

Do we want a peace born out of tolerance? Or do we want a peace that is the means for a much greater purpose in the onward journey of civilisation?

Sometime in October 2001 a laminated and framed letter appeared on the gate of a small park in downtown Manhattan. The author of the letter had lost her husband in the terrorist strike on the World Trade Centre two months earlier. Please, let there be no more killing, pleaded the writer in a letter which had been published by the Chicago Tribune and posted at the park gate by an unknown person.

That widow's plea echoed the phrase made famous by Gandhi: 'An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind'.

This conviction must have resonated strongly with others bereaved by the 9/11 attacks, for many joined a campaign to establish a Department of Peace in the US government. Many also rallied together in 2006 to celebrate a hundred years of Satyagraha – since it was on September 11, 1906, that Gandhi first made a public appeal for non-violent civil disobedience.

Gandhi is now a natural inspiration and inevitable symbol for all humanitarian efforts in favour of peace and non-violence across the world. But there is the need to look closely at the underlying challenge that Gandhi posed. Do we want a peace born out of tolerance – perhaps even driven by exhaustion with violence? Or do we want a peace that is the means for a much greater

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purpose – enabling mutual creativity of diverse races, faiths and nations in the onward journey of civilisation?

The latter is possible only if we do not equate civilisation merely with identity affiliation – that which gives us a sense of ethnic belonging. We could instead experience civilisation as a framework which enables us to define and explore ‘purpose’.

Since the mid-1990s there has been a buzz around the phrase “Clash of Civilisations”. Its proponent, the American academic Samuel P. Huntington, argued that the fundamental source of conflict in the 21st century will not be ideological or economic but cultural. According to Huntington “the fault lines between civilisations will be the battle lines of the future.”

When the World Trade Centre was attacked on September 11, 2001, many people in the media and in corridors of power saw it as a validation of Huntington’s predictions.

It is deeply significant that the practice of ‘non-violence’ has acquired global resonance in our times. From the streets of North Africa to Wall Street, the efficacy of non-violence as a mode of dissent and protest is powerfully established – even if many of those engaged in these activities do so more out of pragmatism than moral conviction.

But what is the relevance of Gandhi’s vision in the face of intractable conflicts within a society and between nations – be it Hindu-Muslim, Christian-Muslim, Shia-Sunni, Iran-US, India-Pakistan. Invoking Gandhi in such situations seems unrealistically idealistic, not merely to those in corridors of power but to many ‘ordinary’ people. Gandhi’s prescriptions are dismissed for being morally and psychologically over-demanding.

And yet, if we view these realities through the lens of the civilisational Gandhi we might find that

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speculations about a clash of civilisations as cultures are minor disturbances on the surface of global relations.

The dominant discourse defines civilisation as that which defines 'who you are' as in where you belong – which tends to seed conflict. But in the framework offered by Gandhi, civilisation is not about tribal or cultural identity – it is that which enables us to process foundational questions: 'Why am I here?' 'What is the purpose of life?'

Amartya Sen, too, has cautioned about the danger of seeing people as belonging to one civilisation or another: "Civilisational partitioning is a pervasively intrusive phenomenon in social analysis, stifling other – richer – ways of seeing people. It lays the foundations for misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world, even before going on to the drumbeats of civilisational clash."

Ethnic diversity

Similarly, Gandhi was convinced that contact between different cultures can be healthy and mutually beneficial. In essence, this is what got Gandhi killed. Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin, wanted free India to be a modern European style nation state based on a singular categorisation of the entire subcontinent as a Hindu nation. Gandhi's insistence on honouring, even celebrating the spiritual and ethnic diversity, as well as intensive interrelations, was anathema.

It is true that since the late 1980s, polarisation between Hindus and Muslims has increased. But attempts to strengthen our shared co-shared heritage have also continued.

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All this is well and good but how does it help us to grapple with the harsh realities of the world we live in?

One, such endeavours necessarily view peace not as the absence of violence but as universal well-being and mutual creativity. The latter might be severely undermined even in situations where there is no visible violence. Two, when you expand space for recognising and appreciating overlapping identities and affiliations there is greater chance of finding some common ground. This can then, potentially, become the basis for addressing points of conflict and disagreement. Three, it is important to creatively oppose all forms of retributive vengeance. This opens up space to examine the limitations, even dangers, of an approach to human rights which is based on a firm division between victims and perpetrators.

Though practice on the ground might not always bear this out, societies across the world do in principle acknowledge the futility of an 'eye for eye' model of justice. But what about situations where one set of people have been brutally oppressed and abused by the dominant group?

An answer to this question was offered by the post-apartheid regime in South Africa. Instead of opting for a Nuremberg-style court of justice the South African leadership instituted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This decision was challenged by some, for it seemed to short-circuit serious justice. But two decades later the TRC is acknowledged as one of the key steps by which post-apartheid South Africa avoided a protracted civil war. Certainly the TRC approach is complex. Both in South Africa and in Ireland, where it was also applied, it has helped to heal and not just wiped out the wounds of deep injustices. But, it did open spaces to both acknowledge wrongs and move on to a future in which the injustices can be corrected.

This is what drew Gandhi to Christ's call – 'Love thy enemy'. For injustice can never be undone by fostering hatred towards the oppressor.

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Similarly, shifting the focus to the core civilisational questions of purpose and meaning and moral wholeness might seem difficult today. The assumption that a clash of civilizations and cultures is inevitable and more natural is still very much in the air. But so is the awareness that to be locked into this assumption is somehow to diminish human potential. A surrender to such real-politik is a failure of spirit that makes revolt even more powerfully inevitable.

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