

THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF NON-VIOLENCE (2 OCTOBER) – REMEMBERING MAHATMA GANDHI

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It gives me great pleasure to participate in the United Nations Academy hosted by the United Nations Association of Hungary. The lecture sessions and consultation provide participants, specially our young friends and colleagues, an opportunity to discuss and debate some of the major global issues that are currently on the agenda of the United Nations. I would like to congratulate the United Nations Association of Hungary for having organised this programme.

The proposal for the United Nations to declare an International Day of Non-Violence, originated at an International Conference on “Peace, Non-Violence and Empowerment – Gandhian Philosophy in the 21st Century” that was convened in India in January 2007, to commemorate the centenary of the Satyagraha Movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa. Conference participants included national and international leaders, noble laureates, academicians and practitioners of Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy. The Declaration issued by the Conference emphasized the contemporary relevance of Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings. One hundred and thirty seven countries led by India, co-sponsored a Resolution at the United Nations General Assembly entitled “Culture of Peace”, which reaffirms the “universal relevance of the principle of non-violence and seeks to promote a culture of peace, tolerance and understanding”. The Declaration, adopted unanimously by the Assembly declared 2nd October, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, as the International Day of Non-Violence. The first International Day of Non-Violence was celebrated last year throughout the world. Governments, NGOs and civil society organisations came together to create greater awareness and the great power of the principles of non-violence.

I am also happy to inform you that the Central European University is organising an International Conference on Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy and teachings, entitled “*Gandhi in a Globalised World: Contemporary Relevance of Gandhian Thought*” during 1-3 December, 2008. Eminent academicians and scholars from India and the world will debate and discuss this theme with specific reference to Central and Eastern Europe. I would invite you to participate in this Conference.

More than any other Indian, it is the name of Mahatma Gandhi that strikes a responsive chord in the hearts of people all over the world. An apostle of peace and non-violence, his message has relevance, across frontiers and over the ages.

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Perhaps, never more so than now when we see our world driven by conflict and violence, poverty, discrimination and injustice and environmental degradation. Einstein said of the great soul and I quote, “As a leader of his people, unsupported by any outward authority; a politician whose success rests not upon craft or mastery of technical devices, but simply on the convincing power of his personality; a victorious fighter who has always scorned the use of force; a man of wisdom and humility, who has devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people... a man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human being, and thus at all times risen superior. Generations to come, it may be, will scarcely believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”.

Such a man was Mahatma Gandhi, Father of our Nation, who delivered India and her people from the colonial yoke into freedom and liberation through a mass non-violent movement for which there is no parallel in human history. A nation long suppressed, responded to the humiliation and suffering imposed by a colonial power not by violence or hatred but by peaceful protests and civil disobedience which ultimately culminated in India’s independence.

For Gandhiji, non-violence was not a mere political weapon or strategy. It was a deep rooted conviction, the practice of which required great courage in the face of adversity and fearlessness before brute force. He said that “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”. He had developed this weapon in South Africa to protest the laws that discriminated against Indians. He was utterly convinced that there can be no compliance with anything that is humiliating for the people. At the same time there can never be any recourse to violence not only because an unarmed people have little chance of success before the armed might of an empire, but because violence begets violence just as hatred only sows more hatred. The means applied to achieve a goal were extremely important. If the means are sullied, the end, however noble, would also be sullied. To Gandhiji, violence was “objectionable because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary but the evil it does is permanent”. “Counter-hatred only increases the surface as well as the depth of hatred.” He did not believe that there would ever be any victors or vanquished in any conflict. He once said that “an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” The history of the 20th century is littered with examples that demonstrate unambiguously that violence is no solution to global problems.

At the core of Gandhiji’s concept of Satyagraha or Truth Force was his conviction of the innate goodness of all human beings; that hatred would respond to love and brute force would falter before the voluntary and courageous suffering and the fearlessness of the Satyagrahi. Hate the sin and not the sinner, he exhorted. Gandhiji demonstrated that the oppressed, the deprived and the weak have the great moral power of righteousness, of truth and non-violence. He successfully mobilised the long suffering masses of India in an entirely non-violent manner against the injustice of empire.

Gandhiji's philosophy and approach influenced many of the movements for liberation in Africa and for greater freedoms in the US and Europe. Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and other leaders including Lech Walesa and Václav Havel were inspired by his philosophy. I am informed that civil society organisations active prior to the change of regime in Hungary in 1989-90- were also inspired by Gandhiji's teachings.

Contemporary societies face violence in many different forms both within and from without, in this increasingly interdependent world where borders are becoming irrelevant. Discrimination against women, between high and low, rich and poor continue to plague human society. The stockpiling of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons has the power to annihilate the earth many times over. We are faced with the scourge of international terrorism that knows no boundaries. Humankind is worried about climate change and global warming. Violence against the earth, the relentless exploitation of nature's bounties are resulting in rapid environmental degradation and ecological imbalances. Global warming and climate change are wreaking havoc through tsunamis, cyclones and hurricanes. We would do well to pay heed to what Mahatma Gandhi had once said: "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not every man's greed."

While global society has made great advances, it is also characterised by growing terrorism and extremism. Scholars are seriously debating the so-called clash of civilisations and cultures and religion-based conflicts. Deeply religious, Gandhiji believed that the essence of all religions is one. Only their approaches may differ. He once said, "One's own religion.... is a matter between oneself and one's Maker and no one else's". We in India, have therefore never accepted theories of civilisational conflict.

As a pluralistic multi-cultural society with diverse religions, languages and ethnic groups, we take great pride in our diversity. Our national slogan is 'unity in diversity'. Indeed, our diversity strengthens our unity. As Gandhiji said: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be shut. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet...". This pluralistic ethos can only be nurtured in an environment of peace and tolerance. Tensions do arise from time to time but these are resolved democratically, through give and take, in a spirit of compromise and consensus. The democratic framework that we have established is flexible enough to accommodate individual, regional and national aspirations of people of all communities, religions and linguistic groups.

Many of the tensions and conflicts that characterise global society can be resolved through peaceful and non-violent means, provided there is tolerance, a willingness to see the "other" point of view and to agree to solutions where neither side wins entirely or loses outright. To Gandhiji, intolerance was a form of violence. Non-violence on the other hand required an intensive engagement with the adversary and a common striving for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Globalisation of the last few decades has unleashed unlimited opportunities for growth and prosperity of peoples and nations. Unfortunately, this has also been

accompanied by regional disparities and growing inequalities between the haves and the have-nots, the rich and the poor. Crass materialism and unbridled consumerism have become the new mantras with scant attention to those that lie beyond the pale of globalised processes and markets.

Mahatma Gandhi not only rejected colonialism and imperialism, violence and militarism, but he also was against materialism. He once told the rich landlords of India: "You may hold all your private property in trust for your tenants and use it primarily for their welfare. I have told mill-owners that they are not exclusive owners of mills and workmen are equally sharers in ownership. In the same way, I would tell you that ownership of your land belongs as much to the ryots (peasants) as to you". There are important lessons that the world can learn from Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy. He pioneered the concept of people-centred development or Sarvodaya at the core of which was the individual. He believed in grass-roots and participatory democracy and self-sufficient rural communities. While some of the ideas may be utopian in our globalised world, his focus on the individual, the bottom-up approach rather than the top-down trickle down theories are of abiding relevance in our contemporary world. Perhaps, Gandhiji's philosophy gave birth to the concept of sustainable human development.

The great initiative on micro-finance pioneered by Prof. Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh, that is, empowering the rural folk, especially women, is very much in line with Gandhian economics. The new trends that have started in some Western countries whereby people are sourcing their food from within a radius of 100 to 200 kilometres from where they live, is another example.

I believe in the following message of Mahatma Gandhi to his followers, which has timeless relevance.

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away."

Let us rededicate ourselves to the principles and values that Mahatma Gandhi stood for and apply them in our own deeds and actions.