

Fourth International conference of the Memory of the World Programme
of UNESCO, *Culture – Memory – Identities*, organized by the Polish
National Commission of UNESCO and the State Archives of Poland

Opening ceremony, The Royal Castle, Warsaw, 6 p.m., Wednesday 18
May 2011

Keynote speech by Rajmohan Gandhi

To stand amidst this body of thinkers and scholars gathered to reflect on the tough question of the Memory of the World is a great honour, for which I feel deeply thankful, and also a challenge, which makes me suitably nervous.

The honour seems the greater when, standing here in the recreated Royal Castle in Warsaw, I become conscious of the trauma and wonder in Polish history.

On that fateful day over 70 years ago, the 1st of September, 1939, when Poland was attacked by Hitler's Germany, your remarkable pianist-politician, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, was one of many Polish men and women who sought the world's help. Paderewski cabled my grandfather, Gandhi, who at the time was striving to liberate India from British rule. In his reply to Paderewski, Gandhi said: 'My whole heart is with the Poles in this unequal struggle... Their cause is just and their victory certain, for God is always the upholder of justice' (76: 314).

God took his time, and the world took its time. Long years and great suffering had to be gone through before Poland finally found freedom. It took even longer for Poland to find a decent measure of justice. Allow me, nonetheless, to thank God for the amazing things that Poland has achieved, including, more recently, recognition of the long-unacknowledged Katyn massacres. And allow me to honour the sacrifice, courage and resilience of the Polish people, without which such blessings sovereignty, justice and memory would never have been received.

My friend of old and distinguished scholar who is present this day, Ambassador Professor Kryzstof Byrski, has reminded me of the link between the theme for this conference, “The Memory of the World,” and my grandfather Gandhi’s favorite verses from the Bhagavad Gita.

Among the lines from the Gita that Gandhi daily recited is Verse 63 from Chapter II, which states, simply and tersely: “From the loss of memory follows the death of reason. All is lost.”

The Gita is not, in this verse, speaking of the effects of illness or old age. It is speaking of loss of memory linked to a moral failure. It is speaking of drawing a curtain over facts which if remembered would cause individuals and the world to act more wisely, and if buried would increase the chances for a reenactment of folly or horror.

Dear friends and scholars, the world cannot afford to draw a thick curtain over events of cruelty and tragedy, or over cultures and identities dismissed as not central, or small, or peripheral.

Let me say that I have been observing our world from two vantage points. One is of a traveler who at times has been a public figure. The other vantage point is of a historian.

From both angles, I have witnessed not only great diversities and numerous identities but also sites of suffering – sites of pain and humiliation –, of an extinction of life both brutal and callous. At times I have observed a second, third or fourth enactment of suffering on the same site.

As a historian I see this frequently but I do so even as a traveler; in fact even as a resident. Delhi, the city where I was born and where I have lived for many years, a city that Ambassador Byrski and others here know well, is among other things a city where ghosts from ages past cry out for healing, or in some cases for revenge.

The same is true of another city I love, Lahore, in Pakistan, and of Peshawar, also in Pakistan, of Amritsar and Ayodhya in India, and Mumbai, and places in Kashmir, in the Punjab, Indian Punjab as well as Pakistani Punjab, India’s

northeast, Pakistan's Karachi, and places I have seen in Africa, the Americas, the Pacific; even in great Europe; even in Jerusalem, Hebron and Bethlehem.

Currently I am engaged in researching the 18th-century story of the Punjab, divided since 1947 into Pakistani Punjab and Indian portions. As I pursue my inquiries, I learn of one Punjabi site or another, or the same place more than once, losing all its inhabitants or having all its dwellings burnt down, of women and girls carried off, of thousands of bleeding heads carried on poles by a victorious army, and so forth.

What the documents do not generally reveal are the victims' names. Numbers without names offer not memory but a statistic. How we remember the cruelly killed of the past -- how we give them a morsel of posthumous justice, in the process restoring our own self-respect -- is clearly an important question for much of our world.

A by-product of studying a painful past is the enriching discovery that cruelty was at times paralleled by brave interventions -- usually secret interventions -- to assist or save targeted individuals belonging to the "enemy" group. In 2005, my wife Usha and I were able to conduct interviews in India and Pakistan with persons who had memories of the killings that in 1947 disfigured the two neighboring countries.

The interviews not only revealed many instances of risky and noble across-the-fence compassion; they also showed that relating such stories, or listening to them, often proved to be a healing experience. Such stories are part of our world's intangible heritage.

And I am finding such stories even in the case of 18th-century Punjab, as surely many here have also found in respect of other ravaged places and periods.

The world of our time witnesses positive developments that we don't always hear of. Let me touch on what has happened in the city of Richmond in the state of Virginia in the south of the United States, a city that was the capital of the Confederate States during the Civil War over slavery. What for long was a site of humiliation and shame in Richmond, the spot where around 300,000 slaves were sold over time, is now a site where, since 2007, a wonderful Statue of Reconciliation has been standing, a memorial honestly acknowledging the past and showing two figures in a close embrace.

This statue, made by Stephen Broadbent of Liverpool, England, has also been erected in two other places, Liverpool, which was an important center for the *traffic* in slaves, and in Benin in West Africa, a *source* for the slaves. These three Reconciliation Statue sites are the result of an effort that began in 1993, an effort in which I too was given an occasional tiny part, to, among other things, “make public the hidden history of Richmond.”

Making public the hidden sorrows of peoples and places, unearthing buried cultures, and preserving diverse identities are causes that to its credit UNESCO has tried to shoulder, and causes this gathering hopes to advance.

Friends, I feel impelled here to recall the privilege I had of meeting more than once Poland’s gift to the world, Pope John Paul II. The first time was in February 1986 in Madras, India, now called Chennai, when from out of an eager and almost restive crowd of thousands, an Indian archbishop somehow managed to present me to the visiting Pope. Bowing before the Pope, I said I had been praying for Poland. He graciously blessed me. In about five seconds the audience was over, I stepped aside, and someone else was presented to the Pope.

Many months later, in October 1986, I had the privilege of meeting him again, this time in Assisi. When presented to him, this time in a disciplined but long line of guests invited to partake of an evening meal with the Pope, I mentioned the privilege I had had of being blessed by him earlier in the year. “Yes,” the Pope said, adding, “you spoke of my native country.”

Since the Pope had met only about a few hundred thousand people in the nine intervening months, I was entirely bowled over by the *memory* of the Pope.

In Assisi, I was given the chance of offering a Hindu prayer in the Pope’s presence and before a huge throng. I recited these three short lines addressed to the Lord of creation and humankind:

Asato ma sadgamaya; tamaso ma jyotirgamaya; mrityo ma amritamgamaya.

Lead me, the prayer says, from falsehood to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality.

I marvel at the relevance to this conference of that ancient prayer even as I recall my good fortune of meeting Pope John Paul II and the time in Assisi 25 years ago when, in his saintly presence, I recited it.

We who desire to strengthen the Memory of the World seek the truth, not falsehoods, about the past's cruel and sad events. We would like to expose the truth to the light, and not allow it to remain in darkness. Especially would we want this for the sufferings that are hidden from our eyes. All of us feel *rebuffed* when our pain, culture, or identity is ignored, *angry* when our pain, culture, or identity is disdained, and *glad* when our pain, culture, or identity is acknowledged.

And we yearn for the Memory of the World and the cultures of the world to remain alive for a long time.

For this to happen, “memory” will need the support of friends – the support of the world's citizens, governments, organizations like the Polish National Commission for UNESCO, the Polish Committee for the Memory of the World Programme, and international organizations like UNESCO.

But for a truly long life “memory” may also need the support of forgiveness. Needless to say, the opposite is also true. We cannot forgive what we do not remember; we must remember in order to forgive.

But when we do not forgive, our memory loses clarity. Anger obstructs the light of truth. Forgiveness is what gives sharpness, permanence and singularity to Memory, enabling us – and enabling the world -- to recall an event of great pain in a manner that gives no one fresh pain to anyone, in a manner that melts any desire for a violent counter-event.

Forgiveness preserves an event of pain as a unique memory, not one that gets lost amidst a chain of unpleasant memories.

Memory has bequeathed to India, and to some other parts of the world, a striking image of the ancient chariot. The Bhagavad Gita, from which I quoted a famous verse near the start of my remarks, offers an account of a dialogue in a chariot between the warrior, Arjuna, and the divine charioteer, Krishna.

On the face of it, the divine charioteer is exhorting the warrior not to shirk his duty, which appears to be the duty to fight and wage war. However, many Hindus, most I should say, understand the dialogue in a deeper sense. They see or hear it as a call to human beings to fight their own greed, hates, and fears.

This was my grandfather Gandhi's reading of the Gita; it was also how many thinkers before him had interpreted it; and it is how, as I have said, a great number of Hindus understand it.

This suggests that Memory, for instance a memory of the dialogue in the chariot, is not enough. Memory needs the lamp of Wisdom, which asks us to go beyond the surface meanings of words and pictures.

I am saying nothing that is new. If I have underlined it, that is because in my part of the world – in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka -- we greatly need both Memory and Forgiveness as well as the ability to know our neighbours beyond the labels they wear or the labels we give to them. And we need the ability to take in the stories of our neighbours, whom we sometimes see as enemies, and not just our own stories.

I referred earlier to the killings of 1947 in India and Pakistan. No one even knows how many were killed. Was it half a million or two million? We do not know. We do not know the names of most of the killed. Their deaths are as yet unrecorded, un-mourned, un-honoured. We have replaced earlier populations but not healed old wounds or mourned old deaths. The result is psychological breakdown and fresh violence

Until in God's good time we are able to create on the India-Pakistan border a Garden or a Bridge of Memory and Forgiveness, the ghosts from 1947 will continue to cry for healing.

Sadly the same is also true of so many painful events in other parts of the world. But even while we wait to create that garden or bridge, we can choose to recall the unrecorded innocent dead when we see a flower, bridge or star, or hear a heavenly note of music. Fortunately our earth and sky – and wherever music comes from -- can be aids to both Memory and Forgiveness.

Only a few days ago, while walking to work on a fine Spring morning -- in Urbana, Illinois, in the United States --, I told myself that each beautiful flower I was walking past represented one of the hundred or so innocent young Pakistani cadets who had been cut down, just as they were about to go home, in that suicide bombing in Shabqadar in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province.

Let us remember that in many places in our world a mother cannot publicly mourn the killing of one of her children, for doing so could invite the death of another child. For such a mother, protecting the living child becomes the only way of honouring the dead one.

It is an unpleasant truth that our world contains some who design, defend, or glorify the killing of the innocent, who invoke selective memory, not for justice or healing, but for a symbolic blast of destructive power at a place seen as a symbol of the “enemy”, destroying whoever happened to be at that place at that point of time.

In such actions, the avenger of a perceived or selected injury occupies the place of God or of explosive Nature, obliterating those who happen to be in a particular place at a particular time.

Sooner or later, the designers of such actions confront the laws of human society and the laws of God. Such is the evidence of history, which is another name for the Memory of the World.

History also tells us that actions of callous revenge derive encouragement from wrongs done to a people or a culture. Anger subsides when wrongs are acknowledged, and where possible put right.

The Memory of the World – or history -- should also tell us that humanity has paid a great price for treating one section of humanity as inferior or flawed for being who they are. Repeating that mistake would be folly.

Dear friends and scholars, you will agree with me that protecting culture, memory and identities -- the task of recognizing, respecting and preserving every distinct story of suffering --, has to go hand in hand with the task of bringing down the walls separating the Earth’s people from one another – the walls of blame, anger,

suspicion and indifference. Putting it more simply, preserving memory and protecting life have to go hand in hand.

Fortunately, we don't have to invent wisdom, including the wisdom of tolerance, respect and forgiveness. We only have to recognize it. People practice it daily, for the sake of sanity and survival. We only have to see it, and honour it, and embrace it, and allow it to melt our hardness.

With these words, I salute the vision and endeavor of all the women and men engaged in preserving the Memory of the World, and in particular the initiative in this regard of UNESCO and of the people of Poland. May Poland, with its history of great trials and great achievements, be enabled to lead this effort for the sake of the varied humanity to which all of us belong.

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