

Chapter 5: Gandhi, Mandela, King 2023

International Conference

Welcoming Address

Ela Gandhi

Thank you for giving me the honour to open this conference. We have an extensive and interesting programme having started already on the 6th with the important youth summit, today's commemoration of the railway incident where Gandhiji was thrown off the train and the important consequences emanating from this.

I would like to focus on three important outcomes that I would like to see from this conference.

1. What happened on the railway station can happen to any of us. The important consideration is how these three icons learnt from their experiences and how they developed ideas from both their experiences and from reading and learning from others who went through similar experiences before them. Adversity can make us disillusioned, angry, and discontented. What we see from the platform incident was that Gandhiji tried to contain his anger, he tried not to be disillusioned but yes he was discontented and channelled all his energies from anger and disillusionment into looking at how he can deal with the discontentment and turn it around so that the cause of discontentment can be removed. Finding a way and taking responsibility to do something about the problem confronting him, was Gandhiji's way of dealing with the issue. In the present times this is a vital lesson. for all of us as we face the many challenges of our present state, we too can channel our energies into finding ways to deal with the issues, neither running away from them nor condoning them but confronting them. The important challenge we face is whether we can contain our anger, whether we can think logically and not emotionally and whether we can channel our energies towards a constructive solution to the problems we face. Like Mandela said – 'it is in our hands'.

2. The discussions in this conference are vital as we gather together here in this historic space and at a historic time and in times when issues of nonviolence, equity, honesty, love, compassion, and environmental consciousness are of even greater significance than in earlier days, 130 years ago. What we learn from these Icons is the fact that they did not think of their personal problems but rather saw and began to deal with the collective problems faced by them. They saw their own interdependence and interconnectedness with humanity as a whole and the universe generally. This led to them not thinking in terms of their individual needs but the collective needs of the community. Moving away from self-centredness to community centredness. This is an important lesson for the world today as we witness the obsession with materialism, accumulation of wealth as the central concern and the greed and corruption of the present times.

3. Gandhi, Mandela, and King saw life in a broader sense than a narrow inward looking vision. Gandhiji articulated three points which he learnt from his readings of Ruskin's book *Unto This Last* namely,

- The good of the individual is contained in the good of all;
- That all work has dignity and should be respected equally and hierarchies of jobs, professions, work etc. should be reconsidered in order to build greater equity in our social structure and getting rid of the barriers that divide us for instance in terms of class, caste, gender, race, ethnicity etc.; and
- That work on the land and with your hands is of the greatest significance.

These are profound lessons for the times we live in where hatred, exploitation not only of people by people but also of our earth and its resources and of other life, as well as selfishness and violence abound. We see from the work of these icons that the power of love surpasses not only all these base instincts but also the mightiest weapons of war and violence.

Nonviolence as we shall see is not just the absence of violence, but it is a force driven by profound love of humanity as a whole, of the universe and all that is

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in it. Love drives us to protect, to conserve to cherish and to value every atom of the universe and that was the nonviolence that Gandhiji, King and Mandela upheld.

The importance of this conference is therefore the revival of this spirit in the world so that once more we can all begin to see the need to do something about our rapidly deteriorating climate conditions and environmental degradation, the state of inequality and stark poverty that we are living with, the crime corruption and violence in our society, the wars that we are witnessing, internally and between countries as well as the wars for power and control.

So, as we go forward let us interrogate the wise words of the many highly skilled presenters in this conference and come up with our own blueprint which will guide us going forward. Let us be the torch bearers of the important messages emanating from this conference.

Reference

Ruskin, J. *Unto This Last*. Essays from the *Cornhill Magazine* 1860, reprinted as *Unto This Last* in 1862.

https://muff.uffs.net/skola/dejum/ruskin/texts/unto-this-last/unto_this_last.pdf

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