the “World Youth Peace Summit” in Bangkok. The youth in this forum focused on entrepreneurship and inclusive dialogue opportunities. Another initiative was undertaken by Asia Society and Jinnah Institute entitled “India- Pakistan Regional Youth Leaders Forum” in 2012. The forum consists of 12 students below the age of 40 years who have the motto of “convene, connect, and catalyze.” It works on a public service project.

To enhance the youth exchange program with the agenda of improving and normalizing India-Pakistan relations, there is a need for a strong alumni base, which would likely play an effective role in keeping youth engaged, exchange of youth, and collaborative approach. There is also a need for the foundations and government to create a multi-year youth exchange program. The policy should remain consistent in engaging youth in the long term. The sustainability of the initiatives has also yielded results in the past (Bornstein *et al.*, 2015).

5. Future prospects of peace and the role of civil society

The role of civil society in fostering peace is both critical and transformative. Civil societies comprising several NGOs, academicians, media, artists, activists, and others can influence public discourse, bridge divides, and encourage sustainable peacebuilding that official diplomatic channels might not achieve alone. The prospects lay in building people and people relations through cultural exchange programs and youth engagements. CSOs can be involved in unofficial dialogues and problem-solving processes that complement formal negotiations. They can also work to counteract extremist ideologies through interfaith dialogue and addressing the root cause of radicalization. It can amplify the voices of those affected by the conflict, ensuring their concern are part of the peace dialogue. Civil Society can also act as a watchdog, ensuring that both governments adhere to peace agreements and commitments. At a time when all hopes are almost shattered, civil societies can act as a catalyst in enduring peace between both countries.

There are several challenges in achieving immediate peace looking into the deep-rooted political conflicts, especially Kashmir issues and militant activities in that region. Both governments view cross-border civil society collaboration with suspicion, citing national security concerns. NGOs and activists also faced restrictions or legal hurdles because of decades of mistrust. However, sustained civil society engagement can shift public opinion, influence political discourse, and create a bottom-up demand for peace, which could push governments toward negotiations. While civil society alone cannot ensure peace due to the entrenched political and military dimensions of the conflict, it can play a crucial role in the foundation of long-term reconciliation. While emphasizing fostering dialogue and addressing trust deficits, civil society can complement official peace processes and make lasting peace more achievable over some time.

6. CONCLUSION

Civil society can play an indispensable role in shaping the future of peace between India and Pakistan. They can pave the way for a more inclusive and sustainable peace process by fostering trust, challenging divisive narratives, and addressing shared challenges. In the last decade, CSOs remained almost invisible in articulating the peace process between both countries. The efforts of civil society actors must be supported and scaled up to ensure that peacebuilding becomes a collective endeavor that transcends borders. Civil society initiatives remained significant and invaluable despite facing challenges such as limited access, societal resistance, and governmental restrictions. All these barriers can be addressed through continuous and sustainable dialogues, which would likely pave the way for some hope in mitigating conflicts. By fostering trust, challenging divisive narratives, and promoting shared human values, civil society can find a way for enduring long-lasting peace.

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8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The author has written this paper significantly solely in an objective and unbiased manner.

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