

**"Peace, Nonviolence and Empowerment  
Gandhian Philosophy in the 21st Century"**  
New Delhi Conference, January 29-30, 2007



*Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Centenary Commemoration*

**Inaugural Address  
of  
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President, Indian National Congress**

***International Conference on  
"Peace, Nonviolence and Empowerment -  
Gandhian Philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"***

**29-30 January, 2007, New Delhi**

I

It is a unique privilege for me to welcome you all to this Conference to commemorate the centenary of the historic "satyagraha" movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa.

By accepting our invitation, you have demonstrated that the "greatest man of our generation" as Jawaharlal Nehru described him while heralding India's Independencies still an inspiration to millions across the globe. Your participation reflects the continuing resonance of Gandhian ideals, of the Gandhian way of life itself.

The Indian National Congress is humbled by the response that the Conference has evoked. Through this Conference, we seek to reach out to like-minded individuals and institutions in different parts of the world to build a "coalition of conscience", as it were, to address contemporary concerns and challenges.

II

The satyagraha movement changed the course of history.

It first won respect, though limited, for Indians living in racist South Africa.

It then brought freedom to India from the mightiest colonial power of the day.

It went on to serve as a guiding spirit to some remarkable personalities in their own struggles. Badshah Khan, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King come readily to mind.

September 11 in our own times has become a watershed date.

Ironically, it was also on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of September in 1906 in Johannesburg that a young lawyer, dissatisfied with the idea of mere passive resistance, unveiled the concept of "satyagraha". The lawyer Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi described satyagraha as a "force which is born of truth and love of non-violence". For him, it was the end of a quest for a moral equivalent of war. In his own words:

"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".

In his design of satyagraha, the empowerment of the weakest was fundamental and means were as crucial as ends. With satyagraha, Mahatma Gandhi ushered in the Age of the Common Man in history (and I should add, Common Woman as well to an unprecedented degree). He did not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. He was always at pains to point out that, in his own way, he was trying only to apply the eternal truths to daily life and its problems.

Satyagraha and all that it entailed was a completely novel mode of mass mobilization and non-violent action. Over the years, it was used with wondrous effect. It showed how the individual can bring about social and political change.

Of course, we all know that with Mahatma Gandhi, more than with any other individual, the life was itself the message.

A lightness of spirit was combined with a seriousness of purpose.

A respect for tradition was combined with bold iconoclasm.

A life of contemplation was lived with galvanic energy.

A personality unyielding in principle was also flexible in approach.

Austerity was his hallmark, transparency his creed.

Everything he thought, everything he did was open to public scrutiny. No Freedom of Information Act was needed to shed light on his motives and actions.

Never has there been a man who was so merciless in self-criticism and self-reproach. Never has there been a man more unremitting in self-analysis and self-healing. He once remarked that self-purification was fundamental to satyagraha.

Thus, while we reflect on what he taught us, we should not forget how he lived. It is this coming together of thought, word and deed that is unique.

But we are not here just to celebrate Mahatma Gandhi once more, or to simply add to the Gandhian bibliography so to speak.

We are here today not just to recall what Mahatma Gandhi said and did yesterday but to explore what he might say and do today.

We are congregated here to learn from each other, to share our experience, to reignite the spark of hope amidst the indifference and cynicism that surround us.

Although much of what he did has to be seen in the specific context of his times, the core of his philosophy reverberates even more strongly today.

To help us along, the Conference will have four specific but inter-related themes.

First, a non-violent approach to conflict resolution and peace-building.

Second, the Gandhian philosophy for poverty eradication, education and people's empowerment.

Third, dialogue among peoples and cultures.

And fourth, towards a nuclear weapons – free and non-violent world order.

Permit me to say a few words on each of these areas.

III

The end of the Cold War has not seen a pandemic of peace as we might have hoped.

Democracy has certainly spread. But sometimes democratic forms can mask undemocratic practices.

There has certainly been a growth of nationalism.

But, too often, this nationalism, in the guise of building pride, is stoking prejudice with horrifying consequences.

We continue to witness outbreaks of large-scale violence across the world targeting innocent men, women and children. Millions have been killed and displaced from their homes.

We are today faced with the scourge of terrorism fuelled by religious, political, ethnic or sectarian conflict.

In too many parts of the globe, societies are in discord, nations are at war, human security at risk.

In many cases, violence is the cry of the oppressed and the exploited.

It is a sad reality that in many instances violence has to be resorted to in order to be heard.

While the underlying causes of conflict have to be understood, it does humanity no good to rationalize, let alone romanticize, violence in any way. It provides no lasting solutions. It leads to untold suffering and atrocities. Mahatma Gandhi was decidedly against the idea that violence is the only answer to violence. As he famously remarked: "an eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind".

It is only natural to question, is the Gandhian way feasible at all today? Can it prevail against terrorism and extremism? It would, I suggest, be a grave error to write-off the Gandhian approach as irrelevant to our age. There are individuals and groups who are trying to adapt and adopt satyagraha to deal with changing circumstances and situations. The challenge for us now is to find creative inspiration from Gandhian way to evolve a satyagraha appropriate to our times.

#### IV

Globalisation has had both positive and negative effects.

It has certainly expanded opportunities for many in the developing world but it has also left many poor countries behind.

Moreover, even in the countries that have reaped the fruits of economic expansion, there are regions and communities that have become poorer, at least in the relative sense.

Our own country, for instance, has made spectacular gains over the past decades and is being rapidly transformed. But destitution, poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy are still widespread. Inequality is very visible.

We live in an age of incredible scientific achievement and awesome technological advance.

But are not the fruits of this achievement and advance still inequitably distributed?

Is it not the case that a few enjoy the gains, while many bear the pains?

We must accelerate economic growth.

But should we not be mindful of possible adverse consequences of that progress and take steps to deal with them? Can we not satisfy material wants and aspirations without threatening ecological security and planetary survival?

Does economic progress have to be necessarily accompanied by the spread of social bigotry, as we see in many places? Must gender and disadvantage continue to be synonymous?

To be equitable, economic growth has to be sustainable.

To be sustainable, economic growth has, in turn, to be all-inclusive. All-inclusive is no longer the "greatest good of the greatest number". It is actually "sarvodaya", or "the rise of all". This, Mahatma Gandhi saw as essential to satyagraha itself.

He insisted that such a rise must be respectful of land in harmony with nature and the earth's long-term future.

#### V

A noted anthropologist has recently said that while the very idea of a clash of civilizations is wrong, a civilization of clashes is today's reality.

That is what makes dialogue among cultures and peoples urgent.

But dialogue to be meaningful has to proceed in a spirit of give and take.

Dialogue to be meaningful has to be infused with a spirit of accommodation and compromise.

Mahatma Gandhi once declared that intolerance is the worst form of violence. Without genuine tolerance, without that tolerance that springs from within, no dialogue can have an impact.

Of course dialogue is between peoples and among cultures.

But Mahatma Gandhi did more than this.

His external engagement proceeded from a ruthless internal interrogation of himself.

That is what made his approach unique. He was not always successful, as he himself admitted more than once. But he never abandoned the pursuit.

For us to follow in his footsteps, we need to rid our minds of stereotypes that condition us to act with hostility towards others.

Where are the roots of hatred sown? Where is the poison of prejudice first injected?

Without doubt, in young and impressionable minds.

That is why personally I believe that education and the values it inculcates and instills is so very important. Sometimes, I just feel that if we were to rewrite history textbooks together, nations that confront each other could reduce distrust, setting the stage for reconciliation.

## VI

In the immediate aftermath of Hiroshima, Mahatma Gandhi had said that "the moral to be legitimately drawn from the supreme tragedy of the bomb is that it will not be destroyed by counter-bombs, even as violence cannot be destroyed by counter-violence. Mankind has to get out of violence only through non-violence".

Since then nuclear weapons have become even more of a terrifying reality.

They have become the very currency of power.

The world's nuclear weapon states have more than adequate atomic arsenal to destroy humanity many times over.

And it is not just nuclear weapons.

We also confront the spectre of chemical and biological weapons.

In October 1988, my late husband, Rajiv Gandhi, had presented a blueprint for comprehensive, universal nuclear disarmament at the United Nations. Just a few days ago, four influential Americans who held very different views whilst in office, including Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, have drawn attention to his impassioned plea and called for urgent action.

Yes, India has nuclear weapons. This became a strategic compulsion for us, born out of the failure to persuade the world to abolish nuclear weapons.

But the commitment to comprehensive, universal nuclear disarmament remains our profound conviction which we intend to carry forward.

VII

Ladies and Gentlemen, the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi is not the real issue. Our preparedness for him is.

The question is not whether Mahatma Gandhi is relevant for us. Instead, it is whether we are ready to embrace him once again.

It is not a question of going back to Mahatma Gandhi as much as it is of going forward with him.

This is not as simple as it sounds.

While he fascinates and enchants, we have to admit that it is difficult to emulate him.

It is easy to make him an icon.

But it is infinitely more exacting to make him our beacon.

He did not provide us with final answers. He wanted us to find our own and make our own experiments with truth.

The task before us is how we, individually and collectively, launch an organized, disciplined mass movement for peace, non-violence and empowerment, which is the very essence of satyagraha.

In his own lifetime, it was the youth who were particularly drawn to that rare combination of passion and compassion, of candour and courage. Likewise, it is today's young men and women who have to take the Gandhian torch forward. We look to them for initiative and leadership.

Let the message go forth that men and women from across the world assembled here, and resolved to rediscover the Mahatma's way for peace and harmony.

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Let the message also go forth that we met here to rekindle the flame of Gandhian action with its array of revolutionary ideas and techniques.

Let the world know that there are men and women, in governments and outside, who are determined to propagate Gandhian values.

Plurality preserves us.

Diversity defines us.

For that plurality to survive, for that diversity to prosper, we need a new global compact, a new global covenant.

I submit to you that the foundations of this new edifice can be found in what Mahatma Gandhi preached and practised, in what Mahatma Gandhi lived for and died for.

Thank you.