

Mahatma Gandhi –
Nonviolent resistance is as relevant as ever
By Shobhana Radhakrishna
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My first obeisance is to God Almighty, who has inspired me to take up this task, my second obeisance is to the Mahatma, the great soul, whose life enlightens us all from inside out, his faith and endeavor make him a role model for us all now, and in every age and my third obeisance is to all of you, whose eyes give me strength!

It is a great honor to be here today on the occasion of the International Day of Non-violence and the 147th Birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to H.E. Ambassador Prashant Pise ji, Indian Council of Cultural Relations, New Delhi and the University of Mannouba in Tunis for inviting me to speak on this occasion. I thank you for this opportunity to be here with you and engage in a shared exploration of a question, which haunts and taunts people across the world.

I am told that Mahatma Gandhi is revered in Tunisia; was brought out a street is named after the Mahatma; his statue is being installed in the university, there is sculpture of Mahatma Gandhi in the garden of Hammamet International Cultural Center in Tunisia and schools teach Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy as part of school curriculum. These are very commendable steps to recognize the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, the Apostle of Peace and I am happy to be with all of you to day in Tunisia to revisit the ideology of Peace and Nonviolence of Mahatma Gandhi.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, "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".

For the International Day of Non-Violence, 2016, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has said and I quote:

Every year on the International Day of Non-Violence, we re-commit ourselves to the cause of peace, as exemplified by the life of Mahatma Gandhi who was born on this day 147 years ago.

We know that a culture of non-violence begins with respect for others, but it does not end there. To nurture peace, we must respect nature. I am pleased this year's International Day of Non-Violence puts the focus on sustainability and the environment. In all he did, Gandhi honored our obligation to all living things. He reminded us that "Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's needs, but not

everyone's greed." Gandhi also challenged us to "be the change we wish to see in the world".

What could be a better way to commemorate Mahatma Gandhi and his legacy for people and planet? This is essential to building a safer, healthier and more peaceful world.

According to my understanding, Mahatma Gandhi's life is an epic of faith & endeavor. The source of his real strength was his faith in God. The deeper the faith; the greater was the endeavor. Truth was the deepest and most complete form of God. His faith was in Truth, in the ultimate reality of Truth, and he endeavored to attain it through non-violence, throughout his life, till the very last breath. He said Truth is God. Faith in Truth led Mahatma Gandhi to two other realizations. If each human being was an aspect of God, then each person was capable of Truth.

The basic faith that he had was that in every person there is some innate goodness. His endeavor throughout his life was devoted to the search of that element of Truth, to awaken it and to nurture it. The other aspect of Mahatma Gandhi's faith was in the ultimate destination of human society towards what was good and auspicious, no matter how treacherous the path appeared to be. If God is auspicious, then the world that is contained in Him, could not be, but auspicious.

More than half a century ago, Mahatma Gandhi sought to break the cycles of violence and reprisal. What distinguishes us from brute beasts, he said, is our continuous striving for moral self-improvement. Humanity is at crossroads and must choose between, he asserted, violence (the law of the jungle) or non-violence (the law of humanity). The world today, in fact, has an extraordinary and unprecedented opportunity. We have the chance to open a new page in human history.

In the context of the horrors being experienced in the world these days, a glimpse into Mahatma Gandhi's 'nonviolent civil disobedience and non-cooperation', as successful methods to overturn unjust political systems and to alter the status quo of injustice, that may lend a healing touch for those face to face with the horrors today, his days in South Africa, peaceful civil disobedience movement, Satyagraha, his experiments with Truth, and his commitment for democratic values and freedom for every citizen are indeed the guiding stars for Tunisia's commitment to democracy and universal human rights.

The 21st Century finds our world confronting new challenges, no less apocalyptic than in the 20th Century, despite the industrial, scientific technological, and information revolutions, no longer confined to the traditional heartlands of Europe and North America. We are witnessing the financial and economic collapse of regions which owed the most to capitalist development, even as amazing transformations have radically changed the day to day lives of many in the world for the better, and in many respects for the worse.

In times such as these, even though it is more than half a century since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, wherever in the world, individuals and social movements have struggled for answers- whether at successful Tunisian or Egyptian model of civil disobedience, or in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s starting with Poland or in recent years in Bolivia and Ecuador's Citizens' Revolutions, we witnessed its Indigenous citizens resorting to civil disobedience to overturn entrenched exploitative systems or racial institutions which sometimes appeared to be difficult to defeat.

In many political frontlines and arenas the world over, wherever citizens gathered in mass to defy tyrannical systems; the moral, the political principles and strategies of Mahatma Gandhi continue to guide humanity, along with his critique of the human ravages of colonialism and capitalism as economic systems; his political strategy of mass political education and 'nonviolent civil disobedience and non-cooperation', which he termed as Satyagraha (Truth force, love force, soul force) as methods to overturn unjust political systems, alter the status quo of injustice; methods which Gandhi ji adopted, successfully defeating the most tyrannical of tyrants , an entrenched Empire remain as relevant as ever.

Mahatma Gandhi is the most powerful visionary and a practical idealist from the first half of the last century whose life is a role model for us all. But the effort has to begin from a point where you are standing. That is what made all Mahatma Gandhi's idealist actions practical and he can be truly called a man of action, but it does not only mean he was very busy. What we mean is the action of putting ideas or beliefs into practice more than anything else was the driving force in his life. The answer for Mahatma Gandhi was always found in action. He had said, 'An ounce of practice is worth more than tons of preaching.'

He desired purity of means not only among individuals, society and religion, but also in the political realm. Today, when the world has become more complex than the one experienced by Mahatma Gandhi and would be even more so in the years to come, the purity of means emphasized by the man who experienced absolute oneness would be even more relevant.

Pure means has lead the world on the path of peace, love and enrichment. In the absence of these, the annihilation of the human race, a deluge, appears even more immediate. Mahatma Gandhi advanced steadfastly on the path of morality and spirituality; he removed every obstacle along the way, reached a higher plane at every juncture, and continued his journey upwards. His journey has been the journey of humanity towards truth and non-violence.

I am happy to inform you that I was born in Gandhiji's Sewagram Ashram in Wardha, Maharashtra and imbibed the Gandhian way of life. Gandhiji had established four ashrams or settlements in his life time, two in South Africa and two

in India. These ashrams were his laboratories of community life and simple living. They were the role models of self-sustainable life, of less consumption of resources and non-violent, face to face, society as envisaged by Gandhiji. These ashrams also were the training grounds for the *satyagrahis* to prepare themselves for the non-violent struggle for restoring their dignity and self-respect in South Africa; and for participating in the freedom struggle in India by increase their inner strength for offering the highest sacrifice in the service of the Nation. My father had spent twenty years in Gandhiji two ashrams and he had spent 10 years in working with Gandhiji.

Gandhiji's story is the story of his experiments with truth. It is the story of the journey of an ordinary person like you and me towards an absolute truth. He is convinced of his existence; hence his life is an incessant journey in the quest for truth. Truth for Gandhiji is an immediate presence. For many of us the awareness that our being is a part of the larger being is not immediately felt. Gandhiji was constantly aware that his truth was a part of the absolute truth that he sought. This led to the birth of non-violence.

Non-violence requires the recognition that truth belongs to others as well. Truth is the end; non-violence is the means to that end. But gradually, Gandhiji saw no difference between them. His striving was for truth and non-violence; he called it satyagraha.

His search was to realize and experience that absolute truth as it is reflected in his autobiography. His understanding of truth is simple: *'to utter as you think and to act as you utter.'* The unity of mind, speech and conduct for him is truth. The simple definition of truth bears testimony to his transparency.

In South Africa, very early in life, he had come to realize that any change in the condition of the Indians living there would be caused not by the mercy of the white rulers, but by their own strength. He had long understood that this strength lay in their unity and organization. The roots of the new force, he would discover, however, went deeper than mere unity and organizational strength. He searched within himself for the source of that strength.

He could clearly see that this was something other than bodily force. His intellect and legal acumen had limited scope in the present situation. The new force had to be of a kind different from both physical force and intellectual power. Its source had to be deeper, more fundamental and more resolute.

He had already experienced the working of such a force. When his father had torn young Mohan's note of confession with tears, he had used not physical force but the force of love. When his adolescent wife had refused to obey his orders, she had used the force of truth and determination. He had himself, while resisting the beatings of the white leader of the coach at Charlestown, not used the force of his muscles but his unflinching determination. If this force of determination, the force of truth and the force of love could be harnessed for the community, it would give rise to a new kind

of power, a real and genuine power, he understood. When his search for truth took him deep within his soul, the force of love, non-violence and the power of self-suffering came together and this churning yielded satyagraha.

Others around the world who have been inspired by Gandhiji have carried on this from, reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to Ceasar Chavez in the United States, from Nelson Mandela, Father Desmond Tutu in South Africa to Professor Wangari Mathai in Kenya, Dr. Auag San Suu Kyi in Myanmar to His Holiness Dalai Lama, Father Kuntz in Brazil to Dubcek and those young men and women, who under his leadership stood before the Russian tanks in Czechoslovakia, from the black and white men who stood in front of Pentagon with flowers to Malala Yousafzai in Afghanistan and hundreds of such people have fought injustice with justice as tyranny was resisted with love and non-violence was embraced.

Gandhiji maintained that the first step towards a non-violent strategy is the education of the people. This leads to awakening, which in turn leads to a people's movement. The victims of injustice and immorality are the ones who need to be educated and awakened. The more sympathetic and sensitive elements in the opponent's camp also need to be cultivated. The final step is to educate and sensitize those who perpetrate injustice and commit these immoral acts. This act of education, of spreading awareness is central to the philosophy and practice of non-violence as practiced by Gandhi.

The most effective and finest means of educating the people is to hold up the example of the life, actions and conduct of the public worker. Gandhiji believed that self-practice is more powerful than preaching good conduct. The other means of reaching across to the people is through language, both as speech and as script. Therefore, now is the time to take strength from Gandhiji for all of his efforts and work to build a world of non-violence and lasting peace.

Gandhiji extended the experiment in non-violence, to non-violent resistance, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Gandhiji, through his life demonstrated that non-violence was not a passive, weak force, but an active force full of opportunities. This force needs newer experiments in different fields. More specifically, we are yet to experiment with non-violent resistance in times of so much aggression in today's age. There is the danger of the looming economic and other forms of deadly and dangerous discrimination. Terrorism, trampling of human rights and violence against women, many folds increase in the greenhouse gas emission, catastrophic climate change threaten millions of people. It is true that in the world inebriated on violence many have been drawn to Gandhij's experiment with non-violence and many such experiments are taking place today, for which Gandhiji's lifelong endeavor remains the main source of inspiration.

This is a call to the global citizens everywhere to be inspired by the courage of Mahatma Gandhi. If you desire peace, the means to attaining it have to be peaceful. Turn your back on division and hatred; stand up for what is right and just. Work with your fellow women and men for a world of lasting justice, peace and prosperity for all.

Non-violence is not only an effective tactics for Gandhi; it is a strategy and the ultimate vision. Durable ends such as peace can only come through durable means of non-violence.

The method of this experiment has changed with every decade and in each country. The essence though has remained the same; its strategy has changed in response to a specific context. The method that seeks not to vanquish the adversary but causing a change of heart and thus making the victory a joint one is relevant today in the world. We have sought and will continue to seek new methods of attaining this.

My Father told me that in 1931, during Gandhiji's stay at Villeneuve, he met Pierre Ceresole, the great pacifist leader. Gandhiji had heard about Ceresole's movement, but desired to hear from the man himself. Pierre told him that during the war, a village school master had refused to serve his three months as a conscript in the name of Christ. For this, he was first put in a lunatic asylum, and then in prison. Pierre was deeply impressed by this act and followed the same path. Many others followed Ceresole's example and each year many men refused the conscription service. Ceresole told Gandhiji that all wanted to serve as citizens but not as army men. Ceresole established 'Service Civil International', which is active even today and does constructive work in various parts of the world.

Gandhiji told him about his experience in South Africa and India. Ceresole said, 'I am afraid our people in Europe are not like yours in India and are not ready for such acts as these.'

There was a pause, and then, in a low and infinitely gentle voice, as though sorry for the terrific rebuke that he was implying, Gandhiji said, 'Are you sure it is the people who are not ready, Mr. Ceresole?'

'Oh', exclaimed Pierre, and we were all silent, accepting the challenge, wrote Muriel Lester, who was witness to this conversation 'I see what you mean. You are right. It is we who are failing. It's leadership that we lack. Is that what you mean?'

In the same small voice Gandhiji answered, 'I must confess, Mr. Ceresole, I do not seem to have come across leaders in Europe - not of the sort that the times call for.' 'Tell us what qualities you think a leader for this age would need?' Pierre argued.

'Realization of God every minute of twenty four hours', announced Gandhi. 'And if a man asked, what do you mean by God?' asked Pierre. Gandhiji replied, 'I would answer, 'Truth is God, and the way to find him is non-violence.'

Gandhi ji had said:

'Non-violence is the greatest force man has been endowed with. Truth is the only goal he has. For God is none other than truth. But truth cannot be, never will be, and reached except through non-violence. That which distinguishes man from other animals is his capacity to be non-violent. And he fulfills his mission only to the extent that he is non-violent and no more. He has no doubt many other gifts. But if they do not sub serve that main purpose - the development of the spirit of non-violence in him –they but drag him down lower than the brute, a status from which he has just emerged. The cry for peace will be a cry in the wilderness, so long as the spirit of non-violence does not dominate millions of men and women.'

Thus Mahatma Gandhi has reassured us, saying: "I am not going to keep quiet even after I die" What was this faith that he wished to proclaim from the grave?

'It was faith in Truth; that was GOD. It was faith in the goodness of all, as all are capable of truth. It was faith in the history of mankind, it was faith that despite the falls and upheavals it moved towards goodness, because Truth, that is God is also auspicious.'

Mahatma Gandhi had said, 'Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. There are many causes I would die for. There is not a single cause I would kill for.'

Today's youth in Tunisia and Egypt seem to have heard John Lenon skeptical cries to revolutionaries, 'You say you got a real solution, well, you know well, we'd all love to see the plan.'

While Tunisia is facing the challenges of violence, Gandhi's message of non-violence, world peace and love, especially to young Tunisians is more relevant than ever."

147 years after he was born, his life is worth revisiting. Mahatma Gandhi's life reminds us that non-violence and peace are positive forces and that only with that, human race can move away from darkness towards light.

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