

## Gandhi as an Internationalist

G L Mehta

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**"F**or me patriotism is the same as humanity", observed Gandhiji nearly fifty years ago: "In trying to serve India, I serve humanity at large." These words sum up Gandhiji's outlook on world affairs—which was neither national nor international but simply human. For him, expressions like "humanity" and "mankind" were not mere phrases of flimsy, vague ideas; they were concretely embodied in human beings, irrespective of community, religion, colour or race.

He looked upon all men as members of one family. He felt sincerely and deeply for human beings because they are human not someone apart from him. His soul revolted against any outrage on human dignity as in racial discrimination and segregation in South Africa or against the degrading practice of untouchability in his own country. His Ashrams in Phoenix, in Sabarmati, in Sevagram became miniature international institutions.

India was, however, not a free and independent country when Gandhiji launched and led movements of national emancipation. The Indian people could not, therefore, make any effective contribution in the

international realm. Nevertheless, Gandhiji had his ideas half a century ago about internationalism and about the part which India could play in future.

"It is impossible," he wrote in "Young India" in 1925, "for one to be internationalist without being a nationalist. Internationalism is possible only when nationalism becomes a fact, that is, when people have organized themselves and are able to work as one man". He thought that it was not nationalism which was evil but the narrowness, the selfishness and

exclusiveness which are the bane of modern nations. He did not want India to cut herself adrift through attainment of independence. "Isolated independence is not the goal of the world status," he wrote in 1925, "it is voluntary interdependence."

Indeed, one could say that this is precisely the objective for which the United Nations was set up. Conciliation and arbitration, not slaughter and destruction are civilised ways for settlement of international disputes. Loyalty to the Charter of the United Nations and unreserved



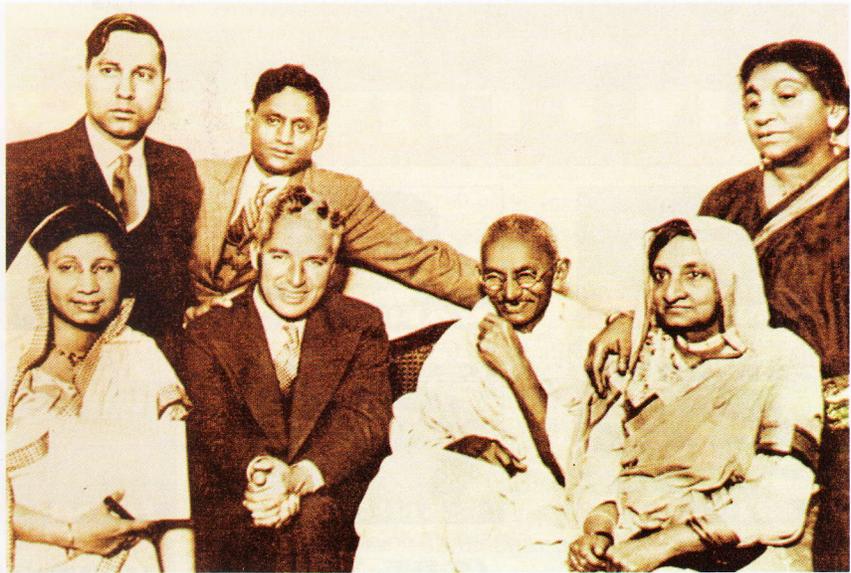
*With women workers of a mill in England (1931)*

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acceptance of the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice gives concrete expression to dedication to peace.

In other words, all that substitutes law for force, reason for violence, understanding for fanaticism is in consonance with Gandhiji's ideals. But experience shows that peace cannot be attained by incantation or simple formula; it has to be striven for by patient endeavour, by adjustment and compromise and by deliberate organisation in a complex, anarchic international society.

Gandhiji felt and hoped that a free India by example and achievement could inculcate a moral sense among nations. "My ambition," he wrote in 1924 "is nothing less than to see international affairs placed on a moral basis through India's efforts". He thought that there was no limit to extending our services to our neighbours across state made frontiers. "God never made these frontiers," he said. But, alas, men made one more frontier on the subcontinent of India itself as a price for winning national independence! Thus, in human affairs high ideals become distorted through ambitions, hatreds and conflicts. Gandhiji, however, argued that just as the individual has to die for the family and his loyalty is extended to village, district, province and the country, "even so a country has to be free in order that it might die, if necessary, for the benefit of the world." His love or idea of nationalism was not exclusive or selfish and there was no room in it for race hatred. His ambition was, indeed, higher than independence. Through the deliverance of India he sought to deliver the so-called weaker races of the earth from the crushing heels of Western exploitation. This ambition, it may be contended, has, to a large extent, been fulfilled. For achievement of independence by India through pacific means and by mutual goodwill did provide an inspiration and an example to several nations in Asia and Africa.



*With Charlie Chaplin in London (1931)*

### **Vital Contribution**

And here we come to what constitutes Gandhiji's most vital contribution to international relations—his philosophy and technique of non-violent resistance. Described by him at various times a "Satyagraha" or "passive resistance" in Africa or "non-co-operation" and "civil disobedience" in India, it was the first attempt of its kind at the application of certain ethical principles on a national scale and to problems of relationship between a dependent country and its alien rulers. It was the principal means of the Indian struggle for over twenty-five years and finally, helped in achieving its aim.

When the atom bomb was used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Gandhiji was deeply distressed and observed that "the employment of the atom bomb for the wholesale destruction of men, women and children" was "the most diabolical use of science." He thought that the only alternative to peace was the total annihilation of mankind. Since his passing away, the world has stood on the brink of disaster through the invention of even more destructive nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, not to mention chemical and germ warfare. What has prevented a nuclear holocaust is a

"balance of terror" between the super powers that renders necessary uneasy accommodation of rival interests. In these circumstances, Gandhiji would have favoured a total ban on nuclear weapons and unilateral disarmament by a single country which believes moral values.

Gandhiji, it is contended, was an obscurantist when it came to cultural matters and wanted the clock to be turned back in our country. In his *Hind Swaraj*, written in South Africa, the underlying theme is almost total rejection of values of western civilisation. But he was not against obtaining knowledge from wherever it came nor did he advocate adoption of primitive customs simply because they were old. In words which have become famous he said: "I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown of my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave." In other words, he wished the people to adapt intelligently, not borrow indiscriminately. In seeking truth and light, he recognised no national boundaries. ■

*(Yojana, October 5, 1969)*