Peacebuilding in South Asia
Beyond Good Theory and Bad Practice

Imtiaz Ahmed

Introduction

Peacebuilding in South Asia is almost as old as its civilization, which incidentally is now over a millennium old. Generation after generation of people from South Asia and beyond were awed by the various efforts at peacebuilding in the region, indeed, not so much for their success as much as for their persistence and the reawakening that came with it. Even T.S. Eliot, the American-British poet, took solace in the words found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, the age-old Sanskrit text of 9th to 6th century BCE, when ending his masterpiece poem, The Waste Land: “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. Shantih shantih shantih.”¹ The latter refers to Lord Vishnu’s uttering of one syllable ‘Da,’ which the humans understood to mean Datta (give or be charitable); the demons understood to mean Dayadhvam (sympathize or be compassionate); while the gods understood
to mean Damyata (have control). Humans, demons and gods, all must play their part for shantih or peace to thrive on earth. There were good reasons for such efforts at peacebuilding to have arrived so early and become spiritual and social exigencies for the bulk of the population in South Asia.

Indeed, the region was so torn into pieces by recurrent conflicts that even familial bonds mattered little. A good example would be the epic Mahabharata or more precisely the sacred text of the Bhagavad Gita that ends up describing the family feud between the Pandavas and the Kurus and the killing and maiming of thousands of lives, and this despite the hesitation of the Pandava warrior, Arjuna, to start the battle:

What can we hope from this killing of kinsmen? What do I want with victory, empire, or their enjoyment?... How can I care for power or pleasure, my own life, even when all these others, teachers, fathers, grand-fathers, uncles, sons and brothers, husbands of sisters, grandsons and cousins, for whose sake only I could enjoy them, stand here ready to risk blood and wealth in war against us? Though they should slay me, how could I harm them? I cannot wish it; never, never.²

Arjuna’s self-doubt or what could have been a desperate plea to stop the war came to a naught. Lord Krishna succeeded in convincing Arjuna to fight the battle by ingeniously transforming a three-dimensional reality into a two-dimensional image, and this he accomplished by telling Arjuna not to see things from near in flesh and blood but from a distance where everything gets blurred and nothing but the eternal atman or soul remains: “Bodies are said to die, but that which possesses the body is eternal. It cannot be limited, or destroyed. Therefore you must fight.”³ Arjuna soon overcame his reluctance and found himself transformed into a killing machine! But then this too became central to the peacebuilding efforts in the region, with millions of Hindus now finding solace in the text by stressing more on the ‘spirit’ of the scripture, which no doubt was intended to unite the people supportive of different doctrines and not propagate the seemingly war-like ‘content’. It is rather a misfortune that many take the ‘content’ literally and advocate violence, the consequence of which, particularly in South Asia, has been destructive to say the least.

Bhagavad Gita, however, is no exception when it comes to spiritualizing and building peace. The goal of all religious books, even
with the numerous narratives of conflict, violence and war, is essentially peace. The matter is not so different even when violence and killing are carried out for secular aspirations. There is always a lament for peace. A good example is Emperor Aurangzeb’s letter to his son Kaum Buksh in which the Emperor not only reflects his deeds, which included ‘committing numerous crimes’, but also refers to his elder brother, Dara Shikoh, with some good words, although he had him killed nearly a half-century earlier, indeed, for the secular reason of reigning the empire. The following is the letter Aurangzeb wrote to his son when he was dying in 1707 at the age of ninety in the Deccan:

My son, nearest to my heart. Though in the height of my power, and by God’s permission, I gave you advice, and took with you the greatest pains, yet, as it was not the divine will, you did not attend with the ears of compliance. Now I depart a stranger, and lament my own insignificance, what does it profit me?... My fears for the camp and followers are great; but alas! I know not myself. My back is bent with weakness, and my feet have lost the power of motion.... I have committed numerous crimes, and know not with what punishments I may be seized.... Though the Protector of mankind will guard the camp, yet care is also incumbent on the faithful, and my sons. When I was alive no care was taken; and now I am gone, the consequence may be guessed. The guardianship of a people is the trust by God committed to my sons.... The domestics and courtiers, however deceitful, yet must not be ill-treated.... The complaints of the unpaid troops are as before. Dara Shikoh, though of much judgment and good understanding, settled large pensions on his people, but paid them ill, and they were ever discontented. I am going. Whatever good or evil I have done, it was for you.4

But the success of peacebuilding, whether religious or secular, has been very modest thus far, although it must be quickly added that secular wars have killed more people in human history across the world than wars fought in the name of religion. In fact, during World War II, which was largely a secular war fought in the name of nation and nationalism, 66 million people were killed in six years from 1939 to 1945.5 This would mean that every year 11 million people were killed, indeed, the highest number of people getting killed in war in recorded history. If we compare
some of the contemporary figures of people getting killed in war, whether secular or religious, the number is relatively low. According to one calculation, war killed 120,000 people in 2012. This is still significantly high but relatively less if compared to the death figure of World War II.

In South Asia, however, religious wars proved more potent, particularly if we include the communal riots leading to the partition of British India in 1947. It is estimated that more than fifteen million people had been uprooted, and between one and two million people were killed, including seventy-five thousand women were raped, at the time of partition. Tragic though this has been, it is quite a wonder why so many efforts at peacebuilding in South Asia faltered and failed to stop the recurrent violence in the region. Ironically, in the demographically rich, diverse, and highly-populated South Asia, there is an abundance of theories of peacebuilding but not necessarily of practices. Contradiction of this kind is not out of the norm, but in the case of South Asia it has had dramatic impact, sometimes with fortuitous outcomes. Three major theories albeit with dismal practices could easily be identified.

The Asokan Theory

The darsana or philosophy of Gautama Buddha (c. 566-486 BCE) and its execution at the hands of the third Mauryan Emperor, Ashoka (c. 304-232 BCE), provided the basis of this tradition. In opposition to the Vedic dogma, Buddha proclaimed:

[There] is no proof of anything permanent. It is all a mere mass of change; a mass of thought in a continuous change is what you call a mind. ... The torch is leading the procession. The circle is a delusion. [Or take the example of a river.] It is a continuous river passing on; every moment a fresh mass of water passing on. So is this life; so is all body, so is all mind.

Reflecting keenly on the nature of reality, Buddha’s primary objective was to put humans at the centre of his darsana. Humans’ fate are not preordained. On the contrary, humans are free to carve out their future. They can change their destiny, their dismal state of living. But for the change to occur, they must work selflessly devoid of passion, as indicated in
Buddhacarita: “I look with equal mind on kinsmen and stranger, and longing for and hatred of the objects of sense have passed from me.” But how will humans perform their work? Buddha’s answer to this was simple—through non-violent means. Similar to Mahavira’s Jainadarsana (Jainism), Buddha’s idea was to create unity amongst humans through non-violent means. It is recorded that Buddha took forty of his disciples and sent them all over the world, saying “Go ye; mix with all races and nations and preach the excellent gospel for the good of all, for the benefit of all.” In this mission, no sword or violence was to be used, only the power of the intellect.

Buddha’s darsana was put into practice by Ashoka in the third century BC, although the conformity of the practice with the darsana remains debatable. Ashoka’s Rock Edicts, which are a collection of more than thirty inscriptions on the pillars as well as boulders and cave walls, and constructed during his reign from 268 to 232 BCE, remain a major source for knowing his adoption of the Buddhistic creed of non-violence. Much of it has to do with the Kalinga war, which was fought between the Maurya empire under Ashoka and the kingdom of Kalinga, located on the east coast of what is now Odisha and north of Andhra Pradesh. As the Rock Edict XIII informs us that in this war, “One hundred and fifty thousand persons were carried away captive, one hundred thousand were slain, and many times that number died.” Indeed, after the horrors of the Kalinga war, Ashoka renounced the age-old policy of digvijaya (conquest by war) and replaced it with dhammavijaya (conquest by the Law of Piety or ‘conquest’ through tolerance and goodness). Dhamma is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word Dharma, meaning righteousness or as Manu would say ‘Shadachar’ (lit. proper conduct). As the Rock Edict IV declared: “The reverberation of the war drums has become the reverberation of the Law of Piety.” It is not difficult to see here that in place of the traditional policy of conquest by war, Ashoka substituted conquest through peaceful means. And through this Ashoka succeeded in keeping what is now regarded as the largest empire in ancient India, free from all internal chaos and alien invasions.

But save Sri Lanka, the Asokan theory of championing the cause of Buddhism failed to attract the rest of South Asia for a sustained period of time. In fact, there is no record, not even in the Puranas (the record keeper of ancient times), as to what happened after the death of Ashoka. His
conversion to Buddhism probably was the reason for the Puranas to have stopped recording the activities of the Mauryan empire after Ashoka. Only Sri Lanka seems to have made a departure from the rest of South Asia, which embraced Buddhism during Ashoka’s reign. What prompted Ashoka to send two of his children—Mahinda, his son, and Sanghamitta, his daughter—to Sri Lanka is difficult to say with absolute certainty. But apart from contributing to the thriving trade relationship, the propagation of Buddhism certainly seems to be one, particularly in the light of the massive expansion of the Mauryan empire under Ashoka and more so after the Kalinga war. But Ashoka’s propagation of religion beyond its borders, bringing the king of Ceylon into his fold, had other consequences.

In 250 BCE, about 18 years after his coronation as the emperor, Ashoka convened the Third Buddhist Council in Pataliputra. If anything, it cemented the confluence between the Mauryan empire and Buddhism or what could be labelled in contemporary times as the confluence between the state and religion. There was an earlier push in this direction during the Second Buddhist Council, which took place approximately in 383 BCE, but the royal patronage and the power of reproducing Buddhism were no match to the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka. Indeed, the contestations that began at the Second Council contributed to the birth of Theravada Buddhism or ‘Buddhism of the Elders’ at the Third Council, which while reproducing a ‘puritan version’ decided “to send missionaries to various parts of the sub-continent and to make Buddhism an actively proselytizing religion—which in later centuries led to the propagation of Buddhism in South and East Asia.” In Sri Lanka, however, the state patronization of Theravada Buddhism, particularly under successive rulers, both monarchical and republican, proved inimical to the non-Buddhist minorities. It soon became a classic case of universalized dispassionateness transforming into a passion for violence!

The majoritarian (Buddhist-Sinhala) bashing of the non-Buddhist minorities, predominantly Hindu-Tamils, occurred periodically but more frequently since Sri Lanka’s independence from the British in 1948. In July-August 1981, however, it reached a situation of utmost gravity, primarily due to the direct participation of the Sri Lankan police and military. A large number of Sri Lanka Tamils, numbering over 100,000, fled to India. Within the next two years in 1983 Sri Lanka found itself
embroiled in a civil war, which continued for 26 years and ended only in 2009 with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The human cost was enormous. One estimate showed that over 100,000 civilians and 50,000 fighters from both sides of the conflict were killed during the civil war.\(^\text{18}\) The actual casualty figures may have been even higher. In fact, one former United Nations official has claimed that up to 40,000 civilians may have been killed in the final stages of the civil war.\(^\text{19}\) Human Rights groups, both local and international, labelled the military action as an act of genocide against the Tamil people, calling upon the Sri Lankan government to punish the military officers guilty of crime against humanity and genocide. The matter is yet to be resolved and the society, although free from violent militancy, remains no less divided as before.

The Ashokan theory of confluening state and religion or proselytizing Theravada Buddhism faltered elsewhere as well. In Myanmar, for instance, the import of Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka by the monks produced identical results, particularly against the religious minorities, including the Muslim Rohingyas. Azeem Ibrahim provides a good account of this:

The Theravada strand in Buddhism is common across Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. Equally, in all three countries there are ample examples of the local Buddhist leadership acting with complete intolerance towards other religious minorities, and one reason for this is the interpretation of Buddhism common to this strand. It is not that Theravada Buddhism is always about extreme nationalism and intolerance towards other beliefs, but that there are elements within its belief system that make it very vulnerable to being captured by those who wish to construct an exclusive, confessionally pure, polity.

In this context, the key tradition in the Theravada sasana (teaching) is that which links religion to state power.... Any state tolerance of non-Buddhist religions is thought to threaten the existence of both state and religion. Theravada Buddhists cite approvingly the actions of a Buddhist king in Sri Lanka who defeated a Tamil invasion. Since he fought a defensive war to protect the sasana, he was absolved of any responsibility for the loss of life. Indeed, he was assured that only one-and-a-half ‘people’ had actually died: these were an enemy soldier who had fully converted to Buddhism and one who had taken partial vows. The rest of the dead were non-Buddhists, and thus not really human and not worthy of pity.\(^\text{20}\)
The consequence of this on the Rohingyas was nothing less than genocidal or crime against humanity, particularly if we take the meaning of genocide as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group," which is codified in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide of 1948. As Ibrahim outlines the Rohingya case in Myanmar:

In the period between 2008 and 2012 the persecution of the Rohingyas was continuous, and a US government report noted that this had a particularly religious aspect. The period saw the destruction of many mosques which, it was claimed, had been built without proper permission, and saw the creation of 'Muslim Free Areas' in some parts of the state. In addition, Buddhist pagodas have been built in areas with no Buddhist population, often using Rohingya forced labour, and there is an ongoing campaign to entice conversion to Buddhism by lifting restrictions on travel, work and schooling for those who agree to do so. In effect, those Rohingya prepared to change their religion received the same rights as other citizens.21

The genocidal act became even more clear when the Myanmar military resorted to violence in the Arakan in 2017, which forced over 700,000 Rohingyas to flee Myanmar and take shelter in Bangladesh. The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar, commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council, concluded in its report on 24 August 2018 that given the inference of genocidal intent, "there is sufficient information to warrant the investigation and prosecution of senior officials in the Tatmadaw chain of command, so that a competent court can determine their liability for genocide in relation to the situation in Rakhine State."22 Indeed, on the ground of committing 'crimes against humanity,' the United Kingdom, the United States, and several other Western countries have already enforced targeted sanctions on the Myanmar military. It is not difficult to see that the Ashokan theory whatever merit it had floundered in practice.

**The Baulian Theory**

This relates to the hyper-tolerance of the heterodox Bauls but the Baulian theory is not limited to the Bauls alone. There are several other groups,
who have been professing and practicing hyper-tolerance just like the *Bauls* for centuries in this region. The origins of the *Bauls* also are unknown, some say that they date from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century or even earlier. What is remarkable is that the *Bauls* succeeded in putting together the message of tolerance found in Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, while at the same time remaining distinct from all the three religious discourses. At the same time, traces of Tantric Buddhism, Hindu Vaishnavism and the unconditional love central to Sufi Islam all are found in the Baulian theory to create an architecture of tolerance not only between the members of different religions but also between high and low castes, rich and poor, men and women, in sum, between all human beings. Let me at this stage be more specific and highlight the constitutive elements of the Baulian theory.

Firstly, the divinization of the human being. Rabindranath Tagore, while sharing his 'personal experience' with the *Bauls* in music and recalling his intellectual indebtedness to them aptly described the element of divinity residing in the human or what he referred to as the *manab dharma* (Religion of Man):

...I have often heard from wandering village singers, belonging to a popular sect of Bengal, called Bauls, who have no images, temples, scriptures, or ceremonial, who declare in their songs the divinity of Man, and express for him an intense feeling of love. Coming from men who are unsophisticated, living a simple life in obscurity, it gives us a clue to the inner meaning of all religions. For it suggests that these religions are never about a God of cosmic force but rather about the God of human personality.23

Two things remain pertinent to the Baulian divinity of the human. One is the centrality of the 'Man of the Heart' (*monermanus*) and the other is the 'unknown bird' (*achinpakhi*) within. While the latter takes recognition of the fact that life is full of mysteries and the principle of uncertainty rules the world, the former alludes to the fact that only the human can make a difference as the divine resides not outside but within the human. This mainstreaming of the human being makes structures like the state, caste, or even religion insignificant and only a passing phenomenon, and the quicker this is realized the greater would be the scope for creating peace on earth.
Secondly, the rejection of both orthopraxies and orthodoxies. One of the greatest Baul poets, Fakir Lalon Shah (d. 1890), sums it up in one of his songs:

O how long are we to wait  
For the birth of a society  
Where castes and clans and labels  
Like Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian  
Will be forgotten?—  
And none will be thereto swindle the innocent  
Pretending to be their savior,  
Nor will there be bigots,  
Trying to cast people away calling them atraf*—  
Where Amirs and Fakirs will sit side by side,  
Each getting his due—  
Where claim to being an ashraf**  
Will not entitle one to any privilege—  
Never again will be heard  
Noisy words about castes high or low?  
How long, O how long shall I wait for such bliss?  
Asks a mournful Lalon.25

On this, Lalon’s plea would be similar to the age-old Sufi doctrine that like all mortals a Sufi is conscious of being a prisoner in the world of forms, yet s/he is also conscious of being free, with a freedom which outweighs his imprisonment. This is precisely the reason why Lalon could sing: “Nobody can tell me whence the bird unknown comes to the cage and goes out. I would feign put round its feet the fetters of my mind could I but capture it.” In fact, in earlier times, the British colonialists amused themselves with the idea that the Indian subjects regarded them as Sufis and the reason could not have been nobler, as James William Graham, a key Orientalist, pointed out:

We are, generally speaking, at least in this country, looked upon as a species or one kind of Sufi, from our non-observance here of any rites or forms, conceiving a worship of the Deity in mind and adherence to morality sufficient. In fine, the present free-thinker or modern philosopher of Europe would be esteemed as a sort of Sufi in the world, and not the one retired therefrom.28
The free-thinking also contributed to different forms of free-practices, including sexo-yogic practices, amongst the Bauls, which made the state and the conformist religious practitioners all the more uncomfortable with Baulism. But what made the greatest impact was the radicalism that was being advocated by the Bauls. The latter not only were “recruited from Muslim as well as Hindu communities,” but also rejected “both religious traditions, including the worship of images and transcendent deities, the authority of scripture and indeed any other knowledge which is not one’s own.” When it comes to the issue of caste and class, the Baulian heterodoxy and radicalism further got complicated as the major chunk of the members were Dalits or from the disempowered class.

Thirdly, the centrality of the samaj (society), including the village. Feeling alienated from urban life, including the state (rashtra), and socially detesting it, the Bauls sought solace in the village. This had a longer civilizational foundation in South Asia where the samaj remained independent or autonomous of the rashtra, and the power of the latter was not comprehensive enough to cover and dominate the former in its totality. As Tagore pointed out:

Through all the fights and intrigues and deceptions of her earlier history India had remained aloof. Because her homes, her fields, her temples of worship, her schools, where her teachers and students lived together in the atmosphere of simplicity and devotion and learning, her village self-government with its simple laws and peaceful administration—all these truly belonged to her. But her thrones were not her concern. They passed over her head like clouds, now tinged with purple gorgeousness, now black with the threat of thunder. Often they brought devastations in their wake, but they were like catastrophes of nature whose traces are soon forgotten.

In fact, the periodic power of alien ‘thrones’ or rashtra in South Asia contributed to having the dissenters seek refuge in the village, and if required, shoulder the responsibility of offsetting the ‘unjust’ power of the state. It may be pointed out that nearly 800 years, almost without a break, the outsiders ruled South Asia (from 1206 to 1947). Indeed, during colonialism once the samaj got into the business of displacing the British colonial power; nothing could stop its demise in South Asia. It is precisely for this reason that Mahatma Gandhi advocated the revival of the village:
I would say that if the village perishes India will perish too. India will be no more India. Her own mission in the world will get lost. The revival of the village is possible only when it is no more exploited. Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing come in. Therefore we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use. Provided this character of the village industry is maintained, there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they can make and can afford to use. Only they should not be used as a means of exploitation of others.33

The Bauls and other heterodox communities had this figured out long before, and this is probably the reason that even with centuries of alien domination of the region, which included the Turks, Mughals, and the British, the Bauls had no problem in reproducing their esoteric practices, particularly in the villages. And it is these villages that the Bauls had been consistent in reclaiming, indeed, through habitation and music, and by remaining a ‘perennial outsider’ and practicing self-exile from the state.

Fourthly, the celebration of non-identity. The construction of identity has always been problematic. If anything, it has contributed to divisiveness and conflict. Indeed, long before the post-modernists were harping against the modernist craze for identity, the supreme construction of which is the modern nation-state, the Bauls had detested all forms of identities, whether secular or religious. The following song of Lalon captures this well:

Everyone enquires about the jat34 of Lalon,
Lalon says, “I’ve never ‘seen’ the face of jat with these eyes of mine!”
Circumcision marks a Muslim man,
What then marks a Muslim woman
A Brahmin I recognize by the sacred thread
How do I recognize a Brahmin-woman?
Everyone enquires about the jat of Lalon.
Some wear a garland, others an amulet,
That’s what marks the jat apart.
But what marks them apart when one is born or at the time of death?
Everyone enquires about the jat of Lalon.
The whole world talks about jat, everyone displaying their pride!
Lalon says, “My jat has capsized in this Market of Desire.... Everyone enquires about the jat of Lalon.\(^{35}\)

There is a consistent drive to free oneself from jat or conformist identity, even if it is symbolic in nature. Openshaw in her study clarified further the Baulian detest of being identified with jat or any form of identity:

...the theme of jati or jat as regional or national identity is absent from more traditional Baul songs. Jat figures prominently in these in the sense of caste or religious (communal) identity, but the ‘I’ theme is used by them to demolish, not establish, jat in these senses.\(^{36}\)

This is something worth reflecting on, particularly in the backdrop of World War II, which, as we have indicated earlier, killed 66 million people in six years in the name of national identity. But more importantly and nearer home, the modernist craze for national identity devoured the entire South Asia into violent madness, resulting not only in the partition of the region into separate nation-states but also in the genocidal killing of millions of people, first in 1947 and then again in 1971. There is certainly some merit in the Baulian celebration of non-identity in the task of peacebuilding.

Finally, the reproduction of indigenous discourse. It is not difficult to see that the Baulian theory nurtures ‘indigenous roots’, whether in celebrating non-identity, humanism, non-discrimination among humans, or respecting women.\(^{37}\) An understanding of this is critical for two reasons. One is the displacement of the ‘indigenous’ following colonialism and the domination of the West. This has changed the course of South Asia almost beyond recognition and Tagore is very clear in distinguishing earlier invasions of South Asia from that of British colonialism and its advocacy of nationalism, which proved nothing less than a ‘great menace.’ As Tagore noted:

But this time it was different. It was not a mere drift over her surface of life, —drift of cavalry and foot soldiers, richly caparisoned elephants, white tents and canopies, strings of patient camels bearing the loads of royalty, bands of kettle-drums and flutes, marble domes of mosques, palaces and tombs, like the bubbles of the foaming wine of extravagance; stories of treachery and loyal devotion, of changes of fortune, of dramatic surprises of fate. This time it was the Nation of the
West driving its tentacles of machinery deep down into the soil....
I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations. What is the Nation?

It is the aspect of a whole people as an organized power. This organization incessantly keeps up the insistence of the population on becoming strong and efficient. But this strenuous effort after strength and efficiency drains man’s energy from his higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative. For thereby man’s power of sacrifice is diverted from his ultimate object, which is moral, to the maintenance of this organization, which is mechanical...

Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles.38

Equally important is the fact that now discourses on humanism, non-discrimination or women empowerment are no longer sought in the ‘indigenous’ but in their advocacy in the West. It is in this respect that the Baulian theory stands as a correction and creates a space for peacebuilding in South Asia rooted in the indigenous. But then so unconventional and dissenting were the Bauls and other heterodox communities to the existing societal life that they soon ended up living outside the domain of social norms, preferring instead a life in exile. The implication of this had been enormous, particularly with the heterodoxy influencing the shamans as much as the anarchists and the state becoming irrelevant in peacebuilding.

The Gandhian Theory

This refers to Mahatma Gandhi’s praxis of accommodation of contradictory forces by keeping both means (upaya) and end (upeya) identical. Gandhi, in fact, held to the view that only by practising the non-violent policy of accommodation (the means, upaya) could the Indian National Congress hope to unite the various contradictory social forces in the campaign against British colonialism for Swaraj or freedom (the end, upeya). Put differently, a non-violent means is required to reproduce a non-violent or peaceful end, while a violent means will only end up reproducing a violent end, one is related to the other. While elements of such a praxis are found in the South Asian civilization—from Saivism to
Dara Shikoh’s *Majma al-bahrain*, it is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* to which Gandhi always referred in stating his position.

This is no doubt puzzling, given the fact that the *Bhagavad Gita* quite openly advocates the cause of *dharma yuddha* (i.e., the war of righteousness against unrighteousness). But unlike the previous interpreters of the *Bhagavad Gita*, like Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Bal Gangadhar Tilak or Aurobindo Ghose, who were inclined towards a more literal and historical interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi saw the scripture, simply as an allegory highlighting “the eternal duel that goes on between the forces of darkness and of light.”

In fact, Gandhi held the view that a mere historical interpretation of the scripture, without attempting to make sense of it in light of changing social reality, harboured the danger of subjecting the *Bhagavad Gita* to ‘violent practices,’ and this he contended was against the spirit of the scripture. His criticism of Tilak on this is noteworthy:

Tilak has written on the inner meaning of *Gita*. But I have always felt that he has not understood the age-old spirit of India, has not understood her soul and that is the reason why the nation has come to this pass. Deep down in his heart he would like us all to be what the Europeans are. As Europe stands on top at present, as it seems, that is, to those whose minds are steeped in European notions, he wants India to be in the same position.

In sharp contrast to this, Gandhi opted for a ‘new but natural and logical interpretation’ of the *Bhagavad Gita*, stressing more on the ‘spirit’ of the scripture (one which was intended to unite the masses supportive of different social doctrines), rather than the ‘content’ that it had actually propagated. A closer exposition of the scripture will make this clear.

Dvaipāyana Vyasa, the author of *Bhagavad Gita*, writing between 150-350 AD during the post-Buddhist era of Brahmanical resurgence (referred to as neo-Brahminism or Hinduism), attempted to accommodate different doctrines on the basis of the Upanishadic saying, *eko sat viprah bahuda vandante*, that which exists is one, sages call it by various names. Indeed, in the context of the prevailing social reality (i.e., marked by the decline of Buddhism and the rise of neo-Brahmanism), Vyasa felt that only by accommodating the ‘different currents of thoughts’ (Vedic Brahmanism,
Upanishadic monism, Sankhya dualism, Yogashastra, Bhagavata theism) could the anti-Brahmanical doctrine of classical Buddhism be totally uprooted and the doctrine of neo-Brahmanism be firmly established.

It is this praxis of accommodation, devoid, however, of ‘historical content,’ to which Gandhi remained firmly committed throughout his life.Vyasa was to show Gandhi the importance of tolerance; to the extent of accepting contradictory social forces, if an objective common to all was to be achieved. But Gandhi differed from Vyasa in that for him, as mentioned earlier, the praxis of accommodation was not only a ‘means’ (upaya) for achieving a specific objective but also an ‘end’ (upeya). The latter position is strongly rooted in Vaishnavism (‘Lord Vishnu is not only the upeya but also the upaya’), of which Gandhi was a life-long devotee. In fact, by subjecting the Bhagavad Gita to key Vaishnavite elements, Gandhi reconstructed and interpreted afresh the teaching of the ever-popular Bhagavad Gita.

But this, far from constituting an eclectic mixture of two or three different doctrines, represented an innovative exposition of the Bhagavad Gita from within. Gandhi’s reasoning goes like this: Insofar as ‘accommodation’ must mean a situation free from violence, any recourse to a conflictual relationship is sure to hamper the task of accommodation itself. Therefore, the cause of righteous war in the Bhagavad Gita must be forsaken and replaced by the practice of non-violence, the latter being the natural and logical element of accommodation.

This Gandhi pursued throughout his life, often to the annoyance of his opponents, particularly the Hindu fundamentalists. Once in Gujarat in a predominantly Hindu locality he was asked to give a modern example of Ramarajya, the audience not convinced that such a regime could be established in modern times. Gandhi, to the surprise of all, claimed that there are modern examples of Ramarajya and then he went on to say “the period of Hazrat Abu Bakr and Hazrat Umar” Dipesh Chakrabarty rightly referred to Gandhi as the “master at civility in opposition.” Not only did he make a pair of sandals as part of prison labour and presented them to General Smuts after getting out of the jail but also insisted that Rabindranath Tagore should oppose his views in public when the latter disagreed with Gandhi’s assertion that the 1934 earthquake was a ‘divine chastisement for the sin of untouchability.’ Again, when the whole nation...
raised the Indian national flag on 15 August 1947 to mark the independence of the country Gandhi refused to do the same at his ashram, lamenting in the wake of the genocidal partition that this is not the Swaraj he had wanted. On 25 July 1947, less than a month before the formal departure of the British from the Indian sub-continent, Gandhi remarked:

Why so jubilant? Purna Swaraj (complete independence) is far off. Have we got Swaraj? Did Swaraj mean only that the British rule should end? To my mind it was not so.47

Accommodation of contradictory forces or anarchical accommodation is what Gandhi advocated for peacebuilding in South Asia. But then Gandhi's praxis of accommodation could stop neither the genocidal partition of British India nor the rise of fundamentalist forces in the like of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in post-colonial India.

Beyond Good Theory and Bad Practice

But if the Asokan, Baulian, and Gandhian theories of peacebuilding have floundered in practice over the centuries, what prospect does the highly-populated South Asia have in building peace in the future? The answer probably lies in locating the common elements in the three 'indigenous' theories of peacebuilding outlined above, and the common elements are the theory of abundance and empowering the person in building peace. Let me explain.

In recent times, save few exceptions, there has been a persistent drive to seek solutions in 'scarcity' or what we have less, and not in 'abundance' or what we have more. The state of economy and disciplinary pursuits, particularly the development of capitalism and the hegemonic role of economics, could be responsible for this. Capitalism, after all, seeks to make profits from scarcity and not from abundance. The discipline of economics only provides options of how best to manage the household and, if possible, profit from scarcity. Peacebuilding, however, is qualitatively a different matter, mainly because it requires both 'mind' and 'matter' to make a difference. In building peace, therefore, the first thing that is required is a post-disciplinary focus not on the theory of scarcity but
on the theory of abundance. The matter is not difficult to understand. Indeed, when it comes to peace the more we focus on ‘scarcity’ the more we end up reproducing, what Carl Gustav Jung would say, the archetype of fear, which only nullifies the very effort of building peace. One cannot help remembering here the Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), who said: “Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hatred, and hatred leads to violence. This is the equation.” A beginning ought to be made from the standpoint of abundance.

A critical reading of the Asokan, Baulian, and Gandhian theories of peacebuilding would show that they all had focused on abundance, mainly on the demographically rich, diverse, highly populated South Asia. This is more pertinent in contemporary times. In fact, the current population of South Asia is 1,893,707,070, based on the UN estimates of 2018. This is equivalent to 24.78 per cent of the total world population. South Asia now ranks number one in Asia’s sub-regional ranking by population. Moreover, over 671 million or 35.5 per cent of its population is urban. But what is worth noting is that the median age in South Asia is 26.4 years, which is nothing less than a youth bulge, ready to make a difference to South Asia not only in rebellion and unrest, if uncared for, but also in productivity and development, if cared for. And this is the moot question, how to make best of abundance?

There are good examples elsewhere. European powers, particularly Germany and France, the two arch enemies of yesteryears, following the dreadful World War II, made a difference to their relationship by focusing on something they had in abundance, namely coal and steel, and this cooperation transformed the whole of Europe. As one commentator recently noted:

We must give credit where credit is due.... In 1950 France, West Germany, Italy, and the Benelux countries organized the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). Its success reduced the suspicions of government and business groups about the concept of coordination and economic integration. Interestingly, one of the reasons for creating the ECSC was to prevent Germany from becoming a military threat towards France....

The Schuman Plan (a declaration made by the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman) was designed to alleviate concerns that Germany’s
dominance in coal and steel could be used to harm European reconstruction efforts or to build another war machine.... So we see that France decided to take a different path from before. After the First World War, France repeatedly invaded, or threatened to invade, and occupied the Ruhr area, to force Germany to fold to French demands, and to keep them lenient. This time, France seemed to decide that linking themselves closer to Germany was the best way to go.\textsuperscript{50}

Indeed, it is this cooperation in coal and steel that eventually led to the formation of the European Union. But that is not all. Mutual trust among the European powers also led to the creation of the European Court, European Parliament, the Schengen visa regime, and a host of other institutions, indeed, contributing to a sense of Europeanness or having an European identity. It may be mentioned that Britain entered the European community in 1973, almost 16 years after the establishment of the European Economic Community, and therefore had little or no connection with the theory of abundance. From this point of view, one can certainly say that the idea of Brexit could impress upon a section of the British population as it had more to do with scarcity than abundance, although it now looks that many who have voted for Brexit are having a second thought!

China too made a difference by focusing on abundance, mainly in making use of its massive labour force. Deng Xiaoping realized that the developed economies were suffering from high cost but this trend could be arrested if they produced their goods not at home but in countries where labour cost is relatively low. In the process, the latter will also gain because of industrialization and transfer of technology, which is bound to take place once the industries start moving from the highly costly to the less costly economies. It is this \textit{mantra} of globalization that attracted Deng, making him invite foreign capital to China despite its advocacy of socialism. As Loretta Napoleoni commented:

\begin{quote}
Deng Xiaoping, the man who must preside over the post-Mao period, is an astute and pragmatic politician. He senses that foreign capital represents the only hope for the survival of Chinese socialism, and that in order to attract it, it will be necessary to make use of cheap local labor. Deng is convinced, therefore, that the Marxist model will be modernized by none other than its archenemy—Western capitalism....
\end{quote}
Deng’s plan comes to fruition thanks to delocalization. Moving foreign factories to China knocks down labor costs and thus also manufacturing costs. Profits rise in consequence. There’s no better formula for attracting foreign capital. Thus begins the race to the East. 51

Deng, however, was confident of making good use of globalization because China over the years invested on education, including creating a pool of disciplined labour force, and had a literacy rate of over 95 per cent. All this came handy when industries from the developed economies started moving to China, indeed, for reasons of making good use of cheap labour and profiting from it. The abundance of people could not have been put to a better use!

In South Asia however, if we were to focus on the massive population of 1.8 billion or the abundance of people the first thing that would be required is a campaign for mass literacy, which, save the Maldives and Sri Lanka, is certainly in a dismal situation. Indeed, the theory of abundance, particularly with reference to the massive population, could be put into good use in South Asia provided there is a high literacy rate and the people have a good foundation in the three R’s—reading, writing and arithmetic. This of course is easier said than done.

This is because education in South Asia has always remained elitist, although colonialism did complicate things further to the detriment of both the educated class and the uneducated masses. But interestingly, if the British were at fault in organizing a colonial education, the Babus (the elite class) were more to be blamed for shunning the masses from having an education. In fact, in the latter half of the 19th century, following their realization that education was not filtering through and attracting the masses, the British initiated a move to reform the education policy. 52 The Babus of Calcutta, however, almost singularly opposed such an initiative. In this context, Viceroy Richard Mayo, in a letter to his friend, wrote:

I dislike this filtration theory. In Bengal we are educating in English a few hundred Babus at great expense to the state. Many of them are well able to pay for themselves, and have no other object in learning than to qualify for government employ. In the meanwhile we have done nothing towards extending knowledge to the million. The Babus will never do it. The more education you give them, the more they will keep to themselves, and make their increased knowledge a means of tyranny. If you wait till the bad English, which the 400 Babus learn in Calcutta, filters down into the 40,000,000 of Bengal, you will be ultimately a
Silurian rock instead of a retired judge. Let the Babus learn English by all means. But let us also try to do something towards teaching the three R’s to ‘Rural Bengal.’

Evidently, once the caste-cum class-conscious Babus had come into being, they busied themselves in the task of reproducing their own power and position, which effectively kept the bulk of the masses not only poor but also illiterate. The collective literacy rate in South Asia has improved since the days of Mayo but still today when compared to the developed economies, including China, it is dismally low. Only 70.99 per cent (2016), that is, nearly 30 per cent of its population are still without literacy. This, I believe, became a serious hurdle whenever efforts were made for peacebuilding, whether Asokan, Baulian or Gandhian, mainly because the society remained socially and intellectually divided. This is one example where one could see that with all the potential of making a difference to life and living, the theory of abundance was not practiced and put into good use.

This brings us to the issue of empowering the person, which all the three ‘indigenous’ theories of peacebuilding have tried to emphasize one way or the other. Indeed, a multi-layer, multi-verse intervention focusing on the ‘person’ is required for building peace. One can get a sense of this from the Preamble of the Constitution of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which boldly states that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.” But such empowerment ought not to be only political, which certainly remains weak and efforts ought to be made for the political empowerment of each and every person. But at the same time, efforts must be made to empower each and every person economically, culturally, technologically, even psychologically. Anything short of this would reproduce divisions and conflicts and derail whatever other efforts are made, whether coercive, legal or institutional, for building peace.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Peacebuilding is no easy task, but at the same time it has remained one of the serious efforts of humans from time immemorial. Indeed,
civilizations were built on how best humans could reproduce peace and contain wars. This certainly gives us hope, but then it also reminds us that humans have an enormous capacity of breaking peace and engaging in violence. If we were to see from the standpoint of history one cannot help giving humans some amount of credit for containing wars and building peace, albeit not perennially but momentarily. Earlier we have indicated the decline in the number of people killed in wars in recent times when compared to World War II. But this is no guarantee that the decline would hold, particularly in the backdrop of the race for stockpiling weapons, including nuclear. On this, South Asia is no exception, particularly India and Pakistan. And there lies the ‘fear,’ which has the potential of reproducing ‘hatred’ and ‘violence.’ If anything, this is the time not only for newer theories but also newer practices of peacebuilding in South Asia, indeed, with both being good.

Notes

3. Ibid.


Mahavira was born in the early part of 6th century BC and is the founder of Jainism.


Swami Vivekananda, op. cit., p. 34.


Thapar, op. cit.

Ibid., p. 73.


Ibid., p. 80.


Jeanne Openshaw, op. cit., p. 3; Edward C. Dimock, Jr., The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaisnava-sahajiya Cult of Bengal, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 268

Ibid., p. 4.


Jat or jati stands for identity, it could be caste, communal or regional, although in contemporary times jati has come to mean the nation or having a national identity.


Jeanne Openshaw, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

Ibid., p. 15.

Rabindranath Tagore, op. cit., pp. 50, 86-87.

Saivism is related to the cult of the God Siva. He represents a unity of contradictory qualities. He is both ‘the destroyer and the preserver, the great ascetic and the symbol of sensuality, the benevolent herdsman of souls and the wrathful avenger’; Dara Shikoh, the son of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, writing in the 17th century, attempted to compare and harmonize Hinduism and Islam. See, Wilhelm Halbfass, India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding, New York: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 34.


Mahatma Gandhi, Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, selected by Ronald Duncan, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1951, p. 46.


Mahatma Gandhi, 1951, op. cit., p. 45.


46 Ibid.


53 Ibid.