



Rajmohan Gandhi by a statue of his grandfather during a visit to Hull.

## PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

### What would Gandhi do?

The new President of Initiatives of Change International, Rajmohan Gandhi, shares his grandfather's peace-building mission.

Mike Lowe reports.

It began years ago. 'The Muslim question nagged me from my depths, and from an early age,' he writes. In 1947 his grandfather, Mohandas K Gandhi, 'the Mahatma', was assassinated by Hindu extremists who thought he was being too friendly towards Muslims. It was the time of partition between India and Pakistan and the accompanying bloodbath between Hindus and Muslims which the Mahatma had struggled to avert. Three years later, and after India and Pakistan had gone to war over Kashmir, a 16-year-old Rajmohan Gandhi heard that Pakistan's Prime Minister had been shot. Gandhi responded to the man bearing the news that he hoped they would soon hear that the PM was dead. 'He froze, and I was embarrassed at my silly and ugly remark about someone who had done me or mine no harm. Later the realization that the subcontinent was overflowing with the sort of ill-will I had entertained got me thinking.'

**'One step of reconciliation, one step of bridge-building, one honest attempt to restore a divided relationship – and terrorism, extremism, receive a blow'**

Since then Gandhi has worked with a passion to promote better relationships between Hindus

and Muslims and between India and Pakistan. His books include *Understanding the Muslim Mind: a study of Eight Lives*, and *Reconciliation and Revenge in South Asia* as well as major biographies of his two grandfathers (his maternal grandfather, C Rajagopalachari, was independent India's first Governor General).

Last January when the Mumbai terrorist attacks were pinned on highly-trained operatives from Pakistan, Indian military forces were put on high alert. There was talk of war. As passions rose, Gandhi was among a network of Indian and Pakistan intellectuals and social activists calling for caution, saying, 'war is not an option... given the nuclearization of the subcontinent', and calling on the government not to endanger the 'fragile web of emerging relationship' between the two countries.

In a country where the Mahatma is still revered such statements may carry some weight. But Gandhi's authority also stems from his own life and work as a journalist, social reformer and academic with several honorary degrees. In 1963 he led a 'March on Wheels' across India inspiring thousands to work for 'a clean, strong and united India'. After the march, in response to many requests for further training, Gandhi took steps to develop the Initiatives of Change training and conference centre, Asia Plateau, at Panchgani in Maharashtra State, which opened in 1968. From 1964–81 he edited *Himmat*, a national weekly magazine. In the 1990s he served in the upper



house (Rajya Sabha) of India's parliament. He is currently a research professor in the United States at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as well as co-chairman of the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation in Gurgaon, India.

A longstanding and regular visitor to Pakistan, Gandhi was in Pakistan's frontier province, close to the Afghan border, two days before the 2001 September 11 attacks. He was meeting grandsons of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Muslim colleague of the Mahatma who died in 1988. Khan's leadership inspired many Pakhtuns, who live in Pakistan and Afghanistan, to adhere to nonviolence in their struggle for rights and independence. Since then violence has overtaken the region and enmity between the various ethnic and tribal groups has deepened.

At a March 2009 public meeting in Washington, Gandhi told his audience that his concern now goes beyond Indo-Pakistan relations to helping the people of Pakistan overcome their tragic divisions in order to salvage their country. He is inspired by the example of President Obama's words to the Joint Session of Congress: *'I know that we haven't agreed on every issue thus far, and there are surely times in the future when we will part ways. But I also know that every American who is sitting here tonight loves this country and wants it to succeed.'* Similarly Gandhi wants the people of Pakistan to say to each other, 'I have fought with you, I have called you names, but I know that deep down you love your country. And let us now together do something to save it and rebuild it.' He challenges his audience, 'one step of reconciliation, one step of bridge-building, one honest attempt to restore a divided relationship – and terrorism, extremism, receive a blow.'

Asked about Iraq, Gandhi agrees that the challenges are similar. 'Each Iraqi has to ask him or herself "who are my people?" .... Is it just the Shia, or the Sunni, or the Kurds? Or is it all the people of Iraq. When we hear news that so many people from this or that group have been killed, some of us may be very pleased. So long as our hearts are like that, rejoicing at the suffering of some people and pained at the suffering of others, we have to say to ourselves, "My God, please do something to my heart.'"

## ***'Is the hate, fear or greed around you going down or going up? – That would be his test for a peacemaker'***

As a historian he sees parallels with India. 'The British were in India for much longer than the Americans in Iraq. But when the British wanted to leave, many Muslims said, "Wait, if you go the Hindu majority will be rough on us Muslims. Don't go. Or if you go, please partition us before you go." But [Mahatma] Gandhi said that Hindus and Muslims MUST learn to live together.'

Gandhi's in-depth studies of his grandfather's life and thinking inevitably lead to many questions along

the line of 'what would the Mahatma do now?' In speeches and writings in the years since 9/11 Gandhi has vigorously challenged the West not to demonize Islam. Speaking alongside the Dalai Lama on 'Religion as a source of conflict and a resource for peace' at Emory University in 2007, Gandhi listed three things he thought the Mahatma would be saying now:

'He would say, "Let people first of all throw a searchlight on the deeds of their own side." Secondly, "Do not let us fall into the temptation of believing that one faith community out of all is uniquely fallen, uniquely infected, uniquely dangerous to the rest. Can peacebuilding be reconciled with the notion of one flawed religion, race or community?" Finally Gandhi, Hinduism's exponent, would say to people of all religions, "Is the hate, fear or greed around you going down or going up?" That would be his test for a peacemaker.'

More recently he has been looking at parallels between President Lincoln and the Mahatma. 'Lincoln tried to find the deeper meaning of what was happening. Why this costly war? Why was so much blood shed. And he reached this tremendous, painful, sobering conclusion about the link with slavery. Similarly Gandhi said again and again that perhaps all the afflictions we suffer come from the idea of untouchability – that this "high and low" idea is somehow responsible for all our sufferings.'

He sees great opportunity in encouraging people to ask the same deep questions of the current crisis. 'And to ask, not in a spirit of anger – though it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that certain things done by certain people are responsible – but to go beyond to the deepest possible understanding of why the world is the way it is.'

Since January this year, Gandhi has served as President of Initiatives of Change International – a movement he has known since his youth. 'One of the first things I learned from what was then called Moral Re-Armament was conveyed through a picture of a boy sitting at a desk with a globe on it. The caption read, "God has a plan and you have a part." There was a suggestion that each one of us has a part in changing the world. The Almighty has a plan and every individual can have a part in it.'

Despite the mysteries of why God should continue to allow so much pain, he says that this idea remains a tremendous inspiration. 'If there isn't a God who solves all the problems we want solved, there is a God of small, and sometimes large, mercies and small miracles and wonderful things that happen at least in some portions of our lives and in some parts of the world. So IofC is inspired by and moves forward by this belief; that if you want to change the world, start with yourself; if you point your finger at your neighbour, three more fingers point back at you; and also with this notion that the Almighty has a plan and you have a part.'

*For further reading related to the contents of this article, go to [www.rajmohangandhi.net](http://www.rajmohangandhi.net)*