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**Indian Ambassador explains for Nacional why he sees post-election processes in Croatia as an evolution of democracy and which are the similarities and differences between the Croatian and Indian political and social life, and he also speaks about his love toward body-building and life in Afghanistan**

Sandeep Kumar, the Indian Ambassador in the Republic of Croatia, began his mandate in August 2015. He has extensive international experience which started back in 1985 when he joined the Indian diplomatic service. During his rich diplomatic career, he served in various missions – from Hong Kong, through Hanoi, Paris, Cape Town to Kabul. In Afghanistan he spent three years in the Indian Embassy, and then after since 2008 until 2013 he was a member of UNDP – working on police reform. Before his arrival to Zagreb, he was a Joint Secretary for Western Asia and North Africa (Wana) at the Department of the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Aware of the fact that Croatia is not limited only to Zagreb, Ambassador Kumar started his mandate by visiting many counties and cities in Croatian hinterland, wanting to establish even better relations with local communities and institutions. Immediately he wanted to meet county prefects, mayors, but also head of smaller municipalities, as well as university rectors, faculty deans, and presidents of chambers of trade and economy. His aim is to initiate cooperation not only in the field of economy, but also in fields of culture, science, research and student exchange programmes between Croatia and India.

**I believe you followed post-election developments in Croatia. Was there anything which reminded you of India?**

*Yes, the strengthening of the democratic system and institutions. I do not think anything negative about the whole process after the elections. It is all very positive. You had elections, then negotiations, forming of coalitions, it is only a part of strong democratic system, it is evolution of democracy. It is the same in India – there are a few parties on federal level, and then different parties on regional level. And they all together again represent one, consolidated India. This is empowerment of our democracy. What we have witnessed in Croatia is that for the first time you have technocratic Prime Minister, who did not participate in election process but was brought in by the wining coalition and now we will see how this will function. I am convinced that the government has committed people and that we can cooperate well. And what considers the Indian political system, I think that the present government generated a lot of positive energy abroad – every time when our Prime Minister goes for a visit, every time new contracts are signed, from economic side results are visible and all the statesmen that he visited are very positive about him.*

*This is a new approach of doing business with India, which change in a very positive way.*

**India and Croatia have a long tradition of cooperation within the Non-Aligned Movement. President Tito and the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru were founders of the movement whose aim was to eradicate poverty, promote economic development, as well as to oppose colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism. How important still are those ties in political circles?**

*Those historical and political linkages between our two countries will always remain important and they can serve as an excellent foundation for building of new trade, economic, cultural and human relations. This is our focus here in Croatia. Our traditionally good and warm political relations must be upgraded. Today, nobody talks anymore about political diplomacy, but the economic one instead. It matters how much trade and business you can bring into the country. We never say that India is a large country, and Croatia is a small one. No – we are equal partners. And there are a lot of achievements we have already accomplished in many fields. You, for example, have an established Hindu community. It is completely composed of Croats, around one thousand members, who embraced the Hindu way of life. Maybe there are more, and perhaps some of them are too embarrassed to talk about their Hinduism. But – those people are here, they have branches in some cities in Croatia. Therefore – those human connections indeed exist. Additionally, there are a lot of people interested in yoga or Ayurveda. Honestly, I am surprised by a number of people practicing yoga; there are a lot of yoga-centres which teach yoga skills. In fact, I am touched to see how many people, who are not rich, travel to India once a year, perhaps spending their entire savings, with an aim of acquiring their own peace, experiencing some kind of spirituality, or learning about new techniques they want to practice. And it is not about religion. It is about the way of life. Healthy, balanced way of life, which balances soul and body bringing them into the state of harmony.*

**How much the name Croatia means to an average Indian? Do they have any idea about the location of our country?**

*To be honest – my own mother had no idea about the country I was being posted to. She asked me: Where is Croatia? I suppose many people don't know. About Yugoslavia and Tito – yes. But after the break-up of Yugoslavia and gaining of independence, there is not enough knowledge and understanding. Perhaps even because we haven't been working enough on development of economic ties between India and Croatia. Tourism in Croatia is growing, but we must work on bringing Croatian tourists to India as well. When talking about the Indian middle class – composed of almost 300 million people – it is a large group that travels to Europe frequently and we encourage them to visit Croatia as well, as part of their visit to the region. I can understand that perhaps business people don't understand the opportunities which are opening up to them – but that is why I recommend to them to combine pleasure and business and come to Dubrovnik, Hvar, Krk, on a business retreat and may be use this opportunity to create new connections and start businesses.*

**Former President Mesić is a frequent guest at various conferences in India. Did you have the opportunity to meet and cooperate with him?**

*I had the opportunity of meeting with him, in fact, we maintain regular contacts. President Mesić is being invited to some larger events, international peace conferences. We are very happy because of his contribution to our relations, as we are to all the representatives of your country – to the President, as well as the new government whose Foreign Affairs Minister announced expansion and strengthening of relations with countries besides Europe and United States, that is, the Asian countries – such as China, Japan and India. We welcome these efforts and our message is that we want to be your strong and trusted partners.*

**India celebrated its National Day on 26th of January, that is, sixty seventh anniversary of its statehood. How did you mark this day in Croatia?**

*We wanted to organise it a little bit differently and exit the framework of hotels, and that is why we chose to celebrate it at one of the most enduring institutions in Croatia, The National and University Library. This was also our message that we want to connect with the academic community in Croatia and considerably strengthen our relations in that field. As you know, there is a very efficient Department of Indology at the University of Zagreb. They are one of the exceptionally important centres in this region, specialising in research and promotion of Indian languages and culture. However, Sanskrit in Croatia was being taught much earlier before the Department of Indology opened up officially fifty years ago. In fact, it has been taught for more than 300 years. Professors that I have met are completely dedicated to their job, they visit India frequently, and they collected a large knowledge on the Indian philosophy, Hinduism, folk tales, Vedas and have thus far rendered a fascinating research work. I truly feel humbled in their presence, and I want to express my big respect for what they do. Currently, there are some students who are studying at various Indian institutions, expanding their knowledge of language. However, I proposed that we renew our Academic Memorandum of Understanding between our two countries, which would enable even larger capacity of exchange of students, professors and joint research. I am personally interested in linking the Indology Department of the Zagreb University with other universities or colleges in Croatia. I visited Osijek, Vukovar, Slavonski Brod and they have all shown interest.*

**The population size of entire Croatia equals to population of a smaller Indian city. How do you feel here (in Croatia), considering you are coming from such a large and culturally different country?**

*Honestly, I feel humbled. And this is not because of the difference in size of our two countries, or the strength of economy – there is this certain vitality I can see in Croatia and that is perhaps not being reflected in a best possible way. I think you underestimate the achievements you accomplished in this short period since becoming independent, in these twenty five years, despite great challenges you encountered along the way. And we are trying, regardless of limitations which exist because of our geographical distance and mutual differences, to find a way of using the potential in sectors of high-technology, investing in IT and pharmaceutical start-ups, agriculture, shipbuilding and energy. And I know Croatia has some excellent projects in renewable energy. And In India, a country of 1.2 billion people, there is a*

*huge market for everything you can produce, for all Croatian investors who want to enter joint manufacturing with Indian partners, or who want to launch their own products. Besides, it is not only a market of South, but also of Southeast Asia, and even of Africa. For Indian businessmen, Croatia does not represent only the Balkans, but also it is a gateway to the European market, markets of west and north Europe, through strategically important ports, such as the Port of Rijeka.*

**The key to your economic miracle is certainly the education – the number of highly educated young people in India is growing, especially in the field of IT technology. Where do these people find employment?**

*Engineering, management, IT industry, as well as some other areas of education and employment – in the finance sector, for example. And innovations and start-ups are something which is entering in a big way. Young people come with their own ideas which they are trying to achieve, and that is what, I think, brings us closer to Croatia. Croatia as well, is opening up to innovations, and in our country also start-ups are being launched not only in large cities, but in smaller communities likewise. This is the power of youth. In the beginning, the IT technology grew without any government control. You could sit at home behind a computer and start your own business. There was no control, however, as the market grew rapidly, authorities realised the need to establish the Ministry of Information and Communication in order to govern and coordinate this sector in a country that has become one of the largest exporters of IT services in the world.*

**Where does this Indian talent for technology originate from? Your young computer geniuses have become a world phenomenon?**

*You are asking me why? It is because of creativity, openness and freedom in a society which is pluralistic, multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious, and also democratic, in which you have a freedom of creative expression and to be what you want to be. And to achieve your ideas. And then there is a focus on education, a large number of educational institutions which are being invested into. High education in India is accessible to almost everyone. In other words – public universities are subsidised by the government, so the share payable by students is minimal. Naturally, considering our huge population, there is a large number of private universities which have sprung up recently, complimentary to those established by the government. And they are quite expensive. There is a whole array of new courses in new sectors – besides technology; there is environmental protection, renewable energy, in conformity with changes in a globalised world. There is also an occurrence of a new trend – young, educated Indians who go to study in Great Britain, Europe or the United States, are acquiring new knowledges and are returning home, starting new businesses, civil society associations and alike, and by doing it they are in some ways giving back to the country that which was invested in them. Even though, maybe they would be earning more money if they remained abroad. However, those who return, open up their own businesses and create new employment for other people. This is a very encouraging trend.*

**Regardless of these great economic successes there are a lot of poor people in India and social differences are immense. What is the Indian Government doing to solve this burning issue?**

*There are two ways – one is a Government employment program developed over the last few years. It was greatly helped by the global concept of digital connectivity that enabled the connection of all citizens with the banking system. Almost anyone can now open a bank account and connect to the financial system, which makes it easier to access information and open your own business. There are programs targeting the unemployed and securing a minimum income for them through social assistance payments. In addition there are many programs for young girls and women in various forms throughout the country. They are not only provided by the federal government, but also by state governments, that are trying to bring the unemployed into the social and economic sector. In addition to that there are more opportunities for health insurance for poor people, which go hand in hand with social assistance. The other way is private entrepreneurship – even in the most abject poverty, in the slums next to the richest part of town, even there business happens. People open start-ups, small crafts – whether its hairdressers, shoe repairs, collection and reuse of waste – they are very innovative. Even these private activities in slums improve the general welfare of these people. There is a lot of positive energy throughout the country, a rising wave is felt, but of course such development must be sustainable, and the Government must have a proactive role in taking care of the huge population. You have to understand that the number of 1.2 billion people is a huge challenge and a huge responsibility for any government, and the federal as well as the state level. You mentioned great social differences that are visible. But even the group of the wealthiest people is showing a new consciousness about how they can contribute to social development projects that include most of the people. The government has also focused on projects in public-private partnership trying to convince the large corporations to help in providing socio-economic services to the poorest people. Everyone understands that the government cannot do it alone. It needs to partner with non-governmental organizations, the civil society and the private sector.*

**Another big problem that often appears on the front pages of the world's media is the frequent rapes of women and girls. There were some really brutal examples, for which Indian laws did not provide adequate sanctions. How do you explain these events, is the atmosphere in society and the legal system changing under pressure from the media and women's movements.**

*Yes there have been many changes to the legislature. It is a problem that is unfortunately persisting in large cities and is tied to many aspects. It has a lot to do with the status of law and order, the number of police officers, the legal system, and most importantly –the education system in India, and of course the state of mind of certain individuals and groups. As far as the legal system is concerned, it has significantly changed in 2013, a few months after the horrific gang rape of a girl in 2012. This law significantly changed the relevant sections of the penal code of India. The definition of rape has significantly expanded, the law is much stricter with much harsher punishments. Sanctions increased on all levels, stigma was removed from the victim and the concept of rape in marriage was introduced. Last year, in 2015, they even reduced the age limit for minors, now those between 16 and 18 can be held criminally responsible in front of an Indian court for such a crime. This change of*

*approach was of course aided by the public propaganda of non-government organisations and the civil society, whose actions showed how one case can influence changes in the law, but also the attitudes in society. So as far as the legal system is concerned, there were many changes in that area. Of course that leaves the problem of implementation and changing attitudes, this cultural and educational aspect remains that should be handled far more seriously on all front.*

**Like the rest of the world, India as well is not protected from terrorist attacks, especially because of the sensitive relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan is also very close. How did India join the global fight against terrorism?**

*Our position is that you should always look at the cause of the problem. Problems must be resolved internally – we support consolidated, political solutions to the problems, not military solutions. We firmly believe that against terrorism – in all its forms and manifestations we must fight. There is no good or bad terrorism. Terrorism is terrorism, and it is spreading across all international borders. We need to unite in the fight against this evil. But – the solutions should come from the inside, from the people who live there. It cannot be imposed from the outside. And I am afraid that during the last years there were a lot of imposed solutions. Even in Syria – India has always asserted that all the sides in the conflict must sit at the negotiating table in order to get to their solutions – in order to arrange who should be in the government, who will be transitional government – it is on them to decide.*

**Before coming Croatia, you had a very personal experience working for UNDP in Kabul?**

*First I worked 3 years for Indian Embassy and then for UNDP. It was a very challenging situation. There is a huge number of international organizations, representatives of the international community, individuals. A lot of development work has been done, but only a little bit you could find out about it from the media. The progress has been made in terms of women's rights - a number of women involved in the labour market, many girls began to go to school, what was not the case earlier. Also a number of development projects were completed, hundreds of kilometres of roads that were destroyed in the war were re-built, the infrastructure was renewed. A new Parliament has recently been built by the Indian Government, and it now has a lot of women representatives. Many Countries are involved in various projects but that fact is not published at all. It's no a sexy topics. I wrote a book about my experiences in Kabul, which is called "On Edge". I did not write exclusively from a political point of view but also talked from the social and cultural aspects. In the book I also described the daily life, outings, participation in body building competitions, weddings where I was invited. Because- you know, there is a life and positive energy despite terrorism and constant threat people are exposed to.*

**Do you still practise bodybuilding?**

*Oh, yes, I joined in your local club and I became very depressed when I saw how big are your guys! I go to a club Play fitness and my first week was the worst during my tenure, because I felt completely dwarfed next to the all these huge guys! I thought of leaving it! Play fitness is a new club, it's excellent and the people professional and great!*

**In Ludbreg there is a very successful project in pharmaceutical industry and the investor is a company called ACG Worldwide from India. What can you tell us about it?**

*Yes, it is a manufacturer of capsule pills in which Croatia ranks third in Europe. And they have plans for another 40 million dollars expansion in the coming period. This factory has created new jobs in the local community, a new attitude towards the environment. They had initially some losses which they have since recovered and now have space for further development. This is one of the best models how Croatia and India can work together. This requires pragmatism, innovation and the courage to take risks and we have all of that. We hope that this will not be applied only in the pharmaceutical sector, but also in all other sectors, for which there are potentials in Croatia or India. It is important to be a win-win situation for both of our Countries.*

*India and Croatia, Forward Together*

