

The 2024 Essay & Art Contest on Civil and Human Rights

We are pleased to present the winners of the Third Annual Essay and Art & Multimedia Contest on Civil and Human Rights. This national contest was sponsored by *Hindus for Human Rights* and *Dalit Solidarity Forum*. The 2024 theme was about **Inspiring Traditions of Peacemaking in South Asia**.

Essay Winners:

- * First Place: **“With Andal Comes Grace,”** by *Lekha Kolli, grade 12, Virginia.*
- * Second Place: **Anti-Sikh Riots and Ongoing Traditions of Peacemaking,** by *Ira Tiwari, grade 11, Illinois.*
- * Third Place: **“South Asian Peace Through the Millennia”** by *Jacob Sajan, grade 11, Arizona.*

Art & Multimedia Winners:

- * First Place: **Narrated Bharatanatyam Performance** by *Deekshitha Jayaprakash, grade, 11 Minnesota.*
- * Second Place: **Flowers of Peace,** by *Aniya Taneja, grade 12, Massachusetts.*
- * Second Place: **Bangladesh Protests,** by *Eshita Lahiry, grade 11, Louisiana.*
- * Third Place: Drawing inspired by the **10,000 for World Peace Assembly** by *Diya Lane, grade 12, California.*

Our Hearty Congratulations to all the Winners!

The First Place winner, **Narrated Bharatanatyam Performance**, can be viewed by clicking the link provided earlier.

Second Place Art & Multimedia Winner: **“Flowers of Peace”** by *Aniya Taneja, grade 12, Massachusetts.*



First Place Winner: *With Andal Comes Grace*

By Lekha Kolli, Grade 12, Virginia.

The rich cultural tapestry of South India, with its deep-rooted spiritual and communal traditions, has always inspired me. Two traditions, the Bhakti movement and *Kudiyirkkal*, offer profound insights into how peace, justice, and social harmony can be cultivated in our world. My journey of understanding these traditions has been deeply personal, shaped by the teaching of Andal, the celebrated female poet of the Alvar tradition of Tamil Bhakti. Her vision of divine love, where grace flows like the incarnation of Bhumi Devi, the goddess of Earth, has ignited a desire to contribute to a world where people live with grace and extend peace and justice to all.

Andal is the embodiment of divine grace and equality. Andal's poetry has resonated with me on a deeply personal and spiritual level. Her devotion to Lord Vishnu is not just an expression of personal faith but a call to her entire community to rise above societal divisions and embrace a shared spiritual identity. In her book *Tiruppavi*, Andal invites everyone, regardless of their background, to partake in the celebration of divine love. This inclusivity and her vision of the world where divine grace is accessible to all have profoundly influenced my understanding of peace and justice.

When I think of Andal, I imagine a world where people treat one another with the same grace that she believed was embodied by Bhumi Devi. Bhumi Devi acts as a companion Vishnu, representing patience, tolerance, and unyielding commitment to nurturing life. Andal's devotion to Vishnu, as seen through her hymns, reflects a yearning for a world where humanity recognizes and honors the divine in each other. This vision inspires me to see the divine in every person, to approach conflicts with empathy, and to seek resolutions that uplift rather than divide.

The Bhakti movement is a pathway to peace through spiritual devotion, focusing on personal devotion and spiritual egalitarianism, which offers a vivid framework for fostering peace in society. Challenging rigid social structures of their time, as poet-saint Andal did, and advocating for a direct, personal relationship with the divine that transcends class and caste is revolutionary. Revolutionary in that the movement honored its simplicity; it emphasized that love and devotion to

God were more important than rituals or social caste.

For me, the Bhakti movement, like the words of Andal's poetic teachings, represents how spiritual devotion can be a unified force. In a world often divided by caste, religion, and social barriers, the Bhakti tradition's message, from saints like Andal, of universal love and equality is timeless and relevant. It inspires me to approach life with a spirit of devotion not just to the divine, but also to the well-being of humanity. By focusing on what unites us rather than what divides us, the Bhakti movement offers a pathway to peace grounded in the shared human experience of love and longing for the divine.

A community-centered conflict resolution practice that inspires me is *Kudiyirkkal*, the traditional way of communal mediation in southern India. This practice, rooted in the belief that conflicts should be resolved within the community through dialogue and consensus, embodies a deeply humane approach to justice. Unlike modern legal systems that often emphasize punishment, *Kudiyirkkal* seeks to restore harmony by addressing the root causes of conflict and repairing relationships.

Growing up in a world where justice is often equated with retribution, I find the principles of *Kudiyirkkal* to be refreshingly compassionate. It teaches that true justice is not about winning or losing but about a solution that honors dignity above all. This approach to conflict resolution resonates with my belief in the power of grace. Just as Andal's vision of Bhumi Devi embodying patience and compassion, *Kudiyirkkal* shows us that peace is achieved not through force, but through understanding and reconciliation.

Inspired by Andal's poetry and the traditions of the Bhakti movement and *Kudiyirkkal*, I have cultivated a vision where grace, peace, and justice are not just visions, but lived realities. In this vision, people extend grace to one another, just as Bhumi Devi nurtures all life on Earth. Conflicts are approached with empathy and resolved through dialogue, as practiced in *Kudiyirkkal*. And, like the Bhakti tradition saints, we recognize the divine in each other, breaking down barriers of caste, class, and creed to create a more just and equitable society.

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Second Place: *Anti-Sikh Riots, Sufi traditions, and Ongoing Traditions of Peacemaking*

By Ira Tiwari, Grade 11, Illinois.

Reflecting on my heritage and ancestry, I often find myself at the crossroads of history, where beautiful poems of peace clash with sorrowful cries of violence. A particular tale lingers in the crevices of my mind, tucked behind every thought, action, and decision. This tale is our heritage, a second shadow that follows us even in complete darkness.

This shadow is the memory of the 1984 anti-Sikh Riots, also known as the Sikh genocide. This chapter in India's history looms large, casting a long shadow over the country. It's a tug-of-war between tranquility and chaos.

Two years ago, I found myself scrolling through Netflix, desperate for something to watch. My eyes landed on *Jogi*. Immediately, I pressed *Play*. An hour into the film, I found myself curled up on the couch, clutching my blanket tightly as a shield. My father entered the room and inquired about what I was watching. When I told him, he responded with a casual, "Oh, I remember." Puzzled, I replied, "The movie just came out." He shook his head, "No, not the movie, the riot." At that moment, the atmosphere in the room shifted. This wasn't just a film anymore; it was his story.

He began recounting that year when he was a young boy living in Bokaro. My father and his family

huddled inside their home as chaos erupted outside. They clung to their faith, burning *agarbatti* (an incense stick) in hopes that the smoke would ward off evil. The smoke outside told a different story. It billowed from the burning homes of their Sikh neighbors, lifelong friends with whom they had shared cups of chai and laughter. Now, these friends were running for their lives, their livelihoods, their homes, their families all engulfed by these flames.

Inside their home, my father's family remained silent, their house sealed like a sanctuary. The only sounds that disturbed the quiet were the muffled prayers that flowed from their lips. "We couldn't do anything but pray," my father recalled. They prayed for safety, for peace, and for their Sikh friends' survival as violence turned their once vibrant neighborhood into a wounded landscape. Outside, peace had vanished, but inside, the flickering flame of a *diya* kept a corner of their world illuminated. They hoped the flickering flame in the *diya* was enough to counter the hungry flames outside.

When the violence subsided, my father's family ventured outside to survey the damage. The destruction was brutal. The stores and homes of their Sikh friends lay in ruins, reduced to ashes. The community was left broken and battered, with men burned and beaten to death, and women raped, left defenseless. The thick, long hair of the dead, matted with blood, lay tangled in the debris where once their turbans had proudly sat. The air hung heavy with despair disguised as soot, a silent cry for peace that had gone unheard amid the chaos.

Yet, amidst the devastation, traditions of peace persisted. Sufi songs and bhajans floated through the streets, each hum, each verse combating the sharp notes of the sobs. My grandfather, like many others, visited grieving Sikh families, offering whatever support he could. He shared tiffins with those who had lost everything. A way of offering peace when none seemed to be left. The community responded in kind. Mosques opened their doors, offering *langar* (community meals) to the Sikhs, just as Sikhs had done before. These acts of compassion; providing food, shelter, and solace stood stark in contrast to the violence, proving that amidst destruction, the tradition of finding peace could endure.

With Andal Comes Grace... continued

This is not just a dream but a guiding principle in my life. It influences how I interact with others, how I approach challenges, and how I think about my role in the world. Andal's legacy, along with the teachings of the Bhakti movement and *Kudiyirkkal*, reminds me that peace and justice start with each of us. By embodying grace in our daily lives and striving to see the divine in others, we can contribute to a world where peace and justice are available to all.

In a time when the world is increasingly divided, these South Indian traditions offer timeless wisdom on how to live with grace and foster peace and justice in our communities and beyond. They inspire me to be not just a believer in these ideals, but an active participant in making them a reality.

—Lekha Kolli, Grade 12, Virginia.

The image my father painted, of his nearest and dearest losing everything in days, haunts me. Yet, serves as inspiration. The stories of how they were able to go from nothing to rebuilding everything echoes resilience. The women left with nothing, not a husband, not a home, found the courage to restart, driven by the children in their care. The men who remained collected the rubble from their homes and businesses, putting them back together piece by piece. The *mandirs*, mosques, and *gurdwaras* turned to homes for people rather than gods. These stories of rebuilding are what I hold closest. The daily rituals of South Asia, whether it's the burning of *agarbatti*, the lighting of *diyas*, or the serving of langar are more than cultural practices. They are acts of resistance against hate, tangible symbols of a deep-rooted belief that good can counter evil and peace can prevail.

Reflecting on this story, I realize that these traditions of peace-making aren't relics of the past. They are living practices that shape South Asia and its diaspora today. In recent times, we have witnessed the rise of social movements that draw from this well of peaceful resistance. From the farmers' protests in India to global climate strikes, these movements echo the same spirit of nonviolence. Emulsed in a history of violence, South Asian peace-making glimmers through the cracks, serving as continuous inspiration on a global scale.

The lessons of 1984 remain relevant, in a world where polarization is rising. The stories of people risking their lives to protect others, of communities coming together to support those in need remind us that peace isn't passive. It's active and intentional.

Today, I find myself doing as my father, his friends, and family had clutching on to peace even when the world around me suggests otherwise. The tradition of peace-making isn't just about grand gestures; it's about the small, everyday actions that, when taken together, can generate a force strong enough to counter the greatest acts of violence.

That day I decided to light *agarbatti* after conversing with my father. I prayed as a being without a religion, for the strength to find peace in the midst of chaos. I prayed for the courage to be like those before me, to protect, to nurture, to rebuild, and to find peace. In the

end, peace isn't just the absence of violence. It's the presence of love, community, and hope. That's the tradition I choose to carry forward.

By Ira Tiwari, grade 11, Illinois.

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I'm a South Asian, an Indian to be exact. While I was born in the United States, my parents and brother were all born in India before immigrating here. Even here, so far from the life and culture of my family, where most Americans still view India as a poor, hungry, third-world country, the name of one Indian leader is held in the highest regard. At the risk of sounding cliché, I'd like to talk about Mahatma Gandhi. Rather than stop there, though, I want to delve into the rich history that helped Gandhi lead what would become the role model for nonviolent movements across the world. While Gandhi was an extraordinary man, his philosophy was nothing revolutionary. The idea of nonviolence is deeply embedded into South Asian culture, ingrained into the history of our land through the impact of not just one, but three important leaders that have advanced the movement over the millennia.

In 261 BCE, Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Empire waged war against the kingdom of Kalinga, resulting in a war that took between 100,000 to 250,000 lives. Walking among the corpses in the aftermath of the battle, Emperor Ashoka was shaken by overwhelming horror at what he had just done. From that moment, he vowed "to conquer mankind through people's hearts and not through war." In the *Military History of Odisha*, scholar Ramesh Prasad Malhotra wrote, "No wars in the annals of human history have changed the heart of the victor from one of wanton cruelty to that of exemplary piety as this one." The violent, dominating legacy the Mauryan empire had cultivated over the previous 100 years took a drastic turn with Ashoka. He converted to Buddhism in the aftermath of the war and advocated for its peaceful ideals, such as *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *metta* (loving-kindness towards all), and numerous others. This age-old story inspires me so deeply, because it shows that even the most greedy, violent individuals can turn into peaceful people when faced with our powerful nonviolent culture. Regardless of your worldview, there is probably at least one leader who you see as a brutal tyrant, but our history shows us that even those leaders can become calm, peaceful Ashokas. Ashoka carved many pillars and edicts out of rock known as the Ashokan Edicts to spread nonviolence, which served as the foundation upon which the nonviolent movement would be built.

Even here, over 2,000 years ago, we can see our first powerful individual who left a lasting impact on the nonviolent movement.

Centuries later, we find our second impactful individual, Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire, whose reign lasted from 1556 CE to 1605 CE. Often called Akbar the Great for his intelligent reforms, Akbar made various changes to balance a power disparity older than the Mughal Empire itself. The Muslim minority had ruled over the Hindu majority for centuries in the Indian subcontinent, the power discrepancy dating all the way back to the Delhi Sultanate established in the 13th century. To combat this, Akbar abolished the *jizya*. Until Akbar's time, non-Muslims had always been forced to pay a head tax, called the *jizya*, the refusal of which would result in harsh punishments, from house arrest to enslavement. Akbar also appointed many Hindu officials into the government and military, amplifying Hindu influence. Akbar even tried to synthesize the many religions within his empire into the *Din-i Ilahi*, Akbar's own religious movement. While unsuccessful in gathering followers, the attempt alone is a testament to Akbar's zeal to reduce the violence in his empire. I personally love this story because it shows that it only took one person to undo centuries of injustice. Granted, that one person in this case was an emperor, but we too are the emperors of our spaces, and we can make change around us, no matter how deeply rooted the problem is. Akbar's reforms were the tower upon which Gandhi would promote his peacemaking ideals, built on Ashoka's foundation. Gandhi fought for a unified India, with all religions living at peace with one another in the same country, and though the area was eventually split into India and Pakistan against Gandhi's will, it's certain that the disagreeable terms on which they separated would have been much worse had Akbar not built interreligious peace centuries prior.

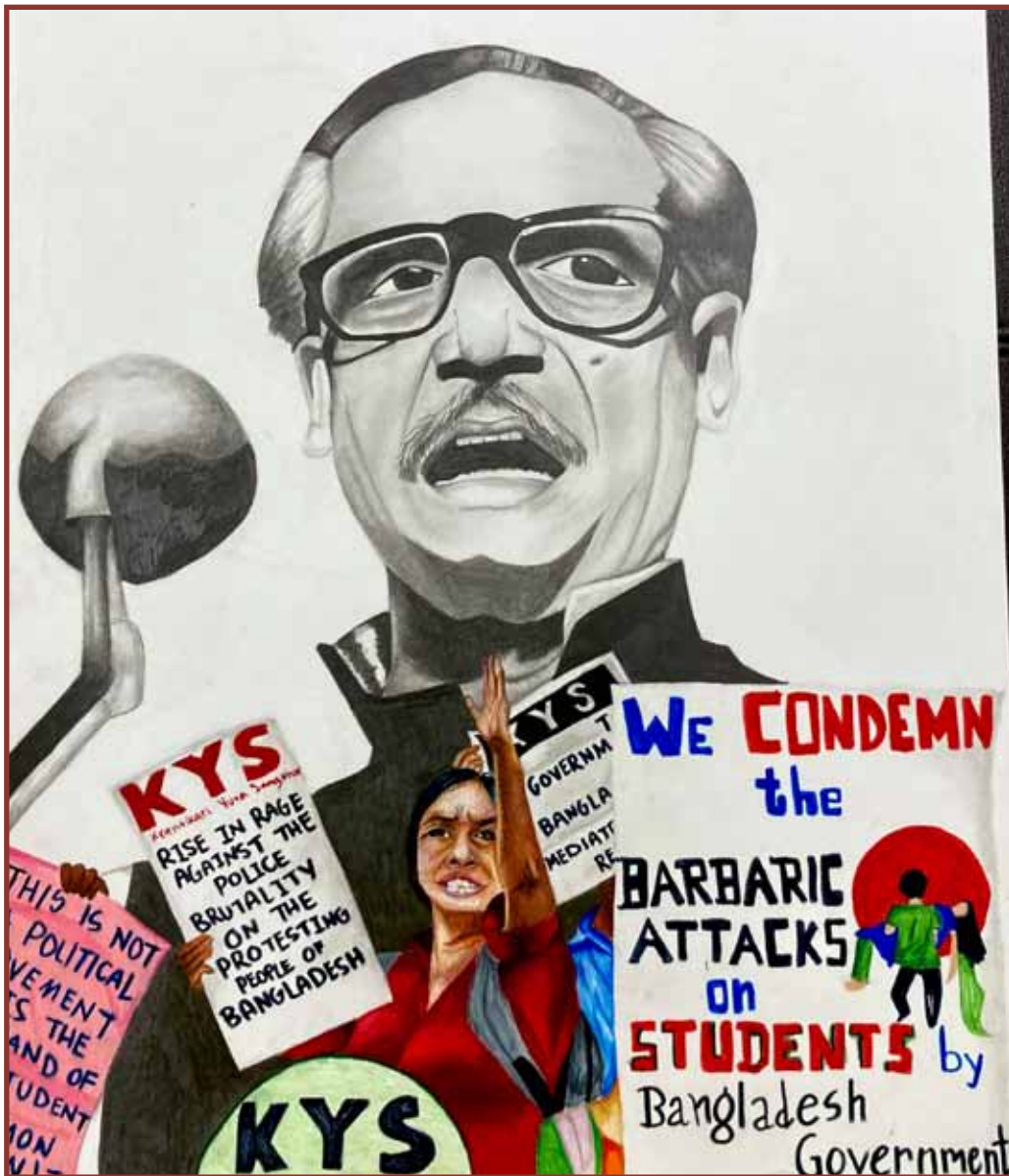
This journey of 2,000 years is what preceded Gandhi's nonviolent movement in India. While Gandhi was no trailblazer, there is no doubt he took the nonviolent movement to new heights. If Ashoka was the foundation and Akbar was the tower, Gandhi was the beacon at the top of the lighthouse, shining the nonviolent movement's light across the world. We so often

forget the aftermath of Gandhi's campaign, though. We all know of the many civil rights movements across the world inspired by Gandhi, but the original nonviolent movement in South Asia itself found a new face in the Non-Aligned Movement. In the midst of the Cold War, India led many countries around the world in forming the Non-Aligned Movement, where countries could find solace in not supporting either side. Among the 120 countries still in the organization, every single South Asian country is listed.

It is clear to me that though our history may not be the prettiest, we have held an ideal of peacekeeping for millennia. Our methods have varied over time, but

it is evident that Gandhi's ideas weren't unknown to our land. What Gandhi really did was stand at the top of the lighthouse thousands of years in the making and call us to our nonviolent roots, just as our forefathers Ashoka, Akbar, and many others have done throughout history. These traditions inspire me since we so often look at history as a tapestry of brutal bloodshed and injustice, a lesson of what never to repeat again, but when viewed through a positive lens, we can also find what our ancestors did right and learn what we can emulate.

By Jacob Sajan, Grade 11, Arizona.



Second Place: Bangladesh Protests by Eshita Lahiry, Grade 11, Louisiana.

2024 Art & Multimedia Winners; Art Descriptions

Second Place: Aniya's Art (p. 1) "As a South Asian, I've been shaped by the principles of good and bad karma. The Hindu culture promotes respect, especially towards one's elders, and kindness as fundamental virtues to display towards everyone. However, above all, I've been raised to show appreciation and worship towards every living thing. Whether it be the plants that consistently nourish our bodies, the animals we've depended on for centuries, or the tranquility we find when all five senses engage with nature, the Earth has been a vital part of our culture and wellbeing for centuries.

As a flower enthusiast, the use of flowers in our culture is the tradition of peacemaking that I find most inspiring. We consider flowers a gift, bringing them into our homes for their beautiful scents, appealing colors, and vibrant presence. Although simple and in abundance, we consider them as symbols of love, devotion, and hope. We give flowers meaning—having a significant place in our festivals, celebrations, and prayers. In my eyes, the shared love and harmony people find in flowers is what makes life so vibrant. Without first learning to revere every little thing, how do we learn to respect each other? Being able to find and share the color in the little parts of nature is essential to finding peace and connection in a world continuously burdened by troubling news. For me, the most inspiring tradition of peacemaking is something I find just outside my home, yet something I can share anywhere I go."

Second Place: Eshita's Art (p. 6) "The Artist Vincent van Gogh once said that there is peace even in the storm. As an artist, I believe that peacemaking can exist amidst conflict and violence in South Asia. There have always been traditions of peacemaking unique to South Asia. In my piece, I have explored the tradition I believe to be the most prominent: nonviolent grassroots movements. To explore these movements, I chose two monumental moments in Bangladesh's history that I believe have best expressed the impact nonviolent movements had on history: the March 7, 1971 speech by *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibar Rahman and the student quota protests of 2024 in Bangladesh. Although years apart, both events express how collective actions grounded in peace can transform societies.

Delivered during a critical moment in Bangladesh, *Bangabandhu's* speech was the unifying call that brought

Bengalis of all faiths and backgrounds to stand against oppression. His speech showed the power words and negotiations have in rallying a movement without resorting to violence. Similarly, the recent student quota protests in Bangladesh showcased how peaceful protesting can lead to meaningful change. These students, united by a shared vision of justice, put aside their differences and employed nonviolent tactics, such as banners and posters, to demand reform of the civil service. Their success was a testament to the power of peaceful protesting to bring social justice and reform. Although I could have portrayed other events, these movements are important to me because I am Bengali. I draw inspiration from these movements to remind myself that there are still individuals willing to set aside their differences and unite for the same cause. They represent collective actions that offer amicable, yet impactful, ways to establish peace without resorting to violence."

3rd Place: Diya Lane's Art Inspired by the 10,000 for World Peace Assembly (p. 8)

Description: "The peacemaking movement that inspired my art piece was the '10,000 for World Peace Assembly' hosted by Transcendental Meditation in India. During this event, several thousands from not just India, but from over 139 different countries, joined together to meditate despite the turbulence of the world. My artwork depicts a diverse group of people gathered together with closed eyes in meditation.

Growing up in an Indian household meant growing up with meditation. Every morning I would wake up to my *Nani* and my mom doing yoga, and then meditating before starting their days. As a kid, the concept of sitting still for minutes (or hours) confused me, but as I got older and began to experience the stress, frustration, and difficulty of life, I learned to appreciate the stillness of meditation. It became an escape from the chaos of the world and gave me a chance to reconnect with myself, even if only for a few short minutes. Meditation has helped me through some of the most difficult, and turbulent times in my own life. The 10,000 for World Peace Assembly represented peace in its most natural, raw form, and in a world where obtaining peace feels like an uphill battle never won, this movement proved that there is peace in the world for everyone waiting within themselves."



*Third Place: Drawing inspired by the 10,000 for World Peace Assembly
by Diya Lane, Grade 12, California.*

The 2024 contest winners were recognized during a national zoom gathering organized by the Hindus for Human Rights and Dalit Solidarity Forum. We invite your entries for the 2025 contest. Visit the contests page of *Hindus for Human Rights'* website for rules and deadlines.