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A Quest for Peace and Reconciliation

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An Initiative of Peace and Reconciliation Network

Jesuit Conference of South Asia (JCSA)

Vision

Promotion of Peace and Reconciliation

The Nodal Platform for Peace and Reconciliation Network of JCSA aims at fostering peace with a multi-pronged approach.

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Editorial

Values, Actions, and Peace

Peacebuilding is a sustained process of creating the political, social, economic, and cultural conditions that allow peace to flourish. Unlike short-term peacekeeping or post-conflict reconstruction, peacebuilding goes beyond the immediate cessation of hostilities. It seeks instead to address the root causes of conflict—such as poverty, inequality, weak governance, human rights violations, and injustice.

We hold that without a robust set of values guiding human action, peace becomes mere rhetoric—hollow and devoid of substance. The primary value in this regard is integrity. Integrity is the flowing stream that nourishes all peaceful action and gives meaning to life. It should never be confused with expediency. Indeed, the flourishing of peace—at least in some parts of human society—is possible only when rooted in integrity.

It becomes evident that sustainable peace cannot exist without a firm foundation of human values. These values must also ensure the preservation and sustainability of the ecosystem. This highlights the truth that the end can never justify the means. Left unchecked, the means risk losing all moral and ethical boundaries.

Human values provide the conditions necessary for right human action. More specifically, compassion, empathy, and love ensure, as Edith Stein once observed, warmth and meaning in relationships.

In today's interconnected world, peacebuilding is a shared responsibility involving governments, international organisations, civil society, faith communities, and grassroots actors. Many countries have established specialised agencies, ministries, and systems to coordinate peacebuilding efforts, often in collaboration with multilateral bodies such as the United Nations, African Union, European Union, and ASEAN. These agencies engage in conflict prevention, mediation, disarmament, post-conflict rehabilitation, transitional justice, and community reconciliation.

The current issue of Pax Lumina explores these diverse systems and agencies across the globe. It seeks to understand how their peacebuilding initiatives, in varied cultural and political contexts, have created positive impacts through collaborative approaches. We hope this issue will help identify pathways to sustainable peace—leading societies and cultures towards meaningful coexistence through non-violence, firmly grounded in strong ethical values.

Jacob Thomas
Editor

Peace begins with a smile.

- Mother Teresa

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MAKING PEACE SUSTAINABLE
THE STRUGGLE IN AFGHANISTAN

Peace cannot be imposed by external powers or a small elite; it must reflect the aspirations of the people themselves. **Inclusive governance is indispensable in societies fractured by ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions and injustices. Communities must see themselves represented in decision-making—not merely in a symbolic sense but as genuine participants.**

A complex web of historical and contemporary factors shapes the conflict in Afghanistan. For decades, Afghans have endured violence, loss of livelihoods, displacement, and fractured families. Living under the constant shadow of war has left deep societal scars. This cycle of violence has devastated communities, dividing them along political, social, ethnic, and linguistic lines. Although there were brief opportunities for peace, these were often squandered by leaders and elites pursuing power and resources for personal or factional gain.

One key reason the conflict remains intractable is the persistent involvement of regional actors and global powers. Lasting peace is unlikely while these interests are neglected. Exclusion often drives external actors to obstruct agreements, support proxies, or intervene militarily.

This pattern is evident in repeated failures of international accords and regime changes, including Geneva, Peshawar, Bonn, and the 2020 Doha agreements. The exclusion of key stakeholders—such as the Islamic Republic in the Doha talks—undermined both the credibility and durability of these efforts.

Local initiatives, however, have shown greater promise. The peace agreement with Hezb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, succeeded without foreign mediation, bringing armed opposition into mainstream politics. Similarly, the 2019 post-election settlement enabling government formation was another example of Afghan-led compromise.

At the grassroots level, traditional practices such as the Jirga, alongside cultural values of forgiveness, created space for reconciliation. The Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP) established provincial committees to resolve local disputes and support the reintegration of fighters. Yet, policy restrictions on engaging senior Taliban leaders at the time prevented a full integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches, limiting the potential for long-term peace.

Experience from Afghanistan and beyond shows that sustainable peace requires moral courage and commitment. Leaders must be willing to tell their supporters uncomfortable truths, compromise for the greater good, and place public interests above personal or political ambition. In Afghanistan, actors consistently prioritised narrow interests over national reconciliation and fair inclusion, perpetuating failure.

The design of peace processes and agreements must be grounded in a clear understanding of conflict dynamics, cultural values, beliefs, and local grievances. Credible mediators and facilitators are essential for sustaining dialogue and ensuring agreements remain inclusive and enforceable. Both the Geneva and Doha agreements demonstrate how flawed design and weak commitment to implementing these can trigger collapse.

The exclusionary character of the Doha deal, combined with inadequate enforcement, directly contributed to the breakdown of intra-Afghan negotiations before any settlement was reached, the fall of the Republic in 2021, and the onset of renewed crises.

Peace cannot be imposed by external powers or a small elite; it must reflect the aspirations of the people themselves. Inclusive governance is indispensable in societies fractured by ethnic, religious, or ideological divisions and injustices. Communities must see themselves represented in decision-making—not merely in a symbolic sense, but as genuine participants.

At present, the Taliban's monopoly on power reflects past mistakes, excluding women, civil society, and political groups. Their authoritarian rule erodes rights and silences dissent. It suppresses inclusive consultation and participation, enforces harsh restrictions on free expression, and is coupled with a lack of services, jobs, and justice. This disappoints the majority of the population and risks fuelling another cycle of conflict, if current policies continue.

Education is one of the most powerful tools for transforming societies plagued by chronic conflict. Schools and universities provide more than skills; they nurture critical thinking, tolerance, and hope for the future. Yet, in conflict zones, education is often the first casualty. In Afghanistan, women and girls—half of the population—are denied the right to learn and work. This denial is not only a violation of human rights, but a direct assault on the very foundation of peace.

> In Afghanistan, the road to sustainable peace remains steep, burdened by history and compounded by current realities. Yet, the resilience of its people has been proven time and again. **Afghans have endured decades of war, displacement, and hardship—and still they strive for hope, despite once again facing profound humanitarian and political crises, as well as large-scale forced deportations from neighbouring countries into an uncertain fate.**

Without access to education, young people become vulnerable to extremist manipulation, perpetuating cycles of poverty and violence. Economic opportunities are equally crucial. Jobs and livelihoods diminish the appeal of armed groups and give families a tangible reason to invest in a stable future.

Peace in Afghanistan has never been solely a domestic concern. Global and regional powers have repeatedly prolonged the conflict by supplying armed groups with money, weapons, and political support. Sustainable peace demands that these actors act not as rival powers, but as partners for stability. This requires cutting off support for extremist groups, engaging in fair diplomacy, and investing in long-term development, rather than pursuing short-term military gains.

Neighbouring States must recognise that instability in Afghanistan ultimately undermines their own security. Pakistan's support for the Taliban has backfired, with groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) now threatening its own stability. The lesson is clear: employing extremist proxies for strategic advantage weakens long-term security. Regional stability can only be achieved through dialogue, mutual respect, and collective responsibility.

For more than four decades, Afghanistan has endured an imposed culture of violence, propagated through extremist ideologies and institutions such as radical madrassas. Reversing this requires an equal investment in cultivating a culture of peace. Families, schools, communities, poets, musicians, elders, and religious leaders must all contribute to creating a narrative that unites rather than divides people.

The Afghan diaspora dialogue offers a valuable example. Initiatives such as this, supported by the University of Melbourne's Initiative for Peacebuilding, bring together Afghan men and women to create shared narratives of reconciliation, drawing lessons from other societies that have overcome division. Such cultural and intellectual work is essential to replacing suspicion with unity and building a shared vision for the future.

In Afghanistan, the road to sustainable peace remains steep, burdened by history and compounded by current realities. Yet, the resilience of its people has been proven time and again. Afghans have endured decades of war, displacement, and hardship—and still they strive for hope, despite once again facing profound humanitarian and political crises, as well as large-scale forced deportations from neighbouring countries into an uncertain fate.

At the same time, international humanitarian support has been reduced to a bare minimum, particularly following the cessation of USAID programmes, leaving returning families in an extremely vulnerable position. The path to lasting peace in Afghanistan must be anchored in a legitimate constitutional end state that protects the rights of all citizens—including women and minorities—and is founded on transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance.

This can be achieved through facilitating a multilayer dialogue. The details of the Multilayer Dialogue and Action framework are explained in my policy brief, Islam, Inclusive Governance and the Quest for Peace, published by the Initiative for Peacebuilding at Melbourne University, which can be accessed here:

(https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/5349254/Islam,-Inclusive-Governance-and-the-Quest-for-Peace-Policy-Brief.pdf)

Peace begins with the recognition that the fate of one nation is intertwined with that of all. It endures when justice, inclusion, opportunity, moral courage, and solidarity move from aspiration to action. It will flourish when every individual—from the most powerful leader to the most vulnerable person—believes that even the most difficult circumstances can change. That tomorrow can, indeed, be better than today.

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EXPERIMENTING WITH A SKILLS-BUILDING APPROACH TO NONVIOLENT PEACE EDUCATION

INSIGHTS FROM BOSTON COLLEGE'S FAITH, PEACE, AND JUSTICE PROGRAM

Peacebuilding is a constructive approach to conflict that addresses the root causes of injustice by encouraging dialogue, repairing relationships, and transforming institutions and structures. It attempts to de-escalate conflict before it erupts into violence, to mitigate and bring violence to an end, and to restore communal life in the wake of political violence.

Nonviolent peace education is imperative in our current context, which is characterized by conflicts resulting in the loss of human life, destruction of homes and infrastructure, migration crises, environmental degradation, traumatization of entire generations, and the use of finite resources to perpetuate violence at the expense of education and integral development.

Through nonviolent peace education, it is possible to transition from cultures that promote violence to cultures that embrace peace. Peace education is not simply the acquisition of information, but also, the formation of values and dispositions that enable individuals to become peaceful agents of social transformation.

Liberative curricula of nonviolence ought to be rooted in the principle of human dignity and informed by praxis. This essay examines how the Faith, Peace, and Justice program of Boston College, through its "Becoming Nonviolent Peacebuilders" initiative, compliments peace education with a constructive nonviolent, skills-based approach.

A robust peace curriculum brings together the insights of peacebuilding and nonviolence. Peacebuilding is a constructive approach to resolving conflict that addresses the root causes of injustice by encouraging dialogue, repairing relationships, and transforming institutions and structures. It attempts to de-escalate conflict before it erupts into violence, to mitigate and bring violence to an end, and to restore communal life in the wake of political violence.

Nonviolence is not merely a strategy of peacebuilding, but a way of life whose foundation is the Gospel. Pope Francis said, "nonviolence is… the attitude of one who is so convinced of God's love and power that he or she is not afraid to tackle evil with the weapons of love and truth alone."[1]

Pope Leo XIV makes the connection between nonviolent education and peacebuilding explicit. In his June 17, 2025 Address to the Italian Episcopal Conference the pope stated, "I hope, then, that every diocese may promote pathways of education in non-violence, mediation initiatives in local conflicts, and welcoming projects that transform fear of the other into an opportunity for encounter. May every community become a "house of peace", where one learns how to defuse hostility through dialogue, where justice is practiced, and forgiveness is cherished."[2]

Because humans are created in the image and likeness of God, we possess dignity and rights that are constituted through right relations with others. Human dignity informs our understanding of respect, empathy, and compassion. Additionally, liberation theologies add praxis as a proper criterion for the meaning of nonviolent peace education. Knowledge is valuable but, in itself, may not be sufficient to move people to action. Praxis-education, education for nonviolent resistance, and service-learning involve students in the concrete work of peacebuilding. Critical pedagogy links the educational project to the community, questioning social, economic, and political events in order to take a stand against acts of injustice.

Education is not neutral; it is either for subjugation or liberation. A guiding question for peace education ought to be, how do we become more authentic, relational, informed, and skilled agents of nonviolent peacebuilding and how does this better our life in community with others? This requires a hands-on, praxis-based approach rooted in encountering the human dignity of the other. This model provides the knowledge and skills to address the causes of violence, challenge systems of oppression and injustice, and empower individuals to become agents of positive change.

Boston College's Faith, Peace, and Justice program has piloted a program aimed at incorporating nonviolent skills-building-workshops into its peace education curriculum. The Faith, Peace, and Justice minor provides nonviolent peace education rooted in human dignity and informed by praxis. It offers students the opportunity to explore, in an interdisciplinary manner, how their own concerns about social injustice are related to the concrete work of promoting peace and justice in the world.

In February 2025, the program launched "Becoming Nonviolent Peacebuilders," which is a series of training workshops designed for students, faculty, staff, and the broader community to develop constructive nonviolent peacebuilding skills. These workshops are being offered with the generous support of internal founding from the Institute for the Liberal Arts and in conjunction with the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative (CNI). CNI is a programme of Pax Christi International and focuses on promoting active nonviolence as a core Gospel value.

These workshops strive to cultivate the habits and skills necessary to transform fractured human relationships. The topics to be explored throughout the first two years of trainings include: nonviolent communication, active

Boston College's Faith, Peace, and Justice programme has piloted a program aimed at incorporating nonviolent skills building workshops into its peace education curriculum. The Faith, Peace, and Justice minor provides nonviolent peace education rooted in human dignity and informed by praxis.

bystander intervention, restorative justice, unarmed civilian defense, and developing strategic nonviolent campaigns.[3]

Nonviolent Communication is a form of compassionate communication that can help de-escalate and transform interpersonal conflicts by focusing on addressing unmet needs through actionable requests. Active Bystander Intervention and De-escalation focuses on assessing, de-escalating, and diffusing harmful behavior by confronting aggressors with nonviolent methods.

Restorative Justice is a trauma-informed set of practices that engage the community in building relationships and repairing harm through inclusive dialogue and shared decision-making. Unarmed Civilian Protection is a compassionate, nonviolent strategy for protecting civilians and reducing violence in conflict situations through public demonstrations and accompanying those in danger of violence.

Finally, Developing Strategic Nonviolent Campaigns allows participants to learn about the components of strategic vision, strategic campaign goals, theories of social change, and SMART campaign objectives.

The goal of "Becoming Nonviolent Peacebuilders" is to offer members of the Boston College community the opportunity to develop habits in order to become better nonviolent peacebuilders and become a leading nonviolent training hub among Catholic universities serving the broader academy and Church.

There is a growing body of research demonstrating that Catholic higher education wields substantial influence on fostering peacebuilding and mitigating conflicts through its educational initiatives. While the Faith, Peace, and Justice program is just beginning its experiment with "Becoming Nonviolent Peacebuilders," it aspires to achieve positive outcomes attributable to the fundamental values endorsed in the Catholic approach to nonviolent peace education.

Through an intentional focus on human dignity and praxis-based skill-building, the program hopes to generate empathy towards others, a stronger sense of community responsibility, commitment to social justice, and provide a further catalyst for student engagement in nonviolent peacebuilding initiatives.

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References

1 Pope Francis, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace," Fiftieth World Day of Peace, January 1, 2017.

2 Pope Leo XIV, Address of the Holy Father to the Italian Episcopal Conference, June 17, 2025.

3 The descriptions of the trainings come from the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative's training hub descriptions. https://paxchristi.net/cni-about-us/



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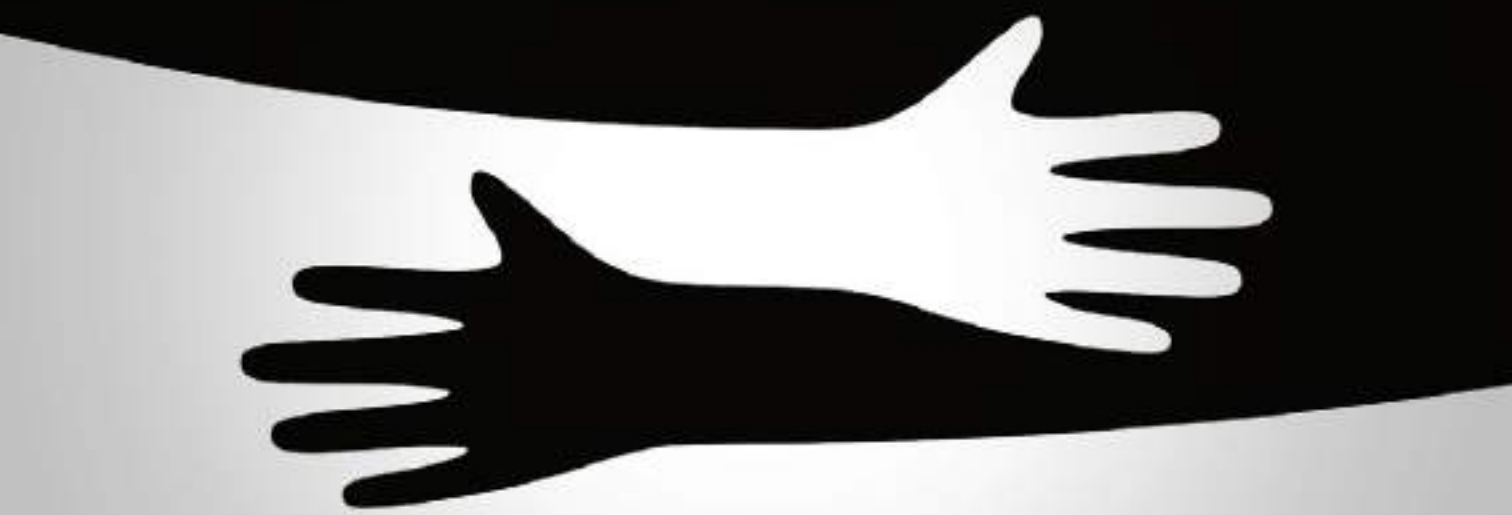
THE **REGIONAL INSTITUTE** ON THE **STUDY** AND **PRACTICE** OF **STRATEGIC NONVIOLENT ACTION** IN THE **AMERICAS**



The presence of authoritarian governments, drug trafficking, organised crime, economic inequality, gender discrimination, and racism, among other factors, leads to injustice, restrictions, and human rights violations .

Latin America is considered one of the regions with the highest rates of direct and systematic violence in the world. The presence of authoritarian governments, drug trafficking, organised crime, economic inequality, gender discrimination, and racism, among other factors, leads to injustice, restrictions, and human rights violations. In response to these issues, solutions have emerged not only from formal institutions but also from ordinary people.

Nonviolent action, also referred to as "nonviolent resistance" or "civil resistance," relies on the organisation of civil society groups. United by common goals, these groups develop strategies to challenge and provoke authorities, regimes, or policies deemed unjust. While the nonviolent activism of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela remains iconic, it does not fully reflect the realities of Latin America. In this regard, the Regional Institute on the Study and Practice of Strategic Nonviolent Action in the Americas provides visibility to nonviolent initiatives in the region.

The Institute results from a strategic alliance established in 2018 between two Ecuadorian academic institutions: FLACSO–Ecuador and the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (PUCE), a member of the International Association of Jesuit Universities (IAJU), with administrative support from an NGO. Through this alliance, both online and in-person capacity-building programmes are offered in Spanish and Portuguese to activists, community leaders, members of civil society organisations, academics, students, and the general public interested in strategic nonviolent action.

Between 2018 and 2020, annual in-person courses on strategic nonviolent action were held in Quito in Spanish and English, attracting participants from across Latin America. However, in the 2020 edition, on Thursday, 12 March, activities were abruptly interrupted following the Ecuadorian government's decree suspending academic activities and closing international borders and airports to curb the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, several participants were unable to return to their countries immediately. FLACSO

and PUCE established a support network to address the basic needs of international students, including accommodation and food.

Adapting to the new context, virtual courses in Spanish have been offered twice a year since 2021, including asynchronous training. Since October 2024, the same online programme has also been available in Portuguese. Since its inception, the Institute has received more than 1,200 applications, with 750 participants from 31 countries.

Additionally, with the support of Rotary International, initiatives in nonviolent action developed by participants themselves have been supported in Haiti, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico, enabling many to access a training-of-trainers process.

The Institute has an official website https://flacso.edu.ec/accionnoviolenta/ through which it disseminates learning and the exchange of experiences in Latin America through a network of activists and academics. It also maintains a presence on social media: https://www.facebook.com/accionnoviolenta and https://www.instagram.com/accionnoviolenta/.

The Institute collects and disseminates lessons learned from concrete nonviolent actions

undertaken by activists, as well as findings from research on strategic nonviolent action in the region. These are shared through the blog En Movimiento (In Movement), which features over 97 publications on realities in 16 countries; the podcast Relatos de la Resistencia Noviolenta (Tales of Nonviolent Resistance), available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, with more than 57 publications covering 19 countries; a monthly newsletter; academic articles; and seminars conducted in both English and Spanish.

These initiatives have been made possible through financial, technological, and human support from organisations such as the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), Humanity United, and Partners Global, among others.

The diversity of nonviolent action across the region reflects the richness of strategies and tactics employed by communities to address their specific challenges.

The Institute focuses on promoting the study and dissemination of a wide range of nonviolent campaigns. These include efforts defending the environment, democracy, indigenous rights, student activism, anti-corruption initiatives, cyberactivism, economic non-cooperation, and resistance against authoritarian governments and insurgent groups.

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Some campaigns have achieved historical consolidation, such as the nonviolent struggles of indigenous movements in Ecuador. Others have gained transnational resonance, like the Chilean feminist anthem A Rapist in Your Path. Still others have enabled various groups, neighbourhoods, and communities to survive, subsist, and, in some cases, overcome violence.

The Institute seeks to highlight these successful campaigns to understand the particularities, methods, and experiences of Latin America. In doing so, it presents viable alternatives for peace in the region.

Nonviolence makes social participation visible. It strengthens civil society, affirms commitment to democracy, and promotes conflict transformation, contributing to the construction of a culture of peace.

As a fundamental pillar of such a culture, nonviolence must be disseminated, taught, protected, and reinforced through emancipatory education and training. This approach not only raises awareness of conflict contexts but also helps people recognise that they have a voice against injustice. Shared values, goals, and ideals can resonate across societies, making actions towards peace visible through processes of resistance and struggle.

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ONE HEART, ONE COMMUNITY

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION AT COLEGIO SAN IGNACIO IN VENEZUELA

Given the complex Venezuelan reality, and in a context where hopelessness and fragmentation seem to grow stronger each day, Colegio San Ignacio has sought to create spaces for encounter, reflection, and action. Inspired by the call of Father General Arturo Sosa, S.J.—an alumnus of our school—to respond to the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, the institution has committed itself to fostering hope and unity. In this spirit, a number of initiatives have been carried out to promote peace and reconciliation:

Ignatian Week

This week offered an opportunity to deepen Ignatian identity and to highlight the distinctive traits of the Society of Jesus. The central theme this year was Reconciliation, presented under the motto "One heart beats in us all." Its purpose was to encourage the restoration of relationships among individuals and groups, as well as to nurture inner peace and a stronger connection with God.

Inspired by St Ignatius of Loyola, reconciliation was presented as a spiritual journey that demands both perseverance and openness to divine love—a call to transform our lives so that we may grow in harmony with God, ourselves, and others, reflecting Christianity's central message of forgiveness and peace.

To raise awareness and inspire participation, texts and images on reconciliation were shared through physical and digital platforms with students, teachers, and families. These were accompanied by daily prayers, which offered values-based reflections to motivate the entire educational community. Similarly, the morning prayer guides, the Ignatian pause (the examen at day's end), and the liturgies of the Eucharist during the week all revolved around the theme of reconciliation.

Inspired by St Ignatius of Loyola, reconciliation was presented as a spiritual journey that demands both perseverance and openness to divine love—**a call to transform our lives so that we may grow in harmony with God, ourselves, and others, reflecting Christianity's central message of forgiveness and peace.**

A highlight was a discussion led by Fr Javier Contreras, S.J., Political Scientist and Coordinator of the Reconciliation Network of the Venezuelan Province, together with Dr Juan Salvador Pérez, Director of Revista SIC (Centro Gumilla, the Jesuit Centre for Research and Social Action in Venezuela – CIAS).

The session brought together 105 participants, including students, teachers, families, and alumni, and provided a meaningful space for dialogue, reflection, proposals, and the search for solutions to address the pressing need for reconciliation in Venezuela and beyond.

Peace Mediators

This programme strengthens the school's mission by empowering students to act as promoters of peace, dialogue, respect, and courtesy. Elected by their peers, Peace Mediators help to resolve conflicts among students and serve as a bridge to teachers. They also run awareness campaigns on issues such as violence, bullying, and coexistence at school. Their election by fellow students gives them a special legitimacy, enabling them to exercise moral authority in the community.

School Patrols

Established with the support of the Chacao Municipality in Caracas, School Patrols consist of students trained to encourage civic values, discipline, and responsible traffic behaviour within the school grounds. Their presence is essential: they welcome members of the community with courtesy, assist the security team, and set an example of positive conduct through their kindness and attentiveness.

In collaboration with Centro Gumilla, a study was conducted to assess levels of violence, socio-emotional variables, and institutional climate at Colegio San Ignacio. Surveys were carried out with 785 participants: 301 alumni, 150 teachers, and 334 parents and guardians of students aged 9 to 18. The evaluation considered school and social violence, exposure to violence, cyberbullying, psychological well-being, lifestyle, parenting styles, and school climate.

The study reached several general conclusions: the incidence of violence is low; bullying and

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cyberbullying are not widespread concerns; students feel their parents provide them with effective tools and strategies; there is strong parental identification with the school community; families value their sense of belonging; the school climate is rated positively; families perceive a strong alignment with the values promoted by the institution; and teachers remain open to opportunities for improvement.

In addition, we highlight two initiatives dedicated to the Care for Our Common Home, implemented at the school in line with the four Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, as promoted by Father General Arturo Sosa. These projects specifically address the preference "To Care for Our Common Home" and also contribute to reconciliation by fostering a renewed and respectful relationship with creation.

Tree Care Project: The school has 175 fruit and forest trees from thirty-three species,

both native to Venezuela and introduced from other regions of the world. An inventory and description of all tree species on campus was completed by sector. Phytosanitary treatment was applied to the wooded areas, removing parasites and cleaning trees, walls, roofs, fences, and surrounding spaces.

Additionally, ten new trees were planted. The pruning and irrigation systems were improved with new equipment and staff training. As a result, the number of birds visiting the campus—including Caracas macaws—has grown, while squirrels, opossums, and iguanas now live freely in the school's green spaces.

Ecological Patrols

These are student volunteers who raise awareness about environmental care, rational use of resources, and pollution reduction at both local and global levels. Within the school, they promote responsible water use, recycling, and waste reduction.

Colegio San Ignacio is clearly committed to forming individuals who are conscious, competent, compassionate, and committed to peace, reconciliation, and the care of life and our Common Home. All these initiatives, as described above, invite the participation and leadership of students, supported by teachers and families. Their goals are educational and rooted in the Ignatian mission of the Society of Jesus, aiming to prepare children and young people to become agents of change in a society that needs them.

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PEACE ACCORDS MATRIX AND ITS PEACE-BUILDING WORK IN MINDANAO

PAM seeks to provide empirical insights into peace process implementation for academics, policymakers, and civil society, thereby strengthening their work in peacebuilding. **PAM maintains a database of 42 post-Cold War intrastate Comprehensive Peace Agreements, with implementation data disaggregated by provisions and tracked over a ten-year period from the date of signing.**

Armed conflicts are becoming increasingly difficult to resolve due to the easy availability of weapons, deepening societal divides, and technologies that amplify misinformation. While peacebuilders have been adapting locally-grounded approaches to bridging divides and addressing conflicts, their efforts could be more effective if comparative research insights on peacemaking and implementation were more readily accessible.

With this conviction, the Peace Accords Matrix (PAM), housed at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs, USA, provides research-based insights into peace processes along with innovative, state-of-the-art tools for monitoring peace implementation.

This brief piece focuses on the analysis generated by PAM's work in Mindanao, Philippines (PAM-M), particularly in collaboration with its partner civil society organisations (CSOs) in monitoring the implementation of the Normalisation Annex of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

PAM seeks to provide empirical insights into peace process implementation for academics,

The Peace Accords Matrix – Mindanao, a collaboration between the Kroc Institute and Catholic Relief Services - Philippines, empowers Bangsamoro civil society organizations to monitor 40 stipulations of the Normalization Annex, integrating community perspectives to ensure accountability and transparency in the peace process.

policymakers, and civil society, thereby strengthening their work in peacebuilding. PAM maintains a database of 42 post-Cold War intrastate Comprehensive Peace Agreements, with implementation data disaggregated by provisions and tracked over a ten-year period from the date of signing.

Academics, policymakers, and peacebuilders on the ground use PAM data to navigate and better understand the complexities of peacebuilding across cases. PAM researchers also contribute policy inputs tailored to specific contexts, drawing on the data and applying it in practice.

Within the peacebuilding community, PAM is perhaps best known for its Barometer Initiative, which carries the primary responsibility for technical verification and monitoring of the implementation of Colombia's 2016 Final Accord, ending 52 years of armed conflict. This marked the first time a university-based research project had played such a direct role in supporting the implementation of a peace agreement, and the first time researchers had measured the implementation of a peace accord in real time.

PAM's analysis provides an independent, objective, and non-partisan perspective on the status of implementation, enabling stakeholders, implementing agencies, the international community, civil society, academics, and peacebuilders to identify options for improvement and to address emerging challenges.

In 2022, PAM received another mandate with Catholic Relief Services–Philippines (CRS) to develop a monitoring and verification system for the Joint Normalization Committee, responsible for the Normalization Annex in the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). The Kroc Institute had been working in Mindanao for many years on various peacebuilding projects in collaboration with CRS–Philippines.

The CAB consists of a political track and a normalisation track. Over the last eleven years, significant progress has been made in the political track, exemplified by the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and the first regional elections scheduled for October 2025.

For its research rigour, PAM was asked to design a monitoring and verification system for the implementation of the Annex on Normalisation. The implementation of this Annex has encountered greater challenges, including the decommissioning of former combatants (the process by which they transition to productive civilian life), reconstruction of conflict-affected communities, redeployment of armed forces, transitional justice and reconciliation, among other priorities.

The peace process, built on decades of negotiations and centuries of conflict, faces a watershed moment in 2025. **At this critical juncture, it will be essential for the Philippines' allies to demonstrate strong support for the implementation of the CAB, laying the foundation for a more stable and secure future.**

PAM–Mindanao, or PAM–M, is known for its exemplary partnership with civil society organisations (CSOs). Following a series of consultative workshops, in 2024 CSOs operating in Mindanao created and finalised a monitoring methodology with PAM's technical assistance. The aim was to incorporate community perspectives on both progress and challenges in implementing the Normalisation Annex. Since then, this platform has published two substantive reports on the implementation of the agreement, focusing on 40 stipulations identified by organisations as the most urgent and relevant to their communities.

To briefly summarise the findings of both reports: all dimensions and components of the Normalisation Annex in the CAB that were analysed showed at least some level of implementation activity observed by CSOs in their communities. Most of the stipulations that have been fully implemented relate to the establishment of security institutions and posts.

However, implementation lags in areas such as socio-economic issues affecting MILF combatants, rehabilitation and reconstruction of conflict-affected communities, Women, Peace and Security commitments, and the recommendations of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC). Gaps also remain in understanding and carrying

Signing of peace deal agreement between the Moro Islamic Liberati.
Photo © picture alliance / dpa / Dennis M. Sabangan

out the amnesty process, confidence-building measures, and the full disbanding of private armed groups.

CSOs have praised the strong commitment of both the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the MILF to securing the peace process. At the same time, they affirm that both sides can do more to mobilise existing and potential resources to support processes that communities can see and feel directly. Out of their commitment to accompany the successful implementation of the CAB, CSOs call for firm dedication from both the GPH and the MILF to hold regular dialogues where obstacles and challenges can be addressed openly.

The GPH, the MILF, and other peace process stakeholders agree that the successful implementation of the Normalisation track is key to lasting peace in Mindanao. Stakeholders recognise the urgent need to fast-track normalisation commitments and to monitor and verify progress objectively through an independent and credible process.

The peace process, built on decades of negotiations and centuries of conflict, faces a watershed moment in 2025. At this critical juncture, it will be essential for the Philippines' allies to demonstrate strong support for the implementation of the CAB, laying the foundation for a more stable and secure future.

PAM-M provides opportunities for stakeholders to discuss pressing issues in real time, using objective data, and to develop pathways towards sustainable peace in the region. In an era of growing misinformation and fragmentation, access to accurate information becomes a source of empowerment. Impartial monitoring, community-based accountability, and transparency are crucial for all stakeholders—particularly the signatories and other duty-bearers—to honour their commitments to peace and to their communities.

Melinda Davis is a Research Associate with the Peace Accords Matrix programme in Mindanao. She has previously worked with the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and interned at the Holy See's Mission to the UN.

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HWPL STEPS TOWARD PEACE FROM SOUTH KOREA

In this movement, Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) has advanced practical initiatives for reconciliation and peace. **Grounded on four pillars—international law, education, religion, and civic participation—HWPL works to address the root causes of war and to institutionalise a culture of peace.**

HWPL Peace Education

Today, many regions of the world continue to suffer from wars, conflicts, religious strife, and social divisions. Despite the tragedies and sacrifices of the past century, humanity still faces the shared task of achieving sustainable peace. In this context, the international community seeks not simply to "end conflicts temporarily" but to move towards "permanent peace through reconciliation and institutionalisation."

In this movement, Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL) has advanced practical initiatives for reconciliation and peace. Grounded on four pillars—international law, education, religion, and civic participation—HWPL works to address the root causes of war and to institutionalise a culture of peace. Its journey began on 25 May 2013 with the Proclamation of World Peace in Seoul, Republic of Korea, which declared that "an international law is necessary to end wars and achieve lasting peace."

At the World Alliance of Religions' Peace Summit in September 2014, held in Seoul, former and current Heads of State, international law experts, religious leaders, and youth and women representatives gathered and agreed to pursue the drafting of an international law for peace.

This was more than a declaration; it was a solid foundation. After eighteen months of study and discussion, on 14 March 2016, fifteen international law experts, together with HWPL, proclaimed the Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW), comprising 10 Articles and 38 Clauses.

The DPCW offers a comprehensive legal framework built on three pillars: conflict prevention (Articles 1–5), mediation and resolution (Articles 6–7), and the promotion of sustainable peace (Articles 8–10).

Since then, the Declaration has gained growing recognition within the international community, with five States offering formal support. The Pan-African Parliament (PAP), representing 55 African nations, adopted a resolution in favour of the DPCW and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU). This affirms that "peace is not merely an abstract slogan, but a task that can be pursued as an international consensus."

To put Article 10 of the Declaration of Peace and Cessation of War (DPCW), "Spreading a Culture of Peace," into practice, HWPL has been conducting peace education programmes. To date, HWPL has signed MOUs and MOAs with 619 educational institutions across 89 countries, and thousands of teachers have completed peace educator training to deliver classes to their students. The curriculum equips learners with practical skills in areas, such as conflict resolution through dialogue, respect for diversity, and the cultivation of human rights, solidarity, and responsibility.

Through these programmes, teachers and students embrace peace not as an abstract knowledge, but as a lived value. In classrooms especially, peace is spreading not as theory, but as a habit of action. Students learn cooperation within their communities, and develop the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully, laying a foundation for future generations to choose peace over conflict.

HWPL World Peace Declaration Monument

Religion has historically played both roles of peace and conflict. While wars and disputes have often been waged in the name of faith, all sacred texts contain shared values of harmony, respect, and peace. Since 2014, HWPL has operated the WARP Offices (World Alliance of Religions' Peace Offices), which now function in 285 locations across 131 countries.

Religious leaders meet regularly to compare scriptures and engage in dialogue, preventing conflict and fostering understanding. These offices are not merely academic forums, but platforms for reducing distrust and building trust among faiths. Representatives of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Confucianism, and others affirm through dialogue that, despite doctrinal differences, their ultimate goal is peace.

Extending beyond religious circles, these efforts also support reconciliation in local communities by easing tensions among neighbours of different faiths. Youth and women leaders join these dialogues, ensuring an inclusive discourse on peace across generations and genders.

Such initiatives have moved beyond declarations to produce tangible reconciliation in local settings. A notable example is the peace process in Mindanao, Philippines. On 24 January 2014, a civilian peace agreement ceremony was held in General Santos City, co-hosted by HWPL, the International Women's Peace Group (IWPG), and the International Peace Youth Group (IPYG). Around 300 participants—including citizens, politicians, religious leaders, academics, and students—attended.

Peace is not merely a present duty we must protect but also a universal heritage to be passed on to future generations. **It is therefore not a choice but a necessity, and the actions we take today will shape the history of tomorrow. Only when governments, international organisations, civil society, and the media unite can peace take root as an irreversible current of our time.**

The principal signatories, Archbishop Emeritus Fernando Capalla of Davao and Governor Esmael Mangudadatu of Maguindanao, pledged to end hostilities and work together for peace. Since then, Mindanao has witnessed annual peace walks on 25 May, interfaith dialogues, and educational initiatives, with government and religious leaders collaborating for reconciliation among ethnic and religious groups.

Today, the Philippine Department of Education has formally adopted peace education in schools, reflecting Article 10 of the DPCW in national policy. Mindanao thus stands as an invaluable example for conflict regions worldwide. Citizens who once endured the consequences of violence chose reconciliation themselves, and through education and dialogue, they are shaping new generations—proving that "peace is possible."

Reconciliation and peace cannot be achieved through declarations alone. They become possible only when international law, peace education, interreligious dialogue rooted in understanding and respect, and local agreements are combined in practice. Over the past decade, HWPL has pursued peace through these four pillars and will continue advancing humanity's shared task: the realisation of peace.

Peace is not merely a present duty we must protect, but also a universal heritage to be passed on to future generations. It is, therefore, not a choice but a necessity, and the actions we take today will shape the history of tomorrow. Only when governments, international organisations, civil society, and the media unite, can peace take root as an irreversible current of our time. HWPL will continue working in solidarity with the international community to move beyond ending wars, and to build a sustainable order of peace.

For this reason, peace is not the responsibility of particular leaders or organisations alone, but the mission of the global family, in which everyone must become a messenger of peace. The media and all sectors of society must consistently report and share these efforts so that the value of peace may spread without ceasing. Ultimately, peace is a common story for all humanity to write together, and it is we who must open its first chapter today.

ANNA LEE, Secretary of Public Relations, Heavenly Culture, World Peace, Restoration of Light (HWPL), South Korea.

INTERVIEW

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A **BATTLE** FOR **INDIA'S SOUL**

CONVERSATION WITH **HARSH MANDER**

The most important step is to avoid undesirable interventions. **The government is, on the one hand, engaging in activities such as building tunnels that weaken the structure of the Western Ghats, increasing the risk of landslides. Then they speak of preparedness and warnings—it's absurd.**

Harsh Mander, a distinguished former IAS officer, author, and social activist, has dedicated his life to advocating for India's most vulnerable communities. His journey from the corridors of power to the grassroots of social justice is a compelling narrative of conscience and courage. In this exclusive interview, we explore his motivations, his pioneering Karwan-e-Mohabbat initiative, and his incisive reflections on the challenges confronting India's secular fabric.

1 Mr. Mander, thank you for joining us. Your career path took a remarkable turn from serving as an IAS officer to dedicating yourself to public service. Could you elaborate on the factors and motivations that prompted this transition in 2002?

I had spent nearly two decades in the IAS, working largely in the tribal districts of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and later teaching at the training academy in Mussoorie. I valued my time in the service—there was much I could attempt and many battles I fought.

But in 2002, I witnessed the Gujarat massacre, in which Muslim women and children were targeted in vast numbers. Having dealt with communal violence before, I knew no riot lasts beyond a few hours unless the State allows it. In Gujarat, the violence raged for days and weeks across almost 20 districts. This was no riot; it was a state-sponsored massacre, brutally directed against citizens for their religious identity.

That moment altered the course of my life. I realised India was heading in a deeply troubling direction. As a civil servant, I could fight many battles within the constitution, but this was different. The government itself seemed to be challenging constitutional principles. I could not remain part of such a system. I knew I had to defend India's secular democracy and the constitutional rights of minorities, and that I could do so only as an independent citizen.

2 Your initiative, the Karwan-e-Mohabbat or Caravan of Love, has gained considerable attention. Could you discuss its core objectives, key activities, and the response it has received?

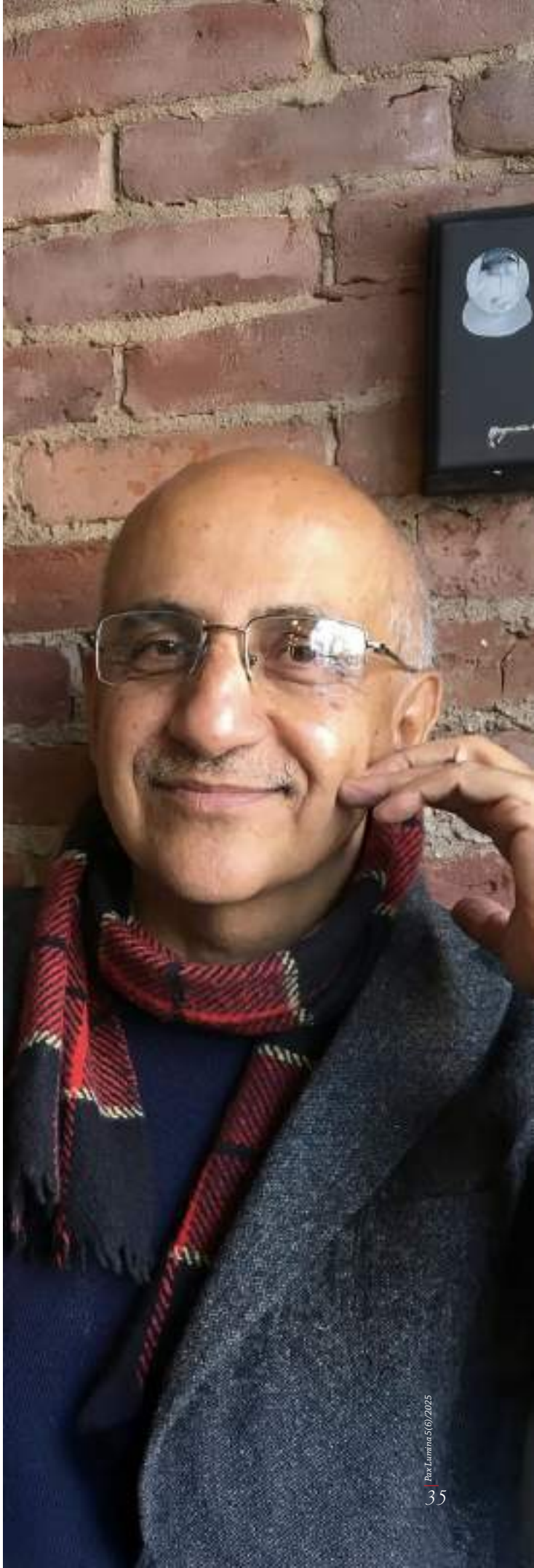
After leaving the service, I worked for years seeking justice for survivors of the Gujarat massacre. But the phenomenon of lynching under the Modi government was something new. Lynching is targeted hate violence, different from riots. It is closer to a performative act: a crowd gathers to beat someone to death on the pretext of religious hatred. These acts are often filmed and circulated, instilling immense fear in minority communities.

I felt this demanded a societal response. Inspired by Gandhiji's belief that hate cannot be countered with hate but only with what I call "radical love," we launched the Karwan. In September 2017, I invited citizens to join us. We began in Assam, where a horrific lynching had occurred, and travelled across the country for a month, stopping at lynching sites, concluding on Gandhiji's birth anniversary in Porbandar. The journey was so powerful it never ended—we have since undertaken more than 50 such journeys.

Whenever we visit a family, we do four things. First, we tell them they are not alone. Second, we seek forgiveness for what we have become as a society. Third, we pledge to stand with them as they rebuild their lives and pursue justice. And fourth, we promise to tell their story. In this way, despite many challenges, the caravan continues its journey.

3 Could you provide an analysis of the challenges faced by religious minorities in India today, particularly Muslims and Christians?

We must understand the crisis these minorities face in light of the ideological project of the RSS. The Indian freedom struggle, led by Mahatma Gandhi and supported by leaders such as Subhash



That moment altered the course of my life. I realised India was heading in a deeply troubling direction. As a civil servant, I could fight many battles within the constitution, but this was different. The Government itself seemed to be challenging constitutional principles. **I could not remain part of such a system. I knew I had to defend India's secular democracy and the constitutional rights of minorities, and that I could do so only as an independent citizen.**

Chandra Bose and Babasaheb Ambedkar, was united by one principle: we would build a country where every religion, caste, and language enjoyed equal citizenship.

The RSS and Hindu Mahasabha stayed away from this struggle. Their battle was not against the British but against what they called the "enemy within"—Muslims and Christians. Their ideology holds that Muslims and Christians cannot be equal citizens because their holy lands, their Punya Bhumi, lie outside India. They must therefore leave or live as second-class citizens. With the RSS now occupying most high constitutional positions, attacks on Muslims and Christians have become deeply alarming. These are not merely attacks on communities but on the Constitution itself and its promise of equal citizenship.

The strategies differ. Muslims face physical violence in the name of the cow, "love jihad," or infiltration. Christians, particularly in Adivasi areas, are targeted with allegations of "forced" conversions through the quality education and healthcare provided by missionaries. These are assaults on their religious freedoms.

4 How do laws like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and anti-conversion laws potentially undermine constitutional guarantees of religious freedom? What reforms do you suggest?

Citizenship was central at the time of Partition. Leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, and Ambedkar were clear: India would belong equally to all who chose to make it their home. This began to shift under the Assam movement and later the Vajpayee government, which introduced the requirement that one's parents also had to be legal residents.

This reversed the principle of justice: normally the state must prove guilt, but here citizens must prove their citizenship—often with documents the poor do not possess. After the NRC exercise in Assam excluded 1.9 million people, only 400,000 of them Muslims, the government introduced the CAA. This law presumes that anyone without papers is a persecuted minority from a neighbouring country who can be granted citizenship—unless they are Muslim. This fundamentally alters the idea of belonging. The nationwide protests in 2019 showed resistance, yet the government continues to push this agenda, even illegally "pushing back" Bengali-speaking Muslims across the border.

5 Hate speech has become a pervasive issue. How effectively are the media and public intellectuals able to counteract it?

Hate speech has spread like a cancer. People openly call for genocide and, far from facing punishment, are often rewarded with election tickets. Kapil Mishra, whose hate speeches fuelled the 2020 Delhi violence, is now a minister in the Delhi Government. Five years later, no FIR has been registered against him.

We must treat hate speech far more seriously. A Holocaust survivors' organisation, It Started with Words, reminds us that the Holocaust did not begin in gas chambers but with hate speech from leaders like Hitler. In our work at Karwan-e-Mohabbat, we have resolved to challenge major cases of hate speech in the courts. Civil society, too, must step up and act.

6 In your book Looking Away, you explore the indifference of the affluent towards marginalised communities. What is your assessment of India's progress towards social and economic equality today?

I am deeply worried about the privileged classes in India—the rich and middle classes, largely of upper-caste identity. Our sense of concern, solidarity, or compassion for disadvantaged people is almost absent. I would place India's middle and upper classes among the most uncaring in the world. We have developed the ability to witness immense suffering and injustice and simply turn away. A Holocaust survivor once said the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. We are striking examples of this indifference.

In Manipur

The absence of outrage and protest—whether about Gaza, Manipur, lynchings, or attacks on churches—is profoundly troubling. I must also note the silence of much of the Christian religious leadership. On our Karwan journeys, my colleague John Dayal found that in almost every case of a Muslim being lynched, the nearest church establishment failed to reach out. This lack of solidarity is a serious problem. At times, the leadership even seems to cosy up to the RSS and BJP, which is not only ethically wrong but also practically suicidal.

7 How should India redefine secularism in the 21st century to accommodate its diverse identities without favouring any single group?

Indian secularism is very different from, say, French secularism. In France, secularism may mean discouraging a young woman from wearing a hijab in a classroom. In India,

Peace Rally

> Indian secularism is very different from, say, French secularism. In France, secularism may mean discouraging a young woman from wearing a hijab in a classroom. **In India, it means defending her right to wear it. Our secularism does not deny religious faith; it ensures equal respect for every faith, and also for those without faith.**

it means defending her right to wear it. Our secularism does not deny religious faith; it ensures equal respect for every faith, and also for those without faith.

It is about the freedom to be yourself—what you wear, what you eat, who you love, how you worship. This personal freedom should only be limited by what we call

Harsh and John Dayal

constitutional morality. If religious beliefs contradict constitutional principles—say, by upholding inequality between men and women or between castes—then constitutional morality must prevail. Within those boundaries, each of us should enjoy the freedom and assurance that we belong equally, without condition.

8 What constructive solutions, from policy reforms to grassroots initiatives, would strengthen constitutional principles in India?

We must begin with ourselves. Each of us should question the prejudices we carry against people of other faiths or castes. In my book Partitions of the Heart, I argued

Mahatma Gandhi

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

Subhas Chandra Bose

that we are now witnessing a million partitions within our own hearts, families, and friendships, created by hate and prejudice.

We must resist this. We must stand in solidarity with anyone facing oppression or discrimination, and demand more from the leaders of our communities and political parties. If you are truly a follower of Christ, for instance, you must be radical in your solidarity with the oppressed. The struggle begins by confronting hate in our personal spaces, workplaces, and on social media, and by insisting that our leaders uphold the principles of equality and justice enshrined in our constitution.

9 Finally, for organisations and individuals working at the grassroots to promote peace and reconciliation, what practical suggestions would you offer to build bridges between communities?

That is a vast subject, but I can offer a few starting points.

First, solidarity must be universal. Wherever we are, we must stand with all who are oppressed—whether a Dalit being persecuted, an Adivasi displaced from their land, a Muslim attacked, or a Christian priest harassed. We must defend each with equal commitment and passion. That is the true beginning.

Second, we need to create inclusive local spaces. I have spoken of Samvidhan Kendras (Constitution Centres), or Gandhi-Ambedkar Centres. These would be places in every village and neighbourhood where young people from all communities can gather. With libraries and recreational activities, their core purpose would be to bring together Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, Adivasis, women, and persons with disabilities. At a time when walls between communities are rising, such centres would work to dismantle them, fostering unity through shared activities and discussions on constitutional values.

Finally, I propose a large-scale interfaith programme to feed the hungry and homeless. Can we bring together Sikhs—with their long tradition of the langar—along with Christians, Muslims, and Hindus for food charities? Caste and religious divisions are often revealed most starkly in the refusal to eat together. If we can break that barrier, using the shared act of a meal as an entry point, we may begin to build genuine religious harmony.

10 Those are excellent, practical ideas. Mr Mander, thank you for your time, your generous insights, and your unwavering commitment to justice and humanity. We have much to reflect upon. Your work is truly an inspiration.

Thank you.

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CONFLICTS AND PEACEBUILDING IN INDIA'S JHARKHAND

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Bagaicha Social Centre

This article argues that sustainable peace emerges not from abstract ideals alone but when historical injustices are sincerely addressed and the rights of deprived communities are fully respected and upheld. **The Bagaicha Social Centre, established and run by the Jesuits in Jharkhand, India, has been consistently engaged in restoring the rights of Adivasi peoples in the light of human rights, the Indian Constitution, and UN conventions on indigenous peoples.**

The so-called "modern" notions of liberal democracy and the rule of law as essential foundations for a peaceful world order appear increasingly illusory. The world continues to witness State-sponsored democide—the mass killing of a nation's own population and the gross failure of governments to protect human rights—even amid vigorous economic growth, technological advancement, and the avoidance of large-scale international wars. Still, the belief persists that the spread of liberal democracy or the curbing of totalitarianism is vital to realizing humanity's deepest aspirations for truth, justice, freedom, peace, and security.

This article argues that sustainable peace emerges not from abstract ideals alone but when historical injustices are sincerely addressed and the rights of the deprived communities are fully respected and upheld. The Bagaicha Social Centre, established and run by the Jesuits in Jharkhand, India, has been consistently engaged in restoring the rights of Adivasi peoples in the light of human rights, the Indian Constitution, and UN conventions on indigenous peoples.

Father Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest and a champion of Adivasi rights, dedicated himself since 1991 to the study of Adivasi history, the fight for self-determination, and the implementation of their special rights. **His foresight and relentless efforts led to the institutionalization of a platform for people's movements: the Bagaicha Social Centre, established in 2006.**

Swamy before a stone plaque at his centre in Bagaicha, Ranchi. The names of Adivasi martyrs are inscribed on the pillar.

The article traces the context and trajectory of historical processes that have pitted opposing worldviews against one another and perpetuated systemic deprivation of Adivasi social formations (mainland India's indigenous communities). It also examines how Bagaicha has worked to foreground the constitutional rights of Adivasis and other historically marginalized groups, despite the backlash that inevitably follows any challenge to deeply entrenched structures of unequal power.

Predominantly Adivasi regions of the Chotanagpur plateau—spanning parts of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh—are hilly, densely forested, and rich in mineral deposits. The Adivasi (indigenous) populations made these lands habitable by clearing forests and establishing villages. Over time, local rulers or rajas—emerging either from within or imposed externally—established syncretic relationships with these indigenous social formations.

Adivasis lived in a symbiotic relationship with nature, maintaining egalitarian social structures among totemic lineages with communal land stewardship. Initially, their interactions with rajas and indigenous chieftains involved symbolic salamis (occasional gifts), exchanged for protection against external enemies.

Gradually, however, salamis hardened into exploitative structures: forced corvée (unpaid labour), land grants by rajas to brahmanas (who popularized Ramkathas, versions of the Ramayana), and malgujari (land tax) imposed by rajas and jagirdars (land revenue beneficiaries). These developments reflected the growing influence of Brahmanical ideology rooted in the caste system of the alluvial Gangetic plains.

Stan Swamy

Brahmanical ideology—what Dr. B. R. Ambedkar famously described as "graded inequality"—asserted the purity of the powerful and wealthy, the impurity of the labouring masses, scriptural sanctions, strict caste endogamy, and the doctrines of karma and dharma. This intruded upon and disrupted the more egalitarian Adivasi social structures, forcing many communities into deeper, less accessible hills and forests. British colonial rule further intensified these exploitative dynamics. Repeated Adivasi uprisings eventually compelled the colonial State to acknowledge Adivasis' distinctive and sustainable modes of production, cultural values, customary practices, and ethnic identities. This led to the demarcation of Adivasi ethno-territories, intended to shield them from the predations of non-Adivasi exploiters, whom Adivasis called dikus (outsiders).

The demarcation of Adivasi territories, along with constitutional and legal safeguards, became the foundation for recognizing the distinctiveness of Adivasi social formations. These protections are enshrined in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution, and reinforced by laws and rulings such as the Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana Tenancy Acts, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, the Samata Judgment of the Supreme Court (1997), the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Supreme Court's ruling that "the owner of the land is the owner of the sub-soil minerals."

Yet, despite these provisions, the Indian State—responsible for upholding them—routinely violates these safeguards with impunity. The result has been chronic civil unrest and near war-like conditions in India's predominantly Adivasi and mineral-rich regions.

Restoring justice to Adivasis, whose ethno-territories have been colonized by the State–corporate nexus in India, has remained a central concern for those who truly cared to understand them. Fr Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest and a champion of Adivasi rights, dedicated himself since 1991 to the study of Adivasi history, the fight for self-determination, and the implementation of their special rights. His foresight and relentless efforts led to the institutionalization of a platform for people's movements: the Bagaicha Social Centre, established in 2006.

Like Jaipal Singh Munda, the great Adivasi leader, he believed that justice was essential for lasting peace and reconciliation. He worked to forge unity among people's movements, studied and exposed instances of violation of rights, brought them to the attention of State authorities, and demanded remedies and restorative justice through peaceful, democratic, and legal means.

However, his work directly challenged the shadow nexus of brahmanical, corporate, bureaucratic, mineral, and land-mafia–based political actors. Determined to silence him, they sought to eliminate Stan Swamy, whose engagements obstructed their interests. He was falsely implicated in the high-profile Elgar Parishad case, incarcerated, denied a fair hearing for bail, and ultimately killed by COVID-19 infection, due to the denial of timely medical treatment, inside Mumbai's Taloja Central Jail on 5 July 2021. Yet, his life and legacy continue to inspire many of us.

Bagaicha continues to highlight and strengthen the histories of Adivasi-Dalit-Bahujan communities **—the deprived majority social formations of India—whose democratic and heroic struggles have always centered on dignity and self-determination.**

Lalgarh Movement

Bagaicha continues to address issues of human rights violations, join people's movements demanding their entitlements, and study concerns affecting the lives of the marginalized communities, such as unjust displacement caused by mining, land alienation, and environmental pollution.

New challenges have emerged with the rise of Hindutva movements—an ideology of corporate Hindu majoritarian ethnic nationalism that seeks to erase Adivasi and Dalit identities. Hindutva aims to unite all "Hindus" while refusing to confront its own deeply exploitative structures of caste and class inequality. It seeks to replace the Constitution of India with the Manusmriti—a text that legitimizes graded inequality based on caste and class divisions.

It also attempts to erase both the memory of oppression and the proud legacy of Adivasi struggles against internal colonialism, struggles that demanded self-determination and secured special constitutional and legal rights. These rights safeguard their distinctive sociocultural identity and dignity as India's indigenous peoples.

Bagaicha continues to highlight and strengthen the histories of Adivasi-Dalit-Bahujan communities—the deprived majority social formations of India—whose democratic and heroic struggles have always centered on dignity and self-determination. The Constitution of India assures all citizens and communities equity, justice, freedom, and fraternity.

The challenge lies in making these promises a reality in our everyday lives and relationships. Bagaicha's peaceful and democratic struggle to fulfil these constitutional guarantees will persist. Only this path can bring lasting peace to Jharkhand and to the country as a whole.

PM Antony is the Director of Bagaicha.

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LAYERS OF VIOLENCE AND LAYERS OF POSSIBILITIES

A LESSON FROM CHAMBAL VALLEY

Pax Lumina 5(6)/2025/45-50

This article is written with two considerations. First, I focus on one region in India, the Chambal Valley in the north, once notorious for violent gangs of gun-toting Dacoits. Second, I introduce what I call the 'layers of violence' that ordinary people face daily. **My reflections draw on personal experience in Chambal from the 1970s to the present. I believe persistent nonviolence opens new possibilities, which I hope will interest readers of Pax Lumina.**

This article is written with two considerations. First, I focus on one region in India, the Chambal Valley in the north, once notorious for violent gangs of gun-toting Dacoits. Second, I introduce what I call the 'layers of violence' that ordinary people face daily. My reflections draw on personal experience in Chambal from the 1970s to the present. I believe persistent nonviolence opens new possibilities, which I hope will interest readers of Pax Lumina.

The mass surrender of Dacoits in Chambal in 1972 is often hailed as a triumph of nonviolence. People frequently ask me: "How did you speak with these men in the jungle?" Nearly 600 Dacoits—more politely, bandits—laid down arms voluntarily, without police coercion. How did it happen, and what lessons does it hold for today's armed rebels?

Hundreds of Gandhian workers camped in the valley for long stretches, travelling across rough terrain. Around 600 Dacoits operated across three States on either side of the Chambal River. Persuading them to surrender became possible after the Central Government agreed to commute the death penalty to life imprisonment.

With this assurance, and under Jaiprakash Narayan's leadership, Gandhian workers began peacebuilding in Chambal. Police and State officials from Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan cooperated, and the region was declared a Peace Zone for the first time in independent India, creating an environment, conducive to dialogue.

Dacoits Phoolan Devi and Man Singh after the surrender

After two years of sustained effort, the historic mass surrender took place on 14 April 1972. The Dacoits laid down their weapons before a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi in Joura, 25 kilometres from Morena, followed by further surrenders at Bhateswar in Uttar Pradesh and Talabshahi in Rajasthan.

Dacoit Malkhan Singh met Government officials before his surrender

After being part of this process for many years, one question repeatedly haunted me: did the surrender of so many Dacoits truly end violence in the region? The simple answer is no. Gun violence may have declined, but structural violence has endured. The economically and politically powerful continued to oppress the marginalised poor, particularly the Adivasi communities, who live hand-to-mouth and face daily humiliation.

Gradually, it became painfully clear that those opposed to the armed violence of the Dacoits were against violence only because they were its victims. The violence suffered by the Adivasi did not concern them, as they were not directly affected. This highlights an important truth: opposition to violence can be highly selective. If it does not affect me personally, it is not considered violence or my concern. A popular slogan that emerged later captured this insight: "Violence anywhere and in any form should concern all people, everywhere."

During a padyatra (foot-march) in Chambal, I wrote an article titled Layers of Poverty. I argued that the poverty of groups like the Sahariya Adivasis resembled peeling an onion: the deeper one went, the more intense the misery, and it was often impossible to hold back tears. Imagine being an Adivasi, landless and dependent on the forest, yet barred from entering it by laws that labelled you a thief. If caught by officials, you needed money to bribe them.

For women, the situation was even more harrowing—they could be coerced into giving sexual favours, compromising their dignity. Travelling through these areas, I constantly heard such stories and witnessed the profound loss of human dignity. Helping people emerge from such deprivation, and instilling the confidence to challenge forces of marginalisation, was a Herculean task.

To address the problems of the Sahariya Adivasis, I began running youth leadership training programmes in small towns. One I recall was in Sheopurkala, on the border of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Fifty local youths participated in a week-long programme. To my surprise, only about half of them attended regularly. Yet, on the days they did come, they arrived very early—long before the camp's routine activities began.

When I asked why their attendance was irregular and why they came so early on some days, their response was deeply disturbing. Many were bonded labourers from nearby villages. They had to travel under the cover of darkness to reach the camp. If caught by their masters, they were forced to work in the fields. They had no freedom of movement. It took years of effort before we could help release them from bondage.

Many civil society groups receive international support for valuable work. Does the source of the money make the work good or bad?

I believe the real measure is the intention and commitment to improving the lives of suffering people. In a globalised world, many governments themselves accept international funds.

Consider another case: a powerful man occupied the land of a poor Adivasi woman. He claimed she had willingly gifted it and produced documents to prove his claim. In this region, fabricating documents and signatures was common. While the law prohibited the sale of Adivasi land, various government offices actively facilitated its alienation.

Ekta Parishad was the principal organisation advancing work among marginalised communities from 1980 onwards. Government officials and political parties were displeased that ordinary people were protesting government policies, holding rallies, and demanding rights over forests and forest produce.

Dacoit Malkhan Singh before his surrender

Awareness-building and mass mobilisation among Adivasis were uncommon in a system accustomed to violence. The response was immediate, often taking the form of false rumours and wild accusations. Those who had welcomed the end of armed violence in Chambal now opposed to work with Adivasis, failing to recognise it as a non-violent struggle.

It is unjustifiable to claim that violence is acceptable when perpetrated by oneself, but unacceptable when inflicted on others. This is a widespread problem. We see it in the way Jewish suffering during the Holocaust is recognised as violence, while the suffering of the innocent Palestinians, often, is not.

Let me address some common allegations against those supporting mass mobilisation of the marginalised communities. The first is that such initiatives are foreign-funded. I ask: what is wrong if genuine agencies support pro-people, pro-poor activities?

Many civil society groups receive international support for valuable work. Does the source of the money make the work good or bad? I believe the real measure is the intention and commitment to improving the lives of the suffering people. In a globalised world, many governments themselves accept international funds.

Officials may argue that funding carries an ideological bias. But why hastily suspect the integrity of voluntary sector workers? Many experienced social workers have a long record of serving communities in need. They continue to uphold Mahatma Gandhi's words, spoken just

three days before his assassination: "India has won political freedom, but India has yet to win social, economic, and moral freedom." Without the voluntary sector and committed social workers, who will carry these ideals forward?

A second allegation is that awareness-building and mobilisation are anti-development. But what is development? True development requires cooperation, participation, and respect for natural resources. Those wishing to form informed opinions must ask how much of development has prioritised profit for a few at the expense of millions and the planet.

Social workers who channel communities' capacity and wisdom to solve their own problems create new possibilities. Mobilising the most marginalised rests on the belief that economic and social improvement for all begins with empowering the least advantaged. History shows that those who stand with the marginalised groups are often discouraged, demoralised, or punished. Yet they hold a vital key to a world of possibilities.

The third argument concerns misinformation aimed at disrupting well-meaning groups. Yuval Harari, in Nexus, highlights the role of 'bureaucracy' in spreading misinformation. The term, from bureau meaning a closed office, describes a system that hoards information instead of sharing it. Centralised control like this is detrimental. Yet, many governments assume a single department knows all about social organisations. Such assumptions must be challenged, especially when bureaucrats or politicians accuse the organisations addressing the needs of the marginalised communities.

Having outlined these obstacles, I turn to nonviolent techniques used by the marginalised communities to influence policymakers. One key method is the padayatra (footmarch). Walking is accessible and cost-free for poor people, who have marched thousands of kilometres before governments took notice. Notable examples include 3,500 kilometres across India in 1999, 25,000 people marching from Gwalior to Delhi in 2007, and 100,000 people marching to Agra in 2012. These marches involved enduring heat and cold, eating only one meal a day, and sleeping on the road. Between 1999 and 2018, Sahariya Adivasis and others protested the unjust policies, demanding pro-poor reforms in land and livelihood resources.

Malkhan Singh (sitting at front, centre) and his much-feared gang in his home village before surrendering

Twenty years of nonviolent struggle did not go entirely unnoticed. Some policy changes were achieved, and their impact is visible in people's lives. **Travelling through the Chambal region, one can meet many who speak confidently about how nonviolent social movements brought tangible change.**

Chambal

Twenty years of nonviolent struggle did not go entirely unnoticed. Some policy changes were brought in, and their impact is visible in people's lives. Travelling through the Chambal region, one can meet many who speak confidently about how nonviolent social movements brought about tangible change.

Can poor and the marginalised people practise nonviolence? My experience with Adivasi communities shows they can, often more steadfastly than the so-called educated or middle classes, who struggle with suffering and sacrifice, whereas the poor accept it as part of life.

The poor took radical steps to ensure the success of their actions. They collected one Rupee daily in a clay pot for years, creating a common fund, and families contributed a handful of rice each day to feed participants of month-long marches, such as the Gwalior-Delhi padayatra. These simple acts were radical statements: poverty would not prevent them from achieving policy change. They also invited broader public support, challenging those who claimed to stand with the poor. The success of nonviolence depends on people's determination to endure suffering and sacrifice. While the middle classes initiated nonviolence in Chambal, it was the poor who carried it to its logical conclusion.

I have long argued that indirect violence breeds direct violence. We often focus on visible forms of violence while ignoring invisible ones. Developing awareness of structural or indirect violence opens up new possibilities.

Chambal's experience shows that ordinary people can perceive how violence is constructed, layer by layer, and can dismantle it, if the environment allows. By deconstructing violence and envisioning alternatives, we can move towards a world order founded on justice and peace.

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INTER FAITH FORUM SEEKS HEALING AND RESTORATION IN MANIPUR

The Forum fixed 2nd October 2025 as foundation day for a World Peace Centre in Manipur and to launch a One Year Youth Peacebuilding Fellowship program with a national seminar on "Politics as freedom from violence". **This occasion will mark the beginning of a long-term peacebuilding engagement from below as the world celebrates the 156th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi as also the UN International Day of Nonviolence. It is by providence that the day also coincides with Vijayadashami - the Hindu festival celebrating triumph of Good over Evil.**

On 3rd September 2025, the Interfaith Forum Manipur (IFM), in a press conference held in Imphal, made two major announcements: first, to establish a World Peace Centre in Manipur; and second, to launch a one-year locally sponsored Youth Peacebuilding Fellowship Programme.

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Interfaith Forum Manipur may be seen as a reincarnation of an earlier interfaith initiative about three decades ago in the state. Interfaith in an multiethnic and multicultural society like Manipur is a geographical destiny of this hills-valley state. Manipur, a hill state at an altitude of 750 MSL, is a territory of a native state comprising of ranges of hills (covering 90% land areas) surrounding a small oval-shaped central valley (10%) tilting gently towards the south forming one of the largest freshwater bodies, the Loktak Lake, in the south-easterly Himalayas.

The central fertile valley drained by three river systems has been the destiny of many migrating tribes and groups of people since earlier times. Just as streams and rivers drain the hills into the lake, making the valley more abundant, so too, did waves of tribes settle here. From the earliest settlements, the valley served as a crucible of composite population and culture, shaping an independent native State that bridged eastern and western civilisations.

Today, Manipur is home to 34 scheduled tribes, along with the Meetei and other minorities. The valley is predominantly inhabited by the Meetei, while the tribes in the hills have historically migrated into the valley and integrated into mainstream society. All groups communicate in Manipuri, the official language and historical lingua franca.

Successive kings fought for supremacy and ruled the fertile valley, enriching its cultural heritage by integrating waves of tribes as recorded in the King's chronicle since 33 AD. The earliest indigenous religion, Sanamahi continues to coexist with Hindu Gouriya traditions and Islam. Though Hinduism and Islam do not share a common place of worship, Meetei Hindus and

Muslims still venerate Sanamahi in a sacred corner of every household—a unique cultural practice illustrating unity in diversity.

However, the valley's composite culture declined after more than 130 years of instability and the absence of a powerful ruler during the colonial and modern periods. Christianity, which arrived in the 1890s, spread mainly in the hills, while the valley remained predominantly Hindu. By natural law, what arises in the hills flows to the valley, yet in the absence of unifying leadership, exclusive communities of Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other spiritual groups emerged without meaningful interaction, deepening stereotypes and mutual suspicions. It is, in this context, that spiritual leaders stepped forward to create the Interfaith Forum in Manipur.

Swami (Dr) Damodar Singh, who founded the ISKCON temple in Imphal, began connecting religious leaders across the valley during the 1980s and 1990s, continuing into the first decade of the 2000s. Under his leadership, a regional Cooperation Circle of the United Religious Initiatives was established at the ISKCON temple in Imphal, bringing together leaders from diverse religions for regular meetings.

A landmark interfaith rally was held on the streets of Imphal in 2000 to mark the UN's International Year of Culture of Peace and Nonviolence. However, after Swami Damodar was assassinated by armed militants in 2016, the interfaith forum weakened.

After a gap of seven years, the Interfaith Forum Manipur (IFM) emerged on 5 June 2023, when Archbishop Emeritus Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati Diocese began reaching out to equally concerned leaders of different faiths in Imphal.

The first meeting was convened at the Manipur Cultural Integration Conference (MCIC), Palace Compound, on 5 June 2023, a month after violence erupted. The gathering resolved to respond collectively to the unfolding human tragedy that was once again dividing and displacing communities in the valley along religious and ethnic lines—the first such clash having occurred in 1992.

Interfaith Forum Manipur – Phase II, now comprising 15 religious, faith, and spiritual communities, stands strong after signing a covenant of interfaith solidarity on 15 August 2025. The Forum is committed to restoring the State's composite cultural heritage through dialogue and understanding, while initiating grassroots peacebuilding as a long-term effort.

At the heart of this initiative, lies the conviction that religions are a stronger unifying force than ethnic identities. Religions themselves do not fight; it is people who do. If followers of different traditions are grounded in core values—love, compassion, and respect for nature—then religions can only meet in solidarity, ensuring peaceful coexistence rooted in mutual respect and environmental care. This vision calls for recognising the sovereignty of each religion within a shared sovereignty, enabling collective influence on politics to foster an environment conducive to peace.

In line with this vision, IFM held a press conference on 3 September 2025 to announce the launch of the following initiatives on Vijayadashami, coinciding with Mahatma Gandhi's 156th Birth Anniversary and the International Day of Nonviolence on 2 October 2025:

By natural law, what arises in the hills flows to the valley, yet in the absence of unifying leadership, exclusive communities of Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, and other spiritual groups emerged without meaningful interaction, deepening stereotypes and mutual suspicions. **It is in this context that spiritual leaders stepped forward to create the Interfaith Forum in Manipur.**

1. Foundation of a World Peace Centre, Manipur – An institutional response to the State's long history of wars and violence, honouring thousands of soldiers who died in Manipur during WWII, as well as countless victims of recurring conflicts, including the elderly, women, and children still suffering in relief camps.

2. National Seminar on "Politics as Freedom from Violence: Exploring Philosophical and Theological Perspectives" – A gathering of religious leaders and university professors. Alongside, four to five parallel panel discussions are planned for students and research scholars on sub-themes such as: The Second Freedom – Moral, Social and Economic: Stories from South India; Vision India and Manipur 2030; Climate Change and Indigenous Rights; Political Aspirations and Hill–Valley Ecological Integrity in Manipur; and Women's Participation in Conflicts and Peace Processes.

3. Launch of the Youth Peacebuilding Fellowship Programme (2025–26) – The first batch of 100 young peacebuilding professionals will be trained over three years. Through customised academic and training modules, fellows will gain skills

in community-level peacebuilding, peace education across informal and formal sectors, and mobilisation of local resources for sustainable peace, security, and development.

Peacebuilding as a collaborative effort initiated by the interfaith collective in Manipur is a historic step and reflects citizens' fundamental duties in a democratic nation. This initiative requires broad support from all sections of society across India, from government and like-minded people overseas, particularly Great Britain and Japan, who ended the Second World War in Manipur.

It is also timely, given the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. The initiative resonates with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030, on which the Government of India has based its Vision India 2030, echoed by similar State-level visions, including Manipur's.

The IFM initiative also aligns with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which stresses preparing younger generations as 'problem-solvers' through value education, critical and creative thinking, innovation, life skills, empathy, and respect for culture and the environment. Sustainable peace and development, both local and global, lie at the heart of SDG 2030 and UNESCO's Culture of Peace programmes.

Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the constant support and inspiration of Acharyasri Sachidananda Bharathi, founder of Deiva Kripa Ashram, who initiated transformative movements including the Greater India Movement, within which Manipur was identified as a pilot project for establishing a World Peace Centre.

Acharyasri also honoured me with Acharya Deeksha to advance the peace mission across India from Manipur. I also thank Rajagopal PV and Jill Carr-Harish, founders of Ekta Parishad and Peacebuilders Forum India, along with many Gandhian and religious leaders and groups from across India, whose encouragement continues to inspire the small initiatives of IFM. I also acknowledge Shri D.R. Mehta, Founder and Chief Patron of BMVSS/Jaipur Foot and Shri Giridhari Singh Bapna, Gen Secy, BSS, Rajasthan for their tremendous support to hundreds of persons living with disabilities during the worst time of the conflict in Manipur. With their support, I hope these efforts will bear fruit in transforming the violent conflicts in Manipur into a role model of peace for the whole nation.

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STUDYING THE SELF-LOCATED IN CONFLICT

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In seminars, the next component of NESRC's work has been to bring intellectuals and peace activists together to better understand issues and form a regional network. Yet, their impact remained limited. After meeting once or twice a year, participants had little or no continuity of contact. **To address this, while continuing these gatherings, partner staff were encouraged to share summary reports with local leaders and intellectuals from conflict-affected communities, and to convene one-day dialogues.**

What makes peace possible and sustainable is the extraordinary human capacity to transcend self-interest through empathy, cooperation, dialogue, and self-reflection. The North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati (NESRC) believes that peacebuilding is a long and gradual process. Therefore, NESRC experiments with peacebuilding through collaborative research, dialogue, and training—always mindful that change does not happen overnight, and that reconciliation is an ongoing journey.

This article offers a brief account of NESRC's peace efforts: its history, current reflections, and the dialogues and conversations it fosters through collaborative meetings, peace research, and activism. These efforts are pursued through four interrelated objectives:

1. Assisting the staff of five partner organisations in conducting research.
2. Publishing their findings in book form.
3. Preparing, when possible, a popular report for circulation among community leaders and intellectuals in conflict areas, and helping partners bring such leaders together for dialogue.
4. Organising professional regional seminars of researchers, scholars, and peace activists to build a network.

The Peace Studies Project in Northeast India (NEI) began in 2006 and has continued since, providing peace services to five partners in the region. Its first initiative was to study one conflict each year in the area of a partner organisation, thereby helping their staff develop analytical skills to support peace processes. Partner staff conducted the fieldwork and wrote reports with assistance from NESRC, and each report became a chapter in a book edited and published by NESRC.

An evaluation of this initiative revealed that research did help partner staff improve their analytical skills and, to some extent, their writing abilities. However, the studies often remained external to them. They examined conflicts involving their own communities, yet emotionally remained detached. The attitudes of tension toward other communities—shaped since childhood—remained largely unchanged.

The approach to research was, therefore, revised two years ago. Partner staff members began receiving training to reflect on their attitudes toward communities other than their own, facilitated through dialogue among staff from different groups. During these exchanges, they realized that although they maintained personal friendships across communities, their biases, stereotypes, and prejudices often mirrored those of their own communities.

To address this, efforts have been directed toward channeling these differences into deeper self-reflection aimed at fostering peace. They are encouraged to dialogue not merely as individuals, but as representatives of their respective communities. Responses varied from place to place—ranging from positive to neutral to defensive. Many acknowledged the need for change at the intellectual level, but struggled with it emotionally and socially.

Following this, partner peace activists undertook either short-term studies or longer, one-year projects. They receive support in writing their reports, and, when possible, in summarizing and translating them into local languages to share with leaders of the conflicting communities, with the goal of bringing them together.

The approach to these studies, and the shifts in attitudes that follow, differ from one place to another. At the same time, a concern has emerged: the risk of the peace project devolving into a series of activities with little or no long-term contribution to peace. To counter this, efforts are underway to help partner staff evaluate their activities—assessing to what extent they contribute to peace and identifying ways they can be improved.

In seminars, the next component of NESRC's work has been to bring intellectuals and peace activists together to better understand issues and form a regional network. Yet, their impact remained limited. After meeting once or twice a year, participants had little or no continuity of contact. To address this, while continuing these gatherings, partner staff were encouraged to share summary reports with local leaders and intellectuals from conflict-affected communities, and to convene one-day dialogues.

This approach has shown success in three out of five locations. In at least two of them, participants have suggested that such dialogues be held quarterly, bringing the same people together every three months, thus turning it into a slow but persistent long-term process.

Too often, the psychological dimension is overlooked, even though transformative processes demand reflection on the self. This reflection opens a window to the wider world, allowing the "other" to find space. **Yet this remains a challenge, as studying the self in conflict raises the deeper question of how selfhood connects to the larger phenomena of being and becoming as a community.**

NESRC has since emerged as a hub for research and action on peace. Its "series on peace" has produced 20 publications to date, all rooted in research and seminars. These works are gaining traction and selling out quickly. Each reflects the distinctive nature of conflicts and offers analyses of peace mediation methods. Yet, there is still a long journey ahead.

We recognize that to practise peace requires being rooted in a deeper phenomenological process—one that enables us to locate the self, the dynamics of being, and the experience of othering. In reflecting on conflict, people's emotional embodiment is often unsettled, forcing them to confront their own attitudes. Othering in discussions of peace is not new; what is new is examining how the abject-body formation of the "other" is produced, and in what subjective ways people come to objectify one another.

Both material and non-material realities shape the experience of violent conflict and its destruction. Too often, the psychological dimension is overlooked, even though transformative processes demand reflection on the self. This reflection opens a window to the wider world, allowing the "other" to find space. Yet, this remains a challenge, as studying the self in conflict raises the deeper question of how selfhood connects to the larger phenomena of being and becoming as a community.

The answer to what makes peace possible and sustainable lies in the act of trying. Peace is a long-term process requiring active reflection. Its sustainability must be endogenous, rooted in the very formation of community life. Research as a tool for peacebuilding is not new, but it can—and must—be adapted to the needs of people working within their own contexts. NESRC continues to take steps forward with the hope of evolving new pathways, experimenting, and walking alongside those committed to the work of peace.

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PEACEBUILDING THROUGH PEACE PARKS

Growing awareness of environmental conservation in an increasingly globalised context has led many regions to create transboundary conservation areas, often called Peace Parks. **These spaces allow unified management of ecosystems divided by national borders, helping to restore animal migration routes. They also promise tourism revenue, as visitors can enjoy a shared, cross-border environment. Beyond ecology and economics, Peace Parks serve as tools of eco-diplomacy, fostering trust and cooperation between nations.**

The 21st century is marked by rising conflict and violence. As of mid-2025, major ongoing disputes include the Russia–Ukraine War, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict with the Gaza war, civil wars in Sudan and Myanmar, and escalating gang violence in Haiti. Additional flashpoints include the Sahel region, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and renewed India–Pakistan tensions after militant attacks in Kashmir. These battlefields not only cause immense human suffering but also disrupt transboundary ecosystems.

A striking example is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, home to more than a third of Europe's biodiversity. Targeted strikes on Ukrainian industries by missiles, artillery, and drones have unleashed widespread pollution and ecological destruction. Ongoing fighting has also prevented proper assessment of the impact on wildlife.

Between 1950 and 2000, over 80% of major armed conflicts occurred in the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots, as studies in Conservation Biology reveal. These hotspots, often remote and inhospitable, lie along difficult borderlands. Conflicts in such areas have severely damaged biodiversity. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, warfare is the leading cause of animal population decline, sometimes intentionally, a phenomenon increasingly described as "ecocide."

Environmental devastation caused by war recalls the scorched-earth tactics of the past. Landmines, for instance, have maimed or killed elephants (Elephas maximus) along the Thai–Burma frontier, wild camels (Camelus bactrianus) in western China, tigers (Panthera tigris) in Cambodia, and water buffalo (Bubalus bubalis) in Vietnam. Elephants in Sri Lanka,

gazelles (Gazella spp.) in Libya, snow leopards (Uncia uncia) in Afghanistan, blue sheep (Pseudois nayaur) and musk deer (Moschus chrysogaster) in Kashmir, diverse species in Croatia, and mountain gorillas (Gorilla beringei) in Central Africa have suffered similar fates.

Growing awareness of environmental conservation in an increasingly globalised context has led many regions to create transboundary conservation areas, often called Peace Parks. These spaces allow unified management of ecosystems divided by national borders, helping to restore animal migration routes. They also promise tourism revenue, as visitors can enjoy a shared, cross-border environment. Beyond ecology and economics, Peace Parks serve as tools of eco-diplomacy, fostering trust and cooperation between nations.

The idea of Peace Parks was first introduced by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the 1980s. A Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) is defined as "a region that encompasses land from more than one country, connecting fragmented ecological habitats while fostering environmental and political stability." Differing interpretations by stakeholders, however, have led to uneven application. To ensure consistency, the Peace Parks Foundation sought support from the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), which in 1998 convened a panel of experts with the IUCN's Commission on Environmental Law. The panel drafted guidelines for transboundary protected areas, a code of conduct for peaceful times, and a global initiative for Peace Parks, including a Peace Parks Council.

The council's founding members were the IUCN, WWF, the Peace Parks Foundation, and the University for Peace in Costa Rica. The first Peace Park was the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, created by Canada and the United States in 1932, though worldwide momentum for such parks grew mainly in the 1990s. While generally seen as a promising conservation model, some initiatives—such as the Lower Orange River TFCA and the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park—have struggled due to limited community involvement, unresolved disputes, property rights issues, and militarised conservation, rather than flaws in the concept itself. Today, pressure to reconcile conservation with competing demands, along with the influence of the global neoliberal political economy, has renewed interest in Peace Parks worldwide.

In South Asia, India shares borders with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan. Its 3,323-kilometre boundary with Pakistan, including the disputed Line of Control (LoC), creates opportunities for Peace Parks. The Siachen Glacier—at over 22,000 feet the world's highest battlefield—has been a flashpoint between India and Pakistan, with heavy losses on both sides. Scholars often cite it as a potential site for a Peace Park.

With Nepal and Bhutan, no globally recognised Peace Parks exist, though proposals for a tripartite India–Nepal–Bhutan park have been made. **The Sacred Himalayan Landscape, spanning Nepal, India, Bhutan, and China, already demonstrates how cross-border collaboration can protect fragile ecosystems.**

Gilgit-Baltistan also offers promise for conservation and collaboration, contributing to the ecological balance of the Karakoram range. Khunjerab National Park in Pakistan's Hunza Valley, home to the Marco Polo sheep, faces threats from the Karakoram Highway, underscoring the urgency of joint management.

The Rann of Kutch and Sir Creek, sites of long-standing disputes, also hold potential for Peace Parks to enhance conservation, tourism, and shared governance of the estuary. With Nepal and Bhutan, no globally recognised Peace Parks exist, though proposals for a tripartite India–Nepal–Bhutan park have been made. The Sacred Himalayan Landscape, spanning Nepal, India, Bhutan, and China, already demonstrates how cross-border collaboration can protect fragile ecosystems.

Although India and Bangladesh do not yet have officially designated "peace parks," the Sundarbans stands as a strong example of a shared transboundary ecosystem with potential for such initiatives, as proposed by UNESCO and the IUCN. The two countries already collaborate through a Protocol to conserve the Royal Bengal tiger, holding regular meetings and developing joint management strategies for the Sundarbans. These efforts could lay the foundation for wider transboundary conservation in the form of peace parks.

All South Asian nations have joined or endorsed the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (India in 1977, Pakistan in 1976), underscoring their commitment to protecting sites of natural importance. In this context, cooperation across the region is essential, for South Asia is a single eco-geographic zone despite its political boundaries. Peace parks would not only safeguard ecosystems and ease regional tensions but also secure a safer future for generations. Peace is more than the absence of war; it is a condition where people live in mutual trust, with joy, energy, and hope.

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SEEKING DEPTH AND AUTHENTICITY IN A CONTRADICTORY WORLD

A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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By uniting human dignity with ecological survival, AHIMSA International stands as both a moral voice and an action-oriented platform, committed to a future rooted in compassion, justice, and non-violence. **This article examines its inclusive spiritual base from a Buddhist perspective.**

AHIMSA International is a platform dedicated to advancing the twin causes of Human Rights and Earth Rights, based on the conviction that true peace and prosperity can only be achieved when the dignity of people and the integrity of the planet are upheld together. Safeguarding the Earth's Rights—its ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural balance—is inseparable from protecting Human Rights. Guided by this vision, AHIMSA International engages in environmental conservation, climate action, and campaigns for sustainable policies.

It promotes peace by opposing wars and conflicts that harm humanity and the planet, and fosters interfaith dialogue to build mutual understanding. By uniting human dignity with ecological survival, AHIMSA International stands as both a moral voice and an action-oriented platform, committed to a future rooted in compassion, justice, and non-violence. This article examines its inclusive spiritual base from a Buddhist perspective.

We live in an age of paradox. Never have we been so globally connected, yet so spiritually fragmented. Technology grants access to ancient scriptures, virtual prayers, and distant teachers, yet wisdom remains scarce. Material wealth has increased, but spiritual poverty persists. People are constantly "online," yet rarely in touch—with themselves or others. This is not merely a lifestyle crisis, but a deeper crisis of meaning, a world adrift in a moral vacuum.

In these times, the Buddhist path offers a timely vision of Inclusive Spirituality.

Inclusive Spirituality is not simply the fusion of religions or practices. From a Buddhist perspective, it is rooted in universal truths: compassion, interdependence, mindfulness, and brotherhood, found at the heart of all traditions. It honours diversity while remaining anchored in inner clarity. It arises from non-attachment to identity, non-dogmatism, and an open-hearted respect for human experience.

The Buddha was not only a spiritual teacher but also a revolutionary voice of inclusion. In a rigidly divided society, he opened the Dhamma to all—ascetics and kings, outcasts and scholars, criminals and commoners—and notably welcomed women into the Sangha, an unprecedented move in 6th century BCE India. This radical inclusivity reflected a profound recognition of the shared spiritual essence of all beings.

As the Buddha said:

"Just as the great rivers lose their names and identities upon merging into the great ocean, likewise all beings, when they enter the Dhamma, are equal."

— Agganna Sutta, Digha Nikaya

The Buddha's spiritual inclusiveness was not merely social egalitarianism—it was a declaration of spiritual democracy. The Dhamma recognises no hierarchy of worth based on birth, class,

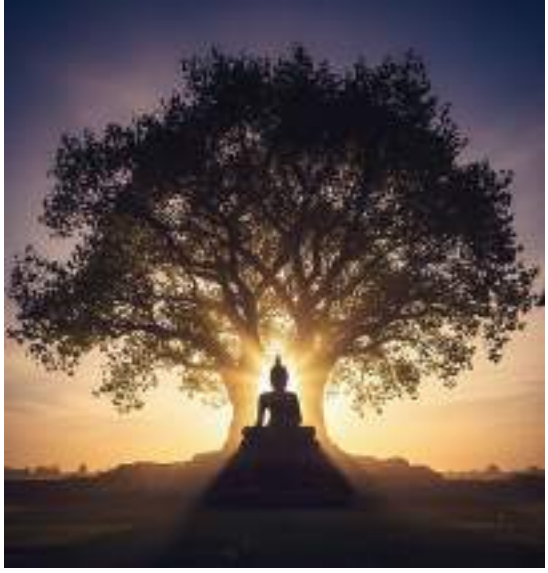
or gender. Its inclusivity stems from a deeper truth: all beings possess Buddha-nature—the innate potential for awakening, wisdom, and compassion.

Thus, the Buddha's Dhamma was not a sectarian fold, but a universal invitation—a home for all: the weary, the sincere seeker, the oppressed, the forgotten. In today's fractured world, divided by identity, religion, race, and ideology, the Buddha's vision reminds us that true spirituality is about inclusion, recognising the potential for awakening in every being.

In an age where spirituality is commodified, sacred practices often become spectacle. Wealth, and grandeur overshadow devotion; rituals become tokenistic displays, form without substance. The essence is lost amid pomp, and the message is drowned by the medium.

Buddhism offers a quiet, simple path—an invitation to depth over display. The Buddha's path is for inner cultivation, not exhibition. At its heart lie Sati (mindful awareness), Vipassana (insight), and Sīla (ethical conduct)—practices for authentic engagement with the world, fostering clarity, compassion, and discernment.

Buddhism does not ask for renunciation of life, but for conscious living—awareness of suffering and beauty in every moment. In a world captivated by spectacle, it gently reminds us of the essential: ethical living, a still mind, and a compassionate heart. The Buddha's path is a quiet revolution, a timeless return to simplicity, sincerity, and the transformative power of mindful presence.



The world today is full of conflict—between wealth and want, indulgence and deprivation, excess and emptiness. The Buddha's Middle Path (Majjhima Paṭipadā) offers a way to navigate these contradictions with balance, tolerance, and thoughtful inquiry. It avoids extremes, embraces complexity, and responds to challenges with wisdom and composure.

Buddhism has long promoted interfaith respect, ecological awareness, and social ethics. These are not modern adaptations but are central to its teaching. The principle of Metta (loving-kindness) extends to all beings. As the Dhammapada teaches:

"Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love. This is the eternal law."

Inclusive spirituality recognises that the sacred is not limited to texts or temples, but is found in listening deeply, acting mindfully, and living compassionately. It seeks to include, bridge, and connect rather than exclude.

At its core, the Dhamma is a gentle, inward journey toward wisdom and love. It requires no dogma or uniform belief, inviting each person to walk their own path with mindfulness and care.

In a fractured world, the Buddha's teachings remain a beacon—encouraging us to seek truth in shared humanity, and peace through compassionate engagement. Inclusive spirituality is a universal path, illuminated by wisdom, sustained by compassion, and open to all who seek depth and truth in a contradictory world.

Harsh Vardhan Umre, Founder, AHIMSA International, Human Rights-Earth Rights.

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NO PEACE WITHOUT WOMEN

A GENDER LENS ON PEACEBUILDING

Of the ten ASEAN Member States, only the Philippines, Indonesia, and Viet Nam have their respective National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). **Among these, the Philippines stands out with 25 years of experience in institutionalising the WPS agenda**.

There can be no peace without women, or so the saying goes. Yet data from 2023 showed the representation of women in peace processes remains strikingly low: only 9.6% as negotiators, 13.7% as mediators, and 26.6% as signatories to peace agreements. Progress in political representation has been slow as well. Globally, women's share of parliamentary seats rose from 11.3% in 1995 to 27.2% in 2025. So, where are the women?

International frameworks have increasingly sought to advance women's role in peacebuilding. In 2000, the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1325) recognised that women's experiences in war and conflict are matters of international peace and security. At its core, UNSCR 1325 emphasised women's full and equal participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response, and post-conflict reconstruction. It called for greater representation of women in decision-making, the adoption of a gender perspective in negotiating and implementing peace agreements, and protection from violence.

Ten years later, UNSCR 1889 further promoted women's participation in conflict resolution, post-conflict planning, and peacebuilding. It highlighted gender mainstreaming in recovery processes and the prioritisation of women's and girls' needs, including access to justice, education, and gender equality. UNSCR 2122 went beyond mere inclusion, emphasising women's leadership, timely conflict analysis with a gender perspective, increased participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations, and accountability for mass atrocity crimes against women and girls.

Subsequent resolutions continued this trajectory. UNSCR 2242 called for meaningful inclusion of women in peace negotiations, advancement of National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), funding of related initiatives, and integrating the WPS agenda with counter-terrorism and efforts to prevent violent extremism, ensuring women's leadership throughout. Finally, UNSCR 2493 in 2019 reiterated the call for timely support for women's full, equal, and meaningful participation at all stages of the peace process, gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and further advancement of the WPS agenda.

At the level of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda emerged relatively late, formalised in the Joint Statement on Promoting WPS in 2017. Key concepts highlighted in this statement included a culture of peace and prevention, addressing the root causes of conflict, gender equality, women's participation, and linking WPS to women's human rights.

The WPS agenda gradually gained institutional recognition in ASEAN through the Regional Study on Women, Peace and Security. A year later, the Regional Plan of Action (RPA) on WPS was adopted, outlining five strategic outcomes:

1. Protection of rights: Ensuring the rights of women, young women, and girls—including marginalised groups—are safeguarded in policies, practices, and institutions related to peace and security. This includes protection from all forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflict, post-conflict, peacebuilding, and humanitarian settings.

2. Participation and leadership: Promoting women's full, meaningful, and equal participation in institutions, organisations, and decision-making processes related to peace and security, including leadership positions.

3. Conflict prevention: Engaging ASEAN sectoral bodies, institutions, and Member States in global, regional, and national conflict prevention, as well as in preventing violence, disasters, and other threats to peace and security, with WPS principles, central to these efforts.

4. SGBV prevention: Ensuring peace and security institutions, mechanisms, and processes actively prevent sexual and gender-based violence.

5. Relief and recovery: Meeting the needs of women and girls in relief and recovery processes at regional, national, and local levels, while promoting their equal and meaningful participation, including in decision-making and leadership roles.

Institutionalisation at the domestic level remains challenging. Of the ten ASEAN Member States, only the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam have their respective National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). Among these, the Philippines stands out with 25 years of experience in institutionalising the WPS agenda.

The Philippines was the first country in Asia to launch a NAP WPS in 2010, led by civil society. Subsequent plans in 2014-2016 and 2017-2022 were government-led. In its latest iteration, the NAP WPS 2023-2033 was crafted jointly by the government and civil society.

The country also possesses the institutional infrastructure to implement the NAP WPS. The National Steering Committee on Women, Peace and Security, established through an executive order, provides strategic oversight. More recently, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU) led the creation of the Center of Excellence on Women, Peace, and Security in partnership with civil society and the academe.

Academic engagement with WPS has grown steadily. Mindanao State University-Maguindanao, with support from the Philippine Center for Islam and Democracy (PCID), offers WPS programmes. Meanwhile, Ateneo de Manila University has provided a graduate elective on WPS since 2017.

Globally, regionally, and nationally, progress has been made in advancing women's leadership in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Yet, institutionalisation must evolve into internalisation to fully reflect the growing leadership role of women in peace processes.

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WALKING THE PATH OF PEACE

CSSS AND THE PURSUIT OF HARMONY

Its vision is clear: to promote respect for religious and cultural diversity, uphold human dignity, and ensure social justice and empowerment for the most marginalised. **Guided by this vision, CSSS pursues its mission by defending human and minority rights, raising awareness through education, and protecting democratic values and institutions.**

There is a Chinese proverb that says, "Peace is not a destination, but a journey of a thousand steps." This idea captures the spirit of the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), based in Mumbai, which for over three decades has quietly yet steadfastly worked to build a just and peaceful society in India.

Its vision is clear: to promote respect for religious and cultural diversity, uphold human dignity, and ensure social justice and empowerment for the most marginalised. Guided by this vision, CSSS pursues its mission by defending human and minority rights, raising awareness through education, and protecting democratic values and institutions.

From humble beginnings as a two-member team, CSSS has grown into an active force spreading the values of peace, justice, inclusion, and democracy across India. Its work ranges from seminars, interfaith dialogues, lectures, and cultural events to training camps and workshops, using both traditional outreach and modern digital platforms to connect with communities. Since 2014, CSSS has also set up eight peace centres in cities such as Kandhamal, Bhagalpur, Varanasi, and Ahmedabad, each fostering cooperation among diverse social and religious groups.

CSSS is an active member of the Inter-Religious Solidarity Council (IRSC), a platform uniting faith leaders, civil society, and activists to advance interfaith harmony. One of its recent events under the IRSC banner, "Universal Teachings of Peace in World Religions: A Path to Unity," brought together religious leaders, IRSC members, lawyers, journalists, and young people—including students—to reflect on the shared values of compassion, justice, and unity across traditions.

The Centre also conducts fact-finding missions on issues of communal violence and social justice. It has investigated areas affected by tensions such as Manipur, Muzaffarnagar, Assam during the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise, and Howrah.

In August 2025, CSSS undertook a fact-finding mission in Assam to document the plight of thousands of Bengali-speaking Muslim families. Many of them, labelled as illegal immigrants despite fulfilling NRC criteria, have faced forced eviction since 2016. Now living in makeshift camps, they endure harsh conditions with poor access to water, sanitation, and shelter. Led by Director Adv. Irfan Engineer, Executive Director Neha Dabhade, and other team members, the mission highlighted urgent humanitarian and justice concerns.

Education forms another core pillar of CSSS's peacebuilding strategy. A recent example was a three-day residential workshop on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) at the University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya. Young students, lawyers, journalists, and peace leaders from across Northeast India—including Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh—took part in nine sessions exploring the realities of religious freedom violations and developing practical strategies to safeguard this right. The programme strengthened local capacity and encouraged participants to share its lessons within their communities.

Similarly, CSSS has developed a diversity module for students of St. Sophia's College, Mumbai. Through lectures and visits to sites such as Mahim Dargah, Mani Bhavan, and Aarey forest, students experience India's pluralistic heritage

firsthand. These immersions nurture empathy and deepen their appreciation of the country's cultural mosaic.

CSSS also helped revive the annual Stan Swamy lecture, cancelled by St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, following threats from right-wing groups. The lecture, "Migration for Livelihood: Hope Amidst Miseries," was held online as a tribute to the late Fr Stan Swamy, the Jesuit priest and tribal rights activist who died in state custody under controversial circumstances. CSSS mobilised over 50 civil society organisations to co-host the lecture, reaffirming its commitment to human rights and democratic freedoms.

Over the past 30 years, CSSS has steadily grown from a small group into a nationwide network. Through its peace centres, public events, training programmes, and outreach initiatives, it engages hundreds and often thousands of people annually.

The organisation recognises the many challenges ahead, including rising intolerance and shrinking democratic spaces, yet it continues its patient work of inspiring positive changes in attitudes and lives.

As Sant Kabir said, "The river that flows in you also flows in me." This timeless truth reminds us of our shared humanity and the need for peace both within and around us. CSSS embodies this spirit, walking the long path to lasting peace, one step at a time.

Diya Sameer is Program Coordinator at CSSS and independent journalist.

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PEACE STUDIES FOR FORMING AMBASSODORS OF PEACE

A COLLABORATIVE VENTURE OF LIPI AND XLRI

This article aims at highlighting the significance of Peace Studies, jointly offered by Loyola Institute of Peace and International Relations (LIPI), Kochi and the Centre for Peace and Justice, XLRI-Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur.

LIPI was launched by the Kerala Jesuit Province on 15 November 2015 with a view to promoting peace both locally and globally. LIPI's activities are academic in nature, interdisciplinary in approach and praxis oriented in impact. XLRI is a premier institute of Management in India, established in 1949. The Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) is a recent initiative of XLRI with a thrust on the social and ethical commitment in management.

Promotion of peace is a dire need in the contemporary context of increasing violence, sectarianism, ethnic conflict, religious fundamentalism, violence against women and children. LIPI, in collaboration with CPJ-XLRI organises a three-month Certificate Programme in Peace Studies. Around 500 peace ambassadors have successfully completed the programme during the last eight years.

Peace Studies is, primarily, a perspective-building programme with reflection and analysis on our context and experience. **It provides participants with a profound understanding of theories, along with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to apply these lessons in their respective contexts. It is not just exam-centred, but people-centred and issue based.**

Peace Studies is, primarily, a perspective-building programme with reflection and analysis on our context and experience. It provides participants with a profound understanding of theories, along with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to apply these lessons in their respective contexts. It is not just exam-centred, but people- centred and issue based.

The subjects covered are diverse, including Understanding Peace, Conflict Transformation, Research Methodology, Legal and Judicial Dimensions of Peace, Structural Inequalities, Identity, Organizations and Peace, Gender and Violence, Industrial Peace, Science and Peace, Art and Peace, Religion, Caste, Violence, and Communal Harmony. There are also sharing sessions by peace practitioners from various parts of the world.

Project work is an essential component of the programme. It is an opportunity to apply the concepts and techniques being discussed in the various sessions of the programme to a concrete situation relevant to the life and work of the participant. In fact, the project is meant to provide a road-map for the participant once he/she goes back to the place of work. Since the participant is expected to become an effective peacemaker, it is important to integrate the various inputs by different experts while doing the project.

The project work is also a confidence-building opportunity for the participant before getting exposed to real-life situations. It is guided by our expert faculty. This has resulted in an impressive array of projects such as inter-group conflicts in the IT Sectors, marital harmony, significance of open spaces for peace, 24x7 AI based Chatbot counselling for students, the empowerment of LGBTQIA++, Inter faith initiatives, conflict resolution through social media, and setting up peace clubs in educational institutions. This list is just indicative and not exhaustive. Leveraging this diversity, we are able to introduce and reinforce peace perspectives and initiatives in contemporary lives.

Our faculty includes a balanced mix of academicians, peace practitioners, scientists, philosophers and social activists from around the world. Dr. Paramjyot Singh (Director, CPJ and Associate Dean of Student Affairs, XLRI-Jamshedpur), Dr. Jacob Thomas, IAS –Retd. (Academic Coordinator and Editor of Pax Lumina), Prof. M.P. Mathai (Dean, LIPI &Adjunct professor, Gujarat Vidyapith), Prof. Dr Neena Joseph (Faculty, LIPI and Former Professor, IMG, Government of Kerala), Dr. Denzil Fernandes (ISI-Bangalore), Dr.Ted Peters (CTNS, California), Prof. Edgar Lopes (Colombia), Elias Lopes and Jaques Haers (IAJU-Task Force for Peace and Reconciliation, Jane Kimathi (Nairobi), Dr. K. Babu Joseph (Former Vice Chancellor, CUSAT), Adv. Irfan Ali Engineer (CSSS, Mumbai), Dr. Augustine Pamplany (ISR-Aluva), Dr. George John (Former Clinical Psychiatrist, London), Dr. Kuruvilla Pandikkattu and Dr. Soumendra Bagchi (XLRI-Jamshedpur) are some of the distinguished members of the faculty. Dr. Binoy Jacob SJ (Director, LIPI) is the Coordinator of the programme.

Despite being an online programme, it is conducted in a participative manner, allowing ample time for faculty-participant interaction. These interactions foster immense peer learning and intense discussions, enriching the programme.

For example, the three-month Certificate Programme in Peace Studies, 2024-25, was organized by LIPI, Kochi in collaboration with CPJ-XLRI, Jamshedpur, from 26 October 2024 to 4 January 2025. Tushar Gandhi, the great-grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, inaugurated the event. According to him, "despite the abundance of theories and philosophies, the ideas of peace do not appear in our streets, unlike the forces of hate, violence, and prejudice that permeate our society. This trend must change. We need to bring workable, actionable plans to our communities, countering the forces of hate and violence with a presence in public spaces."

In all, 40 selected participants from India and abroad completed the programme. They belonged to a wide range of backgrounds, such as students, teachers, corporate employees, NGOs, advocates, and interfaith activists.

The valedictory message was delivered by Dr. Vitaliy Osmolovskyy, from Ukraine. He said: "We must counter the fear and suspicion ingrained in us by fostering understanding, connection, and compassion. These values are essential for building a peaceful community, step by step.

Teaching these values should start with our loved ones, especially children, in kindergartens and schools. It's too late to begin in university or later stages of life. These lessons must begin at the very start." In his view, "Civil society, not institutions, is the true driver of peace. This is why we must reassess and rebuild organizations like the United Nations, the Red Cross, and Amnesty International.

Once symbols of global cooperation and compassion, these institutions have become politicized and corrupted, often serving the interests of powerful nations. To create a world of genuine peace, we must restore these institutions to their original purpose: serving humanity and fostering global harmony."

LIPI is also the Nodal Platform of the Peace and Reconciliation Network of the Jesuit Conference of South Asia (PRN-JCSA) with support from Indian Social Institute (ISI) at Bangalore and Delhi. The Network reaches out to schools and colleges/universities though various projects such as peace clubs and peace forums. Over the years, XLRI Jamshedpur, XIM Bhubaneswar, St. Joseph's University Bangalore, St. Xavier's University, Calcutta, St. Aloysius University, Mangalore, ISI-Bangalore, etc. have launched Peace Centres and Peace Programmes as part of the academic curriculum. More institutions are positively interested in including peace studies in their syllabi. A recent initiative of the Department of Peace and Reconciliation at ISI-Bangalore is a venture to promote peace in schools, villages and among NGOs.

Prof. Dr. K.M. Mathew is a faculty of LIPI and Associate Editor, Pax Lumina. He is former professor at Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies

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BOOK REVIEW

Pax Lumina 5(6)/2025/76-79

THE **FRONTLINES** OF **PEACE**

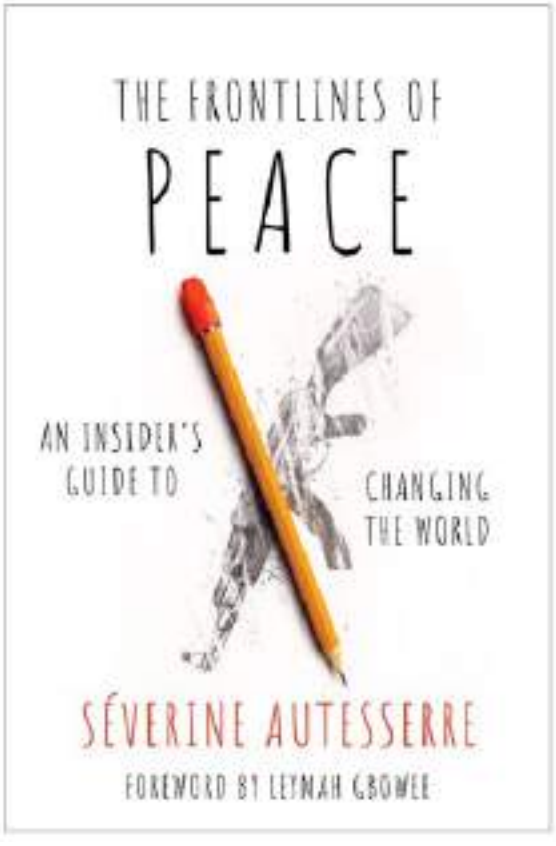
AN **INSIDER'S GUIDE** TO **CHANGING** THE **WORLD**

(Oxford University Press, 2021)

Séverine Autesserre poses a practical question: what kinds of peacebuilding genuinely reduce violence in the places where people actually live? Her answer—grounded in decades of fieldwork from the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo to Somaliland and Colombia—is that sustainable peace is most often built "from below," by coalitions of local actors, with external support that is humble, long-term, and sensitive to context (Autesserre, 2021).

The book is an accessible synthesis, but it also challenges an aid and diplomacy ecosystem that too, frequently privileges elite agreements and rapid, templated interventions.

Autesserre begins with Idjwi, an island in Lake Kivu that has remained relatively peaceful despite its proximity to protracted conflict. She interprets Idjwi's "culture of peace" not as an anomaly, but as an evidence that community norms, inclusive local leadership, and practical dispute-resolution mechanisms can prevent escalation (Autesserre, 2021).



In Somaliland, she demonstrates how layered authority and indigenous mediation fostered stability without the heavy imprint of external State-building—illustrating her broader claim that grassroots institutions often succeed where national peace accords falter (Barma, 2021).

Autesserre is the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, where she specialises in international relations, African politics, and the study of civil wars and peacebuilding. Before entering academia, she worked with humanitarian and development organisations in Afghanistan, Kosovo, the DRC, Nicaragua, and India. Her earlier books—The Trouble with the Congo (2010) and Peaceland (2014)—have influenced both scholarship and policy debates (Autesserre, 2025).

The argument is not anti-international; it is pro-local. International actors retain important roles as protectors, funders, and conveners, but they should not dictate local peace. Autesserre contends that "everyday peace" is built through small-scale, citizen-led practices, such as neighbourhood mediation, religious and civic networks, and local pacts that deflect conflict away from violence (Autesserre, 2021). A Foreign Affairs review captured the book's distinctiveness as a first-person account that foregrounds not only the perspectives of aid workers but, crucially, the experiences of the communities who bear the costs when external plans misfire (Foreign Affairs, 2021).

A review by the Australian Institute of International Affairs highlights that template-driven, outsider-led interventions—constrained by short rotations, recruitment mismatches, and rigid security rules—often overlook local dynamics and suppress citizen agency (Chakma, 2024). Conflict Trends, published by ACCORD, stresses Autesserre's focus on "everyday peace" as it is lived at community level, underscoring the need for trust-building, sustained engagement, and locally tailored design (Odhiambo, 2024). In an H-Diplo roundtable, scholars praised the book's practical clarity while raising the critical question of scale—how to connect grassroots achievements to national settlements without extinguishing them (H-Diplo/ISSF, 2022).

This is a hopeful yet hard-headed book. Hopeful, because it demonstrates that peace can be crafted in the very places where violence seems inevitable. **Hard-headed, because it challenges us to change incentives: funders must reward listening and accompaniment; international missions must protect and amplify what works locally; and researchers and educators must value proximity over performance theatre.**

Strengths

1. Resetting the unit of analysis. Much peace research and practice begins with treaty texts and national indicators. Autesserre instead looks to markets, parish courtyards, and town halls—where violence either flares or cools (Autesserre, 2021).

2. Reframing international assistance. Donors, UN missions, and NGOs are cast as supporting actors. Their comparative advantage lies in protecting space, providing resources, and convening—while those who bear the risks co-design interventions (Barma, 2021).

3. Clear pedagogy. The writing is direct, and the author supplements the book with a teaching guide and discussion materials that carry it into classrooms and training rooms (Autesserre, 2021; Autesserre, 2021/2024).

Limits

Critics raise two main concerns: over-generalization from "islands of peace" and the risk of romanticizing "the local." Barma (2021) notes that Somaliland's success drew not only on grassroots practices but also on elite bargains and State-level compacts. The lesson, then, is not "localism only" but "localism first"—carefully aligned with legitimate national frameworks.

This nuance actually strengthens Autesserre's own call for balance between "grass roots and treetops" (Barma, 2021). Another valid concern is capture: local elites may exclude women, minorities, or dissenters. The practical remedy is design—embedding inclusion and accountability into community mechanisms and linking them to enforceable rights and transparent grievance channels (Chakma, 2024; Odhiambo, 2024).

Tips for Action

- Fund proximity, not just projects: Support organisations that live and work within the communities they serve. Choose multi-year, flexible grants over short-term, output-heavy contracts. Evidence from

Congo and Colombia shows that iterative, participatory approaches outperform rushed assessments (Autesserre, 2021; Barma, 2021).

- Co-design with those who bear the risk: Bring together elders, women's groups, youth leaders, and ex-combatants to define what "safety" means locally, and to map both connectors and conflict entrepreneurs. Use participatory action research methods—emphasised in both the book and its reviews—to secure genuine ownership (Autesserre, 2021; Chakma, 2024).

- Build "everyday peace" infrastructure: Support neighbourhood mediation cells, market-day patrols, inter-faith councils, and shared savings circles that unite former rivals. These mechanisms complement courts and police; they are not substitutes (Autesserre, 2021; Odhiambo, 2024).

- Align bottom-up with top-down: Treat national compacts as capstones to processes that are locally legitimate. Avoid timelines that reward theatrical agreements at the expense of street-level credibility (Barma, 2021; H-Diplo/ISSF, 2022).

- Measure what matters: Track lived security (for example, "Can children walk to school?"), resolution of disputes at first contact, and the transfer of skills to local conveners. If outputs look strong but residents still feel unsafe, recalibrate (Autesserre, 2021).

- Guard against capture: Pair community leaders with rotating citizen panels and women-led forums; make decisions public; and provide confidential channels for complaints (Chakma, 2024; Odhiambo, 2024).

This is a hopeful yet hard-headed book. Hopeful, because it demonstrates that peace can be crafted in the very places where violence seems inevitable. Hard-headed, because it challenges us to change incentives: funders must reward listening and accompaniment; international missions must protect and amplify what works locally; and researchers and educators must value proximity over performance theatre (Autesserre, 2021; Foreign Affairs, 2021). For communities of faith, civil-society leaders, and municipal officials, The Frontlines of Peace offers a practical guide to living nonviolence as a craft—one neighbourhood at a time.

Dr Swapnil Sahoo, Assistant Professor of Strategy at Great Lakes Institute of Management, Gurgaon, holds a Ph.D. in Entrepreneurship and Innovation from XLRI Jamshedpur and has 17 years of corporate experience in multinational firms.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pax Lumina 5(6)/2025/80

Dear Editor,

Pax Lumina July 2025 issue is wonderful. I really appreciate the content and design of it. The articles are amazing. Congratulations to you and your team.

Marta Helena Freitas,
Brazil.

Dear Editor,

Thank you for sharing the July issue of Pax Lumina. The theme and writings are not only interesting but also very relevant. I congratulate all the members of the team, PaxLumina, and all authors.

Kavita Aroa,
Delhi

Dear Editor,

Thanks for Pax Lumina on Reconciling Histories. Very insightful perspectives.

Augustine Bahemuka
Kampala, Uganda.

Dear Editor,

Congratulations on the latest issue of Pax Lumina.

Well done. I went through the articles and found them quite stirring.

Jerry Rosario
Chennai

Dear Editor,

Thanks and congratulation for the July issue of Pax Lumina.

Best wishes to you and your team for all the efforts in building peace.

Vincent Ekka
Delhi

Dear Editor,

Thank you for Pax Lumina.

I was a member of Interfaith Forum (IFM, for peace and harmony), established on June 5, 2023 after the eruption of the ethnic conflict in Manipur. Till today, no solution to the conflict is in sight in spite of the PR (6 months). Our problem is partly historical and partly socio-political. IFM plays the role of APPEAL to all concerned to find ways and means to bring about new normalcy at the earliest, through Memoranda, prayer meetings, rallies, visiting camps, appealing to both conflicting parties to shun violence, etc. The purpose of my writing this note is to ask our Convenor of IFM to contact you, if it is alright with you. As I see, any organisation or group can always contribute towards our effort.

+ Dominic Lumon
Archbishop Emeritus, Imphal

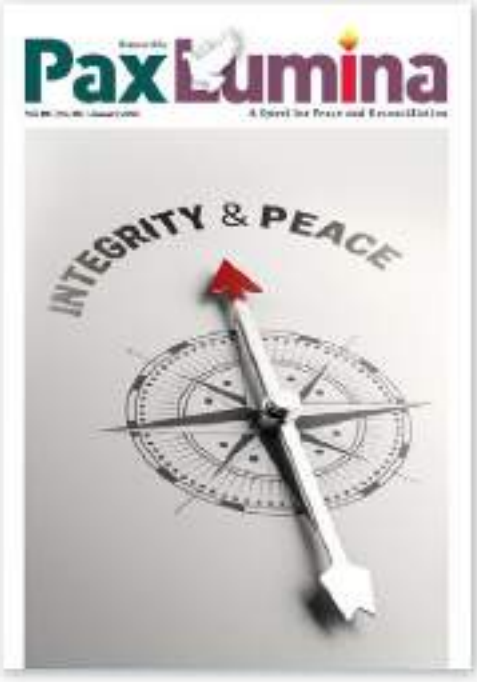
Dear Editor,

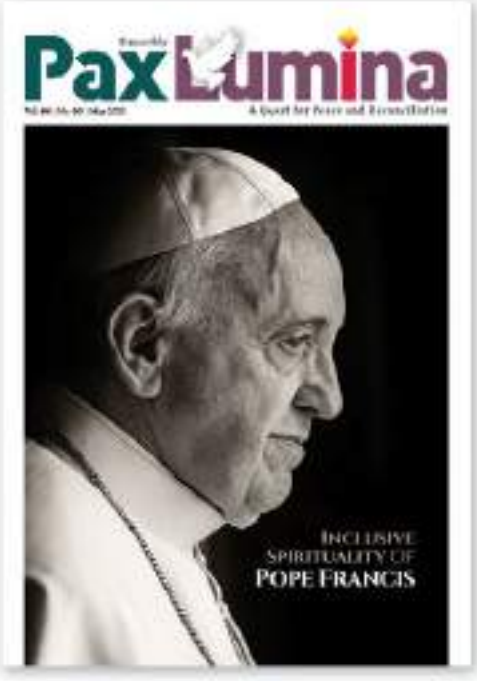
The issue this time is brilliant: Reconciling Histories.....

Relevant, down to earth and challenging.

Thanks for the great work

MK George
Rome





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