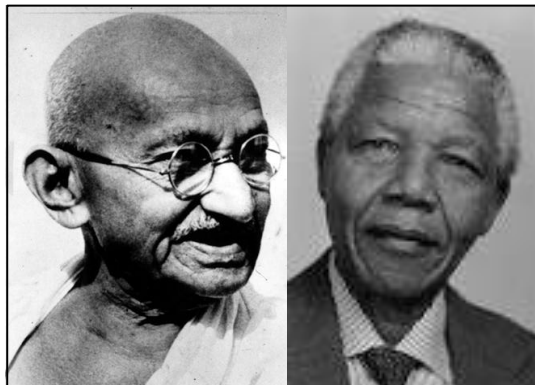


## Meeting of Minds: Gandhi and Mandela on Non-Violence

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This article is not a comparison between Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela as the latter once told, “It would not be right to compare me to Gandhi. None of us could equal his dedication or his humility. He showed us it’s necessary to brave imprisonment if truth and justice were to triumph over evil.” It is a modest attempt to recollect the legacies of both the leaders in terms of the impacts they each had on non-violence as a means of addressing problems of their times on the occasion of India’s 68<sup>th</sup> Independence Day. Both were men of different times, yet they drew upon similar principles in their quests to help humanity. While their causes were distinct to each of their homelands, they inspired similar reverence among followers, eventually standing as inspiration worldwide. While each of these men took unique paths to prominence, a shared sense of equality and belief that society’s oppressed citizens must stand together; provide fundamental cornerstones of their philosophies for bringing change for the masses. With the passing of Mandela, the Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik hailed him as a



‘symbol of anti-apartheid who dedicated his life to fight injustice and racial discrimination. He was a great advocate of humanism and a symbol of struggle for justice, service, dedication and sacrifice. He had strong faith in Gandhiji’s belief in truth and non-violence. The world has lost a great Gandhian.’<sup>1</sup>

Was he a Gandhian? In a sense, yes. In many ways. He was a man of courage, of passion, of struggle and indomitable spirit like Gandhiji who learned from life at every turn and harboured no ill-will against

those who hurt him. Robert Koenig, in his article,<sup>2</sup> Gandhi inspired Mandela on South Africa’s -Long Road to Freedom, has said, one man was felled by an assassin’s bullet after a lifetime of nonviolent struggle to gain independence for his country, the other man survived until age 95 after emerging from prison to lead his nation’s mostly peaceful revolution to end apartheid and become its first black President. It was no coincidence that Gandhi and Mandela, whose paths never crossed directly, both embarked on their campaigns against discrimination in South Africa — the land of Alan Paton’s “Cry, the Beloved Country,” where



apartheid domination had oppressed the black majority as well as the South Asian minority for so many years. In a fitting coincidence of history, the two leaders were both lawyers who spent time in stinking jail cells in Johannesburg's Old Fort prison — Gandhi in 1906, Mandela in 1962. It later became a museum to reveal the brutality of apartheid abuses. On the same hilltop where the prison's notorious wards still stand, South Africa has built a gleaming new high court, the Constitutional Court.

Gandhi was “the archetypal anti-colonial revolutionary,” Mandela once wrote, describing the Indian leader as a role model. “Both Gandhi and I suffered colonial oppression, and both of us mobilized our respective peoples against governments that violated our freedoms.”<sup>3</sup>

Eventhough Gandhi was born in India and studied law in London, he made his name as a young man fighting discrimination against Indians in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. He was thrown off trains. He had organized protests and was jailed several times during his two decades of South African activism. While Gandhi at first supported the British colonial regime and urged Indians to fight on their side during the Anglo-Boer War (now called the South African War) in 1899-1902, he became disillusioned with British rule after he organized fellow Indians into a stretcher-bearer corps to carry wounded soldiers during a Zulu revolt in 1906.<sup>4</sup> “British brutality against the Zulus roused his soul against violence as nothing had done before,” Mandela wrote later. “The sight of wounded and whipped Zulus, mercilessly abandoned by their British persecutors, so appalled him that he turned full circle from his admiration for all things British to celebrating the indigenous and ethnic.” After his experience as a stretcher-bearer, Gandhi became an outspoken but nonviolent advocate of the rights of South African Indians, championing

the Satyagraha campaign of nonviolent refusal to cooperate with the government; arranging marches against the discriminatory poll tax and marriage laws; and enduring months in jails for defying the authorities.

Gandhi received a hero's welcome when he returned to India in 1915 and started a decades-long campaign of nonviolent resistance against British colonialism that led to the nation's independence in 1947. Mandela, who was born to a Xhosa family in the village of Mvezo three years after Gandhi left South Africa, seemed to be an unlikely candidate to inherit the moral legacy of the great Indian leader – and it took many years for Mandela to adopt the nonviolent resistance strategy and to lead what he later called the “long walk to freedom.” He and his ally Oliver Tambo were expelled from South Africa's Fort Hare College – the first South African University for blacks – in 1940 for their political activism. He worked as a night watchman in a gold mine in Johannesburg, then clerked in a law firm, studied law and began his political career by joining the African National Congress. Accusing the ANC's leadership of “appeasement and compromise,” the fiery Mandela started up an ANC youth league, rising to become its president in 1951.

He and Tambo founded South African first black law practice, but the apartheid government – fearful of a revolution – late in 1956 arrested him and 155 other black leaders who had called for an end to apartheid. He was acquitted of treason in 1961, then went underground and formed an ANC military wing (“Spear of the Nation”) and commanded its guerrilla army.

After 17 month underground, Mandela was arrested again and sent to prison for another five years. And in 1964, he and seven other ANC activists were convicted again and sentenced to



life in prison. He would spend the next 18 years in Robben Island prison, off the coast of Cape Town.

After pressure mounted on the apartheid government, South African President P.W. Botha offered to free Mandela if he renounced violence; but Mandela refused unless the government ended apartheid. It took many more years, and behind-the-scenes negotiations with the nation's leaders, before the 71-year-old Mandela was released, without conditions, in 1990. The ANC suspended its guerilla campaign but street violence continued.

After years of negotiations – during which Mandela and President de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – a new constitution banning apartheid was finally agreed to in 1993 and Mandela won election as South Africa's first black president a year later. That is when the influence of Gandhi became apparent, as Mandela – instead of punishing those who had imprisoned him and his compatriots – moved to try to reconcile South Africa's black majority and white minority.

“His journey from a prisoner to a president embodied the promise that human beings — and countries — can change for the better. His commitment to transfer power and reconcile with those who jailed him set an example that all humanity should aspire to, whether in the lives of nations or our own personal lives.

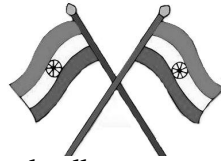
“And the fact that he did it all with grace and good humor, and an ability to acknowledge his own imperfections, only makes the man that much more remarkable.”<sup>5</sup>

Non-violence : A way of life - Nonviolence which Gandhi followed is no ordinary idea or belief. It was born of conviction and was based on the purification of body and mind. It evolved through the control of the palate,

non possession of property or any other material or non material thing, restraining one's senses, adoption of the principle of non-stealing, abolition of untouchability, promotion of communal harmony and above all anchoring life on the moral principles and higher ideals.<sup>6</sup> Sahu is of the opinion that non-violence does not mean the non-use of force, it is deeper in connotation and practice. It involves changing the whole way of life and consciousness and remaining in communion with the nature and feeling that everything in this world including the crawls of the world is throbbing with the divine spirit of which the individual is a part. This identification of the individual with the whole cosmos and at the same time retaining the individuality constituted the core meaning of non-violence.<sup>7</sup> Nonviolence provides us with tools, the positive means to oppose and stop wars and preparations for war, to resist violence, to struggle against racial, sexual and economic oppression and discrimination and to seek social justice and genuine democracy for people throughout the world.

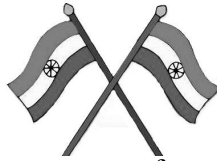
Gandhi provided the world with his timeless philosophy. It was not meant for the independence of India only. Nonviolence is itself normative. It applies to any situation. He was a fearless advocate of the dignity of the human person. This involves recognizing the unique endowments of the human person-in-community and providing a foundation for Human Rights. He is therefore called the emancipator of the oppressed. He helped millions of the discriminated poor to discover meaning in life and live a life worthy of the true human calling. The clarity of the conviction of the transcendental goal of everyman led him to affirm the dignity of the human person at every level.

In his article, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, Nitin Mehta, wrote <sup>8</sup> that the



death of Nelson Mandela has moved people all over the world. The outpouring of grief is similar to the one when Mahatma Gandhi died. It is one of those inexplicable quirks of history that both these giants who shaped the modern world started their long march for justice in South Africa. As a young man looking for a better future Gandhi could have found any of the many countries of South and East Africa that he could have settled in as did many Indians in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. But it seems some divine force brought Gandhi to South Africa which at the time epitomized the oppression of a people in their own country in the form of apartheid. It is in South Africa that Gandhi started a struggle against injustice and his experiences there were of immense importance in his strategy to confront the British Raj in India. Gandhi's nascent movement for justice in South Africa inspired and galvanized a whole generation of South African freedom fighters like Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Desmond Tutu and many others. After Gandhi departed for India he left his son Manilal back in South Africa to continue the struggle. Manilal was present at a crucial meeting of the ANC in 1949, where he pressed the party to unconditionally adopt nonviolence but with little success. The attitude of the party toward the Gandhian ideal of nonviolence was in subsequent years best summarized by Desmond Tutu who said: "Gandhi was to influence greatly Martin Luther King Jr., the leading light in the American Civil Rights Movement, as well as the South African National Congress of Nelson Mandela. So many people expected our country to go up in flames, enveloped by a catastrophe, a racial bloodbath. It never happened. Because in the struggle against an evil of injustice, ultimately it did not take recourse to violence and because you and so many others in the international community supported the struggle."

Nelson Mandela wrote an article for the 3rd January 2000 issue of the Time magazine. The issue celebrated People of the Century. Mandela wrote about one of his teachers: Gandhi. His story was called The Sacred Warrior and showed some of the ways Gandhi influenced him. This is what he wrote: Gandhi dared to exhort nonviolence in a time when the violence of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had exploded on us; he exhorted morality when science, technology and the capitalist order had made it redundant; he replaced self-interest with group interest without minimizing the importance of self. India is Gandhi's country of birth; South Africa his country of adoption. He was both an Indian and a South African citizen. Both countries contributed to his intellectual and moral genius, and he shaped the liberation movements in both colonial theatres. He was the archetypal, anticolonial revolutionary. His strategy of noncooperation, his assertion that we can be dominated only if we cooperate with our dominators and his nonviolent resistance inspired anticolonial and antiracist movements internationally and in our country. Both Gandhi and I suffered colonial oppression and both of us mobilized our respective peoples against governments that violated our freedoms. The Gandhian influence dominated freedom struggles on the African continent right up to the 1960s because of the power it generated and the unity it forged amongst the apparently powerless. Nonviolence was the official stance of all major African coalitions, and the South African ANC remained implacably opposed to violence for most of its existence. Gandhi remained committed to nonviolence; I followed the Gandhian strategy for as long as I could but then there came a point in our struggle when the brute force of the oppressor could no longer be countered through passive resistance alone. We founded Unkhonto we Sizwe and added a military dimension to our



struggle. Even then we chose sabotage because it did not involve the loss of life and it offered the best hope for future race relations. Militant action became part of the African agenda officially supported by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) following my address to the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) in 1962, in which I stated, “Force is the only language the imperialists can hear, and no country became free without some sort of violence.” Gandhi himself never ruled out violence absolutely and unreservedly. He conceded the necessity of arms in certain situations. He said, “Where choice is set between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence... I prefer to use arms in defense of honour rather than remain the vile witness of dishonour ...” Violence and nonviolence are not mutually exclusive; it is the predominance of the one or the other that labels a struggle.”

Nelson Mandela was indeed a great soul. Eventhough his people suffered so much under the apartheid regime and he himself had spent 27 years in jail in conditions that could destroy most people, he was able to forgive the oppressors and establish a rainbow nation of peace and harmony. It is the small and often many insignificant episodes in the lives of great souls that separate them from the rest and here is one such moving incident in the life of Nelson Mandela. In around June 1961 Mandela spent sometime in a farm at Lilies leaf in Rivonia a suburb of Johannesburg. His then wife Winnie brought him an old rifle for target practice. One day he shot a sparrow with it and was mortified when the five year old son of a friend rounded on him saying: “Why did you kill that bird? Its mother will be sad”. Mandela said, “My mood immediately shifted from one of pride to shame. I felt this small boy had far greater humanity than I did.” It was an odd sensation for a man who was the leader

of a nascent guerilla army. That regret he felt at his action and his willingness to learn from a five year old is the making of a great man. It is a matter of great pride for Indians that Mahatma Gandhi has had such an enormous impact on so many people all over the world. Mahatma Gandhi was able to articulate the glorious heritage of India which had been stifled by invading armies for around a thousand years.

Roger Cohen<sup>9</sup> termed both Gandhi and Mandela as the anti-colonialist giants of the 20th century. Gandhi was branded with the racist insult of “coolie lawyer” in South Africa. Mandela was thrown into the same Johannesburg prison as Gandhi before him. Both had arrived to the same conclusion by different roads. Gandhi in his autobiography wrote: “When we come to think of it, the distinction between heterogeneous and homogeneous is discovered to be merely imaginary. We are all one family.”<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi was thrown out from a first-class compartment on a South African train at the Pietermaritzburg station. This was galvanized into nonviolent resistance by the racist anti-Indian legislation in the Transvaal in 1906. He is now seen as a founding father of Mandela’s rainbow South Africa of equal rights for all peoples. Gandhi, as chronicled in Joseph Lelyveld’s book, “Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India,” took many years to embrace the black cause, only declaring on the eve of departure from South Africa that, “This land is theirs by birth.” He was focused on Indians’ rights. Mandela invoked Gandhi’s nonviolent campaigns as a reference for mass action — up to a point. “I called for nonviolent protest for as long as it was effective,” he noted.

Yet they came to a shared conviction that all suppressed people, whatever their differences of religion or ethnicity or caste, must stand

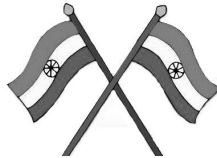


together against their oppressors and, in Gandhi's words, "cease to play the part of the ruled." Only a changed mindset could change the structure of white, colonial power. They reached their convictions through deep inward journeys, undertaken in circumstances of humiliation or imprisonment, journeys that took them beyond instincts of violent reprisal, and ushered them to the inner stillness that is the very thing an agitated world finds most riveting. In both Gandhi and Mandela a light shines that is the fruit of inward-focused constancy of a kind that is a stranger to hyper-connected status anxiety. Through this they live. Yet another link in the Gandhi-Mandela chain is the value of manual labour teaches. His legacy to the world is obvious from his quote, "On my last day, I want to know that those who remain behind will say: The man who lies here has done his duty for his country and his people."

Nelson Mandela,<sup>12</sup> on 6 June 1993 while unveiling the Gandhi memorial at Pietermaritzburg, had said: We are living during a time when the concept of non-violent resistance is facing a serious challenge. It is an honour for me to be here to unveil the very first statue of hope. The hope that once all South Africans are treated as equals, we will be able to forge a non violent society from the havoc wrought by apartheid and colonial-oppression. This event is also very significant because we are unveiling here the very first statue of an anti colonial figure and a hero of millions of people worldwide. Gandhiji influenced the activities of liberation movements, civil rights movements and religious organizations in all five continents of the world. He impacted on men and women who have achieved significant historical changes in their countries not least amongst whom are Martin Luther King. Mahatma Gandhi came to this country 100 years ago, to assist Indians brought to this country as indentured labourers and those who came to set up trading posts. He

came here to assist them to retain their right to be on a common voters roll. The Mahatma is an integral part of our history because it is here that he first experimented with truth; here that he demonstrated his characteristic firmness in pursuit of justice; here that he developed Satyagraha as a philosophy and a method of struggle. The Indian Congresses which have their origin in this period were fashioned by Gandhi as instruments with the assistance of people like Thambi Naidoo, Parsi Rustomji, E I Asvat and others to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity in a just cause.

Today as we strive to achieve a date for the first democratic elections in this country, the legacy of Gandhiji has an immediate relevance. He negotiated in good faith and without bitterness. But when the oppressor reneged he returned to mass resistance. He combined negotiation and mass action and illustrated that the end result through either means was effective. Gandhi is most revered for his commitment to non-violence and the Congress Movement was strongly influenced by this Gandhian philosophy, it was a philosophy that achieved the mobilization of millions of South Africans during the 1952 defiance campaign, which established the ANC as a mass based organization. The ANC and its Congress alliance partners worked jointly to protest the pass laws and the racist ideologies of the white political parties. The enemies that Gandhi fought ignorance, disease, unemployment, poverty and violence are today common place in a country that had the potential to lead and uplift Africa. Today we are faced with the formidable task of reconstructing our country anew. Now more than ever is the time when we have to pay heed to the lessons of Mahatma Gandhi... We need to come together again and revisit the source of the violence in our country. We need to meet collectively and achieve a permanent recommitment to end the violence."



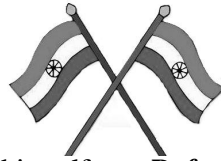
*Amitabh Pal*<sup>13</sup> wrote that Gandhians have been eager, not too surprisingly, to claim Mandela. At a function organized in New Delhi last July on Mandela's ninety-fourth birthday, Gandhi's grandson Rajmohan asserted his grandfather's influence on Mandela was so immeasurable that when Rajmohan met South Africans, they regarded the Mahatma as a fellow countryman. "The locals were surprised to learn that Gandhi was an Indian," he said. "I want Indians, too, to embrace Mandela and make him an Indian hero."<sup>12</sup>

"While Nelson Mandela is the father of South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi is our grandfather," Harris Majeke, South Africa's Ex-High Commissioner to India, had stated once. "Mandela was inspired by the Satyagraha campaign led by Gandhi. The Gandhi scholar David Hardiman pointed out that Mandela never ceased regarding Gandhi as an inspiration, and, in fact, saw nonviolence as an integral part of the movement. Mandela learned from Gandhi the essential virtues of forgiveness and compassion, values that served him and his country very well on his assumption to power. Besides, how much of a role did violence play in the liberation of South Africa? While some scholars, such as Gay Seidman, emphasize the role that armed struggle played, many other scholars say that it was not very big. "Rioting, sabotage, murder of suspected collaborators and other violent tactics were very much part of the anti-apartheid resistance movement," writes Professor Stephen Zunes, "Yet, these were not as important as the ongoing and potentially greater noncooperation with the apartheid regime and the economic system that sustained it." And the predominance of nonviolence in the apartheid struggle was crucial in other ways. "Sanctions had discernible effects in supporting the successful opposition campaign in South Africa," write Erica Chenoweth and

Maria J. Stephan in "Why Civil Resistance Works." "The ANC leadership had demanded sanctions for decades but they came about only after mass nonviolent resistance had spread." Mandela and the African National Congress took a large amount of their inspiration and strategy from Mahatma Gandhi and his campaigns in South Africa and India. The world emerged a much better place for that.<sup>14</sup>

On 10 May 1994 Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected State President of South Africa and remained so till June 1999. He declined to serve beyond a single five-year term. His great success lay in creating a government of national unity, in which F. W. de Klerk, the last apartheid-era President, was persuaded to become deputy president although Mandela's ANC had won a majority. This gave hope to the country's whites, who did not flee in fear. The other great innovation of Mandela was the setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, before which former officials accused of rapes, assassinations and bombings were required to testify before victims' families and seek forgiveness. The whites were perhaps particularly touched by Nelson Mandela's edict that if people could be taught to hate persons of a different skin colour, they could be taught to love them.<sup>15</sup> The great leader had a touch of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1999, Mandela received the Gandhi/King Award for Nonviolence from the World Movement for Nonviolence. The prize was presented by Ms. Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi and a then-member of the South African Parliament, a position she could not have held prior to the end of apartheid. Ms. Gandhi described Mandela as the living legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, the Gandhi of South Africa.

Although they never met, Gandhi and Mandela are often mentioned together as giants



of 20th-century anti-colonialism. Mandela himself often cited Gandhi as an inspiration and claimed the Indian leader as a son of South Africa, stating that “India gave South Africa Gandhi the barrister and Africa gave India back Mahatma Gandhi the Great Soul.” The leadership qualities of Nelson Mandela had at its base Gandhi’s Spirit. When Mandela spent 27 years of his life in Robben Island in the prison, the room was full of books of Gandhi and many other classics. The twenty seven years he spent in jail were spent in meditation and reflection and it is said that throughout the years, the bitterness left his soul and he provided the leadership to steer South Africa to be a multi ethnic state. Gandhi’s influence on Mandela was shown by the then Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. Visiting South Africa on the 137th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday, Singh described Mandela as the greatest Gandhian for transforming the lives of millions. Singh said Gandhi would have been “elated” to see his aspirations of peace and reconciliation realized in the transformation of South Africa under Mandela’s leadership. In the eyes of the world, the mantle of Gandhi seemed to have “descended” on Mandela. On 29, March, 2007, the former High Commissioner to South Africa, Rajiv Bhatia,<sup>16</sup> had the opportunity to call on Mandela. “What happened to Gandhi’s assassin?” he asked Bhatia. On being told that Godse was hanged, Mandela seemed incredulous and insisted that hanging would be a negation of Gandhi’s principles. This was perhaps the lasting impact of Mahatma on him. Mandela called Gandhi ‘a sacred warrior’. Gandhi “threatened”, Mandela wrote, “the South African Government in the first and second decades of our century (i.e. 20<sup>th</sup> century) as no other man did.”<sup>17</sup> Mandela stressed that in a world driven by strife, Gandhiji’s message of peace and non-violence might hold the key to human survival.

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