

Keynote Remarks at IofC Japan Conference, Oct. 23-24, 2021

“Let us be a bridge of Trust with heart of transformation.”

Rajmohan Gandhi

Greetings to everyone who has joined! Let me start by appreciating the theme of the conference. I really like the thought, “Let us be a bridge of Trust with a heart of transformation.”

My talk will be in three sections.

In the first section, called “*Our world faces tough challenges*,” I will offer my understanding of one or two of these tough challenges.

The second section will be on *Asia and Asian-ness*. I will recall Frank Buchman’s thought 70 years ago that Japan was meant to be the Lighthouse of Asia. I will try to explore the meaning of that phrase and also the meaning today of Asian-ness.

My third section will ask, *Is mutual respect and goodwill possible between neighbors?*

Our world faces tough challenges

I won’t talk of the great risks from hot and angry oceans, or from earthquakes. Let me say that I salute the way in which the people of Japan cope with the behavior of Planet Earth.

My focus is on how the world’s human beings are connecting to one another.

Until quite recently, our world’s men and women, having over time grown in wisdom, seemed to agree that a common humanity lives all across the planet. We realized that earlier notions of superiority or inferiority were irrational and harmful.

We realized that human beings of any and every background were the same in essence, and also of equal value. This was a great intellectual and moral discovery. We rejoiced. Our family expanded! We saw the whole world as a family and could imagine that others on the planet were brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces.

This widely shared realization is now being challenged. We are told that in every nation “some people” are more “authentic” than others, and that a nation belongs to these “authentic” people, not to everyone. Thus the U.S. belongs to the whites, who must take America back, that Australia belongs to the whites, India belongs to the Hindus, Iran to the Shia, Afghanistan to the Sunnis, and so forth.

Scholars call this attitude ethno-nationalism. Whatever the name, this outlook treats equality and democracy with contempt. It glorifies supremacy.

To illustrate my point, I will refer to an email I received from someone in India who was upset by an article of mine recently published on a widely read online platform. I am assuming that all of you are aware that in today's India, supremacy is being glorified in a big way.

In my article, I had referred to a call by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a day to remember the horrors of India's 1947 Partition. Indeed there were horrors in 1947, perpetrated by all sides, with victims from all sides. I had requested the Prime Minister to confirm that when, addressing the Indian people, he used the phrase "Sisters and brothers," everyone was included in that phrase, including India's Muslims.

Upset by this request, a reader of my article sent me in an email in which he said:

"Your grandfather left us to live with termites for all the times to come."

In saying this, my critic was, firstly, complaining that millions of Muslims had citizenship rights in India. He was also giving his explanation of why this was so. In his view, my grandfather Mahatma Gandhi had unwisely made the pledge that India belonged not just to its majority Hindus but also to its minority Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Christians. Unfortunately, in my critic's opinion, India's leaders and people had endorsed the pledge. When the critic used the phrase "termites," he was referring to India's Muslims.

People in Japan may find it hard to believe this, but in some countries at this juncture, when the 21st century will soon complete a quarter of its life, people with strong vocal cords are expressing their annoyance that people of a particular group actually exist. In their view, such people should cease to exist.

As you can see, this is a genocidal wish. If people of the despised group cannot be eliminated, or deported, they should be sent to crowded ghettos far from where we live. They should remain quiet, invisible, uncomplaining, grateful that they're allowed to exist.

In India, which holds 1.3 billion people, some minds seem convinced that only a great error in how our universe has been managed has allowed 200 million Muslims to exist in India, forming a minority of about 14.3 percent. Not only Gandhi, but the force controlling our universe is to blame. To such minds, any reduction in the number of India's Muslims, no matter how it comes about, is cause for celebration.

On September 23, in India's northeastern state of Assam, under a so-called eviction drive, police personnel in riot gear cornered an unnamed Muslim villager and battered him repeatedly with their batons, until the villager fell to the ground. When the policemen stepped away, a photographer ran towards the man's body and jumped on its chest. The police simply watched, doing nothing, as the photographer danced on the motionless body, presumably expressing his pleasure, and also making sure that the unwanted man wouldn't survive.

Yes, dear friends, this happened in India on September 23, was recorded on video, and was widely seen.

Five days later, in another part of India, the decapitated body of another Muslim, 24-year-old Arbaz Mulla, was found on a railway track between two small stations (Desur and Khanapur) that lie about 30 km from the city of Belagavi in Karnataka. Here is what a report in an Indian online journal, *The Wire*, says about Arbaz:

“Exactly a year ago, when Najeema Shaikh first discovered her 24-year-old son Arbaz Mulla was in love with a woman belonging to the Hindu community, she knew her son would be killed. In a desperate attempt to save him from trouble, she moved multiple houses and tried every trick in the book to keep the couple apart. “But they were simply inseparable,” she says.”

<https://thewire.in/communalism/belagavi-sri-ram-sene-men-allegedly-decapitate-muslim-man-for-loving-hindu-woman>

The story adds that several members of a Hindu extremist group, which has whipped up support in the region, have been arrested for suspected involvement in Arbaz’s murder and in trying to present it as a suicide. Arbaz’s relatives remain in danger.

A hundred years ago, in the 1920s and 1930s, people in Germany and Italy defied prevalent global opinion and declared that equality was foolish, that democracy was the creation of impractical minds. ‘We will show what a superior race can do,’ they said. ‘We will show what a bold, patriotic, and commanding leader can do.’

A great price was paid thereafter for this idea, which appealed to quite a few. Sadly, many in Japan too were attracted by the notion of superiority and control. After a great upheaval, much of the world came together.

The world learned lessons. Japan resolved itself to march again towards democracy, equality and mutual respect. It was an inspiration.

The United Nations was created. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights came into being. The opening sentence of this Declaration says, “The recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

This declaration confirmed that democracy, and one of its central pillars, equality, had become the great norms, the great goals, of our world, even if not always the great reality.

In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, there was a new challenge. Some people again said that democracy was foolish. They labelled the principles of liberty, equality, and friendship as sentimental and in fact harmful. Calling themselves revolutionaries, these men and women said: “We will show what those speaking in the name of workers and peasants can do for the world by controlling the state and punishing the enemies of the people.”

There was great tension again. Once more the world offered a united resistance. Once more democracy was restored to the place of honor. The Soviet Union was not able survive beyond 1989. In China, Confucius was restored to his place of great respect.

When this new century started, this 21st century, optimists declared that history's struggle had ended. Humanity had reached its goal. Globalization and a revolution in IT and communication had turned the planet into a happy village! East and West, North and South, were becoming one!

Alas, the celebration was premature. In country after country, primitive and once discredited notions of race and tribe are back with a vengeance.

The whole world knows that in South Asia – in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh – Hindus and Muslims have a history of difficult relations, a history that resulted in the division of India in 1947 into India and Pakistan. India's Muslim-majority areas separated and became Pakistan.

Then India's leaders did the right thing. In 1949, they produced a constitution which said that the Muslims in the rest of India would have full rights. In the last thirty years, however, a movement, a popular movement has grown against equality. It wants India to be turned into a Hindu state where Hindus are honored, and Muslims, Christians and other minorities treated as second-class citizens.

Not only as second-class citizens, but as unreliable second-class citizens who must constantly prove their innocence as individuals and their loyalty to the state.

I request the people of Japan to recognize this unhappy reality in countries like India. I hope that Japan will never accept that America belongs only to the whites, or that India belongs only to the Hindus, or that any nation is the property of one dominating race.

Racism is a child of arrogance and cruelty. It is based on grading people as high or low, as higher or lower. A racist wants to be top dog, the bully, and wants others to call him "boss" or "master"!

My grandfather Mahatma Gandhi wrote that in the India of his dreams *quote* 'the last is equal to the first and in fact no one is to be the first and no one the last.' *Unquote*. Surely this is our dream for the world.

Asia and Asian-ness

I first visited Japan in the year 1957, only twelve years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I saw how Japan's men and women were rebuilding their broken cities and roads, rebuilding the broken spirit of Japan, and rebuilding also the broken relationships between Japan and the rest of Asia.

Since then I have made many trips to Japan. I don't have to tell you that I love Japan. It is more than admiration for the difficult, almost impossible things the Japanese people have achieved. It is actually love. My wife Usha and I have close friends in Japan. Many of these friends have spent precious time and precious money to visit India and also to support some useful things that humble individuals are trying to do in India and elsewhere in the world.

In that first visit to Japan in 1957, I noticed that although there had been a big war between the U.S. and Japan, a few Americans and other *gaijin* were trying to be friends to the people of

Japan. One of them was this man Frank Buchman, born in the state of Pennsylvania, who started the work of MRA, which later became IofC.

I noticed that Frank Buchman was deeply impacted by Japan's misfortunes and by the qualities of the Japanese people. Having made several visits to Japan from about 1915 and made many friends in Japan, he was troubled. Thinking and praying about Japan, a thought entered Buchman's mind: Japan can become, will become, the Lighthouse of Asia.

Buchman expressed this thought many times, privately and publicly. The parents and grandparents of those listening to me heard the thought from him. It seemed to bring hope and confidence back to many Japanese.

If we look at the words "Asia" and "Asian," we can see that these words are, primarily, geographic concepts. Anyone living in a place westward from Japan to the Middle East, including Korea, China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, India, etc., etc. is an Asian. Anyone from Japan southward all the way to Indonesia is an Asian too.

The lands and islands of Asia contain many great peoples: Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Indonesians, Filipinos, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Laotians, Thais, Malaysians, the people in Myanmar, Pakistanis, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, and Indians, and Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis. Even the Palestinians and Israelis are Asians. And there are many more.

People in this vast range of countries often look different from one another. They speak different languages. They belong to different religions. They are Asian because they belong to a large section of Planet Earth that was given the name Asia.

But there is also a psychological meaning. Asians are not Europeans. Europe dominated the world for a long time. White Europeans and their cousins, White Americans, controlled the world for a long time. Then it occurred to some that Asians, the non-whites, will lead the world to a good path. In the 1950s and for some time after, there was power in the feeling that the time of Asians has come, that Asia, the place of ancient wisdom, will lead the world!

But wait. Why shouldn't Africa lead the world? Why not Brazil or Peru? Why shouldn't the indigenous people of Australia lead the world? Let any country lead the world in service, in compassion, in bringing relief, in bringing people together.

If Europeans or Americans, Canadians, Australians or New Zealanders, the so-called white race, turn to service, compassion and trust, and show a new way, that too would benefit the world.

Everyone would welcome such a leadership, wherever it comes from. But all would oppose a leadership coming from anywhere that says, "We are the boss. Obey us."

If Asians make up their minds, they can lead the world in the right way. Sadly, however, Asians quarrel with other Asians. They have negative feelings about other Asians.

A prominent English-language newspaper published in China and read online in many parts of the world referred recently to a survey that apparently found people-to-people dislike in Japan-China relations. This is what the *Global Times* wrote on September 9:

Quote. The Chinese and the Japanese public hold negative sentiment toward each other. According to a survey conducted by Beijing-Tokyo Forum at the end of last year, 52.9 percent of Chinese held a negative impression of Japan while about 90 percent of Japanese had an unfavorable impression of China. *Unquote* (Global Times editorial, Sep 9, 2021)

This so-called survey cannot be fully trusted. The newspaper quoting it is a party newspaper in China and cannot be relied upon. But if even a tenth of this report is true, all of us should be concerned.

We have to become bridges of friendship, bridges of trust. Can you imagine the force that will be created if the people of Japan, Korea and China deepen their friendship with one another? I am not thinking of governments. Governments have their own agendas, sometimes strange agendas. But people are different from governments.

When neighboring governments criticize one another, it is cause for concern. If neighboring populations retain negative feelings for one another, concern turns into great sadness. In such a situation, the call for “a bridge of Trust with heart of transformation” takes on urgent meaning.

Is mutual respect and goodwill possible between neighbors?

In my travels in different parts of the world in the last 60 years and more, I often saw that when my Japanese friend met my Chinese friend, they understood each other by drawing characters with their fingers on their palms. What an amazing link that is, an ancient link that remains useful today.

Large numbers of Chinese people live and study or work in Japan. There must be many families where one parent is Japanese and the other is Chinese. In addition to such intimate connections, there are strong cultural, religious, artistic, and literary ties. For the Japanese, China is not a different world. For the Chinese, Japan is not another universe. Culturally and not just geographically, the Koreans, the Chinese, and the Japanese seem to belong to a single family.

In a long life during which I have traveled a good deal, seen many nations and peoples, and also studied some history, I have learned a truth about us human beings. *We have opinions about neighbors, we don't have knowledge.*

As we rush through life, we pick up *opinions*. When we stop, sit down with someone, and listen to them, we pick up *knowledge*. We also pick up knowledge when we sit down, read a book, or see a film, or hear an audio. And when we are quiet, and reflect, we pick up *wisdom*.

I knew a Japanese lady associated with IofC, Sakaki-san, who made more than a dozen trips to China to learn about the Chinese people. There must be tens, hundreds, thousands of Chinese, or

Japanese, or Korean women and men who know their neighboring country really well, who have learnt its language, its history, its pain, its dreams. These people will build the Asia and the world of our dreams.

What do our schools and colleges teach about neighboring countries? About the people who live in those countries? Let's forget the governments for some time. Let us focus on the people, their food, songs, skills, ingenuities, the courage, suffering of people. The difficulties they face in coping with life's constant demands.

We all know the saying, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." "Knowing thy neighbor" may be the start of "loving thy neighbor." You know. You admire. You start to like.... You create small circles of friendship and trust. They will become large circles.

I have seen the work of individual Japanese who made visit after visit to Korea, to China, to Thailand, to Cambodia, to Indonesia, to Afghanistan, to India, to Nepal, becoming bridges of trust.

To give two more examples: Yukika Sohma-san spent her whole life in making friends with people in countries far and near. If you can see the heart of Masa Shibusawa-san, you will find Indonesia, China, Korea, and other countries also there.

But remember that a bridge has to bear the weight of many people carrying heavy belongings. Heavy trucks move on bridges! You have to bear a load when you are a bridge.

Some will be angry because you are a bridge. Such people don't want bridges. They want separation.

I said earlier that knowledge and wisdom can be acquired by listening, reading, and reflecting. Understanding the person on the opposite side may help you win half the battle, but you may need something more. Healing may be called for! Even forgiveness may be called for. Offering forgiveness, accepting forgiveness.

One of the most amazing things in our world is the ability of wounded and hurt people to forgive. We see this in our families, where, often, one or two say very little but do a lot. Instead of complaining, they hear the pain of others. Through IofC, we have seen this spirit outside our families too.

We have seen and embraced the spirit of inclusion, of acceptance, of forgiveness, of reconciliation. We have discovered that we are not all that different from one another. In fact, we are alike! We are even ready to speak again a language we once hated.

Friends, in a long life I have interacted with human beings all over the world. I have tried, as a journalist, to probe happenings near me; as a biographer, to understand the inner impulses of some interesting personalities; as a student of history, to understand the movement of nations and societies.

Will people understand one another? Will neighbors work with each other? Will millions of people get a new understanding of millions of other people across a border, or across a sea?

Such questions cannot be answered.

But when you say, “Let us be a bridge of Trust with heart of transformation,” you show boldness. You want to *confront* the great questions. I salute this courage and I extend my best wishes.

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