

My grandfather Gandhi: Arun Gandhi has felt the burden of expectation from an early age, but has continued to preach the great man's credo



Arun Gandhi

Published Date: 01 September 2008 'The Scotsman'

By Jim Gilchrist

GANDHI. the name resonates like few others. The "father of the Indian nation" – whose doctrines of non-violent resistance and mass civil disobedience helped bring about his country's independence from British rule – was assassinated 60 years ago, but still inspires peace campaigners the world over. As wars, inequality and suffering fester across the face of the planet and the Mahatma's declaration that "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind" falls on deaf ears, hi

Visiting Edinburgh last month to speak at the city's Festival of Spirituality and Peace, which this year adopted as its slogan his grandfather's exhortation "Be the change you want to see in the world", the 75-year-old journalist and peace campaigner admits to having his low moments. "What I despair over is that for centuries we, as civilised human beings, have seen that killing and destruction have not cured any problems, yet we persist in using the same methods over and over again. When are we going to wake up and say, 'Let's find some other way?'"

We're talking in the Roxburghe Hotel, comfortably insulated from international crises – and from the rain, which is mercilessly whipping the marquees of the Book Festival across the road. This is his first visit to Scotland, and he smiles when I apologise for the weather: "I haven't experienced Indian monsoons for nearly 20 years now, so this is a good experience."

Now 75 and an American citizen, Arun has lived in the United States since 1987, when, after 30 years in journalism (his cousin, Rajmohan Gandhi, also went into journalism, spending some months as a trainee reporter on The Scotsman during the 1950s) he left India for the Christian Brothers University in Memphis. There he studied comparative racial prejudice – something of which he'd experienced his fair share, growing up in South Africa. In 1987 –

and he and his wife Sunanda (who died last year) established the M K Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence at the university, in 2004 moving it to the University of Rochester in New York State.

Quietly spoken, though not without a sense of humour, he is soberly dressed except for a cheerfully patterned Save the Children tie. Our planet may be sorely in need of saving, but for Mahatma's legacy of non-violence to have any impact globally, he explains, it must work at an individual level. "The tragedy is that instead of trying to understand what he really meant by non-violence, we just assume it is the non-existence of war," says the man who once spun yarns alongside his illustrious grandfather, for whom the weaving of homespun khadi was not only an exercise in self-discipline, but a political gesture, encouraging Indians on the route to self-sufficiency and a boycott of British-made goods.

"Non-violence," he continues, "is about the individual. It's about learning to build relationships between people, learning to respect other people's philosophies and religions. That's why we say that we must be the change we want to see, because unless we make that effort and break down prejudice, we are not going to create peace in the world."

Now with four grandchildren of his own, he recalls the two years he spent living with his grandfather until his murder in 1948. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi – "Mahatma", or "great soul", was an honorific – could make hard demands on those around him, but Arun remembers him as a loving grandfather: "He was a tremendous disciplinarian, of course, and he wanted you to account for every moment of the day. But it gave me discipline and enabled me to use my time effectively. And he never asked anyone to do anything he didn't do himself."

Even "Bapu", father of the nation, had his lighter moments. "He had a tremendous sense of humour and a very hearty laugh. We used to spin for an hour every day, and we'd have competitions to see who could spin the most yarn. He wrote to my parents conceding that I beat him consistently."

For such a gently-spoken man, Arun makes his voice heard. Speaking in the Scottish Parliament debating chamber along with Northern Ireland peace campaigner Mairead Corrigan-McGuire, he warned that US policy on fighting terrorism was creating more insurgents. "The mindset of the United States is to kill all terrorists – but how can you identify who are terrorists?" he demanded. "In killing whom you perceive to be terrorists, you kill a lot of innocent people," adding that the survivors of counter-terrorism strikes could potentially become terrorists themselves.

"Humans have become very good crisis managers," he tells me. "Instead of being able to see a conflict coming before it becomes a crisis, we ignore everything in the world until it blows up in our face."

Earlier this year, another statement rebounded so severely that he was forced to resign from the institute he and his wife had founded, after condemning Israel and the Jews as "the biggest players" in a global culture of violence, on the Washington Post's "On Faith" online blog site.

In hindsight, Arun, who visited the West Bank in 2004 and urged Palestinians to resist Israeli occupation peacefully, agrees that it came over as a partisan statement and he could have worded it better – "but I regret that people didn't accept it in the spirit in which it was given. I was hoping that people would have a dialogue."

In fact, he believes the Israelis have an important role to play in the riven Middle East, "because it's always the powerful who have to lead to peace. The Palestinians can't create peace when they are oppressed." During his visit, he sat in on a discussion at North Edinburgh Arts Centre, in an area of the city which has seen its fair share of deprivation and crime.

Global or local, he dismisses what he calls Band-aid solutions: "We have to find out why people are violent or crime-ridden; if they are living in poverty we have to eliminate that poverty, we have to give them some hope in society."

Which returns us to the great contemporary bogey: "It's very easy for us to look at Islamic suicide bombers and say they have no value for life, but that's not true. For a young person to go out and sacrifice his or her life in that way, it's not because they're so ideologically bent, it's because they're so frustrated with their own situation that they have nothing to live for. If we give them something to live for, they won't be willing to sacrifice their lives."

Satyagraha, the Gandhian principle of non-violence and truth, raises the old question about the justification of violence if pitted against an arguably greater evil.

It was the Mahatma, after all, who suggested that the British lay down their arms against Hitler and Mussolini and allow themselves to be slaughtered.

One might be excused for concluding that such an improbably selfless act would simply have unleashed a far greater evil on the world.

Arun sees it differently: "Hitler didn't emerge as an evil person with an ambition to take over the world. If we aren't aware of all the circumstances and milieu that creates this sort of evil person, we are never going to be able to stop that evil.

"We destroyed him and sort of saved the world. I say 'sort of' because there have been smaller Hitlers doing just as nasty things ever since ... So what did we really achieve?"

Growing up in the shadow of such an extraordinary grandparent, he admits, brought a heavy burden of expectation, which he resented as a teenager: "My mother told me there was nothing I could do to get over that, short of disowning my whole family.

"She said, 'If you consider this legacy a burden, it will just get heavier and heavier, but if you consider it as a light illuminating the path ahead for you, it will become much easier.'"

We live in dark times, but he has looked to that light ever since.

BACKGROUND

IN AN example of what his grandfather termed "trusteeship" – the promotion of relationships between those with seemingly conflicting interests as a means of radical social change – Arun Gandhi and his late wife, Sunanda, became involved in developing local self-help programmes for poverty-stricken Indian rural communities. Following her death last year, he and his family have been developing the Sunanda Gandhi Memorial School near Kolhapur.

As Arun explains: "In the past, people have built schools and taken a child from a poor family and given them a conventional education, but that has simply alienated the children from their

families, because once the child leaves school, he or she doesn't want to go back and live with a family still languishing in poverty."

Described as a \$1 million project, the proposed residential school will assist not just the child, but the whole family. "The children will get their education and the parents will get a little education in reading and writing but also vocational education, enabling them to do something which would bring them economic benefits, so the whole family can be lifted out of poverty."

- www.globalgiving.com/pfil/1855/projdoc.doc