

Book on PEACE
Senior Grammar School of Slovenj Gradec
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I am delighted to introduce this remarkable compilation of essays on 'PEACE', authored by the talented students of Slovenj Gradec Grammar School as part of their special social sciences project this year. This book symbolizes the strong bond between India and the municipality of Slovenj Gradec, which was solidified with the gift of a statue of Mahatma Gandhi by the Government of India to the city. Since the installation of the statue, this gesture has further strengthened the people-to-people relations between India and Slovenia. There couldn't have been a more fitting city than Slovenj Gradec, a United Nations Peace Messenger City, to house the statue of Gandhi, which was unveiled on October 2nd, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi—a day celebrated worldwide as the International Day of Non-Violence. Furthermore, the timing of this book's publication is significant, as we celebrate 15 years of association between the people of India and the municipality of Slovenj Gradec, since the statue was installed in 2010.

It is particularly heartening to see the efforts made by the municipality of Slovenj Gradec in spreading the ideals and importance of peace. Over the past four and a half years, I have witnessed this process firsthand. Last year, on October 2, 2024, I had the privilege of addressing a lecture hall filled with 90 students from the social sciences and linguistics elective courses, spanning the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years at the Slovenj Gradec Grammar School. During this session, I engaged in one of the most insightful discussions on the topic of 'Peace' and 'India' with these bright young minds.

One of the questions that left a lasting impression on me was: What is 'Peace' and how can we promote it? This seemingly simple question underscored the complexity of putting the concept of 'Peace' into action, given that it is perceived differently by various people and cultures. I was delighted to see that the students were grappling with questions that are crucial to our times, such as how to create a more peaceful world and how to cultivate peaceful societies. In the Q&A session, we delved deeper into the essence of 'Peace' and its implications. My response to the question asked, was to learn to be open to embracing, and respecting differences, and accepting, and cohabiting with variations around you. It is essential to empower and respect the weakest in society. The world and societies are not homogenous and attempts to make them so will always create conflicts and friction. Mutual respect has the inherent power to address differences, but this respect only comes when we accept and embrace those differences and being kind to all. These principles are the strength of India, the world's largest democracy. India's 4,500-year heritage and culture one of the world's oldest civilizations, is also the most evolving and adapting, teaching people to grow together by accepting variations and differences. While the numerous cultural and sub-cultural variations within one nation may astonish and stun other cultures, it is this force in the process of accepting the variations and co-habiting with them keeps the nation in harmony and united – this is the equilibrium of variations, where there is a constant and active process of counterbalancing taking place, making full efforts to maintain peace.

To further elaborate, my understanding as an Indian diplomat, of 'Peace' may perhaps offer a new perspective about 'Peace' and 'Processes that go in maintaining peace'. 'Peace' has always been humanity's highest values, an ideal state desired by all societies, cultures, and nations. The fact that it is understood differently by various people and cultures adds to the confusion. If we all agree on one definition and share common understanding about peace, our varied ways of approaching the processes of establishing 'peace' creates further confusion, making us ask, "how to promote peace?". In the Western view, 'peace' is often understood in terms of the absence of conflict, violence, war, whereas, in the Eastern worldview, it is seen as harmony and tranquillity, a state of inner peace. For the Western worldview, the point of reference is society—a composite of individuals where absence of conflict, war, violence, disruption is a measure of a peaceful state. However, in much of the Eastern world, the individual takes a central stage. They believe that unless the individuals are at peace with themselves, a community or society cannot be in peace, and consequently, neither can nations. Even though it may be perceived differently across various faiths and religions—Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Islam, Buddhist – or defined differently by varied schools of social sciences and international relations, 'peace' fundamentally refers to ensuring freedom, justice and equality, and balance of power for maintaining harmonious living together.

Much of the confusion also arises because we often treat 'peace at the societal level' and 'peace at the individual level' as separate subject matters, when in reality, they are deeply interconnected. It is a spectrum that extends from the individual to the social level, where a life of an individual is at the same time 'individual', 'social' and 'collective'. This spectrum of peace is as wide as the spectrum of violence, which ranges from inner conflict, one's own frustration, to small disputes between individuals, misunderstandings and clashes, misinformation and prejudiced perception about other cultures to religious hatred, and all the way to war.

When we understand our roles both as individuals and members of society that we live in, it becomes easier to address 'how to promote peace?'. 'Peace' now can be best understood as the result of small acts of kindness, consistently performed by each one of us in our daily interactions, as individuals as well as the members of society. To achieve 'peace' or 'state of peacefulness' the act starts with being in 'peace with oneself' and then contributing to the community. India, the birthplace of Buddha, has long been a beacon of peace, and in Buddhist writings has very clearly laid out principles of the 'peace' and what goes in 'peaceful living' or 'peacefully co-habiting'. According to Buddha's teachings, peace is attainable only when individuals are happy. One can be peaceful when the basic needs (food, home, clothing, education, health, work...) are met with. But a person cannot be at peace even after attaining the riches. Acquiring riches will not always bring happiness. It calls for learning on how to be happy and at peace with whatever one has. According to Buddhism, only a content person, having compassion, serenity, and composure, can contribute greatly to the happiness and peacefulness of the people he/she lives with and to the larger community – the *Sangha*, and the *Sangha* will in turn together work for ensuring the harmony of the people (societies and nations), where each individual equally participates in building peace. Peace calls for positive outlook for everything within us, around us and in our relationships. It is the process of developing enduring relationship with oneself and others for harmonious living together, based on respect and mutual understanding. It is an ongoing effort and process of building warm and friendly relations based on shared values, and

efforts from each one individual to overcome the difficulties and differences. The perceived dichotomy between the 'individual' and the 'member of society' dissolves when we begin to see ourselves as part of a greater whole. Rooted in India's cultural ethos of वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम् (Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam), the philosophy that "the world is one family" emphasizes peaceful coexistence. This perspective underscores the importance of individual peace while also highlighting the necessity of integrating oneself into the collective for the sake of harmony. In essence, the path to peace and the process of building peace involves maintaining one's inner tranquillity while being willing to merge into the collective to ensure the overall harmony. India's respect for diversity as part of one family is enshrined and protected in its Constitution, which is guided by the principles of justice (social, economic, and political), liberty (of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship), equality (of status and opportunity), and fraternity (assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the nation). These principles weave the rights and aspirations of individuals seamlessly into the vision and growth of the whole – the nation that India, the Bharat is.

Not only was it deeply fulfilling to discuss and share India's perspective on 'Peace' with the bright and compassionate students of Slovenj Gradec Grammar School, but it is also an honour to be part of this insightful compilation of essays. It is heartening to see how wholeheartedly the students, along with their dedicated teachers, mentors, leaders, and the people of Slovenj Gradec, have embraced and are actively promoting the principles of peace through their own acts of kindness. India will continue to have a special connection with the municipality and people of Slovenj Gradec, symbolized by the monument of Gandhi. At the heart of Slovenj Gradec, the statue of Mahatma Gandhi stands with a serene presence and powerful message. This monument is not only a tribute to Gandhi's teachings of peace and non-violence but also a symbol of Slovenj Gradec's openness to embracing all cultures and people of the world, and its dedication to promoting peace, beautifully documented in this inspiring book.

I extend my deepest gratitude to Mayor Matjaz Zanoskar, whose initiative led to the installation of the statue in 2010, and to Mayor Tile Klugler, who has not only maintained the monument but also championed the cause of peace since 2018. Special thanks to Deputy Mayor Martina Šisernik, whose compassionate leadership in social sectors such as education, health, culture, youth affairs, and tourism, has furthered the city's peaceful ethos. A heartfelt appreciation goes to the headmistress: Alenka Kac Herkovič for her support and Mojca Čerče, who led this project and nurtured the students to become responsible citizens. My best wishes to the students who have internalized the ideals of peace in their thoughts and actions. In today's world, we need more peace messengers and champions like these young minds.

May the special bond between the Embassy of India in Slovenia and the Municipality of Slovenj Gradec continue to grow stronger by each year, and together we strengthen the INDIA-SLOVENIA relations.

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