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The Universal Didi

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TRIBUTE

Nirmala Deshpande was Didi not only to those who belong to the Gandhian movement in India, but also to people in Pakistan, ranging from grassroot activists, academics, all the way to the most powerful politicians; and to the people of China who apparently have already instituted a chair in her honour at a university as a tribute, not to mention Nepal and Sri Lanka, and everywhere again sweeping the broad range of actors.

Didi's particular engagement with peace reveals what one person can do with purity of heart—to quote the famous philosopher Kierkegaard who said “purity of heart is to will one thing”, in enabling people across borders to trust each other.

Nirmala Didi's real mentor was Vinoba and this would come out often in her political life—and as we all know, while Vinoba Bhave was Gandhi's greatest disciple, there were nuances of differences between Gandhi and Vinoba, which were part of Gandhi's own experience. My particular bond with her was also because I had walked with Vinoba, on his padayatra in Maharashtra in 1956, and then lived in the gram dan villages in Orissa, in response to his advice.

One never imagined that we could lose this ambassador of peace so quickly, as it is particularly in the last two-to-three years that she had built up the momentum through her inimitable characteristic of looking totally disarmingly simple but full of clarity, and capable of strategising how to bring people together and remove suspicion and distance. Nirmala Didi showed what one woman can do in changing the landscape between tense nations.

At one of the many condolence meetings that was held in Delhi on May 5, and organised by the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce, Didi's particular position in what can be called the world, revealed itself in tangible ways. Ministers, such as Anand Sharma from the Ministry of External Affairs, Members of Parliament ranging from Sitaram Yechury of the Left to Amar Singh and Srinivas Prasad, journalists such as Kuldip Nayar, civil servants spoke of what she had taught them.

One MP, Roberts, described how Didi had taken a few of the new young MPs to Jantar Mantar to show them and encourage them to participate in a protest meeting that was taking place in support of Aung San Suu Kyi. He then described how she could oppose the state when it came to human rights, and yet not confront it!

BUT the real tributes, extraordinary and unusual for anybody whether an MP, a citizen or the Prime Minister or President, to receive, were from the ambassadors, the official

representatives of Pakistan, China, Sri Lanka, Nepal. Their tributes to Didi, of how she could meet the State and yet be so much a part of civil society, of resistance, of going against the official relationship and yet be a messenger of peace, came through in remarkable ways. Everyone wanted her work to be carried on. But knowing her as I did and that particular quality that she contained, namely, to be totally and disarmingly straightforward, extremely loving—willing to share anything that she had with anybody who wanted it, seems a challenge. For example, in my case, it was sharing a discovery she had made of a special treatment invented by the medical team at the Air Force Hospital in Bangalore for healing osteoarthritis of the knees. She took me in her car, introduced me to the doctor and ensured that I would be treated there.

I could phone her as someone who had not registered for the Women's Peace Bus to Pakistan, but wanted to go and she would say 'jump aboard' and got me the visa within a few hours. She would come to Bangalore, call and invite to a press conference where she wanted to brief the Bangalore press about the latest on Indo-Pakistan dialogues or she would call and speak about what an amazing interest she found in China for Gandhi.

That kind of inclusive nature enclosed in a body which did not hold any power, who invoked trust just through her personality would be difficult to institutionalise in any committee or group of people. This is a pity, as the bridges she built, especially with China and Pakistan through what can be called the message of Gandhi, should not be lost. She took several delegations of MPs when she travelled and perhaps now it is for a group of MPs to, not build a memorial or a scholarship or an institution in her name, but use their energies to travel with that message. Parliamentarians could provide the healing touch to border conflicts, and enoble themselves too, in the process.

The author, a noted development economist, is a former Member of the South Commission.