

Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy in Contemporary World

(Address by Amb. Rajiv Bhatia at the celebration of the International Day of Non-Violence at UNESCAP: Bangkok, 2 October 2015)

H. E. Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, Executive Secretary of UNESCAP; Mr. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Ambassador of India to Thailand and PR to UNESCAP; Excellencies; Members of Diplomatic corps and UN agencies, Members of Indian Associations, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to the organizers of this special event. Your invitation to address this distinguished assembly is a singular honour. Six years ago as I prepared to retire from India's diplomatic service after a 37 year-long innings, I did not at all imagine that I would one day have the opportunity to speak at the prestigious UNESCAP complex. It is a real privilege to celebrate the International Day of Non-Violence here, together with the rest of the world. My felicitations to you all on this special occasion.

I specially thank Amb. Shringla who seems to believe that a retired diplomat should not be allowed to rest for long; rather he should be encouraged to work harder than before!

Gandhi – key to India

May I begin with Gandhi's immortal words:

There are many causes that I am prepared to die for, but no causes that I am prepared to kill for.

At the outset, let me confess that I am neither a Gandhian in the full sense of the term nor even an expert on Gandhian philosophy.

But, I have been a dedicated student of the Gandhiana, the vast and ever-growing corpus of literature relating to his life, times, work, ideas and impact. One has utilized Gandhi as a valuable tool to understand the soul of India as well as to interpret, explain and represent India in different parts of the world. Above all, I believe in the reality of Gandhi as a universal man. His appeal was by no means confined to Indian shores alone. It is my conviction that Gandhi's relevance in the 21st century has increased, not diminished. Hence introspecting on what he stood for is neither an empty ritual nor a mere intellectual pastime. It is truly an occasion to reflect on the finest elements of the world's heritage, and

to consider how it can be deployed to promote a safe and fulfilling future for our children and grandchildren.

The proposal to celebrate Gandhi Jayanti – 2 October – emanated from an international conference, held in New Delhi in January 2007, to mark the first centenary of the Satyagraha movement, launched by Gandhi in South Africa in 1907. In June 2007, the UN General Assembly considered a draft resolution, with 140 countries as co-sponsors. The wide and diverse sponsorship of the resolution was a confirmation – if confirmation was needed at all – of the universal respect for Mahatma Gandhi. In adopting it, the UNGA hailed the International Day of Non-Violence as an occasion to ‘disseminate the message of non-violence, including through education and public awareness.’ It reaffirmed ‘the universal relevance of the principle of non-violence’ and the desire ‘to secure a culture of peace, tolerance, understanding and non-violence.’ As Mahatma Gandhi said:

Non-Violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.

His multi-dimensionality

Was he a sage who stumbled into politics? Was he a politician who masqueraded as a saint? Or was he both? The debate may go on, but there is consensus that Gandhi can be best understood only as a multi-dimensional man. He was ‘a many-sided personality to an unusual degree,’ as an expert put it.

Gandhi left India for South Africa as a young, brief-less barrister who had been trained in the UK. He invented and perfected the doctrine and craft of Satyagraha (i.e. passive resistance based on the force of Truth) on South African soil, in order to advance the welfare of Indian community. At the same time, he raised a volunteer medical corps and personally nursed the wounded in the Anglo-Boer War. After 21 years there, he returned home as a famous figure, but he found India an unfamiliar, if not an alien, land. Yet, he soon established himself as the leader of the Congress Party and turned popular discontent against the British Raj into a mass movement – of the kind history had not witnessed before.

As a politician, he insisted on adherence to ethical values. He was a thinker and a practical man, an idealist and a realist. He drew inspiration from the past, but dreamt and prepared for the future. He was opposed to mindless industrialism, but had no problem in using trains and ships, clocks and public

address systems. Above all, he was a man of God, religious to the core, who believed in respecting all other faiths.

Modern India's fundamental convictions – democracy and decision through discussion and consensus; tolerance and secularism; pluralism and inclusive development – owe much to Gandhi and also to those who helped mould his personality and philosophy – people like Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Thoreau. He drank from many wells of wisdom, including the Gita, the Bible and the Koran. Later, he impacted on those who in the course of time became influential leaders themselves – Jawaharlal Nehru, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and many others.

Political contribution

To my mind, Gandhi's biggest achievement was to lead India's freedom struggle and bring it to a successful conclusion through peaceful and non-violent struggle, without alienating the people who colonized India for long. Under his inspiring leadership, the nation climbed up three steps – the Non-cooperation movement, Civil disobedience movement and 'Quit India' movement – in order to attain the goal of independence on 15 August 1947. When finally freedom dawned, he chose not to become the president or the prime minister but to serve ordinary men and women who faced the danger of violence from their own neighbours. He became the firewall against communal strife that shook India. His tragic assassination on 30 January 1948 was mourned the world over.

Gandhi believed that India's freedom should be part of a larger phenomenon – the liberation of Asia and Africa from the tentacles of colonialism. This explains why during the freedom struggle as well as after the attainment of independence, India worked steadfastly until exploitation, injustice and inequality ended elsewhere.

Sixty-eight years later, India continues to march forward on the path of progress – political and economic, wedded to the goal of inclusive development, protection of pluralism and promotion of tolerance. A lion's share of the credit for India's success goes to Gandhi and what he stood for.

Other roles

Time will not permit me to go into detail about his views on economics, ethics, work as a moral crusader, and his contribution as a social reformer. Suffice it is to stress here that his appeal extended well beyond the political arena. The

empowerment of the weak and women was of great importance to him. He recognized the potential of women power during his sojourn in South Africa. He learnt much from his own wife – Kasturba. ‘To call women the weaker sex is a libel, it is men’s injustice to women’, he said.

Gandhi’s ultimate success was his identification with the common Indian people. He achieved this to a much larger degree than any other leader could do, whether in India or abroad. The Mahatma saw himself as ‘the humblest servant’ of India and humanity. He stood for international peace and cooperation. He was also a great believer in the power of education, the need for cleanliness, for punctuality and the value of time, and probity in public life. In essence, he represented the soul-force which the British rulers and his other opponents found impossible to overcome.

As Narayan Desai, a well-known Gandhian expert, suggested, it is best to think of Gandhi ‘comprehensively’, covering his spirituality, constructive work and political activities that were ‘connected with the idea of searching for Truth.’

Mahatma’s humour

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his autobiography that those who did not know Gandhi personally might think that the latter was ‘a priestly type, extremely puritanical, long-faced, Calvinistic, and a kill-joy....’ In fact, Gandhi was quite different. ‘His smile is delightful, his laughter is infectious, and he radiates light-heartedness. There is something childlike about him which is full of charm,’ Nehru added.

Gandhi spent many years in jails of the British Raj. He called them ‘His Majesty’s Hotel or Guest House.’ He once received a letter from Tolstoy. It was in Russian. He sent a reply written in Gujarati. ‘Gandhi’s sense of humour’, wrote an expert, ‘made Tolstoy realise that the English language would have bridged the minds of the Russian and the Gujarati!’

Gandhi went in his loincloth to meet the King at the Buckingham Palace. When asked if he was not a bit underdressed for the occasion, he replied: ‘His Majesty had enough clothes on for both of us!’

When a reporter asked him what he thought of Western civilization, he famously replied: ‘I think it would be a good idea.’

And, finally, a joke about Gandhi. The following conversation took place in a class on Indian history:

Teacher: What happened in 1869?

Student: Mahatma Gandhi was born.

Teacher: What happened in 1873?

Student: Mahatma Gandhi became four-year old.

Personal Journey, with Gandhi

At this stage, dear friends, let me take you on a brief stroll down memory lane in order to experience how Gandhi was present wherever I served India as its diplomatic representative.

In 1975, i.e. forty years ago, as a young diplomat, I listened to D.N. Chatterjee, the Indian ambassador in Paris and an erudite man, say on Gandhi Jayanti that the Mahatma made more sense ‘when you are sixty rather than when you are thirty.’ If so, I suppose it is our fault not to introduce Gandhi to the younger generation properly. In 1996, I paid attention to Ovide Mercredi, then Chief of the Assembly of the First Nations in Canada, as he delivered the inaugural Mahatma Gandhi Lecture on Non-Violence at the McMaster University at Hamilton. Three years later, while visiting Mombasa in Kenya, I found local Indian community leaders, both Hindus and Muslims, lamenting that their youngsters knew little about Gandhi. From this emerged the plan to celebrate 2 October 1999 through a series of public events in Mombasa and Nairobi. It was executed perfectly.

A few years later, I found myself in a one-to-one interaction in Yangon with a global icon, Aung San Suu Kyi who was then under house arrest. The meeting took place on Gandhi’s death anniversary – 30 January. As we talked about him, she recalled growing up in a house located near Gandhi Smriti in New Delhi. At the time her mother served as the Burmese ambassador to India.

From Myanmar, we moved to Mexico. I was happy to visit Gandhi’s statue in the Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. Laura Alanis, a Mexican journalist, remarked in April 2008 that the principles of truth and non-violence to which Gandhi was committed, transcended time and were as relevant today as they were during his lifetime. Incidentally over 70 countries have installed Gandhi’s statues.

My best Gandhi-experiences were reserved for the last posting – South Africa. The day I visited Pietermaritzburg railway station and stood quietly at the spot where Gandhi was unfairly thrown out from his first class compartment on 7 June 1893, I felt I was visiting the original pilgrimage site from where emerged the Ganges of India's freedom struggle. I should add that this visit was ably arranged by none other than Amb. Shringla who then served as India's consul general in Durban.

At an exclusive meeting with me in Johannesburg in March 2007, Nobel Laureate Nelson Mandela spoke passionately about the Mahatma. Mandela was an ardent admirer who explained Gandhi's contribution to South Africa in an authentic manner. Elsewhere, he called him 'a sacred warrior', stressing that in a world driven by strife, Gandhi's message of peace might hold the key to human survival.

Question of relevance

The quintessence of the Gandhian thought - the constant striving by man towards divinity - has obvious relevance. Faced as we are with the scourge of violence, terrorism, extremism, selfishness, greed, domination and environmental degradation, we need to reflect on Gandhian values. Distressing television images day after day point to the need for us to return to Gandhi.

He stood for liberty, ethics in public life, equality and humanism. Human beings may fall short of his ideals, but he provided the yardstick without which we would find it difficult even to measure our flaws and shortcomings. He may aptly be called the beacon for our ships, now and in the future. Martin Luther King once said that Gandhi was inevitable if humanity was to make progress. He added that we would ignore Gandhi's message at our peril.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks frequently about Gandhi. He recently observed that the world currently faced two major challenges, terrorism and climate change, and the solution to both could be found in the life and thought of the Mahatma.

What Gandhi means to me

I am happy to note the sizable presence of youth amidst us. Many of you probably want to know: what does Gandhi mean to this speaker? Here is the short answer: we may note five take-aways from his life as he had said: 'My life is my message'

- Every human being has seeds of greatness in him/her. Choose the right values and adhere to good principles, and they will take care of the rest.
- Truth and Non-violence, Satyagraha and Sarvodaya are not just ideals; they represent practical wisdom, as Gandhi showed amply.
- It is not enough for us to take care of ourselves and our families. We should promote the welfare of our neighbours, community, nation and humankind. It is the duty of the strong to help the weak and the vulnerable.
- We should develop a democratic temper, anchored in genuine tolerance of others' opinions. Talking is good, but listening is better. 'I do not agree with you, but I shall defend to death your right to say it', should be our guiding principle.
- Respecting the Nature should come naturally to us. 'There is enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed', said Gandhi. If we injure and destroy wild life, plants and trees, rivers and oceans, we are destroying ourselves.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by stating that you have been a great audience. Thank you very much for paying rapt attention to me. I know you did this to respect the memory of one of the greatest human beings and world leaders – Mahatma Gandhi.

I wish to conclude the address with another quotation from him that should inspire us all:

We may never be strong enough to be entirely nonviolent in thought, word and deed. But we must keep nonviolence as our goal and make strong progress towards it.
