

**Mahatma's Message By: Ram L. Bhutani, Ambassador of India**

## **In An Era of Violence**

October 2, 1996 marks the 127th birth anniversary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, lovingly called Mahatma Gandhi. The word 'Mahatma' means great soul. Mahatma Gandhi was a great humanist, a social reformer and a freedom fighter with a difference. He awakened the masses to fight imperialism morally and non-violently. His was fight of the right against the might.

The idea of offering moral and non-violent resistance to injustice was born when young man Gandhi, a fresh Barrister from England, was thrown out of a train, in 1893, while travelling from Durban to Pretoria in South Africa. He had a first class ticket but was asked to leave the compartment and shift to a third-class coach. Why? - because he was not a white man. He refused to leave voluntarily. He was pushed out and had to spend the cold night in Maritzburg railroad station. That night iron entered his soul. He resolved to fight it on moral grounds and thus the first organised crusade against apartheid emerged.

It was in the laboratory of South Africa that he perfected the techniques of 'Ahimsa' and 'Satyagraha' i.e. non-violent mass action and civil disobedience, with which he led the struggle against racial discrimination and imperial domination there for almost 20 years.

He returned to India a changed man, joined the freedom struggle and changed its course. He effectively used these instruments of passive resistance on a mass scale and launched the famous Dandi March against Salt Tax in 1930. Thousands upon thousands joined his movement - went to jail with him, observed fasts with him. It became a people's movement with social service and prayer meetings. The Sermon on the Mount had greatly influenced him as had the Bhagvad Gita and holy books of other faiths. He received inspiration from the Quaker Movement and was influenced by the writings of the well-known American thinker, Henry David Thoreau. He read Thoreau in S. Africa in 1907.

He had a brief correspondence with President Roosevelt. In his reply in 1942 (which reached him 3 years later after his release from the British Indian jail) President had said, 'Our common interest in democracy and righteousness will enable your countrymen and mine to make a common cause against a common enemy'.

He devoted his life to the uplift of the down trodden and the socially backward. He practised what he professed and actually stayed amidst the weaker sections of society. A man of strong conviction, he had unshakable faith in Truth and Non-violence. He often said: "I may be a despicable person; but when Truth speaks through me, I am invincible."

He strongly believed that the means were as important as the end itself. The struggle must be carried out only with truth and non-violence. It should be without bitterness and hatred. He manifested this when he was attending the Round Table Conference on the political status of India in 1931 in London. A journalist asked him if he had come to fight the English people. He replied: India should be held with silken cord of love. I have come not to fight the English people but British colonialism. I am a friend of the Englishmen.

The Mahatma fell to an assassin's bullets on 30th January, 1948. Representing feelings of a grief-stricken nation, India's Prime Minister Nehru then recalled: "The light has gone out, I said, and yet I was wrong. For, the light ... was no ordinary light ... and the world will see it and it will give solace to innumerable hearts. For that light represented... the living truths ... the eternal truths, reminding us of right path ... " Mahatma Gandhi did not claim to be a prophet or philosopher. He once told his gathering: There is no such thing as Gandh-ism. I do not want to leave any sect after me. 'My life is my message'.

The universality of Mahatma's message is striking and more In our strife-torn, tension-ridden and terrorist-stricken world that is sinking under the weight of nuclear armaments and weapons of mass destruction, his message of love and peace, truth and non-violence is a ray of hope. He gave humankind the hope by his olive branch of non-violent resistance to evil. His simple message is: Do not let yourself be trampled upon. Stand up to evil-doing, without rancour for the evil-doer. Win the evil-doer's heart and shame him into doing what is right.

The world is afflicted with exploitation and tense with the tussle between the haves and have-nots. Everywhere you observe multitudes of people plagued by injustices of every kind at the local, national and International levels. Those exploited either fall into pits of depression and do-nothingness or take to violence which breeds more violence. Mahatma Gandhi pointed to a new direction to fight this evil and opened man's mind to discover an extra dimension to his self. This will remain Mahatma's monumental contribution to human thought and action. His teachings inspired Martin Luther King and many other crusaders. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that, "Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.

A great son of India, Gandhi belongs to the world. He served humanity with humility. He will remain an inspiration for ages. Of him Einstein said: "Generations to come, it may be, will scarcely believe that such a one, as this, ever in flesh and blood, walked upon earth."