

Your excellency, Ambassador Jha,

(aansprekingen aanvullen)

Is Gandhi still relevant today, 150 years after his birth?

We live in a world and in a society that differs greatly from his. Isn't it naive and simplistic to believe and to think that his thought and philosophy are still applicable to today's issues, challenges and problems?

"It would be a grave error to write-off the Gandhian approach as irrelevant to our age," Sonia Gandhi once stated. I couldn't agree more.

Year after year, since my appointment as Governor in 2008, I feel delighted, honoured, humble when given the opportunity to deliver a speech at these special commemoration ceremonies, on the magnificent and inspiring person of Mahatma Gandhi, on the International Day of Non-Violence, a day that marks and honours Gandhi's commitment to and belief in non-violence.

The United Nations-website notes however that the world remembers Gandhi not just for his passionate adherence to the practice of non-violence and supreme humanism,

but as the benchmark against which we test men and women in public life, political ideas and government policies, and the hopes and wishes of our shared planet.

So, is Gandhi still relevant today? Yes. And we need a Mahatma Gandhi more than ever. Instead of losing his relevance, it only grows stronger, larger and becomes even more pertinent in the 21st Century.

But we have to understand and acknowledge that this tremendous legacy comes with an assignment, a responsibility, an effort, an appeal for you, for me, for all of us. We cannot, must not use and copy his legacy just like he left it for us.

No, we would be doing Gandhi's legacy great injustice if we do not interpret, mould and shape his message, his words, his thoughts and philosophy against the background of today's challenges, of our time and universe.

South-African activist Raymond Suttner once pointed out, comparing the great Nelson Mandela and the great Mahatma Gandhi, that "both were complex personalities, whose character could not be defined at any single moment in time, nor by any single utterance.

They were both open to a range of influences, never being complacent or arrogant about their understandings and willing to change, if necessary.”

Ladies and gentleman,

Facing the most complex, difficult and challenging transition since years, facing climate change, calls for a Gandhian person, for Gandhian leadership and understandings. Climate change calls for Gandhi’s kind of actions and strategy. Climate change, finally!, created a new sense of responsibility, a sense that reminds me of Gandhi’s words, spirit, sober lifestyle and actions.

There is a lot to learn from Gandhi when it comes to creating a more sustainable planet. Over a century ago, Gandhi already pointed out that Western consumption and production patterns would become a threat to our planet and its resources. Regrettably, his words and thoughts turned out to be visionary and prophetic.

Inspired and enthused by Gandhi, I want to underline and promote the essence of a sustainable society, based upon sober living, upon Reducing, Reusing and Recycling.

Every single person can and must contribute to a better, more sustainable world, through actions and protest, through changing consumer behaviour, through participation in sustainability initiatives. We owe that to Gandhi, to ourselves, our (grand) children, and we owe it to our planet.

At the same time, the care for our planet has to go hand in hand with the care and focus for the end of the month. Growing poverty, worldwide and also here in Belgium, in our Antwerp municipalities, asks for our attention and action. These voices remain unheard too often, their misery and powerlessness unnoticed. As Nelson Mandela, greatly inspired by Gandhi, said: "Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice".

Ladies and gentlemen,

Sobriety, sustainability, tolerance, togetherness, thoughtfulness, caregiving. These should be the core values of our ethics, our morality, our actions, with Gandhi as ultimate reference framework.

The empowering of every individual, on all levels and by all means, should be our common aim: not just for the government, but for each and one of us. People as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.

Or to say it with the rephrased words of Mr Ambassador Santosh Jha, as we discussed Gandhi during our previous meeting: no principle can be high enough, important enough to offer a human life to it.

Let us rather invest morally and globally in discourse and dialogue, in respect and responsibility. Each and every person as a partner of the other one. This implies to listen, to make constant efforts to understand, to make yourself understood.

Although not being easy or evident, it is so important to deal with the wrongs of the past in a positive way, to use it constructively to shape your and our future, despite things that might have overcome you, your people. I hope, belief and trust in the fact that this will be beneficial for all of us. And thus, one more time, is Gandhi relevant for us? Yes, he is, he definitely is, if we brave and courageous enough to follow in his footsteps, to take up leadership, to put his ideas and visions into everyday practice.