

"RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY IN THE 21ST CENTURY"

Inaugural Lecture by Hon'ble Mrs Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson, UPA

CAPETOWN

23rd AUGUST 2007

Vice Chancellor Professor Ndebele,
Distinguished faculty members,
My young friends,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I

I feel privileged to inaugurate the Gandhi Lecture Series being organized by the Government of India in major universities of the world.

It is indeed an honour to be here at this esteemed centre of learning situated amidst such breathtaking beauty.

I stand before you in a spirit of humility to speak about one of the greatest figures of history, whose experiments with truth began in your country. For me as an Indian, a visit to South Africa is a pilgrimage.

The world knows greatness in many forms. There are the great, who won celebrated military victories. There are the great, who have deepened our knowledge of the physical universe. There are the great who have helped us understand the workings of the human mind. There are the great who by their inventions have transformed the way we live.

Mahatma Gandhi stands in a category of his own. He too was an inventor but of a different kind—an inventor of a unique way of protest, of struggle, of emancipation and of empowerment. His generalship lay not in making war but in waging peace. His weaponry was not arms and ammunition but "truth force", "satyagraha" as he called it. The moral universe was his field of action. He explored a whole new dimension of the human psyche—its capacity to willingly accept suffering, even unto death, not to attain the kingdom of heaven, but a better world here and now, by bringing about social and political change.

II

On June 7, 1893, a young Indian barrister, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, was evicted from a train at Pietermaritzburg station for being a non-white. "I have never understood", he later remarked, "how any man can derive pleasure from the humiliation of another". A spark was lit which was to change the course of world history.

On September 11, 1906, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi launched the first satyagraha campaign from the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg. He issued a clarion call for nonviolent resistance against racial discrimination, oppression and injustice. He described satyagraha as "a force born of truth and the love of nonviolence", a moral equivalent of war.

After 21 years in South Africa where his views took shape and were tested and refined, he carried the torch of satyagraha to India. The world saw with amazement how this unique technique energized millions of men and women to bring a mighty empire to its knees.

III

Mahatma Gandhi, the person was a many-sided personality to an unusual degree.

He was a man of peace who did not hesitate to fight for what he believed to be right.

He was a political strategist who shunned conventional politics and held no office.

He was a thinker and a philosopher who was, first and foremost, a man of action.

He was extraordinarily pragmatic and adapted himself to changing situations without compromising or abandoning his basic values.

Mahatma Gandhi respected tradition. Yet, he was also an iconoclast.

He was deeply religious. But his was a religion that drew from every faith, a religion that was all-inclusive.

He embodied spirituality. But his was a spirituality rooted in an abiding concern for the poor and the deprived, of service to and empowerment of the disadvantaged and underprivileged.

He was impatient for cataclysmic change. Yet, he shunned violence in any form as an instrument to force the pace of change. In his own words “nonviolence is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction, devised by the ingenuity of man”.

The popular picture of Gandhi is that of a highly solemn and earnest person. His mission was indeed a lofty one but his personality was full of lightness and humour. Once, reacting to criticism that he was wearing merely his usual loin cloth, sandals and shawl when invited to tea by King George and Queen Mary, he said, "The King had enough on for both of us."

Although Mahatma Gandhi was a true revolutionary, he was that rare exception – a revolutionary who could laugh.

IV

A common response to Mahatma Gandhi—to Gandhian thought, word and deed—is that it was extraordinarily effective given the times in which he lived. Today’s world, it is often argued, is dramatically different, and while Mahatma Gandhi is certainly worthy of continued admiration and awe, it would be naïve and unrealistic to expect his methods to be effective today.

I beg to disagree.

I am glad to say that an increasing number of young people in India and elsewhere are today turning to him to seek solutions to contemporary concerns through individual and collective action.

Here in South Africa, Nelson Mandela is a shining embodiment of that vision. The whole world celebrates the achievement of him and his fellow freedom fighters.

It is true that the world of today is vastly different from the world of Mahatma Gandhi. The fundamental issues he was confronted with, namely colonial subjugation, has disappeared from our world. Racial discrimination too has been blunted significantly.

At the same time, new threats to peace, harmony and stability have emerged. And it is one of the paradoxes of the 21st Century that while the establishment of peace has become the

world's single greatest imperative, the traditional instruments of preserving peace have been found to be increasingly ineffective. Whether it is ethnic nationalism or religious chauvinism, economic inequality or military might -- all of them powerful drivers of conflict in today's world -- there is no doubt that we are in great need of a new paradigm for solving conflicts.

Today, we face the challenge posed by continuing confrontation in the name of religion and ethnicity. At its worst, this is terrorism, which inflicts untold suffering on innocent women, men and children.

We confront also the challenge of growing inequality both within and amongst nations. Economic disparities are accentuated by lack of access to education, health and food security. To these are now added the new threat of environmental degradation and climate change, as well as new diseases like HIV-AIDS.

The question to ask is not whether Mahatma Gandhi is relevant or not. The real issue is whether we have the courage and strength of mind to follow in his footsteps, whether we are prepared to live our lives by what he preached and most importantly, practiced.

The simple truth is that instead of diminishing in relevance, Mahatma Gandhi has actually become all the more pertinent in the 21st century. Whichever the challenge we confront, you can be sure that the Gandhian way is a real, live option, an option that informs and illuminates. But we would be doing him great injustice if we didn't interpret, in contemporary terms, what he spelt out in the context of his times. He would have wanted us to experiment and find our own way without compromising our fundamental beliefs.

Mahatma Gandhi bequeathed to us three guiding principles: Ahimsa (or nonviolence), Satyagraha (or the force born of truth and nonviolence) and Sarvodaya (or upliftment of all). It is the value of these principles that we have to rediscover if we want to deal effectively with today's challenges.

V

Let me take the challenge of inequality first.

The essence of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy was the empowerment of every individual, irrespective of class, caste, colour, creed or community. To him, extreme poverty was itself a form of violence.

Democracy has become the preferred form of government in the 21st century, yet sadly his "notion of democracy" is far from being universally accepted.

We now recognize that political liberty must go hand in hand with economic progress. But to be truly meaningful, this growth has to be equitable. As with political power, a few cannot enjoy the gains of economic progress, while the many do not get their due share.

Economic growth has also to be consistent with the imperatives of environmental conservation and stewardship. But sustainability does not mean that vast numbers of people are denied better material well-being and living standards.

What is the Gandhian perspective on economic growth?

It is that wealth created and generated must contribute, first and foremost, to a larger social

purpose and cause. By stating this in today's world, we do not negate the principles of profit and commerce. But we do underline the need to use a part of the wealth created, to better the quality of life of those whose voices remain unheard.

Observing the rush to consumerism that is so evident today, Mahatma Gandhi would also most likely have reminded us that a modicum of austerity would not be out of place.

For many, Mahatma Gandhi was and continues to be the ultimate touchstone of moral authority. This means judging all our actions – in word and deed – on the touchstone of public purpose. Public purpose itself has to be judged against the yardstick of the welfare and well-being of the poorest and most deprived in the land.

VI

Let me now turn to conflict.

Here I would straightaway say that Mahatma Gandhi would give primacy to the search for the underlying causes of conflict. Violence can be wanton and senseless. But often, conflicts can be symptoms of a deeper malaise that needs to be understood. This is not to romanticize violence—Mahatma Gandhi never did. But it is to analyze why it occurs and address it at its very source and root.

The political discourse, these days, is centred on a global war on terror. And indeed, terrorists who target innocent men, women and children deserve no quarter.

But today's enemies are not just individuals, they are also ways of thinking and perceiving the world itself. Countering violence with even more violence does not provide a durable solution. Whatever else Mahatma Gandhi may have done in our circumstances, surely strengthening the well-springs of discourse and dialogue must play a central part in it. And he would have gone even further. He would have looked within himself. For him, external engagement went hand in hand with internal interrogation. In reaching out, he would first and foremost have asked himself the question—"to what extent am I myself responsible"?

If democracies are going to wage a war against terrorism, the measures that are adopted, should be consistent with and not contrary to the values of democracy. This is in keeping with the Gandhian consonance of ends and means. "There are many causes that I am prepared to die for", he said, "but no causes that I am prepared to kill for".

What would the Gandhian perspective be on the so-called "clash of civilizations" about which we hear so much these days?

I am reminded here of his response to the query of a foreign journalist who asked what he thought of Western civilization. "It would be a good idea", he answered.

Actually, Mahatma Gandhi would straightway and summarily reject the very idea of such a clash. He never accepted the exclusivist approach to religion, culture or civilization.

Mahatma Gandhi fervently believed in the pivotal role of religion in every-day life. He saw it as an ethical and moral mooring to all our actions – private and public. But his was a faith that drew from every religion, a faith that was all-inclusive. When asked about his religious belief, he said, "yes I am a Hindu. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Jew".

VII

Ladies and Gentlemen

And what of the future?

Conflict and inequality seem an inevitable part of the human condition. Mahatma Gandhi's greatest lesson to the world was that this need not be destructively so. Conflicts can be resolved and inequalities can be contained. But without worthy means, worthy ends can never be attained. Will the 21st century see the fulfillment of Mahatma Gandhi's vision? Or will non-violence be viewed as outdated and utopian? All around us, we witness that violent means do not bring about lasting change, that violence cannot bring about peace. Violence only begets violence and spirals on.

It is my fervent hope that the world will embrace Gandhian truth and action and that you, my young friends here, will be among its torchbearers.

Thank you.