

Moving mountains with music

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Overview:

Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed region in Pakistan that has witnessed violence in form of sectarian clashes, linguistic disputes, and cultural differences. Through our project, we are planning to use music as a tool to enhance harmony within diverse communities that live here. We plan to publish a web series that features musicians from across Gilgit-Baltistan collaborating with one another to create music. Furthermore, we also plan to establish an online digital portal to preserve existing literature across Gilgit-Baltistan and share it across the region to develop cooperation within communities so that they work towards peace.

Context:

My home region, Gilgit-Baltistan, is a rugged region amongst the mighty Himalayas that both Pakistan and India claim. Though officially administered by Pakistan, the area has been deprived of any political representation in Pakistan's democratic system owing to its status as a disputed territory according to the United Nations. Unfortunately, since the people of Gilgit-Baltistan have no vote in deciding who governs them, governments have often neglected the area when introducing policies which has led to the people of my home region missing out on crucial development in the region.

Historically, this has resulted in young passionate adults becoming easy prey for extremist religious organizations and inducing sectarian violence in the region. In 1988, over 500 people were killed in the sectarian massacres and violence, in which entire villages were also burnt down. Similar unfortunate incidents have repeated over the decades, with multiple curfews being enforced to stop the violent riots.

As a child growing up in the region amongst the violence, I had unconscious biases about other communities and would rarely interact with them. However, when I traveled outside of the region and made friends with people outside my community I realized how little I knew about these communities and their stories. I have now realized that the violence stemmed from our unconscious biases which were deep-rooted on all sides because of our ignorance of one another's cultural, linguistic, and religious beliefs.

Experience:

For the last two years, I have been working with the Lakshmi Mittal Institute for South Asia at Harvard University to [document and share stories from Gilgit-Baltistan](#). Through my on-ground research and experience, I realized that music and literature have immense power to bring people together. I worked with young artists with diverse backgrounds from Gilgit-Baltistan to release a [web series](#) of their performances, which was exceptionally received by all communities in the region. The most interesting thing was to see the comments about peace and harmony by young people on social media. The following year, we formed a team of young artists from across the region to break the Guinness World Record for the [highest altitude dance performance on land](#). Upon achieving this milestone, our efforts were celebrated by all communities together. Through these experiences, I realized the power of music and literature in bringing people together.

Proposed Solution

Through the project, we plan to improve the harmony between the various communities by documenting and sharing music and literature from Gilgit-Baltistan. We are planning to do this by working on sharing cross-cultural music and literature with the masses and creating an online digital library for others to do so too. Our first phase of the project is to create an online web series that would document and celebrate diversity by fusing the music of the various communities that live in the area. We will be working with young artists such as Noman Asmet, Shehzad Hunzai, DJ Ghasuray, Rameez Ahmed, and Gurgu to develop music that celebrates the multitude of communities that live in Gilgit-Baltistan. We plan that this music will serve as a unifying tune amongst the divided youth of Gilgit-Baltistan. We also plan to have live sessions with musicians across the region so that a sense of harmony between cultures is revived. Our final product will be the web series which will be released across YouTube and Vimeo so that it is accessible to everyone.

Our second phase is to create an open-source ‘Gilgit-Baltistan Literature Digital Portal’ to preserve existing literature and create a platform for writers from all backgrounds in the region to share their literature with one another. This would be the first digital library of the languages of Gilgit-Baltistan which includes endangered languages like Wakhi. Creating this digital portal will enable people to easily access each other’s stories so that we understand one another. I have discussed my project extensively with the Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religions at Harvard University, whose own work focuses on devotional literature in the Indo-Pak region. He has agreed to supervise my research and has also expressed interest in mentoring me virtually as I create the digital library. Similarly, Saad Ata Barcha, a research fellow from Hunza who is currently at York University, who has conducted extensive research about bazmi poetry and music in Hunza, has agreed to mentor me and provide assistance in translation and transliteration.

Plan:

3rd June - 10th June – Traveling to the region and figuring out the logistics for setting up the recordings.

11th June - 20th June – Creatively discussing our ideas with the selected artists from the region. Incorporating their ideas and advice into our project. Setting up the website for the digital portal.

25th June - 15th July – Travel across Gilgit-Baltistan and record the performances and collect initial data for the digital portal.

16th July - 28th July – Post-production process. Editing the footage, adding captions for wider reach.

Mid-August – Release the web series on social media platforms and the digital portal. Host webinars, talks, and Q&A sessions in Gilgit-Baltistan and Harvard.

Outcomes:

Through our project we want to achieve three key objectives: Promote inclusion and peace within the communities of Gilgit-Baltistan through music. Create creative avenues for young artists to express themselves and connect with each other. Document the rich culture, language, and heritage of the region. Finally, we hope that the project inspires people in Gilgit-Baltistan to listen to each other's stories so that we understand one another and work towards creating a peaceful future.