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International Day of Non-Violence

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Today, the Father of the Nation 'Gandhi' may not be with us, but his ideologies live on. Not just India, but the world over, his principles are celebrated for a better living.

The United Nations' International Day of Non-Violence is

celebrated on Oct. 2, the birth date of Mahatma Gandhi, who was one of the most admired and influential proponents of non-violence in the modern world.

It was established on 15 June 2007 according to a United Nations General Assembly resolution. India immortalised Bapu's ideals which not only helped in

giving us our freedom from British rule but also gave us a message for life—of peaceful means of resistance through non-violence.

So, while the World observes this day to draw attention to global issues, we ought to celebrate this National public Holiday of Gandhi Jayanti as a day to recap

and adapt his great principles for a peaceful existence.

Its relevance has increased in today's times of rampant corruption and needless violence to achieve one's end. The idea of 'ahimsa' should be imbibed in our younger generation who are the leaders of tomorrow. That would be the ideal tribute paid to him.



Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi today

On the occasion of Gandhi Jayanti, Vivaan Sharma shares his views on the relevance of Gandhi today



Vivaan Sharma

In India's present day political culture there are many disturbing developments. Money power, muscle power, religion and caste play crucial role in elections. Family based dynastic politics, though contrary to the idea of democracy, is prevalent. Corruption is rampant and so is violence perpetrated by terrorists, separatists, Naxals and religious fanatics. In the context of such all-pervading degradation in public life Mahatma Gandhi becomes relevant as only his brand of politics can redeem the situation. What was Gandhi's politics and his political creed? It was non-violent satyagraha.

At the height of non-cooperation movement in 1922, Gandhi learnt on 8th February that on 5th February there were disturbances at Chauri Chaura, a village in Gorakhpur district of U.P. A procession in support of non-cooperation was fired upon by the police in which two persons died. The processionists, nearly 4000 in number, retaliated. Policemen, after exhausting all ammunition they had, took shelter in the police outpost. The mob set fire to the police outpost in which twenty-two policemen were burnt alive. Gandhi was shocked and on the spur of the moment he withdrew the non-cooperation movement. He declared that India was not yet ready for non-cooperation which necessarily has to be non-violent and truthful.

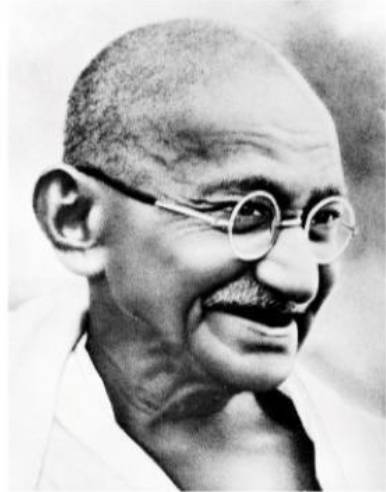
Eight years later when Gandhi launched Salt Satyagraha, he first tested whether the country was ready for a non-violent satyagraha. He asked his countrymen across the land to take

a pledge of independence and of willingness to break laws, if necessary, but only non-violently. He put his immediate followers through rigorous training in self-discipline and endurance. The historic 220 miles long march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, a coastal village in Surat district of Gujarat, along with selected volunteers, to break the salt law remains an unparalleled example of non-violent civil disobedience.

In Gandhi's political thinking a strong civil society was very important. For that he resorted to various constructive programmes like promotion of khadi, removal of untouchability and rural development. Such programmes became a part of the freedom movement and provided committed cadres whom he trained in the techniques of satyagraha. In the process social fabric of the civil society was strengthened and local leadership developed which was highly principled—something totally missing today.

Gandhi strived for Hindu-Muslim unity all his life. In 1924 he fasted for 21 days for that purpose. Gandhi said: "I am striving to become the best cement between the two communities. My longing is to be able to cement the two with my blood, if necessary. But, before I can do so, I must prove to the Muslims that I love them as well as I love Hindus. My religion teaches me to love all equally." That statement embodies his idea of secularism. He was of the view that there was no need to separate religion from politics. He believed that both religion and politics are means to serve the people. For him the core of secularism was treating all religions equally (Sarvadharmasambhava).

On the eve of independence there was widespread communal hatred throughout India. In Noakhali, a district in East Bengal, there was terrible communal violence. Gandhi was appalled and he resolved to go to Noakhali himself, to stay there



until sanity returned—and if necessary to die there. From October 1946 to March 1947 he roamed the villages of Noakhali infusing courage among those who had lost hope. In the words of Sudhir Ghosh, a close associate of Gandhi, "he walked from village to village every day. He had discarded even his leather sandals as a sign of atonement for the violence and walked bare-foot and did not stop for more than one night in one village. He slept in any hut where the villagers gave him shelter. He ate whatever food they gave him." He did all that to drive some sense into those whom the communal frenzy had turned mad.

Again, the partition violence was a mortal blow to Gandhi. In January, 1948 Gandhi undertook his 18th, the last, fast. It lasted for six days. He ended the fast only after he got specific pledges from the majority community on the

safety of life, property and freedom of movement for minorities. It was a pledge of friendship between communities. Gandhi said: "To break that friendship would be to break the nation." Even today India is reeling under communal tension and mistrust. Though there is no Gandhi around but his message is there and his well-documented sacrifices for bringing about communal harmony available for everyone to read and understand. That is why he is relevant. In the words of historian Ramachandra Guha, "Gandhi's respect for other religions was intimately connected with his philosophy of non-violence. He chose to study Islamic and Christian texts, bringing to them the same open, yet not uncritical, mind that he brought to Hindu scriptures. In a world riven by inter-religious violence and misunderstanding, Gandhi's ideas and example may yet provide a

moderating influence."

Gandhi understood how diverse India was. He realized that unless there is unity of purpose amongst the diverse multitudes of his country, his non-violent freedom movement would have no chance of success. He, therefore, adopted the method of gentle persuasion through dialogue and compromise. John Gunther, an American journalist, visited India in 1938. Speaking of Gandhi, he said that "most striking thing about Gandhi was his inveterate love of compromise.... Surely no man has ever so quickly and easily let bygones be bygones. He has no hatreds, no resentments; once a settlement is reached, he cooperates with enemies as vigorously as he fought them."

In 1931 J.R. Glorney Bolton, a British Journalist, based in India, wrote to Gandhi that "whether or not you are to be the architect of India's new constitution, your advocacy of the doctrine of non-violence as a political weapon will remain throughout history as your greatest contribution to the world." Even after his death non-violent resistance to arbitrary state power is in vogue. Chipko movement in Uttarakhand, northern India, to save the forests was launched in 1970's. Chipko volunteers would hug standing trees so that no one would dare to cut them.

Struggle against apartheid in South Africa was inspired by Gandhi. For some time, the African National Congress resorted to armed struggle but finally reverted to Gandhian method which resulted in a negotiated peace settlement between apartheid regime and those who fought against it. When Nelson Mandela became the President of a democratic South Africa he followed the Gandhian path of reconciliation. He appointed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to heal the country and bring about a reconciliation of its

people, the whites and the non-whites.

American Civil Rights Movement, led by Martin Luther King Jr., against racial discrimination in the southern United States was also inspired by Gandhian principle of non-violence. The

doctrine of non-violence was used in Poland by Lech Walesa and in Czechoslovakia by Václav Havel to get rid of dictatorships and bring democratic regimes. Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz Lozano said that "Gandhi's movement which was at once spiritual and political was one of the historical novelties of the 20th century."

Gandhi published on October 25th, 1925 a list of seven deadly sins from which emanate all the ills of societies all over the world. They are:

1. Politics without principles
2. Commerce without morality
3. Wealth without work
4. Education without character
5. Science without humanity
6. Pleasure without conscience
7. Worship without sacrifice.

Today's world seems to have gone insane and is heading for self-destruction.

When the strong and mighty threaten the world with nuclear weapons, it is time to revisit Gandhi's list of seven sins as that may help humanity to think and act nobly.

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- An article by Dr. Ram Chandra Pradhan in the Quarterly Journal "Dialogue" - Vol. XIV No. 1 - July-September, 2012 issue (A Journal of Ashra Bharati, New Delhi).

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