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“Embracing the Other” in Gandhi’s teachings

‘Embracing the other’ is one of the greatest challenges for every human being, particularly so in the present century that is marked by divisiveness in the name of religion, economic disparity, ideology, class, caste and gender. It is a fact we human beings we are genetically wired to ‘the other’ where ‘the other’ is the opposite of ‘the same’. Where there is an ‘I’, there is a ‘you’ and where there is an ‘I’ and a ‘You’ there is a conflict. The ‘I’ is always in conflict with the ‘You’ as no two human beings are alike. How do we chart a new path that resolves this clash between ‘I’ and ‘You’ or between ‘We’ and ‘the other’- in short how to embrace ‘the other’. The article draws upon Gandhiji’s sayings to show that through mutual trust, love and faith in humanity, and through genuine dialogue it is possible to accept, respect and embrace others and cultivate humanity.

Key words: “Other”, “I-Thou Relationship”, “freedom and Responsibility, “vasudeva Kutumbhakam”

What do we mean by ‘the other’? ‘The other’ is a utility word that can be used as an adjective, as a noun, as a pronoun and as an adverb. As an adjective it means “ something different from that or those implied or specified.” It refers to something being not of the same kind or having a different quality. When used as a noun it refers to a different person or a different thing or to the remaining ones left after the departure of several other members – For example “after she left, the others resumed their discussion”. As a pronoun it means “ a different or an additional person For example, “we will get someone or other to replace him”. Finally as an adverb, it means “in another way”– For example, “the great tennis player performed other than perfectly”.

The core meaning of ‘the other’ running through all these usages is “*not the same one or ones already mentioned or implied*”. All through life at different times, in different situations, we engage with the other both internally and externally. When the self struggles with conflicting ideas, the engagement with the other becomes a part of the self. On other occasions, when the self is challenged externally with regard to ideas, ideologies, perspectives and decisions, the other is seen as apart from the self-as being different from or alien to the self. Thus the other is either a part of the self or is apart from the self.

This means that as human beings we are genetically wired to ‘the other’ where ‘the other’ is the opposite of ‘the same’. Where there is an ‘I’, there is a ‘you’ and where there is an ‘I’ and a ‘You’ there is a conflict. The ‘I’ is always in conflict with the ‘You’ as no two human beings are alike. When the ‘I’ gets extended to form groups that band together on different lines such as class, caste, religion, nation, ideology etc, the ‘You’ is present as the opposing ‘other’ resulting in conflicts among people with their allegiance to different faiths and beliefs. All major conflicts arise out of the clash with ‘the other’ and *‘embracing the other’ is one of the greatest challenges for every human being.*

Conflicts in contemporary times span a wide range of issues. Conflict ensues from a state of opposition between persons, ideas or interests. Given the fact that there is no single view or interest that is common among diverse people belonging to different nations, cultures, religions and gender, conflict cannot be wished away. Since we have been gifted with the faculty to think and articulate our individual views, opinions and interests, it is not an exaggeration to say that we are genetically tied to the other and thence to conflict.

The concept of the other assumes urgency in the 21st century in the context of the unprecedented violence and unrest affecting different parts of the globe and severely impacting civil societies and humanity at large. The turn of the New Millennium saw a group of suicide bombers bang up the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and snuff out three thousand innocent lives besides inflicting a disastrous fall-out on American economy and the global markets. It brought to the fore the fatal animosity between two groups-one founded on religious fundamentalism and the other founded on material civilization. Benjamin Barber refers to this as “Jihad Vs McWorld”. India had also witnessed suicide killing ten years earlier when the nation’s ex -Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a female suicide bomber. The

7/7 bombings in London in 2005, four years after 9/11, and the 26/11 attack on the iconic Taj hotel in Mumbai in 2008 were a repeat of suicide-cum-terrorist bombing that had gained mindless acceptance among uninitiated minds as the only means to assert one's faith or ideology or doctrine against the 'others' who did not subscribe to it. In the present century this method of killing oneself in the process of killing hundreds of anonymous victims (who have no personal or collective animosity against the suicide bomber) has become a heinous and reprehensible tool in the hands of naïve, artless and unsuspecting minds, brainwashed to believe in killing and dying for a specious cause. India has in recent years seen the rise of Naxalite-Maoist insurgency killing hundreds of people annually. There are many parts of the globe today such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Gaza, Ukraine etc., that experience violence, bloodshed and barbaric savagery- seemingly a throwback to the primitive ages and to the unleashing of primitive passions to settle scores with the opposing groups. The only difference in today's encounter is the striking use of fatally superior weapons often labeled as WMD or weapons of mass destruction. This is what Sartre meant when he said: "hell is other people". Sartre said this in the context of three conclusions he had arrived at:

- (a) human beings are inextricably linked together
- (b) human existence is intertwined with other people and
- (c) When one cannot relate to the others, existence becomes hell.

Can we allow our existence to be hell? Can there be a halt to inhuman barbarity that we see all around? Can innocent minds be restrained from acts of violence and inhumanity against 'the other' on account of fallacious reasoning, unsound arguments and delusory dogmas? Can the future generation be educated to explode the myth of fraudulent and erroneous beliefs so that humanity is spared the blushes of primitivism? The only answer to halt this pernicious spread of hatred and violence and to resolve the conflicts that arise out of a clash of with 'the other' on religious, social and political issues is to cultivate a catholic, liberal and all inclusive views and beliefs nurtured by tolerance and broad-mindedness, empathy and magnanimity- in short to *cultivate humanity*.

How do we chart a new path that resolves this clash between 'I' and 'You' or between 'We' and 'the other'- in short how to embrace 'the other'. It is axiomatic to affirm the fact that there is no new value on earth to be discovered. Value is nothing but the meaning we give to life. Human has to create the values that make him/her. Everyone has to make his/her choice and willing to accept responsibility for the way that choice will impact others. This is exercise both of *freedom and responsibility*. To live means to be involved in a situation in which one must make a choice ethically, responsibly and without arbitrariness. Sartre says: "In choosing ethics, he makes himself" and explains:

“The only way of creating a human community is to accept the human condition- that we exist, that we must work, that we are mortal, that we are involved, that we must choose, and that in choosing we invent ourselves and take full responsibility.”

These words knit well, but when one tries to follow them, they fall apart. It is here that we have to take lessons from the lives of great men and women who have proved that it is possible to make a choice without shirking responsibility- a choice that helps us to embrace others. Gandhiji was a living example who by his words and actions made his choice that was an ambrosial mixture of courage with conviction, religion with reason, strength with forgiveness, tolerance with firmness, openness with rootedness and above all love with compassion. Gandhi led nationwide campaigns for easing poverty, expanding women's rights, building religious and ethnic amity, ending untouchability and above all for achieving *Swaraj* or self-rule. In this process he eschewed violence and hatred.

In the peaceful struggle he led – *not against the British, but against the British rule*, -he said: “I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent. Anger and intolerance are the enemies of correct understanding.” He believed in the *Swaraj* and said “All compromise is based on give and take, but there can be no give and take on fundamentals. Any compromise on mere fundamentals is surrender.” The fundamentals that he believed in were morality and non- violence. This gave him enormous moral strength which he said was far superior to the strength derived from physical capacity. His strength came from his indomitable will- the will to achieve one’s legitimate goal through ethical means. He said “Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.” The will to achieve self rule or *Swaraj* was his noblest and highest form of selfishness for freeing his countrymen from an alien rule. His values are the products of his will to moral power that made him a man out of the welter of men.

Gandhi derived his sustenance from his faith in humanity. “You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.” This is the message that we in the 21st century should understand and follow. A few insane terrorists cannot make the whole of humanity evil. It is wrong to castigate a whole religion or community for the sins of a few radicals who employ terror as a political and religious weapon. The uniqueness of Gandhiji lay in his ability to marshal the goodness of humanity and make it a potent force to counter a small minority of terrorists. He said: “I claim that human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another.” Gandhi’s message is not just one of tolerance towards others who are different from us but one of accepting and respecting the others as well as their ideas and ideologies.

Gandhiji stood like a colossus who had the capacity to give and receive strength and whose words and action strongly influenced the freedom movement. He had no hatred even for the few misguided groups that took to violence. He said: The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” He never wanted anyone or any group or any nation to remake the world

in the way they believed in, because the beauty and splendour of the world lie in its pluralism. The greatness of human beings, he said, did not lie in reshaping the world as according to their perception, but in their ability to remake themselves according to the demands of the world. The best way to accept 'the other' even if the other is different in all respects is through love and empathy. He spoke about the power of love. "Power based on love," he said, "is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment." He believed in the "I and the "You" for the two are the two sides of the same coin. Coming 2000 years after Jesus, Gandhi admired Christianity and its teachings whose cardinal principle is "love thy neighbor". Embracing the Other is possible if we learn to accept fellow humanity. In Hitopadesha, it is said: "*Ayam Nijah paro veti gananaa laghuchetasaam udaaracharitaam tu vasudeva kutumbakam*" (The thought that one person is related to me and another is not is that of the narrow minded. For the broadminded, however, the whole world is one family) This concept of Vasudeva Kutumbakam is what Gandhiji affirmed all through his life and this, he felt could be possible if we accept, respect and love our fellow beings.

I will be false to myself and to you all if I do not say what my young nephew and niece told me when I was attempting to write this paper. They are young in their late teens reaching adulthood in the next couple of years. They were skeptical about the power of love in the present world where individualism, materialism, selfishness, fundamentalism, greed and violence dominate, where obedience to authority overrules obedience to one's instinctive responses, where violence cannot be countered by non violence, where all relationships between I and you are impersonal relationships that hinge upon mutual benefits that accrue from it and where 'embracing the other' is more a slogan than a reality. Though initially devastated, I understood the validity of their doubt and explained to them that I-thou relationship should be based on mutual trust and love. Marriage is an exemplary bond between two individuals. Through marriage one enters into relationship with otherness, experiencing its response. "Real marriage leads to vital acknowledgement of many faced otherness- even in the contradiction and the conflict with it." (Martin Buber) In a similar way I and others who I meet in different situations are also interwoven and this is the basic structure of the body politic. In accepting otherness, I-thou relationship gets mutual trust. One of the best ways of generating trust is through dialogue. It is in the dialogue that we can open ourselves to the otherness of the persons we meet and interact at different phases of our lives. In place of the present day dialogues with AK47 rifles, we have to enter into genuine dialogue with the other or others in which each one of us, the participants keep in mind the presence of the other or others and turn to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relationship between them and us. This means seeing the other as not oneself, but as someone different but nevertheless communicating with him. This also means confirming and acknowledging the other even while differing from him. It is this acknowledgement of the other as an authentic human being, that develops trust and love.

I ended my dialogue with the two youngpersons with a quotation from Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century Danish philosopher who wrote in his Works of Love:

“There are a *you* and an *I*, and there is no *mine* and *yours*! For without a *you* and an *I*, there is no love, and with *mine* and *yours* there is no love but “mine” and “yours” (these possessive pronouns) are, of course, formed from a “you” and an “I” and as a consequence seem obliged to be present wherever there are a *you* and an *I*. This is indeed the case everywhere, but not in love, which is a revolution from the ground up. The more profound the revolution, the more completely the distinction “*mine* and *yours*” disappears, and the more perfect is the love.”

Gandhi’s message is his own life that nurtured and preserved the bond of love and trust among all fellow beings. In the wake of increased consciousness of the human potential for destructiveness, Gandhi has charted a new path towards global community. His life is his message and the message he has left as his legacy is to embrace the other to cultivate humanity.