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Gandhi: Walking with us today

By Gurdial Singh Nijar

Gandhi, his writings and his words are as relevant as ever today as when he lived. This is the theme of the Sixth Gandhi Memorial Lecture presented by Gurdial Singh Nijar, a prominent Malaysian lawyer and former law professor, and organised by the Gandhi Memorial Trust, Malaysia. The text of the lecture, which was presented in Kuala Lumpur in October 2016, is below.

This an exciting age – technological advances have liberated us in ways unimaginable. Communicating with others, transferring money, even the mundane paying of bills; and most significantly of all - accessing any information from anywhere in the world. All accomplished with a swift press of a button. Like the waving of a magician's wand!

Then there's a step up from biotechnology to modern biotechnology – where life-forms can be engineered and owned by big corporations – to nanotechnology – where life forms can be reduced to one-billionth of a metre. Indeed, even the creation of life not in the way the Almighty ordained – but through artificial asexual reproduction seems attainable, if we believe specialised scientific journals.

But to quote Charles Dickens in the famous opening paragraph of his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*: "*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, ...*"

For, we are hit by scourges of gigantic proportions that spell dire consequences – for

communities, countries and the world at large. Emanating from identifiable causes: the environment - including climate change; and wars - including the threat of nuclear wars. And the subversion of established institutions – from on-high like the UN Security Council to domestic institutions. The initiation of illegal wars in defiance of established internationally agreed processes; on the basis of bald-faced lies. Leaving in its wake a litany of wasted lives – mainly women and children - murdered through unparalleled sophisticated weaponry. War crimes committed with impunity.

What, you may ask, has this to do with Gandhi Ji – in whose memory this lecture is being rendered?

Loads. Just listen to him.

On the Environment

“The earth, the air, the land and the water are not an inheritance from our forefathers but on loan from our children. So we have to hand over to them at least as it was handed over to us.”

The world has since recognised this as a basis for human survival itself. The **World Conservation Strategy** of 1980 states: “Human beings, in their quest for economic development and enjoyment of the riches of nature, must come to terms with the reality of resource limitation and the carrying capacities of ecosystems, and must take account of the needs of future generations.” This strategy - formulated more than three and a half decades ago – drew attention to the almost limitless capacity of peoples to build and destroy. It called for globally coordinated efforts to increase human well-being and halt the destruction of Earth’s capacity to support life. Exactly as Gandhi exhorted.

Yet despite serious efforts and numerous treaties, on earth or *Pachamamma* as the Latin American indigenous communities refer to Mother Earth, the threats subsist. The latest report of the World Health Organisation (WHO) released just last week noted that nine out of 10 people globally are breathing poor quality air; and that pollution accounted for more than six million deaths a year. The data “is enough to make all of us extremely concerned”, said WHO’s head of the public health and environment department.

Climate Change is now no longer a distant phenomenon to be discussed in intellectual parlours. A random pick of the daily papers attests to this. I looked at the Sun daily of

Wednesday 28 September. What stories it told.

Typhoon Megi hits Taiwan, the headlines screamed - the third storm in 2 weeks. 8,000 people evacuated from their homes, 2,800 in shelters. In Thailand monsoon in many parts are affecting 20,000 households, with some of the top tourist destinations submerged in water. Huge losses.

Nearer home, it was reported that “a high tide phenomenon with massive waves and strong winds is expected to hit the west coast of the peninsula from Oct 17 to 20 and from Nov 14 to 17.” This will coincide with the floods brought with the northwest monsoon.

Little wonder that Noam Chomsky, the world renowned linguist and Professor Emeritus at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, identifies climate change as one of the two major threats facing the world today. (The other is nuclear war, of which more will be discussed later.) And he is not alone. Scientific journals attest to the fact that the rate of global warming today is far faster, maybe a hundred or more times as fast as any moderately comparable period that can be estimated in the geological record.

Glaciers are melting much faster than thought. The Arctic mass is melting; the Himalayan glaciers are melting. This will undermine the water supply for huge areas in South Asia. The sea level is rising threatening millions who live on coastal lands as well as on the plains as in Bangladesh. Severe droughts have claimed, in the land of Gandhi Ji itself, three-digit million lives.

Species are being killed at the level of the so-called fifth extinction – when 75% of the world’s species disappeared after 5 mass extinctions. Sixty-five million years ago, an asteroid hit the earth, with catastrophic consequences. It ended the age of the dinosaurs. It opened the way for small mammals to develop, ultimately evolve. Finally, the evolution to *Homo Sapiens*.

But we, the evolved *Homo Sapiens*, are acting in the same way as the asteroid did. A defiance of Gandhi Ji’s sustained pronouncements on preserving Mother Earth – the sixth extinction? As alluded to by Kolbert, a prize-winning New York journalist in her book on the environment, “The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History”. The reality is that climate change is actually part of an even bigger phenomenon: the many ways humans are changing the planet. Are we not, the successful species, harnessing the qualities that make us successful —smart, creative, mobile, cooperative — to destroy the natural world?

On Nuclear war

Gandhi's response to the news of Hiroshima was as follows: "Unless now the world adopts non-violence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind."

Martin Luther King, who embraced Gandhi's non-violence *Satyagraha* legacy said, 4 days before he was cruelly murdered:

"It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. And the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world, may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat would be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine."

Both Gandhi and King experienced the news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in their lifetimes; but neither man lived long enough to appreciate how many times the world was stopped from coming close to Armageddon since 1945.

You know, shortly after the atomic bombing, atomic scientists established a Doomsday Clock. Every year a panel of specialists make an estimate of how close we are to midnight – the hour when all species will terminate. It moves up and down. It moved 3 minutes closer to midnight last year because of these two threats: nuclear war and global warming! Closer than it has been since the early 1980s when there was a major war scare.

The nuclear weapons race is escalating. NATO on the Russian border. Russia's nuclear modernization and U.S. plans to spend hundreds of billions to update its nuclear arsenal and pursue an irrational nuclear competition.

US military spending is almost as great as the rest of the world combined, and technologically much more advanced. Not least its manoeuvres in the South China Sea.

William Perry, a respected nuclear specialist, a former US Defence Secretary, recently estimated that the threat is higher than it was during the 1980s. He also opposes the Obama administration's plan to build a new nuclear-capable cruise missile. "I see an imperative to stop this damn nuclear race before it gets under way again, not just for the

cost but for the danger it puts all of us in," he said.

On Corruption

"Corruption and hypocrisy ought not to be inevitable products of democracy, as they undoubtedly are **today**." "I have derived my politics from ethics... It is because I swear by ethics that I find myself in politics." And the famous: "There is sufficiency in the world for man's need but not for man's greed."

Gandhi Ji's message? Taken cumulatively, it is this. The *sine qua non* of a functioning democracy requires clean uncorrupted governance. Rulers lose their right to govern, indeed even be in politics, if they breach this fundamental ethical incorruptibility norm.

Corruption – the cancer that insidiously nibbles established governance systems and ultimately destroys them irreparably. We in Malaysia are all too familiar with this infliction. It has been lit up for us of late by a thousand spotlights.

Corruption can reach such a proportion whereby those in power, the kleptocrats - bent solely on their own enrichment – drive indignant populations to extremes (such as the Taliban, ISIS, Boko Haram and the like). This may occur, says the 17th century political thinker John Locke in his *Second Treatise*: "Where an appeal to law, and constituted judges, lies open, but the remedy is denied by a manifest perverting of justice, and the barefaced wresting of the laws to protect or indemnify the violence or injuries of some men or party of men..."

In her book, *Thieves of State*, Sarah Chayes, an award-winning former NPR correspondent, makes a compelling case that we must confront corruption for it is a cause – not a result – of global instability. Perhaps we are beginning to see signs of the relationship between instability and corruption in our very own country.

Perhaps we should pause to reflect whether corruption is just a matter of legality, or financial irregularity and bribery; or as Arundhati Roy, of the *God of Small Things* Booker Prize winner asserts - is the currency of a social transaction in an egregiously unequal society in which power continues to be concentrated in the hands of a smaller and smaller authority.

On Racial discrimination & Inter faith harmony

Gandhi's quest against discrimination came alive when he renamed India's 'untouchables' as 'Harijans' or 'Children of God'; and admitted them into his ashrams. This stain on humanity had to be erased, he said. There have been some detractive comments about Gandhi's role in this context; and it is contrasted with that of Ambedkar, the first law minister credited with drawing up India's Constitution and a dalit. Professor Mridula Mukherjee, an expert in modern Indian history at Jawaharlal University in Delhi, says that Gandhi and Ambedkar "represented different understandings of how to solve problems of caste oppression in India, but each was equally sincere".

Equal to the task was his fight against religious disharmony. The mass killings in the wake of the partition of India to create Pakistan (which he opposed), troubled him deeply. He went on a 'fast unto death' unless and until the violence stopped. It did. For this he paid dearly with his life. A few days later he was assassinated by a religious fanatic.

These Gandhian proactive moves undoubtedly staunch the growth of discords that often threaten to tear asunder societies and communities and the very fabric that holds a country together. The mere mouthing of slogans of unity do not; especially when accompanied by turning a blind eye to the action of those who persistently threaten to wreck social, ethnic and religious harmony.

Learning from Gandhi

Perhaps the best we can do is to listen to him; and imbue his values in our own life and interaction. He talks to us. And in a sense, he certainly walks with us; his guiding hand outstretched to carry us across what seem unsurmountable barriers. Even in failing to attain his level of commitment, purity of thought and action - on all the issues I have covered - that journey for me, and I trust for all of us, is a journey worth embarking upon. I daresay that even achieving the smallest measure 'a nano-modicum' of Gandhi's attributes will enervate one's life – and society's – to no end!

Conclusion

Many despair of the gloomy times we are faced with in this blessed country of ours: corruption, racial discord, religious acrimony, and much more. To many - no end, no resolution, seems to be in sight. My well-heeled friends think of migration to "greener pastures".

Well, learn from Gandhi: he migrated to South Africa, and then after 2 decades re-migrated back to India in 1915, to fight the good cause and rid his country of the colonial yoke. He traded his lawyer's bib and gown for a "naked fakir's" garb - in the unsolicitous words of Winston Churchill.

Gandhi had even greater lessons for our activists. He walked the Salt March from March to April 1930 with the masses – 390 kilometres from his Ahmadabad Ashram to Dandi on the coast of Gujarat to protest British colonial rule of India. Britain's Salt Acts prohibited Indians from collecting or selling salt, a staple in the Indian diet. Citizens were forced to buy the vital mineral from the British, who, in addition to exercising a monopoly over the manufacture and sale of salt, also exerted a heavy salt tax.

This historic peaceful march which resulted in 60,000 arrests of ordinary Indians including Gandhi, was amidst threats more severe than our IGP's to disrupt the couple of kilometres 'street demonstrations'. And without the Federal Constitution guarantees of right to movement!

Nor was Gandhi spared prosecution under the pernicious Sedition Act; in form and spirit virtually identical to our colonially-inherited Sedition Act. In March 1922 he was prosecuted under the Act; with equanimity he acknowledged that he was right to challenge colonial rule and restore India's dignity. If that be the crime, he gladly pleaded guilty. The English Judge Bromfield of the Sessions Court in Ahmedabad, promptly jailed him for a six-year term.

This is only a glimpse of the measure of the man. And the colossal contribution Gandhi bequeathed - to India, to the world, indeed to humanity. His salutary lessons on non-violence in opposing injustice, *Satyagraha*, if adhered to and incorporated as a critical component to guide foreign policy, would banish mass murders – which we euphemistically label as 'wars' – that are raging unceasingly today. And eliminate the arms race, human suffering, and the mass migration episodes as people flee for safety to other lands.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have exhausted my time and hopefully not your kind patience. Gandhi Ji admonished those who go on talking long after they have nothing more to say. I will adhere to his

advice. And say no more.

Thank you!

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