

**PUBLIC LECTURE BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA,
SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT UPPSALA
UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN ON THE TOPIC ‘TAGORE &
GANDHI: DO THEY HAVE CONTEMPORARY
RELEVANCE FOR GLOBAL PEACE?’**

Stockholm, Sweden: June 02, 2015

Your Royal Highnesses,

Your Excellency Madam Margot Wallstrom, Foreign
Minister of Sweden,

Your Excellency the Governor of Uppsala,

Vice Chancellor of Uppsala University Professor Eva
Akesson,

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

It is a privilege for me to visit Uppsala University and share my thoughts on the contemporary relevance of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, India’s national poet and the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for literature as well as Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation.

I have spent two packed days in this beautiful country. Robust bonds bind our two countries, not the least, a steadfast devotion to democratic values and a

fundamental commitment to global peace and non-violence.

Global peace was a value both Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi espoused. To speak on this subject in Uppsala University is therefore particularly relevant for two reasons:

First, *Gurudev* or Respected Teacher as Tagore was called by Mahatma Gandhi and the rest of our country visited Sweden in 1921 and 1926. During his visit in 1921, he also visited Uppsala where he met Nobel Laureate Archbishop Nathan Söderblom and familiarized himself with Odinslund, the historical royal burial site from Viking times. Thereafter, in an ecumenical spirit, he made a visit to the Cathedral.

I express the deep gratitude of my delegation and myself, indeed of all my people, to the University of Uppsala for having installed a bust of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in its Department of Foreign Languages. This bust commemorates the centenary of the award of the Nobel Prize to Tagore and stands as a reminder of his special link to Uppsala. I am delighted to know that 27 of Tagore's works have been translated into Swedish and are widely appreciated.

The second reason I am particularly happy to be addressing you on the topic of world peace is because this hallowed centre of studies nurtured Dag Hammarskjöld, a great Swede and the second Secretary-General of the United Nations. Hammarskjöld at the age of 47 years and 255 days was the youngest to have held the post. He held office for two terms beginning from 1953 till his unfortunate demise on September 12, 1960 in a plane accident in Congo. His contributions to the cause of peace brought him respect and popularity across the world.

I wonder how many of you know that this noble diplomat was also blessed with immense spiritual wisdom. One of his legacies at the United Nations is the creation of the Room of Quiet, which exists to this day. Dag Hammarskjöld was aware that the first step towards finding peace outside is to find it within. He knew that meditation and quiet are important conditions for this quest.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Constitution of UNESCO begins with the following words,

“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed;

*That ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war;...”*¹.

These words ring as true today as they did when UNESCO was founded in 1945.

Enduring peace can only be established on the basis of humanity’s moral and intellectual solidarity. Political and economic agreements will not on their own build a lasting peace. Peace has to be founded on the belief that there is only one humanity and, to use Tagore’s words:

“Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls”.²

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rabindranath Tagore was a renaissance man and such men are found rarely in history. In their personality, they capture not just the times they live in

¹<http://portal.unesco.org>

²Tagore, Rabindranath, 2011, Gitanjali, Poem No. 35 Line 3, New Delhi, UBSPD

but also many complex questions that transcend geography and are pertinent for all countries and communities across the world.

Tagore was a versatile genius. He was not just a poet and author, but also a composer, painter, philosopher and educationist. He was the perfect ambassador of our country at a time when little was known about India in the outside world. Throughout his life, he was fascinated by the idea of interaction between civilizations through the exchange of knowledge about their cultures and literatures which reflect the universal values of humanity. In a world fettered by race, creed and colour, Rabindranath Tagore promoted internationalism for a new world order based on diversity, open-mindedness, tolerance and co-existence. He travelled far and wide preaching the religion of truth and harmony, and of love and compassion.

Tagore's views on 'nationalism' reveal his distaste for parochialism, racial divide and social stratification. He firmly believed that world peace could never be achieved until big and powerful nations curbed their desire for territorial expansion and control over smaller nations. In his view, war was a consequence of aggressive western materialism that developed in the early part of the 20th

century, with science divorced from spirituality. According to the Poet, the East and the West must meet on a common ground and on terms of equal fellowship: "*where knowledge flows in two streams - from the East and from the West*"³ and "*in their unity is perceived the oneness of Truth that pervades and sustains the entire Universe.*"⁴ As he put it pithily: "*It was Buddha who conquered the world, not Alexander.*"⁵

If Tagore was the intellectual and spiritual torch bearer of global peace, it was the *Mahatma* or the Great Soul who showed the world that *Satyagraha* or Truth Force and *Ahimsa* or Non-Violence can be marshalled to create a more just world. Mahatma Gandhi commenced his experiments with the use of truth against violence in South Africa and then developed it to create in India a peace movement of a kind the world had never before seen. This movement not only resulted in the independence of India but also heralded the end of colonialism worldwide. I am happy to inform this audience that on January 09 of this year, we in India

³Tagore Rabindranath, 1996, English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Ed S.K. Das, Vol. 3, Essay on 'The Meeting of the East and the West', pg. 376, Delhi, Sahitya Akademy

⁴Tagore Rabindranath, 1996, English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Ed S.K. Das, Vol. 3, Essay on 'The Meeting of the East and the West', pg. 376, Delhi, Sahitya Akademy

⁵Tagore, Rabindranath, (Tran. Surendranath Tagore), 1985, Home & The World, Pg No.180, New Delhi, Macmillan India Limited

marked a hundred years since Gandhiji's return from South Africa.

Gandhiji said; '*My Life is My Message*'⁶. Our former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in her foreword to the 90th Volume of the monumental compilation of Gandhiji's writings – '*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*', explained the significance of these words. She wrote: "*He was one of those who spoke as he thought and acted as he spoke, one of those few on whom no shadow fell between word and deed. His words were deeds, and they built a movement and a nation and changed the lives of countless individuals*".⁷ What is this shadow that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi spoke of? It is the shadow of untruth and falsehood. Only a person who saw Truth as God could speak of Life itself as a message.

The Apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi had the same profound faith in humanism and openness of mind as Tagore did. He said "*I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet*

⁶While visiting Bengal in 1947, Gandhiji was asked to give a message to the people of India, to which he responded, "My life is my message". <http://gandhiashramsabarmati.org>

⁷Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 1984, Vol.90- Part V, Foreword by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, New Delhi, Publications Division

by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave".⁸

Gandhiji, like Tagore, had an abiding concern with Nature and the unique placement of human consciousness in an intricate, intimate and harmonious relationship with nature. Another important message Gandhiji gave was that economics is of no use without ethics. This simple injunction creates a moral frame within which human ingenuity has to function. The limits to human greed have to be defined by inner imperatives and not external constraints. This inner imperative that he called beautifully "*still small voice*"⁹ is available to all of us, if we cultivate the capability to listen and follow its dictates.

By placing ethics at the heart of economics, Gandhiji gave us an idea whose significance is timeless. This is the idea of Trusteeship based on faith which is a unique human capacity. All of us live by and through trust. Gandhiji asked us to be Trustees and to have faith in the goodness of our hearts and the hearts of others. This goodness would enable us to act as Trustees of what are both ours and not ours.

⁸Gandhi, Mahatma, 1924, Young India 1919-1922, pg. 460, Madras, S. Ganesan

⁹Gandhi, Mahatma, 1924, Young India, 1919-1922, Pg. 1012, Madras, S. Ganesan.

For Mahatma Gandhiji, *Ahimsa* was not just a method or an instrument. It requires recognition of the humanity of others, including the humanity of those we seek to challenge. *Ahimsa* is based on the idea that others are capable of recognising Truth and acting upon it however misguided or even oppressive they might be in the short term. *Ahimsa* is not just non-injury. It is an active force that embraces the other, eradicating differences between I and You. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhiji both recognised that the use of *Ahimsa* will eventually free the unjust and the oppressor from the need and desire to perpetuate injustice and suffering to others.

It happens rarely in history that two seers, two persons who are capable of addressing not only their times but generations to come, work in close dialogue. The simultaneous presence of Poet Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi is a unique blessing that modern India received and we believe that this good fortune places upon us a special responsibility to involve ourselves actively in the promotion of dialogue amongst different religions, faiths, cultures and civilizations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

India, with its population of 1.25 billion has been home to the harmonious mingling of ethnicities and

religions for centuries. We are clear that lasting peace can be built only on a foundation of mutual respect which was consistently and eloquently advocated by both Tagore and Gandhiji.

Mahatma Gandhi influenced many leaders across the world through his thoughts and action including Martin Luther King Jr, Lech Wałęsa, Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyi. Martin Luther King Jr went to the extent of saying, *“Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished their method.”*¹⁰ He said on another occasion: *“If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony.”*¹¹

The Mahatma once asked: *“What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans, and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and democracy?”*¹²

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have no hesitation in stating that the ideas of truth, openness, dialogue and non-

¹⁰ King, Martin Luther, 1958, *Stride Toward Freedom The Montgomery Story*, pg.85, New York, Harper & Brothers

¹¹ King, Coretta Scott, 2001, *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* pg. 71, New York, Newmarket Press

¹²Gandhi, M.K., 1942, *Non-Violence in Peace and War*, Vol.1, Ch.142, pg.377, Ahmedabad, Navjeevan Publishing House.

violence espoused by Tagore and Gandhiji provide the best way forward for a world confronted with intolerance, bigotry and terrorism. Their values and their vision are more relevant today than any time before in a world desperately searching for permanent solutions to conflicts and tensions. These ideals therefore need to be propagated far and wide, especially amongst the youth.

I thank the Uppsala University for having signed an agreement with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for establishing a Chair in Indian Studies, which I am sure will also disseminate knowledge about the life and work of Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi amongst the Swedish people.

Permit me to end this lecture with the words of Tagore from his famous telegram to the Swedish Academy after winning the Nobel Prize. I convey to each and every one of you *“my grateful appreciation of the breadth of understanding which has brought the distant near and has made a stranger a brother”*¹³.

When all is said and done, a willingness to understand what is distant and different is the best way to ensure global peace.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!

¹³Telegram from Rabindranath Tagore, read by Mr. Clive, British Charge d’Affairs, at the Nobel Banquet at Grand Hotel, Stockholm, December 10, 1913.
http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1913/tagore-speech.html