

S P E E C H

India and Nonviolence

We reproduce below the translation of the address of His Excellency, Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, the President of the Islamic Republic Iran at Delhi University, Delhi, India, in January 2003

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate and the Merciful

**Mr, Vice-Chancellor,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Indology is in reality the study of the whole world. As every individual has taken characteristic share from the world, so, India of the people, too, like the spectrum of light of different hues and colours of an Indian peacock feather, exhibits a blend of colours and offers a unity in diversity. The India of the Upanishads and Vedas, the India of Buddha and virtues of his contemplation and smile, the India of *Ahimsa*, of forbearance and contentment, and the India being treasure trove of purity, love, mysticism and music has throughout her history; bestowed upon the world untold knowledge and learning, and love and truth. In the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, in order to dispel the age of darkness '*Kaliyug*', India presented to the world, a figure, who would sing the tune through his singular voice for the whole of India; who would be a river for the thirsty; a shower of benevolence and affection upon the charred bodies; source of sustenance for the unfed, who would be an embodiment of ethics for politicians; who would be a teacher of conduct of life to the students of morality and; Mahatma, the great soul of spirituality for the whole India and the world.

Had the present world not seen Gandhi, it would not have believed that politics could possibly blend with ethics and morality; resistance and struggle with love; and knowledge, mysticism and statesmanship would be applicable, sans worldly, materialism, to run the affairs of our world. Gandhi's life is undoubtedly a sound proof of his deep-rooted beliefs. He put all his vision into practice; He taught us that real victory was not the victory over the opponent but a victory- along with the opponent. He was turning the spinning wheel with one hand, and a world of politics and economy with the other, in order to demonstrate to us that if "progress" and economic advancement are not achieved from the bosom of ones own soil and the indigenous traditions, then they would really never flourish and bear fruits. They would continue to remain alien and imported.

Some people say that Gandhian thoughts, concepts and precepts are not applicable today. Of course this may be true only when we come to know that the one who has truly been defeated is the world of ours and not the Gandhian thoughts, concepts and precepts. We must also know the fact that our world is simply incapable to comprehend his notion and vision, listen to his voice and appreciate the meaning of his smile. Grasping his thoughts and concepts, listening to his voice, and appreciating his smile, may appear so simple yet so difficult. He himself used to say,

“What I am saying to you is as old as the enormous mountains of the earth but to understand it, one has to have a trained mind and robust and liberated soul. To listen to every great man, in whose bosom history is chronicled, and whose heart pulsates with tradition, one needs to have trained, refined and tuned ears. If we are incapable of listening to such great personalities, instead of admitting our mental inability, infirmity and delirium, we must not attribute our shortcomings and frailties to them.

The triumph of the Islamic Revolution of Iran was the victory of blood over sword, and that of the flower over bullet. This however not so easily understandable for a person who believes that barrel of a gun or muscle power, is the source of might. Unfortunately there is no dearth of people who construe blood to symbolize a sword. They also assume that the might of blood is the might of sword. For such men, therefore, the victory of blood over the sword is nothing but the triumph of a sword over a sword. The triumph of blood over sword is only realized by those who understand that smile overcomes wrath, that simplicity and contentment repel luxury and extravagance, that flower triumphs over bullet, that life overcomes death, that forbearance defeats blind prejudice, that love overpowers hatred, and that the sprouting fresh grass defies the pitiless nipping cold. However, “overcoming” does not mean that a smile to change into anger. For instance, a sardonic smile at an enraged person is a clear mockery of his wrath. Such smile is as worse as anger. Gandhi’s smile was unique; he never laughed at any body but he laughed with every body.

Gandhi does not belong only to India. He is the Gandhi of the world of mysticism of both the Iranians and the Moslems. Although he had a hand in politics, his hands did not have the taint of politicization. His frail body had firm personality as firm as the mountains of India and Tibet. Attired in his modest *dhoti* his modesty was woven by the warp of philosophy and the woof of wisdom. In him, more than and prior to anyone else were found our mystics who along with all the others, by the divine love, enchanted— the Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. After the passage of many centuries in all the world history, the mystics of time had finally found someone in the present world, who could epitomize them in merits, thoughts and concepts, and could, in addition, demonstrate to everyone, including the power-centered politicians, that the magnificence and integrity belonged to a unique figure who was capable of earning every body’s love without exception. Even the English workers whose commodities no longer attracted customers in India would receive Gandhi with love and respect in their gatherings.

It was Gandhi who with his philosophy and policy, poverty and contentment, showed to the needy, wealthy people and to the helpless men of power that they were really weak and wretched. This was because for one thing, the wealthy and the powerful had not even understood the meaning of poverty and richness— and who is poorer than an ignoramus? In reality, since such people are power greedy, they are forever deprived of tasting the flavour of “truepower”.

Until the time when Gandhi emerged on the political scene, everybody used to say. “God is always on the side of bigger armies”. And when he appeared on the political stage they all found out that “God eternally resides in bigger hearts”.

Some fifty-six years before Gandhi was born, Karl Von Clausewitz, the Prussian military commander and theorist has said, “War is the continuation of politics by other means”. The

world had to wait for another eighty years for Gandhi to appear on the political scene in order to reveal the sordid nature of war and violence to us in his plain, fascinating and firm style; and more importantly, to teach us that war and politics do not compliment each other for their continuation, and that morality and politics are not necessarily in conflict with each other.

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

The real meaning of what I have called “the dialogue between civilizations” can easily be seen in the life and thoughts of Gandhi. On 10th September 1928, he said, “I must say that three men have influenced my whole life: first and foremost, Raj Chandra, the poet who had the highest influence on me; the second was Tolstoy, and third was Ruskin,” in tandem. Romain Rolland has narrated to us the story of the association and friendship which developed between Tolstoy and Gandhi. In the year 1847, Tolstoy then 29, was hospitalized at ‘Ghazan’. The patient next to his bed was a Buddhist monk whose face received serious injuries at the hands of the robbers. In Tolstoy’s opinion, this monk was the first example of the principle of passive resistance. It was based on the principle of endurance that he practiced for thirty years of his life to preach Buddhism. Ghazan is an Islamic city. Tolstoy, the ‘Christian’, who is hospitalized there to receive his enlightenment by the teachings of the ‘Buddhist monk. This treasure of enlightenment is being held in trust for sixty-two years only to be delivered to the young Gandhi when Tolstoy is fast approaching the final days of his life in 1909. There have been others before Gandhi who benefited from the light of knowledge and the message of love of Tolstoy. One such figure is Sheikh Mohammad Abdoh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, who on April 1904 writes a letter to Tolstoy from Cairo to which Tolstoy lovingly answers. Just a year before Gandhi’s letter to Tolstoy, that is, in 1908, an Indian Moslem writer from Calcutta, Abdullah Mamun Sohravardy, while admiring Tolstoy, writes that Tolstoy’s view about passive resistance “is mingled with the teaching of the Indian sages, and it is quite likely that it will usher in some new messengers in our days”. This prediction, proved true. Tolstoy who had himself been influenced by two of the Indian philosophers and mystics named Rama Krishna, and Vivekananda, in turn influenced the mind and heart of another Indian thinker. This ensures clearly the good results and blessings of the ‘dialogue between cultures and civilizations’. A true dialogue is a transaction benefiting all the parties without loss to any one of them.

Tolstoy, before his correspondence with Gandhi and in response to an Indian journalist named Das who was initially critical of his ideas and later became one of Gandhi’s friends and assistants, writes a letter in which he uses a number of quotations from Krishna, the god of love and in which he described his concept of passive resistance. In his letter to Gandhi, Tolstoy predicts before his death, “There will ultimately come a day on which not only the Christian, nations but also all the people of the world will follow-you”. Tolstoy’s prediction has not yet come true. But what Romain Rolland envisioned, however, came true: “The sapling that Tolstoy had planted had to bear fruit eventually in India”.

Before that sapling bore fruits in India, however, Gandhi himself put Tolstoy’s name on a farm received as a gift from a German friend. The farm was located twenty-one miles from Johannesburg. Gandhi named it “Tolstoy Farm”. As a very natural sequence the farm which was in Tolstoy’s name and whose gardener was Gandhi, bore the first fruit of emancipation and independence for the people of India. And the subsequent achievement would be the

emancipation and liberation of the minds of all those people who have been able to listen to Gandhi's voice from those days in the past, till this very date.

For Tolstoy, love and non-violence are principal truths of life; and for Gandhi, truth, non-violence and love are inseparable. Gandhi says, "One who believes in non-violence is full of hope; the hope is apt to give birth to love and love nurtures courage and faith". Just like the eternal truths of the Upanishad and Vedas, the history and geography of India, the ever surging waves of the Indian Ocean, Gandhi's entire existence is both historical and modern, mystic and fascinating and humane and delicate. That is why he is able to declare, "In my view, the truth is God; and to discover the truth, there is no path but that of non-violence".

The greatness of Gandhi lies, *inter-alia*, in the fact that he deprived himself of the joy of triumph over his adversaries; and he always endeavoured to bring about his own victories, which are nothing but the triumphs of truth and non-violence. Overtly it is an act of compromise in which the victor enjoys no victory and thus mitigates the sufferings of his opponent's defeat. Obviously following such a great figure is no easy task. Naturally, the power one needs to overcome violence and wrath, is not of the same nature as the force applied to bring forth destruction to the world and humanity. That is the reason why history has to wait and watch for thousands of years now before another person like Gandhi to emerge— a person who can combine in one's own unitary self, firmness and dignity with tenderness and grace— the sort of elegance, like that of Gandhi's, who endured enormous problems and pain as well as endless sorrows without breaking down

Many of Gandhi's supporters and adherents were with him merely because they considered his path to 'victory' was the best and the shortest. Needless to comment that such people with such pragmatic frame of mind, were not far from fully denying the truthfulness and nobility of Gandhi's ideas and as such they could not be regarded as his true friends.

For Gandhi, the concept of non-violence is not merely an effective tool for resistance. It is a pure truth, which has risen from the depth of Indian thought and Indian history. Non-violence is both an instrument of action and a criterion of truth. It is both a means to purify individual and an instrument to reform society.

Today, the world is more than ever in need of the voice of Gandhi. If 'today' we listen to the voice, which liberated 'yesterday' India, we will then be in the position to salvage our 'tomorrow'.

Thank you.

[Courtesy: Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Teheran, Iran]