

Mahatma Gandhi, Non-violence and Noakhali

The following is the transcript of a talk by Shaheen Choudhury Westcombe MBE at the AGM of the The Gandhi Foundation at Kingsley Hall, London on 21st May 2012

Ladies and gentleman, I feel extremely privileged to have been asked to speak about Gandhi at this historic place, Kingsley Hall which was set up by the Lester sisters, Muriel and Doris. They were friends of Gandhi and shared common ideas. Gandhi stayed here during his visit to London in 1931 in preference to the imperial arrangements. There is only one Mahatma Gandhi, to me he is a legend.

I am neither an academic, nor a politician, philosopher, sociologist or writer. I have been invited to speak simply because there is a family link with Gandhi's historic visit to Noakhali that dates back over six decades. My paternal ancestors come from the Feni area in Bangladesh which was then in the Noakhali district of undivided Bengal. My father happened to accompany Gandhi in 1946 when he visited the area during the horrific and inhuman communal riots between the Hindus and Muslims that tore the region apart. But, before going further, let us look at Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence.

The words *non-violence, peace, harmony, simplicity, equality* are all synonymous with Gandhi. He was one of the greatest humanist leaders the world has known. In today's world of conflict and violence, discrimination and exclusion, hatred and torture, inequalities and communal tensions, Gandhi's teachings are more relevant than ever before.

Gandhi believed in non-violence. According to the encyclopaedia, 'Non-violence is a moral philosophy that rejects the use of violence in efforts to attain social or political change and proclaims other means such as disobedience or the power of persuasion.'

In simple terms non-violence means not using violence but other techniques such as disobedience or persuasion in bringing about social or political change.

In his social struggle, civil disobedience was used by Gandhi for his campaign for the Independence of India. Non-violence was also used by Martin Luther King to attain civil rights for the African Americans and by Nelson Mandela in South Africa under apartheid.

It has been said that non-violence may have been influenced by religious or ethical beliefs or from pragmatic political analysis. In the West, the labour, peace, environment and women's movements have all used non-violence extensively. In the protests against some repressive political governments in the developing countries and the former Eastern bloc there are examples of non-violence.

Power depends on the co-operation of others. Non-violence undermines the power of rulers through the deliberate withdrawal of co-operation. There is a notion that just means are the most likely to lead to just ends. Gandhi said that *'the means may be likened to the seed, the end to a tree'*. Various thinkers have their own views about the use and effectiveness of non-violence.

Communal violence has existed all through history. Conflicts associated with religion is a sensitive issue in today's world.

It is said that some proponents of non-violence preach love and respect. This is seen in Jesus when he says *'love thine enemy'* in the Taoist concept *'wu-wei'* or effortless action; in the philosophy of the martial arts, *Akido*; in the Buddhist principle of *'metta'*, loving kindness towards all beings and the principle of *Ahimsa* or non-violence towards any being, shared by Buddhism, Jainism and some forms of Hinduism. The very word Islam means Peace. An example has been cited in the story of Abel in the Quran.

Gandhi believed in truth or '*Satya*'. He believed in having a dialogue. One must hear one's opponents in order to be heard.

We are all familiar with some form of non-violence - strikes, hunger strikes, human shields, barricades. We have seen women chaining themselves to railings. During the eighties the women of Greenham Common who protested against the cruise missiles featured regularly in the news.

Gandhi's 240 mile Salt March in 23 days, from Ahmedabad to the coast to collect salt grains is an example of his civil disobedience strategy. The government had the monopoly of producing salt. He challenged this. He boycotted British goods and institutions. India, a country of princes, principalities and provinces, a myriad of different cultures and religions had been under British rule for two centuries.

In 1946, whilst negotiations were progressing for the Independence of India and political leaders were discussing the details of a separate homeland for the Muslims, riots broke out in Calcutta (Kolkata). It spread like fire to the villages of Noakhali and then to Bihar and the Punjab.

Hindu and Muslim families who had co-existed side by side for decades, their children who had grown up together into adults turned against one another. As in all riots, during such events, the barbaric instinct takes over resulting in brutal killings. Alongside, the loss of life and damage to property, there is looting, raping and kidnapping. Children are often left homeless and parentless. The mental scars of such violence can never be repaired.

People resort to all sorts of means to protect themselves. My parents lived in Calcutta (Kolkata) at the time of the riots. This was soon after I was born. I had heard from my mother that they were so frightened of attacks that everyone moved to the top floor of the house. My father was away, and the members of the extended family were mostly women. They had pots of water boiling on the stoves day and night. Rows of kettles were ready with hot water. Should there be an attack, the women would pour the water from upstairs. They had crushed all the red chillies in the house to prepare a paste to throw at the attackers in self defence. Fortunately this never happened.

All around were sounds of slogans '*Allah hu Akbar*' said the Muslims '*Bande Mahtaram*' shouted the Hindus.

My family are Muslims. My small green rubber baby changing mat was used as a flag and waved at the Muslim attackers who had on a number of occasions mistaken the family to be Hindus and approached the house. The green flag with a white crescent and star was to be the flag of Pakistan later, the symbol of the new Muslim state. Gandhi did not want the partition of India but it happened.

Riots continue even today, a documentary titled *The Final Solution* which I saw not long ago shows footage of the Gujarat carnage that took place some years back. Families wiped out; a pregnant woman kicked brutally and a young survivor vowing to take revenge when he grew up.

Even after partition there have been communal riots in the then East Pakistan. I remember my father worrying about his Hindu friends during the troubles and doing everything to make sure they were alright. My mother who was the Principal of a school brought the Hindu Sanskrit Teacher home when there were communal tensions. He spent a fortnight hiding in the attic. Although we were protecting him, he kept the door locked at all times. Such was his fear. My mother arranged for him to be escorted back safely to his village home to be re-united with his family.

Going back to Gandhi's trip to Noakhali in 1946, it is said that Muriel Lester had begged Gandhi to go on this peace mission. I do not know how my late father Muhammad Habibullah Bahar Choudhury (1906-1966) joined him. Gandhi's philosophy of peace and harmony was very close to his heart. My

father, as I have said before belonged to the Noakhali region but had settled in Calcutta (Kolkata). He was a writer , a columnist, a politician and a sports personality who in his youth was the captain of the 'A' Division football team of the Calcutta Mohammedan Sporting Club. From his student days he had been active in the movement for the Independence of India. His close school friends were the famous freedom fighters, Anantalal Singh and Ganesh Ghosh - disciples of the famous Surya Sen.

At the time of Gandhi's peace mission, my father was a Member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly of undivided India in Calcutta (Kolkata). He believed firmly in communal harmony, respect and co-existence. He published and edited a magazine titled *Bulbul* during the 1930s. The spirit of secularism echoed through its pages and a large number of the then literary masters including the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam wrote in it. After partition, he was a Minister of the first cabinet in the then East Pakistan. He is still remembered for what he stood for and his contributions to society. His birth centenary was celebrated both in India and Bangladesh in 2006. In Kolkata a copy of a selective issue of *Bulbul* was printed after 70 years.

An event in Dhaka, now the capital of Bangladesh that took place on 21st February 1952 marks the beginning of another chapter in the history of the sub-continent. Shots were fired at students killing several of them when they took out a procession demanding that Bengali , their mother tongue should be the national language of Pakistan. The day is observed globally today as the International Mother tongue Day .

After two decades and following a war in which millions lost their lives, Bangladesh formerly East Pakistan split up from Pakistan and became independent under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The killing of the students during the language movement of 1952 broke my father's heart. Soon after he had a stroke and lost his memory. I was only about seven years old and regret that I never had a chance to hear about the historic mission to Noakhali with Gandhi from my father. My sister recalls my mother saying that when my father returned home from Noakhali after months he could not be recognised. The clean shaven handsome man looked unkempt and had grown a thick dark beard.

In Noakhali, Gandhi went from village to village through the muddy paddy fields. He carried his holy books. He appealed to Hindus and Muslims , men and women that they should pledge not to kill each other and ensure peace. His tireless journey lasted four months.

Andrew Whitehead, a journalist writes about his own visit to Noakhali some years back. He mentions the Hindu village of Jayag where a *zamindar's* (wealthy land lord) house has been converted into an *ashram*. It is now the centre of social development programmes.

Every morning and evening people gather for a prayer meeting in a room that contains momentos of Gandhi's visit . It is a living memorial of this remarkable peace mission. He mentions Jharna Choudhury who runs the ashram today. She recalls her memories as a child regarding how their house was set on fire by the attackers, some of whom they actually knew.

Abdur Rauf who took Andrew Whitehead to the spot where he had watched Gandhi pass 50 years ago ,said, 'Gandhi came from that direction, from the north. I remember he was wearing two pieces of *khadi* cloth, and there was a watch at his waist. He took support from the shoulders of two women. All the Muslims were pleased to see him and respected him.'

Andrew Whitehead writes, 'Gandhi visited dozens of villages in the four months in the area. The troubles had largely burnt itself out by the time he arrived in November. But there is no doubt that his calming presence and message, the concern he showed for both communities, and the sight of India's foremost leader , barefoot, negotiating the narrow bamboo bridges, had an immense impact'.

After the riots were over, Lord Mountbatten, Viceroy of India wrote to Gandhi on 26th August 1947

*My dear Gandhiji ,
In the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, there is no rioting.*

As a serving officer, as well as an administrator, may I be allowed to pay my tribute to the One Boundary Force, not forgetting his Second in Command, Mr. Suhrawardy? You should have heard the enthusiastic applause which greeted your name in the Constituent Assembly on the 15th of August when all of us were thinking so much of you.

Sixty five years on, the world today is still crying for peace. On the 10th November, 1998, the United Nation General Assembly proclaimed the first decade of the 21st century, the years 2001-2010 as the International Decade for the Promotion of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World. It is an irony that there is more violence today on a global scale. We need to reflect and remind ourselves of Gandhi's teachings.

In Gandhi's own words,
'If my faith burns bright as I hope it will, even if I stand alone I shall be alive in the grave and what more speaking from it.'

References:

Wikipedia , the free encyclopedia

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