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From Auschwitz to Treblinka: 'Never again' is The Unmistakable Lesson of Holocaust

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Passing through the arch bearing the inscription meaning “Work Will Set You Free”, one is engulfed with diverse thoughts and emotions. The sea of diverse and youthful faces at the main entrance might give the impression that one was about to enter a monument of past glory. But the remains of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau are anything but glorious.

Waves of youth silently pass through the gate that symbolized and immortalized the Holocaust in numerous documentaries, films, exhibitions and paintings. Only a few decades ago, thousands of Jews and others walked through that deceptive banner but never returned alive. They were brought from different parts of Poland and other countries occupied by the Nazi army and were shot, burnt, gassed and cremated.

However, years of knowledge is insufficient to comprehend and convey human emotions as one passes through the brick houses that once briefly hosted human beings. Despite the presence of hundreds of fresh and lively youths, the main concentration camp at Auschwitz had an eerie silence except for the hushed tones of a couple of Spanish-speaking tour guides, who were explaining the gory details of internment cells, crematorium and other torture chambers. With silence and curiosity in their eyes, the visitors, mostly in their teens were trying to connect with the past through selfies.

Writing in *The New York Times* in 1958, A.M. Rosenthal observed “No News from Auschwitz”. Things have changed a lot since then and for good. On that milder Wednesday morning, there

were some elderly people and a handful of senior citizens but the vast majority of visitors were youths. They had come to Poland from different parts of the world for the World Youth Day, organized by the Catholic Church in Krakow in the last week of July. An estimated three million youths took part in the week-long event. Despite their exuberating energy and their presences in thousands, many of them were quietly reflecting of the “banality of evil” as German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt chose to depict.

Because of the presence of such a large international audience at the Auschwitz museum, which is about 80 kilometres from Krakow, it was closed for two weeks. Indeed, the visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp almost did not happen until the last moment and one needed special permission for entering the camp area. While some Spanish-speaking visitors had guides, others were left with ‘paper guides’ in their respective languages. At the same time, the third World Youth Day not only brought thousands of Catholic youths from across the globe but also Pope Francis, who visited Auschwitz two days later.

As one passes by the buildings at the main camp and the barbed-fences across the vast auxiliary concentration camp at Birkenau (also known as Auschwitz-II), one cannot but reflect on the burden of history. Hasty efforts to destroy the vast camp are testimony to the depths to which the civilization had plunged only a few decades ago.

Cities like Jerusalem, Berlin and Washington have Holocaust memorials and some have recreated the crowded bunkers of Auschwitz and poignant and lonely wagon which brought the Jews in their thousands. Though important, they are incomparable to the bare reality of Auschwitz whose silent red bricks reflect and echo the cries and agonies of thousands of their former inmates, who never survived. Death is inevitable and unavoidable but at these camps, death was invited, inflicted and hastened as a form of state-policy and was executed with a scientific precision and racist justification.

If Auschwitz was crowded with the youths, the trip to Treblinka three days later was a different experience. Except for one large Hebrew-speaking group and a few smaller families including some children, the memorial at the former extermination camp was quiet and empty. A large memorial rock at the centre where the crematorium once stood was surrounded by about 17,000 stones of different shapes and sizes symbolizing the Polish Jewish communities whose members were killed at this camp. The only exception is the stone marking the Polish Jewish educator Janusz Korczak (also known as Henryk Goldszmit) who refused freedom when 192 children at his orphanage were sent to the Warsaw ghetto. He accompanied them first to the ghetto and then eventually chose to die with them in Treblinka in August 1942.

The contrasts between Auschwitz and Treblinka are unmistakable. If the former is an open area, the Treblinka site is shrouded among deep forests and tall pine trees. Unlike Auschwitz which has the remnants of the atrocities, Treblinka camp was completely destroyed by the Nazis. The

memorial that stands today at Treblinka evokes the memory of sad history and tries to connect with the past. Despite the mild and cloudy weather and impending rains and rainbows, even birds do not disturb the visitors. This gives one the space, time and silence for calmer reflection and introspection. The guide who proclaims her moral but non-religious lifestyle informs that visitors to Treblinka are rare. A less crowded Auschwitz and crowded Treblinka would not be in sync; it would have transformed the former in a ghost town and the latter into a picnic spot.

Though smaller and remote, Treblinka was as notorious as others. It operated only for a shorter time between July 1942 and August 1943, but between 700,000-900,000 Jews were killed here as against at least 1.1 million who were executed, gassed and cremated at Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945. Whether one is familiar with the history of Holocaust or not, a visit to Auschwitz or Treblinka is a numbing experience. At the end of the day, human morality and behaviour are a result of culture and society but more than that they are also individual choices as the tour guide reminded.

While central and Eastern Europe is littered with them, Nazis established some of the most notorious labour and concentration camps in Poland. Their recognition and remembrance by the Polish society were marred by the ideological divide of the Cold War and internal turmoil during the Communist era. It was only after its transition to democracy since 1989 one could notice an open and greater Polish recognition of its troubled and tormented history under the Nazi Germany.

Though these camps were located and operated on the Polish soil, they were anything but Polish. Indeed a large number of Poles were also killed in these camps. Therefore, the expression “Polish death camps” evokes considerable resentment within the country due to its ahistoric nature. Last week, the Polish government approved a bill that seeks a prison term of up to three years to anyone using phrases like “Polish death camps” to refer to Auschwitz and other camps that the Nazi Germany established and operated in occupied Poland during the Second World War.

Passing through the ruins of the labour camps in Birkenau, one’s phonetic skills are tested and treated. The youth speak French, Spanish, Russian, German, Chinese, Korean and Hebrew and there were occasional exchanges in Arabic as well. There were people from Asia as well as Africa and Latin America. Among the thousands of visitors one did not see or hear any Indians or people of Indian origin. This rekindles the remoteness of the Holocaust to India and its people even as one cannot miss *Mein Kampf* displayed prominently in many bookstalls, especially at railway stations.

Moreover, Indians do not figure in the four typologies of people who are commonly associated with the Holocaust, namely, perpetrators, victims, bystanders and rescuers. Far removed from the

destruction of the European Jewry during the Second World War, the Indian nationalists were fighting liberation from the British and had little time or inclination to understand the depths and magnitude the Holocaust.

In a belated move marking the 60th anniversary of the end of the world war, in November 2005 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring 27 January (the day Soviet Red Army liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945) as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This day commemorates six million Jews, two million Roma people, quarter of a million differently-abled people as well as about 9,000 members of LGBT community who were killed by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War. Though New Delhi is a party to this UN decision, the Holocaust Day is yet to become a part of the official Indian calendar. Coming a day after 26 January, such a commemoration will also add sobriety to the gaiety of the Republic Day.

With rampant Holocaust denial and trivialization, the presence of such a large number of youths at Auschwitz is a sign of hope. With dwindling number of survivors (Pope Francis met a few of them at the same venue a couple of days later), only these youth could carry forward the knowledge of the Holocaust and its unmistakable lesson: Never Again.

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