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MAHATMAS OF THE YEAR

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Abstract:

We are born and we die. These are the two major events of our lives. And the subtle thing is that neither of these is in our own hands. As if to disdain our very existence, they are triggered by the Great Creator. However, the period between these two miraculous phenomena, which authenticate the Omnipresent, Omniscient and Omnipotent God, is solely in our hands. Now, as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola has written in his work, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, it is in our hands how to fashion our lives and to make this incarnation meaningful and fruitful. The lives of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Frantz Fanon and Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje provide the illustrations of such sublime lives which are remembered by all ages in all Ages. This paper aims to investigate such deeds of Gandhiji, Nelson Mandela, Fanon and Plaatje under the title, *Mahatmas of the Year*.

Key words: humiliation, human rights, fight, service to man, nation, deeds, *Mahatma*

Introduction:

Lives of great men all remind us

We can make our lives sublime,

And, departing, leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of time;

The thought provoking words mentioned above are by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Every age has its own importance. And in the midway of the life thoughts are bound to come in a conscious mind; why we should live, for what and for whom we should live. The person with such conscious mind always seeks his hands at the welfare of the mankind. He may or may not be a patriot; however, his deeds would always be in favour of the nation.

It is historically noted that sometimes social, political and economical conditions of one country of one continent resemble to another country of even another continent. We find such resemblance especially when we refer a world history of colonialism. There was a time when India and Africa both were facing the atrocity of the colonialists and nonsensical social issue of differences between the upper and lower classes of the societies on the basis of colour, caste, creed and race.

Hegemony on other is a common desire of living beings. Consequently the weak will always be subjugated, dominated, humiliated and exploited by the strong. Such binary opposition is universal. In Africa, even today, we find the social issues like racism and classicism. This reminds me an experience of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in South Africa.

It was in about 1893, when Gandhiji went to South Africa for certain legal work. There he was opposed for wearing a turban. He was insulted for it. Every now

and then he had been told to take off his turban. He might have bid good-bye to it and worn an English hat to save himself “from the insult and the unpleasant controversy” (Gandhi, Story Ch-32), if he had not been warned by Abdulla Sheth. It was just a beginning, yet many experiences and lessons were waiting for him on a foreign land. Just after a few days, he had to go Pretoria for some legal work. When his train reached Maritzburg, he was noticed as a “coloured” (Gandhi, Story Ch-33) man, and had been bluntly told that he must go to the van compartment even though he had a ticket to travel in the first class compartment. When Gandhiji refused to leave the compartment, he was pushed out by a constable. It was the time for him to decide either to give a fight for his rights against “a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice” (Gandhi, Story Ch-33) or to return to India after finishing the case. And it was the matter of pride for being an Indian. So ultimately he decided, “I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. Redress for wrongs I should seek only to the extent that would be necessary for the removal of the colour prejudice” (Gandhi, Story Ch-33).

In South Africa the Indians were deprived of all their rights by a special law enacted in 1888 which was “manifestly unjust” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 38). They had to pay a poll tax of £ 3 as fee for entry into the Transvaal. They were not allowed to own land except in the areas allotted to them. But these areas were dirty places situated far away from the towns where there was no water supply, no lighting arrangement and no sanitary convenience to speak of. They were treated as *untouchables*. Their children were not allowed to attend public schools. Indian travelers could not get secure accommodation in hotels. They were subjected to humiliation and labor. The word ‘coolies’ had become a common prefix for the Indians. The white South Africans had developed a wrong notion for Indians: “These Indians have no sense of human decency. They suffer from loathsome diseases. They consider every woman as their prey. They believe that women have no souls” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 37).

The Black Act introduced in the Transvaal made compulsory for the Indians living in South Africa to get issued their identity cards which carried details regarding their names, residence, caste, age, etc. The entire process was very humiliating. Without that certificate they could not move from one place to another. They had to produce that certificate before the police officer whenever and wherever they have been told to do so. If they failed, they had to pay fine or to go prison. All these things provoked the Indians.

The Musalman traders and the Hindu clerks from Gujarat living in South Africa represented the class of free Indians. They undertook to resist the wrongs of the government. They fought well against difficulties, seeing that they were thus seriously handicapped, that they were ignorant of English, and that they had no experience of public work in India. They sought the help of European barristers and did what they could to mend matters. After reading *Natal Mercury* Gandhiji suggested to the Indians living in South Africa that they should strenuously resist this attack on their rights. They agreed but were unable to fight the battle themselves and therefore Gandhiji led the battle. Meetings were held. Many South African Indians took part in that revolution and many volunteers contributed their help in various activities. This is

how the “Satyagraha sprang into existence” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 50). The movement had been given a name, *Satyagraha*, “a pure, unarmed and non-violent struggle” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 295), “a priceless and matchless weapon” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 312), a movement without physical force.

The *Satyagrahis* went through a natural course of preparation for this fight for rights and respect. Pain to a Satyagrahi was “the same as pleasure” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 306). They tried their level best to ameliorate their condition and enhanced their prestige. Great march was stated and Gandhiji and many other marchers were jailed. The struggle also encouraged the Indians living in Natal and no power on the earth could hold them in check. They went for strikes as well. But the government became harsh towards the strikers. The police opened fire on them, wounded many and killed some of the labourers, volunteers and strikers. Gandhiji writes, “Pain is often thus the precursor of pleasure. The Pain of the Indians in South Africa made itself heard everywhere” (Gandhi, Satyagraha 294). In spite of all these things there was a beginning of the end of this struggle against the unjust government of South Africa.

Relief had been sought on certain points, like repeal of the three pound tax, legalization of the marriages celebrated according to the rite of Hinduism, Islam, etc., the entry of educated Indians, alteration in the assurance as regards the Orange Free State, and an assurance that the existing laws especially affecting Indians will be administered justly, with due regard to vested rights. A provisional agreement took place between the South African government and South African Indians. The *Satyagraha* was finally suspended. Finally the Indians Relief Bill was passed and that closed the *Satyagraha* struggle after eight years in the September of 1906 at the cost of physical suffering and pecuniary loss of Indians living in South Africa.

This was about the movement that Gandhiji had started in South Africa for the rights of South African Indians. But let us expand our territory of discussion about the struggle for the human rights. The issue of racism under the name of apartheid in South Africa cannot be overlooked here.

Apartheid means apartness. It is an atrocious racial segregation. It confines the people to certain circumscribed area of residence or separate institutions, like schools, churches, and facilities, like parks, playgrounds, restaurants, restrooms etc. on the basis of race or alleged race. It provides a means to maintain the economic advantages and superior social status to the politically dominant group. It has been practiced all over the world where there are multiracial communities. But as legal segregation, it is practiced as an occasional social discrimination except in the Southern states of the U.S.

In South Africa apartheid was employed by white populations to maintain their ascendancy over other groups by means of legal and social colour bars. It is but natural that if a country is divided by such narrow domestic walls from within, it would be dominated by the power from without. Here, in Africa, thus the uitlanders succeeded to establish, exploit, maintain, acquire and expand their colonies.

In South Africa the black South Africans had been allotted a separate area to live a life as unwanted. O’Malley Archives states that the Bantu Land Act and Union

Land Act allocated only 7.3% of the total South African land area as reserves to accommodate the Native population. It restricted the natives to buy and/or own land outside the reserves. As they could not own the land, they would have to work as labourers at mines. Thus, the white “had begun to use land as a tool to limit African political participation” (Native). Boddy-Evans writes that the reserves which were allotted to the natives were “not only amounted to just 7-8% of South Africa’s land, but were also less fertile than lands set aside for white owners” (Pre-Apartheid). This Act defined natives as “any person, male or female, who is a member of an aboriginal race or tribe of Africa; and shall further include any company or other body of persons, corporate or unincorporate, if the persons who have a controlling interest therein are natives” (Native). Solomon Plaatje, a South African intellectual, journalist, writer and politician, has in an appealing way written how this Native Land Act and many other Acts had all of a sudden distorted the peaceful lives of the natives. As an activist he struggled a lot throughout his life to liberalize his fellowmen. He, like Fanon, made his pen a weapon to fight against the white South Africans for the rights of the black South Africans. The effect of the Native Land Act is well defined by him in the following way:

Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth. The 4,500,000 black South Africans are domiciled as follows: One and three-quarter millions in Locations and Reserves, over half a million within municipalities or in urban areas, and nearly a million as squatters on farms owned by Europeans. The remainder are employed either on the public roads or railway line, or as servants by European formers, qualifying, that is by hard work and saving to start farming on their own account.

This is how, all of a sudden, without any kind of warning, the life of the native was changed, sacrificed on the altar. With this stormy change the white South Africans slept peacefully in their houses. The Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 and the Racial Classification Act classified the people on the basis of their colour. That stated that a white person is one who is in appearance obviously white-and not generally accepted as Coloured-or who is generally accepted as White-and is not obviously Non-White, provided that a person shall not be classified as a White person if one of his natural parents has been classified as a Coloured person or a Bantu. In the same way it stated that a Bantu is a person who is, or is generally accepted as, a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa and a Coloured is a person who is not a White person or a Bantu. Thus this Act divided all South Africans into two classes: white, which was of white South Africans, who were in minority and Bantu, which was of Black South Africans, who were in majority. Apart from these, two more classes were there; colored, which was of the mixed races and Indian and Pakistani living in South Africa formed another class. This abysmal segregation sanctioned political and economical discrimination against non-whites. Thus, the exploitation of the native continued in various ways with the contraption of a series of new Acts from 1913.

The purpose of apartheid was separation of the race not only of whites from non-whites, but also of non-whites from each other, and among the Africans (called Bantu in South Africa), of one group from another (Apartheid, Columbia). According to Thompsell the method of determination of the person's race was humiliating and shocking. If the classification of the race of any person was challenged by other, then that person had to go to certain unofficial tests, like the 'pencil test', examination of the colour of genital or any other part of the body that could be accepted as a clear mark of the race by the official (Racial).

The "inhuman behaviour" (Fanon, Black 63) of the white South Africans in enslaving and exploiting the black South Africans can be felt in Fanon's words. Throughout his life he struggled to change the wrong notion of the westerners about Africa and Africans. Being a psychiatric Fanon could develop empathy for those who were colonized, slaved and subjugated and understand their agony. His works have played a world-shattering role in exposing the exploiters and in inspiring the exploited. He considered the black problem as his own. He was stirred with the racism that segregated black South Africans from their fundamental rights and made them vagrant in their own country. His agony for the sufferings of his black fellowmen can be felt in his words: "What is South Africa? A boiler into which thirteen million blacks are clubbed and penned in by two and a half million whites" (64). His works reveal his aim and claim for equality for all human beings in the world. He wants the world to develop a new sight to glance at the Negroes as they are also human beings. In his words, "All I wanted was to be a man among other men" (85). He focused on his own right: "That of demanding human behavior from the other" (179). He writes,

I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possess the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. . . The Negro is not. Any more than the white man. (Black 180)

In Africa, in 1924 "black African unrest grew into a widespread nationalist movement opposed to the rule of the British settlers. African nationalists conducted strikes, protests, and guerrilla warfare" (Cell) to decline the British Empire. To suppress their resistance, the British encouraged the white supremacy by strictly limiting the voting rights of black Africans and by putting other restriction on them. However, "Change was in the air in the 1940s" (Mandela, Long 110). They resisted and gave a vigorous fight to the European powers, which shuddered to the deep rooted imperial power like a house of card. In the mid of 20th century almost all colonized countries achieved sovereignty. Nigeria got independence on 1st October, 1960 and South Africa got independence on 31 May, 1961. But in South Africa the power remained in hands of the white South Africans who continued exploitation of the black South Africans under the legal policy of apartheid. Criticizing the government, Nelson Mandela writes that when an African,

. . . grows up, he can hold Africans Only jobs, rent a house in Africans Only townships, ride Africans Only trains and be stopped at any time of the day or night and be ordered to produce a pass, without which he can be arrested and thrown in jail. His life is circumscribed by raciest laws and regulations that

cripple his growth, dim his potential and stunt his life. This was the reality, and one could deal with it in a myriad of ways. (Long 109)

Such thousands of unforgettable moments produced in Mandela “an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned” (Long 109) his people. He was hurt on seeing his people suffering under an inhuman system. He was greatly disturbed by the housing shortage, the schools crisis, unemployment and the crime rate. This compelled him to devote his life to their liberation. He understood the deprivations his people suffered, but he opposed the crime they were committing on the name of freedom. After 27 years of imprisonment, when he was released from the jail, addressing to the people, he said, “Freedom without civility, freedom without the ability to live in peace, was not true freedom at all” (Long 681). Thus, he encouraged his people for a decent fight against the tyranny of the British rule followed by the men in power after independence.

This situation of South Africa during pre/post apartheid was continuously challenged by the South African Native National Congress (ANC). Cecil John Rhodes, who drafted the Glen Grey Act, claimed that the Africans were citizens who were still children and the government protected their land, thus “they had no right to claim a vote on it” (Native). Land and race were used as triggers by the South African government to control the native. But ANC claimed for everything that belonged to the native. It aimed at the voting rights of Coloureds and black South Africans and fought to eliminate apartheid. Though it was banned from 1960 to 1990 by the white South African Government, it continued its dignified skirmish during these three decades underground and outside South African territory. It conducted many non-violent protests, strikes, boycotts and marches against the apartheid. It opposed the “pass” law and other government policies. Thus, it demanded for the complete, transparent and legal freedom and equality. It claimed for all kinds of rights that a citizen of a *Nation* deserves. But Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd—the primary architect of apartheid, was ambitious to change South Africa from a monarchy to a republic. On other hand the ANC became ambitious for the rights and freedom of the native. Boddy-Evans quotes Mandela’s defence statement during the Treason Trial of 1961, “We are not anti-white, we are against white supremacy . . . we have condemned racialism no matter by whom it is professed” (Quotes). Thus, Mandela’s fight was for the rights of the black against the white supremacy.

Before 31 May, 1961, Mandela, the Director of the All-In African National Action Council, wrote a letter to Verwoerd on 20 May, 1961, stating that his government could not take a decision of changing South Africa into a Republic nation “without first seeking the views and obtaining the express consent of the African people”. He demanded “a non-racial and democratic Constitution” to avert the worst situation of the Nation and a call for the convention before 31 May 1961. He warned him that if he failed to do so, the Africans would refuse to co-operate him and they would go for a country-wide demonstrations “in a disciplined and peaceful manner” on the eve of the Republic (Doc. 9). But the Government did not pay attention to the caution. ANC called a General Strike on the 29th, 30th and 31st of May 1961, and staged country-wide demonstration to protest against the White Republic forcibly

imposed on them. The government arrested more than ten thousand innocent Africans and their activities were banned throughout the country. In the second letter Nelson Mandela made this point very clear to the Government that they would “never cease to fight against repression and injustice” (Document 11). Very audaciously, Mandela wrote,

. . .the result of the last strike has proved no power on earth can stop an oppressed people, determined to win their freedom. History punishes those who resort to force and fraud to suppress the claims and legitimate aspirations of the majority of the country’s citizens. (Document 11)

This demand made the Government more brutal. Many leaders were arrested in order to annihilate the anti-apartheid activities. On 31 May 1961, Verwoerd, the primary architect of apartheid, finally succeeded in changing South Africa from a monarchy to a republic. In 1964 Mandela and other ANC leaders were sentenced to life imprisonment by the Rivonia Trial (African), but they proved themselves by not relinquishing their fight for their rights. On 2 Feb. 1990, the President F.W.de Klerk promised to repeal all apartheid laws and negotiate a new non-racial constitution with anti-apartheid groups in order to bring reformation in South Africa. He released Mandela after 27 years of imprisonment, unbanned ANC and released its all leaders. He repealed the Separate Amenities Act, the Group Area Act and the Land Acts. On 1 Feb. 1991, he eliminated the laws of the registration of people by colour, of housing segregation and of race restrictions on land ownership. On the very next day, he addressed to the South Africa’s racially segregated Parliament that now there is neither time nor room for turning back. There is only one road and that is ahead. And on 17 June 1991, he repealed the Population Registration Act – the last of the pillars of apartheid. The apartheid became history and South Africans became free from that four decade experiment in racial separation. And in 1994 a general election took place. Nelson Mandela became the first non-white president of South Africa which marked the end of the apartheid legally; however, it continued its existence as it was deeply entrenched in the society and psyche of the white South African.

And finally, on 27 April, 1994 when multi-race elections were held, Africa surmounted “that long road to freedom” with a realization of a subtle knowledge “that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb” and one can rest only for a moment to steal that glorious victory of freedom “for with freedom come responsibilities” and that “long walk is not yet ended” (Long 751).

Conclusion:

Thus, Gandhiji, Nelson Mandela, Frantz Fanon and Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje gave a vigorous fight. They all aimed at the human rights. They renounced their comfort zones and dedicated their lives to service to men and service to Nations. After coming back from South Africa to India, Gandhiji scrutinized the juxtaposing two classes of Hindu society. His experiences in South Africa made him to understand the exploitation of the *Harijans* in India who were also discriminated from their fundamental rights. He quit his reputed job of barrister by which he could have earned good money and accepted the philosophy of simple living and high thinking. At the cost of his personal life Nelson Mandela dedicated the most precious period of his life to his black South African fellowmen and spent about 27 years in jail. Mandela, Fanon and Plaatje in South Africa and Gandhiji in India worked for the welfare of

human beings, especially for those who were completely neglected and considered as untouchables, uncivilized and savages. They adhered to the doctrine of *Ahimsa* and gave a decent fight to the prevailing social domination and governing body without weapon, without bloodshed. Their deeds have made them the *Mahatmas* of the year.

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