

What would Gandhiji Do Today?

Interview with Tushar Gandhi

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Abstract: The following is an interview with Tushar Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi (Bapuji) on the occasion of the Gandhi's death anniversary. The topics covered are the recent communal violence in India, the role of politicians and of the ordinary people.

Keywords: Gandhi, Godhra, communalism, religions, India.

Tusharji, we will be happy if you can share some of your reflections with the readers of Jnanadeepa. Can you tell us something personal? How are you related to Mahatma Gandhi?

Mahatma Gandhi had four sons. Harilal, Manilal, Ramdas and Devdas, I am the grandson of Manilal Gandhi, the second son of Gandhi.

What is your profession now? Educational and social?

Yes I work with the internet and I am the managing Trustee of Mahatma Gandhi foundation, which has various social welfare as well as educational programmes.

Can you explain something more of your educational activities.

Education is more of information. We are creating the most comprehensive electronic archives on the Mahatma. This is going to be available to people on the web so that they can take whatever information they wish according to their specific need. And the other motive of the electronic archive is to save the work of Mahatma Gandhi in an electronic format so that in the future something will be available even when the physical things deteriorate. At least the electronic copies will be available.

Coming to the topic about religious dialogue and harmony, what do you feel about the present situation?

Well I think it is very necessary to talk on this subject now because there is a misconception that when you say that the problems are being caused by religion today, people feel that we are criticising religion. But it is not really religion that is being criticised, but it is the version of religion that is being propagated today, which has been twisted to suit the needs of vested interests. And this I speak in general. I do not single out any one community or religion. But as a general rule today religion has been corrupted for the selfish motives and needs of people. And that is what is causing the problem. We have to fight against that. We have to expose the corruption in religion. And instead of others' criticising – a Hindu criticising a Muslim, or a Muslim criticising a Hindu or a Buddhist criticising Christian – if we all look internally towards our own self and try to improve them, we will be much better off. That is what is required. That would be a constructive dialogue, instead of coming and saying that my religion is good. In fact all religions are good. But if we have the guts and honesty to say that there have been certain bad elements that have crept into our religion, and certain bad practices have come and dominated this religion, then that is the way we will serve our religion and its faithful followers. That is what is required today.

Tell us more about the reconciliation that you would visualise, now that the situation is so bad. There is no use ignoring or denying what has happened. What would be the next step in terms of reconciliation?

I think, if you want to really reconcile the differences we have and we want to live in peace, we have to accept the fact that there are different races of people, there are different people following different ways of life. But for me religion is a way of life. I have always maintained that if I want to tolerate somebody else, that means I am bottling up my anger and my displeasure. I am bottling up my hatred of the practices of that person. And that bottling-up capability or capacity will be finite. And one day I will lose that capability. It will be like an electric fuse which has a fixed tolerance and after that it blows. When the time of tolerance breaks, the hatred that spews out

would be so devastating that it really annihilates or creates massacres which are unimaginable. I would rather understand my opponents or the other person's necessities and why they practise what they practise. I would be much better off if I were to learn of them and accept that person with all the differences. And thus I will be able to overcome my irritation towards that person's practices. And to say that it is his or her right to practice that. Then I should not feel irritated, as my practice should not irritate that other person. When that understanding is born, then we will really be able to live together. When such understanding and acceptance is experienced, we will be able to live and grow together in harmony.

Such a acceptance will be through understanding and respect. I had an experience in my political life: Two years back Bakrid and Mahavir Jayanthi were falling on the same day. Jains follow ahimsa and Bakrid is the day of qurbani. The Muslims give qurbani in the form of goat or animals. So some political vested interested spanned up the anger in both the communities and Jains went and demanded that Mahavir Jayanthi be declared as ahimsa day and no slaughter should take place on that day. It should be banned. So the Muslims rose up in arms and said that to us the qurbani is paramount. And we will do the qurbani. Now the Jains are violating their own belief of non-violence by imposing their will on the other person. True ahimsa does not allow you to impose your will on the other. The Muslims were also violating their understanding of qurbani. Because the true qurbani is supposed to be sacrificing something that is most dear to us. And beloved to you. If giving qurbani was most dearest to them, sacrificing that right of giving qurbani would have been the greatest sacrifice on that day. But they did not look at it in that way. The Muslims wanted to give the qurbani and the Jains wanted to impose their will on the Muslims. Both were violating the corner-stone of their own principles. And that is the kind of spark which can lead to holocaust. And we intervened. We requested them to please accept each others' practices. You say, "I will ignore his practice of qurbani." And you say, "I will perform my qurbani in such a way that it does not offend my Jain brethren." Be considerate to each other. And that is what happened. They said fine. Although we do not agree with this practice of Muslims, we will be understanding enough to accept

that. The Muslims said, yes, we understand the Jains' necessity and we will take that into consideration and will moderate our practise in that manner. And thus the whole situation was diffused. It was diffused only through understanding not through tolerance. Because Jains would never have been able to tolerate animals being slaughtered on Mahavir Jayanthi. And the orthodox Muslims will not have tolerated the refusal of their rights to give qurbani. It happened in 1998 and 1999 in Mumbai. Those were the two years when Bakrid and Mahavir Jayanthi coincided.

Coming to the present situation, especially in Gujarat, I want to ask you: if Gandhiji were alive today what would he have done?

If Bapuji were alive today, Gujarat would not have happened. Unfortunately all of us, who call ourselves liberal, have been sleeping on past laurels for too long. Gujarat did not happen overnight. Gujarat did not burn because of Godhra. Godhra did not happen overnight either. This has been simmering for a long time. Gujarat has been cultivated to become the fire, cauldron of violence. The hatred and mistrust of each other have been very scientifically propagated in society. Minds have been very systematically poisoned against each other. When all those things were happening, the liberals just kept quiet and said that these are just aberrations and will go away. But the planning and strategy of five years of the Sangh Parivar culminated first in the Godhra happening and then the entire Gujarat. They did not occur over night. The Hindus did not suddenly become angry after Godhra. What Godhra achieved was that some of the Hindus who would not have tolerated such a thing, were led into the tragedy that was unfolding. Bapuji would have seen signals long back. And he would have started working long back to see that these kinds of flash-points were never reached. We all are trying to dig the well after the fire has not only started but consumed the house. Bapu would not have done that.

What are your suggestions?

In Gujarati there is a saying that the morning is the time we wake up. If you have woken up at noon and realise it, we can still take it as a beginning. I think we need to work now. We should all learn the lesson. We have slipped up in the past. But now we would

not let it happen again. We won't let Gujarat be replicated in other parts of the country. We will not let hearts be divided all over the country and the world. We will not allow anybody to kill our brother and sisters. We will have to. We will have to be pro-active. We cannot be reactive any longer.

Concrete visions in the political areas?

In political arena, I would suggest that as soon as possible politics of religion should be stopped. I won't say religion should be delinked from politics, because religion can't be delinked from any human being. Finally politics is made by human beings. What is unhealthy is not really the safeguarding or promoting of one's religion with the use of one's political practices, it is playing politics using religion. We must be aware of the fact that fanaticism is not a Hindu prerogative. There is fanaticism in the Muslim field, there is fanaticism in the Christian field. Human being is by nature, somehow or other, a fanatic. We must learn to address fanaticism. I refuse to react only to Hindu fanaticism. I refuse to acknowledge that fanaticism is a Hindu prerogative and terrorism is an Islamic prerogative. It is human beings who are terrorists or fanatics. We have to fight them everywhere.

What would be your suggestions and comments for the ordinary people?

I would tell ordinary people not to follow the sheep mentality. Today we have all become flocks of sheep. We have shepherds who lead us through their rhetoric and make us do things. If we have thought for ourselves or our intellect, we would never have done that. We lost the power to question our leaders. That is why corruption in politics is so rampant.

Narendra Modi tells us that since Muslims have three wives they will have 25 children and we believe it. How many Muslims today have three wives? Show me the number? And if we they have three wives, how many of them have 25 children? If they have 25 children, how many of them are growing up to become responsible citizens? Half of them die in infancy and you will see in large Muslim families at least two or three siblings who are mentally challenged. How many Muslims have three wives? Nobody has asked Narendra

Modi. Everybody says: ten Muslims with three wives and five children. So thirty Muslims each year. So let us kill 20 off of them. Use your intelligence and think of the biological probabilities and possibilities. Listen to your inner voice.

They told you that Ram Mandir is here, and you start worshipping that place. Otherwise you did not even know of that place. Ram lives in our hearts. How can he be imprisoned in a stone building. Unless we have the capacity to think, using the intellect given by God, we cannot be genuine. But we love to become sheep. We accept Bal Thakery. Since he is the leader we follow him blindly. We accept Laloo Prasad Yadav as the leader and we follow him blindly. When are we going to use our grey cells? When do we think of our own welfare? Think of the continuance of our own life!

How do you suggest reconciliation on a personal, one-to-one basis?

One of the things to be done is to learn not to seek revenges in history. Forgiveness should be practised more than preached. That can be done on a personal level. The other thing is that we need to respect the other persons' rights and practices. We must respect everybody's right to practise their own faith. Practices which are harmless to others. I am not saying that if your neighbour is a murderer, you must respect and allow him to murder. Harmless practices should not cause irritation. We must learn to understand each other.

There must be a spiritual laboratory in every school. Our educational curriculum must have religion as a subject in which every religion is impartially taught. It is a utopian situation. When a Moulavi teaching Gita and a Pandit teaching Koran is the ideal. Because the Moulavi will always teach Koran better and the Pandit will always preach the Gita better. If they reverse their role, we will learn the real meaning of those books. If we will it, it can happen. Finally, they are men of God and they should know all things in the name of God.

How do you visualise the future of our nation in 20-25 years?

I am an incorrigible optimist. I see hope in the most hopeless of situations. I am sure that India had sunk to unplummable depths

even in the past, and has risen to glorious heights by the endeavour of its own people. I feel that if we all come together and work towards that goal, it will happen more easily.

We have the mentality of *thatha-astu*. We all think that one day God will get up and say *thatha-astu* and then all the problems will be solved.

The day we realise that we can, we truly will be able to. The British had ruled over us. The day the entire nation got up and said enough, they had to leave. We have lived as brothers and sisters for centuries. The aberrations of few decades cannot destroy that ever. So I am an eternal optimist, not only on the social and religious fields but also in political situation.

Thank you, Tusharji.

Welcome. It was nice talking to you.

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