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Posted on Thu, Mar. 14, 2002

The Mercury News

Indians must take a stand against violence

MY VIEW: By Kumar Venkat

The brutal violence between Hindus and Muslims in India has receded, but the mistrust between the communities has not. If anything good is to come out of this conflict in the long run, it must serve as a wakeup call to Indians everywhere.

We cannot forget that modern India was born out of a rare non-violent movement that remains a model for peaceful resistance around the world. Any moral authority that India has in its international affairs derives almost exclusively from the fact that it is a large, secular democracy in a region that is otherwise dominated by authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships. It should be a matter of pride that India is home not only to a Hindu majority but also to one of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

The attempt by Hindu extremists to reverse history by rebuilding a temple at the site of a demolished mosque is futile and misguided. It is difficult to imagine how this fanaticism and the resulting violence on both sides can serve any religious ideal. India's Supreme Court got involved in the conflict Wednesday, ruling that a Hindu religious ceremony should not be allowed at the disputed site. But healing the longstanding communal divides in India will take more than court decisions.

The answers may well lie in India's cultural and spiritual traditions,



which are rooted in non-violence. The Upanishads, which contain the core philosophies of Hinduism, proclaim that non-injury to others is our highest duty. The Vedanta philosophy asserts that the fundamental truth in our universe is the oneness of all beings, from which all other truths are derived.

Swami Vivekananda, an inspiring spiritual teacher who lectured extensively in the United States in the 1890s, explained it thus: "Everything that makes for oneness is truth. Love is truth and hatred is falsehood, because hatred makes for multiplicity. It is hatred that separates man from man; therefore it is wrong and false ... Love unites; love makes for that oneness ... Therefore in all our actions we have to judge whether our act is making for diversity or oneness."

Mahatma Gandhi lived, and ultimately gave his life, for this ideal of unity and oneness. Gandhi's satyagraha movement derived its tremendous power precisely from this highest interpretation of truth. If India has any message at all for a world that is divided along ethnic, religious and nationalistic lines, and fractured by incomprehensible violence, it can only be this message of oneness, this wholeness, of humanity. It is a message that is hard to come by these days, and hence all the more valuable.

Equally important is the need for Indians -- including those of us who no longer live in India -- to apply this timeless message of universality in our own lives. India has been divided in so many ways for so long -- not only by religion, language and caste, but also by economic status, education and opportunities. We must work to bridge the numerous cracks and divides in Indian society, starting with providing hope and opportunities to the hundreds of millions who have long been sidelined.

And we must resist attempts to divide us further. This means speaking out against the dividers at every opportunity and withdrawing support for politicians who engage in a "divide and rule" strategy. It means using peaceful and democratic means to work for social change and justice. Incidentally, there is much that Indians can learn from Americans about grass-roots political activism.

The ultimate cure for mindless violence and hatred consists in uniting all of us on the basis of our humanity alone, making all superficial differences irrelevant. India -- with its non-violent traditions, transcendent philosophies, and secular democratic institutions -- is the perfect proving ground for demonstrating that the ideal of oneness is



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not only attainable but also practical.

Kumar Venkat runs a Silicon Valley software business. He is originally from India.



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