

**Inaugural Address By Smt. D. Purndeswari, MoS (HRD-HE) at  
“The National Seminar on Relevance of Gandhian Thoughts to  
The Professional Social Work” on 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2007 at Andhra  
University, Visakhapatnam.**

Mr Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests and friends. I deemed it a rare privilege for being called upon to inaugurate a national seminar on Relevance of Gandhian Thoughts to the Professional Social Work on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Department of Social Studies Centre Andhra University.

It is a big irony that we are called upon to consider the relevance and utility of the life and teachings of one our leaders hailed as the Father of the Nation, whose portrait hangs in every government office and court hall, whose picture is emblazoned on our currency notes, whose statue in the familiar loin cloth and a staff in hand adorns India's every city, town and hamlet and after whom an arterial road is named in most of the major cities in our country. It is indeed paradoxical that the credentials of a self-made leader with excellent and self-evident qualities have to be put test periodically on the touchstone of their relevance and validity.

Gandhian outlook philosophy and teachings are now a part of the intellectual heritage of mankind. While it is true that more than ever before, one could notice serious efforts being undertaken in different parts of the world, to understand Gandhi's thought, the fact

remains that the policy planners, thinkers, politicians and others who control the destiny of mankind in the post-World War scenario are yet to take Gandhi seriously. On the contrary he is being seen as an inconvenient irritant by the promoters of unlimited economic growth which smacks of neo-colonial instincts. They hope that the mighty tides of consumerism and its mesmeric ability to enslave the material part of human character will ensure permanent dependence on, and help the emergence, of a new century of votaries and champions of unlimited material growth. It appears that at one go humanity has been seized by those who believe that economic growth is the real index of both development and power and lasting index of human happiness. Never before in human history there came such a predicament when every thing is being measured in terms of per capita income or GDP or the relative purchasing power or such other material considerations. This preoccupation on the part of the twentieth century man which has created a situation where family ties, inter personal, cultural, ethical, and even religious and social aspects have been relegated to the background is really sending shock waves all around. Nobody seems to be worried about the manner in which all finer graces of human civilization have ceased to receive priority attention from those who control our lives. This has become a universal phenomenon and no society or country can feel that the situation is different with them. All what we hear is the talk about sharing of wealth, arms reduction and nuclear non-proliferation by those nations who produce all lethal weapons that could wipe out humanity several times over in the event of a war and advocating acceptance of NPT which several countries like India genuinely feel is

discriminatory to them in its present form. The spirited campaigns undertaken by the environmentalists against threat to global warming and environmental pollution and their request to prevent these harmful steps by the managers of our destiny receive only scant attention and unfortunately these warnings, by and large, remain cries in the wilderness.

The relevance of Gandhi and his thought have to be examined against these emerging trends. If we are really serious about Gandhi and his teachings, the galloping horses of humanity which are at the moment being goaded and whipped to run as fast as they could in order to win the heights of material achievements have to be reined in by the collective assertion of an awakened humanity which has a right to a danger free existence. As I have just said, a frightening aspect is the sad fact that man is nowhere in the reckoning now. He has been pitifully reduced to the status of a consumer; he is a consumer first and a consumer last. Similarly the purchasing power of a nation is all what the other nation now cares for. The talk in the world capitals are all centered on which are the biggest markets in the world and newspapers everywhere devote bulk of their space for trends in stock markets bullion rates, and their bullish/bearish tendencies.

Gandhi warned humanity of this dangerous situation as early as 1909 when he pointed out in the, 'Hind Swaraj', that unprincipled growth and unbridled rivalry among nations will land humanity on the brink of disaster. He further warned against a series of social and

political turmoils, ecological devastation and other human miseries that would arise unless modern civilization took care of nature and tried to reduce his wants and that unlimited consumerist tendencies and callous indifference to values would not help humanity to progress towards peaceful existence.

Gandhiji was an ardent supporter of a fully educated citizen. His educational philosophy can be summarized in the following cardinal postulates: 1) Education means all round development; it is best obtained through action. 2) Education has to be through a craft, and not merely through books and abstractions. 3) The basis of true education is character building so that an educated person could become an ideal citizen. 4) Education should be self-supporting as far as possible and also equip the pupil to better his own economic conditions. 5) Primary education should be free and compulsory for all children and should last for at least seven years. 6) All educational planning should be undertaken with the rural Indian masses in mind; in other words, education should not be elitist, but popular in its character. Quoting Huxley, Gandhi says that that person is properly educated “whose body is the ready servant of his will, whose intellect is clear, whose mind is stored with a knowledge of fundamental truths of nature and whose passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will. Gandhiji advocated that our educational system should be such as to make the students “true representatives of our culture, civilization and of true genius of our nation”. He considered the character-building as an essential ingredient in our educational

system which is also what Swami Vivekananda said decades before him.

These educational ideas, founded as they are on certain eternal principles, have not lost their fundamental relevance in the years to come. Our planners are drawing up a self-supporting primary education system, which would improve the lot of the poorest of the poor. That such an education would be based on action, problem-solving and practical activity, rather than mere book learning is also perfectly valid. His idea of an integral education, which allows the whole being of a person to grow, an education which emphasises character-building and cultural identity, is once again, our model.

It is often said that he was opposed to modern ideas especially from the West. His letter to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore is an utter contradiction of this popular misconception: I quote “ **I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible, but I refuse to be swept off my feet. I also refuse to live in other people’s house as an interloper, a beggar or a slave. In this respect his ideas were in consonance with the our Vedic injunction: “Let noble thoughts pervade us from all sides”** Unquote

Gandhi’s contribution to the political awakening and freedom movement in different parts of the world and adoption of nonviolent strategies which help both the opposing groups respect each other’s sentiments and accommodating the views of others has much in

common with UNESCO's decision to propagate the message of tolerance for human survival. There is a surprising similarity between UNESCO's statement in its Preamble that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed" and Mahatma Gandhi's assertion that the world either progresses with nonviolence or perishes with violence. Asia and the African continent particularly have seen peaceful transition of political power and social change thanks to Mahatma Gandhi's initiative which included different methods. One important thing that keeps alive Gandhi's teachings and strategies is the utmost importance Gandhi attached to pure means to attain lasting ends. Gandhi's attempts to make politics value based were part of a new world vision. He emphasized that politics bereft of moral and ethical considerations will not sustain humanity. Gandhi seems to stand almost alone among social and political leaders in his firm rejection of the rigid dichotomy between ends and means. This was because of his basic belief that in politics, as in all spheres of action we reap exactly what we sow- the inexorable law of "Karma" which is the very foundation of Hindu religion and philosophy.

Under the spell of Gandhi's leadership, India's traditions were re-furnished, mobilized and galvanized to serve new goals and objectives. Gandhi's capacity for innovation was stupendous. He was, in fact, a great builder. He built institutions- women's' institutions, labour unions, institutions like Satyagraha Ashram, political movement like Indian National Congress, Harijan Sangh, Hindi Basha Pracharini Sabha, Khadi Gramodyoga Sangh, and all this

along with his ubiquitous contacts with India's millions. Gandhi was keen to apply the most appropriate technique in his agricultural and artisanal activities. He advocated a careful study of agriculture and the establishment of model farms that would provide an example for surrounding farmers. He encouraged his followers to undertake socio-economic surveys of villages, so as to be able to obtain the facts on which appropriate campaigns for rural improvement could be based. Rural development and agricultural improvements were, according to him, inter-linked and inter-dependent. To-day is not our performance in the farm sector a prime concern for our overall economic growth?.

Gandhiji was never against advancement in technology but he was against any technology which denigrated human beings. He was not against large entrepreneurship but was against profiteering as a basic motive in large-scale production. To-day an understanding has developed in the corporate world that mere profit motive would not help them in the long run to attain optimum production. They are now therefore talking about inclusive growth and social responsibility. They are gradually beginning to understand that benefits like better health care, subsidized housing schemes etc are likely to motivate labours to put in unstinted efforts in their work and would promote a sense of belonging among the workers.

While addressing the session of the General Assembly of the United Nations which for the first time observed Mahatma Gandhi's

birthday on 2-10-2007 as International Day of Non-violence, the U.P.A Chairperson and the Congress President observed: I quote

**“Some question the relevance of his methods in today’s fast paced and globally inter-linked world, where threats to peace, security and social harmony abound. But the essential validity of Mahatma Gandhi’s truth has not changed, because human nature itself has not changed”. It is not the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi that is in question today. What is in question today is whether we have the courage in emulate what he preached and practised, what he lived and died for”. Unquote**

With these words I wish the seminar all success and hope that the New Gandhian Studies Centre of the Andhra University would conduct meaningful studies into various facets of Gandhian philosophy and teachings so as to make available reliable and authoritative studies in regard thereto.

Jai Hind.