



## *On Education and Culture*

Interview with H.E. Namrata S. Kumar  
Ambassador of India to Slovenia

With Lali S. Illic

**As a relative newcomer to Slovenia, what have you found the most surprising about the country since you first arrived?**

It was like love at the first sight with a beautiful country and its warm people. That is my first impression of Slovenia and that is how I feel about the people of Slovenia. The country is so beautiful and Slovenian people are very warm.

**Is there a particular place in Slovenia you look forward to visiting when the pandemic restrictions are lifted? If there is a particular city you would like to recommend to your friends to visit?**

In my view there are many places in Slovenia to be explored. Whole of Slovenia has amazing places. Whatever I have seen so far of this country since I arrived, I cannot point to one particular place. I feel that every place is unique in itself. I had a chance to visit Slovenj Gradec, one of the United Nations Peace Messenger Cities, where we have a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. I would be very happy if I could arrange a visit for SILA members to Slovenj Gradec to see the statue. Then, I could visit the coastal cities such as Koper, Piran and Portoroz. They have their own beauty with colorful houses, people enjoying their time in the sunset. Koper is unique in being a strategically located port, aiding the country to enhance its trade relations with other countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia had kindly arranged a beautiful excursion to Vipava valley, wherein I

also participated. Vipava valley again is such a beautiful part of Slovenia. And then of course the capital city of Ljubljana, which is a jewel in itself. But I think I need to explore the whole country and its people to FeelSlovenia.

**We can imagine that starting a new posting in the COVID-19 reality cannot be easy. What has been the biggest challenge for you caused by the lockdown or the restrictions, professionally and personally?**





I feel we should not see this as a difficult time. It is only a different situation, not a difficult time. It is only a process of adapting to new situations and adopting new ways of living. COVID19 has taught us to be less materialist and respect health and life, respect our own selves - one self, one's family, one's country, our elderly people (who also have contributed a lot and we cannot see them as liability now because COVID19 is affecting them the most, we must take care of them) and yet be connected with all.

At work fronts, we have adapted very well to deliver daily business, both on domestic and international relations' fronts. We are on virtual platforms, sometimes we do hybrid meetings, where some meetings are in person if possible, and some are in virtual format. We are discovering and developing new skills. This is both at the individual and Country level. Citing examples of my country, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi leadership we have initiated Mission Aatmanirbhar Bharat which means "Self-Reliant India" and Mission Vocal4Local, which is to focus on adding value to our domestic strengths. During the COVID-19 times many people have lost their jobs, many people are unemployed. Under Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Vocal4Local Missions, Prime Minister has called all the citizens of India to respect themselves, to identify our own strengths, develop skills to improvise these strengths, manufacture within the country and be strong within to be able to contribute to the world outside. So, for example this year during India's one of the most important festivals - Diwali, the focus is on domestic production of all the items that are used by people to celebrate Diwali, such as lamps, textile, decoration items, idols, clothes for festival etc. We are also producing domestically all that is required to arrest the spread of COVID19, such as the sanitizers, PPE, masks etc. Our Self Help Groups from villages

are into mass production of masks. The Government of India also has a dedicated programme for research and production of vaccines for COVID19. This way we not only get self-reliant but the people continue to have jobs, become more respectful towards their own strengths and enhance capacities and be better prepared to share our knowledge, research and strengths with the other countries. Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Vocal4Local Missions have shown that COVID-19 is an opportunity to achieve economic self-reliance to be shared with the world. Here, now the focus is also on Local4Global - building domestic capabilities and strengths for the good of the world. We have lost many lives to COVID19 and my heartfelt condolences to the families of those lives, yet I would say COVID19 has helped us in many different ways, which we need to recognize. It is only a new normal that we have to get adapted to. In doing so there is hope and future. In focusing on losses there is only despair.

**Many of our SILA ladies are mothers who are increasingly worried about their children's education during the lockdown, as well as the long term effect the pandemic is having on their education. As a mother yourself and a diplomat who is passionate about the topic of education, what advice can you share? Also how do you see education for the girls and the boys and gender equality.**

Education for girls. If you educate a boy it is only that one boy who is educated. If you educate a girl, you educate the whole family. You end up educating more members of the community. Not that the boys should not be educated, but educating a girl is always advantageous for society than only working on educating boys. But when we talk about gender equality, focusing only on girl-centric

initiatives does not help, as “gender” does not only include a girl or a woman. It includes both boys and girls, men and women. For gender equality, we need to see that our education and socialization processes are such that both girls and boys are made sensitive about each other and they learn to respect each other.

As for education in the COVID-19 times. I will say the same, we have to adapt to the new conditions. Our education institutions – schools, universities, education ministries... have adapted to the new situation preparing themselves for online management of education, online classes, evaluation and examination. Of course, when the school level children are at home, this puts a lot of pressure on the parents, especially the mothers. Their work is increased multifold when the children are at home, but perhaps just looking at the brighter side, that we get to spend more time with our children, will give us energy to deal with the situation. It is also not a very happy situation for children for not being able to go to school, not to be with their friends and teachers. For example, I have a son in his final year of his school. Children at this level work very hard to be able to head school or head various other school bodies, to represent school and participate in inter-school activities,

that they can have a proper annual school events and proper graduation ceremony. Unfortunately, they have all been robbed off these opportunities and experiences. It is like the most beautiful and significant year of school was skipped from their school lives. But, I guess, both parents and children have to be more creative keeping ourselves interested in activities at and done from home, at the same time in seeing the brighter side of every situation. Now, my daughter is in a University in India and all her classes are happening online. Good part of the current situation is that she is able to be with me here in Slovenia and do her classes, otherwise she would have to be in India to attend her university. This way both I and my daughter have each other’s company and we are not alone in our respective places, and at the same time she is able to do her university. In these different, not difficult times, we just need to learn to see the positive aspect of these times and make the best of it. I am sure, with this approach we will walk through this time very easily together.

As for the protocol to be followed with regard to COVID-19, such as maintaining distance, use masks, staying at home/ work-from-home as per our respective Government’s directives... these are desirable measures for the good of people. We should all follow it. Some may not take these seriously, but we must make wise choices for the welfare of all. One is not alone in the globally connected world, we are all in it together. Make right and wise choices :) as it is going to be for the good of one’s own self as well as for the larger community.

**We are happy to see the strong relationship and growing cooperation between Slovenia and India, not only in the area of the economy but also education and culture. There is also an established India-Slovenia**



**Friendship Association, which has been in operation since 1998. I believe that you are also personally passionate about art and culture - have you got any plans and hopes for the cultural cooperation between the countries in the near future?**

Indeed, there are plans for further strengthening the already existing strong relationship between India and Slovenia. Also, of course there are plans for enhancing the

relationship between the Embassy of India and SILA-IWCL.

Speaking of the bilateral relations between our two countries, the two countries share friendly and strong relations since the day Slovenia attained independence in 1991 and India recognized it in May 1992. Our relations with Slovenia were concretized with the presentation of credentials of our Ambassador in Vienna in 1993 for concurrent accreditation to Slovenia. We established our resident



Mission in Ljubljana in February 2007. We have had several ministerial level visits from Slovenia to India, including the State Visit of H.E. Borut Pahor in year 2011 (13-16 June 2011) in his capacity of the Prime Minister of Slovenia. We had a very successful visit by our President H.E. Ramnath Kovind to Slovenia from 15-17 September 2019 last year accompanied by a large business and parliamentarians' delegation. This was a first ever State Visit from India to Slovenia. The high level visits have added a new impetus to our bilateral relations.

On the bilateral trade front, in 2013, Slovenia identified India as one of its strategic focus markets. The bilateral trade in 2018 increased by 33.79% from EUR 270.01 million to EUR 361.25 million. This is the highest commodity trade between the two countries during the period 2014-2018. India has continuously enjoyed a trade surplus with Slovenia. We are at a satisfactory level at present but certainly there is further scope of growth.

On the personal front, since I presented my credentials to the President of the Republic of Slovenia H.E. Borut Pahor on August 27, inspite of the COVID19 situation, until recently when we entered the time to observe restrictions on travel and in-person meetings, I am thankful to several ministers and senior key officers of various Ministries of the Government of Slovenia and other establishments who were very kind to give me meetings. These include meetings with H.E. President of National Assembly, Hon'ble Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Interior Affairs, Minister of Education and Sports; Mayors of Ljubljana, Koper, Slovenj Gradec; officers from various ministers, Rectors of various universities; Heads of commerce and trade related establishments, Indian community members in Slovenia and more. After having very fruitful discussions during these meetings I feel very confident that there is a lot of scope for further enhancing cooperation between the two countries in various sectors. Both of the countries have unique strengths, and these strengths need to

be brought together and matched properly. I will for sure contribute my bit in further strengthening the relations between our two countries.

Two significant events are taking place next year in 2021. India is going to celebrate its 75th year of independence and Slovenia is going to take up the EU Presidency in the second half of 2021. If, we are able to control COVID19 spread by next year and able to travel internationally, we have plans to bring in a





spectacular Indian cultural festival to Slovenia towards the second half of 2021 to commemorate India's 75th year of independence during Slovenia's EU Presidency. Provided the situation gets better, the festival will have exhibitions, films, gastronomy, performances, conferences & seminars, Yoga, crafts etc. as major elements in physical presence, otherwise we have to enjoy everything virtually. And of course I want to bring in SILA-IWCL here. I will be pleased if SILA-IWCL is one of the Embassy's major partners in realizing Indian cultural festival next year.

**You are an active Twitter user -it is amazing how many diplomats and politicians have taken to social media lately. It is a great way to get important updates but also to find out a bit more about public figures and see them in a new light. Do you see social media playing a large part in the future of diplomatic communication?**

Social media platforms are being used more and more, and are also becoming more and more useful in disseminating information about Governments' initiatives. With Twitter you reach your audiences instantly but have a limit as far as content size can be posted. With Facebook, Instagram, Linked etc. you can post more content. Social media has both advantages and disadvantages and certainly therefore it should be used responsibly. It is better to maintain separate social media accounts for sharing personal views and those for sharing content in official capacities. Used wisely and with responsibility, social media can certainly play a good role in disseminating information and reaching your audiences.

**We love your Twitter and Facebook posts and that you share a lot of wisdom and personal photos of nature and family, as**

**well as updates and comments on current events. It really shows your love for India and appreciation of Slovenia and passion for education, culture and empowering women.**

I love nature. My love for nature and studies in Botany at university (under graduate) level have enabled me to appreciate flora both in its artistic and scientific form. My studies in Anthropology at postgraduate level on the other hand has enabled me appreciate man-nature-culture relations. I will give you one very good example of how man-nature-culture are integrated in India's faith system from ancient times. In Hindu way of life, every God and Goddess has an animal or a bird as his/her vehicle; a plant or a flower dedicated to this God or Goddess and a color symbolic of this God or Goddess. For example Lord Ganesha's vehicle is a mouse. So you see the little mouse gets importance in the whole ecosystem as it is lord Ganesha's vehicle, and the human beings learn to treat even the little animals with respect. There are six types of flowers offered to Lord Ganesha - Red Hibiscus, Dawny Jasmine, Blue Gokarna, Orange Marigold, Yellow Chrysanthemum and white Pavizhamalli. One plants, takes care and learns about the importance of plants in life when they are associated with God. So this is how through Indian traditions have kept the relations of human-beings with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, entire ecosystem intact. We are all interconnected, exist because of each other and cannot survive in isolation. We have to respect each-others' existence and work together to preserve this whole connection. I find this beautiful connection between man-nature-culture very awestrking and like to share stories about this connection through my tweets.