



Bridging Borders Through Culture: Transforming Education and Promoting Peace

By: Arya Ameshi | Published: 04-Dec-2024



Tina Vachani, Co-Founder of Routes2Roots (R2R)

In a world where arts and culture are often sidelined in education, **Routes2Roots (R2R)** stands out with its innovative approach and demonstrated impact. Under the leadership of Tina Vachani, R2R has not only revolutionized cultural education in India but has also extended its influence across borders. From running the **world's largest digital cultural education program**, reaching over **2 crore students and 24,000 schools**, to facilitating transformative **India-Pakistan cultural exchanges**, Tina's journey is a testament to the unifying power of arts and culture.

Born in Pakistan and now a proud Indian citizen, Tina's personal story is as compelling as the initiatives she champions. Her work reflects a deep commitment to promoting inclusivity, peace, and a profound appreciation for India's rich cultural heritage. With achievements like the Social Stock Exchange (SSE) listing and the introduction of interactive digital classrooms, R2R is redefining how we integrate technology with traditional art forms. In this exclusive interview with TheCSRUniverse, **Tina Vachani, Co-Founder of Routes2Roots (R2R)** shares insights into R2R's milestones, the challenges of fostering cross-border cultural dialogue, and her vision for the future of cultural education. From empowering rural schools to embracing emerging technologies like AI and robotics, Tina sheds light on how R2R is shaping young minds while building bridges of understanding across communities and nations.

Read on to explore the inspiring story of a woman who turned her passion for culture into a movement that transcends borders and generations:

Q. Your journey from Pakistan to India has undoubtedly enriched your unique perspective. How has your personal story influenced your vision for Routes2Roots and your work in cross-border cultural exchange?

A. Having spent my formative years studying in Karachi, Pakistan followed by Bachelors and Masters from Delhi University, I felt exposed to both the cultures and the in-depth feelings people had for each other's country and people, giving rise to numerous misconceptions led by political agenda and propaganda. I found Routes 2 Roots a perfect platform to address these misconceptions by finding a common ground which was no other than the medium of culture which transcends all languages and geographical barriers. I felt that despite shared histories of independence and the trauma around it, people of each country had nostalgic memories which were laced with underlying affection for each other. The commonalities of food, language, attire and similar interests of culture was the bonding factor. Routes 2 Roots held innumerable musical concerts, theatre festivals, food and cultural events which were attended freely by thousands of people from all stratas of society creating inclusivity and tolerances for one another. My cultural background from Pakistan helped me to introduce great talent from across the border and at the same time living in Delhi helped me to identify and take the world famous Rajasthani food, art and culture across to Pakistan. My vision as the name suggests was to create the path(route) to enable us to reach and rediscover our roots which is a stability factor for every human being.

Q. Routes2Roots launched one of the world's largest digital cultural education programs, reaching over 20 million students across 24,000 schools. Could you walk us through the vision behind this massive undertaking? What impact have you seen so far?

While successfully executing the scientifically designed Student Exchange program which lasted over 6 years, I had the opportunity to visit many schools across the county . It was during those visits that the glaring absence of the rich Indian culture in schools was noticed and it was saddening to see that our young future generation's knowledge and interest was only limited to aping Bollywood culture. I felt it was our moral duty towards society to make them proud and aware of Indian culture and that's how the seed was sown in 2016. Since then this journey has gone through many challenges as the idea and concept was alien at the time of inception and many apprehensions were voiced by our advisors who felt that culture could not be taught digitally. Starting from digitising 50 schools spread across all states of India, our awardee board of advisors curated the curriculum and our IT team worked to create our inhouse software. Each day was a new learning experience with various challenges but our passion to make our dream a reality gave us the resilience to overcome all obstacles. Funding has always been tough as culture has never been a priority for CSR funding and most of the time we would be self funding the program.

Over the years we saw that the interest started to grow among the children who were attending these classes since these were real-time and interactive which helped them to have their queries and doubts addressed instantly and get the appraisal also realtime from the renowned Gurus who were taking these classes. The feedback from the school Principals and Teachers was further encouraging where a definitive change for the positive was found in the behavioural pattern of the children since their energies were being channelized productively. Today this program is impacting millions of children and thousands of others indirectly thereby creating art appreciation and building students towards a holistic growth . This program is addressing their mental and growing anxiety issues related to the chaotic environment surrounding them.

Q. In 2010, Routes2Roots launched the "Exchange for Change" program, facilitating a historic cultural dialogue between students in India and Pakistan. What were some memorable moments or challenges from this program?

A. Exchange for Change program was one of its kind scientifically designed year long activity comprising letter writing of students from each other 's country to their pen friends , followed by making collages depicting each other 's culture, food, historical monuments and festivals (these would be displayed on the school notice board for all to see). The next stage was the making of postcards where students would click pictures of their favourite food, place, pet festival or family and their histories were recorded by the students from their grandparents recalling the nostalgia and memories of pre-partition. Final stage would be the selection of students for the physical exchange which was the most exciting where students got the opportunity to meet their pen friends and experience the culture of their neighbouring country. There were numerous memorable and impactful moments.

Upon crossing the border all the age old dogmas held were completely demolished when they saw how friendly and welcoming the people were. When the Pakistani delegation of students, teachers and principals were hosted by the High Commission of Pakistan in Delhi they freely expressed how they had been misled about their neighboring country and that people from all cultures coexisted peacefully here. Similarly when the delegation from India visited Pakistan they were floored by the warmth and hospitality of the people there much against all the apprehensions they had about the neighbours. Special efforts were made by schools in Pakistan when hosting our group to write welcome notes in Hindi language and serve vegetarian food and have students perform with Indian and Pakistani flags. Routes 2 Roots were lauded by the high Commissions of both the countries who generously granted visas and permissions on both sides as they felt we were successfully carrying out our soft diplomacy between the two countries.

Q. R2R's listing on the NSE's Social Stock Exchange (SSE) marks a milestone for arts and culture NGOs. Could you share your thoughts on this achievement and what it signifies for NGOs aiming for transparency and sustainability? How has the listing impacted your fundraising capabilities, and what role did this funding play in advancing digital classrooms in schools across Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh?

A. Undoubtedly listing on the NSE 's Social Stock Exchange has given a new lifeline to the NGO. In the past, the reputation of NGOs has been greatly damaged by the nefarious activities conducted by some which impacted the credibility of the ones who were doing honest work for society. Listing gave a new perspective where the genuine NGOs got credibility and a platform to raise money to achieve their objectives and at the same time the donor was confident of the reliability of the NGO and the fulfillment of all the compliances. We were able to get our IPO oversubscribed for digitizing the 100 schools of Himachal and Uttarakhand located in far off and remote areas with little access to the modern education tools. We have equipped these schools with the latest Interactive Flat panels which will assist the local teachers in imparting the K-12 education which has 50,000 videos loaded along with 100,000 questions and answers. It also has Routes 2 Roots cultural classes in 16 disciplines which are interactive as well as accessible offline. We plan to raise more funds in future through the SSE to help us achieve the objective of bringing the students from the less privileged on par with the urban school students.

Q. The installation of India's Best Interactive VIRSA Flat Panels in digital classrooms has brought quality cultural education to rural students. Could you elaborate on how this technology has enhanced students' learning experiences?

A. State of the art flat panels were installed in the schools with a built-in camera and 1 terabyte SSD to support adequate storage facilities. The panels were equipped with Wi-Fi, and powerful microphones eliminating the need of mics for interactive real-time classes. With the help of these large panels a virtual classroom was created in these schools where the students could learn 16 different disciplines in Indian art forms, including instruments, dances and vocals. These panels help in empowering the teachers with unlimited avenues of teaching thereby creating interest in the students and giving them a wider canvas of studies as these panels are equipped with 50,000 videos relating to K-12 educational curriculum and 100,000 questions and answers to help in their learning.

Q. What role do emerging fields like AI, robotics, and mindfulness play in R2R's curriculum? How do these subjects intersect with traditional cultural education?

A. AI, robotics and gaming has become the emerging technologies in the world, and it is important the students in the remote schools are provided an insight into these new technologies and at the same time teach the students to be part of this transformation. The traditional education system to change into the modern education system may take some time to reach these far flung schools grasping for resources, we provide these schools with this education through virtual classrooms and bring them at par with any school. The mindfulness classes help the students in these schools to be stress free and are given exercises to improve their learning powers and use their energies into constructive areas of their self-development.

Q. Routes2Roots has taken Indian cultural programs to diverse countries, such as China, Russia, and South Africa, in collaboration with ICCR and other bodies. How do these programs contribute to India's soft power and global presence?

A. We were taught that what is visible, sells. Therefore teaching Indian art and culture globally results in India as a country being known internationally. The short term gains are that Indian Diaspora that has been living away from their country can connect to their roots and specially the newer younger generation and secondly the foreigners who adapt and learn India art forms become part of our cultural ambassadors thereby providing might to our soft power. This initiative ultimately becomes a self-growing creation of Indian supporters globally.

Q. Can you share an example where R2R's initiatives led to a tangible positive outcome in a community, such as a conflict being resolved or a cultural revival? How do you ensure that R2R's programs remain relevant and evolve with changing cultural and societal dynamics? The Routes2Roots program was initiated after a detailed study, the summary of which was that most of the schools in India do not have music teachers and those which do have may be one or two. How can these teachers teach the students the vast cultural rich heritage of our country?

A. Routes2Roots program was initiated after a detailed study, the summary of which was that most of the schools in India do not have music teachers and those which do have may be one or two. How can these teachers teach the students the vast cultural rich heritage of our country? The schools that had the music teachers were primarily preparing the students for their annual programs with unauthentic teaching of culture mixed with popular film culture. The first tangible result that we got was a comment from a senior educationist of a chain of schools that ever since the Routes 2 Roots program has been introduced in their schools the conflict/aggression in their schools have reduced. There is no society that can exist without culture and therefore our program will be relevant for times to come. The culture is human driven and it automatically adapts to changing society and dynamics and the change is such that it is not felt but evolves.

Q. How does R2R address the digital divide, especially in rural areas, to ensure that all students benefit equally from its programs? How do you integrate feedback from students and educators to improve the digital classroom experience?

A. Routes 2 Roots program targets to demolish the digital divide amongst the schools across the country. We have largely digitized schools in the tier 3 cities and remote parts of the country. The best part of our learning has been that those schools who were unaware of digitisation were very quick to adapt and learn education through digitisation. We had schools that did not have last mile connectivity and to provide these schools with dogle to ensure adequate connectivity and experience digitisation in the education sector. We also think that it is important to digitise these schools in remote areas as they are also entitled to quality education to be able to compete with their counterparts in the cities. We have a drawn out SOP whereby our team of regional coordinators are in constant touch with our beneficiary schools.

The connection between the coordinators and the beneficiary schools is through emails and region wise specially created whatsapp groups. The information, feedback received from the beneficiary schools is processed by the national coordinator and passed on to the relevant department for redressal. To smoothen the process we have an active CRM specially created to our needs. The help and the inputs we receive from the educators is valuable and has helped us improve our program from the day of inception to what it is today

Q. R2R has received consistent support from the Ministry of Culture and ICCR. How have these partnerships facilitated your initiatives, and what opportunities do you see for further collaboration in promoting Indian culture globally? What role do private sector partnerships play in R2R's projects? Are there any unique partnerships you're particularly proud of?

A. Our association with the Ministry Of Culture helps us in receiving cash grants though marginal and also their support from time to time, our collaboration with ICCR helps us in reaching the international diaspora and local communities of these countries through Indian Embassies worldwide. These two collaborations have helped us in expanding our program and its reach phenomenally in such a short period of time. Just to give you a brief, at present we have more than 24000 schools/ colleges spread over all the districts of the country impacting over 22 million students and reaching out to more than 68 countries globally. We aim to reach every school at the village level also and all the countries of the world . For this we need sustained support from the Ministry of Culture, ICCR, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Education and Indian embassies worldwide. This is the only one of its kind program which is free of cost for the beneficiaries and to sustain this program, private partnership is essential in the form of CSR funding and adoption of beneficiary schools. We are grateful to our existing donors and CSR funders who have made us deliver this program till now. As an NGO we are proud of each one of our individual donors and equally value our substantial donors whose contributions have been important contributors in our growth story.

Q. What are some key challenges R2R has faced in bringing cultural education to remote areas and in fostering cross-border exchange? How has the organization navigated these challenges?

A. Any organisation specially an NGO with limited resources faces challenges in starting and implementing an out of the box project. Similarly we faced an uphill task in implementing our project . The biggest challenge that we faced was to start real time interactive digital education in the year 2016 when nobody had heard about the webinar / video conferencing solutions that we know of today. Our solution had to be robust and technologically superior to the other available solutions so that it is interesting to the students and user friendly. Therefore we created a solution where virtual classrooms were created in the beneficiary schools with multi camera shoot and the convenience of students being answered their queries instantly.

Q. What are some upcoming initiatives or projects for Routes2Roots that you're particularly excited about? Do you see potential for expanding your digital programs internationally?

A. The initiative and the ultimate goal of Routes 2 Roots is to make available art and culture to all the schools in the country up to the village level. The methodology of on-line real-time creation of virtual classrooms of Routes 2 Roots is the only cost effective solution of immediately addressing the problem. We will have a new generation that appreciates music and believes in co-existence with peace. At the international front we plan to reach out to other countries which are not being covered currently, for which we need adequate funding to have 24 hours operations to align with the world time zones.