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Gandhi's Vital Pertinence to India and the Contemporary World

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World History – The Last 150 Years

While Gandhi was born in the 19th century, most of his life and work was in the 20th century. So why, we may ask, is he of vital pertinence to India and the world in the present 21st century? The answer to this question lies in the history of the world in the last 150 years.

The second half of the 19th century, when the European powers divided Africa and Asia amongst themselves, witnessed the subjugation, oppression, and impoverishment of the peoples of these two ancient continents. Millions of them died, initially in battles of resistance and after that from famines and imported diseases.

The 20th century was the most blood-stained in human history, with almost 100 million people killed in the two world wars, Hitler's gas chambers, India's partition, Korean, Arab–Israel, Iraq–Iran, US–Vietnam, Soviet–Afghan wars and national liberation struggles in Asia & Africa.

The 20th century was also the most racist and revolutionary in the history of the world. Racism was widespread in all European countries and empires, including the USA. Fascist and Marxist revolutions occurred in Italy, Germany, Spain, Russia and China. The last two were particularly replete with violence in keeping with Marx's assertion that,

“Violence is the midwife of all old societies pregnant with new life.”¹

Soon after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Albert Einstein ruefully observed:

“The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything but our way of thinking; thus, we are drifting toward a catastrophe beyond comparison. We shall require a new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.”²

Gandhi's "Soul-Force" is the answer

Gandhi's continuing relevance to India and the world is because, in the bloodiest century of world history, he enunciated this "new manner of thinking" and an effective praxis for arresting humanity's drift to the "catastrophe beyond comparison" that Einstein had spoken about.

What was this "new manner of thinking"? Gandhi described it as follows:

"There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything ... a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates.³ That Power is God ... He who denies the existence of this Power denies to himself the use of inexhaustible power. Satyagraha is Soul Force pure and simple. It connotes the living Law of Life. This law will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not.⁴ In politics, its use is based on the immutable maxim that government of the people is possible only so long as they consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed"⁵.

Gandhi's praxis for the use of this "inexhaustible power" was to:

"Pit one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant" and be assured that working under the law of our being, it is possible even for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire and lay the foundation for its fall or regeneration"⁶

This amazing assertion by Gandhi was vindicated by developments in South Africa from 1893 to 1915, in India from 1917 to 1948, and in the world after that. The "Soul Force" struggles he conceptualized and fearlessly led facilitated the political and social status of South African Indians and liberated India, the "brightest jewel in the British Crown," as Winston Churchill described it, from colonial bondage. He and his disciples then steered this highly feudal, deeply caste-ridden, minimally enfranchised

former colony into a secular democracy with universal adult franchise. This polity elected a woman prime minister and an 'untouchable' president in its 19th and 50th year of independence. During this time, it had two Muslim presidents; since then, it has also had two women presidents and a Sikh prime minister.

Further, during the 1947–2000 period:

- Over 100 former European colonies in Asia and Africa attained independence;
- All Eastern European communist dictatorships and military regimes in the Philippines, Argentina, and Chile were overthrown;
- Racial discrimination in the US and Apartheid in South Africa was ended with "Soul Force" uprisings.

Vaclav Havel, who led Czechoslovakia's successful Dec. 1989 uprising, described it as the "*Power of the Powerless*." It is now widely referred to as the "Velvet Revolution." It is notable that all these 'revolutions' took place after India's independence. In the second half of the 20th century, Roger Markwick wrote a book titled '*From Violence to Velvet: A Century of Revolutions 1917–2017*'.

These velvet revolutions gave the US and South Africa their first black presidents; Sri Lanka, Philippines, and Chile, their first women presidents; and Bolivia, their first indigenous Aymara president, brought down the Berlin Wall, reunified Germany, dissolved the Soviet Union, and established democracies in most of its former states, many of which joined the European Union. These radical changes are history's most sweeping democratization of national politics and international political geography.

Professor Johan Galtung rightly observes:

“Gandhi was certainly a revolutionary, much more revolutionary than the piecemeal revolutionaries of Western civilization who triggered the Bourgeois, Socialist & Feminist revolutions. Gandhi revolutionized revolution itself.”⁷

These spectacular changes that the ‘Soul Force’ revolutions brought about in the 2nd half of the 20th century aroused high hopes worldwide that the 21st C would be blessed with peace, nonviolent conflict resolution, and progress. The United Nations General Assembly fueled these hopes by declaring 2000 as the ‘*International Year for the Culture of Peace*’ and the 2001–2010 period as the *International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence*’, and calling upon all UN Member States, Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations, “to disseminate the message of nonviolence by all possible means.”

The Constitution of India affirms what Gandhi had asserted:

“Independent India as conceived by me will have all Indians belonging to different religions, living in perfect friendship...”⁸ “It would spell the ruin of both the Hindu religion and the majority community if the latter, in the intoxication of power, entertains the belief that it can crush the minority community and establish a purely Hindu Rashtra”.⁹

Gandhi’s ‘Talisman’ of “recalling the face of the poorest and weakest man/woman and asking oneself whether the contemplated step will be of any use to him/her” needs to be re-asserted, and the actual New India would emerge when due justice is done to unemployed; bridging the disparity between the rich and the poor; ensuring that those elected to the Parliament and Legislative Assemblies are without criminal records and those would not fall prey to such business tycoons whose only goal is profiteering from exploiting the weak and marginalized and making the system of governance dysfunctional.

The Way Forward

All Indians and other dedicated Gandhians need to make strenuous efforts to revive and promote Gandhian ideals.

On the global stage also, humanity's fond hopes for a new century of peace, nonviolent conflict resolution, and progress have been grossly betrayed by the explosive "9/11" terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington in 2001 & USA's retaliatory wars against Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003. Equally cataclysmic is 9/11 ushering the ominous new era of "*asymmetric warfare*" in which the enemy is not a foreign army, navy, or air force but a handful of fearless and determined "non-state" warriors with innovative strategies.

The 8 Saudis and 6 Egyptians who embarked on the 9 /11 terrorist attack are a good case study of how "asymmetric warriors" operate. They used US flying schools to learn how to fly, US aircraft, US gasoline, and US airports to destroy two of its most iconic national assets in just one hour on a sunny September morning! None of the USA's ultra-hi-tech surveillance systems could detect or forestall this devastating attack.

Joseph Nye, in his '*The Paradox of American Power*,' states:

*"This terrorist attack is a terrible symptom of deeper changes that are occurring in the world. A technological revolution in information and communications has been diffusing power away from governments and empowering individuals and groups to play roles in world politics – including wreaking massive destruction – that were once reserved for governments of states. Privatization has been increasing, and terrorism is the privatization of war."*¹⁰

In the two decades since 9/11, there have been terror attacks in London, Madrid, Bali, New Delhi, Mumbai, Moscow, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Karachi, Lahore, Colombo, Kabul, and Be'eri, Kfar Aza Kibbutz and in the recent Re'im music festival in Southern Israel on October 7, 2023. Israel has described this terrorist attack, in which 1139 of its civilians and soldiers

were killed and about 250 civilians, soldiers, and foreign nationals taken hostage, as 9/11. It has rightly done so, for it has many similarities to the 2001 one, both in its astounding surprise and also in its causes.

The underlying causes for the US 9/11 have been revealed by Samuel Huntington in his book, *'The Clash of Civilizations – Remaking of the World Order'*:

“The West’s efforts to universalize its values and institutions, to maintain its military and economic superiority, and intervene in conflicts in the Muslim world, generate intense resentment among Muslims. During the fifteen years between 1980 and 1995, the US engaged in 17 military operations in the Middle East, all of them directed against Muslim states. No comparable pattern of US military operations occurred against the people of any other civilization.”¹¹ Since 1995, the US and its allies have devastated seven more Muslim countries – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. The underlying causes for Israel’s Oct. 7 terrorist attack are diverse. The proximate causes have been meticulously documented by South Africa and submitted to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on December 27, 2024. They are primarily extreme oppression, deprivation of water, food, and medicine, and brutal decimation of Palestinians by Prime Minister Netanyahu’s ultra-rightist wing Govt. in the last three years.

The long-term causes go back to when Gandhi first articulated his concerns about Palestine being partitioned to create Israel in 1938. He had then declared:

“My sympathy for the Jews does not blind me to the requirements of Justice. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs. The nobler course would be to insist on a just treatment of the Jews wherever they are born and bred. Every country is their home, including Palestine, not by aggression but by loving service.”¹²

Despite this, not only was Palestine partitioned and Israel created, but soon thereafter, the latter's leaders massacred many Palestinians and drove out almost 700,000 of them. They then began to populate the emptied lands with Jewish immigrants from all over the world but mainly from Eastern Europe & Russia. In order to safeguard its security, it made preemptive strikes against Egypt and Syria in 1967, destroyed Iraq's Osirak Nuclear reactor in 1981, invaded and occupied southern Lebanon for 18 years, and clandestinely armed itself with nuclear weapons, as was revealed in 1986 by its atomic scientist Mordechai Vanunu.

Many reputed Jewish writers have acknowledged that the "requirements of Justice" Gandhi had written about have not been met in Palestine. Tom Segev has exposed the falsehood that Palestine was "*A land without people for a people without land*" and quoted the British General Walter Congreve: "*We might as well declare that England belongs to Italy because it was once occupied by the Romans.*"¹³

Amnon Rubinstein has critiqued the "*God-given land*" claim as "*a creation of the post-independence period*" and urged humane treatment of the Palestinians in keeping with traditional Jewish values, and argued that since Jews today can "*flourish in non-Jewish countries without having to relinquish their Judaism*", Israel should not deny to non-Jews similar rights and opportunities.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, in his book '*Healing Israel-Palestine*' has declared:

*"A state is not a Jewish State unless it embodies an ethos of love and justice and becomes a living proof that healing and transformation is possible. Israel is not yet a Jewish state in this sense, so we will assist it to evolve in this direction. We call upon the United States and other world powers to intervene with all their influence and economic power to end the occupation and all acts of terror, and all other parties to adopt the nonviolent philosophies of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi."*¹⁴

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, initially a strong proponent of the *'Iron Wall'* approach, in his second term as Prime minister, saw, as a pragmatic, former military general, that Israel's security could only be ensured with a *"land for peace"* agreement with the Palestinians. He, therefore, negotiated secretly with Yasser Arafat, through intermediaries, at Oslo. The Norwegian government provided hospitality and ensured secrecy. These negotiations resulted in an Accord which was signed in Washington on 13 September 1993 by Mahmoud Abbas for PLO Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres for Israel, Secretary of State Warren Christopher for the USA, and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev for Russia, in the presence of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and US President Bill Clinton.

Along with this Accord, both parties also signed Letters of Mutual Recognition – Israel recognizing the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the PLO recognizing Israel's right to exist and renouncing terrorism and other forms of violence against Palestine.

The Accord was to lead within five years to a permanent settlement, based on UNSC Resolutions 242 and 338, with Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and mutual respect.

Sadly, on November 4, 1995, at a mass rally in Tel Aviv celebrating the Oslo Accord, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a Zionist youth for "agreeing to give up God-given land." This was a great tragedy for Israel, Palestine, West Asia, and the world.

Hard Liner Likud Leader Benjamin Netanyahu, who had derided the Oslo Accord, won the 1996 election and scorned it even more in the subsequent three years. His successor, Labour leader Ehud Barak, resumed negotiations with Yasser Arafat, with President Clinton's good offices at Camp David in July 2000 and at Taba in January 2001. The joint statement issued thereafter stated that progress was made, but more negotiations were needed. Sadly, Ariel Sharon, who took over as Israel's Prime Minister, thereafter rejected all contact with Arafat, who ailing and isolated, died on November 11, 2004.

In March 2009, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu became PM again and has continued in that post for the last 14 years, with only a brief 18-month break during the 2021- 2022 period. Each of his cabinets was more right-wing than before.

Meanwhile, Hamas had won an impressive victory in Gaza in 2006 and broken away from Fatah, the Palestinian party that governed the West Bank. To further weaken Fatah, Netanyahu began to assist Hamas on the one hand clandestinely, and on the other, resumed building the 700 kilometers (450 miles) fifteen-foot-high (twice the height of the 'Berlin Wall'!) "security barrier," which Ariel Sharon had commenced in 2002. The ICJ held that this was "Contrary to International Law" in 2004, but this did not deter Netanyahu. When completed, it confined the West Bank's 3 million Palestinians to 16 disconnected enclaves comprising only 27% of their land. These enclaves are pretty similar to the 'Bantustans' of Apartheid South Africa.

2015 onwards, Netanyahu also installed "Iron Dome' cyber security protection over Israel's principal cities and proudly declared that he had not only made Israel impregnably secure but was also the only Israeli Prime Minister who could prevent a Palestinian state from being established. In an effort to ensure this, he also presented an attractive mega development plan to Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab countries, which included the construction of a new canal through the Gulf of Eilat, bringing instream new gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean; despite these being within Gaza's territorial waters. The USA has supported him in all of this.

The stunning October 7 Hamas attack on three of Israel's southern communities, which killed 1132 of its civilians and soldiers and took about 250 of them, hostage, reduced all these grandiose plans to rubble almost as promptly as the World Trade Towers had collapsed 22 years earlier. There have also been other stunning blows.

Despite its ceaseless bombing of the Gaza strip for over 100 days, in which most of its residential buildings, refugee camps, hospitals, and even

mosques and churches have been destroyed, IDF has neither been able to destroy nor disarm Hamas. Early on New Year's Day 2024, it fired 35 missiles at Tel Aviv!

By early January 2024, Israel was battling Hamas and Al Quds Brigade in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen. Because of all these attacks, Israel has had to call up over 50,000 of its reservists from hi-tech jobs and evacuate almost 100,000 civilians from border towns. Most airlines have canceled flights to Israeli airports because of the risks to aircraft and ships. Shipping companies divert their exports via the Cape of Good Hope, significantly escalating their costs.

On January 4, 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled that the charge of genocide that South Africa had made against Israel was "prima facie plausible" and called upon Israel to report to it within 30 days on the corrective action taken by it.

Notwithstanding all the above adverse developments and Israel's invasion of the Gaza Strip, despite its advice not to do so, the US has continued to provide solid support to Israel. The vital question is WHY?

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, in their book titled *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, have written:

*"For the past several decades, and especially since the Six-Day War in 1967, the centerpiece of US Middle Eastern policy has been its unwavering support for Israel. This and the related effort to spread 'democracy' in the Islamic world has inflamed Arab and Islamic opinion and jeopardized US security. This situation has no precedent in American political history. Why has the US been willing to jeopardize its own security in order to advance the interests of another state? This derives almost entirely from the activities of the 'Israel Lobby'. Other special interest groups also manage to skew US foreign policy but no lobby has managed to divert it as far from what is in its national interest."*¹⁵

Israel, having destroyed nearly all of Gaza's residential buildings, refugee camps, hospitals, mosques, and churches and killed over 25,000 Gazans, millions of people worldwide and 153 countries at the UN General Assembly have called for an immediate ceasefire, but the US has continued to veto all ceasefire resolutions introduced in the UN Security Council. It is pertinent to recall here that between July 1, 1945 – December 31, 2023, the U.S. vetoed 89 Security Council resolutions. Of these, 45 were critical of Israel's attacks on neighbouring countries, occupation of Palestinian land, and oppression of Palestinians.

In geology, tectonic plates move when tremendous pressures build upon them. This also happens in geopolitics and appears to be happening now. Nearly all countries of the Global South have supported South Africa's genocide charge against Israel. Its killing of over 25,000 civilians, two-thirds of them women and children, has triggered a global outpouring of anger and revulsion against it and the countries supporting it. Mega pro-Palestine rallies have been held in the US, European, Canadian, and Australian cities of these countries. Notable among these rallies are the large numbers of 'Jews for Palestine' and 'Zionism is not Judaism' groups. For the first time, the 'Israel Lobby's nefarious financial control of US politics and politicians is being boldly and openly opposed. Also significant is that NATO is now openly split with the US, UK, France, and Germany on the one side and Turkey, Spain, and Italy on the other. Nonetheless, even the former are declaring their support for the 'Two State Solution'. As Russia & China have been urging for the last many weeks, all the P5 have now agreed on this. Hopefully, therefore, this long-awaited solution to this long-festered imbroglio will soon become a reality. The big question is what the relationship between these two states will take. In breaking its Apartheid shackles, South Africa has shown the way for this. Rather than setting out to settle scores with South Africa's whites for the many years of brutal oppression meted out to them, they, in true Gandhian spirit, stretched out their hand of friendship to them and created what Nelson Mandela described as a "Rainbow Nation." By doing so, he converted what was the "Pariah country of the world" into the 'Conscience of Mankind.' Palestinians and Israelis have far better potential for doing this as Muslims and Jews lived and worked, harmoniously and fruitfully, for almost 800 years in Spain 710–1498 and for 400 years thereafter in the Ottoman Empire 1500–1920.

In the 'Force More Powerful' movie titled 'Freedom in our Life Time', the great brutalities of Apartheid South Africa and the determined struggle of its blacks for freedom led by Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and others, are impactfully recorded. The link to this 30-minute film is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4dDVeAU3u4>

I hope readers of Global Gandhi will take the time to view this film.

I shall conclude, keeping in focus the much-brutalized Palestinians, with Mahatma Gandhi's inspiring words:

*"When I despair, I remember that throughout history, the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall."*¹⁶

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Mr. Nazareth has served in India's diplomatic missions in Tokyo, Rangoon, Lima and London before his first Ambassadorial appointment in 1979 as High Commissioner/Ambassador of India to Ghana, Liberia, and Togo and subsequently Consul General of India in New York and Ambassador of India to Egypt and Mexico. Ambassador Nazareth retired in May 1994 and in the years thereafter has been Guest lecturer at National Defence College, New Delhi and National Institute of Advanced Studies Bangalore. He was presented the U Thant Peace Award by the Sri Chinmoy Meditation Group at the United Nations, for his 'Life Time of Dedication and World Service by promoting the Gandhian Values of Truth, Non Violence, Communal Harmony and Humanitarian Service'. On October 2, 2012 Ambassador Nazareth delivered the keynote address at the International day of Non Violence event at the United Nations in New York.