
DIPLOMACY- UNITY THROUGH MUSIC IN PAKISTAN

Utilizing music, celebrity, media, and cross-cultural collaboration to build feelings of unity and hope.

Overview

Cultural interaction is a useful tool to support a nation's interest abroad. After the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001, many commissions and prestigious institutions in the United States recommended increased support for cultural diplomacy. The 911 Commission, the RAND Corporation, the Government Accountability Office and the Council on Foreign Relations all advised an increase in funding, accountability and support for more cultural programming and exchange. The revised U.S. thinking was reflected in fundamental changes in the way U.S. civilian aid is being delivered in Pakistan. In late 2009, responding to widespread criticism that reliance on contractors and international organizations resulted in substantial administrative costs and complexities; a new approach was designed centered on routing assistance through Pakistani and U.S. organizations. As a consequence, cultural diplomacy has become an important vehicle for aid delivery (Sullivan et al., 2011). Particular attention was given to the negative public perception towards America abroad. The battle against

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Islamic extremism is of the highest importance governmentally, but cultural funding initiatives have proven mostly ineffective and still underfunded. Movies, TV series, music, and celebrities are the largest cultural exports of America. These are outside of government influence and have the most significant impact abroad. State Department supported programming and cultural exchange initiatives are seen as not impactful and lack measurable results (Ang et al., 2014). Many of these programs emphasizing exchange and cooperation do not engage any media interest or register any lasting impact on American perception. This viewpoint applies in particular in Muslim societies. Studies show that many highly funded media projects in Muslim communities lacked marketing impact and often display conflicting messages (Ang et al., 2014).

The Unity Song, Pehlay Hum Pakistani Hain is a venture that penetrated into most households in Pakistan and produced positive feelings towards the song, the artists and, one may project, in turn, America as a nation. The Unity Song is a privately funded initiative that was highly effective in this contentious anti-American landscape. Music, coupled with celebrity and diplomacy, combined to produce a national song with acknowledged categorical results in Pakistan. Pakistan is divided into four provinces and five languages. Each region with their language and culture are divided, acting towards their regional interest instead of the good of the country as a whole. The motivations behind the project were two-fold.

One, to ignite a sense of unity in Pakistan so that in-fighting and regionalism would diminish. The second was to create empathy and understanding towards the people in the US in hopes of deescalating extremist views.

The song, music video, and interviews allowed Pakistan to see the artists and collaborators genuine interest in creating solidarity between the nations.

The Unity song is known to most Pakistani citizens and held in high esteem. Online Posts, sharing, Facebook post responses, and popularity of the song on the radio and TV are evidence of this statement. Measurement for national acknowledgment, popularity on the radio, television and social media shares, show quantifiable favorable outcomes of the Unity Project.

The National Unity song was released on August 13, 2013, to the media in Pakistan. The music video touched upon the sentiment of constructive nationalism to unite the country under one song. Collaborating with music icons of Pakistan to form the original song, Pehlay Hum Pakistani Hain was performed and sung in Urdu. Arshad Mehmud wrote the melody. Professor Mehmud is a well-known composer and head of NAPA the only national arts college in Pakistan. Anwar Maqsood wrote the lyrics. Mr. Maqsood is referred to as the “Shakespeare of Pakistan” because of his prolific, witty writing going back several decades. Syra Mehdi originated the song and idea. Ms. Mehdi is an accomplished musician and singer in the US. She is the daughter of International Recording Artist and GRAMMY member Heather Schmid and Dr. Rafay Mehdi. Syra assisted the production and mix of western and eastern instrumentations. Syra also composed the chorus. Professor Jon Finn of Berklee School of Music played lead guitar. The Boston Symphony Orchestra member contributed many complimentary western instrumental lines to the eastern melody. Ms. Schmid and her husband Dr. Rafay Mehdi filmed and recorded several indigenous musicians in the villages of Pakistan. Musician groups and individuals played the Dholuk, Chimta, Narr, Dilo to be added to the final production. Producers in Los Angeles and Boston contributed to the final mix and mastering.

In preparation for the collaboration, the Mehdi family conducted several television interviews to dispel suspicions as to the purpose of the Unity song. The tone of these casual conversations were light and humorous but demonstrated the commitment of the family to be open about their intentions and the purpose of the song. The Mehdi's reiterated their commitment to support Pakistan during the turbulent time leading up to the release of the song, music video, and subsequent live performances. By the time the song was released, the couple, and their musician daughter Syra, were well known to any who had seen or heard about the interviews on TV. The public's suspicions were assuaged, and support for the song was widespread.

The Unity Song was in regular rotation on modern Pakistani radio. Today, almost two years later, the song is frequently heard on the radio in Pakistan. The song is also played each year as a National song for holidays. The music video was shared more than 51,400 times. There are more than 42,000 comments on the music video detailing gratitude, appreciation for the song and thanking the family for supporting Pakistan. Over 3 million people watched the video on Facebook making it a viral hit. The Facebook audience is primarily English speaking, young people in Pakistan who have access to the internet and a computer. The other 200 million people in Pakistan watched the music video on TV, heard it on the radio, viewed a

television interview or live performance, read about it in the newspaper or were told about the song by a friend.

Motive Questioned

From the beginning, The Unity Song was met with suspicion and pessimism. The Unity Song encompassed a year and six months of travel to set up collaborations. Meetings in Pakistan for media assistance, government support, NGO alliances, private companies, charity support, were cordial but ultimately futile. Most thought the idea was sound, but the song, music video, security concerns, and size and scope of the project were insurmountable. No outside funding was secured at any point to the Unity Project. Most questioned the motive of the song and collaboration.

Repeatedly statements by individuals in Pakistan wondered whether the song and project were a subversive tool of the American government. An early article online on Dawn News, the nation's largest newspaper displays this suspicion. Comments posted below the article articulate the feeling that Pakistani citizens did not want an American Pop singer to sing a Pakistani National Song in their country. Security concerns were a major issue in 2012 and 2013 in the major cities in Pakistan. Terrorism on Pakistani soil was rampant, and many Pakistani's could not understand why this American family would put themselves at

personal risk for a song. There were few Americans or Western foreign faces in Pakistan in Karachi at this time. Waves of bombings and terrorist acts made each day dangerous to the people in Pakistan. Due to the issues above, there was a pervasive feeling of hopelessness in Pakistan, particularly Karachi, in 2012 and 2013. Many of the initial larger and more impactful ideas for the project needed to be abandoned due to lack of funding and security concerns. The danger, excess travel expenses, and lack of partnerships in Pakistan made the national holiday of August 13, 2013, the final deadline necessary for the Unity Song. With the Unity Song finished, media and television support helped to increase the awareness of the song.

Declined US Government Involvement

The US government refused funding to the project in a meeting with the State Department in 2013. Similar to the Pakistani meetings, enthusiasm for the project and interest in the personal stories of the family was there, but declined any support or funding for the project. It is important to add that 2013 and 2014 supported State Department music projects in Pakistan were unsuccessful. Suspicions, disinterest by the Pakistan public and improper media support were likely rationale. Our research shows that people in

Pakistan are suspicious of any projects openly funded by the State Department.

To the Pakistani people, Pakistani government and the American government, Pehlay Hum Pakistani Hain is an example of successful cultural diplomacy. The popularity of the song, the positive reactions, the alliances forged in the minds of everyday Pakistani's are all very positive. Syra Mehdi, Heather Schmid, and Rafay Mehdi are viewed in highly positive light in Pakistan.

Syra Mehdi, Heather Schmid and Dr. Rafay Mehdi have interest in following up with the initial project by completing the television series, large scale anniversary video, commercial collaborations, full documentary, and a scripted drama. There are many opportunities to utilize the now celebrity status of the family to further diplomacy between the two nations.

Metrics

The following Metrics were used to gauge the results of the launch of the Unity Song.

Social Media Response

General Public acceptance index depicted by number of downloads and repeat play

Shares and comments on Facebook

The Ambassador of Pakistan's response & comments

Local and national politician's responses

Supreme Court Chief Justice's response

Military establishment responses and comments

Media Coverage and Comments

Radio Play

Television commentary

Emails sent to Heather Schmid, Syra Mehdi and Dr. Rafay Mehdi by fans of the song

Personal encounters and comments-first hand accounts

Awards offered, Live Performance, speaking and special occasion invitations

Commercial Contract Offers -Brand Representation offers

Results

An American musician won the hearts and minds of Pakistan people at the most difficult dangerous and hostile times. (according to media reports and the Pakistan Ambassador 2016)

Over 200 million views of the Unity Song

Routine music video play on all major TV: GEO TV, AAJ TV, PTV, FM Radio

Regular radio play -Radio Pakistan within the 4 provinces of Pakistan.

Comments online reflect positive responses relating to The Unity Song's themes of unity, understanding, and oneness.

Invitation to honor the Unity Song at the Pakistan Embassy in Washington DC. March 23, 2016

Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States Jalil Abbas Jilani

noted that the performance symbolized the vitality of close cooperation between the United States. Music based on thoughtful and research based neuroscience can be deeply influential towards larger cultural understanding.

Title referred to Heather Schmid and Syra Mehdi as "Global Music Ambassadors" in introduction and speech Pakistan Ambassador(2016)

This live performance went out live to the nation of Pakistan- March 23, 2016

Invitation to the 2014 International Justice Forum in Islamabad PK

Supreme Court Chief Justice Tassaduq Jilani expressed to the judges and live televised audience, The Unity Song has won the Hearts & Minds of millions of Pakistanis.

Covered live on television. States the importance and interest given.

Invitation for award to the 2015 Innovative Youth Forum in Swat Pakistan. Video created. It should be understood that the Swat Valley, known to be the most conservative, anti-American region of Pakistan, honored the song and family.

Two hour long interviews with Dr. Rafay Mehdi , Heather Schmid and Syra Mehdi on PTV Global were broadcast to 87 countries worldwide and watched by an audience of 190 million.

Unity Song Entered the Grammy Academy Ballot in 2014

Published by Harvard International Review on April 29, 2013 “Global Music Ambassadors: Changing Paradigms, Uniting People”

Further the Project

Television Series in Pakistan- there is strong interest in the personal story of Heather Schmid and Dr. Rafay Mehdi in Pakistan. Syra Mehdi's appeal and connection with the youth of Pakistan will be further established with her own programming and series.

Large scale anniversary music video- as a national song, The Unity Song is replayed on Pakistani national holidays. The hastily created music video for the Unity song is now being played at national holiday events throughout Pakistan, the US and in Europe, as evidenced by fan photos.

An impactful, collaborative, moving music video could become a timeless symbol of unity every year on national holidays.

Commercial Contracts-Collaborating on fashion, jewelry, a Coke Studio performance may be re-established with funding. The opportunity to model 21st century gender roles is strong here.

Documentary-Oscar nominated/winning documentaries from Pakistan are met with pessimism in the country because of the viewed negative portrayal of the Pakistani people. The net results of these Oscar nominations further anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. Conversely, a documentary of the making of the Unity Song and the subsequent positive reception in the country would produce national pride while highlighting this international collaboration. The story highlights the nation's embrace of an American pop singer and family would be a strong anti-terror diplomacy tool.

Interviews-

Further personal interviews would continue to model equality in relationships to Pakistani men and women. Syra Mehdi is poised to represent the melding of two cultures and model 21st century youth embracing east and west unity.

Conclusion

There are many opportunities to further cultural diplomacy through Pehlay Hum Pakistani Hain and Heather Schmid and Syra Mehdi in Pakistan. The profile of Heather Schmid and Syra Mehdi can be utilized to deliver significant anti-terrorism messages.

In spite of nearly insurmountable obstacles, suspicion, lack of funding, and popular support from the outset, the Unity Project is now a well-known national song collaborating with the nation's respected popular icons to produce positive feelings of unity, and in turn, decrease the anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. The Unity Project should be viewed as a case study proving the widespread efficacy of cultural diplomacy.

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