

Marking June 7

Pietermaritzburg Re-visited in times of a pandemic

Nandi Mandela, Clayborne Carson and Gopal Gandhi on zoom

07.06.2020

(Gopal Gandhi segment follows)

We cannot celebrate Gandhi today nor Mandela nor Martin Luther King Jr without inviting their immediate and stern reprimand.

They would, all three, say, each a bit differently from the other: 'If you are gathered to celebrate us, stop right here. If you are gathered to think with us, then listen. Not to us or to those who speak in our names but to your consciences for that is all we did. We did look back to our heroes and heroines, we did celebrate their anniversaries, but only in order to look more clearly at the world around us and into the future that beckoned. India is a free country today, the colonised world is gone. South Africa's sharp, bruising chains of apartheid iron have snapped. The US, with its Civil Rights Act in place, has made slavery a thing of the disreputable past. It has gone on to elect a distinguished President – Barack Obama – from among people who did not, until very recently, even have the right to ride in a bus on a seat of its choice. But are you, Indians, South Africans, Americans a happy and contented people?'

They would, all three, ask us this question in anxiety and in pain. We know the answer.

India, South Africa, the USA and the whole world are in the grip of the vicious virus that goes by the name of COVID-19 but is in reality in the grip of the collective greed, in fact, gluttony of a civilisation that is disembowelling the earth of its resources and is hunting down the earth's life-forms to gratify its appetites and its craving for commercial profit. There is a wild animal market like that of Wuhan in every city and town and more significant than that, within each of us who are not among the poor, in the shape of a callous disregard of the web of life and the sanctity of due proportion.

The 'crown' of the Corona microbe is not different either in its human origins nor its inhuman effect from the giant plumes that rose over the embers at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Its victims are like those of the bomb, extinguished innocent human beings, invariably poor and marginalised.

Blaming China's opacity or Nature's insentient actions shifts our own guilt for the willed depredations of the human species' powerful segments. Nature is not taking it out on us. It has caught our hegemony destroying what we are meant to respect, to nurture. Zoonotic pandemics are modern power-houses' most diabolic if un-intended creation, after our fabrications of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the propensity of nation states to practice custodial torture. Luthuli's and Mandela's South Africa, to its great credit, has signed and ratified without any objections or reservations the UN Convention Against Torture. Lincoln's and Martin Luther King's USA has done so with reservations. What would Einstein or Robert Frost have said to reservations about outlawing torture? Tagore's and Gandhi's India has signed but has not taken the next step to ratify its signature to that Convention Against Torture. What, one wonders, would those two men have had to say about this? Is something about torture more valuable to a state than its outright abolition?

George Floyd's dying words 'I cannot breathe' rival Martin Luther King's living words 'I have a dream' – from the other end of the oxygen line of visionary hope. That they were uttered when the world was breathing through masks, inhaling with fear, expiring in despair, under the constriction of a virus that shuts off the lungs, has given us a chilling picture of the human origins of the crisis that we humans have brought upon ourselves.

Gandhi was thrown out of a train on this day in 1893, in Pietermaritzburg. That train journey, we believe, changed the course of colonial history. Trains have captured India's headlines today – only very differently. Not by someone being thrown out of one of them but by millions bundling themselves into them. The Indian Railways themselves put the number at something like 8 + million. They were – are – all migrant workers, exactly as Gandhi himself was, in South Africa except that he was a lawyer with a solid income and was in a different country. These migrant workers were locked out of livelihoods and of ways of travel in their own country but in a far distant part of it when a lockdown was announced to contain the spread of the virus. While for the upper class of society lockdown meant staying home, watching films, baking, eating, doing stationary exercises and staying one metre away from one another, for these millions it meant the sudden disappearance of wages or work, of every security and, ironically, because they were now obliged to stay cooped up in their tiny dwellings, it also meant over-crowding, inhaling others' exhalations for hours together. While those like me busied themselves with wearing masks, sanitising our hands and watching sport and cinema celebrities extol the virtues of washing hands at regular intervals, these men, women and their children were huddled in stupor and danger. So they moved, moved on foot, no matter how far they had to go just to get back home. And for the reason that they were breaking the lockdown rules, they were pushed back. Until it dawned on those that mattered that these fellow human beings had to get home to stay home. And trains were deployed. Too few for too many, they saw the opposite of social distancing. I believe the Railways when they say that the nearly 90 migrant workers who died on these trains died not due to infection or starvation. I want to believe that for I trust the Railways and Government to speak the truth. But even the Railways do not say these persons did not die.

We are thinking of heroes today. May I speak of a little heroine? The indefatigable documenter of rural livelihoods in India, P Sainath and his colleagues Pushpa Usendi-Roakade, Purushottam Thakur, Kamlesh Painkra tell us: Jamlo Madkami was a twelve year old girl from the tribal Muria community of Chhattisgarh who went with others of her village to the south Indian state of Telengana to work on chilli farms. When lockdown was announced she was told her work had stopped and she might as well leave. So, with others the little one walked. Over three days and 140 kilometres she walked and when she was just 60 kilometres from her village and could walk no more, collapsed and died. The virus did not kill her. She was thrown out of no train. But she was thrown out of opportunity, pushed out of life. No Government, no politician, no employer but the whole lot of India's consumerist population, we, did that.

Will post-COVID the world return to the profligate misuse of its natural inheritance? Will it learn any lessons from the deaths of thousands? If the way in which the upper classes are hailing relaxations of the lockdown is any indication, the old story seems set to be back. After all only those dying and meant to die, die.

And yet we must not on this day let hope down. Rajmohan Gandhi has reminded us of Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who first sounded the world about the respiration-choking virus that he had found in seven patients and then himself succumbed to the virus. Li had been pilloried for having started a rumour and disrupted social order. He is now receiving honours. 'I think there should be more than one voice in a healthy society', Li said before dying.

There are Lis among Indian, African and American doctors , nurses, lab assistants, police and guards and there are many who are speaking up not only against racism but against what Sainath has described as classism, a new form of callous elitism. Protesters in the USA and in England and Australia and elsewhere saying 'I can't breathe' are not doing so in Gandhi's or Mandela's or King's name. But they are doing exactly what Gandhi, Mandela and King were doing. They are, in fact, Gandhi, Mandela and King. Together with Li and Floyd and Jamlo they are saying we are with them. We are them.

This day is their day.