

Let us hand over the microphone  
So it is the young voice amplified  
For it is their feet  
That will lead the charge for change

# GIVE YOUTH A VOICE

## 5 South Asian Countries

India | Pakistan | Bangladesh | Nepal | Sri Lanka

## 5 Projects | 8 Organizations



## 3 Core Concerns

COUNTER RADICALIZATION

CHALLENGE IMPUNITY FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE

PROMOTE CIVIC INCLUSION

Nearly half of South Asia's population of 1.8 billion, led by India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, is under the age of 24, making it the largest youth force in the world until 2040. This is cause for hope. And reason to work hard at keeping young women and men in our line of sight at all times. Prevent them from succumbing to the worst in our societies. Imbue them with purpose as leaders towards the better tomorrow, taking on the grave challenges to peace and equality that we confront.

To this end, the IDRC Governance and Justice programme supported positive, evidence-based, action-oriented initiatives on political engagement, socio-economic inclusion and violence reduction in South Asia. In each initiative, young women and men have been the actors of change, and played a critical role in strengthening their communities and societies

These projects in South Asia have grappled with real-time political change and economic challenges. Even before COVID-19 hit, many countries in South Asia were facing recession. As in many other parts of the world, they also grapple with varying degrees of sectarian strife and social unrest.

This has directly affected lives of young women and men, placing new and difficult choices before them. Violence has increased. Radicalization and criminality parade their wares in front of vulnerable youth, like sham choices. The Yugantar project found a way to give young people in Hyderabad an alternative, a real choice, pulling them out from a spiral of criminality toward productive lives

and constructive citizenship. We found young women and men, in the CYAAD project, using the power of art to forge inclusive identities as their response to extremism in Balochistan. Poetry and literature was both their shield and their voice. They harnessed the courage to emerge as youth leaders; able to seek better for their torn communities and their world. The CEPA project responded to rising youth radicalization in Sri Lanka through youth-led research and regional dialogues. They put young women and men in charge of co-creating knowledge. Young people asked their own questions, researched structural inequalities that fuel radicalization and emerged with their own answers.

Impunity for sexual violence exists across South Asia, cutting at the core of all freedoms we hold dear. The freedom to be, the freedom of speech, mobility, employment and education. The freedom to own your own body. In the Zubaan and Panos project, we found that theatre as an art form, allowed the traumatic experiences of women to unpack the idea of impunity. Theatre pieces raised questions about structural barriers to justice, and triggered complex conversations around sexual violence; helping young people challenge prejudice and patriarchy, to begin the walk to justice.

Young women and men from minority communities face specific vulnerabilities across the world. Placing them at the centre of the solution, as changemakers is how Misaal and Bandhu responded.

Minority youth worked as catalysts in their own communities. They helped people get equal access to services, entitlements and opportunities at the local level, and worked to ensure their rights through national advocacy.

Across projects, communication and the construction of narratives emerged as new sites of contestation - between what is, what can be and what must never come to pass. Young people, especially those from marginalized groups and communities, want to speak but are often fearful. The social media environment is increasingly polarized and can be threatening. Facebook posts and tweets attract trolling. Real life experience of discrimination morphs into cyber-bullying in the virtual world. This has implications for how young people express themselves. And sets for everyone in the development world a renewed agenda for the freedom to think and speak.

If there is one lesson from the body of work in these projects, it is this - neither inequality, bigotry nor violence are beyond solutions. These young women and men are testament. Economically and socially marginalized, from small towns and ghettos, kept outside mainstream power networks, yet undiminished in their faith - in themselves, in their ability to dream, in their right to a better world, and the right to full citizenship in it. Our work remains to amplify the rising voices. Handover the microphones of the mainstream. And ensure that these young people, women and men, have a say in our collective futures.

### Youth-led Research

#### Context

Young people in Sri Lanka inherited the legacy of the three-decade long civil war. It tore the island apart between 1983 and 2009, and a decade later fault-lines have not healed. The post-war years have seen rising inequalities between Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim youth, fuelling a politics of resentment that builds on existing prejudices. Extremists seek young people of all communities – those in precarious situations, and those from dominant communities. Most youth groups are organized along the precise ethno-religious lines that radical influencers want to deepen. Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim youth groups seem unable to reach across barriers of identity to speak for peace in a single voice.

#### Intervention

- Youth-led Research – Co-creating knowledge about youth with youth, to impact policy; understanding radicalisation through direct engagement with youth communities.
- Youth Networks - Creating a data-base of youth groups and holding regional dialogues with them on alienation and peace-building; leading to national forums for young men and women to dialogue with each other, and for policy makers to listen to their concerns.
- Social media engagement - Studying social media trends in Sinhalese and Tamil languages; engaging with key influencers for positive messaging.

**Fellowship call for young scholars to do research, mentored by senior researchers and academics**

**10 research studies – 4 young external researchers, 4 junior CEPA researchers, and 2 mid-career academics or researchers**

**Mapping - a database of active youth groups, regional and national**

**4 regional forums – with key regional collaborators in Southern, North Central, Northern and Eastern provinces, discussing structural vulnerabilities faced by youth of different communities**

#### Looking Ahead

The Easter Sunday attacks in April 2019 shifted the political mood in Sri Lanka and hijacked the conversation around radicalization. It became difficult for researchers to revisit communities for more information or discussion on this theme. There has been a rise in radicalized Sinhala and Muslim youth groups, with mainstream media supporting Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism. Regional youth dialogues were put on hold. In this fairly fraught environment, it was hard to have open conversations or seek the truth about what young people feel. The project shifted some gears:

- New comparative research will look at emerging concerns of Sinhala and Muslim youth, post the Easter Sunday bombings.

- Short videos will be created and disseminated through social media, to counter hate-based radicalization.
- On-going research papers will be consolidated, with a theoretical framework and policy recommendations.
- Regional youth dialogue in Jaffna, in the Tamil-dominated northern province that was put on hold will, be completed, with follow-up dialogues in all 4 provinces.
- Short course/workshop on radicalization with academics, journalists and participants from the regional youth dialogues is proposed.



#### Glimpses: Young researchers at work...

**Youth issues in a low-income urban settlement with field work in wattas (shanty settlements) in Colombo.**

**Concerns of minority Christian Tamil youth - barriers to education, unemployment, lack of recreational spaces, biased police conduct, and consequent drug abuse, domestic and ethnic violence. The draft paper begins with this framing:**

**Depraved conditions leave them feeling as though they are without use or purpose, unable to control their situations and surroundings. This leads them to engage in violence as a means of self-assertion and as a method of escaping from an identity and role that they perceive to be superfluous (Alsop, 2005)**

**Youth radicalization and social changes in Nallinakkapuram in Jaffna in the North.**

**110 families from three refugee camps were resettled in Nallinakkapuram. Two-thirds of this area was under government control from 1990 during the civil war. Young people were born in refugee camps. Their socio-psychological needs are enormous with insufficient parental supervision, peer pressure, drug usage and the trauma of being a permanent refugee. Any national youth policy will have to address these specific needs.**



## CHALLENGE IMPUNITY FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE

ZUBAAN INDIA PANOS NEPAL

# Theatre as Dialogue

### Context

Young people across South Asia are struggling with the reality of sexual violence. And the impunity which surrounds it. In media and public discourse, sexual violence is discussed like an emergency. Yet solutions seem distant. There needs to be a radical rethink, a rupture in methods of communication and imagination.

Placing young men and women in the vanguard of the struggle, this project does something counter-intuitive. In an age of mass media and social media, Zubaan and Panos go back to the arts, and specifically theatre, as their experiment in rupture. They use the body of existing research, and convert it into art. And they retrieve the power of the face-to-face dialogue.



**15** scripts/performance pieces and slam poetry created in interactive workshops with students, theatre groups, activists from Kathmandu (Nepal), Bangalore and northeastern states of India

**16** youth groups from India and Nepal involved

**2** documentary-theatrical pieces created

**2** performance pieces created and performed by known theatre artists

**48** private and public performances (33 in India and 15 in Nepal)

**2** day regional showcase in Delhi (15 pieces shown)

### Intervention

- The pieces raise questions about sites of violence; about structural barriers to justice; about caste, community and patriarchy. They interrogate legal protocols; unpeel layers of bias and bigotry in medical practice and forensic protocols that underpin impunity. They open up spaces for personal, complex conversations around sexual violence. They try to help young people unlearn prejudice and patriarchy – both social and institutional.

- The Alphabet Project [[click for video](#)] A typographical art production using letters of the alphabet to trigger discussions on sexual violence and impunity, was released in December 2019. This is the project's flagship online product.

- The immense linguistic diversity of India and South Asia posed a creative challenge. India alone has 22 official languages; and more than 19,500

languages or dialects spoken as the mother tongue. How does theatre negotiate barriers of language? The theatre pieces, crafted in local contexts, emerged in local languages - Kannada, Khasi, Manipuri, Assamese, Hindi, Nepali, Tharu and English. Sometimes these were performed for audiences who did not know that language. It worked. This speaks to the power of theatrical art forms. When emotion and experience resonate, words recede.

### Looking Ahead

- Use performances to talk: Create space for dialogue after each performance.
- Develop a written guide, to help more people facilitate these difficult, often contentious, discussions.
- Push the conversation on impunity through social media products: Share inspirational, positive stories of young people's struggles against impunity for sexual violence.



### Conversations with Youth

Sexual Violence, Impunity and the 'Good Victim'

Sex workers cannot play 'victim' when they are sexually assaulted, said one person. After all, they choose 'this' job. A strange discomfort descended on the room. Suddenly a young Dalit woman shot off a volley of questions:

"How many of you married according to your choice?" No one said yes. "How many of you slept with your husbands on the wedding night?" Everyone said yes.

"How many of you did it because you wanted to? How many of us continue to sleep with our husbands even when we don't want to?" Nobody responded.

The conversation turned. It was unplanned, but we were suddenly talking marital rape – and why that doesn't seem to deserve justice. Is a married woman a 'good victim' only when assaulted by a stranger? We discussed women's 'choices' and how they are mediated through notions of shame, honour, and patriarchal entitlement to women's bodies. The justice system's responses to 'good' and 'bad' victims was debated. Caste, class, religion, occupation - justice is actively denied because of these identities. Impunity is not a single moment of denial. It is recreated every day, through collusion between family, state and the criminal justice system...

- Lucknow, March 14, 2019

## Community Changemakers

### Context

Young people from marginalized communities and minority groups in both India and Bangladesh, confront specific vulnerabilities, including social exclusion and ostracism. Under Section 377 of the Bangladesh penal code, for example, same-sex sexual activity is criminalized, making sexual minority youth unsafe. Young people from marginal communities invariably have unequal access to the fruits of national development and face exclusion. This is a global reality and true of South Asia as well.

### Intervention

- Misaal and Bandhu placed young women and men from marginalized communities as community 'changemakers' at the heart of civic engagement.
- They work on equal access to services, entitlements and opportunities at the local level, as a strategic entry point for engaging the broader community for battling exclusion. Changemakers belong to the same communities that they try to help; drawing upon their own experiences and subject location in their work.

- In India, changemakers come from socio-religious and caste minority groups, and in Bangladesh from sexual minorities. This cadre of youth leaders develops capacity in improving access to development schemes and community organizing. They are trained to use national and international best practices to work towards equal rights for all.
- These projects are as much about 'changing the changemakers', as they are about improving the lives of their communities. Without a committed cadre of young people from marginal communities finding their own voice and taking the lead, the balance of rights will not shift.
- Yet, placing an individual at the community level to catalyse change, is not easy. For, the minority youth often have to counter their experience of discrimination alone, without local support. In Bangladesh, gender diverse communities have no statutory recognition; trust and safety-security are real worries. Gathering for monthly 'courtyard meetings' is done discreetly, especially for members of the lesbian community who lead extremely secret lives.

### I Speak and I am Heard

Barnali\*, a 25-year-old undergraduate, identifies as gender-queer. She joined Bandhu as a volunteer in January 2018, but soon made it a permanent arrangement. Barnali's family has tried to get her married since grade 9. Now, at university, the pressure to marry has not eased. Some months ago, she set her hair on fire, to escape a marriage proposal. The family's expectations - she cannot meet. But here, as a changemaker, she meets them all. She can be who she is, and help others be themselves. In her work as a changemaker she has learnt to use the computer, document, write reports, speak to groups. She learnt about laws, human rights and paralegal services. *"Now I am heard," she says. "I speak. I used to suffer from fear of existence. I felt alone. I felt like an alien. But now I have found people...Now I feel like I have a part in the future – a purpose. I want to work for communities in any way I can. If it is advocacy, I will do advocacy. I know how painful it is to be alone, and what change is possible by having a shared platform."*

\* name changed to protect privacy



### Training of 18 changemakers in India and 13 in Bangladesh

#### Community mobilizers & Paralegals (India)

Monthly 'courtyard meetings' with gender diverse youth in local neighbourhoods and safe spaces, on personal experiences, community health, legal rights, and gender-sexuality (Bangladesh)

Peer-outreach system for gender diverse youth to access health and HIV services (Bangladesh)

Establishing networks of youth groups, within and across excluded communities in the poorest areas (India)

### Looking Ahead

- Continue to strengthen and support changemakers to learn from their own lives and location, to help their communities move towards inclusive citizenship.
- Use the ground experience of changemakers for promoting greater inclusion at the national level.
- Develop a course curriculum on minority rights for social workers and activists.



### The Art of Resistance

#### Context

It is not easy for young people in the volatile province of Balochistan to speak openly of their deep angst at what has happened to their society. It is harder still to choose a path to peaceful social change. Balochistan, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, is home to Baloch, Pashtun, Punjabi, and Hazara, among other communities. A region of cultural richness and beauty, but also with violence, along fault lines of ethnic, sectarian and tribal identity. Vested interest groups compete for young people's attention, including extremist groups eager to radicalize and recruit.

#### Intervention

- Safe cultural spaces - inviting young women and men to introspect, develop critical thinking, and craft a common ethos as a youth collective.
- Art and literature by youth - for creative self-expression and as a powerful uniting force. Hazara, Pashto and Baloch youth, sitting alongside Punjabi and Urdu speaking youth, composed poetry, communicating across languages.
- Counter-narratives to violence and extremism - through blogs, poetry and music. The art affirms inclusive identities and social harmony in a multi-cultural society. Local artists,

writers, intellectuals became youth mentors.

- Reclaiming the public and shaping discourse – on issues like provision of basic services, social exclusion and political representation; through creating platforms where young people perform, speak, sing, recite, from the deepest recesses of their lived realities. Art and literary forums lead by youth in Quetta, Loralai and Sibi gave youth visibility in civic spaces.

#### Looking Ahead

- Two creative labs in each district will refine the 210 pieces, which include free verse, slam poetry, and 30-35 self-made videos.
- Poets and writers, will work as mentors, one-on-one, with young people.
- Creative groups, of 6-8 participants, mentored by a senior artist/poet, will combine poetry and theatre into performance art; to trigger dialogues on youth issues - poverty, conflict and absence of opportunities.
- A series of public events will culminate in an arts festival in Quetta or Islamabad. This will invite influencers, officials, university teachers and government representatives to convince them of the power of the arts in helping young people overcome contexts of violence; and promote more sensitive youth policies.



#### Voices Carry

Politics is in her blood and in her poetry. 20-year-old Nimra Pirkani is a Baloch. Her uncle, a prominent Baloch political leader, was killed when Nimra was in grade 8. The event affected her family and sparked Nimra's interest in the political and the public. She went on to study political science at the University of Balochistan. But poetry tugged at her. For years she felt she wanted to write, but did not know where to start. In December 2018 she responded to CYAAD's online call to join a creative expression workshop. It taught her about other women, other communities. It clarified her future direction. Today Nimra writes poetry on peace, social cohesion, women's rights, and youth issues. She has emerged as a prominent youth leader in Quetta. In November 2019 Nimra established a local youth group - YOURS (Youth Organization to Uplift and Reform Society).

**360** young women and men - in a baseline study about peace, identity, conflict transformation and struggles in navigating rights and citizenship

**200** young women and men - in intensive creative expression workshops, reflected on lives, emotions, exclusion, and violence; and expressed themselves through art and literature

**210** creative pieces - sent to CYAAD after the workshops

**6** large public events in districts - public intellectuals, writers and artists spoke to young people on contemporary issues, art and peace



Young women participated in creative workshops in large numbers. Videos of them reading their poetry are expressive and powerful. Many don't want these to be public. There are sensitivities, given Balochistan's feudal and patriarchal social ethos. But there are young women who do speak and recite verse, navigating the resistance on a daily basis.

# Choice at the Crossroads

## Context

Deepening inequality can push young people into psychological and physical ghettos. How do we help a young person, who may be from an extremely low income family, or from a marginalized social group, and prevent them from reaching the tipping point of violent behaviour? This project is located at precisely that confluence – of individual human psychology and structural marginalization.

When state and society offer few alternatives, a young person can be

drawn to crime. Petty criminality can make them vulnerable to long-term violent behaviour. It may begin with a single act of lawlessness – unthinkingly joining an unruly mob or petty theft. But once marked by local police as a potential trouble maker (called ‘rowdy sheeter’) they can be picked up under suspicion for anything that goes bad in the neighbourhood. This spiral pulls a young person into more serious crime, away from a potentially productive life and constructive citizenship.

**14** cognitive behaviour therapy sessions

**49** youth-at-risk (first batch of trainees)

**Profiles:** Painters, butchers, students, shop owners, technicians, auto drivers, petty businessmen

**Criminal charges:** Murder, attempt to murder, causing serious injury, arms possession, rioting

**Post-session process:** Wait a few weeks | Ensure no recidivism | Push police to remove them from ‘rowdy sheets’ | Give them a clean slate to start life over | Link them to community work, employability training, and legal assistance



## Intervention

- **Do Raahein (Crossroads):** A programme in Hyderabad City using cognitive behavioural therapy tools to help social recovery of ‘rowdy sheeters’ – marginalized minority and Dalit youth at risk of criminalization.
- **Partnership with the police department:** Encourage them to change attitudes to at-risk-youth and use the ‘soft option’ (rehabilitation), rather than the ‘hard’ approach of marking, rounding up, incarcerating and further criminalizing.
- These interventions meant reaching inner-city youth, building trust in neighbourhoods, with families and community leaders; convincing sceptical young people to join. Repeated visits took place to the Police Department, and local police stations whose support was vital for the success of the programme.

## Looking Ahead

- Convert participants of the first programme into co-facilitators for the next batch.
- Deepen collaboration with the police department.
- Create a mentor/buddy system for ‘spreading out’ – each training participant connects with 3 younger people in their family or neighbourhood to prevent at-risk behaviour patterns.
- Set-up an on-call support system within the project team to prevent recidivism.
- On the fun side, Yugantar recorded a music video with at-risk-young people, in which they talk about their problems. It is a Hindi rap song, performed by professionals, slated for release after the COVID-19 crisis wanes.

## Aslam’s Way Out

24 year old Aslam\* the eldest of four siblings, lost his father at an early age, and was raised by a single mother. Education held no interest. He joined a local gang instead, skipping classes, and entering the world of substance abuse. All his friends had ‘records’ - some for 10 fights, others for 10 murders. “I wanted to earn a ‘name’ for myself like them,” he says. The first time Aslam was arrested for a crime, was also the day he lost his first child. Sending him into a downward spiral of addiction.

His mother first brought Aslam to the Do Raahein programme. Something clicked, and Aslam stayed, not missing one day of 14-sessions. He became a regular volunteer for Do Raahein’s community work. So far he has devoted 12 Sundays to cleaning streets, painting walls, serving food to the homeless. He also introduced a 17 year old boy, who was hanging out with local gangs, into the programme. Aslam says he doesn’t want to go back to “that life.” And the local police, once wary of approaching this young toughie, now describe him as “polite.”

\* name changed to protect privacy

