

The 2023 Essay & Art Contest on Civil and Human Rights

We are pleased to present the winners of the Third Annual Essay and Art Contest on Civil and Human Rights. This national contest was sponsored by *Hindus for Human Rights* and *Dalit Solidarity Forum*. The 2023 theme was: *Which South Asian Social Justice Activist Do You Admire and Why?*

High School Essay Winners:

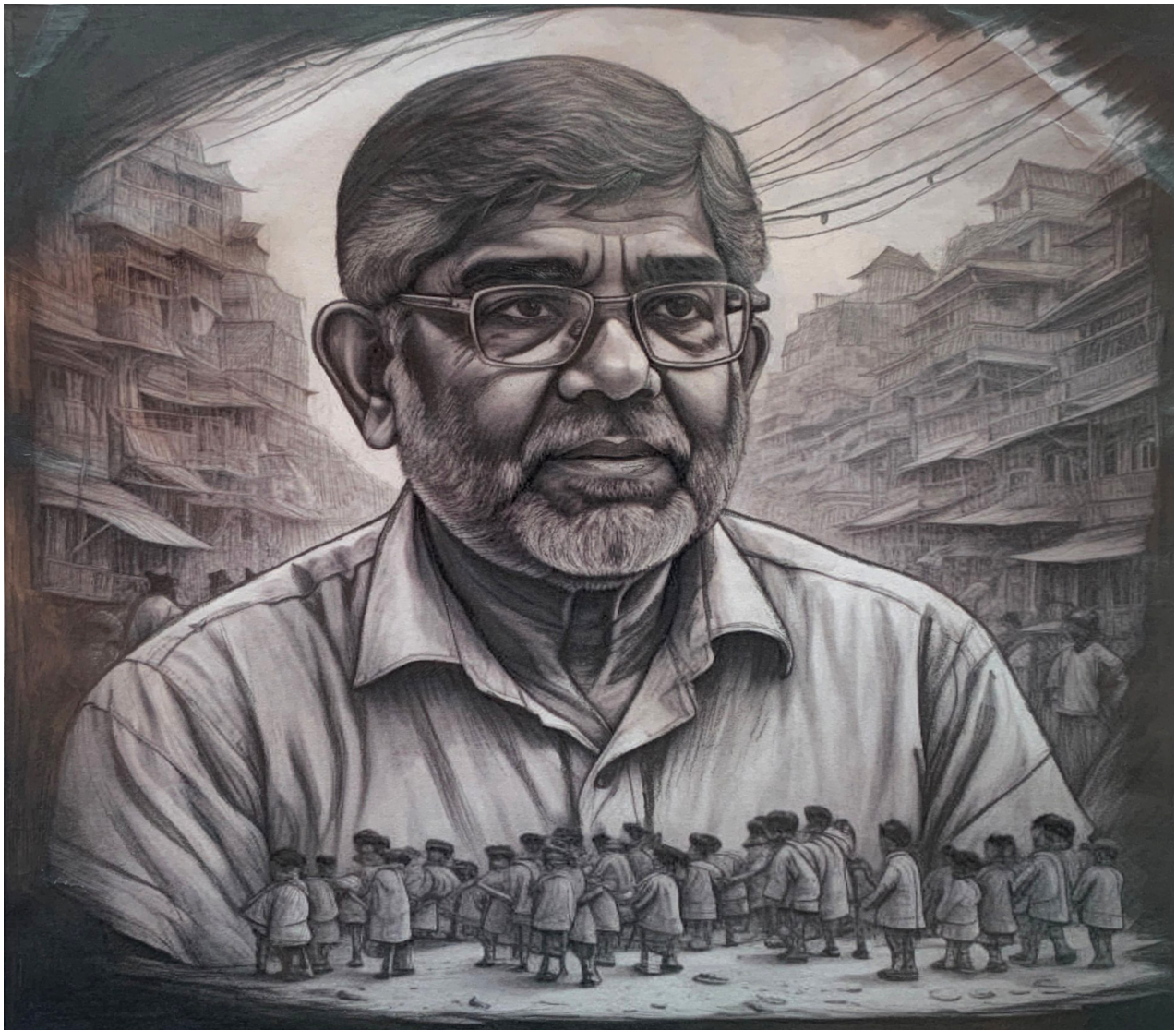
- ★ First Prize: Samara Desai, “Guruchand Thakur”
- ★ Second Prize: Saraah Zaheer, “Rana Ayyub”
- ★ Third Prize: Titas Mukherjee, “Kavita Emmanuel”

High School Art Winners:

- ★ First Prize: Kommali Kommana, “Kailash Satyarthi”
- ★ Second Prize: Eshita Lahiri, “Seema Hari”
- ★ Third Prize: Neha Srinivasan, “Kiran Bedi”

Middle School Winner: ★ Megan Gurung, “Dr. Bishnu Maya Pariyar”

Hearty Congratulations to the 2023 Winners!



First Place Winner: **Kailash Satyarthi**, a pencil sketch by Komali Kommana, Grade 12, North Carolina.

How Guruchand Thakur Changed a Community, and My Family

“When it comes to population, we are in big numbers, but if we are not educated, those numbers are of no importance.”

—Guruchand Thakur

Chaos theory suggests that a butterfly flapping its wings in Africa can lead to a hurricane in North America. I view social justice similarly—that a small act of empowerment causes a ripple effect. This is why I admire Guruchand Thakur, a 19th century Dalit activist in Bengal, India. For thousands of years, people belonging to the lower castes of Hinduism were denied an education and could not advance in society. While many South Asian reformers campaigned against the caste-system and in favor of educating the underprivileged, Guruchand stands out to me. This is not only because of my family’s personal connection to him, but also due to the principles he preached. He helped give the Namasudra community of Bengalis, who were lower-caste and marginalized, a voice and an education. My family, who belong to this community, have long been inspired by Guruchand and his tireless campaign for reform through education.

Guruchand was the son of Harichand Thakur, who founded the Matua sect of Hinduism in the 19th century. This sect emphasized equal rights and education for everyone, especially focusing on the lower-caste people of Bengal. While he built the foundation, his son, Guruchand Thakur, carried the movement for equality forward. In 1880, after higher-caste community leaders refused to allow their children to share classroom space with Namasudra children, Guruchand established one of the first schools exclusively built for the latter. This allowed many people, who previously had no way to advance in society, to access learning. He expanded this project, opening the door to education for thousands of people. In addition to building schools for boys, he also valued educating girls and created a number of all-girl schools—a rare priority for an activist of his time. In an 1881 speech, Guruchand said, “It’s knowledge, and only knowledge that made the earth so beautiful in the universe.” This belief motivated his efforts to better his community.

Guruchand’s activism had a profound influence on my own family. Starting with my great-great-grand-

parents, my family members sought out education at a time where neither lower caste persons nor women were encouraged to go to school. My great-great-grandfather studied to be a lawyer because he believed that it was important for his people to understand the law, and to see justice as something that was achievable for them. My great-grandmother went to school and her husband became a doctor. Being a doctor brought a steady flow of income into the family, which allowed my great-grandparents to give back to their community.

Both of my great-grandparents had a deep admiration for Guruchand and wanted to carry out his legacy in newly-independent India. Between the years of 1947 and 1971, due to violence, millions of people were displaced from their homes and had to move between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. During this time of hardship, my great-grandparents decided that it was their time to make a difference. Carrying out what Harichand had begun a century before, they helped refugees, particularly from lower castes, to access education. They helped youth escape the crushing caste system of rural India by helping them move to the large city of Kolkata to pursue their studies. With the help of friends, they were able to establish an NGO named Harichand Seba Sangha (Harichand Welfare Organization). This *sangha* built a residential facility for young men to live in while they were studying in the city. The *sangha*, which is still in operation, is not big; but it makes a real impact by helping students. My great-grandparents also helped young people by hosting them in their own home.

My favorite story about my great-grandfather is when a young man came to his clinic to ask for guidance in a job interview. This man had been uprooted from his home, and as a result, his appearance was disheveled. My great-grandfather simply gave the young man a small amount of money, and told him to get a shave and a haircut before his interview. After hearing of this, my great-grandmother proposed the idea that every Sunday, she would open up their home so her husband could give young men a shave while she provided them with food. This would give them confidence while going to school or applying for a job.

Decades later, this young man—now an older gentleman—recited this story to my mother, saying that this small act of kindness made all the difference to him and his family. This story is extremely touching to me because it shows how seemingly trivial actions can alter a person's life for the better—a great example of the ripple effects of doing good.

Guruchand's work is often overlooked when discussing activists and educators in India. Yet, his impact was profound. He emphasized the education of lower-caste men and women, and empowered those who were historically shunned. Guruchand was a deeply religious man, as were my great-grandparents. Their efforts show the power of spirituality to build equality, instead of fostering divisions. We often see that religions can divide and polarize—but their legacy is one of reform through devotion. Most of all, Guruchand inspired people like my great-grandparents to believe in themselves and in their own capacity to change their environment. In school, we often learn about the “big” people who introduced revolutionary changes that transformed our world—but Guruchand and my great-grandparents show the value of everyday service to the community. It is these changes that can ultimately lead to a social revolution. As I begin high school, I will continue their legacy by giving back to my community and by remembering that a quality education isn't just about getting into college or finding a high paying job. More than anything else, it is about gaining dignity for oneself and for others.

—Samara Desai, grade 9, Washington.

When I open my laptop, I am greeted with the familiar comfort of clacking noise from my keyboard as I press each key with simultaneous haste and precision. It sets the tone for the next few hours, during which my desk will become my new residence, and writing will become my sole purpose. My pace only increases as more ideas flow from my mind all the way to my hands, and they are executed through a series of meticulous clicks. As I witness my literary ambitions being pursued right in front of me, I receive a rush of adrenaline that cannot be recreated elsewhere; a sense of gratification that I know only from writing, a feeling that is incomparable, something that I will always crave.

It may sound cliché, but when I write, I fear nothing. I do not care how my words are interpreted, because I know I conveyed them the way I wanted to. I did not engineer my sentences with words to cushion the impact of my ideas. I can only credit my acquisition of this unwavering confidence to Rana Ayyub, a Muslim journalist from India, and one of my biggest role models.

Ayyub's unwavering courage is evidently something that she has carried with her since the budding days of her career as an investigative journalist. One of her most remarkable accomplishments is her coverage of the 2002 Gujarat Riots, during which she exposed unjust cover-ups fabricated by politicians and government officials. Ayyub took it upon herself to commit to a considerably long sting operation, understanding all of the risks and imminent danger she would be putting herself in if she went through with it. Over the course of ten months, she went undercover as a filmmaker and befriended various people in positions of power. She extracted the corrupt ideas and plans behind the riot cover ups from many bureaucrats and police officers.

These cover-ups weren't only shallow political schemes, they were the embodiment of the justice stolen from those who lost their lives in these riots, they were the closure taken away from mourning families, friends, and communities. In a beyond selfless act of journalism, Ayyub shined light on these schemes, and in turn, shined light on the victims of the riots. Her writing became the performance of last rites for the riot

victims who could not receive them.

The amount of hardship that Ayyub endured during these long ten months almost amounted to nothing when the political news magazine that she worked for claimed that the story she compiled using the information she acquired was incomplete, and consequently dropped her as an employee. Yet, Ayyub persisted. She went on to compile the information she had obtained into an exposé that she later entitled ***Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up***. This book proved to be instrumental in depicting just how much politicians downplayed the severity of the riots and the government's failure to bring justice to those lost to the violence of these attacks. Ayyub witnessed how little state intervention went into resolving these attacks. When the government failed India, her journalism brought the country the justice it was lacking through bravely worded sentences and skillfully written passages.

The difficulty did not end after she finished the Gujarat Files. In fact, it endured for much longer. Ayyub has received a plethora of death and rape threats from various different groups, and has gotten her personal details leaked to the public in an effort to retaliate her journalism. Yet, she continues to write about issues that endanger India's social justice, such as the rampant Islamophobia that continues to plague the country. Her resilient journalism has won her several awards as well as recognition from organizations around the world.

Ayyub writes in the name of justice, and for the people that did not receive it when they needed it most. I do not know if she takes pleasure in the same clacking noise of the keys while she types as I do, but I do know that she writes with a purpose. Her writing has made a lasting impact on the lives of countless people and will no doubt continue to do so for years to come.

When journalist and social justice activist Rana Ayyub opens her laptop, she writes without fear. And, while the fearlessness I feel while writing is to a much lesser degree, I know it is because of her. She did not fear, so I won't. She continued to write for those who could not be heard, so I will strive to do the same.

—Saraah Zaheer, grade 12, Tennessee.

Third Place Winner: Kavitha Emmanuel

India's Acceptance of Color

The Sun is the most devoted friend of growing South Asian girls; its warmth envelopes us with a tired layer of sweat, its light occupies our time into the late falling of night, and its shine paints us a deeper brown coloring. As I grew, my time with the Sun grew; each scorching summer day would end with my legs staggering inside and my brown skin with a deeper tint of a tan. Each hot summer day ended with my mother's consistent rambling about her dislike of my changing skin, about how darker I had become, about how "This isn't what you're supposed to look like, Babu!" As a child, I didn't understand that my color, along with other South Asian girls who shared a similar one, would bring such distaste. As if I had owed my family and myself a new look, an identity different from darker skin, I ventured towards makeshift solutions; this ranged from makeup ten times lighter than my shade to moisturizers that promised a whitened look. My curiosity of the topic and desperation for those solutions has led me to the discovering the first campaign combating colorism in India, crafted by the hands of Kavitha Emmanuel.

As a young Indian girl, Emmanuel was raised in a home that held the belief that all humans are equal. However, she traveled an all too familiar path of hostility directed towards her natural tone that was a stark contrast to what she was taught at home. Kavitha Emmanuel has recognized the need for people who have faced colorism to have a platform for themselves. Building her own program for acceptance, she has established herself as an internationally recognized speaker and panelist, constantly working to uplift girls and women.

She achieved this through her non-profit organization, Women of Wonder, and a globally recognized campaign, Dark is Beautiful. Kavitha Emmanuel's campaign was launched in March of 2009 to battle the toxicity behind the idea that one's worth is measured by one's skin color, recognizing a struggle tackling the lives of many individuals worldwide, especially in South Asia with its history of displeasure regarding dark skin. Her unwavering determination towards her initiative allows for children, specifically young girls, and even

adults to embrace what they have been gifted with, and grow comfortable in their skin and flaunt its beauty.

Kavitha Emmanuel's perseverance concerning her work has allowed it to reach a universal spectrum; her constant diligence towards her goal of slowly ridding the prejudice targeted towards darker skinned individuals with her campaign has brought it to the news headlines. Several research papers concerning the topic of colorism, guided by Kavitha Emmanuel's efforts, have been initiated in notable academic institutions such as Harvard, and the campaign has expanded its message through entertainment networks with channels like HBO Vice, NPR, and Netflix. Additionally, in Emmanuel's Ted Talks, she shares her personal struggles as well as stories of numerous girls who hold many insecurities stemming from colorism to bring a sense of empathy in her listeners. She ushers in the motto: "I am dark and talented."

This mantra that Emmanuel encourages serves as a reminder that dark skin should not prevent anyone from reaching one's goals and achievements. Dark skin is part of one's identity and has no bearing on someone's worth as an individual. Kavitha Emmanuel has built a bridge between her audience and her work on the issues of colorism. She talks about the normalcy of self-doubt as well as how to combat the detrimental effects of it.

Helping people find their footing in their skin, to grow within it, and to embrace their shade, Kavitha Emmanuel serves as a constant inspiration for young children and students. She stands as an artist who paints over the canvas of aversion with the colors of acceptance and brings a celebration for the millions of Indian people with darker skin tones. Taking influence from Emmanuel's work, young children now learn about the topic of colorism and how to combat it. Teens and adults also have an example of how to approach a real-world issue and introduce it into their communities with a sense of open-mindedness. In Kavitha, our youth have a motivating figure who has built a new path that sheds light upon the prejudice of colorism and acknowledges the diversity of the numerous skin complexions across the globe.

—Titas Mukherjee, grade 11, North Carolina.

Works Cited:

Murphy, Rachel. "Kavitha Emmanuel: Women of Worth Founder, Dark Is Beautiful Campaigner." Sonshine, 14 Mar. 2023, sonshine.com.au/kavitha-emmanuel-women-of-worth-founder-dark-is-beautiful-campaigner/.



Middle School Art Winner:

Dr. Bishnu Maya Pariyar

A Portrait by Megan Gurung, Grade 6, New York.



Second Place Winner: **"Seema Hari"** by Eshita Lahiri, Grade 10, Louisiana.



*Third Place Winner: “**Kiran Bedi**” by Neha Srinivasan, Grade 12, North Carolina.*

The contest winners were recognized during a national zoom gathering organized by the *Hindus for Human Rights* and *Dalit Solidarity Forum* on October 15th.