



**Institute of Social Sciences**

*Integrating Research with Action*

**30th Anniversary Lecture**

*by*

**Ms. Ela Gandhi**

**on**

**How can Gandhian ideas be woven into  
the Social Science Agenda?**

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Ms. Ela Gandhi, Grand Daughter of Mahatma Gandhi, Peace Activist and former Member of Parliament, Republic of South Africa, delivering the 30th Anniversary Lecture of the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS). From left: Dr. George Mathew, Chairman, ISS, Mr. Anand Sharma, former Union Minister for Commerce, Industry & Textiles and presently Deputy Leader of Opposition, Rajya Sabha (Upper House, Parliament of India) and Dr. Ash Narain Roy, Director, ISS.

**M**s. Ela Gandhi, Grand Daughter of Mahatma Gandhi, Peace Activist and former Member of Parliament, Republic of South Africa delivered the lecture on "How can Gandhian ideas be woven into the Social Science Agenda?" on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Institute of Social Sciences.

### **Welcome Address by Ash Narain Roy**

In his welcome address Dr. Ash Narain Roy said that “Gandhiji has a wide array of followers, extending from vegetarians, ecologists, moralists to anarchists, luddites and nudists. But everyone also loves to hate him. Gandhiji was the most radical dissenter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He taught humanity the power of ‘No’, a symbol of resistance. It implies a halt, a cessation and an insistence that enough is enough. As Dai King, woman who resisted 3 Gorges Dam in China said, “The highest expression of dignity can be summed up in a single ‘no’. During the recent citizens movements in the Arab world and elsewhere, we heard the same Gandhian ‘no’—Kefaya, Ya Basta! English writer Paul Kingsnorth says pretty much the same in his book, ‘One ‘No’ and Many Yeses’.”

He further said that “Elaji has been saying how Gandhi’s philosophy of non- violence and simple life-style is more relevant today than ever before as Islamophobia, terrorism and climate change stand in the way of peace. Gandhiji’s ideals held key to solving some of the modern society’s biggest problems, including the cycle of extremist violence and environmental destruction.”

### **Ela Gandhi**

#### ***How can Gandhian ideas be woven into the Social Science Agenda?:***

In most Universities throughout the world and certainly in South Africa the Social Sciences have followed the Western Model. Gandhiji spoke at length in Hind Swaraj about the folly of following Western models and his reasoning was that in the western thought a strong element is the link between civilization and bodily comforts. In the Eastern philosophy or way of thinking, everything revolves around the mind and spirituality and African thought revolves around the community – it is always about us not I.

We look at social sciences as the study of relationships, of communication of behaviour and of society and its evolution. When we talk about Gandhiji and his legacy, our thoughts immediately go to Satyagraha and Ahimsa. These have been over-killed by writers and biographers to the detriment of Gandhiji’s other legacies in the social field.

While in South Africa and later in India, more of his time was spent in developing his constructive programme. This included putting into action the ideas of communal living of a holistic approach to health care of social change in terms of mental transformation as the basis for social change, interfaith harmony and equality of all beings regardless of race colour creed gender etc. and most importantly empowerment of all. He spent a large amount of time both practically and in writing to build up a store of knowledge on these aspects particularly at the Phoenix Settlement and later at Tolstoy Farm.

May I share a little story that comes to my mind about a school. In this school teams of children were given various responsibilities and these responsibilities rotated so that each team would have turns to do certain chores. One team reported about their turn in the kitchen serving meals to the



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children. They spoke about the tea break when they would serve each child a glass of milk and a biscuit. Their story concluded by the following report. “Today it was our turn to give out the biscuits. We gave each child the best biscuits and kept the crumbs and the broken biscuits for ourselves.”

I told this story to a group of educators and they laughed and said that at their school they would wait for their turn because on that day they would have the opportunity to select the best biscuits for themselves. It was their opportunity and they did not consider it wrong to seize the opportunity to select their choice on the day they get to serve.

By logical deduction then if these people are elected to a city council for instance, would they then select the best services for themselves? Would that not be a logical conclusion that they would wait for opportunities in life to enrich themselves? This is the present reality of all our lives. There are very few who would select the crumbs for themselves given the opportunity to have the best. They may not commit fraud or corruption but if they could they would give more attention to that which directly affects them rather than that which affects others.

This makes one think, is this attitude a result of early conditioning of the mind to seize an opportunity to enrich one’s self?

When Gandhiji bade farewell to one of his dedicated colleagues who was to accompany and take care of some deportees, he said, “Take care and look after these brothers on the way. See first to their comforts then to your own.” That was the message and the philosophy behind the message!

Social science has a huge role in developing theories and methodologies to look at how change occurs and what are the important messages that one needs to communicate to future generations if the present spiraling trend towards selfishness has to be reserved.



In our work in South Africa we applied Gandhiji's teachings by emphasizing the idea of manual work, tiling the soil, alongside learning and communicating.

We emphasized the importance of not devaluing manual work. This was a key lesson that we were taught in the Phoenix ashram. All work is equally important and should have the same value. This was also Tolstoy's idea promoted by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji evolved many ideas but his ideas were not scientifically tested or based on any theory. Gandhiji would read and he was an avid reader, but at the end he would combine many ideas into one and act on them. His logic was born out of his activism. He was not interested in academic methodology.

So applying or studying his principles concepts and ideas would be difficult because he did not even write them up scientifically and therefore his ideas are open to many interpretations. Martin Luther King Jr on the other hand has written extensively on nonviolence and in detail about his movement and the principles on which the movement was based. One can learn a lot from his books on the principles of nonviolence.

To understand Gandhiji's ideas one needs to apply a different research methodology. Perhaps one where some ideas can be tried and tested. That is what we did at Phoenix. University students came and stayed at the settlement under very rugged conditions and tilled the soil and then had political discussions. How does this help? It helps by conditioning the mind to the basic philosophy of equity of respect for all and for all work, by learning to live under difficult circumstances, so that we can experience and understand the kind of hardships the poor and the deprived undergo. It is a humbling experience, and certainly goes a long way to teach us to see through the lense of other people.

Many of the students were deeply affected by this training and told us that their lives changed as a result of the training they received at Phoenix Settlement.

Gandhiji also threw in his lot with the struggle for women's emancipation but had his own method of working. As an activist again he preferred to teach by example and not by speeches or writings. He encouraged the women to participate in the Satyagraha struggle in South Africa. He started off being a typical male chauvinist but it was around 1908 that he began to understand women's oppression. His interaction with some powerful women in South Africa made him see and understand that men and women are two sides of the same coin. He then immediately encouraged women to participate in the struggle and that led to the 1913 women's march which was a precursor to the great march across the border.

He writes about the conversation with Kasturba, his wife. Kasturba said, "I am sorry that you are not telling me about this. What defect is there in me which disqualifies me for jail?" His response, "You know I am the last person to cause you pain. There is no question of my distrust in you. I would be only too glad if you went to jail, but it should not appear at all as if you went at my instance. In matters like this everyone should act relying solely upon one's own strength and courage. If I asked you, you might be inclined to go just for the sake of complying with my request."

He wrote in his autobiography that once the women had indicated their willingness to go on the march, the husbands should take over the kitchen chores and take care of the children. This would convince the women that the men were capable of these responsibilities and would be at ease when they leave their home and children.

So already in 1913 Gandhiji had helped women emancipate themselves. They proved to be more than capable. African sisters had also started protesting nonviolently against the pass laws in the Orange Free State in 1913. Later they demonstrated their power in 1956 when over 20000 women marched to the union Buildings in Pretoria, braving all the obstacles placed before them by the government and evoking the admiration of the ANC which declared 9<sup>th</sup> August as South

Africa's Women's Day. These strides in the emancipation struggle of women are important areas of study and for learning as it is these actions that build respect and encourage men and women to be able to live in harmony rather than engaging in power struggles ending up in violence.

One of Gandhiji's key lessons was that it is important to always look for the positive. An interesting story quoted by Prof. Bhattacharya illustrates Gandhiji's views on sensational writing, "In one of the Voyages to England, his fellow passengers formed a club called "Billy Boats" and published a sheet, "Scandal Times". The name suggested the materials in it and they brought an issue to Gandhiji and asked for his opinion of it. He took the sheet, extracted the pin which fastened the leaves and told them that he had taken the most precious thing from the sheets." Bhattacharya S.N. Mahatma Gandhi – The Journalist p.83.

Interestingly, Gandhiji kept the three monkeys on his desk, one of his few possessions and that says it all. His idea of positive stories, thoughts and speech enhances a person's own character is an important lesson particularly in the present context when there is a move to vilify Gandhiji. Of thousands of pages of his writing if people can only find a few sentences for criticism and ignore the many writings, actions and stories which suggest the opposite of what they believe and say then there is a certainly a very sinister motive behind this kind of vilification and perhaps we should in fact reinforce the positives because there is much in the positive messages that could benefit our community.

Nelson Mandela said in his acceptance speech when receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others," Gandhiji's message teaches us to live the kind of life, Nelson Mandela speaks of.

An important part of Gandhiji's teaching was the empowerment of communities. His spinning wheel was introduced to both give people work to do and through the production of cotton to be able to buy the necessities of life. The idea of spinning wheel is linked to the dignity of labour and the pride in being able to meet one's own needs.

Gram Swaraj, whereby individuals would be able to rule themselves in every little constituency. However, for this process to be successful we need two important elements.

1. An educated competent people
2. A clear government hierarchy, process and procedures which people can learn, access and be able to seek services.

Social Sciences can research, advise and advocate for such effective, efficient structures to empower people."

## **Presidential Address**

### **Anand Sharma**

*former Minister for Commerce, Industry & Textiles; Deputy Leader of Opposition (Rajya Sabha)*

I have had the privilege to know Elaji over the years and I am deeply impressed. She has throughout her public life committed to understanding people, societies, and the dignity of human beings. There are very few countries who have always had a history so intertwined as India and South Africa, an understanding so rich and deeply rooted in history with shared experiences of struggles, icons, and heroes. In Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, that's what not only we share but we gave to the world. Most of us feel inspired by Gandhiji's work, his struggle, and the ideals that he subscribed to. More importantly, one has to remind oneself, at least I do, that to be a Gandhian is very difficult and to follow Gandhi is the most challenging thing. If you can take steps in that direction, it will make each one of us a better human being and the world perhaps a more peaceful and happy place. It is not a question of tolerance, it is essentially a question of harmonious coexistence.



Mr. Anand Sharma

People talk of the issues that have cropped up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as the lack of tolerance, the violence, and the continued suffering from a vast majority of human beings. Suffering because of accidents of birth, which country and which society they were born into, which family, which social or economic background they came from. There is a need to uplift these fellow human beings and to give them what rightfully belongs to each citizen of the world - a life of dignity. The most dehumanising thing is poverty which can only be fought by making people aware through education. We live in times which are challenging as well as interesting. I think a large number of countries have not been able to overcome these challenges not because of a lack of commitment but because of multiple challenges that have continued the painful baggage of history that generations have carried.

The biggest challenges that we continue to face are new technologies and an explosion of knowledge and science. We have not been able to create societies which you referred to Elaji, which are fair and just, where equity is embraced. We must connect to the message of

the great father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, and to Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela who were firm believers in what Gandhiji stood for.

Elaji you were right about how to understand and reproduce what was not one but multiple streams of Gandhiji's thinking. People try to connect, there are scholars who understand but not the average person. But what I have found in my four decades of political activism and the work that we did during the struggle in South Africa is that irrespective of the passage of time, his message is timeless and has an enduring relevance even for this century and I am sure for the next one. As long as the issues that truly agitated his mind and the concerns which other great men who followed are shared, he will remain relevant.

We were together when we commemorated the 100 years of Satyagraha, and there were people who asked why that commemoration was important. I think it was to our mind an occasion to recall and to recollect. And there were many, even among my colleagues who come from a political ideology and the party which is committed to Gandhian thought and Gandhian values. It was in South Africa on November 9, 1906, that the first Satyagraha was launched by Gandhiji. When we look at the history of the Satyagraha movement that inspired our people and gave strength to people who were considered to be too weak and too helpless, illiterate, without access to national resources. It gave them a voice and courage to stand up and fight and defeat the largest empire in the world by embracing non-violence. That in itself was very powerful, not having been fully understood at the time, but showed that Gandhiji had absolute clarity as to the way forward for this country.

Nelson Mandela was also transformed from his formative years as a leader of the youth movement. He became a leader of the underground and then truly a Gandhian in spirit and the father of a nation for South Africa. The country was so divided because of racial discrimination and apartheid. If leaders like Gandhi and Nehru—Nehru comes in because he had his own important role and contribution, of those who followed Gandhiji I think one who stands out is Jawaharlal

Nehru, whom Gandhiji loved and truly respected. If these great leaders were not there, the hope would not have been there.

More importantly, India and South Africa would not have seen peaceful transition if the path of non-violence was not accepted. So Gandhiji gave the healing touch to the people following bloodshed in the aftermath of India's partition. And he worked for those who were affected, showing enormous courage. And the same we saw in Nelson Mandela. No rancour, no bitterness, but his path of truth and reconciliation gave the healing touch to South Africans. And we have to constantly remind ourselves that we live in times where these challenges remain and we will get tested over and over again. Not only when it comes to commitment to our ideals, but also in building and sustaining societies which are respectful of diversity— religious, ethnic, lingual—and creating societies where human beings can live with dignity.”

### Remarks by George Mathew

Dr. George Mathew spoke about the 30-year journey of the Institute of Social Sciences. He said that “when the Institute was registered on 28 August 1985, power to the people, based on the Gandhain idea of *Gram Swaraj* was the rallying point for many intellectuals, activists and concerned citizens. It is against this background that the Institute found its institutional expression...The Institute's birth was also necessitated by the extraordinary demand from the intellectuals and activists to come forward on a common platform not only to create knowledge, but also to share it with policy makers, workers, practitioners, organizations and others.”

According to Dr. Mathew “All those who supported the Institute wanted it to be an independent institution which will grow as think tank. That gave us power and courage to fight against several anti-people issues. It was indeed a difficult and strenuous task, especially as far as the finance was concerned. But many friends, bilateral and multi-lateral organizations including the UN agencies and the World Bank, the Union and State governments came forward with support at critical times.” ■

