

THE NEEDLE'S EYE You have to be tall to apologise, and taller still to atone

Apologies and Atonement


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The 2019 election campaign was set to be the biggest, costliest and dirtiest in our democratic history. In this dog-eat-dog atmosphere, no politician can afford to indulge in humility or ask voters to forgive their past sins. Remorse and contrition make you look weak.

Atonement is even more unimaginable. The greatest example of atonement we have is Emperor Ashoka's remorse after the slaughter of tens of thousands of his foes in Kalinga in the third century BCE, and his embrace and propagation of the Buddhist path of dharma. The last politician in modern India who genuinely tried to atone for what he saw as the ill effect of his message was Mahatma Gandhi, whose 150th birth anniversary we celebrate this October. I wrote in this newspaper of Gandhi's suspension of his civil disobedience movement after the Chauri Chaura killings of 21 policemen in February 1922. When Congress leaders protested, he told them: "I am incorrigible...the only tyrant I accept in this world is the still small voice within."

Gandhi went on fasts at least 17 times during the freedom struggle. He used fasting as a political weapon to exert pressure on the British, but he fasted for five days after Chauri Chaura as atonement.

Tellingly, Gandhi did not feel the need to fast in protest at the Jallianwala

la Bagh massacre of April 13, 1919, when hundreds of unarmed men, women and children were gunned down by British troops. Gandhi was permitted only several months later to visit Amritsar, where, after inspecting the Bagh, he addressed a women's meeting. Alluding to the violence that had bracketed the massacre, he said: "It is true that a large number of our people were killed in Jallianwala Bagh. But we ought to have maintained peace even if everyone present had been killed. It is not right, in my opinion, to take blood for blood."

It was left to C F Andrews, Gandhi's old comrade, who was returning to South Africa after a long spell in India, to condemn the crowd violence, the punishments meted out to Indians by colonial authorities, and the massacre, in agonised plain-speak. "Every day that I have been working side by side with my Indian fellow-workers, the deep sense of the wrong done has come home to me, and each act has been in very truth an act of penance, of atonement, an act of reparation for my country," Andrews said in his speech.

Regret Mortis

The 100th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre reminded some of us that Britain had not apologised appropriately for the deed, although the British High Commissioner travelled to Amritsar to write in the visitors' book: "We deeply regret what happened and the suffering caused."

Nobody likes to apologise under duress. The most sincere apologies are heartfelt, spontaneous, and followed by corrective action. Germany and Japan were both compelled by peace treaties dictated by the victorious Allies after World War 2 to pay reparations to countries that had suffered under their occupation. But Japan's contrition


Jallianwala Bagh: Killer instinct

has been criticised as "one step forward, one step backward". Japanese politicians routinely pay homage at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo where Class A war criminals have been deified. Japan has not formally apologised for the 1937 Nanjing Massacre in China; controversy reigns over whether a 'personal' apology or expression of regret by individual politicians constitutes national shame. Similarly, Japan has paid compensation, but not formally apologised, to South Korean 'comfort women' who were forcibly abducted or lured into Japanese military brothels during the war. Only about 25 of the traumatised sexual slaves are still alive and still demand formal atonement by Japan. Estimates of the victims of coerced prostitution, most of whom were abused and tortured, range between 30,000 and 200,000.

Australia, in regard to the Aborigines, and New Zealand in regard to the Maoris, have both apologised for killing the native inhabitants and seizing their lands — and, in the case of Australia, forcibly separating thousands of Aboriginal children from their families in a grotesque campaign to assimilate them and "breed out colour".

New Zealand's prime minister Jacinda Ardern did not just express sor-

row over the March 15 Christchurch mosque killings of 50 worshippers, she followed it up with legislation that banned the sale of semi-automatic and assault weapons. Australia had taken similar action after a 1996 mass shooting. In contrast, in the 20 years after the Columbine High School shootings, 223,000 students in 233 American schools have been affected by shootings, the Washington Post reported.

Apology of an Apology

How are we doing in India? Here's Sadhvi Pragya Thakur's non-apology apology: "If outside enemies are happy, then I take back my comments (on Hemant Kar-kare). My suffering cannot be reversed...he was killed by a terrorist so he is a martyr, but this was my personal pain."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, asked why the BJP had fielded somebody as controversial and divisive as Thakur, an accused in the Malegaon blast case, retorted by first, correctly, noting that there had been no apology or remorse for the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. He went on to assert that a 5,000-year-old religion like Hinduism had been wrongly accused of terrorism. "This is a symbol to answer all of them. This symbol will cost the Congress dearly," an unapologetic Modi said.

New Zealand's PM did not just express sorrow over the March 15 Christchurch killings of 50 worshippers, she followed it up with a ban on the sale of weapons