

Natural disasters around the world have become headlines in our daily news. At a time when one loses faith in human nature due to reports of violence, genocide and ethnic cleansing, such disasters serve as a reminder to us that we are still human beings and need to extend a helping hand to those in need. I am heartened by fund raisers to help our neighbors in Haiti, a country which many of us hardly know except as a news item or a speck in the world map.

I am moved by the enthusiasm and sincerity with which our community members from three of our ethnic organizations, Nandi Kannada Koota, South Florida Chapter of Telugu Association of North America and Then Poovaga Tamil Sangam, representing three distinct cultures from the Southern part of India, have united in this common cause to help our brothers and sisters in Haiti. After all we are all one family created by the same divine power. I will end my talk with a personal anecdote from my childhood which conveys a potent message to all of us..

I was a student at an elementary school in Chennai, then called Madras. Mahatma Gandhi was coming to Chennai to address a prayer meeting and collect fund to help the victims of ethnic violence in the Northern part of India. Oops! Have I disclosed my age unwittingly? So what? I am not worried because I know all of you follow and respect the dictum: Age before beauty! Let me continue with my story. As a very vocal student of the school, I was chosen to head the collection of funds in the school. As the fund raising was announced in advance, students had come with a rupee or two to donate. As I was making my rounds in the play ground of the school during the lunch hour, one of my classmates approached me hesitantly and said, "I have one anna (which is one sixteenth part of the rupee) to give which is my lunch money". I knew she came from a family which was headed by her brother who worked in a coffee shop as a server; she used to buy a packet of peanuts and a small cotton candy for lunch everyday from a cart vendor at the school gate. She did not mind giving up her lunch for a good cause. I took the money. In the evening, I went with my headmistress Mrs. Govindarajan to Thakkar Baba Vidyala in Mambalam where the prayer meeting was held. When our school's name was called, I went to the platform where Gandhiji was sitting. I bowed to him and gave my collection. He gave me a small copper coin pendant with his photo in front and Hare Ram written at the back. On receiving it, I asked him, "Can I have another one?" The volunteers around him were annoyed at my insolence but Gandhiji asked me why did I need a second one. I told him that it was for my friend who had sacrificed her lunch and gave her lunch money. I hastily added, sensing the displeasure of those around him, that if he did not have another coin I would give my coin to her. Gandhi with a mesmerizing smile said, "child, here is another coin and tell your friend that God loves her". I learned a valuable lesson then that God loved those who loved others. I, therefore, want all of you, young and old, to take with you an important lesson from today's event: "Service to humanity is service to God. Manava Seva, Mahadeva Seva",

Finally I thank the Board Of Trustees of our Temple for giving us readily the space to conduct this fund raiser.

Thank you once again for participating and donating your time, effort and money. May God bless us all

