This project is planned to take place in the extensive slums of Ahmedabad, the capital city of Gujarat, India. Various religious and ethnic groups namely Hindus and Muslims, but also Christians and Sikhs live together in a very limited space, sharing a marginal existence. Aggravated by the precarious economic condition, competition for scarce resources (income opportunities, access to minimal infrastructure, etc.) is harsh and injustices based on religion, caste, social class or gender seriously threaten the fragile balance and social cohesion of this mixed society. Particularly tensions between Hindus and Muslims pose a major challenge to peace. This was most brutally manifested during the “Gujarat violence” between February and May 2002, killing a total of 1,044 people (790 Muslims and 254 Hindus) \(^1\) and injuring another estimated 2,500 persons. In order to effectively prevent future violent outbreaks of violence, the project aims not only to address the direct causes of violence, but also its structural and cultural aspects, namely the systematic exclusion of the most underprivileged to social services and economic opportunities (schools, employment, health services etc.) and its cultural justifications, to be precise the caste system, religious discriminations and gender inequalities. The ones who most suffer under these injustices are the children and youths, often not having access to the most fundamental goods and services such as sufficient nutrition, housing, health and basic education. It is this new generation which shall be the focus of this project, as they are not only the most vulnerable and defenseless, but also because our hope for a better world lies in their hands.

The proposed project, called **theater for peace** will be carried out in close partnership with the Indian Educational and Charitable Trust VIDYA\(^2\) based in Ahmedabad. VIDYA was formed in the year 2000 with the purpose of training sixteen slum dwellers as a professional company of performers, educators, political activists, and workshop leaders. This has provided permanent employment and valuable skills to these individuals, as well as facilitated their ability to promote critical consciousness and practical solutions within their own communities and beyond. In working towards these goals, the company has been guided by the very influential theatrical methodology developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal and his pedagogy of “Theater of the Oppressed” or “Forum Theatre”. Since 2003, VIDYA has been busy organizing educational projects, script-writing workshops, many performances, as well as a variety of intriguing programs targeting community development and the dissemination of creative solutions in order to improve the living conditions of the poorest citizens.

The “Theatre of the Oppressed” emerged during the 1970s in the slums of Brazil, its main creator is the Brazilian dramaturge Augusto Boal. The goal of this theater method consists in understanding theater as a social tool for solving ethic and social conflicts in an innovative and experimental manner. Its procedure is simple and easy applicable: A particular conflictive situation which is negatively affecting a group of individuals or the society as such is expressed in an unconventional and interactive theater play. The individuals who have a stake in the conflict represent their situation directly as actors in the play. Thereby they frequently change their roles, representing one time the oppressor, and another time the oppressed. Through this virtual change of characters, their capacity for empathy, tolerance and mutual understanding is enhanced. The play is carried out under the supervision of a moderator, called the joker, who initiates, moderates and intervenes as an arbiter in the process of the representation. As the example of VIDYA shows, this theater method has been applied in the last decades not only in Brazil, but also in other parts of the world\(^3\), including India.\(^4\)

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2. See [http://www.vidyaindia.org](http://www.vidyaindia.org)
3. For more information about the “Theater of the Oppressed” see [www.theateroftheoppressed.org](http://www.theateroftheoppressed.org)
The local partner VIDYA already possess very ample experience in implementing the “Theater of the Oppressed” in a variety of issues such as girl child development, education, sanitation & hygiene and environmental questions. Up to now, however, issues of peace and conflict have not been addressed. The main idea of this project therefore is to initiate theater plays and theater classes covering central themes of conflict prevention and peace promotion (for example religious conflicts, gender inequalities, social injustices etc.). To this aim, firstly I will initiate and conduct, together with the local partner VIDYA, an assessment for defining the major threats and challenges to a peaceful coexistence in the slums of Ahmedabad via interviews with experts and people living in the slums. Which are the major obstacles for the optimal development of the individual and the society as a whole? Who is repressed by whom and why? How could these inherent conflicts be addressed by the “Theater of the Oppressed”? In a second step, new young teachers for giving theater classes and organizing public theater plays shall be formed to become experts both in the method of the “Theater of the Oppressed” as well as concerning the fundamental theoretical and practical basics of peace and conflict analysis. To reach this objective, a free two weeks workshop will be organized in Ahmedabad, addressing mainly young students of theater, but also interested youths from the slum areas. During this workshop, an experienced staff of VIDYA will teach the students the philosophy and procedure of the “Theatre of the Oppressed”. Having specialized during my studies on peace and conflict analysis, the classes about peace promotion and conflict prevention will be taught be myself. At the end of the workshop, around four to five students will be selected to implement their newly gained expertise in the slums of Ahmedabad. On the one hand, these newly trained teachers will set up free theater classes covering issues of peace and conflict in the slums of Ahmedabad, regularly taking place about three to four times a week and open to all interested youth (aged around 12-20 years), no matter what their religion, caste, social class or gender. On the other hand, these young teachers will also serve to organize and carry out public “Theater of the Oppressed” plays, addressing the main social inequalities and problems present in the slums of Ahmedabad. For additional support and supervision of the young teachers, as well as the coordination of the whole project, one senior staff, expert in the “Theater of the Oppressed”, will be employed.

In this way, the “Theater of the Oppressed” will provide a creative and interactive platform for addressing any type of cultural, structural or direct form of violence. The objective is to contribute to a truly peaceful development of the marginalized slum society in general and the youth in particular. After an initial period of one year, the project will be evaluated and carefully revised. If successful, the project could be integrated in already existent community development activities of the local partner VIDYA Educational and Charitable Trust. Eventually, the theater group could even become self sustained by periodically performing in a wider public. The outputs expected from this project are threefold: Firstly, young and talented teachers of the “Theater of the Oppressed” with specialization in peace promotion will be formed, thus not only investing in human capital, but also creating tangible income and work possibilities for the youth. Secondly, The theater classes will enhance creativity, imagination, critical thinking, and most importantly, empathy with the most disadvantaged. Thirdly, the open “Theater of the Oppressed” performances will help to raise awareness about structural injustices in a broader public and mobilize not only the players, but also the audience to critically reflect on social problems and find creative solutions. Likewise, structural injustices and discriminations of the most disadvantaged are addressed in an interactive and creative manner. By learning how to switch roles between gender, religion, caste or social classes in the theater, the youth gradually learn how to peacefully solve problems and conflicts, contributing to a sustainable peace.

4 Another example is the well established “Centre for the Theatre of the Oppressed” called Janasanskriti in Calcutta, India. For more information see www.janasanskriti.org