

Planting sprigs of peace in deserts of hostility –



PAIGAAM 2011

“Peace...can only be attained through understanding,” once said that stalwart of American individualism, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Little did he know that more than a century after his death, a motley group of teenagers from around the Indian subcontinent would gather together yearly, with a message to spread and decades-old barriers of animosity and mistrust to overcome, and follow his words of wisdom, in a bid to rid themselves of unfounded bias and misgivings about the people across the borders. This gathering of the young and dynamic from three nations (despite the Pakistani delegates’ inability to be physically present, we still include them – for they were with us in mind and spirit, and in Skype video chats) spent a week packed with activities and surprises, at our long-established, well-beloved, home-grown peace conference – PAIGAAM. And understanding could well be the most important quality that grew within us all – after all, peace (paradoxical as it may seem) is an individual’s battle against half-baked conceptions handed down to us. It is a test of our tolerance and persistence, and at PAIGAAM, we are fortifying ourselves with information and awareness, and a recognition of our biases (which, in our view, is as important as their elimination).



The aim was to mature into discerning citizens of the world with the ability to filter out the facts from the prejudiced conjecture and to explore multiple points of view with sensitivity and openness. And our path to discovery, our most pleasant surprise, was not

the serious sequence of heavy-handed discussion several delegates had been expecting. It was a more low-key and informal process, with which we witnessed even the most reticent of delegates opening up and venturing out of their comfort zones (in true revolutionary spirit). One of the first activities – Labelling – saw delegates placing themselves at the receiving end of a torrent of stereotypical accusations, all along the same negative lines and targeted at the flimsy paper label they stuck on their foreheads, notwithstanding the depths of their individual personalities.



After the startling revelation that however open-minded they purported themselves to be, they still nurtured their own preconceptions, the participants examined the subtle imposition of views in supposedly objective history textbooks from India and Pakistan. It was disturbing for us to learn that the “dry, uninteresting” (sic) subject some of us had grown to hate was a fragile thing – it was fraught with patriotism and the glorification of

certain individuals (and the abasement of certain others). The motives of national pride had been woven into what we consider (most clinically) “a study of the events that occurred in the past”. Another game in a similar vein – the Media Game – took this issue up to the scale of a far more influential force on the public imagination. Should we leave aside our personal pride, and tell it like it is – or do we need to fuel our communities’ faith in ourselves by revealing, concealing and even distorting this elusive truth? PAIGAAM focused on the power of the individual, asked us to look within and gauge for ourselves the reliability of an information source and of the ‘facts’ as they are given to us, for (as a rebuttal from our very own Press Team showed) the media is as governed by ulterior motives as anyone else. This propensity of ours to blame the “government” or any large organization for the evils that lurk in society was called into question during the Role Play, where, despite our peaceful ideals, we were just as ineffective at preventing war as the 1971 politicians we simulated. To borrow from Gandhi, “you must be the change you wish to see in the world”, so before aiming to save the world and take corrupt governments head on, save yourself. Start small, think tall.



All this soul-stirring and mind-jolting left delegates in need of a breather. Charades out on the lawn, the Amazing Race, and various other light-hearted games gave us the opportunity to relax, share and bond. A quick glance through the posts on PAIGAAM 2011’s Facebook group will tell you that this bonding is what our friends miss most. Some of us, hadn’t it been for PAIGAAM, would have never known (I quote our participants here) that “Indians

are not snobbish, after all” or that “Pakistanis are just as cool as we are”, or that “Bangladeshis are sweeter than their rosogollas”.



Several “converted PAIGAAMees” reported how their views on religion changed after experiencing their Bangladeshi friends piously observe their all-night Ramazaan, and almost everyone came to appreciate Bollywood (for all its irrationality and escapism) as a

binding factor. These bonds, considering the welcoming environment they are forged in, will last lifetimes. And this is PAIGAAM’s fundamental objective – to bring us all together and show us we are one.