

INAUGURAL ADDRESS FOR THE JANUARY 31, 2022 WEBINAR ON 'GANDHI'S GREAT PERTINENCE TO INDIA ON THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS INDEPENDENCE'.

Socrates has been compared to a “mountain peak that dazzles in the last rays of the setting sun though lost in the mists of time will yet remain in the minds and hearts of men as long as right is might and life is stronger than death”. Gandhi will forever be such a dazzling mountain peak of Righteousness. His scholarly grandson Rajmohan Gandhi has expressed this thought excellently. “ Strange yet wise, hard with many but hardest with himself, drawn instinctively to Truth and love, his life was a fuel for lighting up human suffering, obstinate at times and hazardously sure of himself, Gandhi was through the twentieth century a spark for consciences across the world”.

Louis Fischer “We have too many men of science, too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi rejected the atom and grasped the Sermon on the Mount. He was a nuclear infant and an ethical giant. He knew nothing about killing and much about living in the twentieth century”

In the first half of the twentieth century, which was the most blood drenched century in history, Gandhi non violently plucked the ‘brightest jewel in the British crown’ and secured for India the Independence it had struggled for almost a century. In the 75 years of its independence, it has, despite the acute communal hatreds and economic devastation its partition gestated, it painstakingly created a democratic polity based on

universal adult franchise and equal rights for all its citizens irrespective of gender, creed or caste, enshrined in a carefully crafted constitution. During this period, its central and state governments painstakingly built up its political, economic and social infrastructure and transformed India from one of the world's poorest, most backward countries of the world into one its top ten, democratically governed, industrial and technologically advanced ones. It was the first country that built-up its economy not merely with the muscle-power of the factory but with brain-power.

Sadly, as India prepares to celebrate the 75th anniversary of its Independence its political, economic and social scenarios gestate more concern than satisfaction. Despite very impressive and indeed spectacular progress in recent years in digitization of governmental activities, banking, education, elections and electioneering, and in generation of non-conventional particularly solar energy, the overall situation is somber as religious bigotry, unemployment, and social distress are causing concern. Besides the Gandhian ideals and strategies which had secured India its Independence and nurtured its national unity and progress, have been steadily replaced by those of his ideological antipode.

Gandhi's fundamental contribution in the field of religion was to give primacy to Truth rather than to traditional practices. In fact, he made Truth the basis of all morality by affirming "I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality". Though a deeply devout Hindu, his religion was that "which

transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, binds one indissolubly to the truth within and ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which leaves the soul restless until it has found itself".

Gandhi had also affirmed "Independent India as conceived by me will have all Indians belonging to different religions, living in perfect harmony".

In 1931 he had written in Young India "It has been said that Swaraj will be the rule of the majority community i.e. the Hindus. If this were to be true, I for one would refuse to call it Swaraj and would fight it with all the strength at my command. For to me Hind Swaraj is the rule of all the people and the rule of justice."

On January 23, 1948, just a week before his assassination he declared "It would spell the ruin of both the Hindu religion and the majority community if the latter, in the intoxication of power, entertains the belief that it can crush the minority community and establish a purely Hindu Rashtra".

Gandhi's enlightened views about religions and religious freedom are well embodied in the Indian constitution. India's constitution making was a sublime event. The debates reached spiritual heights. The aspirations of a large mass of humanity with diversities of every kind had had to be captured through compromise and consensus. Ideas of equality and fraternity were not merely legal concepts but, as Acharya Kriplani said, were moral and spiritual and mystic principles.

It is pertinent to recall here the stirring words of the revered Swami Vivekananda at the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in September 1893:

"I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted of all religions and nations of the earth. The present convention, which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is in fact a declaration to the world of the doctrine preached in the Gita: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men struggling through various paths which in the end lead to me." Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood and destroyed civilizations. I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning at this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticisms, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal."

Gandhi was the first victim of religious bigotry in post Independent India. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi a subsequent one. Other 20th century VIP victims of religious bigotry were Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel. Religious bigotry is therefore the

vilest demon to harbour in any country, particularly in a country as vast and diverse as India.

Gandhi had stated “Real Swaraj will come, not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused”.

The renowned Gandhian scholar Gene Sharp, has written: “Gandhi was an experimenter in the development of “war without violence”. His work here was pioneering and not always adequate, but it represents a major development of historic significance both in ethics and in politics. Many problems in the further development and application of this approach of course remain. But in words and action Gandhi pointed toward what may be the key to the resolution of the dilemma of how one can behave peacefully and at the same time actively, and effectively oppose oppression and injustice.’ The recent 402 days of non-violent resistance of thousands of farmers to three farm laws enacted in the October 2020 which they contended would put them at the ‘mercy of corporates’ which finally resulted in the revocation of these laws in November 2021 is proof of this, despite some serious concerns that some hostile groups attempted to exploit the situation for achieving anti-national ulterior motives.

Writing about ‘Freedom and Equality’ on the twentieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Nobel Laureate Prof. Rene-Samuel Cassin, concluded his essay in these words: “If the world, whose progress towards unity is increasingly determined by technology, is

to remain a humane world, humankind must ensure the realization of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration, and as Mahatma Gandhi wisely counseled, treat his fellow humans as brothers and sisters". Asked why we need a universal declaration of Human Rights, he, in a great understatement, said 'we need it because Men are not always Good'.

Gandhi had affirmed "Peace will come where Truth is pursued and Truth implies Justice" and urged "Each of us must be the change we wish to see in this world".

In enlightened progressive societies it is the civil society that shapes and guides the political society. Here, in India, it is the political society that dominates and manipulates sections of civil society setting-up one against another on every possible lines of cleavage. In an enlightened democracy it is the duty of government to educate the people in the values and duties of good citizenship.

We are a plural society. Plural societies are the products of irreversible movements of history. We cannot wish them away. They are here to stay. There are time- tested civilisational standards of successful management of plural societies. Even applying those standards may not guarantee success in the fullest measure, but not applying them will guarantee failure. The broad philosophy is not merely 'live and let live', but 'live and help live'.

In its past four hundred years, Europe had hundreds of armed-conflicts amongst its states and political units. The European Union and the common-market brought about a near revolution in inter-state relations, particularly in preventing armed conflicts. Helmut Kohl had played an important role in bringing this about. Gandhi demonstrated the same visionary approach at the time of India's partition. He appealed to Jinnah that the two newly independent India and Pakistan live as brothers and have common Defence and Foreign relations. That could have been the foundation of an ideal South Asian Union—virtually a 'of Gandhian common-wealth'.

Soon after he assumed leadership of India's freedom struggle Gandhi called on its women to join it and declared "As long as women do not come into public life and purify it, we are unlikely to attain Swaraj. Even if we did, I would not favour that Swaraj in which women have not made their full contribution". They responded to his call, initially as volunteers at Congress sessions, later as participants in the anti-foreign cloth and salt Satyagrahas. The latter, at the Dharasana Salt Works was led by Sarojini Naidu. When Gandhi and other Congress leaders were arrested soon after the 1942 Quit India movement was launched, the brave young Aruna Asaf Ali unfurled the Indian flag at its venue. Brave young Usha Mehta, and three of her women companions set up and operated a secret 'Congress Radio from somewhere in India". Gandhi's non violent freedom struggle had transformed these and many other patriotic women from just wives and mothers into "non violent Warriors"

However, many Indians, though admired Gandhi, had their doubts about pure 'ahimsa' prevailing over the naked ruthless ambitious power of the British Empire and how Gandhi's 'Ahimsa' could be integrated into demands of state-craft and the power structures of the modern-state. A deeper insight into the mechanics of violence and its inherent capacity to perpetuate itself should convince all right thinking people of the futility of violence as a tool to achieve peace. Alan Nazereth in his 'Gandhi the Soul-force Warrior' convincingly argues the theme with examples. Gandhi revolutionized revolution and spiritualized it.

Our tired and morally exhausted world can survive the suicidal arms' race and competitive destruction only on Gandhian principles.

In conclusion, I offer my grateful thanks to all the renowned scholars who will be speaking at this webinar, to its eminent moderator, to India International Centre for hosting it and all those who are participating in it as listeners.

Jai Hind.

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