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India and Germany: A Two-Way Learning Street

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There is much that India can learn from Germany's remembrance of the Holocaust, though the insensitivity towards the Palestinians is a smear. Germany too can learn from India, for while India has been brutal in its oppressions of caste and gender, it has been most comfortable in embracing diversity.

Speaking to American philosopher Susan Neiman for her remarkable book *Learning from the Germans* (Allen Lane, 2019), German pastor Friedrich Schorlemmer alerted us, "No country, no culture, no religion is immune to falling into the abyss into which we fell. And once it begins, there will always be people who shut down their conscience and side with the strongman."

Look around at our world, at this moment of the profound civilisational crisis in which we find ourselves. Can we recognise that leaders in so many countries around the planet have taken their countries and people to the very edge of an abyss?

My desperate hope is only that there are enough of us-in my own country India and in every country of the world-who refuse to shut down our conscience. There is too much at stake. What is at issue is the world we wish to grow old in, and the world we hope to leave for our children.

If all people, at all times, are vulnerable to falling into the dark abyss of collective, targeted hate and fear, the only defence for humankind is for all people at all times to recognise, strengthen, and sustain their capacities for fraternity, for care; to shore up their human faculty to treat people who they see as "different" with acceptance and not suspicion, and welcome them as human beings of equal worth and dignity. In other words, the only way for humankind is to learn to live together with diverse populations with kindness and respect.

Germany and historical memory

I lived in Germany for a year, in 2016-17. During this time, I tried to learn from the German people how they courageously and painfully struggled to confront their horrific Nazi past, and through this endeavoured to reclaim their moral compass. Above all, the paramount lesson that I carried away from Germany was of how all peoples at all times remain vulnerable to the dangers of being drawn to the politics of fear, resentment, suspicion, and, indeed, frenzied hate.

The German state and people offer an extraordinary, even singular, example of agonised striving through successive generations to collectively confront their shameful collective histories, and to seek repair, atonement, and forgiveness. They still have significant milestones to cross, about which I will speak soon. But I must underline that there are no examples anywhere in the world in modern times of the kind of journey undertaken by the German people.

What makes Germany unique and admirable is that its people have owned their collective responsibility, even guilt, as a nation state, for the unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by National Socialism and the Third Reich. Their journey of atonement, at its soul, reflects their deep commitment to achieving true fraternity and humanity.

> No country today has been as brave and honest as Germany in encouraging its citizens and children to acknowledge its own history, and to learn from it the critical importance of respecting and embracing diversity and pluralism.

I learned during my months of study that getting to the point Germany has reached today was not at all that easy. After a generation or more of denial, it took decades of tortured soul-searching to arrive at the place the German people have now arrived in their journey of rare moral salience.

There are limitations to this journey, as I said. But that it has happened at all is its achievement. As Neiman observes, "A nation that erects a monument of shame for the evils of its history in its most prominent space is a nation not afraid to confront its own failures." No country today has been as brave and honest as Germany in encouraging its citizens and children to acknowledge its own history, and to learn from it the critical importance of respecting and embracing diversity and pluralism.

It is hard to imagine this happening in any other country of today's world. Think of what the United States would be if its most prominent monuments marked the momentous crimes of its history-slavery, lynching, racial segregation, mass incarceration, and the annihilation of Native Americans. Or countries of Western Europe highlighting monuments that acknowledged the crimes of colonialism. Or, in South Asia, memorials to mark the mass slaughter of people, mostly minorities, during the Partition riots, and, in India, the many pogroms and incidents of lynching that followed. Or, even more pertinently, monuments to mark millennia of violent crimes and discrimination against Dalits, indigenous people, and women.

Silence during the Holocaust

And yet, where is Germany today? Look at the staggering results of the 2024 elections to the European Parliament. In this election, the far-right Alternative for Germany raced past even the Social Democratic Party of Chancellor Olof Scholz. Winning 16.5% of the vote share, it secured the second largest vote share in Germany and led in all the five former East German states. Despite all that the German people have done-more, I repeat, than in any country in the contemporary world-to try to rebuild a humane democracy, how is the far-right the second largest party in Germany today, in power in many provinces, and straining at the leash to take over the federal government one day?

During my year in Germany, I noted much that we can admire and learn from the German people from the ways they dealt with the collective crimes of the Nazi period. Yet, I left the country that I came to love and admire with many troubling concerns about imperative tasks unfinished. These, I am convinced, must be confronted if the new social contract of fraternity and solidarity that the German people are attempting to craft is to be realised and to endure.

My first concern is that I believe there is still not enough collective introspection to acknowledge the culpability of large sections of ordinary Germans in Nazi crimes. What happened in those years was not merely the result of evil people "up there" led by Adolph Hitler. Germany slaughtered millions of innocent children, women, and men because of the great support Hitler enjoyed from overwhelming sections of the German people of every region, class, and gender. The Holocaust happened both because of the silence and the active support of the large majority of German people.

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It was easy to locate the locus of evil in Nazi Germany in Hitler and the top leadership of the Nazis. It has been much harder to look within the German society of that decade. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women participated in, or actively supported, genocidal crimes organised by the Nazi leadership. The Hitler Youth recruited most teenage boys, and there were many who reported on their neighbours. The military, the civil services, the church, intellectuals, professors, doctors, scientists, leaders of industry, artistes, and so on were culpable-the list is very long.

Historians who I spoke to in Germany estimate the active opposition to Hitler's regime was in the vicinity of 1% of the people. This does not mean that all the remaining 99% supported the Nazi genocidal project. Many were guilty because of their silence. Their weak defence that they did not know has worn thin-did they not know, or did they not want to know? Forced labour camps dotted all of Germany, and not just big businesses but also small enterprises like wayside bakeries and farms employed forced labour. Concentration camps were also not in the wilderness. People saw and inhaled the smoke from burning human bodies that rose daily to darken the skies from the chimneys. And people could not in all honesty claim to not know what the probable fate was of Jews who were marched out of places where they lived.

What then could be the reasons for their silence? The first was, indeed, fear. This is often cited as the defence by ordinary German citizens when agonising questions are asked of them by later generations. But fear was often an alibi rather than reason for silence. There is evidence that even within the uniformed forces, there occasionally were men who refused to join the enterprise of killing Jews, but they did not suffer drastically-they were just shifted to other responsibilities. Many quiet acts of resistance would not have resulted in severe punishment.

The second possible reason for silence could have been indifference. I am not a Jew, a Roma Sinti person, a homosexual, a Communist, a political dissident, a disabled person, or a homeless man. This will not happen to me. So why should I care?

A third reason was that many willingly profited from these crimes, such as by buying cheap properties expropriated from the Jews; filling jobs vacated by expelled Jews, including in universities; and opening small businesses in place of those that were earlier owned

by Jews. Prodigious profits were also made from forced labour, not just in big industry but also in small farms and bakeries.

But a fourth and the most culpable reason was that some people supported the project of fear, hate, discrimination, and ultimately extermination. Daniel Goldgahen in his harrowing treatise Hitler's *Willing Executioners* (Vintage, 1977) documents that most of the mass killings were not carried out by army soldiers but by the civil police and civilian recruits. There was no shortage of people who volunteered. He speaks, for instance, of men whose day job was to shoot maybe a hundred Jewish children, women, and men a day. They would typically return home in the evening, shower, and go out in the evening with a girl or with men friends. Next morning, they would return to the same task.

It is difficult to estimate precisely how many of the German people harboured active ideological support for the Third Reich and how many were fearful, indifferent, or profiteering bystanders. Historians were unwilling to make estimates, but some suggested that the first could be as many as 40% of the German people at that time.

I fear that while acknowledging the crimes of Nazi Germany, there is still too little acceptance of-and collective introspection about-the culpability of ordinary Germans in the excesses of National Socialism, including the overwhelming majority of German families. Historians estimated that maybe just 0.1% of Germans saved Jewish lives. But in a recent survey, more than 18% of young Germans spoke of how their grandparents had saved Jews!

On the question of culpability, I also wonder about whether various other sections of German society need to reflect more on their specific culpabilities of the past. For instance, has big business sufficiently atoned for the crime of mass forced labour? Or doctors and the medical profession for the policies and practices of eugenics and the culling of persons with disabilities? Or the Church for its intensely problematic role during the Nazi years? Or academia, cinema, and the arts for their ideological legitimisation of Nazism? They need to do this not only to embrace guilt but also to think about how they went so horribly wrong and assume responsibility for it not happening again.

Selective fight

My second major worry is whether the project of dealing with and coming to terms with their past is seen primarily as fighting anti-Semitism, or whether it has broadened into a fight against any form of anti-minority bigotry and discrimination. Too often this is seen as the historic responsibility of the German people to fight anti-Semitism, while in practice (not in principle) being indifferent or blind to or at least less concerned about other forms of anti-minority discrimination and violence.

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I worry (relatedly) about the signs of anti-Muslim sentiment that I found even among officials and organisations committed to fighting anti-Semitism. Do both official and societal battles against anti-Semitism not see their mandate to fight all forms of discrimination, against every minority? A large part of my own extended family is furious with me; some have cancelled me out of their lives, because of my public defence of India's Muslim minorities. They remind me that our families suffered unspeakable violence, including mass killings and rape, at the hands of Muslim mobs in the Partition violence of 1947 in what is now Pakistan. They say that after all of this personal history, I have gone to the "wrong side". They are unwilling to heed my answer-"After all that we suffered during Partition, who better than us can understand what it means to be targeted with hate and violence only because of their identity? So I am on the right side; it is you who are on the wrong side. Don't you see?"

That, in the end, it is not my identity that should drive my opposition to discrimination, but my ethics.

Another major anxiety that I have about Germany's "memory culture" is that there seems to me a problematic separateness and even an implied hierarchy in its official remembering. The memorials in Berlin to murdered disabled people, homosexuals, and Roma Sinti are separate, but also much smaller, more modest than the commanding memorial to murdered Jews. It seems to me important-ethically and politically-for German society to remember, reflect, and atone for each of these mass murders both separately and together. For the German people to build a humane and inclusive country, they need to introspect even more profoundly about, for instance, the intimacy of their culpability for the murder of persons with disabilities.

Historians spoke to me of families that not infrequently tacitly consented to giving up their disabled family members for "euthanasia". The Roma and Sinti people tell me that judges and police persons even decades after the Holocaust believed that they were culturally

criminal and deserved to die. And I watched an extraordinary film, Great Freedom (2021), about a homosexual man who was sentenced to a concentration camp. He survived it, only to return to prison in "democratic" West Germany, where homosexuality continued to be a crime for decades.

And it is only recently that Germany is having a belated debate about its disgraceful colonial history. Unlike the UK, France, and the Netherlands, Germans until recently almost forgot that their country had its own history of very cruel colonialism, with mass slaughter, concentration camps, and eugenics.

Does Germany respect diversity?

Finally, very significantly, I worry about problems with the question of what constitutes "being German". I think that if Germany is to be authentically democratic, it must willingly, bravely, and generously embrace, even welcome, diversity.

> White German society is still not fully ready to accept diversity as part of German identity. It is immigrants coming into Germany who are in a sense reforming the German nation.

Germany was after World War II still relatively homogenous, even more so after most surviving Jews left its borders (although it must be stressed that Jews in Germany were culturally integrated into society). Therefore, the Germans found it difficult to welcome immigrants. In West Germany, immigrants were called "guest workers"; the underlying notion was that we invite you to come to our country, to work, but then we expect you to go back to your land. Not just you, but even your children and their children who were born in Germany, and know no other country. East Germany cloaked its unwelcome in the garb of "socialist solidarity"; it welcomed workers from socialist countries like Vietnam, but wanted them to ultimately return to "build socialism" in their countries of origin.

Has this changed when more than an estimated quarter of Germans are today of immigrant background? I fear not nearly enough.

The requirement for immigrants who seek a German passport to not just learn the German language but also the "German way of life" remains to me a fraught idea. What is the German way of life? Is Germany multi-religious or Christian? Is it multi-cultural, or is there one dominant culture to which all prospective German citizens must adhere? Is it multi-lingual, or must all Germans be proficient in German before they are admitted into the German nation? Is there, and should there be, a hierarchy of belonging? Who belongs to the German nation, who does not belong, and what are the conditionalities of belonging? What is the place of people of colour, those not fluent in German, and believers in Islam, in Germany, an ageing country where these numbers will only swell more?

Germany also has around a million people of African descent, dating to before the rise in immigration in recent decades. Are they full and equal German citizens? In a recent survey of discrimination against Black people by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Germany and Austria were found to be the worst offenders in Europe with 64% people of African descent reporting that they felt discriminated against.

Is the idea of Germany, in practice, a German-speaking, white, culturally Christian, heterosexual country, and do all those who wish to belong to this nation but are not all or any of these, become people with lesser eligibility to belong, at least until they learn and assimilate? Given the Nazi obsession with racial purity, do we not see the pitfalls? I learned from many non-white Germans I spoke to that white German society is still not fully ready to accept diversity as part of German identity. It is immigrants coming into Germany who are in a sense reforming the German nation.

Germany and its Palestinian blindness

During the months that I spent studying Germany, no one could have predicted the genocidal war unleashed by Israel after a Hamas assault of 7 October 2023. But when it did come to pass, I found all of my fears of tasks still unfinished in Germany's memorial culture were sadly too well-founded.

In 15 months, the military actions of the Israeli state razed most of Gaza to rubble, killed women and children on a scale unseen in this century, targeted hospitals, health workers, schools, aid workers, and journalists, and used starvation and terminating water and electricity supplies as weapons.



Author Jonathan Cook writes in the *Middle East Eye*, "It was no surprise that, in rationalising its genocide in Gaza, Israel first spread wholly false stories that Hamas had baked babies alive in ovens, evoking the crematoria of Auschwitz … It is no surprise that Israeli popular culture has so dehumanised Palestinians that report after report finds those imprisoned by Israel face systematic torture, sexual abuse, and rape. Or that Israeli soldiers regard Palestinians as so vermin-like that, as western doctors who have volunteered in Gaza keep warning, Israeli snipers and drones appear to be shooting Gaza's children for sport."

The response in Germany to Palestine overturned, indeed, squandered so much of the moral advance it had made to atone for the crimes of the Holocaust. The multitude of crimes against humanity by the Israeli state did nothing to shake the support of the German establishment for it. It became abundantly clear that "Never Again", the resounding historic resolve after the Holocaust, did not extend to all people. The response of Germany and the entire Western establishment to the genocidal assault on the Palestinian people was Islamophobic, even perhaps racist.

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Soon after the war started, German Chancellor Scholz visited Israel and Egypt, and while declaring his country's solidarity with Israel, also said Germany's existence depends on that of Israel. It was Angela Merkel who had coined the phrase "reason of state" in German, meaning that the foundation of Germany is tied inextricably to the existence and security of Israel.

This resolve was interpreted to mean that pro-Palestinian protests were banned and suppressed across Germany. The official claim was that these were anti-Semitic. The German state refused to acknowledge that opposition to the policies of the Israeli government, especially the hard-right coalition currently in power, was not necessarily anti-Semitic. Protestors also included Jewish and left-leaning German groups. National Public Radio's Berlin correspondent Rob Schmitz reported, "So many people here are angry about this ban on rallies supporting Palestinians. They're saying that they do not support Hamas and only want to show support for families in Gaza, but they're not allowed to do that."Al Jazeera reported that even Germans who stood with Israel could not ignore Palestinian suffering.

Berlin schools were authorised to ban Palestinian flags and keffiyeh scarves and the pro-Palestinian slogan "From the river to the sea". Germany has the largest Palestinian diaspora in Europe, estimated at 300,000. But the protestors were not all Palestinian, or Muslim. German public broadcaster ZDF found in a poll that 61% respondents did not feel that Israel's military actions in Gaza were justified. German Green lawmaker Lamya Kaddor admitted to CNN that it was unfair to equate pro-Palestinian supporters with Hamas sympathisers in Europe. "Not every expression of solidarity with Palestine is support for Hamas; the desire for the Palestinians to have their own state and for peace is not anti-Semitic; a Palestinian flag is not a criminal offence."

The German government went further to suppress dissent. It passed a law adding a condition for people seeking naturalisation in Germany. They would now be mandatorily required to affirm Israel's right to exist. Welcoming these changes to German citizenship law, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser maintained, "We have also made it ... clear: Whoever doesn't share our values, will not be able to get a German passport. Here we have drawn a crystal clear red line and made the law much stronger than before. Anti-Semitism, racism and other forms of contempt for humanity rule out naturalisation. There is no tolerance for that." Again, there is the same confusion between political opposition to a regime and "racism" and "contempt for humanity".

Even more complicated is the German export of military arms to Israel. In 2023, there was a ten-fold rise in German arms exports to Israel, worth 326.5 million euros. This slowed down in 2024 in the face of lawsuits that the exports broke international law because the arms could be used for genocide and crimes against humanity The German defence in the International Court of Justice was awkward and unconvincing. "For every [arms export] licence that is granted, the German government carefully assesses whether there is a clear risk that the particular item subject to licensing would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, or grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949," the counsel said in court.

German-Palestinian academic Anna Younes, born and raised in East Berlin "right next to the wall", is scathing and agonised by these actions of the German government. She thinks that Germany's support "for the genocide in Gaza" has only served to show that "Palestinian lives … Muslim lives, Arab lives, and non-white lives in Europe and the Middle East" are expendable.

I recall how moved I was to witness a recording of the commemoration of the Holocaust Remembrance Day in January 2022. But author Cook searingly speaks of the hypocrisy of the West while commemorating the Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2025. The roll-call of leaders who attended the main ceremony at Auschwitz was impressive, including King Charles III, Scholz, and Emmanuel Macron. However, as Cook observes, Western leaders are determined to look back at the crimes of the past, but equally determined not to look at the crimes of the present-crimes they have been so deeply complicit in perpetrating.

Cook speaks of "an unwanted ghost at the commemorations. In fact, tens of thousands of ghosts. Those ghosts included the children shredded by US-supplied bombs; the children who slowly suffocated under the rubble of their destroyed homes; the children whose bodies were left to rot, picked apart by feral dogs, because snipers shot at anyone who tried to retrieve them; the children who starved to death and dying in their parents arms because they were seen as 'human animals', denied all food and water; the homeless babies who froze to death in plunging winter temperatures; and the premature babies left to die in their incubators after soldiers invaded hospitals and cut off the power".

At the foundation of German support to Israel is ultimately guilt. As a German said to Al Jazeera, "Almost every German has ancestors or relatives who were in some shape or form involved in the slaughter of six million Jews". But as Cook says, "The Holocaust has been turned into a shield that, rather than protecting others from becoming victims of genocide, is used to protect those in the West who wish to perpetrate it."

Learning from each other

When I started my fellowship to study how the German people dealt with their Nazi past, I was also looking for what Indian people could learn from Germany's journey of atonement. But as I went along, I increasingly began thinking about an imagined dialogue between the German and Indian people, and of learning from each other.

> Radical love is love, such that I suffer your pain and injustice as though it is mine.

What do I think the German people can profit from learning from India? I think that both Indian and German people-and indeed all of humankind-can learn from what is finest in India's civilisational practice. India has been brutal in its oppressions of caste and gender. However, at the same time, more than any other civilisation, it has been most comfortable in embracing diversity. Christianity came to India centuries before it came to Europe. Islam travelled to Indonesia from India, not Arabia. Eight major religions of the world originated or parked their caravans in India, and made the land their own. Each took from it, but gave richly to it as well.

So, briefly, let me talk of four major lessons I have learnt from what is best in my own country.

• The idea of equal belonging without conditionalities. You do not have to learn to be like us, the dominant majority, to be eligible to belong. We need to accept, respect, learn from, and, in the end, celebrate each other.

• Second is that the idea of secularism does not require the denial of religious faith, but instead equal respect for every set of religious faiths, including the denial of faith. The Abrahamic religions are sometimes (and I believe wrongly) interpreted as maintaining that "their" path is the only path to the divine. This interpretation makes it difficult to incorporate equal respect for other religious beliefs. In *The Argumentative Indian* (Penguin UK, 2006), Amartya Sen argues that the singular strength of the Indian philosophical tradition is the giving up of certainty, and the embracing of doubt, of the reality that I could be wrong. This tradition continued in ancient and medieval times, under Buddhist and Muslim rulers, in Indian and Sufi Islam.

• Third, that hatred cannot be fought with hatred-it will only deepen hatred further. Likewise, violence cannot be fought with violence. That too will embed violence more firmly. We need to find a new idiom of resistance to fight hate, based on love. A small example of this was our "Karwan e Mohabbat", or Caravan of Love, to respond to the epidemic of lynching that swept India not with hate, but with radical love. Much greater examples from recent history come from the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, and Nelson Mandela.

• To imagine and try to build a social contract founded on fraternity, solidarity, egalitarian compassion, and social caring, which must include, indeed, front-end the practice of radical love.

Let me elaborate this last. Fraternity as an idea is admittedly problematic because it literally means brotherhood, but what about sisterhood and siblings of other genders? The Hindi word in India's Constitution is much finer and more apt-*bandhuta*. Derived from Sanskrit, this literally is the idea that we belong to and with each other. We might be of different castes, classes, ethnicities, faiths, and genders, but we are still tied to each other.

There are many sibling ideas of fraternity. Some of these are empathy, or our capacity to imagine and feel the pain of the other as our own. Then there is what I call "egalitarian compassion", which is not compassion as charity given by the strong to the weak, but a relationship of shared pain between people of equal worth and dignity. At this moment, you may have suffered immense pain and loss, and I am there for you. But even as I do this, I am mindful that a day can come when I am the one in great suffering, and you will be there for me.

Another critical sibling idea of fraternity is social caring, which to me-paraphrasing Noam Chomsky-is the idea that we should take care of each other.

But perhaps most of all I speak of the idea of radical love-a love that is based on great courage and conviction.

To explain the practice of radical love, let me turn to Gandhi's last months, the most painful but also the most beautiful chapter in his life. His country was torn apart, smouldering with fires of hate that seemed entirely out of control. The smoke from these blocked out all light of hope and kindness. A million people slaughtered each other. Pakistan, torn out of India, was founded as an Islamic country.

Gandhi's last and most significant battle was against those who wanted to make India a mirror image of Pakistan, a Hindu supremacist country, unwelcoming to Muslims. Gandhi fought for India to be a country that belonged equally to people of every faith and identity, including Muslims. For this, he defied the rage of millions of people who had lost their loved ones and their homelands forever. His last heroic battles for peace and forgiveness, his ringing call to Muslims to not leave for Pakistan, and the spilling of his own blood when a Hindu supremacist assassin felled him, quelled the fires of hate that had engulfed the subcontinent.

It was Gandhi's radical love that began the healing of my broken nation. Radical love is love, such that I suffer your pain and injustice as though it is mine. It is love so powerful and resolute that for your defence I am prepared to go to prison, and if necessary, even give up my life.

It is this radical love that alone that can mend and heal our broken world.

Harsh Mander is a human rights activist, peace worker, writer, and teacher. He works with survivors of mass violence and hunger, and homeless persons and street children.

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