

AN OPEN LETTER TO GANDHIJI ON HIS 60th DEATH ANNIVERSARY

---Ravindra. R.P.

Dear Bapu,

I really wonder how I am writing a letter to you. Of course, I am sure, were you bodily alive, you certainly would have replied to this letter in your typical untidy handwriting. Is there an email in the heaven? I am planning to send one addressed to mkgandhi@pureheart.org.

I don't believe that you would not have used email. Sure, you would have been aggrieved by the fact that an email does not reveal the characteristic handwriting and hence one's personality uncovered from it; you would have rejected the option of an email to a face-to-face meeting. But you would not have rejected the countless possibilities of a dialogue just to oppose technology. You did not reject the post, nor the telephone, did you?

The actual problem lies with me. A civil relation between two persons is a prerequisite for communication through a letter. But, since childhood, I had nothing but limitless anger and hatred for you. Had I written a letter then, I would have simply abused you (of course, I would have been smart enough not to sign it). I don't know how over a period of time this relation got transformed from my side. In fact, I am writing this letter precisely to understand it.

Bapuji, I remember, I must have been in the sixth or seventh standard. I was a regular swayamsewak of the R.S.S. My aim in life was to be its whole time worker. In that impressionable age, hatred for Gandhi and for Muslims got imprinted on my mind. Nowadays, I wonder whether most Maharashtrian Brahmins carry within themselves a gene for Gandhi-Muslim hatred. (I should better check out with some NRI working with the "Genome" project.) But it would most probably be a virus, rather than a

gene; how else can one explain its rapid proliferation to the likes of Narendra Modi and Vinay Katiyar?

In the "Shakha", we boys learnt many things while playing games. One was to run a round a widening circle in one breath, chanting "Hinduncha Hindustan" - Hindustan for the Hindus - (automatically we used to hum "Pakistan for the Katelas"). Cool evenings and moonlight picnics were invariably linked with the "Bauddhiks" when we listened to the horrific tales of partition, of atrocities committed on Hindus, of the rebellion of the Moplas (yet another bloody tale of Hindu massacre). Our blood literally boiled, letting out fumes of hatred. That was the time I was introduced to Savarkar and I started asking, "How can freedom be won without a war?" In the sixties, your official heirs were the devious Congressmen and the Sarvodaya workers trapped in the rituals like spinning. I was thoroughly convinced (of course without any study) that the freedom was won mainly through the sacrifices of armed revolutionaries, while Gandhi and congress ran away with all the credit. The biographies of Savarkar, Bhagat Singh and Netaji Bose were so thrilling. (I genuinely believed that all of them were de facto Danda-carrying Swayamsevaks, or at least very close relatives of the R.S.S. Parivar!) As against this, your biography was very insipid. (It was only after Attenborough's "Gandhi" that I realized the beauty and bravery in non-violence, but that was quite late.) I read "Shatruchya Shibirat" (Inside the enemy camp- Savarkar's autobiographical account of his trip to England) and concurred with Savarkar that in order to be brave and strong like the English men, we too should start eating meat. (That was the time when at home we were forbidden even to utter "E for Egg".) And you, what a contrast! Repenting the fact that you ever tried "imitating an English gentleman". So feeble and weepy! Your language was too simple. When I read your lesson in our English textbook, I didn't need to refer to the dictionary even once. Your "opposition to science", "obsession with spinning and prohibition"--- Gandhians meant spinning wheel, loin cloth, sheep's milk -- No wonder their caricatures tickled the funny bone of ALL Maharashtrians (That's what we thought at that time- "WE" means ALL). My stubbornness grew with age. Most of "us" had no property- farms or mansions. But we were brought up on tales of how we had lost everything in the 1948 anti-Brahmin riots. This feeling of being wronged, targeted was passed on to our generation. However, the elderly generation around us held you in high esteem; nobody criticized you openly. But hiding the banned books of Nathuram and Gopal Godse, passing them on to others and discussing about

them in hushed tones were common- it was thrilling, and deeply satisfying- almost like performing a religious ritual.

Later I spent a year at Pune and six years at Nagpur for my college education. That was the time I was really growing- physically as well as intellectually. I was a voracious reader. In the inspiring seventies, change was in the very air I breathed. I was reading not only the RSS literature, but also about Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. My Dalit friends drew me to the fountainhead of dalit literature. Thus, paradoxically, in the very strongholds of RSS, I not only outgrew it, but also became its staunch opponent. Later, I traveled a long road- JP movement, Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini (JP's youth organization), feminism, people's science movement and graduated to become a "progressive". But this process hardly altered my opinion about you. There were flashes of disturbing exceptions- there was JP, candidly describing his voyage from Marxism, socialism and finally reaching your path. He asked, "But, where is the "incentive to goodness" in any ideology? What inspires a person to transcend selfish motives and do any thing good for others, for society?" Acharya Dada Dharmadhikari, the leading commentator on "Total revolution" asked a pertinent question- " It's natural and just for members of any oppressed group – dalits, women, toilers to struggle for their liberation by rebelling against the system that oppresses them; it is absolutely essential too, but is it sufficient to bring about a fundamental change in the society? Who will struggle for the liberation of the entire humankind? In a complex society wherein each one is a part of the oppressive structure, how can we develop "revolutionary consciousness", transcending mere class/caste consciousness?" These questions did disturb me, but only temporarily. I was young, haunted by the spirit of "progressivism", afraid of being branded a "Savodayi". Bapu, for us, you were an "outcaste". For some, you were actually their "Enemy Number One" (For progressive people like us, the numbering and sequencing of our enemy list has always been a problem; basically, weak in Maths, you see.) These numbers kept changing- some times it was you, at times, the Congress, quite often the dissidents (from Socialists to Maoists, their number was ever growing.) It is funny, but we never felt the need to consider RSS as our "Enemy Number One" and really fight it. Now, after 1992, some of these very militant secularists are vying to be RSS's "Bibi Number One". Forget it, Bapuji; these new references are beyond you.

We were talking of our relationship. Let us be clear. Your use of the term "Harijan", your efforts for eradicating "untouchability", your appeal to the high caste Hindus to take over "dirty jobs" like "scavenging" in a spirit of atonement - - For several Dalits, all this stinks of high caste egotism. Congress's opposition to Dr. Ambedkar and its manipulation of Dalits in the parliamentary politics are also being blamed on you. As usual, you are the favorite culprit for all the evils of this country. You are the Father of the Nation, a nation that, in fact, does not exist. Hence, no one is offended when you are attacked, because, you have no children. For the Marxists, you have always been a stooge of the National Capitalists. They won't forgive you because you stood between them and the revolution they intended to bring about. Many feminists don't even mention you - you were a man, an Indian, a traditionalist, who advocated "Brahmacharya", rather than contraception. Your ideal of "RamRajya" is obviously unacceptable to the heirs of Shambuka, Seeta, Marx and Lenin. Nothing wrong with that, except the fact that this opposition blurred the fact that your Ram was diametrically opposite to the "Jai Shree Ram" of the Sangh Parivar and would never do injustice to anyone. You were an old hat, Bapuji, while all of us were "modern"; that was the only thing we agreed upon. We were votaries of modernism. We were convinced that all the problems of our times could be solved through planned development spread of modern education, progressive legislation and constitutional provisions like reservations and adoption of secularism by all.

We would have jolly well spent our lives, fighting each other, cursing you, and spinning the yarn of "intellectual" discussions. But, then, as a bolt from the blue, the Soviet Union was splintered, the socialist dream soured, and the Babri Masjid was destroyed, and we suddenly woke up from our slumber. I won't say that all of us were brought to our senses at the same time. How can we call ourselves as progressive if we become aware of all our "historical blunders" at the same time? But then we woke up to the fact that we all had become redundant. "The caravan had driven past us and we were left staring at the cloud of dust it raised!" it had not only bypassed us, it trampled over us, reducing us to caricatures. The "viral infection" or "dormant genes" of some of us got activated and they left us to seek a space for themselves in the "Rath yatra". Some others got disenchanted with the fallacies of this mortal world and they migrated to their "respective Himalayas" in search of the "eternal truth and inner peace". The remaining lot is still busy fighting with one another, yet thinking seriously of what went

wrong. Bapuji, I am ashamed to admit, but many of us are slowly inching towards you.

It's not an easy process, we must admit. Where is your vote bank, Bapu? Hindu fanatics killed you for being "pro-Muslim", but Muslims are hardly aware of what you have done (for them, for this nation and for upholding humanism). You considered eradication of untouchability to be as important as the freedom struggle, but for the Dalits, you are the kingpin of Brahminical power structure (more dangerous than the RSS). Your agenda of revival of village industries brought productive castes of weavers, potters, oil smiths (the OBCS in today's jargon) into the mainstream of production processes. You were instrumental in bringing about the change in leadership from the upper castes to the Bahujans during freedom struggle and paved the way for the democratization of the Indian polity; but the votaries of "Mandal" are blissfully unaware of this contribution. The congress party and the so-called Gandhians buried you in statues and made you into a pygmy, to suit their size. Today, you have no one to carry forward your heritage with pride. The whole business of being the father of an ungrateful nation has been totally loss making. What sort of Bania are you?

Well, you aren't that unpopular either. Many of your favorite concepts, freed from the ideological clutches and after a "suitable make over" have now become "class symbols"(just as "Lower Parel" became "Upper Worli"). Khadi is now seen more on the bodies of models walking down the ramp, rather than on the activists. Nature cure has become a rage for the elite crowd queuing for sauna baths and weight reduction programmes. The rich, while shopping in food malls, always prefer organic food. We all will start drinking sheep's milk, once its nourishing value is established by American scientists!

But, in all this maddening chaos, you have become much more relevant. The overfilled and bursting mega cities, drained-out villages, the growing number of farmers' suicides and the cynical middle class treating it as yet another "score", the lavish malls built on the tombs of the textile mills, school children exhausted by the burden of school bags, Narmada, Singur, Nandigram, Kalingnagar, Khairlanji; people, media, judiciary, bureaucracy, political leaders and workers- everyone incapable of rising above their narrow caste/class/other vested interests; our horizons fragmented by

narrow domestic walls----Bapu, we need your all-embracing, integral vision encompassing the wholeness of life. Your skill of discovering the hidden strengths of thousands of activists, strengthening their wings, widening their horizons and of weaving them together—we need them today. We don't want your glasses, Bapu. We are already like the blind men probing the shape of an elephant. After wearing your glasses, we shall end up with egoistic confirmation of our individual discoveries of parts being the whole. Moreover, in the past six decades, we have traveled so much of a distance in a direction reverse of your "Hind Swaraj" that it would add to our confusion. Today's problems need today's solutions. Hence, we ask not for your glasses, but your clear, loving, whole vision. We need your support to break through the fallacies of development vs. environment, constructive work vs. struggle, synthesis vs. analysis, creation vs. distribution of wealth; to be unforgiving to our own selves, and accommodating for others; to explore wider mass support (beyond funding agencies). Not just a handful of (former and present day) activists dreaming for a more humane world, but all of us feeling suffocated in this unipolar world seek you. Why do all the bright and inspiring victories in the struggle for equity and humanity get transformed into ultimate defeats- India, China, USSR, Vietnam, South Africa- all those saddened by this realization seek solace in you. The young American peacenik that threw herself before the invading Israeli tanks in Palestine chanted your name before embracing death. You have survived the bullets of Nathuram Godse and the innumerable deaths inflicted by your followers. You live, not only in books, museums and statues, but in our minds as well. You are getting younger day by day, year by year. Hence, let me say "Long Live Bapuji!"

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