**Mahatma Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi – A Leader Years Ahead of His Time**

Speaker           : Barrister Rizwana Yusuf

Designation     : Director Administration

Affiliation         : Institute of Hazrat Mohammad SAW

Honorable Chief Guest, Distinguished Specials Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Assalamu Alaikum.

Good Afternoon.

I feel deeply honoured and humbled to be part of this glorious event to celebrate one of the greatest leaders of all time, Mahātmā Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Today we commemorate his 148th birth anniversary and International Non-Violence Day. It’s a day of immense significance and we convey our wholehearted gratitude to the Gandhi Ashram Trust for organizing this discussion.

**Mahatma Gandhi – a visionary leader years ahead of his time**

The concept of nonviolence gained special importance in the era of Mahatma Gandhi. He not only theorized on it, he adopted nonviolence as a philosophy and an ideal way of life. Mahatma Gandhi made us realize that the philosophy of nonviolence is not a tool for the weak; Rather, it is an effective weapon that can be tried by all.

**Two cardinal priniciples – Satya and Ahimsa**

So what did the Father of Non-violence exemplify? The Gandhian philosophy represents the religious and social ideas adopted and developed by Gandhi. He believed in two cardinal principles - truth and nonviolence. In his words, the principles were “Satya” and “Ahimsa” both of which are more profound than their English translation “truth” and “doing no harm or non-violence”.

**Let us begin with the children**

Gandhi was a philosopher years ahead of his time. In 1998, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously voted to proclaim the first decade of the twenty-first century, an “International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010)”. The UN made this declaration specifically for children because they are the most vulnerable individuals and most likely victims of violence of all kinds. However vulnerable they may be, children are also the leaders of our future. It is by educating and empowering children that we can sustain the culture of peace and non-violence. This fact Mahama Gandhi conceived long back when he stated , “If we are going to bring about peace in the world, we have to begin with the children”.

**"I believe in nonviolence and will take a risk here and now"**

When conflicts are not reduced or settled through negotiations or other constitutional means, it leads to violence. Violence is taken as a short cut method for resolution of conflicts. Suppressed sense of deprivation or injustice finds vent through violence and in extreme cases may lead to terrorism. It is important to dig out the root cause of any violence. Hatred is inherent in human character which is kept subdued by rationality and wisdom. When this rationality and wisdom disappear in the name of religion or ethnic superiority or a strong sense of injustice or deprivation, conflicts develop and violence sets in.

Violence engenders violence. On the other hand, non-violence does not just mean not doing violence. It is the act of taking positive action to resist oppression or bring about change.

Mahatma Gandhi believed non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all - children, young men and women or grown-up people,**provided they have a living faith in the God of Love and have therefore equal love for all mankind.** When non-violence is accepted as the law of life, it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts.

The aim of non-violent conflict is to convert your opponent; to win over their mind and heart and persuade them that your point of view is right. An important element is often to make sure that the opponent is given a face-saving way of changing their mind. Non-violent protest seeks a 'win-win' solution whenever possible.

**Leader with a timeless, global appeal**

Today we are celebrating 148th birth day of the Mahatma, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The great man with his simple living and simple principles has touched hearts not only in India but throughout the world. Famous personalities from around the globe whose lives were inspired By Mahatma Gandhi are Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela, Steve Jobs, Rabindranath Tagore, Bernard Shaw, Martin Luther King, President Barak Obama etc.

**There is no Path to Peace. Peace is the Path**

As a whole, Bangladesh is a country of peace loving people. We are a pluralistic society where Muslims, Hindus, Christians and people of other Faiths have lived side by side in harmony across many generations. People of each faith have followed their norms and rituals without fear or repression.

Now a days, when we face sporadic possibilities of intolerance within our national perimeter, we must remember Mahatma Gandhi’s words that Interfaith dialogue involves an appreciation of the differences between faiths and of how these differences complement one another.

**Non-violence is a weapon of the strong**

Needless to say, violence leads to violence whereas non-violent movements lead to expression of inner discontent in a positive way which often results in concession from the other party. A tell-tale example of nonviolent movement in the recent history of Bangladesh has been the cancellation of VAT on education. The government had contemplated stamping 7.5% VAT on university fees which would have greatly raised the cost of education in private universities. Hence the VAT proposal led to large scale protests from the students. They expressed their discontent in a range of non-violent protests from human chains, blockades, sit-ins, pictures and skits. The movement was non-violent in nature and yet gave vent to their pent up emotions of broken dreams from lack of education. Internet and digital media contributed towards publicizing their innovative protests and within the span of four days the government revoked the VAT plans.  It was wonderful to note how our young generation relived the time-honored teachings of Mahatma Gandhi through non-violent movement delivered with passion, creativity and innovation.

**"An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."**

Mahatma Gandhi’s deliberations have not been limited to the young generation only. Under the leadership of H. E. Madame Sheikh Hasina, the Government of Bangladesh has executed a profound act of Gandhism in handling the Rohinya Crisis. The Government did not close its doors to the outpouring of Rohinya refugees from Myanmar from a violent military crackdown. Rather giving way to the divine values of humanity the Bangladeshi Government gave them shelter and unleashed a series of efforts for their immediate rehabilitation. The refugees were forcibly driven out of their state through a series of cold blooded, grisly violence. On the other hand the government of Bangladesh launched a series of nonviolent movement including diplomatic efforts such as protest through diplomatic missions, pleading for much needed UN assistance, mobilizing the media and garnering international support. The Honourable Prime Minister utilized her participation at the UN General Assembly to garner attention and has met with the Islamic nations on the sidelines of the UN assembly seeking urgent humanitarian assistance from Muslim nations to cope with the influx of Rohingya . H. E. Madam Sheikh Hasina epitomized the Gandhian philosophy that firm, continued non-violent resistance is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapons of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.

**“Religion binds man to God and man to man”**

On behalf of the Institute of Hazrat Mohammad SAW, which is a research think tank committed to peace and human development, we warmly welcome this meeting to discuss and deliberate on the timeless teachings of Mahama Gandhi on truth, non-violence and inner peace.

Mahatma Gandhi was a firm believer of multicultural society, interfaith cooperation and peaceful existence of different communities. His effort to promote interfaith cooperation is evident from his eagerness to understand other faiths and support interfaith understanding and cooperation. In his statements published in Young India 1924 his views on Islam and Prophet Mohammad (SAW) are stated as follows:

*“I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today an undisputed sway over the hearts of millions of mankind… I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam in those days in the scheme of life. It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement of the Prophet the scrupulous regard for pledges, his intense devotion to his friends and followers, his intrepidity, his fearlessness, his absolute trust in God and in his own mission. These and not the sword carried everything before them and surmounted every obstacle. When I closed the second volume (of the Prophet’s biography), I was sorry there was not more for me to read of that great life.”*

Mahatma Gandhi in his book “Communal Unity” states that religion binds man to God and man to man and hence Islam binds not only Muslim to Muslim; but also Muslim to non-Muslims. The message of Prophet Mohammad SAW was not just for Muslims and if anyone claims to the contrary he does greatest disservice to Islam and is poisoning the minds of Muslims. (Gandhi, 1949, 310). In fact when he was travelling to quell Hindu-Muslim riots in Bengal, he always carried the Gita, the Quran and the Bible.

**Faith in Humanity**

As citizens of a developing country, the people of Bangladesh face daily struggles on many fronts. Nevertheless as a nation we should not lose sight of our rich cultural heritage, our youthful population poised to deliver demographic dividends and be prepared to deal with the natural calamities affecting us. Our daily struggles and natural calamities should not direct us towards the path of ignorance and violence. As Mahatma Gandhi pointed out so succinctly in the following verse:

**We must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.**