What is Peace? The Dichotomies Between War & Peace

by Pushpa Iyer

War, we know; Peace, we seek. War races the pulse; Peace, not that exciting. War is all around us; Peace we must look for. War, we don't like; Peace, we wish for. War is tangible; Peace, somewhat abstract.

Whether one agrees with the dichotomies presented above or not, almost everyone is sure about war: it is violent, it is destructive, it is dehumanizing, it is loss, it is sadness, it is horror and it is pain. Almost with equal certainty most people are unsure of what peace really means or most definitely struggle to accept that different things mean peace to different people.

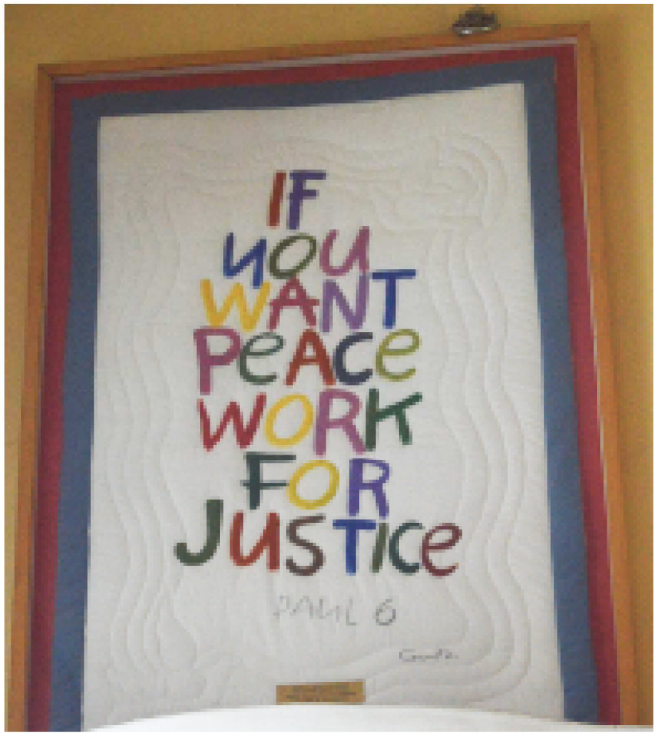
What is peace? I have asked this question in every country I have traveled to (but I will focus on the ones to which I have led a course for my students) and where its people have experienced war and violent conflict firsthand. Their answers tell their own story. In Cambodia, the responses were "Peace is having enough food to eat." Or "Peace is having the freedom to come and go where you want and when you want." Not surprising given that the country suffered the rule of the Khmer Rouge – known for its attempts at agricultural reform resulting in famines and enforcing social engineering through genocide, which severely curtailed any form of freedom a human being could have. What is noteworthy is that these responses came almost 30 years after the genocide!

Sierra Leone has seen one of the most brutal wars of modern times. Fought for control over its rich resources, primarily diamonds, the war attracted mercenaries, criminals and warlords. The impact of war was apparent even 10 years later when I visited the country and the two common issues connected to peace were justice and development, and very clearly those who responded meant only economic development. Understandable given that the country was pillaged and ravaged by the war. The most surprising response however came from an academic who said, "Peace is patriotism and nationalism." Her explanation, though, cleared my confusion. Sierra Leoneans did not have a shared identity, they were divided by their ethnicity, by the part they played in the war, and by the influence of so many regional and international actors; nationality was therefore the most practical way of bringing people together to share one common identity.

In Nepal, a country torn by a decade-long civil war by the Maoists to overthrow Monarchy and establish a People's Republic, peace was closely tied to the notion of justice. Some of the responses were "Unless truth comes out there can be no peace" or "Peace and Justice are equal; without justice we cannot maintain peace." Then there was the response similar to Sierra Leone and one that comes from every society just emerging from war: "Peace is development." Not surprising since these responses were gathered six years after war and there was so much to be done with war related devastation, not to

Photo Credit: Rohan John

ace is Your's



mention that the country was very poor to begin with.

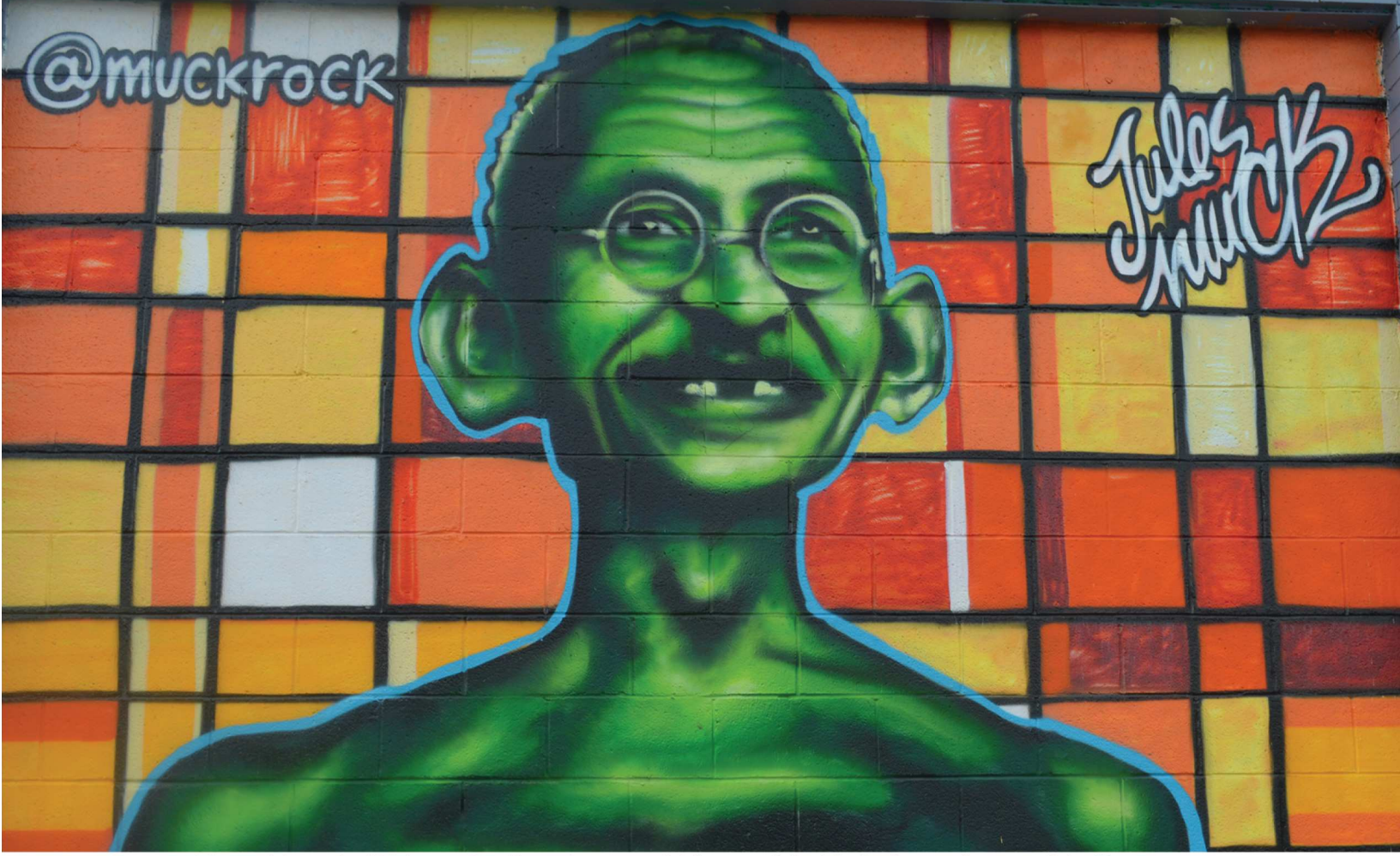
Gujarat state in India has not necessarily seen a war but it has seen state-sponsored ethnic cleansing of the minority community, the Muslims. Ask the state and the response always was “Peace is development.” Talking development is a useful tactic when you do not want to deal with more important issues. Surprisingly though, many bought this idea of peace, especially the middle class, but there was a whole section of the population that screamed for justice. Justice was peace for them.

In Mindanao, a war has been fought over land for over 30 years but it is a conflict that took on religious overtones. The war is made complex by many other types of violent conflicts present such as clan-based conflicts, personal and community revenge conflicts and criminality, all of which are exacerbated by the presence of many different armed groups that have their own agendas. Responses to the question “what is peace?” were broadly categorized into three categories. The first one directly related to the conflicts: "Peace can only come when we accept that we're different” or "Peace is if we freely exercise our tribal governance in the community and were free to decide our own system of development" or "Peace means peace of mind. No conflict, war, no robberies of chicken or goats. Satisfaction of the stomach, that everyone can sleep well." The second type of response was once again, and not surprisingly, about development: “The new name of peace is development" or “Development and Peace are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other.” The third category was about inner peace: "The heart of peace is the peace of heart" or "Peace is very hard to do. It's important to first have peace within" or “Peace is about believing in God.”

Peace that is inward focused is less heard in post-war societies. The two most common definitions are peace as development and peace as justice. The former is materialistic and outward facing – largely visible-to-the-eye kind of economic development – while the latter appeals to morals.

In most post-war societies, one hears people desiring roads, water, facilities and services and one must remember that these are new needs that quickly emerged at the end of war. During war, peace means very different things. For example, in Sri Lanka in the midst of war, peace translated as “if there were no shells falling” or “I can be sure my family member will return home safe” or “my child does not wake up crying again tonight with the sound of the gunshots” or even, “I wish I could provide food to my child today.” Development needs are logical, their importance cannot be undermined but barring highly conscious social leaders, few are prepared in the immediate aftermath to question the nature of development. With the result that often development, as many believe it is engineered to, fails to deliver peace.

The moral aspects of peace on the other hand are broadly related to truth, justice and forgiveness. In Mindanao the persons who spoke about inner peace were usually religious leaders or strong believers in their faith and their peacebuilding work was built on the foundations of inner peace. It was remarkable to see how many others they were able to touch with their notions of peace, for rarely did you hear the demands for moral peace (justice, truth) in Mindanao. Moral needs are connected to inner peace but moral needs take on



A beautiful mural of Mahatma Gandhi in downtown LA by artist Jules Much whose real name is Jules Veros.
For more information visit: http://julesmuck.com

tangible forms in post-war societies and are therefore harder to link to inner peace. For example, you will hear the need to punish someone with the demand for justice (moral need), which will be explained as required for closure even though, most will admit closure usually does not translate into inner peace.

It seems as if there isn't a war for peace, there is a war over peace. What do we mean by peace? Whose version of peace is the most important? How can we ensure everyone's needs for peace are met?

I turn to Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of peace, for guidance. Not only do I come from the land from where he led India's freedom struggle but I strongly believe Gandhi's blend of advocacy was quite practical. Gandhi is known to have said, "I am a man of peace. But I do not want peace at any price. I do not want the peace that you find in a grave." Gandhi was on a mission not to find peace but to engage in the act of peace that stood on two pillars: Satyagraha (the struggle for truth) and non-violence.

Gandhi believed in the moral aspect of peace, he qualified peace when he said he was not interested in just any kind of peace and he defined it as a struggle – a struggle to be acknowledged and to be heard - and not as an end goal. In most post-war societies moral peace is an end goal, where the belief is: when justice is served peace is achieved. For Gandhi, it seems the struggle for justice is in itself peace. He believed in advocacy, taking a stand for what he believed in and he made himself vulnerable. He was fighting for moral peace; he was not waiting for moral peace to descend on him. His tool was non-violence.

I witnessed this in Los Angeles where there is a war raging against the poor and the minorities in that city. Many of the peacebuilders we met, working on issues of gentrification, homelessness, poverty and violence, were struggling to establish the truth - the truth about racial discrimination, the truth about structural violence and the truth about who was implicit in the "crime." They were also trying to establish truth in challenging the efforts of the government to bring peace – that is, they question development as peace or more specifically the kind of development being presented as the road to peace. They were struggling to get their voice heard. Further, every peacebuilder we met in LA stressed on the need for the creation of strong identity group that would collectively fight the powers that are: similar to how Sierra Leoneans wanted to unite everyone under a common national identity. Gandhi would describe the struggle of the peacebuilders in LA - a struggle fraught with anger, frustration, courage and hope – as far more important than some ideal state of peace. For Gandhi did say, "Truthfulness is more important than peacefulness." Gandhi seems to imply that one should not be focused on reaching some end state of idealistic peace but that one should focus on the journey to peace. Peace then is something that emerges from your peaceful actions.

The peacebuilders in LA were taking a stand for establishing truth and they made themselves vulnerable but they were far more at peace than those individuals and institutions that shied away from their forceful advocacy for truth.

For if we were to learn from Gandhi, we would know that our actions mattered far more than achieving peace. And that maybe, we are wasting our time seeking peace when we should all be working on peace. Peace is after all our actions, our struggles, our advocacy and our "truth."

Blessed (indeed), are the peacemakers! (Mathew 5:9)

Pushpa Iyer is Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. Here specialization is in identity conflicts, peacebuilding in post-war societies and non-state armed groups. Pushpa is the founding Director of the Center for Conflict Studies.

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