

Moving mountains with music

Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

Harvard College

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<https://www.burushaskilib.org/> - <https://www.instagram.com/khimoremaraka/>

Summary

Moving mountains with music was a project aimed at celebrating music and literature within the mountain communities of Northern Pakistan. Our goal was to document the unique literature and music of the Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan, and make it accessible to a wider online audience.

How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?

Burushaski is a local language spoken primarily in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, and by a handful of people in Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir. Owing to its unknown roots, it remains an enigma for linguists worldwide, who have described it as a linguistic isolate, i.e., a language that is not related to any other known language in the world. As I began reading more about burushaski, I realized how little preservation, documentation, and understanding of the language existed in academia (and online). Therefore, I decided that I will be working on making the Burushaski language more accessible. Since improving access to the language was our primary goal, we planned to create a library for burushaski literature (more geared towards researchers), and a social media presence to share snippets of local *bazmas* (musical gatherings).

Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

We did not work with a particular organization but rather with a variety of local musicians, researchers, authors, and language experts to complete our project. We were supported a lot by local artists and experts particularly Noman Asmet, Saad Ata Barcha, Azeem Hunzai, and Naveed Tanha. These local relationships assisted us tremendously in searching for manuscripts as well as translating and transliterating them. Similarly, local enthusiasts also offered spaces to record bazms and interviews with musicians and poets. We also collaborated with web-developers who assisted us in setting up the platform for the online digital library.

What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

Originally our primary focus was solely on music and literature in Burushaski speaking communities throughout Gilgit-Baltistan. We were planning to focus on the Yasin region as well, however, due to floods and landslides we were unable to conduct research to other parts of the province.

Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

No.

Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.

Yes. I believe that we have merely scratched the surface. We created the platform and have enabled the public to populate it. Overtime, we envision it to be the primary hub and source of burushaski literature.

Moving forward, young artists have already been inspired by our *bamzs* and website, and are reaching out to volunteer to help us in the future projects. The long-term goal of this project is to inspire the young generation to connect with their culture and roots and have a platform to promote Burushaski literature.

How do you define peace?

Violence and oppression exists in several forms. One of the most dangerous of these is erasure of culture and identity. Therefore for me, peace is the celebration of our different cultures and unique perspectives. In a world where the loudest voice often overshadows all others, it becomes absolutely crucial that smaller voices are represented too. With our project, our goal was to work towards peace by creating resources to understand underrepresented cultures, communities, and languages.

In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?

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 our culture and work towards creating a peaceful future.

In the short-term we plan that more people will be exposed to burushaski literature and start engaging with it. In the long term, we want a new generation to be inspired by their native language. We also plan to work with the education ministry to design a study course and officially make burushaski a part of the local schools curriculum.

What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies?

The biggest takeaway for me was that there are hundreds of people ready to help you in creating peace, all it needs is one person to initiate a project. For my particular project, many people were keen to assist us in creating the online library. What was missing was one person setting up the framework so everyone could come together and contribute.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

Working on my project has taught me that in a country that wrestles with identity-crises and violence based on the lack of understanding, local efforts become crucial. Unless action is taken from within these communities, no positive impact will be created. Working in my hometown has given me a tremendous insight into how positive change can be created in the community, and has inspired me to return to my hometown to work on similar projects.

Personal Statement

“Working on creating a literature hub in my community did not only fulfill my desire to gain first-hand experience but also exposed me to activities that my traditional classroom in college never could. Thank you so much for your support and commitment to enable students like me to serve their communities globally and have meaningful and rewarding experiences.” - Noshir Ali Khan