

SPEECH BY HIGH COMMISSIONER

Friday, June 07, 2019
Pietermaritzburg Railway Station

Mr. David Gengan, Chairperson of Pietermaritzburg Gandhi Memorial Committee (PGMC),

Mr. Prasad Gollanapalli – internationally renowned Gandhian scholar and Keynote Speaker for today's event

Mrs Ela Gandhi – Chairperson, Board of Gandhi Development Trust

Mr Aroo Naidoo and Kay Makan – Honorary Life Presidents of the Pietermaritzburg Gandhi Memorial Committee and esteemed members of the Committee

Mr. Ranjiv Nirghin – President of Midlands Hindu Society

Hon'ble Members of the Clergy and Esteemed members of the Audience
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning, Namaste, Vanakkam, Salam alaikum, Sanibonani

I thank Mr. David Gengan and every member of the Pietermaritzburg Gandhi Memorial Committee for inviting me and my wife here today. I feel blessed that less than a month after arriving in South Africa I have had the privilege of visiting this historical place to commemorate an event that marked a turn in India's history.

2. It is hard to put my feelings into words as I stand here at the very place that Gandhiji was forced to end one journey but where he began another. Later, scholars and historians marked the day as the starting point of a political struggle that would dismantle an empire and whose defining ideas would reverberate in similar struggles elsewhere.

3. But the grand ideas that infuse a revolution can also be those that guide us in our more mundane tasks. I recall very well the complex feelings of hurt mixed with hope and pride that I experienced when I saw the dramatic picturisation of Gandhiji being thrown out of the train in the film 'Gandhi'. As I reflected on what the Pietermaritzburg incident meant to me, I was struck first of all by Gandhiji's refusal to accept the status quo. Hidden behind the robes of a disciplined lawyer trained in precedent and procedure was a mind that refused to accept the prevalent reality. He rebelled against racial, religious or gender prejudice, violence as a means of struggle and customs that lowered the dignity of man. I hold my head down when I think how I am sometimes myself complicit in perpetuating practices or beliefs that I readily recognise are wrong. And I suppose that holds true for many of us.

4. Both South Africa and India, the countries where Gandhiji worked and fulfilled his life, are countries of great diversity. But in the communities and organisations where we live and work there too is a diversity of circumstances, opinions, interests and motivations. As Gandhiji showed, we move ahead with the maximum force and impact when we recognise and respect the varied character and personality of any group of people. Each colour has its important place and part in making a beautiful rainbow.

5. There are many who recognise injustice and even fight it. But more often than not they do so as valiant but ineffective voices. Gandhiji's life and work showed that however oppressive the status quo and however insurmountable the powers against you may appear to be, there is always a way to fight and triumph. It is a lesson that the power of the human mind is supreme. Today we see how individuals fired only by the power of their ideas imaginations can disrupt the global economy and the business of the world's largest corporations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. Mahatma Gandhiji is remembered today for his defining contribution not only to the freedom of India but to the cause of world peace. He demonstrated that the human spirit is more powerful than the mightiest of armaments.

7. But it was not only the mightiest of arms that Gandhiji fought. In a speech that Madiba gave on this day 26 years ago at the unveiling of the Gandhi Memorial, he said that the enemies that Gandhiji fought were ignorance, disease, unemployment, poverty and violence. Can any society say that these are not their enemies even today?

8. His message, therefore, is universal, timeless and eternal. As Martin Luther King said, “If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, and acted inspired by a vision of humanity evolving towards a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk.”

9. This year, we are also celebrating the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi for which the celebrations began on October 2, 2018 in India and across the world. So, this year is a special occasion for all of us. South Africans and Indians resident in South Africa have participated wholeheartedly in various events organised by the High Commission of India in Pretoria and our Consulates in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban as well those organised by the Gandhi Development Trust and Gandhi Memorial Committee and other organizations and institutions in Pietermaritzburg and Durban. I thank everyone for joining us in honouring this precious and cherished legacy.

SIYABONGA
