

Mahatma Gandhi: Today and Tomorrow

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a great champion of humanity. He is still considered to be so. In the year 2000, he was voted the Greatest Man of the Millennium in a pole organised by the BBC. Leonardo da Vinci and Jesus Christ came the second and the third, respectively. Keeping up with the Indian tradition, we will refer to M K Gandhi, in reverence, as *Gandhiji*. This also reminds that there are many Gandhi-s, but only one *Gandhiji*.

Gandhiji said that his life was his message. Nothing can be a more exact description. His life and work centred around four intermingled principal themes – *Satya* (the truth), *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Satyagraha* (the quest for the truth) and *Sarvodaya* (development for all). We will attempt to develop these ethos through our following multimedia and live presentation. This will include a narration accompanied by illustrations and songs composed by the Nobel Laureate Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore and sung by the members of Udayan. Tagore was a great admirer of *Gandhiji* and gave him the title, *Mahatma*, meaning 'the great soul'. So, it is very appropriate that we sing Tagore's songs to celebrate *Gandhiji*'s birth anniversary and thus pay homage to him. We will also project the English translation of the songs so that unfamiliarity to the Bengali language does prevent anyone from following the meaning of the lyrics.

Gandhiji's truth is a humanist's honesty to and faith in one's own self and all the people around. That is why he saw his own life as a series of "experiments with truth". While this philosophy was not new and he inculcated it from Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, *Gandhiji* applied the principles actively in the modern world to alleviate indignity and injustice to common people in South Africa and India. He believed that oppressors were just as human as their victims and therefore they could be made to understand their mistakes. This was the core of *Gandhiji*'s thinking, which brought about fresh hopes at a very dark time in human history that saw two world wars. *Gandhiji*'s life has shown that the hope becomes reality and *Satyameva jayate*, that is, 'truth always wins'. This is a strong reassurance, and we all appreciate that unfortunately the need for this hope is not any less today, but perhaps, even greater. The need is likely to grow tomorrow unless we and our younger generations do something about it. In the words of Bill Clinton, "We constantly struggled to get beyond the narrow confines of our own experience to the larger truth of our common humanity. All of history, in a way, is the story of that struggle. In my lifetime only two people have made that personal journey as the leaders of their nations, in the rough and tumble world of politics, Mahatma Gandhi and his worthy successor, Nelson Mandela." So, we acclaim the great hero, *Bapuji*, the father of the Indian nation, by singing the lyrics of Tagore

ভেঙ্গেছো দুয়ার এসেছো জ্যোতির্ময় ...

The way to achieve the truth is *Satyagraha* – the quest for the truth. This was Gandhiji's innovation and his weapon to fight the mighty. It was clear to him that it was impractical and foolish to fight a powerful oppressor physically, and “an eye for an eye would soon make the whole world blind”. However, as long as they are human beings, it is possible to fight the oppressor by creating a moral pressure on them. The oppressed would protest against the wrong-doings, would not comply with unjust practices and point out where the wrongs are, but will not use violence, or strike back physically. Nelson Mandela commented, “He believes in the human capacity to change and wages *Satyagraha* against the oppressor, not to destroy him but to transform him, that he ceases his oppression and join the oppressed in the pursuit of Truth.” This is where Gandhiji's principle of *Ahimsa* comes in. This is more than just non-violence, and involves love and peace for all humanity. This inspires us to sing

হিংসায় উন্মত্ত পৃথ্বী ...

The path of the quest for truth, non-violence, peace and love to alleviate human sufferings is not an easy one. It requires indomitable moral strength, courage, and power of endurance. This is echoed in the words of Albert Einstein who said, “Mahatma Gandhi's life achievement stands unique in political history. He has invented a completely new and humane means for the liberation war of an oppressed country, and practised it with the greatest energy and devotion. The moral influence he had on the consciously-thinking human being of the entire civilized world will probably be much more lasting than it seems in our time with its overestimation of brutal violent forces. Because lasting will only be the work of such statesmen who wake up and strengthen the moral power of their people through their example and educational works. We may all be happy and grateful that destiny gifted us with such an enlightened contemporary, a role model for the generations to come.” We acknowledge this by singing:

বরিষ ধরা মাঝে শান্তির বারি ...

For Nelson Mandela, Gandhiji was the “sacred warrior”, often striving to preach and do what he thought would do good to humanity without caring for whether he had many followers, or not. Mandela wrote, “At a time when Freud was liberating sex, Gandhi was reining it in; when Marx was pitting worker against capitalist, Gandhi was reconciling them; when the dominant European thought had dropped God and soul out of the social reckoning, he was centralizing society in God and soul; at a time when the colonized had ceased to think and control, he dared to think and control; and when the ideologies of the colonized had virtually disappeared, he revived them and empowered them with a potency that liberated and redeemed.” Gandhiji was resolute in his conviction and ventured to march alone against all oppositions faced in his walk of life. He found great solace in the following Tagore’s song:

যদি তোর ডাক শুনে কেউ না আসে ...

Gandhiji believed in absolute equal opportunity for all the people for development. He named this as *Sarvodaya*, meaning emergence for all. He considered any kind of social or religious discrimination as an indignity. He thought that self-reliance and appreciation of dignity of labour were the keys to remove discriminatory ideas and practices from the society. To demonstrate his ideas, he started the Phoenix and the Tolstoy Farms in South Africa and the Sabarmati Ashram in India where every member of the community used to do, in turn, all the different works to run their daily lives. The spirit is echoed in our next song:

যেথায় থাকে সবার অধম ...

Self-reliance of each person in the society was Gandhiji’s key idea for national development. As India was and still is a country consisting mostly of villages, he stressed on economic self-reliance of all the villagers through handicraft and small-scale green industries based on agriculture. His famous *charkha* or, the spinning wheel movement to produce one’s own clothes was a practical symbol of these ideas. Nelson Mandela aptly summarised this to write, “Gandhi remains today the only complete critique of advanced industrial society. Others have criticized its totalitarianism, but not its productive apparatus. He is not against science and technology, but he places priority on the right to work and opposes mechanization to the extent that it usurps this right. Large-scale machinery, he holds, concentrates wealth in the hands of one man who tyrannizes the rest. He favours the small machine; he seeks to keep the individual in control of his tools, to maintain an interdependent love relation between the two, as a cricketer with his bat or Krishna

with his flute. Above all, he seeks to liberate the individual from his alienation to the machine and restore morality to the productive process.” The following song is a call to dive in to action with self-confidence:

সঙ্কোচের বিহ্বলতা নিজেৰে অপমান ...

This brings us to the end of our presentation on Mahatma Gandhi: Today and Tomorrow. As we said earlier, we will continue to organise programs over the year to spread Gandhiji’s messages, particularly among the young people. Your help and support for that will be invaluable.

Thank you.