

Project Dastaan 75th Peacebuilding Tour – Healing the Wounds of Partition

Background: The 1947 Partition of India is the largest case study of forced migration in history. Over 14 million people migrated, and around a million tragically perished. 73 years later, the Partition still casts a shadow on the modern subcontinent. Not only have India and Pakistan fought 4 bitter wars since (and Bangladesh created in 1971 on ethnic lines), but religious identity continues to be South Asia's biggest political divide. Hate crimes and state-endorsed xenophobia against religious minorities are sharply rising, driven in large part by obsolete and intolerant national-creation myths which emerged in the aftermath of 1947.

It is critical that we educate people about the historical origins of this conflict, the impact it had on the everyday citizen, and how religious intolerance and damaging stereotypes developed during the struggle for independence. By addressing South Asia's colonial trauma, we can pave the path to a pluralist future.

Materials:

Child of Empire is a VR (Virtual Reality) animated documentary that puts you inside the shoes of a migrant during the 1947 Partition of India. Weaving through the stories of three-present day survivors, it navigates identity and sectarianism during times of immense social upheaval in British India. The experience is funded by Arts Council England, National Geographic and the CatchLight Foundation. *Child of Empire* was selected for the 77th Venice International Film Festival Production Bridge.

Lost Migrations is a three-part animated (flatscreen) series which tells the untold stories of the Partition through the voices of the colonised. Each 6-8 minute episode focuses on a community that has been excluded from South Asian literature and historiography: women, the Chettiar diaspora and the stateless. These stories have never before been showcased to popular audiences, and have been animated by Puffball Studios in Pakistan and Spitting Image in India. Lost Migrations was funded by the British Council's Digital Collaboration Fund and an exploration grant from the National Geographic Society.

Proposed Project: Next year will mark 75 years of Independence for India and Pakistan. This anniversary will bring a renewed interest to the Partition, and trigger public discourse worldwide around colonisation and empire. We propose a travelling exhibition across the UK, India, Pakistan and select countries with strong South Asian diasporas (particularly the US and Canada) to mark this critical moment in world history.

The exhibition would involve three components:

- A travelling VR installation of *Child of Empire* across select museums and galleries, coupled with first-hand photography and videography from the Dastaan Social Impact Program. The number of headsets can be adjusted depending on the capacity constraints of our partner venues.
- Screenings of *Lost Migrations* at various cultural institutions and universities, organised by local partners and student groups in each country.
- The dissemination of an online educational pack (interactive website and lesson plans) to critically engage academic communities with the work.

So far, the following venues have confirmed their commitment to hosting the exhibition if funded: The V&A Museum, Bradford Cathedral, Friction Arts Birmingham, the Delhi, Amritsar and Calcutta Partition Museums, and the Citizens' Archive of Pakistan's venues in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. We are also currently in talks with National Museums Liverpool, the Barbican, the British Library and the South Asian Institute in Chicago. Through our international partner Teamwork Arts, we also have access to the following cities across the world: Istanbul, Cairo, Madrid, Colorado and Jaipur.

A peace-building project of this scale has never been attempted through VR, which is still a novel technology in South Asia, and the educational potential of the content is exciting, given the content it addresses, and its topical release on the 75th anniversary. It is important to note that artistic and cultural collaborations between India and Pakistan are rare, given political tensions. This project provides Rotary a unique opportunity to bolster the immersive capacities of public spaces in a pan-South Asian context, as well as showcase artistic output from these countries for the first time outside the country.

We would invite schools, universities and youth groups in the area to take part in the experience, which would be entirely free of charge to the participants themselves.

Aims and Objectives:

- 1) Cultural Preservation:** We want to preserve and promote knowledge of the shared cultural heritage of the subcontinent using VR.
 - 2) Awareness and Empathy:** We aim to recognize and remember the shared trauma that the generation of Partition went through, and help them tell their stories to younger generations in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as diaspora and beyond.
 - 3) Peacebuilding:** We want to sow the seeds of peace between religious communities in South Asia by addressing trauma through art.
 - 4) Education:** Partition is usually studied from a macro-political, statist lens. Our Project seeks to educate future generations about the micro-level effects of Partition on everyday individuals and modern day politics.
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About Us:

Project Dastaan is a peace-building initiative which reconnects Partition survivors to their old homes through virtual reality.

Dastaan works with some of the leading activists and institutions in the South Asian cultural sphere. The Project is backed by Malala Yousufzai and Suroush Alvi, and our partners include the UK's National South Asian Heritage Month Campaign, of which we are founding members, as well as the Citizen Archives of India and Pakistan. We've widely presented at forums worldwide, including the British Parliament, Double Exposure Festival, in collaboration with the MIT Open Documentary Lab, TEDxIGDTU, Oxford University, SOAS, Jaipur Literature Festival and the YOUNGA Conference, the first UN event in VR.

The Project has been widely featured across South Asian and international media for its unique yet gentle critique of religious polarisation in the subcontinent. Our work has been covered in TIME, the BBC, Reuters, Dawn Pakistan and the Times of India amongst others.

www.projectdastaan.org