

Upendra Vajpeyi Memorial Lecture Series (2016)

Peace in the 21st Century

By

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Preface

It was a pleasure to attend the Ninth Upendra Vajpeyi Memorial Lecture on April 1, 2016, delivered by Balmiki Prasad Singh, who is a respected administrator, scholar, author and thinker. Mr Singh, a former Governor of Sikkim, is familiar with the absence of peace – he was a senior official in Assam when the anti-foreigner movement erupted there in the early 1980s. He went on to powerful positions like Union Home Secretary in the final years of the 20th Century and then Executive Director with the World Bank on the cusp of the new millennium. He is also well known as the author of the Bahudha Approach, a road-map for a harmonious world that he referred to in his lecture.

I was struck by the subject of Mr Singh's lecture. 'Peace in the 21st Century' seemed counter-intuitive. We are well into the second decade of this century and I would certainly like to wake up to nothing but peaceable headlines in our newspapers. Unfortunately that has not been the case. I can only hope fervently that in Mr Singh's lifetime, and mine, we will see peace settle over most of our planet.

The current U.S. president, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, has not shut down the American prison for terrorist suspects held without trial in the notorious

Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba; U.S. military personnel are far from gone from Iraq; and Barack Obama has put U.S. Special Forces "boots on the ground" in Afghanistan, Syria and even Cameroon. No wonder the Secretary of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee said last year that he felt the award to Obama had been a mistake!

Indians have experienced terrorism for at least 35 years. I saw one report saying there had been at least 136 terror attacks in India between 1989 and 2016, but this list does not include the killings associated with the Khalistan movement in the early 1980s.

The 21st Century has seen unprecedented and deadly violence visited upon thousands of innocent people in countries that were peaceful. Mr Singh quotes experts in his lecture as saying that the 21st Century may have truly begun on September 11, 2001 when Al-Qaeda terrorists killed thousands in coordinated attacks in New York City, Washington DC and a Pennsylvania field where a hijacked airplane crashed. But this is history re-told by the world's most powerful nation. The United States had never been attacked on its soil, and Americans justifiably described this, as Mr Singh notes, as "a new type of war".

What is happening today across the continents is "war by other means". True, the 20th Century was one of the bloodiest in history, but most of the blood was shed as a result of wars where you had identifiable foes. Now we are beset by enemies who are invisible, indistinguishable, and seemingly invincible. This war is being waged by stealth from all sides, whether it is the suicide bomber in Paris or

Brussels or the U.S. drones that are firing missiles at targets in several countries unbeknownst to all but the most avid watchers of conflict.

Mr Singh says "Peace is not simply the absence of war..." and in this he echoes Albert Einstein, arguably the greatest genius of the 20th Century ("Peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of justice, of law, of order – in short, of government") and Baruch Spinoza, the 17th-Century Dutch philosopher ("Peace is not the absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition of benevolence, confidence, justice"). But I liked Mr Singh's codicil: "Peace can be secured firmly only in a wider environment where injustice, inequality, and exploitation are tackled effectively and there is freedom of expression and dignity of human life."

Mr Singh then methodically sets out the attributes of peace in an increasingly unequal world threatened by nuclear proliferation, destructive climate change, and the inherent risks in globalisation and a borderless world. He points to three events in this decade – the annexation of Crimea by Russia, China's claims over the South China Sea, and rise of ISIL/ISIS and its claim to a long-quiescent pan-Muslim nationalism and the aspiration for a new Caliphate.

Indeed, like an ink-stain on blotting-paper, it is the slow spread of radicalisation that is most worrisome in the 21st Century. I read with interest and horror the other day of how Boko Haram, the Nigerian terrorist army that has pledged allegiance to ISIS, has indoctrinated and brainwashed its women and girl captives to themselves become suicide

bombers. Here in India we also see signs of growing religious polarisation although mercifully it is so far emotional and not murderous.

Mr Singh poses the question "How should we live?" and then states his touching faith in political dialogue and the UN Charter. Touching, because the United Nations, set up at the initiative of the Western victors of World War Two and carrying more than a whiff of the Woodrow Wilson's naively idealistic League of Nations proposal (the U.S. never joined the League!), has failed miserably to bring peace to the world. It has not brought rogue leaders to heel and watched helplessly as genocide unfolded in Bosnia or Rwanda, or members of its 'Permanent Five' Security Council thumbed their noses at the institution. The UN has outlived its utility (something that Mr Singh echoes later in his speech); we need a new way to marshal the world's moral forces for the good of mankind.

Mr Singh expounds at length on his concept of Bahudha (broadly, pluralism) and the importance of diversity and tolerance. He ends on an optimistic note – rising longevity, falling poverty, more openness may well bring about greater peace in the remainder of the 21st Century. It is easy to be cynical and pessimistic when scenes of cruelty and violence stream instantaneously into our consciousness through television, social media and the omnipresent Internet. But it is also important to be hopeful.

Chaitanya Kalbag
(Columnist, Writer and former Asia Editor, Reuters,
& Editor-in-Chief Hindustan Times)

Ninth Upendra Vajpeyi Memorial Lecture

Peace in the 21st Century

– Balmiki Prasad Singh

I join all of you in paying my tribute to the memory of Shri Upendra Vajpeyi, Panditji to his friends and admirers, this evening. Shri Upendra Vajpeyi was a very well-known journalist of distinction and dedication who was much sought after in the early decades of the Indian Republic. His quest for truth and integrity in expression are well-known and worthy of emulation by young journalists. He was an exceptional human being who endeared himself to everyone who came in contact with him. He personified the qualities of Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb in his behaviour that he carried along with the mannerisms of Lucknow – a place where he lived for long. He was the founder of the Media Centre for Research and Development.

Aruna, his wife, and other trustees of the Media Centre for Research and Development are guardians of the flame of Upendra Vajpeyi's reputation as a journalist committed to