

Research Foundation for Governance: in India

Public Debate on 'Gandhi and Gadugi'

August 12, 2010 at Ahmedabad Management Association, 5.30 PM to 7.00 PM

On the International Youth Day on **August 12**, Research Foundation for Governance in India (RFGI) organised a Public Debate on **“Gandhi and Gadugi: Traditional Indigenous Views on Service and Community”** at the Ahmedabad Management Association (AMA) from **5:30 PM to 7 PM**. The debate discussed Gandhi's ideas on the role of youth and working together for development of the community.

The evening began with Ms Kanan Dhru, founder of RFGI introducing the organisation, its activities and plans for the coming year. She introduced the panelists, Prof. Michael Morris from the University of New Mexico and Dr. Ameer Yagnik, practicing lawyer and PhD from Stanford University. She mentioned both how India can learn from the situation of native Indians in the US, and that the world can learn much from Gadhiji's teaching.

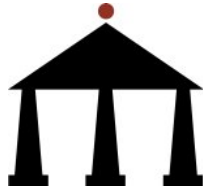
Professor Michael Morris then spoke, thanking RFGI for the opportunity to participate in the debate and stating how cutting-edge and necessary the work the organisation is doing. He highlighted the fact that the day of the debate was the same as the International Youth Day and how important it is that young people are involved in issues of equity and inclusion, the very issues that Gandhi cared about. He shared his experiences of working amongst the American Indians and the history of the tribes there as well as their current progress and situation. American Indian tribes faced the similar kind of colonisation that took place in India where outsiders looked for resources that could be effectively extracted for profit. He especially highlighted the 'Cherokee' people, with their own language, culture and distinctive names. The word 'gadugi' means for them 'to work together to solve common problems in society'. The Cherokee used to occupy a large area of land, living agricultural lives until the gold rush in 1838 forced them off. The tribe was assertive and took the issue to the Supreme Court to protest. They in fact won the case but the court did not prevent a



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military operation to march the tribe into Oklahoma, where all native Americans were forced so that dominant society could have the land they wanted. The Cherokee resisted and survived by building their own school and legal systems, however they were such a strong force that people became fearful of them and the state took over their institutions completely. The Chief of the Cherokee was then even appointed by the President of the USA until this was abolished in 1978 and the Cherokee were granted a greater degree of self-determination. Prof. Morris worked for the 2nd elected Chief and established a youth programme to teach young Cherokee about their heritage. He spoke about some of the current leaders of the Cherokee, particularly the Cherokee youth and gave an example of 'gadugi' in practice; that to provide a community with clean water a pipeline was planned, but instead of just building it through already existing villages without their permission, the families all worked together on their respective parts of the line. Gandhi may be on all of our money notes, but we've forgotten what he stood for. For example, Nike used his image to promote a new brand of walking shoes and a major chain of book stores in Mexico is named after him! Gandhi had a great impact on many prominent figures, including Martin Luther King Junior who worked for the emancipation of African Americans and affected the lives of American Indians also. So Gandhi displayed universal principles, and we still have much to learn from him today.

Ms. Kanan Dhru then invited Dr. Ameer Yagnik to speak. Dr. Yagnik thanked Professor Morris for his presentation, and stated how valuable she thought the idea of having such public debates was. She commented on the fact that in every Indian city the main road is always 'Mahatma Gandhi Road', that every office has a picture of him, and that when you go abroad everyone sees you as 'from the land of Gandhiji', and yet a lot of people cannot tell you much about him, not least young people in school. He led the strongest non-violent movement in human history and gave up his normal clothes when he met a woman who owned only one sari because he realised the extent of poverty in his country. Many in India still live like this today. Gandhi not only taught service and self-sacrifice, but he lived it. We hear of riots and killings

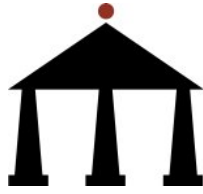


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and wonder whether this is the same land where non-violent action freed us from 200 years of British rule. Justice has two aspects: means and ends. Only just means will lead you to just ends. Society needs to be just, and there is a specific role for the youth in this. The ideas of Gandhi came into the constitution through the establishment of the 'rule of law' and the principle of self-rule. Gandhi wanted young people to have a role in governance, not just listening to others but being part of the process themselves. The constitution says things, but they're not a reality. Gandhi's ideas about community level empowerment and local government become particularly relevant because they primarily focus on people working together to achieve what is right, and in our times, what the constitution says. The youth have the opportunity that others don't have of giving their time and energy into this project. They are the anchor for the future as they have the raw material and the enthusiasm. People whose rights are violated often need and want someone to come and tell them how to claim rights. This is where youth have a role to play.

Prof. Morris responded to this by highlighting that community learning is very important, that we need to have humility in learning from everyone, and that 'the community is the curriculum'. He mentioned that the biggest instrument in the civil rights movement wasn't King, but instead was the citizenship schools, very similar to what Gandhi promoted.

Ms Kanan Dhru then opened the discussion for the audience, challenging people to answer the question of whether it is really possible for India to get back to the Gandhian philosophy. One young person asked the panel whether the purpose of young people going in to rural communities is for us to learn from them, or them from us. Prof Morris replied that Gandhi criticised modernisation and was prophetic in the sense that today we've all made a life for ourselves but have not contributed to where we come from. What would Gandhi think of the modern philosophy of 'personal achievement'?



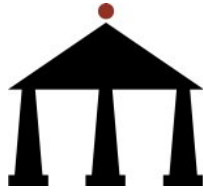
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Ms Kelly Dhru then asked the audience whether and how we can pick and choose what Gandhi supported in this modern day, and if this is what we are doing then are we truly talking about Gandhi anymore? An RFGI volunteer, Kush, then commented that he doubted the relevance of Gandhi's principles today, saying that he wants to enter into politics but is sceptical that he would receive any votes if he adopted true Gandhian principles.

A member of the audience and a law student, Gursharan, responded that he is personally not a follower of Gandhi. He does not oppose the sentiments of what Gandhi taught necessarily and commented that the only reason India became a 'socialist' democracy was because people wanted to make India what Gandhi dreamt it could be, but that Gandhi's principles won't, or even shouldn't, work. People have misunderstood Gandhi's opinions and there are moments in his life where he was very hypocritical and failed to look into himself. Gandhi tried to foster a sense of communalism that does not exist anywhere in the world because humans are too weak. He stated that he couldn't follow Gandhi's true principles, because often Gandhian principles required renunciation of material comforts and be happy with only basic properties. He stressed his point by saying that Gandhi's principles are completely irrelevant because people like to own things. In his time it may have been relevant, when things weren't quite so developed. Maybe we need neo-Gandhism – something that is similar in spirit but with a more modern outlook.

Another member of the audience Mr. Rahul Mehta, then questioned whether Gandhi had ever drafted any possible laws or policies that could actually do much in terms of the reduction of poverty. He went on to give an example of a Bill drafted by Gandhi which supported the right to bear a weapon. This may surprise supporters of Gandhi, that he was not always true to his own beliefs, or at least modified his stand when actually put into practice.

In response Kelly Dhru stated that it is one thing to consider an ideal, and another to know exactly how to implement it. Perhaps our society is not fit for Gandhism, rather



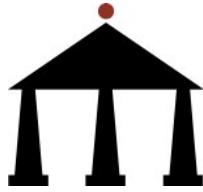
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than Gandhism not being fit for our society? In addition Prakash, an RFGI volunteer, commented that we make a mistake when we think that Gandhi was never wrong. He himself called his life an 'experiment'. We forget that he was human and was just dedicating his life to being an example which you can either choose to follow or not. Another young person then said that maybe Gandhi's ideas are in fact futuristic rather than archaic, for after all people back then also didn't accept many of them. He was more of a visionary.

As a reply one young person stated that people are selfish and only ever help each other for such reasons. We are the focus of all that we do. Even with global warming the focus is about saving ourselves, so Gandhian socialism isn't really practical. Dr. Yagnik stated that we can practice Gandhism, just in a way that looks slightly different to how it was back then. We should take Gandhi's 3 basic principles (sacrifice, service, putting others before ourselves) and apply them to today's society. If we had taken his philosophy literally we wouldn't have any technology today. She also added that we don't have the stature to criticize if we haven't practiced. Who are we to criticize the work and ideas of Gandhi without first trying to practice them?

Gursharan confirmed this idea of neo-Gandhism and challenged the previous comment on the futurism of Gandhi's ideas. He gave the example of Native Americans in the Grand Canyon that socially adapted and embraced tourism as a way of making a living. A member of the audience added that Gandhi was dynamic. We can keep truths like non-violence and compassion constant whilst recognising that Gandhi isn't just a symbol of fixed ideas but someone who gave general guidelines. Another attendee then agreed that Gandhi's philosophy was flexible. He wanted to involve all groups in the mainstream of society, and so he probably would have agreed with liberalisation. After all what is the value of GDP growth without making it available to all local people? So it is to *this* extent that Gandhi's ideas need to be implemented.

Furthermore a senior professor from the audience added that we can both appreciate Gandhi, and differ from him. Gandhi was a man who was true to his own conscience,



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and that is not to say that he was true for all people at all times as we must try to be true to our consciences. An impactful comment then followed that Gandhi must still be relevant for today's world since out of the people debating the subject in the room, the majority of them have been young people. The numerous Facebook pages on Gandhi show the youth interest in his ideas and philosophy.

Prof. Morris concluded the debate stating the reason why we don't have many Gandhi's today. It is because he set high standards for all of us. He added that sometimes we do great people a disservice by focusing too much on certain ideas and works and not on how they evolved during their life. We memorise one caption of what they said and forget that they were humans, and that humans change. He commented that whilst he himself has been a Research professor of science, Gandhi was a Researcher of life.