Was Gandhi Wrong?
Category : December 1990
Published by Anonymous on Dec. 01, 1990

Was Gandhi Wrong?

Palani, Sivasiva

It has been a bad season for the image of Hinduism and swamis in the world. Firstly, a federal grand jury indicted Swami Kirtanananda, controversial leader of the 600-member New Vrindavan Krishna community in West Virginia. The swami was charged with racketeering and other crimes related to the murder of two members, one alleged to be a contract hit for which the Krishna leadership paid US $8,000. We will report more on that trial in future issues.

Next headlines blazed with tales of a "Rajneesh Hit Squad" when the US Justice Department arrested overseas four ex-followers of the late cult leader. All of the women were "sannyasins" at Rajneesh's 64,000-acre Oregon commune when they allegedly conspired to kill Oregon's US Attorney Charles Turner. The murder never happened. But the world media went on a feeding-frenzy pursuing the wild rise and fall of the ex-Jain guru who owned 94 Rolls-Royces and was forced out of America by immigration authorities. The public is largely unaware that Rajneesh is not a Hindu and makes little or no distinction between real swamis and his "sannyasins." So our Hindu holy men were indirectly slandered when Rajneesh disciples managed to engineer the largest marriage fraud case in the history of the United States, the largest wiretapping case in the history of the US and the largest poisoning case in the history of the US - over 750 people poisoned in local restaurants.

I know this doesn't sound much like dharma, but wait, there's more. In late October orange-robed sadhus and sannyasins were in the news every day, shown on world television brandishing a wild arsenal of hand-held weapons, attacking the 450-year-old, run-down mosque in northern India, swearing viciously and threatening violently to break through the cordon of police and army sent to prevent death and destruction. One outspoken sadhu said that, if necessary, that Ayodhya temple would be built not with bricks but with human skulls. Hindu fundamentalism, like the fundamentalism of any religion, can be a powerful and

cruel force when unleashed upon others.

This is all horridly sad. Sad because at its heart Hinduism is so gentle, so wise and compassionate. Sad because people are suffering and dying. Sad because it offends the deepest Hindu ethic, ahimsa, or nonviolence.

When people in the West talk about nonviolence, they think of a man named Gandhi and another who was inspired by him, Martin Luther King. They think of nonviolence as civil disobedience, as not killing others, of avoiding physical injury. But nonviolence means so much more than that. Our scriptures enjoin us from injury by thought and word as well as deed. How subtle is this commandment which instructs us not to be hurtful with our hands, with our speech, even with others emotionally, we attack them mentally. But ahimsa nevertheless remains our moral compass.

Or it should. In fact, Hindus are being quite hurtful these days in India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. They feel they have taken enough. They have been hurt and offended by others, and they are striking out from the depths of their frustration, from the depths of their anger and confusion. They forget the words of the 2,000-year-old Holy Kural, "It is the principle of the pure in heart never to injure others, even when they themselves have been hatefully injured." They forget the Vedic hymn, "Do not injure the beings living on the earth, in the air and in the water." They smell vengeance and they have the power to extract it. They smell vengeance and they have the power to extract it. Hindu fundamentalists no longer quote from peace-loving scripture. Instead they quote from the Mahabharata or Ramayana to justify the warring, to rationalize the pain they bring upon others.

Was Mahatma Gandhi wrong about the power of nonviolence? Are the strategies and ideals he proved no longer dear to us? Is there hope for a return to kindlier days?

An experience we had in April of 1988 promises at least the possibility. The publisher and I were at Oxford University where several hundred politicians and spiritual leaders of the major faiths had gathered for a five-day discussion on human survival. Each afternoon we met in small conference rooms, about 25 in a group, for private discussion and exchange of ideas. No press was allowed, and so

the exchanges were delightfully candid, even though six languages were being translated.

Toward the end of the week I was standing in the modern hall outside, waiting for the session to resume. Quite suddenly, a bearded Muslim delegate stood in front of me. He came quite close, smiled and then reached out to take my two hands in his. For a full fifteen minutes we chatted, my hands cradled in his. He said softly that he was a devout Moslem and felt a great sympathy with the Hindu views on spirituality which I had been sharing with the group all week. He noted that Islam and Hinduism "are true religions, for they both embrace every part of life, not a single human need or activity is left outside of the faith." There were a few less charitable words about less complete paths, but for the most part he spoke of a natural affinity between his and mine, and he did so with such quiet intensity that the encounter continued to echo in my head for days.

Here was one of Islam's world leaders reaching out to a Hindu swami, telling him in essence that followers of our two traditions have every reason to get along. Ironically, while we two were communicating harmoniously, millions were combating hatefully. Why? Clearly Moslem and Hindu leadership is responsible. When leaders call for blood, crowds see that it flows in wide, sanguinary rivers. When leaders urge patience and negotiation of differences, the people listen, wait and seek change in more humane ways. It is the leaders who set the tone in any negotiation. But it is the people who choose those who will lead them.

In the Ayodhya affair, HINDUISM TODAY'S staff is very much in support of the effort to reclaim Hindu temples that were unjustly destroyed. But it must be done ethically. We can never condone violent methods to achieve this goal, however noble. We urge all Hindus to rediscover the power of harmlessness, whether personal, political, economic, military or cultural. Keep the goal, but find a better means.

When a man beats his wife, the whole family is hurt. When a terrorist kills, the whole nation dies. Everyone is a victim of every violent act, for they tear the very fabric of our humanness. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have been teaching non-hurtfulness as a spiritual principle and practical ethic for millennia. Let us not abandon its ideals.

Ironically, many who flocked to Hindu dharma in this century were fleeing in disgust from religions that indulged in crusades, in condoning animosity and death in the name of God. They imagined that true spirituality must be kindly, that a true God would condemn, not condone, barbarism. They found solace in Hinduism's devotion and freedom in its cosmic vision. They found peace in the meditative impulse so prevalent in India. They learned that people never hurt what they revere, and that Hindus revere all life, all creatures large and small. Many of us now seem intent on destroying this. I hope there are more who are not.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.