

United by spirituality, divided by religion



Ringside View

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The life and work of the Father of the Nation has been in the headlines this month. External Affairs minister Sushma Swaraj was in South Africa on June 7, marking the 125th anniversary of the historic incident when a young Mahatma Gandhi was thrown out of a first class train compartment at Pietermaritzburg railway station. The event in 1893 was a turning point in Gandhi's fight against racial discrimination in South Africa. In Singapore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi put it well when he and Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong unveiled a plaque on June 2 marking the site where Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were immersed at the Clifford Pier: "Bapu's message reverberates globally. His thoughts and ideals motivate us to work for the greater good of humanity."

Officialdom has its way of retelling and reliving the story of Mahatma Gandhi; it is important that we keep reminding the world and indeed ourselves about the lessons we can learn from a life lived in service of humanity.

However, the real strength and appeal of these messages is more in the way everyday people can relate to, practice and engage with them. No official telling, however strong the arc lights, can match up to the pull and power of citizens taking the message forward and making it a part of their lives and their mission to live it and tell it. Take the example of a song like Vaishnav Jan To, which was played in Singapore as Modi listened in. The rendition was beautiful; the setting was just perfect and the message as always flawless. But Vaishnav Jan To is powerful because it needs none of the imagery to shine through and live on in eternity, as it has five centuries after it was first sung in Gujarat by Narsinh Mehta, who lived 1414-1480.

→ Consider this: Somewhere in faraway Chicago, an Indian journalist battling difficult times in the news media business found strength and comfort in this very song, which is also celebrated as Mahatma Gandhi's most loved prayer. So, keeping aside his troubles, the journalist put together a team, flew down to Gujarat and successfully wrote,

directed and produced a 68-minute documentary titled "Gandhi's Song". It tells us the story of the song, its philosopher-poet and a lot more about the wealth of the Indian ethos. The journalist, who produced the film is Mayank Chhaya, 57, a news writer who has a flair for free flowing prose and is noted for his best seller on the Dalai Lama, Man, Monk, Mystic. Here is an ordinary, everyday person, telling in his own small way a big story for humankind. It's a story captured in the simple and powerful idea of what constitutes right conduct – to understand the pain of another, to help those in distress and to serve with humility. Gandhi's song moves people.

The militant Hindutva discourse tears into this rich fabric. Its viciousness, deep-seated hatred and growing violence against all those it deems as others is a threat to the Indian way of life, to the message of the scriptures and the way the messages are lived — quietly, in small ways, in simple stories of people.

The documentary merits mention against the high profile global events if only to point out and celebrate the magnetic pull to a life lived by a set of values. These values are at the heart of Indian scriptures and teachings. Across time and geographies, people of all hues have been attracted to the timelessness and simplicity of the messages. They tie in together as a spiritual path, or spirituality as distinct from religiosity. This is a source of strength for India and a reflection of our rich ethos.

Examples are everywhere. In Mumbai, more than five years ago, an ad for the position of an assistant to research Indian spiritual texts to teach leadership of the self in modern day management sessions found a rush of volunteers. The salary became irrelevant; applicants made it clear the subject was a draw, not the place, the money or the position. Many offered to work without a fee with the understanding that the learning would be a reward in itself.

An engineer-entrepreneur in Mumbai is now working with ideas to put together teaching and

training material on values and the "value of values" to take to the education system. Separately, a young journalist has taken up study of Sanskrit and recital of hymns and verses as he begins his journey to learn and engage with spiritual knowledge from the Upanishads.

The documentary, the management course, the work on values are independent efforts that flourish as ordinary people at various points in their individual journeys come to ask deeper questions, seek spiritual knowledge and look to a life of service. This is a source of strength, the inner shakti that drives the Indian worldview and the Indian way of life. Call it by whatever name, this is the essence of Bharatiyata or the Indian way and everyday, people from all regions and religions can relate to it quite simply. Endless stories of giving, sharing, sacrifice add to the message in a variety of ways and are often internalised from a young age.

The militant Hindutva discourse tears into this rich fabric. Its viciousness, deep-seated hatred and growing violence against all those it deems as others is a threat to the Indian way of life, to the message of the scriptures and the way the messages are lived — quietly, in small ways, in simple stories of people. Further, pushing a distorted idea of Hindutva in a centralised manner from positions of power in a military style prescription and with a narrow political agenda, exactly the way it is sought to be done by the BJP-RSS and a mushrooming army of self-appointed leaders and voices, is to do deep damage to our true traditions.

This damage diminishes us bit by bit. It silently chips away at the Indian way of living and the vision of oneness that is central to it. The most apolitical of independent initiatives, particularly those drawing energy from our spiritual traditions, today run the risk of being dismissed as being part of the saffron agenda. Where there was acceptance and reverence, today there are questions, doubts and worries.

This is unlike the ugly violence against minorities that makes it to the headlines, but it is no less a dagger in the heart of India. Celebrations in South Africa and Singapore, important as they are, will have more meaning if those who have weaponised Hindutva can learn to embrace the true spirit of Gandhi's song.

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Views are personal.
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