

A Peace Museum on the Wagah Border

By

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The Peace Museum on the Wagah Border

Syed Sikander Mehdi

War museums, in both developed and developing societies, glorify past heroic war deeds and promote jingoism and militarism. In contrast, peace museums are only very few in the world and even these were created in the 1980s. In fact, until recently, museums focusing on issues related to building peace were a few even in the West (The US got its first peace museum in Chicago in 1981).

Furthermore, even though the movement for establishing peace museums has gained considerable momentum in recent years and a number of such museums have already been built in the developed countries, information about peace museums is not readily available. But clearly the highly unstable, fragmented, conflictual and violent societies of the East need peace and peace museums no less, if not more, and perhaps a region which needs both peace and peace museums the most is South Asia—still a highly militarized, nuclearised and conflict-torn region.

The concept of peace museum is of recent origin, coming into mainstream consciousness during the last 25 years. The first known proposal for establishing the peace museum was made a little over 200 years ago by an eminent physician of Philadelphia, Dr. Benjamin Rush. In 1798, he proposed the appointment of a U.S Secretary of Peace as well as the organization of exhibits to assist him in his work for advancing the abolition of war. Rush called for placing exhibits at the lobby of the war office to depict the horrible and unsepeakable evils of war (Dungen, Peter van den 1999: 692). It is generally agreed that the first peace museum was established way back in 1902 when the Polish-Russian entrepreneur, Jean de Bloch, founded the international museum of war and peace in Lucerne, Switzerland. However, the idea really gained popular attention when peace museums were established in Japan to highlight the effect of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings and, finally, when the United Nations published a comprehensive guidebook book, *Peace Museums Worldwide* in 1995.

The concept of peace museums is still fairly unknown in contemporary South Asian societies. Peace movements originating from the region or studies on peace in this region have failed to focus on the feasibility, role and potentials of peace museums. Some in South Asia may argue that the idea for the establishment of a peace museum on India-Pakistan border is a little premature. The idea of a peace museum at Wagah border may also be brushed aside as naïve and it may be argued that such a museum on a poisoned, heavily garrisoned, and violence-spitting border is unrealizable—for a long time to come. But is it really so? Don't the South Asian societies need peace and peace museum? Don't they know what damage a war can do?.

War is not something unknown to the people of India and Pakistan. They have experienced the wars of 1948, 1965, and 1971 fought between these two former British colonies. They are also the victims of protracting conflicts over the Siachen Glacier and Kashmir and are hostage to their nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, indoctrinated for years by the academic and research institutions teaching hate and violence, by a mass media promoting conflict and disharmony, by politicians, military and other hawkish elements and by the militarized societies spitting violence, the common people have remained hostage to war slogans for a long time.

In India and Pakistan, the concept of a peace museum is alien to the masses. Some may, of course, argue that peace museums have existed, in one form or the other, in all the societies and in all eras of human interaction. What else are temples, mosques, churches, gurdwaras and the worship houses of other religions if not peace museums? In the Indo-Pakistan context, it may also be asserted that the Ashrams, Gandhi Foundations, Shanti Nikitens, religious seminaries, public charity houses, folklore, eternal songs of love and harmony and narratives of peace preserved in the memory houses of generations are nothing but moving exhibits of peace. However, a number of temples and mosques and other religious seminaries have been used in India and Pakistan for hate-preaching, conflict-fuelling and communal and sectarian killing. Likewise, there are Gandhi museums in India which are less focused on peace and nonviolence and more on promoting Hindu fundamentalism and militancy.

A peace museum, simply defined, is an anti-war museum. But since peace is more than absence of war, so a peace museum, as it is understood today, is much more than a mere anti war museum. For Ikuro Anazi, Director and Professor of Kyoto Museum of World Peace, peace museums are the 'facilities for social education functioning to dispatch values of peace to the community'. 'Peace in this definition', Anzai adds, 'is understood not only as 'absence of war' in its narrow sense of the word but also as 'absence of structural violence' in its wider sense, including those issues of starvation, poverty, social discrimination, environmental destruction, poor quality of education and hygiene that are the fundamental social factors preventing full-scale development of human ability.'

Hence there is an element of inclusiveness in the peace museum concept and peace museums are now increasingly perceived as a phenomenon encompassing a range of diverse museums and institutions. There are museums that promote the anti-war drive and document the tragedies of war. In addition to these are the ones that focus on peace education through visual arts and then there are the issue-based museums formed in response to specific events like the museum of holocaust and interpretative centers at the many former concentration camps or those dealing with nuclear bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki or genocide. Then there are those focusing on the humanitarian nature of individuals or group of individuals or on nonviolence or human rights.

Irrespective of how it is named, a museum which concentrates on peace issues has the potential to serve as a museum of peace. The primary objective of establishing such a museum is to promote the idea of co-existence and togetherness,

harmony and tolerance, happiness and creativity.

While every region of the world needs peace museums, South Asia needs it most. Almost seven years ago, in 1997, Dr. Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, Islamabad, published its first annual report on human development in South Asia and made certain startling revelations. Some of these, in brief, are as under:-

While South Asia contains one-fifth of humanity, and the annual increase in its population exceeds the total population of fifty smaller UN member states, it is the poorest region in the world. Nearly 40 per cent of the world's poor live in this region. With 46 per cent of the world's total illiterate population, South Asia is the most illiterate region of the world.

This is the most malnourished region. According to a UNICEF report, half the children in South Asia are underweight compared to 30 per cent in Sub-Sahara Africa, though it has much higher GNP growth rate.

South Asia has the highest human deprivation. About 260 million people lack access to even elementary health facilities; 337 million lack safe drinking water; 830 million have no access to basic sanitation facilities; and over 400 million go hungry every day. South Asia is the most militarized region. Two of the largest armies in the world are in this region and the region spends twice as much each year on the purchase of high-tech arms as does Saudi Arabia. Again, it is the only region in the world where military spending (as a proportion of GNP) has gone up since 1987: it has declined substantially in other parts of the world after the end of the cold war.

Things, for the common people of India and Pakistan, do not seem to have changed for the better since these observations were made years ago. They have, in fact, become worse and India and Pakistan, the two dominant member states of the region, have continued to play havoc with the people and peace. The subsequent annual reports of the Mahbubul Haq Centre for Human Development, reports of different UN agencies including UNDP and UNICEF, World Bank, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch clearly indicate that political, ethnic, communal and sectarian violence remain rampant in India and Pakistan and both the countries remain hostage to war thinking and war preparation.

Worse still, both India and Pakistan have gone nuclear. While India had exploded a nuclear device way back in 1974, it did not acknowledge that its programme was for military purposes. But when New Delhi exploded a series of atomic devices during early May 1998, it made it clear that its programme was to acquire the status of a nuclear-weapon state. Pakistan also exploded a number of nuclear devices at Chaghi in the province of Baluchistan in the same month of 1998 and called for its recognition as a nuclear-weapon state. These nuclear tests were welcomed with great fan fare in different parts of the two states and the mass media, under the patronage and directives of the governments in New Delhi and Islamabad whipped up mass hysteria in a favour of these deadly weapons.

With the testing of the bomb by the two countries, jingoism, militarism and nuclearisation soared up in India and Pakistan. Bombs in hands, they went for a bloody war at Kargil in 1999 and then massively deployed their armies on the borders

soon after the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament in December 2001. The standoff continued for more than a year and peace remained precariously dependent on chance alone.

There has been remarkable improvement in Indo-Pakistan relations since the former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpaee extended a hand of friendship to Pakistan during a public address in Indian-administered Kashmir on 18 April 2003 and especially since the 12th SAARC summit held at Islamabad in January 2004. It seems as if the unthinkable has begun. Infiltration in Kashmir has diminished and this has been publicly acknowledged by the Indian officials. War hysteria is no more being whipped up in both the countries and war mongering has almost stopped. High level government officials are frequently meeting and addressing a wide range of issues adversely affecting bilateral ties. Delegations of writers, politicians, judges and lawyers, film makers and film artists, businessmen, women and children, cricketers and cricket watchers, students, teachers, journalists, retired military officials and bureaucrats and peace activists are frequently crossing the Wagah border (Lahore) and boldly expressing their views in favor of friendship, harmony and confidence-building between the two countries.

In this fact changing scenario, the absurdity of religiously clinging to a policy of non-cooperation toward one another becomes all the more glaring when the Siachen conflict is discussed in its proper perspective. Since 13 April 1984, Indian and Pakistani troops have confronted each other, eye ball to eye ball, for the control of the 76 kilometer long glacier. This is the longest-running armed conflict between two regular armies. Fighting at an altitude of over 22,000 feet in the minus 60 C temperatures, both India and Pakistan bear enormous costs for their unwillingness to take the peace route.

Tragically enough, there is little realization of the madness and both the countries have continued to waste their human, material and financial resources on a senseless conflict without any regret. "This", observes Stephen Cohen, a leading South Asian expert at Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., "is like a struggle of two bald men over a comb". He adds: "Siachen is (the epitome of the worst aspects of the relationship. These are two countries that are paired on a road to Oslo or Hiroshima, and at this point they can go either way".

Indeed, so comprehensively militarized are the Indian and Pakistani societies that their citizens—over a billion people—have little realization that much of their deprivation, marginalization and powerlessness is because of the prevalence of militarism and nuclearisation in their countries. In such societies, the need for peace, human rights and disarmament education, and the need for anti nuclear, anti-war and anti-militarism movement for political and social change cannot be ignored.

The peace museums in the territories now comprising India and Pakistan may also project the great nonviolent struggles waged by the people of the two states for peace, democracy and human rights in both the countries. Any serious study of nonviolent political action for the millennia cannot afford to ignore the great

achievements of ancient or modern India for the cause of peace. An example would be King Ashoka (c.273-236 B.C.), the peace King of the Maurya Empire.

More than 2500 years ago—many years before the advent of Ashoka as the peace King of India—Gautama, son of king Shuddhadana of Kapilvastu, left his palace and all earthly belongings and traveled all over the land, teaching opposition to the oppressive and suppressive order based on discrimination, injustice and violence. He developed the concept of Ahimsa (non violence) and Karma and founded the religion of Buddhism. He was a great apostle of peace from South Asia.

The peace museums of India and Pakistan can display the achievements, sayings and contributions of Buddha and Ashoka and many other leaders of other religions, cultures and political thoughts. They can also have works displaying the lives of hundreds of campaigners who fought against British colonial rule in undivided India and for the rights of the people.

When the colonialists departed and India and Pakistan emerged as independent, sovereign states, new goals, tasks and challenges engaged the visionaries, artists, scholars, social reformers and peace activists. This was in response to the nature of the evolving peace process. Prominent peace educator and scholar from Columbia University, USA, Betty Reardon, observes; “The ways in which peace is achieved and maintained change with time and circumstance. Peace is not a fixed goal. It is the challengeable, positive social and political circumstances in which goals can be pursued and differences resolved without harm to others or the environment”. ‘It has been said’, she adds, ‘that ‘peace is a process, a way of solving problems’, and that ‘there is no way to peace. Peace is the way’.

After August 1947, both Indian and Pakistani societies experienced tremendous change and the states became more powerful and more oppressive and repressive. The continued confrontation between the two—three wars in twenty five years (1948, 1965, and 1971), bloody battles on the roof tops of Siachen (1984) and at Kargil (1999), escalation of defense budgets, phenomenal increase in the number of the forces of the two states, unsatiable lust for weapons, acquisition of nuclear weapons, considerable increase in the power and number of hawks and fundamentalists in the corridors of power in both the countries and the temptation to checkmate each other, settle scores and embarrass each other in international fora have all contributed to the rise of a warrior culture and violence in the sub-continent.

However, there is also the subsequent rise and expansion of the constituencies of peace in both India and Pakistan. An ever increasing number of individuals, NGOs, politicians and professional groups in the two countries challenge the national security state, call for people to people contact and for peaceful resolution of all disputes. They also demand for global and regional nuclear disarmament and for the empowerment of the marginalized sections of the societies—women, children and minorities. Demands for a visa-free regime in South Asia and Lifting of all restrictions on travel within the region and on trade relations have also been raised. The emerging

constituencies of peace and human rights in both the countries include former ministers, retired military officials, retired bureaucrats, businessmen, judges, parliamentarians, teachers, scholars, media people, writers, artists and lawyers. As a result of their concerted efforts, the war hysteria has been subdued. Instead, there is peace euphoria everywhere. In the given situation, the establishment of a peace museum at Wagah may perhaps be the best way to commemorate the arrival of peace at Indo-Pakistan borders.

India and Pakistan share long, hostile and porous borders. The total length of the border is 3310 kilometers. Three states of India, namely Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujrat and the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir lie on the borders. The Rajasthan border is 1035 kilometers, Gujrat border 512 kms and Kashmir border 1216 kms (of which 8 kms are riverine), while the Line of Actual Control running through this state is 790 kms long. The border between Pakistani and Indian Punjab is 547 kms (of which 152 kms are riverine border).

Situated between Amristsar in Indian Punjab and Lahore in Pakistani Punjab, Wagah is an army outpost on the border. It has an elaborate complex of buildings, roads and barriers. It is, moreover, the only border crossing between India and Pakistan which is operational and “is as fabled as checkpoint Charlie was in Berlin and the Panmunjom armistice between North and South Korea”.

Wagah is the ultimate border where hate and hostility is enacted every day in the morning and evening when the Pakistani and Indian flags are raised and lowered near the white line painted across the road boundary. Dating back to August 1947 when India and Pakistan gained independence, this daily ritual is an amazing spectacle of stubbornness, aggression and unreason. Popularly known as “Beating the Retreat Ceremony”, the evening ritual commences a little before the sunset everyday, seven days a week and twelve months a year. This ceremony has been described in great detail by many visitors. Reproduced below is the observation of Claudia Kolker, a visitor who observed the ceremony. It gives an elaborate depiction of the daily ritual:

“it starts like this: The hazy afternoon turns saffron, and patriotic songs sweep from the checkpoint’s speakers over nearby wheat fields. High school boys throng at the checkpoint, calling to their friends like flocking birds. Suddenly, waved in by turbaned soldiers, young women clutching husband’s arms and men clasping bemused toddlers dash toward their seats. By 4:45 p.m., 3000 Indians have massed atop the whitewashed stands, Across the gate, in Wagah, Pakistan, perhaps 300 Pakistani settle into their own stands. Though the area falls equidistance between Lahore, Pakistan, and Amristar, India, Amristar is a tourist attraction and train transfer stop, drawing more spectators, resident say.

Below them all the road unspools, elevated at the so-called Zero Line by gates with crescents, stars and metal flowers. Between them, on a path, the flags of the two nuclear-armed powers face each other down.

A hush spills over the spectators. Then inside Pakistan, a guard emits a yell. He looks in many ways identical to his rivals. Pakistani guards wear black uniforms; Indians, olive. But all, broad shoulders and mustached, stand 6 feet 5 inches or taller, and

stride about in sashes, cravats, and cockades like rooster combs. The yell from Pakistan electrifies both sides. Spectors let out joyous cheers. In India, five guards march toward the gate. Long legs fold like pocketknives until their knees touch noses. Outsized arms swing in huge parabolas. Then, in crips precision, all the soldiers brake.

One each side of the national gates, one solider lunges forward, asking his commandant's leave to approach the flag. By now both crowds are on their feet. "Bharat mata!" Boys and men, grandmothers and toddlers howl. In front, a sweating youth in an oxford-cloth shirt shakes as he leads the cheers. "Victory for India!" he barks. The smaller Pakistani crowd pounds a dent into the noise. "Pakistan! Allah Akbar!" One by one, the soldiers swagger toward their flags.

Both armies pick their guards from tribes known for apollonian male beauty. But to a Westerner, the titans' movements seem incongruous. It looks like parody when one flings a gate ajar and stomps inside, shimmying each massive shoulder. When his colleagues follow, legs catapulting vertically, it is a feat that to some visitors conjures the Kilgore Rangerettes.

But even to outsiders, the guard's discipline is evident. When the Indians join the Pakistanis in the space between the gates, that discipline grows stunning. As loudspeakers bid the witnesses to stand, the rivals align beneath their flags.

They space the last phase of the ritual together. First, they snap into two facing lines. In each, three Indians brush shoulders with three Pakistanis. Iron-faced, a solider from each army, grasps the rope of his own flag. Crossed, the cords become a mighty X. Inch by inch, the flags furl down. The timing is precise; after all, anyone, who hurries would unforgivably disort the X. In silent unision, the flags fall into waiting hands. With mirror motion, the flags are folded into squares. Then, sharply, like migrating geese, the guards abruptly wheel, split off, and file back to their territories. The last ones slam the gates behind them. "Hin-du-stan!" India's crowd bellows. The ceremony is done. As the crowds scream from the bleachers, the few foreign tourists in their midst sit stunned. What does it mean? How can nations hissing war perform this daily pas de deux?"

Kolker had witnessed the ritual when tensions were running high and both the countries were almost ready for another war. However, even during peaceful times the ritual is repeated every day with the same zeal, spirit and jingoism. Indeed, the daily display of warriorism at Wagah has always been a serious business. The message sent by Wagah's martial peacocks is very clear: Wagah is a symbolic battlefield where the ritual authentically communicates each army's power to its rival. It also conveys the message that so far India-Pakistan relations is concerned, the military of the two states would have the final word. In addition, the ritual exercises a hypnotic effect specially upon the Indian and Pakistani visitors, spectators. It reinforces militarism and jingoism in them and induces them to accept the hate-building, violence-fuelling and militarism-promoting role of Wagah without raising any question.

However, nations cannot progress in an environment of hate and jingoism. The states cannot acquire strength and power by raising war slogans and by acquiring lethal weapons only and societies cannot flourish where a culture of violence is

allowed to flourish. For a long time, they have suffered the consequences of wars, conflict and war preparation. In this scenario, a peace museum at Wagah should be established to rekindle their hopes in a peaceful future.

Wagah, one may add, is also a witness to the bloody violence which took place on the eve of the subcontinent's partition in August 1947. Indeed, among the four famous 20th Century partions—Ireland, India, Palestine and Cyprus, all of which were accompanied by wholesale violence and large-scale population displacements—the partition of India caused the greatest migration in human memory. Never before or since have had so many people exchanged their homes and countries so fast? In a span of a few months in 1947, more than 12 million people moved between India and Pakistan.

By far the largest proportion of these displaced people—more than ten million—crossed the western border, dividing the province of Punjab. Here, Muslims traveled west to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs east to India. On the roads, in the paddy fields and on the railway tracks awaited violence, rape and death for these migrant Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. In only three months between August and October 1947, the entire Punjab was seized by a communal civil war involving some of the largest ethnic cleansing campaigns in history. Estimates of death caused by slaughter, malnutrition and contagious diseases vary between the British estimate of 200,000 and the Indian estimate of 2 million.

On both sides of the Punjab, houses, shops, office, schools, and the paddy fields were attacked and torched. Men, women and children were abducted, raped, gang-raped and often killed. Many buses and trains carrying families from either direction were attacked by the frenzied and violent crowds and the caravans of the refugees crossing the Punjab border on foot and bull carts were frequently subjected to all sorts of acts of violence.

Being a witness to partition violence, Wagah is clearly an appropriate place where a peace museum may be built up. It can depict the brutalities of mob violence, and record and portray one of the most ignored aspects of partition history: the life saving role of the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. One may stress here that while the members of all these three religious communities were involved in partition orgies and human killings, there were those brave and noble men and women belonging to all these three communities who did not lose their humanity before, during and after the partition carnage and helped save the lives, property and honour of persons belonging to rival religious community. Then there were the artists, writers, poets, peace activists, social reformers and relief workers who worked for the victims in both the countries and who condemned violence and risked life for promoting communal harmony, brotherhood and peace during those weeks, months and years when partition hatred had poisoned all perspectives and ties. The memory house of the proposed peace museum at Wagah may preserve the memories of their noble acts to inspire the succeeding generations living in innocence and ignorance on both sides of the border.

The galleries of the peace museum at Wagah can display portraits of the various rulers, social and religious reformers, poets, yogis and jogis, leaders of

nonviolence and peace activists from India and Pakistan. In addition, the museum may introduce those who have worked relentlessly for democracy, freedom, justice, equality, tolerance and peace in these post-colonial societies. Finally, the peace museum can catalogue and preserve the record of the great movements for peace and understanding between India and Pakistan, for communal and sectarian harmony and for the human rights of the most marginalized in both the states.

Indeed, Wagah is the place where such a museum should be built, because this is the place where peace is being actively pursued. A lot of cultural activities have been taking place for over a decade at Wagah and elsewhere to bring the two countries closer, to diminish militarism and to promote peace and harmony. Wagah, although a military outpost today, is evolving into a peace signpost, a junction where all the peace trains coming from different directions may converge one day.

For the past several years, the peace activists, anti-nuclear groups, prodemocracy groups, human rights activists and women groups from India and Pakistan have been converging at Wagah on the night of August 14-15 and on the night of 31 December-1 January. Holding lit candles and colorful banners, they greet each other from both sides of Wagah and recite poems for peace and friendship between the two states. Again, it is from the city of Lahore that a train travels to New Delhi via Amritsar. The train has been named Friendship Train. Likewise, a bus service via Wagah between Lahore and New Delhi was introduced soon after former Prime Minister Vajpaae's visit to Lahore in February 1999.

Both the bus and train services were suspended after the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament in December 2001 and large-scale Indian and Pakistani troops were mobilized on the long borders. However, peace seems to finally be around the corner, with a newly fuelled initiative taken by both governments to promote peace and cooperation between the two countries. And this is the time when a peace museum at Wagah can be created.

Perhaps the governments of both the countries would be reluctant to take on this project, but a peace museum cannot be built at Wagah without their support. However, this should not pre-empt the launching of the movement. A peace museum at Wagah was almost unthinkable a couple of years ago, but it is clearly not so now. After all, various unthinkable such as: the formation of a South Asian Free Trade Area, adoption of a common regional currency for South Asia, establishment of a visa-free region, introduction of bus service between Srinagar in Indian-administered Kashmir and Muzaffarabad in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, another bus service between Lahore and Amritsar, ferry service between Karachi and Mumbai, promotion of trade between the two countries and enhancement of collaboration in different fields have also been talked about. Although not all are in place yet, they have entered the "possible" zone.

Perhaps lessons from history may be instructive. One should appreciate that times change, and so do the scenarios and the futures. How many, for instance, could expect even after the end of World War II that Germany and France would one day be

able to be cooperate this closely? Likewise, not many could visualize only a few decades ago that a day would come when the Caen Memorial Museum (established in 1988) and the World Center for Peace , Freedom and Human Rights at Verdun (1993) would be constructed on the 20th Century battlefields. Again, how many could think that a Lindau Peace Museum documenting the tragedies of war could be built-up in 1980 at the meeting point of three countries: Austria, Germany and Switzerland?

Hence, what has turned out to be possible for other countries cannot be brushed aside as impossible for India and Pakistan. However, a series of concerted and sustained efforts would be required to make the proposal for a peace museum at Wagah realizable. To begin with , a comprehensive study on different aspects of the proposal is an absolute necessity. Further, interaction between and among the peace scholars and activists need to be enhanced at international, regional and national level to exchange ideas and critically examine the feasibility of the proposal. As a matter of fact, sustained campaigns in support of peace museums in different parts of India and Pakistan would also be required. And finally, consciousness-raising through lectures, seminars, media campaigns, music, plays and paintings highlighting the peace-promoting role of peace museums in the two states are required. Once the movement gets going in India and Pakistan, a peace museum at Wagah would become possible and achievable.

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