

Mahatma Gandhi : The Ageless Life

(Text of Gandhi Oration delivered by Nirupama Rao¹, October 23, 2017 at an event organized by the Sri Lanka India Society, in collaboration with the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies and Indian Cultural Centre, Colombo)

(Salutations)

“I aim to live to the age of 125”, Mahatma Gandhi once said. An assassin’s bullet snatched him away before that milestone was reached but in many ways, for the hope, the courage, the sense of fairness and justice, he infused in the world around him, he lives on, as the Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz said, in an “ageless life”.

For both India and Sri Lanka, with intertwined destinies, there is ample reason today to reflect on the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, its relevance particularly for the young, often called the demographic dividend, and what meaning it holds in a world where the speed of connectivity often disconnects the individual from his or her roots and traditions, and where human compassion and the virtues of forgiveness are not accorded the value they deserve. For us in India, we habitually seek answers to current conundrums by referencing Gandhi, just as you in Sri Lanka, reference the sacred legacy of the Buddha, another of India’s greatest sons, and in my mind, the juxtaposition of Buddha and Gandhi, as the Economist magazine said in 1948, is not at all incongruous. In fact, it is so appropriate and justified. So, I will attempt to speak of both in this lecture for there are organic connections between them. And, I will also weave through the warp and weft, a remembrance of the Chakravartin, or wheel-turning monarch, the Emperor, Ashoka – he, without sorrow – *Dhamma Ashoka* as he is known, and his vision of a subcontinent united by the ideals of good and open governance and righteous conduct.

Let us dwell on the name Mahatma, by which Gandhiji was addressed from 1915, as the records indicate. One of your distinguished countrymen, Ananda Coomaraswamy spoke of the distinction he found in the Buddhist sutras between the “great” and “petty” selves, *mahatma* and *alpatma*. In another passage from these sutras, the human selves are distinguished as “fair” and

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“foul” (“*kalyana*” and “*papa*”) – the petty self is “undeveloped in stature, character, will and prescience; the little self is mortal whereas the other and Eminent Self, the Mahatma, is never circumscribed by the limitations of the petty, little self. The Mahatma is thus defined “of developed stature, character, will and prescience, un-emptied-out, and to whose way there are no boundaries” (*bhavita-kaya, -sila, -citta, -prajna, aprarikta mahatma apramana-vihari*).² Certainly, to our ageless Gandhi, the Mahatma, I would ascribe the virtues of developed stature, character, will and prescience and whose way is not hindered by the boundaries that are hindrances to the petty self. In the words of Carl Heath³, a Mahatma is to be loved for his simplicity and clarity of soul, for the material simplicity of his existence, having divested himself of all possessions, knowing like Thoreau, the joy of possessing all and owning nothing – the ultimate civilized and humanized man.

For the 21st century, these are enduring values. And the electricity of the mind, unites both the Buddha and Gandhi across two and a half millennia. It was Gandhiji who said, an eye for an eye will make the world blind. It was Gautama, the Buddha who said, “If hatred responds to hatred, when and where will hatred end?” What does this signify? That there is a counter-pole between violence and non-violence, that the end does not justify the means, unlike what western history demonstrates through acts of violence and subjugating the weak. Destructive means engender destructive counter-means⁴ until there is nothing left. Gandhiji and the Buddha speak to us against aggressive expansionism and they tell us constantly about the supremacy of importance which must be attached to the means we employ to attain our ends.

The Buddha, Chakravartin Ashoka, Mahatma Gandhi – these lives intersect in many, myriad ways. Let us take the flag of India. The flag as originally conceived had the charkha or, spinning wheel at its centre – the charkha was a symbol of non-violence, representing the humble worker, spinning the garment of a nation. Around the time of independence and shortly thereafter, it was decided by our founding fathers to replace the charkha with the wheel of Dharma, as found on the Sarnath column of Ashoka. Acknowledging this decision, Gandhiji said, “Looking at the wheel some may recall that Prince of Peace, King Asoka,

² “Mahatma”, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in “Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on His Life and Work, Edited by S. Radhakrishnan, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1949, Pg. 63

³ “M.K. Gandhi, Apostle of Light and Truth-Force”: Carl Heath, Ibid, Pg. 91

⁴ “Gandhi’s Place in World History”: Count Hermann Keyserling, in S. Radhakrishnan, Ibid, Pg. 169

ruler of an empire, who renounced power. He represented all faiths; he was an embodiment of compassion. Seeing the *charka* in his *chakra* adds to the glory of the *charka*. The Asoka Chakra represents eternally revolving Divine Law of ahimsa."⁵

The Prince of Peace. How beautifully Gandhiji captures the quintessential Ashoka! The ideals espoused by Ashoka were not far from Gandhiji's own conception of democratic good governance and the love that a leader must feel towards his or her people. "All men are my children", Ashoka declared⁶, "what I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men.. The King is like a father.."

I have been reading a fascinating book these last few days. It is called "Ashoka: the search for India's Lost Emperor" by Charles Allen. It is an account of how the jigsaw puzzle that was the history of Ashoka was pieced together by archaeologists and historians in colonial India in the nineteenth century. More importantly, it is fascinating to see the picture that emerges as this puzzle gradually fits together. The information on the Rock and Pillar Edicts spread across the length and breadth of ancient India, together with the accounts in the Lankan chronicles, the Mahavansa and the Dipavansa, the travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrims, Faxian and Xuanzang, and many more accounts, pieced together, tell the story of this Prince of Peace, Piyadasi, beloved-of-the-gods. Here is a ruler whose self-control and moderation, these twin concepts, together with the love of virtue "by the side of which all other things are but sins", speak eloquently through the inscriptions of empire he left behind.

The mention of "non-injury, restraint and impartiality" in the Asokan inscriptions⁷, powerfully sum up what is for me a definition of ahimsa, the highest duty of all, *ahimsa paramo dharma*. Ahimsa as Gandhiji saw it, and Ashoka would have endorsed this, is the extreme limit of forgiveness. And, forgiveness as Gandhiji said, is the quality of the brave. Ahimsa is impossible without fearlessness. And note Gandhi's use of the word dharma – it is very similar to Ashoka's – that dharma is not so much religious practice as based on ethics, and ethical behavior: in Ashoka's words: "much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity.. much self-examination, much respect,

⁵ <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mag/2004/08/15/stories/2004081500070400.htm>, accessed October 23, 2017

⁶ "Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum", in Charles Allen : "Ashoka The Search for India's Lost Emperor", Abacus, 2013, Pg. 283

⁷ Asokan Rock Edict, No. 13

much fear (of evil) and much enthusiasm”⁸ – these are the constituents of dharma.

When Gandhiji came to Sri Lanka in 1927, he spoke with so much luminosity about his philosophy of being. There is no half-way house for me, he said. He said he was an “intolerable wholehogger”⁹, that he found room in his faith as a Hindu, for Christian, Islamic and Zoroastrian teaching, that his “faith was based on the broadest possible toleration”¹⁰. It was this “broad faith” that sustained him, he said. How true this is, as a message for our troubled times, today. Speaking at the Nalanda Vidyalaya, Colombo in November 1927, he tells students how “if you do not represent the teaching of the Buddha in your own lives you having belonged to this institution will be considered useless..unless you can reproduce the central teaching of Gautama in your own lives. His was the right path, right speech, right thought and right conduct. He gave us the unadulterated law of mercy. And the extent of the law as he defined went beyond the human family..And he insisted upon purity of life.”¹¹ Masterful as he was, Gandhiji was also able to link the central fact of Buddha’s teaching of renunciation of all material things, with the message of khadi or homespun, which is simple living and high thinking.

It was here in Colombo, that Gandhi also spoke of the message he had received from one of his closest mentors, Gopalkrishna Gokhale : that is, the intense desire to spiritualise politics which was why he (Gokhale) had adopted the name “Servants of India” for his Society. And Gandhiji went on to say: “I have not been tired of insisting upon truth at any cost, and non-violence at any cost. Given these two conditions in my humble opinion, you can hurl defiance at the mightiest power on earth..”¹² Hurl defiance: what a powerful thought. He continues: “I know that it very often requires great faith and immense patience, but if this one thing is fixed in our minds, then there is no other way open to the politician, if he is to serve not himself, but the whole nation.”¹³ Politics, said Gandhiji, quoting Gokhale, was not a game for leisure hours, it should engross the attention of the ablest men in the country.

⁸ pg. 389, Allen, Ibid

⁹ Mahadev Desai: “With Gandhiji in Ceylon”, S. Ganesan, Triplicane, Madras, 1928, Pg. 29

¹⁰ “More Memories”: Mahadev Desai, Ibid, Pg. 29

¹¹ Speech delivered at Nalanda Maha Vidyalaya on November 15, 1927 in Desai, Ibid, Pg. 54

¹² Message to Ceylon Congress, November 22, 1927 in Desai, Ibid, Pg. 99

¹³ Desai, Ibid, Pg. 98

Prescience. That is a quality we associate with Gandhiji. And how prescient he is, as he speaks about communalism, affecting both India and Sri Lanka, “I am afraid”, says he, “as we are in India, so are you cut up into groups and communities”. Speaking of India, he says, “we are trying to suppress provincialism, we are trying to suppress religionism, we are trying to express nationalism in its fullest form, but I am ashamed to confess to you that we are still far from it.” And, turning to his Sri Lankan audience, he says, “But it is given to you to outstrip us and set us an example”. In his view, it was easier for Sri Lanka to do this, “but a condition indispensable for that is, that some of you at least will have to give your whole time to this and not only your whole time but your whole selves..”¹⁴.

There is no topic that Gandhiji does not touch. Here he is, speaking of the ancient and modern, of eastern tradition versus westernization. Discard superstition, yes, that was his view, but he also saw much that was ennobling in our ancient traditions – and many are the traditions that bind us, India and Sri Lanka as sisters. At the same time, he clarifies that he does not indiscriminately despise the West. “There are many things”, he says, “which I have myself assimilated from the West”. And explaining this beautifully he goes on to state, “There is a very great and effective Sanskrit word for that particular faculty which enables a man always to distinguish between what is desirable and what is undesirable, what is right and what is wrong, that word is known as “Viveka”.¹⁵ Translated into English, the nearest approach is discrimination. I do hope you will incorporate this word into Pali and Sinhalese”, he concludes. And that any culture, ancient or modern, must be submitted to the test of reason, and of experience.

I was struck when reading about Gandhiji’s Lankan visit, that speaking in Jaffna, he referred to this country as “India glorified”. “A glorified edition of India¹⁶, Lanka certainly is”, said he. Complimenting your scenic beauty, he says, it had “surpassed all my expectations and so I could not help saying at a recent meeting that Ceylon seemed to me a fragrant beautiful pearl dropped from the nasal ring of India”¹⁷. After all, in his view, why should not the people of Lanka “who have inherited and adopted the teachings of the great Master (the Buddha) do better than the children of the motherland?”.

¹⁴ Message to the Ceylon Congress, November 22, 1927 in Desai, Ibid. Pg. 100

¹⁵ At Mahinda College, Galle, November 24, 1927 in Desai, Ibid. Pg. 113

¹⁶ A Glorified Edition of India, speech delivered at Jaffna, November 27, 1927 in Desai, Ibid. Pg. 139

¹⁷ Ibid. Pg. 139

And, what then, of the women? Women, whom the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, spoke of having an “oceanic heart”, hearts which contain “a thousand sorrows, regrets and aspirations”?¹⁸ A number of women, participants in India’s struggle for freedom, felt the need to displace the image of men leading women, off to conquer new worlds, with a new world of equal education and opportunity, where men and women were comrades of the road, thus raising manhood and womanhood together in one nation, united. Some of Gandhiji’s views on women, as being complementary of men in matters of occupation and education, and on female chastity, it must be recognized were framed almost a century ago. But, that he was the best friend of women in India and the world, cannot be denied.

Here he is, speaking of Kasturba, his spouse: “I learnt the lesson of non-violence from my wife, when I tried to bend her to my will. Her determined resistance to my will on the one hand, and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved on the other, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity in thinking I was born to rule over her; and in the end, she became my teacher in non-violence. And what I did in Africa was but an extension of the rule of Satyagraha which she unwittingly practiced in her own person.”¹⁹ A woman comes into her own when she is unflinchingly able to fight tyranny whether in the home or on the national or international stage. Gandhi wanted womanhood to step forward into the “world-wide leadership of ideas, for the ending of the great curses which afflict mankind, poverty, oppression, warfare.”²⁰

As an advocate of the school of feminist foreign policy, I have spoken elsewhere²¹ of why, as South Asian women we should not consider a discourse that speaks of matters beyond war and peace (peace in the South Asian subcontinent seems to be associated with white flags, surrender, submission, weakness)? Do we think of a South Asian Commons? Not an arena for mutual jousting where we bait each other in blood sport, but a space for maturity of peaceful purpose, robust civility, and mutual accommodation. We have built

¹⁸ Said with reference to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, freedom fighter, Gandhian, and early feminist, quoted in “Shining Stars of the firmament”, Dhamija, Jasleen, http://www.indiaseminar.com/2011/628/628_jasleen_dhamija.htm

¹⁹ Cited in John S. Hoyland, “Gandhi’s Satyagraha..” in S. Radhakrishnan, Ibid, Pg. 138

²⁰ Hoyland, Ibid.

²¹ Nirupama Rao: “Have the Women Spoken?”, The Indian Express, October 18, 2016; <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-pakistan-women-literacy-women-empowerment-women-safety-3088484/>

towering babels around ourselves, but we have not cleared a way for the Commons. In embracing the idea of a South Asian Commons, a feminist foreign policy would speak and act in favour not of ravishing disunities, but of rationalising unities, of merging capacities to build, to develop, to link. It would exercise vetoes to block war, not peace; it would emphasise the right to food, the right to health, the right to knowledge and learning, the right to reject the disconnects, the worn clichés and mental barriers that divide us. It would weigh the interests of humanitarianism against the interests of power with far greater precision and wisdom. It would say no to violence, against all, but particularly crimes against women and children. It would reject the voices of the far right and the far left. It would feel the true pulse of the unknown, the marginalised, the excluded. It would represent the word of Gandhiji in its truest form. It would express the ideal to which his whole life was consecrated:

*Ayam nijo paro veti ganana laghucetasam,
Udaracaritanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam.*

“Only base minds reckon whether one be kin or stranger. Men (and women) of noble conduct take the whole world for their home.”²² Let me add that Gandhi did not like the word “*Abala*” or helpless attached to women. He called the woman “*Mahila*”²³ which translates into powerful, tender, affectionate.

There is a moving image on one of the ancient stupas of the Asokan age, that depict the emperor Ashoka fainting, overcome by emotion, at the sight of the sacred Bodhi tree.²⁴ He is held up by two women, his guardians, and protectors. They are depicted as strong and unflinching. Women holding up the man. With their self-control, their capacity to endure suffering, and their instinct for the just, the right, and thinking in as wide-angled a manner as possible – here to shore up their chakravartin. Gandhiji would have approved.

Human nature, as E.M. Forster once said, is set on a very large stage²⁵. We forget that to our disadvantage. There are infinite possibilities yet to be explored. What is the message we take home from the imprisonments, the fasting, the willingness to suffer, that Gandhiji expressed in his existence? His roots are

²² Quoted by E. Berriedale Keith in S. Radhakrishnan, *Ibid.* Pg.169

²³ See Shobhana Ranade, “Gandhi and Woman Empowerment” in “Timeless Inspirator-Reliving Gandhi – Conceptualised and Edited by Raghunath Mashelkar, Gandhi National Memorial Society, Pune, 2010, Pg. 313

²⁴ Pictured on Pg. 344, Allen, *Ibid*

²⁵ E.M. Forster: “Mahatma Gandhi” in S. Radhakrishnan, *Ibid.* Pg. 386

outside time, really. He strode the stage of our freedom struggle but he scales heights beyond. In Forster's words,²⁶ "He is with the founders of religion, whether he founds religion or not. He is with the great artists, though art was not his medium. He is with all the men and women who have sought something in life that is neither chaos nor mechanism, who have not confused happiness with possessiveness, or victory with success, and who have believed in love."

There is considerable debate today in our countries as to the definition of patriotism. Gandhi believed that one's devotion to the nation he or she belongs to goes beyond blind patriotism. It must involve demanding for your nation the best from the world, but even more from oneself, being willing to self-sacrifice to the utmost limit.

Gandhiji always said he was a Hindu. Yes, he was a Hindu of Hindus. Yet, in Durban, during his years in South Africa, he had above his desk a picture, a head of Christ, a singular and beautiful picture placed so, as he explained, that whenever he looked up, he might see it and remember²⁷. The religion he practiced was the religion of truth, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, inclusiveness and toleration. He felt no opposition to Christians or Muslims. Here was a practical man, a man who did not shy away from the tasks of scavenging, his constant exhortation to his followers was that they be good sweepers, good Harijans, to go forth and clean the world²⁸. Here was a man, in the words of George Catlin, whose ways were ways of pleasantness (a quiet, soothing voice never raised in anger, fear or contempt) and all his paths were peace. And, it is certainly a take-away for today's vision of Swacch Bharat – cleaning India, in body and spirit.

There is a Sanskrit word: *Sva Kranti*²⁹ : the revolution within the self. Are we true, are we transparent and sincere? How can we become thought children of Gandhi? Do we cultivate the joy of sharing, are we compassionate in practice? Do we eschew religious intolerance? Are we wedded to the paths of peace? That revolution must be sparked within ourselves, first and foremost. Do we treat compromise just as appeasement? Do we take our point of view too far? As the British journalist Mark Tully once said, we have to accept the uncertainty of certainty³⁰. Compromise is linked to ahimsa, it does not stand apart from it, in

²⁶ Ibid, Pg. 388

²⁷ George Catlin, "The World Mission of the Mahatma" in S. Radhakrishnan, Ibid. Pg. 372

²⁸ Catlin, Ibid.

²⁹ See "Conversations with the Mahatma": Mallika Sarabhai in Mashelkar, Ibid. Pg. 195

³⁰ "The Spirit of Compromise": Mark Tully in Mashelkar, Ibid. Pg. 199

some sterile sphere. It has rightly been said that the greatest single antidote to violence is conversation, speaking our fears, listening to the fears of others, and in that sharing of vulnerabilities discovering a genesis of hope.”³¹

This is where one must place the relevance of secularism. Secularism is more than tolerance of other religions. As the scientist and thinker, Pushpa Bhargava notes³², secularism involves giving up part of the demands of one’s religion. Religious fundamentalism cannot be the dominating force of a modern, truly secular society. I subscribe to the view that religion should be an entirely private matter and it cannot dominate public discourse.

Where does Mahatma Gandhi reside today? What would he have to say of the countless MG Roads that are main streets in India’s densely populated cities? That are commercial bazaars and temples of consumerism? Certainly, there is no Mahatma Gandhi in our MG Roads! Does he stay in the virtual world of the internet where you type his name on Google and come up with three million and more entries? Or, does he reside in the web of our consciousness? The latter is the surer spot. It is from where we can reflect more deeply about the relevance of words like “Swadeshi”. In the 21st century, given the insularities that are fast eroding globalization, can we permit the dilution of the meaning of self-reliance and its descent into the depths of nativism? Swadeshi should mean an openness to innovation, new ideas, that we then use with the principle of “*viveka*” that Gandhiji spoke of, of distinction, of being able to sift and use what is best tailored to our genius and our requirements. It would involve a profound understanding of how inter-connected the world is today. And we must remember Gandhiji always looked beyond India to the horizons of the globe. Think globally, act locally, could well have been his slogan.

Finally, how do we sum up the ageless Mahatma Gandhi? To our century, his memory is still fragrant. That is because his legacy is worthwhile, it is relevant. His is a part of our inheritance as humanity, as a whole. There is no use-by-date to that legacy. Take fearlessness, or *abhaya*, the absence of fear not of body alone, but the fearlessness of mind. Gandhi was not just indomitable. He was inexpugnable³³ – you could not take away from him – he was unconquerable.

³¹ “The Dignity of Difference”, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, quoted by Tully, Ibid.

³² “Some Lessons from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi”: Pushpa Bhargava in Mashelkar, Ibid. Pg. 243

³³ “Last Days”: Vincent Sheean in Radhakrishnan, Ibid. Pg. 450

There is no death, Sarojini Naidu once said, there is only birth. Gandhiji was born. He lives. In our hearts, in the soul that seeks higher and higher stages of the truth. His soul has not been consecrated to the funeral pyre. He is that personification that speaks truth to power, that empowers the powerless. Every action of his in the public domain is to be remembered and celebrated for future generations. We need to showcase his achievements just like those villagers in rural West Bengal's Purulia and Bankura districts who offer the most beautiful horses crafted by a potter to the old banyan tree in the village so as to highlight the highest standards of human excellence for people passing by³⁴. So too, we need to create points of reference to Gandhiji for all the people who walk the world's stage.

Let me close with words from the Memorial Service held in the Community Church in New York City on February 1, 1948³⁵, two days after Gandhiji was assassinated:

“ Yet we know, O God, that Gandhiji is not dead. His spirit singeth still within our souls, and dwelleth on high with Thee in glorious brightness. And we too can turn again from the ways of hate and greed and war to the way of Thy Spirit. We can repent us of our warlike madness and fury to the way of Thy forgiveness and love.”

In a gentle way, you can shake the world. And we must remember, as Martin Luther King said, a single garment of destiny unites us all. Thank you.

³⁴ “Empathetic Innovations: Connections across Boundaries”: Anil Gupta in Mashelkar Ibid. Pg. 51

³⁵ Memorial Service, Community Church, New York City, February 1, 1948, in Radhakrishnan, Ibid. Pg. 535

