



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

The MAKING of the Mahatma: The MARKINGS of the Outsider-Writer

Professor Satendra Nandan

*This talk will be given at the National Press Club, Canberra, ACT,
Australia to mark the UN's International NON-VIOLENCE Day.*

3 October 2017

In 1939 a couple of things happened that touched my later life in one of the smallest islands in the largest ocean: an Australian writer published his first novel that year and went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973; in September the Second World War began and a member of my family joined the colonial Fijian Army.

And because of Patrick White and the Royal Fiji Military Forces I'm here tonight speaking to you. It's a rare privilege.

Canberra is our beautiful city, as lovely as its transplanted trees and its many people in their autumnal glow. In that sense we're all transplanted, if not quite translated. Not yet, though the English Test is getting tougher!

Canberra has another significance: the man who designed this city—its lakes, gardens, avenues with such imaginative spirituality—is buried in Lucknow, not far from the villages from where my four grandparents, with their *jahajibhais* and *jahajins*—shipmates—were transported in sailing ships from 1879 to the South Seas to work on the sugar estates owned by the C S R Company of Australia : men and women, some with their children, who had never seen a ship or a sea-wave or an island. They developed a special mateship to survive in the South Seas.

60,000 of them. 'Girmityas' we call them, our forgotten diggers of wells, roads, railway lines, who cultivated sugar-cane farms. They prevented the dispossession of an indigenous people - a unique fragment of history. You'll scarcely find a similar history on any other island or continent.

When Canberra was being conceived, my ancestors were citizens of no land. Though British subjects, working for an Australian company, neither they nor their children could come to Australia. And yet Indians were part of the British imperial imagination long before Australia was colonized and settled.

Thereby, of course, hang many tales, many connections, benign and brutal. In March this year the centennial of the abolition of the British Indian Indenture system was commemorated in many parts of our post-imperial world, including Fiji. But nothing is really post or past!

The abolition of this abomination in 1917 was Mohandas Gandhi's first historic victory against the British legal system. M K Gandhi was a London-trained lawyer. He knew the Empire did many legal things - illegally. He was helped by some remarkable Australians, among them Miss Hannah Dudley and Rev J W Burton; Rev Charles Freer Andrews became Gandhi's closest English Christian companion.

*

We're in Australia. For many of us this is home, though some may have arrived here with a sense of homelessness and displacement but not without hope.

When Patrick White published his first novel *Happy Valley* in 1939, he had, as its epigraph, a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi from an essay on 'Suffering' written in 1922:

It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone. The purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.

Suffering became Gandhi's badge of courage: Gandhi's point was that one must make oneself worthy of that suffering: that human condition. In the search of an answer for it, Gautama Buddha gave up his kingdom, his wife and child, five hundred years before Jesus Christ.

Gandhi developed the deep conviction that in a world of suffering, one must resist violence and violation with a life of love and truth. He believed that our single life derives its sustenance from the inseparable energy intrinsic to all creation; he gave it the name *ahimsa*, *love in action* through God's grace and variousness of Life.

The remarkable thing is that as Gandhi was dismantling the Empire in 1939, here was an Australian genius reading and quoting him in his first novel!

The idea of suffering became the underlying theme, the leitmotiv, of Patrick White's creative life and Gandhi's long and incredible struggles, until his last breath in New Delhi on 30 January, 1948, at 5.17 pm, Indian Standard Time. I think no human heart suffered more than his in the service of the Other. It's said that Gandhi fought three battles: against himself, against the ills prevalent in Indian society, and against the British Empire. We can add another one: Against God for man's inhumanity in the world. Yet he loved all four.

I know of no man or woman who has ever killed in his name.

Nor no person I know has inflicted more suffering on himself to save the lives of so many millions. It's said he saved more lives during the horrors of Partition than all the armies on the subcontinent - a superhuman expression of fearless love as he walked from village to village.

*

This evening I want to talk about Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, not as a Mahatma, the Great Soul: much is known about that aspect of his almost mythical life; but as a man, an outsider and a writer: what went into the making of the man he became? That is, the quality of his humanity and his understanding of the world in which he lived and loved, the possibilities of the force of the soul-force that he developed and deployed in a profoundly active life.

Today, in a world of migrants and exiles, asylum seekers and refugees, godmen and conmen, from Christmas Island to Manus—how ironically the islands are named, 'Manus' in Sanskrit could mean a human being—Gandhi's life may have a special salience, an immediate resonance in our region and on the subcontinent; above all, in our individual and collective lives. If violence in his fellow creatures was his central concern, humanity in human hearts became his magnificent obsession.

How did young Gandhi acquire his knowledge outside the country of his birth? Is an exilic existence the precondition of all original thought?

As the most perceptive and prescient Indian diasporic writer, the 2001 Nobel Literary Laureate, V S Naipaul, wrote:

His journeys out of India, first to England and then to South Africa, made him see that he had everything to learn. It was the basis of his great achievement.

It's worth noting that Gandhi really returned to India only at the age of 46, the same age at which Patrick White came back to Australia and began writing seriously his several masterpieces. Both died, aged 78.

*

So much of our world has been shaped and imagined by outsiders and outcasts. This island continent is no exception.

Although Gandhi is often put spiritually in the same category as the Buddha and Jesus, I feel his times and life speak of more challenging upheavals and have the deepest meaning for the present existential questions on our only planet—from the catastrophic climatic conditions, violence in words and weapons of mass destruction, to our evolving planetary awareness. There's no planet B. This is it.

We live in tumultuous times: tweets and nuclear missiles are not the only problems. But think of Gandhi's times: he communicated most of his messages through postcards, articles and telegrams. He'd been through racial subjugation, the greatest Revolution in human history, two European World Wars: the imperial powers were groaning and imploding, the Holocaust and Hiroshima...the first fifty years of the 20th century are the most genocidal in human history.

The subcontinent was both on the path of freedom and a suicidal communal Partition against which one man had stood with a clear vision. And with unshakable courage—something for which he was killed in cold blood.

That he succeeded—almost—so brilliantly is the great miracle of the 20th century, when you consider his contemporaries: Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao, not to mention Winston Churchill and General Jan Smuts.

And many in the country of his birth.

Of course being human, he failed—but even his failures were more magnificent than the successes of much lesser men. And that is why we remember him here today, next to our Federal Parliament.

Professor Albert Einstein wrote:

Gandhi had demonstrated that a powerful human following can be assembled not only through the cunning game of the usual political manoeuvres and trickeries but through the cogent example of a morally

superior conduct of life. In our time of utter moral decadence he was the only statesman to stand for a higher human relationship in the political sphere.

And George Orwell, that prophet of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, books relevant to our times, reflected in 1949: 'What a clean smell he has left behind in his long life'.

It's no wonder that he was killed by one of his own: from Socrates to Jesus, Abe Lincoln to Martin Luther King, it's a narrative, oft repeated. What is, however, most significant is that in their bleeding wounds, men and women find the healing powers in their dispossessed, disenfranchised states in so many parts of the our world: from the islands of Fiji to the roof of the world, Tibet; from seats on a bus to ordinary peoples' revolutions on cobbled streets, men and women and children resisting peacefully, from Martin Luther King in Washington to Clinton Pryor in Canberra. I sometimes wonder why we've not produced a Gandhian leader on this ancient and generous continent?

*

If Gandhi had not gone to England at the age of 19, excommunicated by his clan, caste and elders, for he was crossing the kala pani, black waters, to study in England, he would have been a totally different kind of a leader. Gandhi disobeyed his elders but he had his mother's blessings. She influenced him more deeply than any other human being.

He became a rebel with many causes for he had witnessed the first Satyagrahi in his mother's daily living in a patriarchal, caste-clad culture. Gandhi understood that you cannot give birth to a new idea of India or personal freedom clad in caste-iron armour. He was married at 13 to a lively 13-year old girl. Later in life whenever people asked him about his mahatmahood, a title he didn't like, he would answer it with a question: Ask Mrs Gandhi? Kasturba had lived in the shade of Gandhi's tree of truth with many leaves and boughs and roots. And an occasional bitter fruit.

Gandhi understood instinctively that the greatest spiritual human value was love with the growth of the soul: out of his mother's gift and his wife's grit and grace, he shaped and sharpened this insight into his universal idea of *ahimsa*. One could always lean towards infinity even on a lathi, one's walking stick.

*

He returned to his Indian world a London-trained lawyer. In his law practice he was a notable failure. So some small businessmen decided to send him to Natal where a family feud was brewing. It was while travelling to meet his employer when a critical incident took place at Pietermaritzburg railway station which charged his life and changed the British Empire.

Gandhi called it the most creative moment in his life. He was 23 years old on that cold winter's night, when he was thrown out of the first-class railway carriage, on 7 June, 1893.

Then, after two years, almost on the eve of his departure from Natal, two things happened: an item in the local newspaper reported that Indians would not to be given ordinary residential rights in Transvaal; and a while later one badly beaten Indian indentured labourer came into his office, bleeding profusely. The man who was described as a 'coolie barrister' was face to face with a genuine 'coolie'.

Gandhi writes about him in a chapter in his *An Autobiography: My Experiments in Truth* entitled 'Balasundaram'. It's a vivid and haunting portrait of an indentured labourer. In him he saw reflected the subjugation of a subcontinent. He changed from a dandy lawyer, in a three-piece suit, into the sartorial semiotics of the humblest labourer: the soaring last sentence is:

It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow-beings.

The extraordinary perception of the final sentence finally led Richard Attenborough to make that moving and magnificent biopic, *Gandhi*.

After that for much of his life Gandhi travelled third class. As a wag remarked: it cost India a fortune to send Gandhi third class! Or again it cost India millions of rupees to keep Gandhi in poverty!

Of course Gandhi appreciated such wise-cracks for he had a lively sense of humour: how can one forget his quip about western civilization? Or the Emperor's clothes? Or meeting the Viceroy after the Salt March? Or about the lawyer who fell off a train!

Gandhi said that if he didn't have a sense of humour he'd have committed suicide.

And that is what makes him so human—how many saints or prophets have that kind of humanity spiced with humour—the ability to laugh at themselves? All his adversaries recognized this and felt elevated and empowered in his presence. In respecting Gandhi, one's self-respect was ever enhanced, never diminished.

*

Historians and biographers have written about Gandhi's exile and how this exilic existence, especially in South Africa, moulded him into a very different kind of an Indian leader:

Gandhi entered the world historical stage not in India but in South Africa. . . His idea of nationalism does not start with the locality and then gradually extend itself to the province and finally the nation. Quite the reverse. He was an Indian, then a Gujarati,

It's said that

...before the nineteenth century, no residents of the subcontinent would have identified themselves as Indian.

Again it is in South Africa that he practised a multicultural existence; he lived amongst Hindus, Jews, Jains, Christians, Muslims, Parsis in the same house, on the same Farms. His charisma was infectious. And he nursed the wounded native Africans during the Boer war.

It is 'the transforming experience of South Africa which imbued him with a vision of the nature of public work unprecedented in Indian public life. What South Africa gave him was a vision of public work, including political activism as the service to all humanity, rather than as a path to personal, or group advancement...In his ripening understanding of the nature of ultimate truth, and the essential nature of humanity, there emerged a powerful sense of the interconnection of all beings—the sense that action of one affects all in some mysterious alchemy, either for good or ill; and also the belief that ultimate truth, the divine (by whatever name one calls this Mystery), was to be found in the outcast, the poor and the afflicted...for a seeker after truth the religious quest could never be a purely private one. The compulsions of a real religion would drive any seeker after God into the service of his fellows. In this service politics might well become an incurable commitment.'

These distilled thoughts come only through a lifetime's contemplation and action.

So South Africa gave the diasporic Gandhi a different sense of Indianness: not the communal Indianness of the subcontinent oppressively camouflaged by clan and caste, region and religion, and subjugated by the Raj. This amazing insight of double oppression he acquired pre-eminently among the marginalised Indians of the diaspora.

And he tried to make this idea of India the very centre of Indian life and its multifaceted narratives.

II

But I want to talk briefly about Gandhi as a reader and a writer. It is in the acts of reading-writing that Gandhi attained some of his most transcendent insights and perceptions.

Gandhi's great ability was to reinterpret and recreate every act and word in his own imagination and conduct. The man behind the myth, the mind behind the genius, gave his own interpretations and meanings. His freedom of the imagination was his great gift—not limited by traditions or the wisdom of the Elders. I do not think he ever stepped in the same Ganges twice.

Whether he read the Sermon on the Mount, the *Bhagawad Gita*, John Ruskin's 'Unto This Last', Leo Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is Within You', David Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience', among numerous others, he interpreted these in the light of his daily conduct, thus remaking and recreating the world in which he lived.

He wished to show how brute force may be transmogrified, how we can sacrifice ourselves...to our imagined selves which offer far higher standards than anything offered by social convention.

If we must suffer, it is better to create the world in which we suffer, and this is what heroes do spontaneously, artists do consciously, and all men (and women) do in their degree.

Gandhi was an artist—he wrote: 'I always wanted to be a poet'.

Instead, of course, he attained a sainthood of sorts not through any confessions of past sins or transformations on any road but through daily acts and by immersing himself in public life in full view of the public. His many epiphanic moments and exalted encounters are made of very ordinary incidents rooted in reality of the diamond self under intense pressure.

Gandhi had begun his many epic journeys, but always from himself: declaring God is Truth; he changed it to Truth is God. Truth, he felt, was to be found in human action—indeed Satyagraha was *truth in action* just as ahimsa was *love in action*.

III

His journey was always inward although there were many outward manifestations. As an outsider, the markings he made on numerous pages remain, to me, his finest legacy. In them he heard the still, sad music of humanity. That still, sad music of humanity, Gandhi transmuted into ‘the still, small voice within’.

Gandhi’s writings show us glimpses of those moments which make us human but also show us the immense possibilities within each of us: the marvellous in the mundane. ‘As man of his time who asked the deepest questions, he became a man of all times and all places’.

To my knowledge no human hand has written more words than him. Admittedly so much of human civilization is based on orality not literacy. I give my students an example: if we assume that human beings have been on this wounded planet for say 500,000 years, reduce that to the life of a single individual aged 50: then this

person began writing only after 49 years and 364 days – that is, on the last day of his fiftieth year!

Imagine the implications of that on the island-continent of Australia, and the islands of the South Pacific or the African or American continents.

Gandhi's collected works fill more than 100 volumes but only one of these, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, was written as a book: virtually all the rest comprise speeches, letters, dialogues, columns, pamphlets, leaflets, petitions and prayers. Post cards were his versions of tweets of our times.

Louis Fischer, his pre-eminent biographer, wrote:

No man knows himself or can describe himself with fidelity. But he can reveal himself. This is especially true of Gandhi. He believed in revealing himself. He regarded secrecy as the enemy of freedom – not only the freedom of India but the freedom of man (or woman). He exposed even the innermost personal thoughts which individuals regard as private. In nearly fifty years of prolific writing, speaking and subjecting his ideas to the test of actions, he painted a detailed self-portrait of his mind, heart and soul.

Gandhi's writings may not be "literature" or even philosophical treatises, as many understand these, but they are deeply creative acts of self-awareness and reflexivity. It is, I believe in the processes of writing, in these individual acts of meditation, that his deepest values and his most passionate vision evolved, and continued to develop as 'experiments in truth': writing for him was moksha, liberation, the final freedom from human bondage. The conscience of words defined his deepest humanity. They gave breath to an inner power. This was the

statesmanship of the human spirit that we all possess. And it is the act of writing on the ground that led Jesus to make that most compassionate judgement in all literature: *He that is without sin amongst you, let him first cast a stone at her.*

And we've been deciphering ever since what was written on the ground, not on stones and tombstones.

*

Patrick White, our own one and only Nobel laureate in Literature, in 1958, wrote that he began writing to discover 'the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone make bearable the lives of ordinary men and women'.

White goes on to say, 'There's the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding'.

In his 'A Letter to Humanity', read to 40,000 people on Palm Sunday in Hyde Park, Sydney, in 1982, White quotes a remarkable passage from Gandhi, 'this great human being's words':

I am a Christian and a Hindu, and a Moslem and a Jew. The politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircles us today like the coil of a snake, from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake as I have been doing with more or less success since 1894, unconsciously, as I have now discovered, ever since reaching the years of discretion. I have been experimenting with myself and my friends by introducing religion into politics. Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion...but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds indissolubly to truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human

nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the maker and itself.

White comments that ‘Gandhi achieved much with that quality of faith; *We* all in the nuclear age will have to call on our reserves of faith’.

IV

In November 1999 I’d gone to Durban to attend the Commonwealth NGOs meeting, during CHOGM. President Nelson Mandela was presiding. But more importantly for me, I had gone to see Durban, to visit Pietermaritzburg, where Gandhi, aged 23, was ejected from the train on June 7, 1893, on a bitterly cold winter’s night. For some reason, I felt, it was a sacred site, as if so many journeys had begun from there, from Durban to Dandi, from Selma to Suva, an obscure, desolate, decrepit railway station, by an unknown passenger. It had become a place of pilgrimage in my imagination. A century later, in our lifetime, South Africa gained its democratic freedom. In 1993, Gandhi’s radiant statue was unveiled by Nelson Mandela in the city of Pietermaritzburg in the presence of Bishop Desmond Tutu and others. On the plinth are inscribed five words: **My life is my message.**

I’m still contemplating the significance of that incident and a man’s response to many men’s inhumanity.

I could, of course, talk about how the Fiji Government in 1987 was abducted from the Fiji Parliament and how often Gandhi’s thoughts sustained the incarcerated politicians for almost a week. Or the moral power of a single man that reduced the

largest Empire to a rubble. What was his sense of moral power? It was not the modern idea of nationalism, nor borders which make us send asylum seekers to Nauru and Cambodia; nor the ravings of the Rocketman or a Tweeting Tom.

It was some deeper element within us that sees the energy of all creation, that all life is interconnected. It's this that makes a man rush and save someone from a burning car, or jump into the surging waves to save drowning children but he's himself drowned. Everyday we read and hear and see the heroic acts hidden in human hearts.

There's you might put it metaphorically always a place in the manger, if there's no room in the inn.

It seems to me that M K Gandhi demonstrated in his life that a mature moral power had universal value and validity.

That idea and ideal of a moral man or woman, of a nation, culture or civilization, he attempted to communicate and live by in very dark times. That he succeeded so peacefully is the true measure of the man. And how deeply he was supported by ordinary people in their millions. His heroic stands continue to give seemingly powerless people the great power of hope and human decency.

Two months later, I made a trip to Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. It's here that Gandhi had crystallised his experience of Satyagraha in South Africa and extended it towards India's rugged road to freedom. In a fifty-year struggle, the largest colonial empire had collapsed and more people were freed than ever in human history. Between 1948 and 1968, 66 new nations were created.

At Sabarmati Ashram, in an untidy bookstall, I found a copy of John Briley's *Gandhi, The Screen Play*. After desperately searching for Gandhi, Briley writes:

I took the plunge into Gandhi . . . My image of the old man on the rug was wrong. Gandhi's long life was filled with action, conflict, personal tragedy and joy.

And then, almost in desperation, I turned to Gandhi's own writings. Gandhi was not a writer . . . But he wrote almost daily – articles for a newspaper he started in South Africa, and others he later edited in India. And he wrote letters. Hundreds of them.

None of it was "literature," but gradually the personality of this open, questing, unpretentious man began to unfold for me. The well-springs of his courage, his humility, the humour, the compelling power of his sense of the human dilemma – a power which when allied to his striving for decency (and he would put it no higher) made devoted disciples of men as diverse as the cultured, literate Nehru, the cynical Patel . . . and the village peasant who had never been five miles from the mud-brick house where he was born.

And gradually I saw too that Gandhi was not "impractical," not "idealistic." His ideas were forged in painful experience, a growth of perception earned from a life far harsher than anything I have ever known.

In writing "Gandhi" I have tried to make real the brave, determined man I discovered and to show his unsentimental honesty about the complexity of men and his unshakeable belief that on balance they are marginally more inclined to good than evil . . . and that on that slight imbalance they can build and achieve and perhaps survive – even in a nuclear age.

Gandhi lived . . . the most fundamental drama of all: the war in our hearts between love and hate. He knew it was a war, a war with many defeats, but he believed in only one victor.

That is what Gandhi has given me.

I would like to believe that this gift of Gandhi was a writer's gift—the markings of an outsider indelibly imprinted on the pages of our mind with the pencil of peace that tells us of the grief and glory of being human.

For he believed that the force which threatens to blow our universe asunder resides not in the clouds or mountains but in the invisible heart of the atom. Our inner forces, too, which like the power of the atom, can either remake or shatter civilisations, reside in the atom of the smallest unit of society, the irreducible individual. This life force, Gandhi showed, was true freedom through truth in words. That, to me, remains his noblest gift to every child, woman and man.

Pundit Nehru, the first prime minister of independent but brutally partitioned India, was a poet in politics—perhaps poets make poor politicians. I've some small experience of it.

I would like to conclude this talk with lines by an anonymous Greek poet that Jawaharlal Nehru was fond of quoting:

*What else is Wisdom?
What of man's endeavour or
God's high grace, so lovely and so great?
To stand from fear set free,
To breathe and wait,
To hold a hand uplifted over hate
And shall not loveliness be loved for ever?*

Such was the loveliness of this man; he remained simply and luminously Mohandas Karamchand GANDHI—his noblest achievement. Remembering him tonight ennobles each one of us.