

Arts across borders: a series of conversations *Since Aman Ki Asha started on Jan 1, 2010, I've been having conversations with friends on either side of the Pakistan-India border. This is the first of a series related to cross cultural exchange in the subcontinent.*

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By Zarminae Ansari

Shaad Ali: The talented young director of popular Bollywood films like Saathiya (2002), Bunty Aur Babli (2005) and Jhoom Barabar Jhoom (2007) is the son of director/ producer Muzaffar Ali, whose film Umrao Jaan with Rekha informed an entire generation's aesthetic. The movie's songs still resonate, and the atrocious pronunciation of Urdu by Urdu poetess and courtesan Umrao played by Ashwariya Rai in a recent remake was the topic of much indignant water cooler and drawing room talk: people spoke about the older version as if they owned it. The love for all things Bollywood is undeniable, and this odd sense of proprietorship that classic movies invoke, is a true measure of the transcendence of the arts across borders.

I asked Shaad about his personal experience with the cross-border exchange. "My dai lives in Karachi and we've been in touch and very normal about it ever since I can remember. I love Wasim Akram and Imran Khan. I love "Bakra Kishton Pe", and just saw Part 3 last night! In fact, I wanted to cast Umer Sharif in Jhoom Barabar Jhoom. I met him, finalised him but it didn't happen because he backed out for some reason.

I asked whether, in future, he would consider using Pakistani singers like Karan Johar has done with Shafqat Amanat Ali and Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, or whether he worries that it might cause more controversy that may affect projects negatively.

"The only music I heard from 1994 through 1996 was Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. I have no issues or problem at all, yaar -- I'm a global child and the world is my home. I'd like anyone and everyone to work together. I think any kind of exchange is always good, anything but violence..."

Shafqat Amanat Ali: His hits include critically acclaimed successes such as "Yeh Hosla" from the film Dor; Karan Johar's film Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna and My Name is Khan both had musical hits sung by Shafqat, "Mitwa" and "Tere Naina" respectively.

I asked him what he thought of the controversy in Bollywood over using Pakistani singers and musicians such as himself, Atif Aslam, Rahat Fateh Ali, Strings and so on.

He says this is a controversy created by a minority of singers and musicians in Bollywood, who have a right to their own opinion. But mostly there are those who want peace -- and a larger talent pool to choose the right voice for the right song.

"It makes sense to bring people together in friendship and toward greater cooperation. Those who are against friendship are the supporters of terrorist acts in either country," he said. "People who want peace, such as Karan Johar, went against the critics and used

voices from Pakistan, a very big step!"

Getting an icon like Amitabh Bachchan on board the Aman Ki Asha initiative will definitely make a big difference. "We all hope this will continue. I don't know what change will happen due to Aman Ki Asha, but we all have to take that small step toward friendship and at least be able to say that this is MY contribution. We made a UNDP documentary called "Moving Closer". The Fuzon video of the song Deewane with the Bollywood star Urmila Matondkar was based on this. This was our contribution. We can say we stepped up, made the effort and whether or not it makes a difference- we took a step... a step toward moving closer".

R.M. Naeem: R.M. Naeem, originally from Sind, who made Lahore his home after studying at the National College of Arts, Lahore. He runs an artist residency program called Studio RM Residency. He strongly believes that artists can now create a new, positive image of Pakistan. In his last residency program, they had artists from the region including Sri Lanka, but were unable to get the Indian artists across after the Mumbai attacks.

"The residency program is an effort to create a dialogue through visual arts, send a message to the world that if these five artists can paint, live, talk about different issues under one roof, then why not extend this experience to the rest of the country? We want to spread the message of peace. I had so many things in the pipeline with Indian galleries before the Mumbai attacks. If you have stable economic and political conditions then you can plan and act accordingly and have better chance to grow. We need visionaries to guide our nation. I want to give an ad in every magazine and paper for such a visionary," he laughs ruefully.

Rashid Rana is such an acclaimed, and award-winning international artist that it seems unfair to refer to him as belonging to one place. However, he is mostly based in Lahore. One of Pakistan's leading young contemporary artists, he uses digital prints that satirise pop-culture. He has participated in leading international art exhibitions and his work has been collected by major museums and galleries around the world. He often uses tiny pixelated images from aspects of Pakistani pop-culture -- such as the obsession with Bollywood, patriotism, identity and extremism to create larger images and an even larger socio-political comment.

One of his widely acclaimed digital prints about the Pakistan Day Parade, "All Eyes Skywards" shows the deep contradictions in mainstream Pakistani society which is as passionate about patriotism as about Bollywood. The larger image is created with pixels of smaller images, which on close examination are actually images of Bollywood films and actors creating the image of spectators at the parade with their eyes raised to the sky.

Rana, or RR as he popularly known as, says that he is actually better known across the border than in Pakistan. In fact, he is rated as one of the top ten contemporary artists to sell in India. He credits this to a small incident in 2003 when visas were relaxed between the two countries and he decided on a whim to go to India for the weekend. There, he met

curator Pooja Sood. On a later trip with his students, he met her again and was invited for a solo show. The rest, he says, is history.

"When people are not allowed to meet freely that's when we make incorrect statements about each other. When allowed to meet freely we make relationships. Give me a restriction free visa regime between the two countries and I guarantee you peace between the two nations. There is no other way."

-- The writer is an Islamabad-based architect who first formed friendships with Indians as a teenager while studying at the United World College in Canada