

Gandhi's Unfinished Business: World Peace

Ramnarine Sahadeo

The 150th birthday of the Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is being celebrated globally yet many still question his relevance today. Some argue that the world has yet to prove Einstein wrong when he predicted "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood actually walked on this earth". Too many know little or nothing about this great soul who defeated the mightiest empire on earth armed only with truth, knowledge, courage, and a walking stick. The MAHATMA is not the same as PARAMATMA (universal soul), but admirers can contribute to a more peaceful world by sharing with others even segments of his life. This includes peace within ourselves, our families, our societies and among nations. Mutual respect for those with whom we disagree, the ability to listen and to change are basic lessons.

Domestic Relations

Critics point to Gandhi's harsh treatment of his 14 year old bride, Kasturbai (Ba) to whom he was married by arrangement when he was just 13. He later objected to this practice and regretted his unreasonable demands on an illiterate wife when he was "playing husband". However, others consider the times and context and paint the indelible picture of a couple whose bond over the years united them as one soul. She passed away with her head on his lap while in prison, supported all the causes he championed and remarked "...if I am held in high esteem in this world, it is because of my husband". (Ba and Bapu, compiled by Mululbai Kalarthi).

Domestic violence remains a global issue today.

He skillfully relied on the press and other agents of influence but always insisted that Ahimsa, not violence, was the only method to change the minds of the opponent and bring about permanent results. After all headaches he caused General Smuts in South Africa they became good friends. More people if the UK may have greater respect for him today than for Winston Churchill who could not wait for this "half naked fakir" to die. Since his precedent setting SATYAGRAHA struggles that

weakened the imperialists other nations have employed his tactics to their advantage. This included movements in the United States, Brazil, Philippines, Middle Eastern countries, the Arab Spring. Hong Kong is only the latest example where millions have peacefully confronted one of the world's great powers over many months and pledge to continue their struggle for rights and freedoms that inherently belongs to all mankind.

Gandhi's mission was "... to convert every Indian, every Englishman and finally the world, to non-violence for regulating mutual relations whether political, economic, social or religious...whether I have one comrade or more or none, I must continue my experiment". (Page 138, ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS).

Environmental Violence

His lifestyle can only be contrasted with those of us whose seduction with material plenty has done violence to the environment which now threatens our complete destruction. His immortal lesson still escapes most of us who claim to be religious or even spiritual:"the way to god is to avoid passions and possessions". He took guidance from the universal message of the Gita, the book he did not want to read until embarrassed by two Englishmen, and traced most of our predicaments to LUST, ANGER and GREED, the three gates to hell.

Racial and Religious Violence

His struggles for Indian Independence led to a higher perception of confronting not only an Empire but a way of life that was inflicting violence against humanity. Throughout history there has always been attempts to demonstrate superiority of some religions, races, and cultures over others. The conversion of Roman Emperor Constantinople led to the legitimization of the church which then took over or influenced the state. Explorers from European nations took not only their national flags but also their religions in pursuance of the belief that it was the White man's burden to civilize the world. The greed for raw materials, markets and products destroyed people whose cultures stood in the way.

Gandhi was among many icons who questioned the unnecessary practice of religious conversion. His views were expressed as early as 1925 in YOUNG INDIA and HARIJAN and pages 128 to 131 of the book MOHANDAS K. GANDHI, THOUGHTS, WORDS, DEEDS.

Swami Vivekananda also raised the issue of religious bigotry at the first Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893. Numerous leaders described Religious Conversion as an act of violence and an impediment to world peace. The methods used to further this nefarious practice may not only be unethical but in some cases illegal ranging from simple trespass to even Terrorism depending on the country and the context.

There is a point where the struggle for social justice and equality transcend religious principles and practices. It is time to accept the truism that there all religions have produced outstanding human beings and given level playing fields all races can initiate and promote humanitarian causes.

However, claims of racial superiority and religious exclusivity still find overt support today. If hate mongers continue to have friends in positions of influence this will certainly cause more conflict and eventually widespread violence.

Separating Church from State

Canadian society should be proud of its leadership in separating the various branches of government so each can act independently in a system of checks and balances. The Constitution and the rule of law provides protection to minorities from a variety of religions, cultures, beliefs and non- beliefs.

The Supreme Court has demonstrated this in a unanimous and courageous ruling on April 15, 2015 involving the City of Saguenay, Quebec (2015 SCC 16).

Alain Simoneau, an atheist and resident of Saguenay, Quebec, and a regular at council meetings objected to the practice of the recitation of Catholic prayers by the mayor and councillor. A sacred heart statue and a crucifix also adorned the walls of council.

This he testified, caused him to experience feelings of isolation and exclusion thus violating his rights to freedom of religion and conscience as outlined in both the Quebec Charter and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

With the help of Movement Laïque Quebecois (MLQ) He took his grievances to the Quebec Human Rights Tribunal which agreed with him.

However, the Quebec Court of Appeal disagreed. It reasoned that prayers expressed universal values and that the sacred heart statue and crucifix were works of art and not religious.

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the practice of reciting any form of prayers at the start of council meetings constituted a violation of Charter rights.

In doing so it rejected the argument that the prayers were justified on the basis of tradition and that council's attempt at reasonable accommodation by inviting those with objections to leave the chambers during prayers and then re-enter, far from tempering the discrimination, only exacerbated it. This identifies and stigmatises the non-believer. Quebec has a long tradition of the Catholic and Anglican churches being quite influential in government policies and practices but the court felt it was time to change a practice even though it was followed for centuries.

Justice LeBel writing for the court stated that Canadian Society has given rise to a concept of NEUTRALITY, according to which the State must not interfere with religion and beliefs. This requires that the State neither favour nor hinder any particular belief or non-belief.

Canadian Cultural landscape includes many traditional and heritage practices that are religious in nature. Sponsorship of one religious tradition by the State in breach of its duty of neutrality amounts to discrimination against all other such traditions as it creates a distinction, exclusion or preference that has the effect of nullifying or impairing the right to full and equal recognition and exercise of freedom of conscience and religion.

The court looked at the purpose and effect of the practice and opined that even a Non-denominational PRAYER is a religious practice that excludes atheists and agnostics and the interference is more than TRIVIAL or INSUBSTANTIAL. Any form of religious expression under the guise of cultural and historical reality or heritage breaches the duty of NEUTRALITY.

Furthermore the expression “Supremacy of God” in the preamble of the Charter cannot be relied on to deny the guarantees expressly provided in the Charter.

Pursuit of the ideal in a free and democratic society requires the state to encourage everyone to participate freely in public life regardless of their beliefs thus preserving the multicultural nature of Canadian society. In response to the argument that this would now give atheists and agnostics preference the court stated that True Neutrality presupposes abstention, but it does not amount to a stand favouring one view over another.

Shanti

Some public bodies have replaced their prayers with a moment of silent reflection to show respect for cultural diversity.

It will definitely be helpful as a mark of mutual respect if all religious leaders especially those at Interfaith conferences resolve that they will continue to practice their religion without telling others that they belong to the wrong religion or not worshipping the right god or words with similar meaning.

Countries, particular the Western democracies that are members of the United Nations, may now have to remind themselves of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states in part "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..."

The reasoning of the Supreme Court of Canada and the warnings of the Mahatma will go a long way in ensuring greater peace among nations. The starting point however is always the individual and each of us **MUST BE THE CHANGE WE WANT TO SEE IN THIS WORLD.**

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