

Nuremberg International Human Rights Award

Award Ceremony
September 14, 2003 in Nuremberg Opera House

Words of Thanks by the Prizewinner Teesta Setalvad

Can lessons from history, honestly learnt, and remembered, prevent unspeakable cruelties in the present and deeper schisms between man and man in the future?

Nuremberg and Germany have had the courage to face their history, a history that not merely for the German people but for all of humanity raised then, and raises still, raw and brutal questions of the minds and hearts of men and women. And the darkness that can reside within.

Yet we must have faith. This faith gets reaffirmed in the myriad or million small deeds and thoughts of a majority of one billion Indians and a third more of South Asians who dream and aspire to a belly full of food; for fair access to quality learning for their young; to medical care against starvation and other epidemics; protection against flood, cyclone and drought. For the kind of existence that about 60 per cent of their people already have.

But even as the bare existence of a third to forty per cent of our people in South Asia in India alone this would mean 400 million people--is seriously under assault from a callous and irresponsible political, social and economic elite, the right to dream of a land free of bitter hatreds has over the past two decades slowly but surely been snatched away. Today with justice to the victims of perpetrated pogroms seeming distant, if not impossible, the now every day threat of mindless targeted violence has become a terrifying reality.

We are faced in India with the threat of hatred and division impinging on every aspect of public discourse and life. Caste has been an unfortunate historic factor that has denied dignity and access, apart from perpetrating brutal violence on 25 per cent of Indians in the past. Today a more blatant use of hate speech and writing against sections of Indians, on grounds of religious affiliation, has become the norm that precedes, and creates the climate for mass pogroms. Such discourse goes unchallenged by authorities though we remain a political democracy wedded to the rule of law.

For human rights defenders engaged in the struggle for a more equitable system, through our engagements with, and challenges to, the institutions of the judiciary, police, parliament and bureaucracy the lofty mandate contained in the words 'We The People..' in the Preamble to our Constitution, often seem reduced to a banality on a piece of parchment paper.

A stable, democratic and secular India which means an India that can hold its head high ---as we once could, when, though 'poor', we led the Non Aligned Movement in the world and did an honest job of assuring safety and security to all Indians ---is vital for peace, for growth and yes, for the prosperity of the whole South Asian region.

Our sheer size and pre-dominance demands this. It is a shame that instead of leading a discourse within the region on peace, on sanity, on tolerance, India today takes a part in articulating shrill noises against neighbours. We even led the



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sub-continent on its deplorable road towards turning nuclear. I would like to, at this stage, congratulate my co-recipient of the Nuremberg International Human Rights award for 2003, Mr Rehman a Pakistani and a colleague in this struggle for the rights of all, albeit across the border.

The history of the division of the sub-continent on religious lines took nearly one million lives and caused the forced migration of 15 million people. Lasting durable peace within the region, thanks to this history, is linked critically to peace within the countries of the region and their castes and communities. Those struggling for the rights of minorities across national borders have a need to link and sustain each other's struggles. And they know it.

Yet, despite all of this, we must carry on, firm in our belief that things must and will change. And the struggle for that glorious change if pre-determined by its duration is no struggle at all. The demands that such an indeterminate struggle, in time terms, makes on us, as individuals, as colleagues, as parents is enormous and the stake and cost, are high. On this precious occasion, I would like especially to remember our two children, Tamara and Jibran who have sacrificed much and lost so much time with us in their growing up years due to this engagement. I hope and pray to a God that I do not believe in, that they have learnt some and much more importantly, that they understand.

My work in the past decade, that coincides with the decade of publication of our journal, Communalism Combat, would simply have been inconceivable but for the camaraderie and passion shared in this cause with my husband-colleague, Javed. As strength, as inspiration, as learning, this togetherness has made the work possible. I am thrilled that he is here with me to share the moment of glory of receiving particularly this award which has a resonance and meaning far exceeding any other. I know that he has put up with the pressure of my own temperament and zeal for this work that catapults him and our wonderful team at Sabrang into sometimes impossible directions.

The India of old has irretrievably changed and the secure foundations of glory in a shared past, in our literature, music and culture that we grew up with are not available for our children. Streaks of insanity and noises of hate impinge in the classroom and at school ominously making distinctions between the legitimate 'us' and the traitorous 'them.' History is being surreptitiously distorted to support the politics of exclusion and hate. The infamous Nuremberg laws that forbade marriage between sections of one people have not been forcibly enacted yet but Geetabehn happily married to Salim in Gujarat until April 4, 2002 last year was stripped and mutilated in public before being butchered alive on the streets of Ahmedabad, Gujarat's leading commercial centre. Victims of the Gujarat carnage, or Genocide as we have called it face exclusion in jobs and have been denied dignified return to their agricultural lands much less have they got justice.

The language of facism and it's glorification of violence and extermination has deeply disfigured Indian public life. We struggle today against it reaching a crescendo. In that struggle we try among other things to, in Martin Luther King Junior's word, to break the silence of the good people who we believe are still numerically stronger than the wicked people who execute evil deeds.

Thank you, All.