

The relevance of the Gandhian ethic in today's world

Lecture by Rajmohan Gandhi

Centre for War and Peace Studies, Annual Civic Lecture 2005

Liverpool Hope University, 7 PM, Wednesday 16 November 2005

To Professor Gerald Pillay, the Vice-Chancellor and Rector, and the University's Centre for War and Peace Studies, I owe warm thanks for the honour they have given me by asking me to deliver this annual lecture.

They have brought me to a vital centre in a university where great streams of Christianity in Britain have come together; and they have brought me (for the first time in my life) to Liverpool, from where emerged a team of geniuses that caused millions of feet all over the world to tap, and from where, more recently, another team of artists with wonderful feet became the champions of Europe.

Some excitement therefore merges with the sense of honour I feel. This is indeed a special occasion for me.

As everyone here knows, I have been invited to give this lecture solely because of my study of Gandhi's life and ideas -- entirely because of my scholarship. Having clarified that being a Gandhi descendant has nothing to do with my giving this lecture, let me warn you that there is more than one descendant around.

Mohandas Gandhi and his wife Kasturba had four sons -- no daughters, sadly. Between them the four sons, all dead for some time, had fifteen children. Of the fifteen, six are no longer alive. Four granddaughters -- Sumitra, Usha, Tara, and Ela -- and five grandsons -- Kanu, Arun, Rajmohan, Ramchandra, and Gopal, to name them in the order of their birth, are still around. In addition there are numerous descendants belonging to subsequent generations. Descendants live today in India, South Africa, the UK, the USA, Australia, and Japan.

GANDHIAN ETHIC

Saint or politician? It is well known that Gandhi's life contained several paradoxes or puzzles. For a start, was he a saint (or one trying to be a saint) or a politician?

He spoke of God all the time, conducted community prayers twice a day, died with God's name on his lips, and said the aim of life was to see God face to face.

But some British Viceroy's called him a wily politician, as did Indian politicians who were his adversaries: Jinnah of the Muslim League, and Ambedkar, the leader of the "Untouchables" who resented Gandhi's bid to represent the untouchables.

He was, history tells us, a remarkably successful politician. Important sections of the India of 1915 to which Gandhi returned from South Africa were wary of independence. Hundreds of rajas and nawabs -- native chiefs ruling under the Empire's umbrella -- thought independence could lead to revenge by the people. Landlords were afraid of the anger of tenants and the landless; and the untouchables feared caste Hindu domination. Muslims feared that force of numbers would produce Hindu rule, perhaps a vengeful Hindu rule.

These sections felt no special love for the British but were afraid of the consequences of independence. They were inclined to support British rule as against the movement for Swaraj, or Indian self-rule. Combining their resources, they could have blocked Swaraj.

But Gandhi mounted a strategy that prevented such a combination. He enlisted a great majority of caste Hindus, the bulk of the untouchables, and many Muslims, and attracted several princes and landlords too. Churchill, devotee of the Empire, naturally disliked him. Wavell, the General who served as the last-but-one Viceroy, was loyal to the Empire and hated the idea of its demise, also did not like Gandhi. Yet Wavell acknowledged in his diary that Gandhi was "the most formidable of the opponents who had detached portions of the British Empire."¹

Most significantly, perhaps, in a national or political sense, Gandhi gave India an identity.

John Strachey, senior guardian of the Empire in India and once acting as Viceroy, had said in 1888: "This is the first and most essential thing about India – that there is not and never was an Indian or even any country of India, possessing according to European ideas any sort of unity, physical, political, social or religious."²

This 1888 statement was made just when young Gandhi, nineteen years old, sailed from India for England to study law. There is some indication that Gandhi decided at about this time to become the Indian that Strachey said had never existed, the Indian with a feeling for all classes, castes, languages, and religions, and that he wished also to create the India that Strachey denied but which the Raj, too, was involved in creating.

Gandhi -- and, it must be acknowledged, the Raj as well -- succeeded in a remarkable measure; Indians from across the subcontinent began to think they were one; Indian nationhood was felt by Indians, many of whom spoke of Gandhi as Bapu or father, and in 1944 in a radio broadcast Subhas Bose, another of Gandhi's major political rivals, addressed him as the father of the Indian nation.

But mark that Gandhi was a man driven by his conscience.

We see from accounts of his life (his own and that of others) that from childhood his conscience speaks to him: he should not, it says, copy in the exam despite the teacher's prodding; he should confess his stealing to his father. While he is in England, studying for the Bar, this conscience tells him that he should let a young Englishwoman he was meeting on Sundays know that he was in fact married and the father of a son. If he heeds such a conscience, as he does, is he trying to become a saint?

Yet after three years the Inner Voice also asks a 23-year-old Gandhi, now in South Africa, to not to return home from humiliation but to stay and fight; years later it asks him to organize a nationwide defiance over the salt tax; and later still to ask the British to Quit India. Is he therefore a politician?

His precocious conscience urges him to take on political and national issues; he embraces politics but not to seek fame or office or power. Is he then a saint straying into politics?

He neither claimed nor attained perfection; but then all saints are previous or potential sinners; in this astute politician there was something that to many who spent time with him (including hardboiled journalists) seemed saintly.

So we live with the puzzle. The American author and evangelist E. Stanley Jones was a good friend of Gandhi's. They met often and talked frankly. Jones wrote that a set of opposing qualities met in Gandhi. He was of East and West; the city and the village, a Hindu influenced by Christianity, simple and shrewd, serious and playful, humble and self-assertive. According to Jones, the blend gave a sweet taste. But added Jones, while the savour is sweet, the preponderating impression he leaves is not sweetness but strength.³

Since he did not confine his life to saying, "Love God and follow Him," but asked people to fight for their rights, we should perhaps say that the politician in him was stronger than the saint. He indeed took spiritual vows, but often in order to be politically effective. His vows of chastity and poverty freed him not *from* the world, but *for* action *in* the world.

Nonviolence and pacifism. From his life we discover that Gandhi's pacifist commitment was remarkable but not absolute. In the final phase of his life, when India became independent but also divided into two, and great violence occurred, he did not ask the Government of independent India (led by his followers) to deal nonviolently with internal or external threats. He recommended self-defense to targets of Hindu-Muslim violence. Urging Hindus and Muslims not to retaliate against the innocent, and not to feed feelings of hate or revenge, he also asked the public to let the government catch and punish culprits.

He actively involved himself in ambulance work in two wars in South Africa and again during World War One, and he tried also to enlist recruits for World War One, while declaring that he himself would not carry a gun. One of his repeated objections to British rule in India was that it denied Indians the right to bear arms.

During World War II he blessed a resolution of the Indian National Congress that said if the British ended their rule, a free India would host Allied troops. In October 1947 he gave, in his own words, "tacit approval" to the dispatch of Indian troops to defend Kashmir against Pakistani-supported irregular forces.

We may therefore say that reconciliation, justice, and the rule of law -- not taking the law into your own hands -- seemed more his message than unqualified pacifism. He conceded that states had the right of self-defense, and the duty to protect their citizens, and that individuals too could use force to defend themselves.

Yet the source of the power he sought for himself and for India was not the invincible bow, gun, bomb or missile, but the human conscience; and he was well aware, from study and from personal experience in the ambulance corps, of the brutality of war. Let me quote what he said in 1909, when he visited England from South Africa to present the case of Indians in the Transvaal who in impressive numbers had embraced Gandhi's concept of satyagraha ("clinging to the truth"), nonviolent struggle, against racial discrimination.

Speaking in London to the Emerson Club, which may or may not exist in London today, this is what he said on 8 October 1909, ninety-six years ago:

War with all its glorification of brute force is essentially a degrading thing. It demoralizes those who are trained for it. It brutalizes men of naturally gentle character. It outrages every beautiful canon of morality. Its path of glory is foul with the passions of lust, and red with the blood of murder. This is not the pathway to our goal.

The grandest aid to development of strong, pure, beautiful character which is our aim, is the endurance of suffering. Self-restraint, unselfishness, patience, gentleness, these are the flowers which spring beneath the feet of those who accept, but refuse to impose, suffering, and the grim prisons of Johannesburg, Pretoria, Heidelberg and Volksrust are like the four gateways to this garden of God.⁴

We also know that in his nonviolent campaigns Gandhi was vigilant and decisive against the hate that could kill people and kill also his campaigns. When, in February 1922, demonstrators shouting "Victory to Mahatma Gandhi" went berserk in a remote corner of India and hacked to pieces 22 police constables fleeing from their shelter that had been set on fire, Gandhi called off an entire nationwide campaign that had enthused India and frightened the British.

Only days earlier he had articulated an ultimatum to the Viceroy, which was to be followed by an intensification of the campaign. But he called off the campaign, even though a voice inside him argued that it was "cowardly to withdraw after pompous threats to the government and promises to the people..."

"Religious politics." Another key element of the Gandhian ethic, one that confirms its paradoxical and also its realistic character, is a willingness to embrace the religious factor. The Gandhi who was clear that the Indian constitution had to be secular freely spoke of himself as a loyal Hindu; his political discourse was rich in religious vocabulary without which, he knew, India's deeply religious masses, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian, could not be reached.

The critical difference between Gandhi and the other Hindu political figures was that while Gandhi used his Hinduness to build bridges with Muslims, the others sought differentiation and at times conflict.

The contrast with Savarkar, the ideologue of the Hindu right, fourteen years younger than Gandhi, with whom Gandhi had revealing debates in London in 1906 and 1909, is particularly striking. In his theory of Indianness, Savarkar claimed that only those who saw India as both their homeland and their holy land could be reliable Indians, a criterion that made India's Muslims, Jews, and Christians disloyal by definition.

Gandhi, on the other hand, insisted that the God of the Hindus was the same as the God of the Muslims and of the Christians, and also that morality and humanity were more important than ancestry. Winning over many Hindus to such a view, Gandhi helped liberate Hinduism from the Indian earth, apart from protecting the Indian polity against intolerance. Offering an exact opposite of the 'homeland-holy land' thesis, he helped make Hinduism a matter of the soul rather than of the soil, something born in India but not chained to India.

Though many Hindus thought of him as a Mahatma ('great soul'), a section of Hindus saw Gandhi as a violator of scriptural injunctions prescribing the practice of untouchability, and as one who weakened Hindus in their equation with Muslims. Gandhi's answer was that verses from scripture cited by his orthodox opponents "cannot be above reason and morality."⁵

Gandhi's political leadership contributed to India's constitutional commitment to equality irrespective of religion or caste, but a role was also played by Gandhi's ability to win much of Hindu society to his version of Hinduism. Thanks significantly to his efforts, India's Hindus seemed to acknowledge the sin of untouchability and also to adopt a phrase that was

constantly on his lips, *Ishwar Allah Tere Naam* ("Ishwar and Allah are Your names" – God's names), a phrase to which Hindu extremists have never been reconciled, but one that a large majority of India's Hindus have wholeheartedly adopted.

TODAY'S WORLD

Difference. Let me start by noting a critical if obvious difference between the period of the Cold War and our times, which are described as a period of terrorism or of a global war on it, or a period witnessing a global clash of civilizations, or a global fight for democracy.

The difference, plain but not always spelt out, is this: During the Cold War, when Communism ruled large sections of our world, many in the democracies thought that while the rulers of Communist states were tyrannical and evil, their people were innocent victims, good people like those living in the democracies.

Today, by contrast, in our era of an apparent clash of civilizations, many in the democracies see the populations of Muslim lands as flawed, even while good relations are maintained in many cases with rulers of Muslim lands, who are viewed as people with whom business can be done.

Such thinking in parts of the West has its counterpart in much of the Islamic world, which has seen persistent negative propaganda about Christians and the crusades, Jews and Zionism, and Americans and Europeans. The result is people-to-people distrust, and the possibility of people-to-people enmity. This is very different from the times of the Cold War, when there was great people-to-people empathy and warmth.

About a year-and-a-half ago, shortly after the Beslan tragedy, two young Russian women played against each other in the finals of the US Open tennis championship. When the match ended, they spoke on TV as young Russians addressing the people of the USA and said that after Beslan the two peoples, Russians and Americans, had become part of the same battle. The two wonderful tennis players did not of course say that terrorism and Islam were one and the same, but those hearing them took the message that the world's non-Muslims had to show solidarity in an inescapable, deadly clash with the Muslim world.

Chance missed. Diana Eck, the scholar of religion at Harvard University who runs the pluralism project, has written of one of the effects of 9/11 in the USA. In her words, the blast of 9/11 produced an echo boom of interest. People reached out to one another, and in town after town Americans decided to find out about Islam, contacting people they had never before befriended, and trying to obtain copies of the Qur'an. Many of them talked with Muslims in their cities or neighborhoods for the first time.

But, adds Diana Eck, "lessons learned at a local level were never even remotely apprehended at a national policy level. The space opened for new and powerful alliances across the world was instead occupied by a strategy of violent retribution, articulated in the language of war."⁶

When I quote Diana Eck here, I am not suggesting that the action against the Afghan government after September 11 was unjustified, and I am not sure she is suggesting that either.

Just as Americans sought out one another inside America, including Muslim Americans, and talked about what was happening and why, and what should be done, Americans and official

America could have talked with Muslims across the world about what was happening, and why, and what should be done. In the wake of 9/11, as warmth flew to America from all parts of the world, there was a unique opening for an honest, helpful, international conversation.

Instead there occurred a search for an evil spirit behind the destruction of September 11, and many declared that they had found its source: they said the source was in Islam. They declared it over and over again, from pulpits, on talk-radio, on popular TV, and at times in scholarly journals.

"Islam the flaw." A rare and great chance was missed; and a hazardous over-simplification was sold. When, as often happens, I hear the argument about the flawed nature of Islam, I recall the faces and indeed the lives of Muslims I have known and know, I recall images of Muslims kneeling in prayer, or raising their arms in supplication to God, or carrying their dead or wounded on cold earthquake-hit slopes, and ask myself if I could truly believe that the Islam so practised was particularly and peculiarly flawed. Well, I cannot so believe.

When I hear such an argument I also at times recall a radio broadcast, or rather the recording of a radio broadcast, that I first heard as a boy. The voice in the recording was that of Winston Churchill speaking nearly three-quarters of a century ago -- in June 1941, when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union and made Russia Britain's ally against Nazism. Having spent several previous years warning people about the dangers of Russian Communism, Churchill now had to summon support for an alliance with the Russians and the Communists.

The man whose words rose to every challenging moment did not fail this time either. In this speech in June 1941, which included the line that everybody knows about fighting Hitler "by land, by sea and in the air," Churchill also said, referring to Russians threatened by Hitler: "I see the 10,000 villages of Russia, where the means of existence was wrung so hardly from the soil, but where there are still primordial human joys, where maidens laugh and children play."

Well, Muslim maidens laugh too, and Muslim children also play, and all Muslims, Sunni or Shia, are grateful for primordial human joys. They hate terrorism as much as anybody else in the world, and perhaps even more, for more Muslims have been killed in terrorist acts than non-Muslims.

In Rwanda in 1994, some massacres actually took place in churches. Did that make the Rwanda killings a Christian crime? When, in the 1970s, Buddhist Cambodia was the venue for the killing fields, did the killing reflect an innate Buddhist flaw? When, a couple of years ago, almost all members of the royal family of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal were shot dead, and, later, a large number of peasants and security men were killed in shootings, was some Hindu teaching to blame? Indeed, were the two Great Wars of the 20th century a result of Christianity?

Today many in different parts of the world accept that while all others are innocent unless proved guilty, a Muslim is guilty unless he or she demonstrates innocence. Much of the world took a significant U turn in its ethics.

Governments, immigration officers, agents at check-in counters, landlords, newspaper reporters, taxi-drivers, and employers now make at least a mental note, if they do not offer a visible or audible expression, when they find that the person they are dealing with is a Muslim.

Plain argument defended the U turn. Who were the destroyers on September 11? Muslims, Arabs. And why did they destroy? A neat, plausible, concise explanation was offered. Because these Muslims and Arabs were raised in a flawed religion and in failed states. Take away their hate and nothing remains. They hate; therefore they are.

Explaining terrorism. The explanation of terrorism offered by what may cautiously be described as the Western establishment has altered during the last few years. Earlier this year, in his State of the Union address (2 Feb 2005), President George W. Bush, spelt out a different explanation. Let me quote him:

If whole regions of the world remain in despair and grow in hatred, they will be the recruiting grounds for terror, and that terror will stalk America and other free nations for decades. The only force powerful enough to stop the rise of tyranny and terror, and replace hatred with hope, is the force of human freedom.

A Vietnam comparison. After thus suggesting that despair and oppression encourage terrorism, President Bush has more recently stressed the fanatical ideology that al-Zarqawi and his associates evidently subscribe to, and likened it to Communism. Speaking last month (6 Oct.) to the National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush said – I am quoting excerpts --:

The murderous ideology of the Islamic radicals is the great challenge of our new century... [T]his fight [against the Islamic radicals] resembles the struggle against communism in the last century. Like the ideology of communism, Islamic radicalism is elitist, led by a self-appointed vanguard that presumes to speak for the Muslim masses...

Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy teaches that innocent individuals can be sacrificed to serve a political vision...

Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy is dismissive of free peoples, claiming that men and women who live in liberty are weak and decadent...

We will keep our nerve and we will win that victory. We do know the love of freedom is the mightiest force of history. And we do know the cause of freedom will once again prevail. (end of quote)

Much in this speech can be accepted, yet I question the wisdom of elevating fanatics of radical Islam to the status of the chief adversary today of the world's sole super power. These fanatics have to be identified, tackled, and overcome, not raised to an importance they do not possess among the world's Muslims.

For a time during the Vietnam War, many failed to see that in Vietnamese veins nationalism flowed more strongly than Communism. In the same way, nationalism today is a stronger force than radical Islam in the Middle East – in Iraq, in Palestine, in Iran, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Pakistan, and everywhere else.

WHAT GANDHI SAYS

Let me, in this final portion, refer to a few incidents from Gandhi's life that I think have a bearing on our theme. I will start with a story from his boyhood that reveals the highly

conservative character of the home in which he was raised. Gandhi told the story in 1921, when he was accused of yielding to Christian influence in his attacks on untouchability. I quote from remarks by Gandhi in 1921:

I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism. It is wrong to think, as some people do, that I have taken my view from my study of Christian literature. These views date as far back as the time when I was neither enamored of, nor acquainted with, the Bible or its followers.

I was hardly yet twelve when this idea had dawned on me. A scavenger named Uka, an untouchable, used to attend to our house for cleaning latrines. Often I would ask my mother why I was forbidden to touch him. If I accidentally touched Uka I was asked to perform the ablutions, and though I naturally obeyed, it was not without smilingly protesting.

I was a very dutiful and obedient child and so far as it was consistent with respect for parents I often had a tussle with them on this matter. I told my mother that she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.

But here is the punch line:

While at school I would often happen to touch the 'untouchables' and as I never would conceal the fact from my parents, my mother would tell me that the shortest cut to purification after the unholy touch was to cancel the touch by touching any Muslim passing by.⁷

So the boy Mohan was asked by his devout mother to cancel one sin by contracting another sin, one negative by another negative. And when, a few years later, he became keen to go to England to study, his mother and all senior relatives (his father was dead by now) tried their best to stop him. An influential uncle said to him:

I am not sure whether it is possible for one to stay in England without prejudice to one's own religion.... When I meet these big barristers (returning to India after studying in England), I see no difference between their life and that of Europeans. They know no scruples regarding food. Cigars are never pout of their mouths. They dress as shamelessly as Englishmen... I am shortly going on a pilgrimage and have not many years to live. At the threshold of death, how dare I give you permission to go to England, to cross the seas?⁸ (Autobiography)

Gandhi and England. But Mohandas did come to England, and loved his three years here as a student. This is what he wrote in a diary on board the ship that took him back to India:

(1891) I could not myself believe that I was going to India until I stepped into the steamship Oceana of the P. & O. Company. So much attached was I to London and its environments; for who would not be? London with its teaching institutions, public galleries, vegetarian restaurants, is a fit place for a student and a traveler, a trader and a faddist – as a vegetarian would be called by his opponents. Thus it was not without regret that I left dear London.⁹

Some years later, however, he asked Indians to fight the British. At the same time, he asked Indians to love the British!

Let us consider, for instance, the year 1919, when the killings occurred in Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs in the Punjab province, where Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus lived. Early in April 1919 a mob in Amritsar angered by the arrests of two Indians, a Hindu and a Muslim, had killed five or six Englishmen; and an English schoolmistress, Miss Sherwood, had been assaulted. Martial law was declared in the Punjab, and public meetings were banned.

But word of the ban did not reach everyone, and on April 13, about ten thousand Indians, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, gathered in a rectangular garden called Jallianwala Bagh, which was enclosed on three sides by five-foot-high walls. Led by General Sir Reginald Dyer, troops arrived on the scene, occupied the only side of the rectangle that opened out, and fired. According to official figures, 389 men and women were killed in less than ten minutes.

It was perhaps the worst single incident in the annals of British rule in India. Some months later, at the end of 1919, the Indian National Congress, the body that was the chief vehicle for the freedom movement, held its annual session, for obvious reasons, in Amritsar, on a site adjacent to Jallianwala Bagh.

The gifted Brahmin lawyer from Allahabad, Motilal Nehru, father of Jawaharlal Nehru, presided, and those present included the respected Lokamanya Tilak from Maharashtra, the colorful brothers Shaukat Ali and Muhammad Ali, who had just been released from British prisons, Annie Besant, the Irishwoman who had made India her home and Indian home rule her mission and who two years previously had been the Congress President, Calcutta's well-known orators Bipin Chandra Pal and Chitta Ranjan Das, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya from Benares, and Bombay's brilliant barrister, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Also in Amritsar was Gandhi, who had returned to India from South Africa only four years earlier, led some local battles in different parts of India, and earned nationwide fame earlier in 1919 with his call for a nonviolent struggle for free speech. But he was not yet the preeminent figure he would later become, and he was ill.

With the memory of Jallianwala so fresh and, in Amritsar, so intimate, anti-British feelings ran high at the session. K.M. Munshi, another Bombay lawyer who was present at this 1919 occasion, would later recall the mood and Gandhi's intervention:

A resolution was moved (Munshi later wrote) condemning both the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh and the mad frenzy of the crowds. The hearts of most of us revolted at the latter part of the resolution... This must have been Mrs Besant's work, most thought; she was after all British.

One Punjab leader gave expression to this feeling rather crudely: no one born of an Indian mother, said he, could have drafted this resolution. Lokamanya too was indignant and so were Pal and C.R. Das; and the latter part of the resolution was lost by an overwhelming majority.

Next day the President wanted to reconsider the resolution as Gandhiji, he said, was very keen on it. There were vehement protests. Ultimately Gandhi was helped to the table to move that the resolution be reconsidered. He spoke sitting. Out of respect the house sat quiet but with ill-concealed impatience.

Referring to the remark that no son born of an Indian mother could have drafted the resolution, Gandhiji stated that he had considered deeply and long whether as an Indian he could have drafted the resolution, for indeed he had drafted it. But after long searching of the heart, he had come to the conclusion that only a person born of an Indian mother could have drafted it.

And then he spoke (*Munshi goes on*) as if his whole life depended upon the question... When he stopped, we were at his feet.. The resolution was reconsidered and accepted in its original form.¹⁰ (End of quote)

Gandhi was giving a new meaning to being Indian, to Indian honor. Because much of India accepted his meaning of these concepts, the Indian movement for freedom occupied the moral high ground and put the Empire on the defensive.

Gandhi & Britain. In 1931 Gandhi made his last visit to England, to attend the Round Table Conference on India convened by Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. The previous year Gandhi had led a nationwide yet nonviolent defiance on a scale that, in the words at the time of Churchill, had “not been known since the British first trod the soil of India.”¹¹

The Round Table Conference failed, but despite the defiance he had organized in the previous year Gandhi was given a great welcome by the British people, including, believe it or not, by workers in Lancashire who had suffered from Indian boycotts.

Making his farewell remarks at the Conference on December 1, 1931, Gandhi said:

[M]y thanks to all—from Their Majesties down to the poorest men in the East End, where I have taken up my habitation...

No matter what the fortunes may be of this Round Table Conference, one thing I shall certainly carry with me—... from high to low I have found nothing but the utmost courtesy and the utmost affection...

[A]lthough ... the Lancashire people had perhaps some reason for becoming irritated against me, I found no irritation, no resentment even in the operatives. The operatives, men and women, hugged me... I shall never forget that.

I am carrying with me thousands upon thousands of English friendships. I do not know them, but I read that affection in their eyes as early in the morning I walk through your streets. All this hospitality, all this kindness will never be effaced from my memory no matter what befalls my unhappy land.

In these remarks he also gave to the Conference his assessment of Britain, which, he said, possessed (I quote) “a record for bravery perhaps unequalled,” (remember this is before World War II), “a nation,” Gandhi added, “noted for having fought slavery, a nation that has at least claimed times without number to protect the weak.”¹²

You can see that it was the place given to the human conscience by the British – by your poets, by heroes that sprang from your soil, by your leaders – that left a mark on their strange opponent, Gandhi.

Addressing hate. Towards the end of his life Gandhi had to address the Hindu-Muslim divide. Here is what Gandhi said from his prayer-meeting platform on 28 May 1947, six weeks before Indian independence:

Yesterday somebody asked what we should do with a mad dog, whether we should not kill it. (*The implication of the question, as you can guess, was that some Muslims were like mad dogs and deserved to be destroyed.*) [The questioner really] wanted to ask (Gandhi added) what should be done when a man went mad.

When I was about ten, a brother of mine had gone mad. Afterwards he was cured. Now he is no more. In a fit of madness he would rush out and strike everyone. But what could I do? Could I beat him? Or could my mother and father beat him? A doctor was called in and he was asked to treat my brother in every possible manner except by beating him. He was my blood brother. But now I make no such distinctions. Now all of you, [Hindus and Muslims], are my blood brothers. If all of you lose your sanity and I happen to have an army at my disposal, do you think I should have you shot?¹³

Asking himself, who are my people, Gandhi had concluded years earlier, despite the background in which he was raised, that Muslims were as much his people as Hindus. But one who thought of Hindus *and* Muslims as blood brothers was not popular with everyone in 1947.

On 30 January 1948 he was killed by a group of Hindus who thought him too friendly and forgiving towards the Muslims. They had tried to kill him ten days earlier.

On 20 January, seven men planning to take his life went to Gandhi's multi-faith prayer meeting, open to the public and held in open air. When Gandhi commenced speaking after the prayers, one of the seven threw a grenade and there was an explosion. The plan was for the others to shoot into Gandhi at this point, but it misfired. The man who threw the grenade was captured, and the others slipped away.

Gandhi continued to speak as if nothing had happened. He was therefore praised for his poise. At his prayer meeting the next day, January 21, he said:

Let me first deal with the bomb incident of yesterday. People have been sending me wires congratulating me and praising me. In fact I deserve no congratulations. I displayed no bravery. I thought it was part of army practice somewhere. I only came to know later that it was a bomb and that it might have killed me if God had not willed it that I should live.

You should not have any kind of hate against the person who was responsible for this. He had taken it for granted that I was an enemy of Hinduism. Is it not said in Chapter 4 of the Gita that whenever the wicked become too powerful and harm dharma, God sends someone to destroy them?

The man who exploded the bomb obviously thinks that he has been sent by God to destroy me.

But if we do not like a man, does it mean that he is wicked? If then someone kills me, taking me to a wicked man, will he not have to answer before God? When he says he

is doing the bidding of God, he is only making God an accomplice in a wicked deed. Those who are behind him or whose tool he is should know that this sort of thing will not save Hinduism.

If Hinduism has to be saved, it will be saved through such work as I am doing. I have been imbibing Hindu dharma right from my childhood. My nurse taught me to invoke Rama whenever I had any fears. Having passed all the tests, I am as staunch a Hindu today as intuitively I was at the age of five or six. Do you want to annihilate Hind dharma by killing a devout Hindu like me?

Some Sikhs came and asked me if I suspected that a Sikh was implicated. I know he was not a Sikh. But what even if he was? What does it matter if he was a Hindu or a Muslim? May God bless him with good sense.

“When he says he is doing the bidding of God, he is only making God an accomplice in a wicked deed.” The sentence applies to many a brutal event today. And Muslims troubled by heartless extremism in fellow-Muslims must similarly feel like asking them, “Do you wish to annihilate Islam by killing innocent women and children?”¹⁴

Ghaffar Khan. Here I should recall Ghaffar Khan, or Badshah Khan as he was more often called, sometimes also spoken of as the Frontier Gandhi, who led a remarkable nonviolent movement in the subcontinent’s Pashtun or Pakhtun or Pathan portions during the British time, inviting twelve years in prison, and who after independence struggled for Pakhtun or Pathan autonomy in Pakistan and spent another fifteen years in Pakistani jails.

The efficacy of his nonviolent movement comes across from a recollection by a British officer called Bacon of the 1930 struggle in Peshawar, Charsadda, and elsewhere in the Northwest Frontier Province when thousands of Pakhtuns nonviolently stood up to the British. Eight years or so after the 1930 struggle, when Badshah Khan’s followers, the Khudai Khidmatgars (“Servants of God”), also known as the Red Shirts, had won power in provincial elections, and his older brother Dr. Khan Sahib, had become the Premier of the Northwest Frontier Province, Bacon talked about the 1930 events with Ghani Khan, Ghaffar Khan’s son, who relates this conversation:

[Bacon] told me, “Ghani, I was the Assistant Commissioner in Charsadda. The Red Shirts would be brought to me. I had orders to give them each two years rigorous imprisonment. I would say, ‘Are you a Red Shirt?’ They would say yes. ‘Do you want freedom?’ ‘Yes, I want freedom.’ ‘If I release you, will you do it again?’ ‘Yes.’ ” [Bacon] said, “I would want to get up and hug him. But instead I would write, ‘Two years.’ ”¹⁵

The Gandhian ethic, the ethic of Ghaffar Khan, let the nationalists of the Middle East note, results in a fight after which your enemy wants to hug you.

Reconciliation. In July this last summer my wife Usha and I spent some time in Lahore in Pakistan, interviewing people with memories of 1947, the year of independence that was also the year of Partition, great violence and trauma. We knew generally, as did others, that present in 1947 alongside the violence were gestures of humanity and bravery, gestures of men and women who saved targeted people belonging to the “other side,” acts of Hindus and Sikhs who helped Muslims, of Muslims who saved Hindu and Sikh lives.

Our aim was to record specific gestures of this kind. The more than two dozen people we interacted with in Lahore recalled several such incidents; and the exercise of unearthing such memories refreshed our faith, and I believe the faith of those we interviewed, in human nature's potential for compassion and courage.

Many are perhaps aware of the inscription at Hiroshima that says, "We will not let this happen again." Who the "we" is, what the "this" is, is wisely left for the visitor to decide. "We will not let this happen again."

Like several others, I have for years longed for a memorial in India and Pakistan where every name of the victims of 1947 is recorded, where their death is mourned and their life remembered, a memorial before which every visitor, Indian, Pakistani or another, a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or anyone else, would want to say inwardly, "We will not let this happen again."

I feel this is the sort of thing that Gandhi says to us today. I think he asks us to play our part in bridging the divide between the Muslim world and the West, the global counterpart in the 21st century of India's 1947 tensions.

(end)

¹ Penderel Moon (ed.), *Wavell: A Viceroy's Journal*, Oxford, 1973, p. 439.

² Quoted in Ainslee Embree, *India's Search for National Identity*, Chankaya, Delhi, 1988, p. 1.

³ E. Stanley Jones, *Gandhi*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1948, pp. 33-34.

⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 2 December 1910, quoted in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 10: 159.

⁵ Remarks in 1917 quoted in *Collected Works*, 14: 345.

⁶ Diana Eck, "Dialogue and the Echo Boom of Terror," in Akbar Ahmed and Brian Frost (ed.), *After Terror*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 26.

⁷ On 13 April 1921. *Collected Works* (new series), 23: 41-47.

⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Dover, New York, 1983, p. 34.

⁹ *Collected Works*, 1: 50-51.

¹⁰ K.M. Munshi, *Pilgrimage to Freedom*, Bhavan, Bombay, 1967, pp. 16-17.

¹¹ Quoted in Madhu Limaye, *Prime Movers*, Radiant, New Delhi, 1985, p. 34.

¹² *Collected Works* (new series), 54: 219-31.

¹³ *Collected Works*, 88: 28-29.

¹⁴ *Collected Works*, 90: 472-73.

¹⁵ Omar Khan, *Interview, May 19, 1990, with Ghani Khan, www.harappa.com*

© Rajmohan Gandhi, 2005

This talk may be photocopied without permission for private use. Any requests for publication or other wider use should be addressed to Edward Peters, 37 Mill Lane, Oxford OX3 0QG, UK – edward.peters@iofc.org