

## Mahatma Gandhi

(Speech at Nehru Centre, London)

Gandhiji was the Father of Indian Liberation, architect of gigantic social reforms and author of spiritual regeneration of our country. He combined in him the political insight of Plato, the saintliness of Spinoza and the faith in the masses of Marx. No Leader achieved such worldwide attention in his own life time as Gandhiji has done. The greatest tribute to him came from Einstein when he said that generations to come “will scarcely believe that such a one as this, ever in flesh and blood, walked on the earth.”

He transformed the mediaeval Indian society seething with abominable practices like untouchability, caste conflicts, exploitation of women and a host of others, into modern society based on human dignity and equality. The seed of human rights he planted in South Africa has today blossomed and the abhorant apartheid has vanished from the face of the Earth.

Now could one man achieve so much? We have great many books on Gandhiji more descriptive of what he did than how he did. He had an unique charishma but that alone could not have achieved these miracles. He had knowledge and wisdom and common sense in an uncommon degree. Others have had them too without a particle of Gandhiji’s success. In my view, the moral and spiritual approach of Gandhiji to all issues, political, social and economic, distinguished him from the rest of humanity.

Gandhiji spiritualised politics. As early as 1915, he declared that his aim was to spiritualise politics and political institutions. He set an almost impossible standard that the servant of the people must accept the monastic ideal and discard all wealth and possessions. He wanted the members of the Ashram to take vows of Satya, ahimsa, swadeshi, celibacy, fearlessness, moderation in food and elimination of untouchability. To him a vow was a spiritual resolve a *Vrata*. Unless one commits oneself to some fundamental principles and upholds them against odds including sacrifice of one’s own life, one is not fit to lead the people in any sphere. One has to prescribe for oneself a code of conduct to be observed honestly and faithfully in all actions particularly relating to public life.

Gandhiji’s prescription for men in public life is the practice of Dharma in thought, word and deed. The two pillars of Dharma are Satya and Ahimsa not in the restricted sense of truth and non-violence but according to Gandhiji’s conception of them.

According to Gandhiji, Truth does not merely refer to truth in speech, but a number of other virtues such as absence of exaggeration, of secrecy, deception, suppression of facts, prejudice, hypocrisy, dogmatism etc. Truth implies a readiness to accept mistakes and retrace the steps. Gandhiji always held that honesty and integrity are the two vital components of Truth and unless one’s actions are based on them, one was not fit for public life.

Similarly ahimsa to Gandhiji is not a negative concept meaning non-killing and non-injury but a positive form of universal love, not merely of human beings but of all beings. It is a crystallized expression of the basic concept of Bhagavat Gita that all beings are the sparks of divinity. “Non-violence is therefore in its active form goodwill towards all life” wrote Gandhiji in *Young India*. Gandhiji defined *himsa* to include ill-will, anger, cruelty and torture of men and animals, harsh words intended to hurt, oppression and humiliation of the weak.

In Gandhiji’s view, persuasion and not coercion should be principal instrument of Government. In this Gandhiji was not addressing the Indian people only but a world audience. He urged humanity to regulate its life according to the moral law – the Dharma – so that peace

and harmony may prevail among peoples and nations. He was a Mahatma not only of India but a great soul of the World.

Gandhiji believed, practised and preached the basic concept of Bhagavat Gita namely that every human being is a part and parcel of the Supreme Atman. Isavasya Upanshishad says

<i>Yasthu Sarvani Bhutani</i>	He who sees all beings,
<i>Atman Yeva Anupasyathi</i>	in his own self
<i>Sarva Bhuteshu cha Atmanam</i>	and his own self in all beings,
<i>Thato no vigupsate</i>	He does not hate any one.

No wonder, Gandhiji believed in inter-faith harmony and brotherhood and sought to win the goodwill and affection of all other religionists, Muslims, Christians, Parsees and all. Communal harmony and respect for all religions was a sheet-anchor of his national movement. He undertook a fast unto death to prevent the vivisection of the Hindu Society by introduction of separate electorate for the Harijans. He plunged into the strife-torn Bengal to quench the communal frenzy. A frail unarmed individual was able to bring communal peace in Noakhali which brigades of armed men could not do in Delhi.

Unfortunately, we the legatees of the great tradition have forgotten all his teachings and only chant his name in a ritualistic manner during celebrations. We have ceased to ask ourselves how **faithful** we are to the **principles** that our great leader taught us by precept and practice.

The **cardinal principle** of Ahimsa has been cast to the winds. We are ready to give and take offence at the smallest provocation. The entire atmosphere is surcharged with violence. Violence in the name of religion leading to massacre of innocents and destruction of public and private property is increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception. Anti-social elements jump into the fray and loot property without being identified. Tolerance which has been the watchword of India ethos has become a word in history books. Instead religious frenzy today has become respectable and even wins sympathy and votes at elections. In the multi-religious society like ours, one has to learn to live in harmony with other religionists.

Crimes like theft, robbery, dacoity are daily occurrences in all cities. Gruesome murders accompany efforts to grab property. The struggle for existences has become so acute that petty things burst to armed fights. Prisons have ceased to be deterrents. Crimes against women who had an honorable place in social fabric have brought disgrace to the nation. Government alone cannot solve these problems. Unless the moral and spiritual foundation is strengthened so that subjective checks are provided by religion and philosophy there is little hope for the nation.

The primordial man was nothing more than a beast. His whole endeavour was to hunt for his food everyday. The primitive man has now moved into a state in which he is called a civilized man and that was possible because he was an intellectual and he could exercise his mind. The other beasts whether they are elephants or monkeys, remained only monkeys and elephants. They do not have any society, they have no cultural pursuits, they have no government, and they have no philosophy. They have not made any improvement in science and technology. Now why is it that the man has been able to advance while other animals like him have remained stagnant? It is because, using the intellect which he has, he has been able to form rules and regulation by which he can live in place and harmony with his fellow beings. He developed self-restraint and respected the rights of his fellow beings. He solved differences by peaceful means and not by force. Religions taught him codes of conduct the observance of

which brought harmony among Men. Gandhiji tried to restore these spiritual values which under stress of material life were scored and abandoned by modern society.

Rampant corruption in our country has turned our Democracy into a mockery. Democracy which is Government according to the general will of the people, will cease to be so, notwithstanding periodical elections if the elections are rigged, polling booths captured, voters bribed or intimidated and money power prevails. Nor will be general will of the people be reflected in the legislature if a candidate in multi-party contest is declared on plurality and not on majority of the votes cast in the constituency. A system of run of between the top two candidates must determine the representation from the constituency.

Another area where Gandhiji strenuously turned all his efforts was alleviation of rural poverty through massive programmes of rural employment, rural self-sufficiency and development. In his expanded definition of ahimsa, Gandhiji said that in a non-violent society, there could be no exploitation or a wide gap between the rich and the hungry millions. He was so saddened by the poverty of the masses that he gave up his clothes and adopted the loincloth. He firmly believed that prosperity could come to India only if the 80% of people living in villages were able to have the minimum of subsistence. As a practical genius, he devised schemes for decentralized labour intensive cottage industries where men and women could work in their homes at their leisure and convenience and earn enough to sustain themselves. The relevance of these thoughts to modern conditions becomes apparent if we realize:

1. that around 38% of our population is below poverty line and another 30% are at mere subsistence level.
2. that employment has not kept pace with the growth in gross national product
3. that the expansion of production is more in the elitist consumption product as a result of which per capita availability of essential supplies had remained stagnant and
4. that the regional disparities still persist.

It is therefore necessary to correct these distortions and have a composite industrial policy consisting of heavy industries, like steel, coal, fertilizers, which obviously cannot be carried on by the small or village sector medium and at the same time encourage small scale industries and rural industries.

Village should be provided with appropriate help such as infrastructure, technological innovation, marketing of products and adequate and timely finance. The utilization of local raw materials for local production afford large employment opportunities for rural people. Harnessing of village energy through Gram Sabhas where the people will have a voice in determining their priorities may go a long way.

India is drifting way from the ideals of Gandhiji whose unorthodox methods were scoffed at by the fashionables of his time. They ridiculed him asking, could spinning charka win you freedom? Will picking a handful salt dislodge the mighty British Empire? But in truth they did.

How can this generation which has seen the success of his policies and programmes in unifying India as a nation afford to forget his teachings?

### **Mahatma Gandhi and Humanism – Usha Mehta<sup>#</sup>**

I deem it an honour and privilege to release the volume Mahatma Gandhi and Humanism, authored by my esteemed friend and eminent Gandhian Dr. Usha Mehta.

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<sup>#</sup> Address on Book release at Gandhi Darshan, Rajghat, New Delhi on 07<sup>th</sup> August, 2000

Before reading a book most of us first look at the author so that we may be satisfied that the writer will contribute to our knowledge. Then we look at the subject matter so that we may be satisfied that the time is worth spending on it. By both these tests, the volume “Mahatma Gandhi and Humanism” attracts one’s attention.

The author Ushaji had a brilliant academic career with an Honours Degree in Philosophy, a Law degree and a doctorate on “Philosophy on Social & Political Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi”; not the honorary appendage of dignitaries. She has an excellent command of clear and crisp English language which goes straight to the head and heart.

It is said that the style is the man. It is totally applicable to Ushaji’s writing. Her personal qualities, like simplicity, sincerity, austerity and profundity of thoughts are fully reflected in this volume. Her in-depth analysis of comparison and contrast of Gandhiji with the Master Minds of the ancient world, Socrates, Plato and Buddha; contemporary leaders in the political firmament Gokhale and Tilak, Martin Luther King; great thinkers, Thoreau, Karl Marx, Tolstoy and Ruskin; and with his life long disciple Jawaharlal Nehru, bring a breath of fresh air to the plethora of looks on the Mahatma. In this sense, the book is a unique presentation of Gandhiji to the World.

The subject matter of this volume, namely ‘Gandhism’ is of eternal interest to the present as well as millennia to come.

Gandhiji was not merely the Father of Indian Liberation but also the architect of gigantic social reforms and author of spiritual regeneration of our country. He combined in him the political insight of Plato, the saintliness of Spinoza, the faith in the masses of Marx, the pastoral romanticism of Rousseau and the passion for non-violence of Tolstoy and Ruskin. No leader achieved such worldwide attention in his own lifetime as Gandhiji had done. The greatest tribute to him came from Einstein when he said that generations to come “will scarcely believe that such a one as this, ever in flesh and blood, walked on the earth.” Gandhiji transformed the medieval Indian society seething with abominable practices like untouchability, caste conflicts, exploitation of women, and a host of others, into modern society based on human dignity and equality.

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The most fascinating study of the twentieth century, is not space research, atomic science, supersonic flights, marvels of medical science such as transplant and implant of organs and production of test tube babies but the voluntary transfer of power from the colonial masters to the millions of subject peoples and the elimination of colonialism through the Gandhian path of peace and non-violence.

While others made changes in materials, Gandhiji changed the Man himself. Satya and Ahimsa were not the invention or discovery by Mahatma Gandhi. The concept remained in the world millennia before Christ. But Gandhiji adapted them for social and political changes. He proved that moral law is higher and more powerful than the material law and that Man can overcome unjust material law by observing the moral code. When Gandhiji started his Dandi march to violate the Salt laws, skeptics scoffed at the idea and asked, “Can the mighty British Empire be shaken by a fistful of salt”. Yet the symbolic act of mass disobedience without retaliation of the brutal suppression resorted to by the government, shook the foundations of the British Empire. Other countries struggling for freedom and leaders struggling against social discriminations and inequality adopted the Gandhian way. The author points out that the Buddha

preached the same philosophy; namely that evil must be overcome by good, anger by kindness, greed by generosity and falsehood by truth. Socrates rejected the offer to escape from jail and said “escape from prison would amount to treason against the spirit of citizenship”. Gandhiji said that “only those can take up civil disobedience, who are prepared to suffer the penalty”. Most countries, which achieved freedom during the last century, acknowledged that the inspiration for non-violent struggle came from Gandhiji. Martin Luther King adopted the Gandhian way when a Black was thrown out of a bus to accommodate a White at Montgomery. The boycott of busses had splendid response and King was put behind the bars. After 380 days of disciplined boycott, the Supreme Court ruled against the discrimination in buses. On receiving the Nobel Prize for ‘Peace’, Martin Luther King said, “this award which I receive on behalf of the movement is a profound recognition that non-violence is the answer to the crucial political questions of our times.”

### LIMITS TO OBEDIENCE.

Through out this volume, lies scattered a deep thought relating to a citizen’s right to rebel against authority. It is a well known dictum that,

“Discipline without Democracy is tyranny, and  
Democracy without Discipline is chaos.”

It is the patriotic duty of a citizen in a democracy to abide by the laws of the land. In fact a true democracy is one where most of the people voluntarily observe the laws. Since in a democracy laws are enacted by the people themselves through their democratically elected representatives, the obedience to law is just a duty of one self to himself. The author has brought out the views of Socrates, Thoreau and Gandhi on the duty of the citizen to voluntarily and unreservedly obey the laws of the State but at the same time has emphasized the right of the citizen to resist unconscionable and unjust laws. Gandhiji said that the citizen should owe higher priority to the law of God over an immoral and inequitable law of the land. Resistance in such circumstances was not only a right but also a duty of the citizen. They however cautioned that such disobedience should lead to social good and not for private gain.

Thoreau was the first to use the term, Civil Disobedience in 1849 and he accepted disobedience of obnoxious laws and non payment taxes as some of the legitimate means of Civil Disobedience. He, however, went a step further and justified violence in the process. The author quotes a statement by Thoreau that “They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slave holder” as proof of his approval of violence. Lincoln also preached obedience to law and held that obedience to laws is the price one has to pay for one’s liberty. However he justified revolution when the majority suppressed and trampled on the rights of minorities with the strong arm of the government.

Gokhale was as ardent a patriot as Gandhiji and Tilak, but he advocated milder methods for achieving Self- Government. He believed in the British sense of Justice and the public opinion in Britain. He preferred sending petitions, leading delegations and creating public opinion in England for securing self government. He disapproved breaking of laws, boycott of courts and colleges and non payment of taxes. Ushaji makes this significant statement at page 124; “Gokhale did not approve of these tactics perhaps because he feared that they would encourage a habit of defiance and disobedience of law and constitutional authority instead of generating a sense of obedience and loyalty.” It may be recalled that another stalwart of the Home Rule Movement, Dr. Annie Besant broke away from the Congress for the same reason. Looking at the current state of affairs, where ‘Bundhs’ are organised for trivial, sectoral or

personal reasons, that normal life is paralysed by strikes, violence, disruptions of production, communication and other essential services, are resorted to for selfish ends and not for common good, one must admit that the Gandhian spirit of civil resistance has been debased and vulgarised by the present generation.

### ECONOMIC POLICY AND SWADESHI

It is imperative that a nation must choose its political and economic framework to suit its conditions and not ape other countries. One of the curses of colonialism is to imitate the rulers and adopt policies and programmes that have served well in their countries. Institutions and principles that work well in advanced countries, fail miserably in developing countries. Economic Policies that suit countries with shortage of manpower create chaos in a thickly over populated nation. Gandhiji realised it quite early in his life and offered programmes that suited the nation with its multitudinous problems. The chapter on Gandhi, Tolstoy and Ruskin illustrate the principle. Gandhiji read Ruskin's "Unto the last" and found an echo of his own ideas in it.

As Ushaji put it Gandhiji gave an ethical orientation to economics. He wrote, "I do not draw a sharp line or distinction between economics and ethics. Economics which hurts the moral wellbeing of an individual or a nation is immoral and therefore sinful. Thus the economics which permits one country to prey upon another is immoral". Ruskin stated that the exploitation of labour by the employers and thereby accumulating wealth was a form of theft. Gandhiji's concept of the rich being Trustees for poor is in parallel with Ruskin.

Tolstoy and Ruskin somewhat pleaded for return to nature. They abhorred machinery. Tolstoy was against law courts, police and military. He was a starry eyed idealist while Gandhiji the pragmatist accepted these institutions but wanted them to function in accordance with Dharma, Satya and Ahimsa

Gandhiji's economic thought is rooted to the welfare of the masses. Whatever affected employment of the masses whether machinery or technology was anathema to him. He said that he had no objection to 30 thousand workers producing all the things required by the country instead of 30 million. But those 30 million must not be rendered idle or unemployed. His Khadi and Village industries programme explains his entire approach. That technological innovation lead to different and more lucrative employment and that in the long run the benefit will trickle down to the masses does not bring solace or food to the worker who is rendered redundant today. We must remember what J M Keynes said, "In the long run we are all dead,"

In countries with shortage of manpower the redundant employees get another employment easily. But in countries with huge population and vast unemployment the social cost of reduction in employment is acute.

At the same time rural population want amenities like railways and buses for travel, electricity for lighting and for irrigation pumpsets all of which require heavy industries. A composite industrial policy of a judicious mix of large, medium, small scale, cottage and village industries is the ideal that is called for a country of our population and problems. Gandhiji himself admitted that he had no objection to machinery, which go to lighten the physical strain and burden of the workers. A half horse power motor will lighten the burden of the potter, blower will relieve the tedium of operating the bellows for the smithy and so on. The introduction of Amber Charka is itself a technological innovation over the takli and the wheel charka. Even today Khadi provides employment to more than 15 lakhs of workers. Khadi has been sustained by rebate on purchases, which serve as a great incentive for persons to prefer

Khadi. Modern day bureaucrats perhaps do not know the origin of the rebate scheme. As early as 1953 the Madras Assembly passed a resolution asking for reservation of Dhoties and Sarees for the Handloom Sector. Shri TT Krishnamachari who was Industries and Commerce Minister, was opposed to reservation and instead suggested that he could levy a cess on Mill Industry and utilise the money for encouraging sales of Handmade textiles. I was then a member of the Lok Sabha and I was actively interested in Khadi and Handlooms. I like the idea as I felt that reservation could be evaded by clever textiles people. Out of the Cess, the rebate scheme was introduced. Thus the rebate scheme is a solemn undertaking by the Union Government to the Khadi and Handloom weavers in exchange of the demand for reservation of certain textile production. It is unfair on the part of Government of India to abandon the rebate scheme. It will destroy the largest rural employment scheme founded by Gandhiji.

It is my earnest hope that the Sarvodaya and social workers will continue to sustain the constructive programme of Gandhiji as a tribute to his sacred memory.

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan deserves our thanks for bringing out this volume. The publications Division of the Bhavan has been appropriately named by Kulapati Munshiji as a Book University. It has published more than 1500 titles on a wide and varied range of subjects. The sales of some of them like Rajaji's Ramayana and Mahabharata have exceeded million each. Besides, every aspect of Gandhiji's life and teachings has been covered by one or other publication of the Bhavans' Book University. I may say without exaggeration Dr. Usha Mehta's "Mahatma Gandhi and Humanism" has a pride of place in that galaxy of books on Gandhiji.

The function of those called upon to release books is to whet the appetite of the public for more information contained in the book. If the person summarizes the book, the listeners would have been fully fed and there will be no further appetite. I hope I have created sufficient interest in the book and in the author's deft handling of the subject. I have great pleasure in releasing the volume, "Mahatma Gandhi and Humanism". I trust that the volume will help the present generation to recapture the Gandhian ethics and ethos.