

The choice that confronts us

NO normal person can ignore the fires burning in Gujarat. As violence rages and neighbours glare suspiciously at each other, one's mind flies to that great apostle of peace, Mahatma Gandhi. It is an irony that Gujarat produced both a Godhra and a Gandhi. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in a challenging period of world history: new inventions had taken the world by storm, the telephone and aeroplane brought distant places nearer and old ideas of democracy and freedom were born again. Insulted by a white man in South Africa and unable to take the slight, he decided to fight for freedom from British rule.

India was poor and Indians had no weapons for a conventional war. But Gandhi did not despair. He took the ancient Indian message of non-violence or ahimsa and made a weapon out of it. A shrewd Gujarati lawyer, he knew that guns, sticks and stones could not win this war. His satyagraha, civil disobedience and jail bhara became household words as he used them to fight each battle. Not only did he succeed in winning freedom through non-violence, he had conceived a great idea for all time, an idea that was to be repeated elsewhere, time and again, through great personalities like Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela.

It is not easy to fight peace. Israel would be forced to accede to a Palestinian state very quickly if the people were to sit on the road, fasting unto death, or if they faced bullets with empty hands. By choosing the path of terror and the gun, the terrorist gives a reason for suppression, harming his people and his cause. September 11, 2001, gave the Americans reason to destroy Osama bin Laden and his Taliban supporters. They could never have attacked without a justifiable cause. Terrorists give governments excuses for TADA and POTA. Peaceful opposition does not.

The human brain is the most wonderful creation, combining a storehouse of data, a super processor and the means to implement all the knowledge and information. Time and again, it has produced great ideas that have motivated people to make their world a better place. The greatest creativity has been of ideas. Archimedes' eureka sums it all up.

An important milestone in the history of humankind was farming and the domestication of animals. The first gave people the means to produce and store food, thereby providing food security. By domesticating

animals they were assured of energy, provided by the bullock, speed and transportation, provided by the horse, and security, provided by the dog. This was no mean achievement of the human brain and human ability.

The next great milestone was the development of writing, reading and arithmetic. It was to revolutionise human development. Ideas could be stored, transmitted from person to person, place to place and generation to generation. People could learn and study about weather patterns, the heavenly bodies, the arts and the sciences. It produced great books, buildings, works of art, inventions and discoveries. Speech, and the ability to read, write and count are the most important factors that distinguish people from their fellow animals.

The Upanishadic sage who first spoke of ahimsa and non-violence did so in a forest, surrounded by hunter-gatherers and warriors. Out of violence was born non-violence. The Buddha made a religion out of it; Mahavira took it to mean compassion for all creation, even the tiniest. And this was at a time when meat-eating and animal sacrifice was the norm. By preaching the message of ahimsa or non-killing, they changed the course of Sanatana Dharma, as Hinduism was then called. It became a sophisticated religion of peace, abjuring the taking of all life.

Democracy and republics are the "in" creeds of the twentieth century. But ancient Greece and India knew of



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them long ago. Leaders were elected as early as in the Rig Vedic period. The Greek philosophers describe democracy. Kautilya describes the republics of his time. However, those were responsible governments, where responsibility was accountable. Only a free man, educated and propertied, had the right to elect and be elected. When we see politicians buy votes and "capture" booths, we must wonder whether our version of democracy is working, whether this is what the philosophers of yore had perceived.

An important milestone in ideas was the French slogan of *liberté, égalité et fraternité*. It changed the course of human history. Kingdoms fell, a more equal and equitable society grew to produce the present world of

equal opportunity. It overthrew kings and kingdoms and ushered in democracy and individual freedom.

Twentieth century India produced some of the most wonderful ideas, although we are slow to recognise them. The first was, of course, Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent freedom struggle.

The second was free primary education accompanied by free lunch, first introduced by Sir C P Ramaswami Aiyar in Travancore. It sounds mundane, but it was to revolutionise society, removing hunger, bringing children to school, educating girls and, thereby, creating a state of high literacy and education levels and low population growth, which stands up as a model for contemporary India. Tamil

times, we owe it to our full bellies.

The fourth great idea also comes from Dr M S Swaminathan: that of food banks. Although we are a grain surplus country, parts of India — Orissa, for example — still see hunger deaths. And natural calamities like floods, droughts and earthquakes devastate individuals and societies, destroying their employment sources and earning capacity. Hunger, disease and death stalk the land all over again. Create food banks, says this great scientist, where they can borrow food and repay it later, instead of making them live on doles. He talks of food security in 2020, when our population will exceed our stocks of food grains. But who is listening?

We started with violence in Gujarat, which is uppermost in our minds today. We are seeing the development of a new credo of intolerance and ruthlessness. The sad aspect that distinguishes these riots from the rest, is that we cannot blame goondas and lumpen elements any longer. Today's young people and the middle class have chosen this path.

The human mind, which has produced some of the greatest ideas and productions, also has the capacity to produce great evil and cruelty. It is very easy to slip. The great French revolution, which was to modernise and revolutionise Europe, also produced the dreaded guillotine, which chopped off so many royal and aristocratic heads, and, later, the Communist revolution that, in the name of equal opportunity and sharing of resources, committed some of the greatest human rights abuses and cruelties of all time.

Hitler may have been a one-man aberration, but the communist pogroms were not. Nor was the Chinese Cultural Revolution or the Khmer Rouge, which took over the gentle Cambodian people and executed three million of them. The balkanizing wars of the Balkans are among the worst cases of mass slaughter in recent years. And what about the cruelties inflicted on other species in the name of science, sport, food and so on? These are all twentieth century terrors, and the twenty first century is barely a little over a year old. The veneer of civilisation is very thin. We have to choose whether we want the hunter-gatherer in us to rule, or whether we prefer to don the mantle of civilisation and respectability. The ideas we choose to live by will make a difference for all time.

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