

*Atonement in Politics Perspectives from  
Mahatma Gandhi*

The Nehru Centre, London May 31,  
2019

“Short-horn cattle”, it is said, “ are highly effective in bestowing their characteristics on their progeny”. Put simply, this means the young of short-horned cattle will turn out to be short-horned cattle. High-minded human beings are highly ineffective in bestowing their characteristics on their progeny. Put simply, this means that the descendants of the high- minded will turn up with minds of opposite height. And so anyone speaking about a great ancestor has to be just about as impressive as an earthworm speaking about the earth.

In inviting me to give this lecture in the strong and strength-giving name of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh and members of the Gandhi Foundation have put me to a hard test. I do not know whether to marvel at their optimism in asking me or at my audacity in accepting. Be that as it may, I offer to them my sincerest thanks and my deep appreciation for the high honour, and I offer to those present, my assurance that I will speak not as a Gandhi descendant but as one who finds Gandhi’s mind fascinating to partner one’s thoughts with, to share hopes and fears with. And I will try - not easy ! - to do this in his spirit of faith which included faith in the saving grace of humour. Sitting his Matriculation examination as a ‘lad’ of seventeen , Mohandas was given a deck of subjects from which to choose one for his English essay. He chose to write ‘On The Advantages Of A Cheerful Disposition’. That essay of his has gone to dust - a great pity for our times in which cheer, as an emotion, is severely challenged, though laughter at other’s expense thrives especially in the world of competitive politics.

*Atonement, for Gandhi*

Another text written by Gandhi, of which the original has also gone into the dust of evanescence, is a letter he wrote to his ailing father. He was fifteen and wrote it in his first language, Gujarati, which was the only language his father, a wise and brave man, knew. And it sought forgiveness for what Mohan, as he was called at home, regarded as amounting to a theft he had committed on behalf of his elder brother. “I wrote it on a slip of paper”, he writes in his autobiography. “In this I not only confessed my guilt but I asked adequate punishment for it and closed with a request to him not to punish himself for my offence, I also pledged myself never to steal in future.” His father, Mohandas writes, read the letter silently as tears welling up in his eyes flowed on to the paper he held in his forgiving, blessing, cleansing hands. That was Gandhi’s first recorded act of atonement, one of many to follow.

And it has three notable ingredients : First, a clear admission of culpability. Second, a request for punishment - external punishment. Third, a promise of non-repetition of the guilt. A fourth is hinted as well: that the one addressed might transfer the expiation to himself, hurt himself become one with (he guilty one. Atonement, after all, is at-one-ment, fluxing the guilt, the guilty, the one causing wrong or pain, the one wronged or pained with the wrong and pain in one at-one-ness.

A sense of responsibility which is allied to a sense of accepting guilt, of feeling regret, remorse, of wanting to do penance, even to hit himself which he urged his father not to do, but which he himself did, as a young father, were all integral to Gandhi. As were his resolves to fast, something he did on more than thirty occasions in the period 1914 to 1948, totalling about 150 days, as penance or for self-purification, or to make his 'target' feel a need to atone, the idea of just reparation, and atonement. They were integral to him from just how he was made. The Jaina influence on his mother, and hers on him had I am sure much to do with this. But it was, basically, Gandhi himself, growing with a deep sense of right and wrong, of the importance of going beyond expressing regret in words to atoning through corrective action for errors, his own and those of others he felt responsible for or connected with. And as he moved inexorably into a life of politics, atonement became part of his politics which played itself out through a war - the Boer War - he participated in as a non-combatant and World Wars I and II in both of which he was directly involved, first as an enthusiast, then as an opponent both of the war's specifics and then of war itself. And, most importantly, in the non-violent war he waged for the freedom of India from British rule. His ahimsa - nonviolence - implied just and fair means for just and fair goals. And self-punishing for lapses stayed part, a critical part, of the proceedings.

#### *Atonement in politics*

Its freedom, in 1947, blood-stained by partition saw India vivisected, broke homes, shattered peace, left about 14 million displaced either because they were Hindus or Sikhs in Muslim areas or Muslims in Hindu-Sikh areas, an estimated 2 million dead and nearly 80,000 women abducted. 'Nearly' and any round figure to describe the abduction of women are outrageous. Each abduction has to be, and was, in that grim theatre, an epic tragedy. How India and Pakistan have lived with and are living with that guilt on their consciences passes understanding. An agonised Gandhi, at 78, was in Bengal and Bihar as India inched through the mayhem and murder of Partition at the time. 'Kill me, kill me', he said to a mob that came to Gandhi's dwelling in Calcutta, looking for the outgoing Premier, Suhrawardy, 'I say, why don't you kill me?' and then fasted, in Calcutta, to atone, to restore peace, sanity. He had just about achieved it, to Governor General Lord Mountbatten's astonished appreciation, when another crisis, for him an existential one, arose in Delhi.

Under the terms of Partition, India was to pay Pakistan as its share of the undivided balance in the national exchequer, Rs 750 million. Of this, India paid up, as first instalment, Rs 200 million. Before it could remit the balance Rs 550 million, Kashmir was invaded. Prime Minister Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister Patel felt giving the second instalment would only fund fresh armed action from Pakistan and so held the instalment back. This was to Gandhi dishonourable, intolerable. 'Pay up', he told the government, his own, ne government of India. When it demurred, he resorted to his tested mode of atonement, self-punishment. He began a fast for what he said, was for the honour of India. It almost looks like he knew this was to be his last fast. Not because he thought he could not, would not, fast again but because he was assassinated, the payment of Rs 550 million to Pakistan being pointedly cited by his assassin as a motivating trigger. Those three bullets sounded like an encore to the ballistics of World War II.

## *Atonement and war*

So much has happened, so much of it so violent, across the globe in recent times that even World War II has receded from active political memory. The restrictions and reparations it called for are now the subject of historians' study, not general, active interest. But we are still living under the shadow of that war and its long after-shock, the Cold War.

As self-punishment for all that happened at the hands of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis, Article 26 of the 1949 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, amended and extended to all of the country after unification in 1990 and therefore, very alive even today, said: "Activities tending and undertaken with the intent to disturb peaceful relations between nations, especially to prepare for aggressive war, are unconstitutional. They shall be made a punishable offense." In addition to military curbs the Potsdam Agreement required Germany to pay the Allies US\$ 23 billion in machinery and manufacturing plants. Article 11 of the Constitution of Italy required it "to repudiate war as an instrument of offence against the liberty of other peoples and as a means for settling international disputes" and "agree, on conditions of equality with other states, to such limitations of sovereignty as may be necessary to allow for a legal system that will ensure peace and justice between nations". The US-authored Constitution of Japan sounds more stringent. It says "Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes." "In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained." The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."

To describe these Constitutional provisions for self-restraining reparation as acts of political atonement may not be quite right, for they were virtually dictated to the countries concerned but to do so would not be that wrong either for they still are active as expiations, internationally-determined and monitored acts of self-regulation.

Germany, Italy and Japan, prominent nations otherwise, have as a result remained out of the United Nations Security Council all these seven decades and more. The nations keeping them out having, of course, established their own shining records of the "use of the right of belligerency". Beyond atoning which the world 'made' Germany undergo, a deep existential moment arose within that country. The name of Konrad Adenauer will not ring too many bells today. The leader of the Christian Democratic Union party and the first post-war chancellor of West Germany, Adenauer did what would have been considered unthinkable by all those who had imposed Potsdam on Germany. He went into negotiations with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion for another reparations agreement. This was not just a matter of the heart. It needed investments. Adenauer is unlikely to have known of Gandhi's fast over the Rs 550 million owing to Pakistan. And yet he was speaking in Gandhi's voice. Asking his parliament to approve the financial arrangement, Adenauer spoke of the debt Germany had to pay: "Unspeakable crimes", he said, "have been committed in the name of the German people, calling for moral and material indemnity." His government, he said, was prepared to offer a "solution of the material indemnity problem, thus easing the way to the spiritual settlement of infinite suffering." There was opposition to the move and his own finance minister was against it. But Adenauer pressed on, driven primarily by what can only be called the imperative urge to atone. I would not underestimate pressures on him from

NATO and also perhaps the Jewish lobby in the United States but Adenauer's was a moral putsch.

When a man or a woman is brave, wise, he or she is seen as being lofty, noble. Activists, writers, philosophers get to be seen as such. If they stand for or - as Americans would put it - run for office and are lucky enough to lose, they are then seen as being all that raised to an even higher plinth. In Gujarati or Hindi they would be *charitravan*, having 'character'. And that would be that. But when a politician says something wise or does something brave, the observer turns cynical and asks 'What is the *chakkar* in this?', what is her or his game? The politician is invariably regarded as being intelligent in the guise of being wise, smart in the shape of being brave and a Gujarati or Hindi word comes into play - *chatur*, 'clever'. Unfair, I would say, to politicians. Bravery, wisdom and why, even nobility can be and should be political for every idea and every step in the public sphere or the *polis* is political.

Elton John's song on the word 'Sorry' is music and also lies at the deepest core of politics. Similarly every politician being owner of a feeling brain and thinking heart can be and should be wise, sensitive, human for every political act being concerned with human beings is about humanity.

Than the Emperor Asoka's edicts of 2000 years ago or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in our times there can be nothing nobler, also nothing more political. It is good to be smart, smarter to be good - so much the better for smartness, so much the worse, alas, for goodness.

That Adenauer was no freak of faith but was made of politics' wisdoms is borne out by subsequent events. On December 7, 1970, there took place an event that belongs not to legend, not to lore but to the history of pain, remorse, atonement. The then German Chancellor Willy Brandt was in Warsaw, Poland (then part of the Eastern Bloc) and visited the monument there to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. After laying his wreath, to the surprise of all present, he did something unexpected. He knelt. And remained silently in that position for a short time — half a minute - by the clock but an eternity in atonement. The photograph of that act is of the stuff of Michelangelo's sculptures and indeed has been carved in stone on a tablet that stands by the monument. The sculptor Wiktoria Czechowska-Antoniewska is 90 this year. Gandhi once said if he only had the time he would spend hours, days, studying the art treasures of Europe. He would have gazed at her depiction of *Kniefall von Warschau* long and lovingly.

But it is important to know that Brandt's gesture was not about that physical gesture alone; he signed on that visit the politically vital Treaty of Warsaw between Germany and the Poland, guaranteeing German acceptance of the new borders of Poland and easing tensions between West and East during the Cold War. Equally important is the fact that *Kniefall* and the treaty were not immediately accepted 'back home' in Germany. Only a narrow majority of the people of Germany backed him and as with Adenauer, there was opposition within Brandt's own party. *Der Spiegel* reported at the time that 48% of all West Germans thought *Urn Kniefall* was excessive, 41% said it was appropriate and 11% - bless them - had no opinion. It was only later, in April 1972, that Brandt after winning a vote of confidence in Parliament by only two votes that he went on to win in the next elections, in late 1972.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel recalled, during a visit to Japan in 2015 a 1985 speech by the then West German President Richard von Weizsacker who called Germany's wartime defeat, his own country's defeat, a "day of liberation". And speaking for herself Chancellor Merkel said "We Germans will never forget the hand of reconciliation that was extended to us after all the suffering that our country had brought to Europe and the world".

Another name that would ring few if any bells today is that of Nobusuke Kishi, a war-crime accused but also post war leader, twice Prime Minister of Japan and maternal grandfather of the present Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Japan's war crimes in China, Burma, Indonesia are not in need of any repetition. The Nanking massacre is part of the darkest history of inhumanity. It is not forgotten. But we do not remember or at any rate do not remember the enormity of the fact that the United States was in occupation of Japan until as long or late as 1952, withdrawing only after Tokyo signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty and accepted the verdict of the Tokyo trials. On December 22, 1948, Tojo and six other Japanese leaders were hanged while the sentences of the remaining 18 were commuted to imprisonment lasting over 400 days. Bearing in mind the torture and killing of Burmese nationals at Japan's hands, Prime Minister Kishi said in 1957 to the people of Burma: "The Japan of today is not the Japan of the past, but, as its Constitution indicates, is a peace-loving nation". And added: "We view with deep regret the vexation we caused to the people of Burma in the war just passed. In a desire to atone, if only partially, for the pain suffered, Japan is prepared to meet fully and with goodwill its obligations for war reparations."

As with Warsaw and Brandt, Yangon can have a plaque for Kishi. Successive Prime Ministers of Japan have apologised, expressed remorse, offered and provided reparation for its war crimes including to its own daughters who were forced to work as 'comfort women'. I do not think atonement can ever find anywhere a parallel to that of Japan's.

Each act of atonement is, however, sui generis for atonement is daughter to remorse, which is personal, the child of conscience which is as personal, as private, as anything can be. Among those who helped end the Cold War from positions of power, by using it redemptively, Mikhail Gorbachev stands tall. He is a tragic, lonely and yet compelling figure. He was troubled in his hugely powerful office, he was restless to set several wrongs right. As a recent study by Werner Herzog shows, his predecessors who were 'Soviet' and his successors who are 'Russian' did and have done very similar things with their people, with their adversaries. Gorbachev stands apart from them, wanting, like Bernie Sanders tries to do today to turn a harsh, aggressive society towards being just, incorporative. Gorbachev failed in many senses but in his very failure, in the solitude of his tragedy, lies his stature. His form of atonement has been giving up without fuss, power, vast power or what Sanskrit would call an *ahuti*, a sacrificial offering to humanity.

#### *Atonement and weapons of mass destruction*

This age of ours which links the world's great powers - the USA, Great Britain, Russia, France, Russia, China - and two countries that emerged in a great but painful birth on the same day, India and Pakistan, as also North Korea and, very likely, Israel, in one great capability that I need not name, can well be said to have begun on July 14, 1945. That was the date on which at what is now famous as the Trinity test site in New Mexico, the world's first atomic bomb was detonated.

Present in the control bunker with the head of the bomb's laboratory at Los Alamos, the 'father of the atom bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, was Brigadier General Thomas Farrell of the US Army. He summarized Oppenheimer's reaction as follows: " Dr. **Oppenheimer**, on whom had rested a very heavy burden, grew tenser as the last seconds ticked off. He scarcely breathed. He held on to a post to steady himself. For the last few seconds, he stared directly ahead and then when the announcer shouted "Now!" and there came this tremendous burst of light followed shortly thereafter by the deep growling roar of the explosion, his face relaxed into an expression of tremendous relief."

I have to thank Great God Google-for telling me that immediately after the Trinity test, Oppenheimer took to the stage and clasped his hands together, it is said, "like a prize-winning boxer" while the crowd cheered. His scientific genius had triumphed. But wisdom, atonement, were to come. He later said that at the time he saw the great explosion he thought of two verses from the Bhagavad Gita - one that spoke of *divi surya sahasrasya* — 'the radiance of a thousand suns bursting at once in the sky', and *kalo'smi loka ksaya fyt pravrdho* - ' I am become death, the destroyer of the worlds'. This was in the nature of what may be called realisation of what he had made inevitable.

Hiroshima happened on August 6 that year, Nagasaki three days later. Gandhi was stunned into silence. His mind was clearly in a chum. Replying to questions from an Associated Press of America journalist Preston Grover, he said he preferred silence to speech at that moment and "I must act if I can". Later, he said on learning of Hiroshima (in his words) "I said to myself 'unless now the world adopts nonviolence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind.' " When asked if it exploded his faith in nonviolence, he said that such a faith was the only thing that the atom bomb could not destroy.

About ten days later, on August 17 , a deeply troubled Oppenheimer went to Washington and hand-delivered to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson a letter expressing his revulsion and his wish to see nuclear weapons banned. In October 1945 he managed to get an appointment with President Harry S. Truman. There are varying versions of how the meeting went. But what is common in all is that during the meeting Oppenheimer said he felt he had (in his words) "blood on my hands" One version says Truman was contemptuous, replying "Never mind It'll all come out in the wash." Apparently Truman ended the meeting summarily and later<sup>1</sup> told his Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson he did not want to see **Oppenheimer** in his office ever again. One version says Truman described Oppenheimer to Acheson as 'a cry baby scientist' and another that he called him "that son-of-a—." Expletives <n<? the White House go back a long time.

This lecture is about atonement, not expletives. So, begging pardon on Truman's behalf to political correctness in speech, I shall go on. Oppenheimer was to go on to oppose the nuclear arms race and, in particular the development of the hydrogen bomb. He had been deeply suspected by the US Establishment, even earlier , for lurking **communist** sympathies and remained under the scanner of surveillance and suspicion until the Kennedy era when a different political ethos rehabilitated and decorated him

Less known are the role and reaction of Kenneth Bainbridge, Director of Trinity nuclear test. Immediately after the explosion Bainbridge described it as a "foul and awesome display" and in a comment notable for its spontaneity said to Oppenheimer "Now we are all sons of—." Explosions and expletives have more in common than their first four letters. This lecture, as I said, being about atonement and not expletives I will once again go on un-distracted by linguistics to what followed, Bainbridge became an outspoken proponent of civilian control of nuclear power and the abandonment of nuclear testing. In 1950 he was one of twelve

prominent scientists who petitioned President Truman to declare that the United States would never be the first to use the hydrogen bomb.

The geioie, however, was out and we know where we stand today. Cynics could ask - and one part of me is that 'cynic' - "Where was Oppenheimer's feeling for human lives and Bainbridge's conscience when they were Ayorking in the Los Alamos lab ?" The truthful answer is that those faculties were asleep in Los Alamos. Something else was awake. In any case the Los Alamos team comprised scientists, not Quakers. That something within them trembled at all even if after the test as with Bainbridge and after Hiroshima-Nagasaki as with Oppenheimer, is in itself remarkable. And if their research-driven work in Los Alamos was scientific, their remorse-driven work afterwards was political in every sense and in the highest sense of the term. Political in spirit, political in form, political in its impact.

Barack Obama is not Willy Brandt and yet his visit, as President of the United States of America to Hiroshima in 2016 matches Brandt's as German Chancellor to Warsaw in 1970. There was no kniefall but he spoke of a 'fall'. "Seventy one years ago", Obama started, invoking Lincoln's 'Four score and...' and then said something that made Oppenheimer's Gita-esque imagery come alive : "... on a bright cloudless morning, death fell from the sky and the world was changed. A flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city and demonstrated that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself." We could say Obama has read and interiorised his Oppenheimer. The White House has had, can have, reading men.

I doubt, though, if the Emperor Asoka's edicts have been Obama's favourite reading. Consider Asoka's words in his Major Rock Edict 13 - he speaks of himself in the third person : "When he had been consecrated eight years the Beloved of the Gods, the King Piyadassi, conquered Kalinga. A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished....On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods and weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods, is that those who dwell there, whether brahmanas, shramanas, or those of other sects, or householders who show obedience to their teachers and behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves, and servants, all suffer violence, murder and separation from their loved ones ...."

And now consider Obama's words at Hiroshima : "We come to mourn the dead, including over 100,000 Japanese men, women and children, thousands of Koreans, a dozen Americans held prisoner.. ..Their souls speak to us. They ask us to look inward, to take stock of who we are and what we might become.... On every continent, the history of civilization is filled with war, whether driven by scarcity of grain or hunger for gold, compelled by nationalist fervour or religious zeal. Empires have risen and fallen. Peoples have been subjugated and liberated. And at each juncture, innocents have suffered, a countless toll, their names forgotten by time."

The similarity is stunning. Asoka Piyadassi is speaking again , 2000 years later, through Barack Obama and expressing remorse for violence on the powerless by the powerful , wanting the soul-cleanse of atonement, for the same violence, the same killing, the same pillage, the same suffering on a different soil, with different enmities, different technologies. Asoka was the victimiser, Obama is a successor of the victimiser, in Roosevelt's and Truman's direct line. Like Asoka, Obama is seeking atonement. And curiously Gandhi with his big ears is hearing somewhere in all this, the word 'atonement'.

Four countries have done something that in politics seem to be unimaginable: surrendered their nuclear weapons. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine had inherited nuclear arsenals from the defunct Soviet Union. The uncharitable thing to say is they lacked the means to maintain them. But had they, somehow, kept them, they would have become one of the largest nuclear weapon states today. Under very different circumstances South Africa, in transition, dismantled the nuclear weapons that it had constructed. Apartheid South Africa's last leader F W De Klerk, it is said, did not want to pass on that power to Nelson Mandela. That was, very *chatur*, very clever, of him, it is said; But in an interview to Uri Friedman in 2017, de Klerk spoke of the real situation: "When I became president, we had six completed nuclear weapons, and the seventh was halfway done. They were Hiroshima-type weapons... I felt that it's meaningless to use such a bomb in what was essentially a bush war—that it was unspeakable to think that we could destroy a city in one of our neighbouring countries in any way whatsoever." (Unquote). And then there was the larger, existential change that was happening, about apartheid, about racism.

De Klerk then says to Friedman something Mandela had seen and recognised in his opposite number. "We accepted the moral unacceptability of apartheid and continued racial discrimination, where we admitted that it was wrong. I made a profound apology about the harm and the pain and the suffering that apartheid had caused. Inner conviction weighs heavier on the scale than international pressure."

#### *Atonement in other situations*

There are counter-Asoka theories that suggest he was a brutal king, that having subjugated Kalinga he had no more territories to conquer, that his remorse was tactical, self-fulfilling. There are several critiques of Barack Obama's presidency. His policy in Syria, in particular remains controversial. We may not object, in objectivity's name. The bare fact is that he spoke of the need for change, moral change and did so from the crest of power and placed himself at the heart of the change he wanted to see.

In some matters the world has changed, changed radically. The majority of the world's countries have, for instance, done away with the death penalty though with India, China and the United States among those that have not given it up, the majority of the world's population is still under the penalty's sway. Torture as an instrument of the State has seen change. Meeting on 10 December, 1984, the United Nations General Assembly stirred the world's conscience. It adopted that day, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment Better known as the United Nations Convention against Torture, it sought to prevent torture around the world. More specifically, it required states to take effective measures to prevent torture and forbade them to transport people to any country where there is reason to believe they will be tortured (refoulement). Most significantly, the Convention made state parties to undertake that "No exceptional circumstances whatsoever" will be invoked to justify torture, including war, threat of war, internal political instability, public emergency, terrorist acts, violent crime, or any form of armed conflict. In other words, it foresaw every possible subterfuge and subversion by states. There is something very healing, very atoning about that convention.

India, it may be said here, took thirteen years to sign the Convention, but sign it did, on 14 October, 1997, during the eleven month old Prune Ministership of I K Gujral, hats off to him. But signing a Convention is only the first step. Unless a Convention is ratified and followed or preceded by domestic legislation that commits the ratifying party to compliance, the original signing carries no meaning. India has not yet ratified. The power over a captive's body and mind is not easily given up, even by Emperor Asoka's legatees, Gandhi's inheritors. Custodial torture can be abolished by conventions but to stop it requires governments and societies to understand that it is a hideous practice, the legacy of barbaric times. One lives in eternal hope. But one dies, not once but a hundred times, the death of fear within that eternity.

### *Atonement and terror*

The world's progress towards a humanitarian order has, meanwhile, been rudely overtaken by another barbaric legacy - the scourge of terror. Every Conceivable technology can be taken hostage by terrorists and then added, as hardware to the software they alone have and States do not : suicidal passion. The whole of humanity, thd world, every member state of the United Nations, is a potential victim of death-daring death-dealing terror. The world with its civil and civilising conscience says that torture is out, even against terror but what about terror itself ? Does it care? It does not. Ready to do the greatest, ultimate violence to himself, the terrorist does not flinch and in fact revels in the prospect of killing those he perceives to be his enemy. He would have as much time for atonement in politics as a crocodile would for a bowl of coleslaw.

"We are all gob-smacked," said Marie Fitzgerald, grandmother of the murderer in Christchurch, New Zealand... "We don't know what to think". Gob-smacked. I had not heard that phrase before, my English is archaic. To what department of English does that phrase belong ? To slang, parallel English, expletives ? Again, this lecture is not about expletives. The phrase belongs, in my mind, to the vocabulary of true shock, a grandmother's shock, language-less, comprehension-less, guileless. She then went on to say she was "...shattered.. .that's the word..

The loner's brutal act in the mosque in Christchurch may well have provoked the suicide bombings against Christians in Sri Lanka. I cannot - who can ? - forget the image of the bereaved woman, Anusha Kumari, wife, mother, who lost her husband, daughter and son in the St Sebastian's Church bombing in Negombo on Easter Sunday last. "You won't believe it" she said, " but I had the perfect family. In 24 years of marriage, my husband and I never argued..." What is she to make of faith, of belief in a God, in Creation ? What is she to make of the value or good in being good ? Will it help her to see Christ nailed on a Cross, bleeding ? That pain is in plaster, hers is made of flesh and now, blood - that of her husband and children.

Retaliatory violence has not spared Sri Lanka's Muslims. This of course is exactly what the agency of terror wants. And this is exactly what New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern did not oblige it with. Her reaction to the terror attack in Christchurch healed, atoned. When Ardern said of the slain "They are us"-not "they are one of us", or "they are like us", but simple, "They are us"-and of the slayer that he was "not us", she received in my mind, at that instant, my mind's equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize. All of Chief Albert Luthuli, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa fluxed then into those words of Jacinda Ardern.

Let us be sure that there is no angel's road to ending terrorism. No *Kniefell* is going to impress IS or Al Qaeda. Only force can. But there is a whole Muslim world that must be rescued from the poisonous propaganda of extremism and the false allure of martyrdom. Farid Ahmad , a 59 year old Bangladesh immigrant in New Zealand, lost his wife Husna , 44, in the Christchurch massacre. When the shooting started in the women and children section of the A1 Noor mosque she helped several escape to a safe garden. Then she came back to the zone of fire to check on her husband, Farid, who was wheel-chair bound having been hit by a drunk driver in 1998. She helped him leave as well. But within moments of that, one of the terrorist's bullets felled her. A shaken yet calm Farid said, after what must have been the deepest darkest and yet illuminated reflection, about the white supremacist "...The best thing is forgiveness...I...tell him he has great potential to be a generous person, to be a kind person, to be a person who ...would be a great civilian one day..." And I want to think of Khalid Mahmud of the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama who said his Islamic organization "vehemently condemns" the bombings as an "inhuman, heinous and shameful" act and "At such times we must stand with our Christian brothers and sisters".

I believe Prime Minister Ardern has shown the way, tentatively, but with total honesty, earnestness and, let it be noted, with considerable risk to herself politically and personally. Farid and Fitzgerald and Jacinda Ardern form in my mind a trinity, a very different one from the Trinity of Los Alamos. They are , on behalf of the wrong, the one wronging, the one wronged in an at-one-ment, atonement.

Farid Ahmad, Marie Fitzgerald, Jacinda Ardern, Anusha Kumari, Khalid Mahmud had pain on their mind, sorrow in their souls. They had no time and no need to think of an old man called Gandhi, now long since dead, and his perspectives on atonement And yet Gandhi, atoning Gandhi, the Gandhi who without doubt, was momentarily angered, even incensed, at the rude elbowing of his nieces by a man who suddenly stood in front of them, but the very next moment forgiving the same man as he sent bullets, one, two, three, into him, that Gandhi, imbued every fibre of their pain, every atom of their redemptive vision, in Christchurch and in Negombo.

There will be, I fear, such scenes happening in the future as well. I do not know when if ever, the cycle will end. On how States will have to act with toughness and with compassion, New Zealand's Prime Minister has shown a way. But we, humans, not confusing the man with gun or the bomb with any group or kind, will have to be Farid and Khalid. At-one with them.

#### *Atonement and the environment crisis*

Friends, there is something we are at-one with and do not see that hardest of hard facts. We are at-one with our physical environment and at-one with its destruction at our own hands.

I started this lecture with Gandhi's letter to his father, hand-delivered, about something he thought was an act of thievery. I will end with a letter that has not been written but should be and handed to our common mother, the earth. And it has to come , with a *Kniefell* from the corporate honchos, the gougers, often illegally, of the earth's mineral resources, the electric sawyers of its forest's trees, the pummelers of its natural hills, the raisers of its cement anthills, the spewers of toxins into the air our children and grandchildren breathe, the water, so- called, that they will drink. It has to come from all those who have infused noxious plastic into our soil, in our rivers and into our ocean, it has to come from those applaud missiles

being launched as marvels and applaud even more when those missiles hit other missiles to show, like school-boys show their glass marbles to other school-children, that they are stronger, and will applaud the loudest when a station is set up by earthlings on the moon - poor clean, pure, moon. It has to come from those who do not protest, do not rage, at the still stubborn stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, biological, chemical and nuclear, and now of unknown digital essences - to say "We are thieves. We have stolen. From the mouths of children and of children yet to be born, we have stolen, from the lungs of the poor and the old, from the pockets of farmers and the overalls of factory-hands, we have stolen, from the brain-cells of our finest minds, we have stolen, and from you, Mother Earth, from the charity of your heart and the grace of your soul, we have stolen what you were giving us in any case, we have grabbed, seized, torn from your hands what you were giving to us so that we use it well, with happiness but not with greed, to share, not to hoard the wealth that your gifts became. We are thieves."

And then like an ailing father did in Rajkot some one hundred and thirty five years ago, mother earth might let tears of forgiveness, healing and blessing flow onto that letter. But then ladies and gentlemen - who knows ? - she may not be able to. All aquifers of life may have, by then, hit rock.

I cannot end a lecture standing in his name, forget Gandhi's choice: the advantages of a cheerful disposition. I cannot end in un-hope. And I have reason not to. HRH the Prince Charles' global lead in matters like ocean plastic, climate change and global environmental protection have been recognized. But not anywhere as urgently as they should be. His description at the Paris Summit to our 'collective inertia' and to the need for 'humane collaboration' to stop our freefall into the abyss of climate collapse belongs to the scroll of testamentary appeals to the human conscience. Prince Charles is, by Britain's practice, precedent and pattern a future King. But the future is the future - a possibility. The present is the present, a reality. He is today the world's greatest environmental philosopher but more - he is the environment's hope-sustaining, faith-salvaging tribune.

Prince Charles must be glad to have seen the British Parliament, just the other day, taking a great step in political atonement. Passing a motion that declares an environment and climate emergency, it became the world's first legislature to do so. Speaking on it, Jeremy Corbyn asked: "Are we content to hand down a broken planet to our children? That is the question members must ask themselves today. We have the chance to act before it's too late. It's a chance that won't be available to succeeding generations. It is our historic duty to take it."

#### *End-word*

Is the Homo Sapien, as part of Nature which is 'red in tooth and claw' inherently and progressively brutal or, as an evolving being, inherently and progressively humane ? We will never know. The evidence will stay mixed, confused, puzzling.

But this much one can and must acknowledge : For every step taken in sheer self-interest, utter callousness as to its impact on other beings, something else comes forward as well, in a hushed footstep, and makes a difference, that does something unimaginable : it tells the time to the clock.

On Gandhi's visit to London in 1931 for the Second Round Table Conference, two Scotland Yard detectives kept watch over him, day and night. Gandhi got to know Sergeant Evans and Rogers well and on reaching India's shores, sent to his watchers an inscribed watch each as a gift to remember him with. They were 'made in England' watches, of a quality the two detectives would appreciate. No suspicion, he was telling them, should mar our ties, not to mention hatred. No bitterness.

Colonialism had manacled India. Here, India was tying its own wrist watches on colonialism. And ones that said Time takes its toll but can also heal in one moment, at-one-ment.