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# ***Here, students from India, Pakistan share a classroom***

NEW DELHI: Imagine students from India and Pakistan studying from a common syllabus and faculty. Their classmates include students from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan. This cross-cultural classroom is a reality in the heart of New Delhi's diplomatic quarter, thanks to an unusual collaboration called the South Asian University.

Started with high hopes, and some scepticism, the South Asian University, which offers masters and doctoral degrees, is taking baby steps towards breaking stereotypes and creating bridges among the young minds of the region.

While India hosts the campus and provides half the operating costs, at least half of the student body comes from outside India. At this year's convocation, the new grads included 21 from Afghanistan, 17 from Bangladesh, 11 from Nepal, five each from Pakistan and Bhutan, one from Sri Lanka, and 99 from India. "It's an ideological project — to inculcate a South Asian consciousness, strengthen cultural connections, without making much of nation-state barriers," explains the university vice-president and dean of social sciences, Sasanka Perera.

It's not an easy venture of course. There was a special SAU visa created for students, faculty and staff, but there continues to be friction and delay in getting documents, especially for Pakistanis. This year, six of the Pakistani students who were accepted into the university have not been given visas, forcing the admissions to be scrapped.

But for all the frustrations of officialdom, Pakistani student Hira Hashmi says that she has experienced many moments of closeness and kindness. When she was hospitalised for a liver problem, her wardmate, a woman her mother's age, asked her why she was alone, and where her family was. "When she figured out I wasn't going back to Pakistan because of how much it would cost, she said beta, don't worry about the money if you want to go to your family. That offer still makes me tear up," says Hashmi. On campus, bonding with Indians is natural. "We have so much more in common with each other than with others," says Hashmi. Her friends, who got their first impressions of Pakistan from the TV channel Zindagi, would hit her up for more recommendations, and no political subject was off-bounds for a joke.

Within the university, the faculty makes sure to enlarge classroom discussions, take away any nationalist edge, says Hashmi. This is saying something, in an international relations class where India, Pakistan, Bangladeshi and other students bring their own narratives and beliefs. "We had some grumbling from some Indian students, when we organised a seminar on the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who happened to be Pakistani at the end of his life", says Perera.

But on the other hand, "a Pakistani friend even apologised to me about events in 1971," says Shardika Haque Monica, a law student from Bangladesh. "We all have our histories, but I feel that at least this generation should feel like it's 2018," she says. India did not feel that unfamiliar to her, but Monica's greatest learnings came from

her Bhutanese roommate Kezang, she says. Everyone makes some adjustments — the food is too vegetarian for Monica's taste, and too spicy for Cheraghali Danish from Afghanistan.

South Asian University is bound to go through some ups and downs, given the fraught relationships within the Saarc compact.

Later this month, there will be a meeting for a fresh round of funds, which will test each country's commitment to the project. The university has to prove that it is not just a structure, but an ethos. But for now, the kids are alright. Some border-busting arguments have been aired, some stereotypes dispelled. That's a good start.

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Hindi version

<https://navbharattimes.indiatimes.com/metro/delhi/other-news/students-from-india-pakistan-share-a-classroom/articleshow/64556932.cms>

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