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GANDHIJI AND THE WORLD

I think I will try to say a few things on the role of Gandhian values abroad.

So, what is the relevance of Gandhian values in the wide world today? The aspect of Gandhian values that tend to receive most attention, not surprisingly, is the practice of non-violence. Gandhiji's championing of non-violence, even when facing a violent adversary, has stimulated public reflection and kindled political action in different forms right across the world. Not least of Gandhiji's influences can be seen in the way courageous and visionary political leaders in many other countries, including such luminaries as Martin Luther King in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa have been inspired by Gandhiji's ideas and values. The violence that is endemic in the contemporary world makes the commitment to non-violence particularly challenging and difficult, but it also makes that priority especially important and urgent.

However, in this context it is extremely important to appreciate that non-violence is promoted not only by rejecting and spurning violent courses of action, but also by trying to build societies in which violence would not be cultivated and nurtured. Gandhiji was concerned with the morality of personal behaviour, but not just with that. We would undervalue the wide reach of his political thinking, if we try to see non-violence simply as a code of behaviour (important as such a code is).

Consider the general problem of terrorism in the world today. In fighting terrorism, the Gandhian response cannot be seen as taking primarily the form of pleading with the would-be terrorists to desist from doing dastardly things, nor even just the form (again, important as it is) of dialogue and public interaction in peaceful ways with potential adversaries. Gandhiji's ideas about preventing violence went far beyond that, and involved social institutions and public priorities, as well as individual beliefs and commitments. Bearing this in mind, and pursuing the general theme of the relevance of Gandhian values outside India, I ask the question: Is there something that America and Britain in particular can profitably learn today from Gandhiji's political analysis?

Some of the lessons of a Gandhian approach to violence and terrorism in the world are clear enough. Perhaps the simplest - and one that has been much discussed recently - is the importance of education in cultivating peace rather than discord. The implications include the need to discourage, and if possible to eliminate altogether, schools in which hatred of other communities, or other groups of people in general, is encouraged and nourished. This applies not only to militant madrassas, but also to other narrowly focused educational establishments in which a strong sense of sectarian identity is promoted, that distances one human being from another, on the basis of religion or ethnicity or caste or creed. There is more to be done on this in India, as we know from many recent events, including the sectarian killings in Mumbai in 1992-93 or violence in Gujarat in 2002. But happily the country seems to have stepped back from what seemed at one stage to be a relentless departure from secular toleration and non-sectarian respect, which were so important to Gandhiji.

My focus today - in line with one of the Bajaj awards - is on the relevance of Gandhian ideas outside India, including in America and Britain. It might be thought that Gandhiji's lessons are widely understood in Britain and America, and at one level they certainly are. For example, militant preaching in mosques and madrassas has come recently under much scrutiny in Britain, especially after the carnage last July that London experienced in the hands of home-grown terrorists. The

British were very shocked that young people from immigrant families born and brought up in Britain could be inclined to kill other people in Britain with such dedication. In response to this shock, many centres of hateful preaching and teaching are being restrained, or closed, in contemporary Britain, which is certainly an understandable move. But I will presently argue that the full force of Gandhiji's understanding of this subject has not yet been seized in British public policy.

However, before going into that, I want to make another very general point. One of the great messages of Gandhiji is that you cannot defeat nastiness, including violent nastiness, unless you yourself shun similar nastiness altogether. This has much immediate relevance today. For example, every atrocity committed in the cause of seeking useful information to defeat terrorism, whether in the Guantanamo detention centre or in the Abu Gharib prison in Iraq, helps to generate more terrorism. The issue is not only that torture is always wrong (which it is), nor only that torture can hardly produce reliable information since the victims of torture say whatever would get them out of the on-going misery (that is also true). But going beyond these obvious - though important - points, Gandhiji also told us that the loss of one's own moral stature gives tremendous strength to one's violent opponents.

The global embarrassment that the Anglo-American initiative has suffered from these systematic transgressions, and the way that bad behavior of those claiming to fight for democracy and human rights has been used by terrorists to get more recruits and some general public sympathy, might have surprised the military strategists sitting in Washington or London, but they are entirely in line with what Mahatma Gandhi was trying to teach the world. Time has not withered the force of Gandhiji's arguments, nor their sweeping relevance to the world.

Gandhiji would have been appalled also by the fact that even though the United States itself, at least in principle, stands firmly against torture done on American soil or by American personnel (indeed America has a remarkable history of codifying and asserting individual rights and liberties going back all the way to the amendments to the US constitution made already in the eighteenth century), there are many holders of high American positions who approve of, and actively support, the procedure of what is called "extraordinary rendition." In that terrible procedure, suspected terrorists are dispatched to countries that systematically perform torture, in order that questioning can be conducted there without the constraints that apply in America. The point that emerges from Gandhiji's arguments is not only that this is a thoroughly unethical practice, but also that this is no way of winning a war against terrorism and nastiness. It is important to understand that Gandhiji not only presented to us a vision of morality, but also a political understanding of how one's own behaviour can be, depending on its nature, a source of great strength, or of tremendous weakness. Indeed, Gandhian values have to be seen and understood in terms of the Gandhian arguments that sustain those values. No matter how terribly well armed with weapons one might be, a loss of moral character saps one's strength in a definitive way. The value of that lesson has never been greater than it is today.

I come back now to the question of cultivating social values, and social identities, that generates peace rather than violence. Even though I admire greatly the way post-colonial Britain has, by and large, succeeded in giving cultural freedom to people of different backgrounds and origins, residing in the country, I cannot fail to have considerable misgivings about the official move in the United Kingdom towards extension of state-supported, faith-based schools. Rather than reducing existing state-financed faith-based schools, actually adding others to them - Muslim schools, Hindu schools and Sikh schools to pre-existing Christian ones - can reduce the role of reasoning which the children have the opportunity to cultivate and use, at a time when the priority should sensibly be towards broadening the horizon of understanding and of choice for the children whose lives lie ahead of them. The limitation imposed on the children is especially acute when the new religions schools give children rather little opportunity to cultivate reasoned choice on the priorities of their lives. They often fail to alert students to the need to decide for themselves how the various components of their identities (related respectively to nationality, language, literature, religious and cultural history, scientific interests, etc.) should receive attention, giving pre-determined priority only to religious

ethnicity.

This is not to suggest that the problems of bias (and the deliberated vision) in these new faith-based British schools could be anything as extreme as in, say, the fundamentalist madrassas in Pakistan, which have been the breeding ground of intolerance and violence-and often terrorism-in that strained part of the world. But the opportunity of cultivating reason and the recognition of the need for scrutinized choice are clearly far less in these faith-based schools than in the more Mixed and less than in old, traditional Christian schools with a long tradition of giving a broad curriculum, along with tolerance of considerable scepticism about religious education itself.

The move towards faith-based schools in Britain reflects, in fact, a more general - and deeply problematic - vision of Britain as "a federation of communities," rather than a collectivity of human beings resident in Britain, with their diverse differences, of which religious and community-based distinctions constitute only one part (along with differences in language, literature, politics, class, gender, location, and other characteristics). It is unfair to children who have not yet had much opportunity of reasoning and choice to be put into rigid boxes in terms of one specific criterion of categorization, viz, the religious divide.

The "federational" view of the people of a nation is a more general problem than the particular difficulty arising from faith-based divisions in schooling. While I am concentrating my attention here on the problems that even as advanced a democracy as Britain faces, it is easy to see how much divisiveness has been bred by the federation view of citizenry in attempts to establish new democracies in countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan. From one perspective, the elections and the referendum in Iraq this year can be seen as considerable successes within their own criteria of assessment: the voting did occur, a fairly high proportion of the electorate did vote, and violent interruptions did not mar the entire effort. And yet in the absence of opportunities for open and participatory dialoguer beyond what was provided by institutions linked with the politics of religion, the voting processes were predictably sectarian, linked with religious and ethnic denominations. The participation of the people from different denominations (Shia, Sunni, Kurd) seemed to be rigidly intermediated by the spokesmen of the respective denominations, with the general citizenship roles of people being given little opportunity to develop and flourish.

Oddly enough, there is an uncanny similarity between the problems that Britain faces today and those that British India faced, and which Mahatma Gandhi thought were getting direct encouragement from the British Raj. I discuss this issue, among others, in a forthcoming book, called 'Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny', to be published by w. w. Norton in March next year.

Gandhiji was critical in particular of the official view that India was a collection of religious communities. When he came to London for the "Indian Round Table Conference" called by the British government in 1931, he found that he was assigned to a specific sectarian corner in the - revealingly named - "Federal Structure committee." Gandhiji resented the fact that he was being depicted primarily as a spokesman of Hindus, in particular "caste Hindus," with the remaining "46 per cent of the population" being represented by chosen delegates (chosen by the British Prime Minister) of each of the "other communities."

Gandhiji insisted that while he himself was a Hindu, Congress and the political movement that he led were staunchly secular and were not community based; they had supporters from all the different religious groups in India. While he saw that a distinction can be made on religious lines between one Indian and another, he pointed to the fact that other way of dividing the population of India were no less relevant. Gandhiji made a powerful plea for the British rulers to see the plurality of the diverse identities of Indians. In fact, he said he wanted to speak not for Hindus in particular, but for "the dumb, toiling, semi-starved millions" who constitute "over 85 per cent of the population of India.

Gender was another basis for an important distinction, which, Gandhiji pointed out, the British categories ignored, thereby giving no special place to considering the problems of Indian women. He told the British Prime Minister, "you have had, on behalf of the women, a complete repudiation of special representation, "and pointed to the fact that" they happen to be one half of the population of India." Sarojini Naidu, who came with Gandhiji to the Round table Conference, was the only woman delegate in the conference. Gandhiji pointed to the fact that she was elected as the President of the Congress Party (this was in 1925, which was, as it happens, fifty years before any woman was elected to preside over any major British political party, to wit, Margaret Thatcher in 1975). Sarojini Naidu could, on the Raj's "representational" line of reasoning, speak for half the Indian people, namely Indian women; Abdul Qaiyum, another delegate, pointed also to the fact that Sarojini Naidu, whom he called "the Nightingale of India," was also the one distinguished poet in the assembled gathering, a different kind of identity from being seen as a Hindu politician. In a meeting arranged at the Royal Institute of International Affairs during that visit, Gandhiji also insisted that he was trying to resist what he called "the vivisection of a whole nation."

During the recent parliamentary debate on the judicial report on the killings of Sikhs that occurred immediately after Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguard, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told the Indian Parliament, "I have no hesitation in apologizing not only to the Sikh community but to the whole Indian nation because what took place in 1984 is the negation of the concept of nationhood and what is enshrined in our Constitution." As a Sikh himself, Manmohan Singh's multiple identities are very much in prominence here when he apologized, in his role as Prime Minister of India and that of a leader of the Congress Party (which was also in office in 1984), to the Sikh community, of which he is a member (with his omnipresent blue turban), and to the whole Indian nation (of which he is, of course, a citizen). All this might be very puzzling if people were to be seen in the "solitarist" perspective of only one identity each, but the multiplicity of identities and roles fits very well with the fundamental point Gandhiji was making at the London conference.

Much has been written on the fact that India, with more Muslim people than almost every Muslim-majority country in the world (and with nearly as many Muslims, more than 145 million, as Pakistan), has produced extremely few home-grown terrorists acting in the name of Islam, and almost none linked with the Al Qaeda. There are many causal influences here. But some credit must also go to the nature of Indian democratic politics, and to the wide acceptance in India of the idea, championed by Mahatma Gandhi, that there are many identities other than religious ethnicity that are also relevant for a person's self-understanding and for the relations between citizens of diverse background within the country.

The disastrous consequences of defining people by their religious ethnicity, and giving priority to the community-based perspective over all other identities, which Gandhiji thought was receiving support from India's British rulers, may well have come, alas, to haunt the country of the rulers themselves. In the Round-table conference in 1931, Gandhiji did not get his way, and even his dissenting opinions were only briefly recorded without mentioning where the dissent came from.

In a gentle complaint addressed to the British Prime Minister, Gandhiji said at the meeting, "In most of these reports you will find that there is a dissenting opinion, and in most of the cases that dissent unfortunately happens to belong to me." Those statements certainly did belong only to him, but the wisdom behind Gandhiji's far-sighted refusal to see a nation as a federation of religions and communities belongs, I must assert, to the entire world.

Perhaps it is fitting that Gandhiji's dissenting views from the 1931 meetings are preserved in the records located exactly in London. I fear London has need for them now. One does not have to be an Indian chauvinist to make that claim. For Gandhiji and his ideas belonged to the world, not just to us in this country.

