

President Cyril Ramaphosa: Gandhi Mandela Freedom Lecture during State Visit to India

25 Jan 2019

Gandhi Mandela Freedom Lecture by His Excellency President Ramaphosa during his State Visit to the Republic of India

Your Excellency Prime Minister Modi,
Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers of the Indian and South African delegations,
President of the Indian Council of World Affairs, Dr TCA Raghavan,
Ambassador of Brazil in the Republic of India,
High Commissioner Kamboj, High Commissioner of the Republic of India to the Republic of South Africa,
The Charge d’Affaires of the Republic of South Africa to the Republic of India,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On this, my first official visit to India as President of the Republic of South Africa, it is a great honour to have been called upon to deliver the first India-Brazil-South Africa Gandhi Mandela Freedom Lecture.

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, India and South Africa have had close political, cultural, trade and strategic ties.

This cooperation has been further deepened since South Africa joined the BRICS group in 2010.

India was one of the first countries to recognise democratic South Africa.

The Red Fort declaration, signed by President Nelson Mandela during a state visit in 1997, is rooted in Afro-Asian solidarity and has given rise to a successful and enduring strategic partnership.

Our partnership is based on shared values and common interests, for we share a common vision of freedom, development, peace and prosperity – not just for our respective peoples but for all the peoples of the world.

As did Nelson Mandela in one of his letters from prison in 1980, I want to acknowledge and thank the people of India for the encouragement, inspiration and practical assistance they extended to us during our struggle for liberation.

We know that this is due to our deep friendship and the progressive internationalism of successive governments in India.

India’s leaders have been consistent in their solidarity with the liberation struggles not just of South Africa, but of others on the continent.

In addressing the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955 Jawaharlal Nehru told delegates:

“Everything else pales into insignificance when I think of the infinite tragedy of Africa ever since the days when

millions of Africans were carried away as galley slaves to America and elsewhere, half of them dying in the galleys...even now the tragedy of Africa is greater than that of any other continent, whether it is racial or political. It is up to Asia to help Africa to the best of her ability...because we are sister continents.”

We are indeed sister continents, and we are bound by the umbilical link of history.

The South African Indian community, who were first brought to the country as indentured laborers in 1860, have a vibrant culture, traditions and values that has added to the rich tapestry that is our multicultural society.

Many of these men, women and children who came in search of a better life were subjected to harsh and inhumane conditions in the sugar plantations.

After serving their indentures, a large percentage returned to India.

But many others stayed, and made South Africa their new home.

It is testimony to the patriotism and love for South Africa in this community that so many of the luminaries of the anti-apartheid struggle were of Indian origin.

The South African Indian community played a formative role in the freedom struggle, and after apartheid ended, in the reconstruction of a new South Africa.

We remember these great leaders: Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, Fatima and Ismail Meer, Laloo Chiba, Barney Desai, Ahmed Timol, Ismail Mohamed, Amina Desai, Billy Nair, Yusuf Cachalia, Ahmed Kathrada, and many others who will be forever remembered for their contribution to the liberation struggle.

The South African Indian community produced outstanding activists and cadres who today serve with distinction in our government.

Mahatma Gandhi's granddaughter, Ela Gandhi, played a leading role in the women's movement in South Africa and was among the first group of MPs of the new South Africa.

These were all leaders of conviction and of principle.

They were unwavering in their belief in the unity of all the oppressed, and stood firmly against attempts by the racist apartheid state to divide our people along ethnic or tribal lines.

They believed, as has been the founding principle of the African National Congress, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it.

Today's lecture pays tribute to the life and times of two of the greatest leaders and statesmen of their generations, and perhaps of all time.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, fondly known as Gandhiji, and Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, known to all as Madiba.

Their legacies go far beyond their stature as the founding fathers of our two great independent nations, India and South Africa.

What they lived for, what they stood for and indeed what they fought for, continues to resonate with people across the world decades since their birth.

They have influenced generations of leaders not just in South Africa and India, but worldwide.

Their thought – on justice and liberty, on human dignity and human rights, and on non-violent resistance – continues to influence social and political movements in all four corners of the globe.

They shared a common passion for, and understanding of, the principle of sustainable development decades before the term was even coined.

They understood the importance of environmental conservation, of the development of rural communities, of agricultural self-sufficiency being critical to a nation's success.

Gandhiji and Madiba were products of their time, and of the social, political, cultural and other influences that made and shaped them.

Yet they were men ahead of their time.

It is indisputable that they were visionaries.

We often take for granted the sheer force of will, courage of conviction and strength of character that would have been required at such times.

These were times when the clamour of the oppressed for justice and freedom was growing apace, matched only by the brutality of those who sought to crush them.

When liberation came, instead of retribution and vengeance, they extended an olive branch to the former oppressor.

They espoused ideals that weren't necessarily popular – and never populist – but that were grounded in the strong belief that resistance against an unjust system could never succeed if the oppressed sank to the level of the oppressor.

Their techniques of civil resistance, coupled with the moral force of their ideas have endured through the passage of time.

They serve as beacons of hope for many who continue to suffer race, gender, class, ethnic, religious and other forms of oppression.

This year, India marks 150 years since the birth of Mahatma Gandhiji, which coincides with South Africa's celebration of the centenary of Nelson Mandela's birth.

We are privileged to claim these two icons as our own and to know, as we do, the deep impact and influence that Gandhi had on Mandela.

As President of South Africa, I am particularly proud that the seeds of Gandhiji's political awareness were sown in my country.

Barely days after arriving in the country as a newly qualified barrister, he was forcibly removed from a train carriage reserved for whites only.

It spurred him to enter a life of political activism.

This and a series of other humiliations at the hands of the colonial authorities awakened in Gandhiji a keen passion for justice and equality among people.

He would later write that this forced him to reflect on the nature of oppression, on the law as an instrument of oppression, and on the pervasive belief of racial superiority held by the European colonisers in India, South Africa and elsewhere.

He began mobilising the local Indian community, and helped found the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 and was its first Secretary.

The organisation was the first in South Africa to bring together Indians of all classes, and during its inception advocated for the rights of Indian traders who faced discrimination in the then Natal province.

This was later broadened to supporting the interests of the local Indian community in general.

It was at the helm of the Natal Indian Congress that Gandhiji first began to articulate his position on civil disobedience, and the philosophy of satyagraha.

A defining moment for the Satyagraha movement was in August 1908 when Gandhi encouraged those present to burn their identity documents outside the Hamidia Mosque in Johannesburg.

More than 2,000 documents were burned that day and mass arrests followed.

The ANC's defiance campaigns and anti-pass campaigns that began in the 1950s and extended into the 1980s were influenced by satyagraha.

Decades after its formation, the Natal Indian Congress and later the South African Indian Congress joined hands with the country's other liberation movements including the African National Congress in organising against the repressive apartheid system.

The South African Indian Congress was one of the organisations responsible for organising the Congress of the People in Kliptown on 26 June 1955.

It was here that the Freedom Charter, the precursor to South Africa's democratic Constitution, was adopted.

It was a firm statement of the commitment of the people of South Africa to a path of non-racialism.

For Madiba, Gandhiji was an inspiration and a role model.

In tracing the evolution of his political thought, as laid out in his writings and speeches, we see clearly the confluence of history, experience and pragmatism – as we have seen with those of Gandhiji.

Gandhiji's formative activism focused on the plight of the vulnerable Indian minority in South Africa.

His documented views, especially those around securing the franchise for Indians in South Africa, but also on western civilisation, on racial hierarchies in India, or on secularism, could today be read through a different prism.

But of this we are certain.

They believed in the innate dignity of the human being, in the moral authority of a non-violent mass resistance to oppression, and in the enduring strength of people's power.

There are so many aspects to Nelson Mandela's legacy – but he is most revered for his commitment to a peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy, one that brought together oppressed and oppressor.

He was able to put in process the healing of a deeply divided and broken society by promoting reconciliation between the races.

Nelson Mandela drew great inspiration from Gandhiji's words, that 'forgiveness is the attribute of the strong'.

Legacy is a complex phenomenon, and it is by no means assured, even for the most revered.

Both of these great leaders entered the political arena at a time vastly different to ours.

The issues they advocated for and how they articulated them; the political positions they took and the political decisions they made – will always be subject to interpretation and re-interpretation.

Those of us who have chosen a life of politics, will know too well that the actions we undertake at a particular time will by necessity be held up to public scrutiny by future generations.

They may be praised, but they may also be derided or condemned.

Yet we know that the transience of politics is one thing, and the enduring nature of universal values – of justice, of equality, of self-sacrifice, of solidarity with the underdog – are another.

In paying tribute to Gandhiji in 1997, Madiba said:

"He showed us that it was necessary to brave imprisonment if truth and justice were to triumph over evil. The values of tolerance, mutual respect and unity for which he stood and acted had a profound influence on our liberation movement, and on my own thinking. This inspires us today in our efforts of reconciliation and nation

building.”

Gandhiji, like Nelson Mandela, was an internationalist.

Long before the issue of apartheid was put on the agenda of the United Nations, he travelled to India to publicise the oppression of the colonial regime.

It was the government of India that was the first to request the UN General Assembly to confront racial discrimination in South Africa and which banned trade with apartheid South Africa soon afterwards.

A hundred years since the birth of Nelson Mandela, and 150 years since the birth of Gandhiji, we are proud to follow in their footsteps of progressive internationalism.

We share a commitment to realising a global community of nations at peace with each other, and a world founded on social justice and human rights for all.

In his first address to the UN General Assembly, President Mandela spoke of the interdependence between nations – saying that ensuring that democracy, peace and prosperity prevail everywhere was “the great challenge of our age”.

As we take up our non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council, South Africa is acutely aware of the responsibility we have been entrusted with.

In Madiba’s honour, we have chosen for our term the theme: ‘continuing the legacy: Working for a Just and Peaceful world’.

The African Union’s Agenda 2063 aspires to an end of conflict and the silencing of the guns on the continent by 2020.

Serving on the UN Security Council affords us the opportunity to meaningfully contribute towards this goal.

We are determined to ensure that Africa is not relegated to the periphery of world affairs.

We will advance our foreign policy in a manner that champions the interests of Africa and her peoples.

As a country, South Africa has come a long way since 1994.

But while we look back on the achievements of the past 25 years, we also know much more needs to be done to eradicate poverty, inequality and underdevelopment.

Yet we take to our challenges with vigour, knowing that the South Africa that Nelson Mandela dreamt of, the South Africa that Gandhiji dreamt of – a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist South Africa – is within our reach.

As we build on our achievements, we applaud the government of India’s focus on Afro-Indian solidarity.

This solidarity and cooperation has geopolitical, cultural, educational, technical and economic aspects.

Prime Minister Modi, the Ten Guiding Principles announced during your visit to Uganda last year stress the importance of an equal developmental partnership that will be to the benefit of all of our people.

South Africa looks forward to participate in the fourth India Africa Forum Summit, and to further advance collaboration between India and Africa within the framework of Agenda 2063.

South Africa and India have come a long way in addressing our respective challenges of underdevelopment, economic and political marginalisation.

Both Gandhi and Mandela wanted to see a world free of racial discrimination, but it was the grinding poverty experienced by millions of people in the Global South that pained them most.

They understood that unless poverty was addressed and eradicated, the highest levels of human progress could not be attained.

Through our cooperation on a range of platforms such as BRICS, IBSA, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the G20, the G77 plus China and the Non-Aligned Movement, we will continue to work together in pursuit of a world free of poverty.

The India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum in particular is a practical expression of our shared values of democracy, justice, human rights, and good governance.

It prioritises inclusiveness, human development, peace, transparency, social justice and equity.

As like-minded emerging economies we recognise that we have a collective role to play in addressing and correcting the imbalances in the global economy.

IBSA countries have made substantial contributions in improving the lives of thousands of people through the IBSA Fund.

Many of these activities have taken place quietly in the background without much fanfare, but have provided much-needed relief and hope to the recipient countries.

As South Africa, we look forward to deepening our relations with India through stronger commercial and people-to-people ties.

We need to focus on growing our trade, increasing investments in each other's economies

We can be proud of the road our two countries have traversed; two sister countries separated by an ocean, but bound by history, by the collective energies of our people, and by the deep friendship and respect we hold for each other.

Distinguished Guests

The legacies of Gandhiji and Madiba have never been more important than they are today.

They sacrificed personal advancement, both as lawyers, for the common good.

Theirs was a lifelong pursuit of sathya, dharma, shanti and prema— of truth, righteousness, peace and love—in order to realise a better world.

With so many parts of the world beset by conflict, we have to hold firm to the belief that peace can be attained, that universal peace is possible, and that no person is too small, or sees themselves as too unimportant or insignificant to play their part.

It was Gandhiji who told us – be the change you want to see in the world.

India and South Africa share a commitment to freedom and democracy, to non-racialism and tolerance, to social equity and the eradication of poverty.

Let us strengthen the bonds that exist between our two countries and our peoples as we look to the future.