

**REPORT on Conference on:
Gandhi Community Empowerment Conference 2016: Teachings & Influence for Change**



Be the change
you wish
to see in the world. *-Gandhi*

Date: Sunday, October 23, 2016 **Time:** 2:15pm – 4:30pm

Venue: Queens College Campus, Campbell Dome

Hosted by:
Asian/American Center of Queens College

Sponsored by:
Indian Diaspora Council



Program

- Welcome & Introductions: Darrel Sukhdeo
- Remarks by Asian/American Center of Queens College: Dr. Madhulika Khandelwal
- Remarks by Indian Diaspora Council: Ashook Ramsaran
- Remarks by NYS Assemblyman David Weprin
- Officials' Representatives & Organizations' Representatives
 - Jessica Douglas (NYC Mayor's Office); Mirna Velasquez (rep US Congressman Joseph Crowley); Aliya Latif (rep NYC Comptroller Scott Stringer); Dr. Shashi Shah (president of Association of Indians in America); Richie Lipkowitz (Co-chair, Indian Jewish Council); Jhairam Persaud (president GOPIO of Upper New York); Robert Mahesh (poet and historian); Vishnu Mahadeo (president of RHEDC).
- 100th Anniv. Commemoration of Abolition of Indian Indentureship: Dr. Tyran Ramnarine
- Q/A Interactive Session: Moderated by Dr. Tyran Ramnarine
- NextGen Engagement: Darrel Sukhdeo
- Recognition of: Hon. David Weprin; Dr. Madhulika Khandelwal; Dr. Tyran Ramnarine
- Prize by Guyana One Air (Presented by Vishnu Mahadeo. Recipient Salima Kushial)
- Concluding Remarks: Darrel Sukhdeo

Moderator: Darrel Sukhdeo, Vice Pres, NextGen Outreach & Digital Media, Indian Diaspora Council

Co-sponsored by:

Indian Diaspora Council (IDC); Indian Jewish Council; American Bengali Hindu Foundation (ABHF); Holi Sannelan & Festival Committee; New York Guyana Medical & Humanitarian Mission; Federation of Hindu Mandirs, Inc. (USA); Indo-Caribbean Alliance; Indo-Caribbean Federation; Association of Artists & Writers; Interfaith Council for Comm. Development; Association of Indians in America; Guyana One Air; Travel Span; Richmond Hill Economic Development Council (RHEDC); and several others

Snacks Courtesy of: Bakewell Bakery & Restaurant Tel: 1-718-322-5600/5601

Gandhi Community Empowerment Conference 2016

The teachings and practice of non-violence by Mahatma Gandhi have had tremendous influence on the US Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's struggle and methodology for social justice and equity. It is generally known that had it not been for Gandhi's leadership, pursuit for social justice, his teachings and influence, Dr. King's civil rights crusade in the United States might have been different.

Gandhi's "satya graha" campaign eventually led to India's political freedom. In a similar manner, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to achieve significant advances in the US Civil Rights Movement for people of color. Today, we the immigrants, also enjoy the benefits of Dr. King's and the Civil Rights Movement. While discrimination and inequity still persist in many sectors of US society, these have been reduced to such an extent that opportunities have now been opened in several areas where these were previously closed.

We believe that a discourse on “Gandhi’s Influence on the US Civil Rights Movement” is a fitting birthday tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, especially at this time in our history when violence is being used indiscriminately to solve problems or to settle scores. Focus on Gandhi's teachings and philosophy will allow us to approach problems in a humane way. We also believe that our youth must become acquainted with works and philosophy of both Gandhi's and Dr. King's.

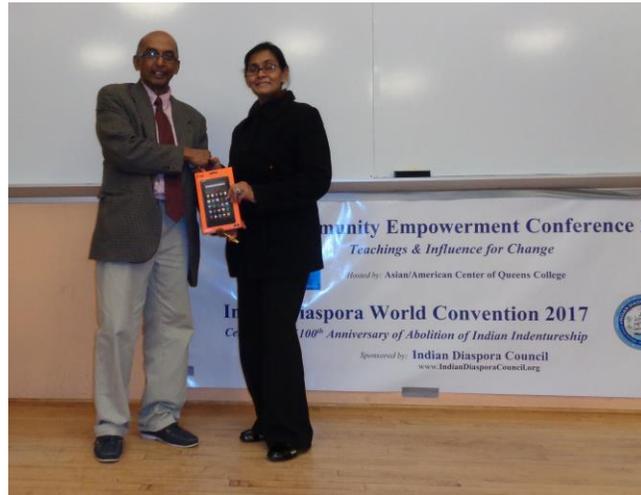
In the evolution of the non-violence movement, Indians (both free and indentured) in South Africa constituted the bulk of the protesters between 1907 (when Gandhi launched his first “satyagraha” campaign) until 1914 when he left South Africa. Gandhi provided his mentor Gokhale in the Indian Legislative Council with information on the conditions in South Africa. In 1912, Gokhale called for the complete abolition of indentureship. When this was finally achieved in 1917, Gandhi indicated that “satya graha” had “hastened the end”.

Dr. Madhulika Khandelwal: Director of Asian/American Center and Associate Professor in Urban Studies Department at Queens College, City University of New York. Taught Asian American Studies at a number of universities and has conducted research on contemporary Asian American communities. Main interests include immigrants, women, South Asian diaspora, Asian American communities, and multicultural issues. Book: *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City*. Born in India, educated in India & USA, PhD in History, Carnegie-Mellon Univ. Honored by NYC Comptroller’s Office, Queens Women’s Center, Elmhurst Hospital Center, and several community organizations.

Dr. Tyran Ramnarine: Born in Guyana, graduate of University of Guyana, University of Kansas (Fulbright Scholar), USA and University of Sussex, UK. Completed his PhD in history Univ. of Sussex, UK focusing on growth and establishment of East Indian population in Guyana (1880 to 1920). Was former history lecturer at University of Guyana, assoc. professor Washburn University, Kansas, USA; worked in adult education in NYC Department of Education. Now retired and works part time in adult education. His article “Over a Hundred Years of East Indian Disturbances on the Sugar Estates” in Guyana appears in "India in the Caribbean." Book in progress: A novel about living and surviving on a sugar estate.



Center: Jessica Douglas rep Mayor of New York



Vishnu Mahadeo presenting prize to Salima Khushal



(l-r) Jhairam Persaud, Dr. Shashi Shah, Ashook Ramsaran, NYS Assemblyman David Weprin, Dr. Tyran Ramnarine, Dr. Madhulika Khandelwal, Darrel Sukhdeo, Santram Dukhbhanjan, Dr. Tara Singh



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10007

October 23, 2016

Dear Friends:

I am delighted to welcome everyone to the Gandhi Community Empowerment Conference, hosted by the Asian/American Center at Queens College of the City University of New York.

I am proud to lead a city that values tolerance, understanding, and equality for all and recognizes just how essential our tremendous diversity is to our success. It has never been more important that we continue to work together to preserve these ideals and ensure that no New Yorker ever faces discrimination or prejudice because of their gender, cultural background, or spiritual beliefs. Founded in 1987, the Asian/American Center at Queens College exemplifies this commitment to inclusivity through its interdisciplinary cultural and educational programs about the diverse Asian diaspora and volunteer-run translation service for organizations that assist New York's immigrant populations. Today's conference will bring together students, scholars and community leaders to share knowledge and explore the enduring influence of the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, a great leader who inspired many people around the world with his humanity. As you discuss how Gandhi's values of peace, equality, and mutual understanding can help foster positive change throughout the five boroughs and beyond, I commend the Center and all those associated with this wonderful symposium for their efforts to enrich our city's academic landscape, amplify the voices of Asian New Yorkers, and keep our city moving forward.

On behalf of the City of New York, please accept my best wishes for a productive event and continued success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill de Blasio".

Bill de Blasio
Mayor



Gandhi Development Trust
P.O. Box 477, Hyper-by-the- Sea
Durban North 4053, South Africa

28th September, 2016

Ashook Ramsaran
President
Indian Diaspora Council
New York, USA

Dear Mr Ramsaran,

Ref: Gandhiji's influence on the civil rights movement

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was an ideal example of change. His life is an exciting journey of the interplay of new knowledge, experiences and change. This cycle continued through out his life. His very important legacy to posterity is of nonviolent action.

He did not approve of the word passive resistance, instead he preferred Satyagraha soul force or the force of truth. His slogan was "***the means and ends must both be just.***" He did not accept the idea of the ***end justifies the means.*** He believed that if you have truth on your side then you need have no fear.

But Satyagraha grew as a result of a number of incidents as well as his reading of various philosophers as well as various scriptures. It is a fundamental reality that Gandhiji was able to make the link between his spiritual beliefs, his political activism and his life style. There was a consonance which led to him being regarded as a Mahatma.

It was this personal commitment which attracted other leaders from all over the world to come and learn about his philosophy. Martin Luther King was strongly attracted by him and not only studied his ideas thoroughly but also put them into practice. As an academic and a priest he was able to articulate the nonviolent active-Satyagraha in clear terms and advocated the use of this method in the Civil rights movement. Many others have also since adopted nonviolent means of struggle.

Interestingly the first experiments and transformation in Gandhiji's life started in 1904 when he left a beautiful home in the heart of Durban, in a neighbourhood where lawyers and professional people lived. He had all the comforts of municipal services, easy access to facilities and a spacious home. He left this to live over 17 Km out of the City, in a small wood and iron structure with no running water, sewerage system, transportation, roads, etc, and his neighbours were Rev. Dube, Rev. Shembe, and the indentured, as well as African sugar field workers, at the Phoenix Settlement.

He said, "*There is no institution today in the world to excel Phoenix in its ideals or way of life*" Later he wrote to his son Manilal Gandhi who returned to South Africa to manage Phoenix Settlement. "*Our mission is to elevate Phoenix; for through it we can find our soul and serve our country*"

Gandhiji believed that resisting an evil system was not about over-throwing "the oppressor" but was about transforming him and also about engaging in a constructive programme to uplift the masses encouraging them to become self sufficient and rekindle their dignity. So began his journey in experimenting with agriculture, as a way to self sufficiency and living among the people. This led to him considering environmental issues of conservation, of recycling, of keeping the environment neat and sanitised so that it becomes conducive to good health. His slogan was create conditions of good health rather than spending undue funds on researching cures for ailments. He wrote,

“In spite of the large number of settlers, one could not find refuse or dirt anywhere on the Farm. All rubbish was buried in trenches sunk for the purpose. No water was permitted to be thrown on the roads. All waste water was collected in buckets and used to water the trees. Leavings of food and vegetable refuse were utilized as manure.” P. 240 Satyagraha in South Africa –by M.K. Gandhi referring to Tolstoy Farm

Today 112 years later the world is concerned about environmental issues. He also picked up that the education, children received from the government controlled schools was oppressive and did not help to free the children. The mind of the individual was an important contested territory and for as long as the oppressor was able to control the minds they would be able to continue oppressing. So Gandhiji believed that the mind had to be freed.

Significantly in April 1895 Gandhiji visited the Mariannhill monastery near Pinetown which was started by a Trappist, Father Francis Pfanner. He was impressed by this little settlement of 120 monks, 60 nuns and 1200 learners, all living together and respecting each other. Writing for the London Vegetarian he described his visit :

"My companions and I walked to Marian Hill ... It is a very pleasant walk through the little hills all covered with green grass. One of the brotherhood came up and bowed very low. We were offered tamarind water and pineapples. After having refreshed ourselves, we accompanied the guide to the various places he took us to. The buildings were all substantial red-brick buildings. All was quiet. The Settlement is a quiet little model village....The principle of liberty equality and fraternity is carried out in its entirety. Every man is a brother, every woman a sister. ...

None may keep money for private use. All are equally rich or poor ... A better instance of undying faith and perfect, implicit obedience could not well be found anywhere else. If their repast is the simplest possible, their dining tables and bedrooms are no less so.

They believe in no colour distinction. ...I know from personal experience that a visit to the farm is worth a voyage from London to Natal." (F. Meer(ed.), The South African Gandhi, pp. 871-4) The original article is preserved by the Nuns at the Marrianhill Monastery.

At Phoenix Settlement in 1904 he decided on a simple life such as the one he had observed at Marrianhill. Mr West who was one of the founding Settlers describes the development, " An acre of ground was allotted to each settler and a block of rooms for single workers was erected near the press. The settlers chose their plots and had their buildings erected according to their requirements. Among the first settlers were four who had the flat-roof style of house.... Sleeping out on top was quite a success, within limitations. When it came on to rain during the night we had to reluctantly pick up our blankets and retire below..... There was much in this life in open country that was attractive. We enjoyed friendly relations with Africans living in the surrounding hillsides and with passersby to and from the station who would frequently call for a drink from our rainwater tank or to buy a pineapple or paw-paw from the garden. They were happy people."

So we see from these experiences Gandhiji learnt and then he did not just admire but he began to emulate and changed his lifestyle. That journey of learn see and change was a crucial feature of his life style.

Gandhiji's nonviolent action however was linked to his constructive programme in the communities, this happened both in south Africa as well as in India. The Settlements enabled families of people who went to prison to come and live in these Settlements where they would have companionship as well as their basic needs of food, shelter health care and education would be met. Gandhiji maintained that violence destroyed while nonviolence helped to build and heal. Martin Luther King who led the Civil rights movement was himself deeply religious and could identify with Gandhiji and his ideas. He and many others after him followed the path of nonviolent action because they believed that nonviolence was the only way in which the ideals that they stood for can be attained. He said, "History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals who pursued this self-defeating path of hate." 202

On the other end nonviolent action is about building trust, love responsibility and a will to transform society rather than to destroy. They stand for something not against a person or institution. Gandhiji asserted and so did Martin Luther King who said,

"Fanon and those who quote his words are seeking "to work out new concepts" and "set afoot a new man" with a willingness to imitate old concepts of violence. Is there not a basic contradiction here? Violence has been the inseparable twin of materialism, the hallmark of its grandeur and misery. This is the one thing about modern civilization that I do not care to imitate." 68

Going on to describe what should be done he said, *"We must be hammers shaping a new society rather than anvils molded by the old.- 68*

These are all concepts articulated by Gandhiji in his call for a new education system, a new world view where equality and friendship were the key essentials and these are molded in a universal climate of love.

Gandhiji and Martin Luther King drew their philosophies from the scriptures and from a deep understanding of all the religions of the world. Martin Luther King said,

“This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighbourly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men.” - 201

When I speak of love I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Budhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the First Epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another: for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love... If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.-201
So we see the parallel between the Gandhian Satyagraha and the Civil rights movement in USA.

Finally I would be remiss if I did not touch on the sensitive topic of the recent moves to discredit Gandhiji and to say that he was a racist and wanted to perpetuate the caste system. There are many converse arguments but it is a waste of time engaging in them.

A result of these criticisms ironically has been exactly as Gandhiji predicted, criticise the man and abandon all that he said- that is the easy root to follow. He asserted that criticisms will always be there about any human being. We are human and therefore we are not perfect. But that does not mean that nonviolence is also imperfect, that love, respect, responsibility and compassion are all imperfect and should be discarded.

Similarly ideas, philosophies and movements are all evolved and built from various sources. We are learning all the time. My grandchild teaches me how to problem solve using my computer. Is that belittling me? So if we say that the civil rights movement was influenced by Gandhiji does that make the Civil rights movement less powerful or unattractive to the people? These are flawed arguments. What is important is to engage in understanding how humanity can live together and how we can help stop the disastrous effects of hatred war violence and inequalities. Let the debate about ideas go on and let us stop debates about personalities and personality assassination simply because it is the lowest form of debate.

Ela Gandhi

Durban, South Africa

Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, is a peace activist and was a Member of Parliament in South Africa from 1994 to 2004, where she aligned with the African National Congress party representing the Phoenix area of [Inanda](#) in the [KwaZulu-Natal](#) province. Her parliamentary committee assignments included the Welfare, and Public Enterprises committees as well as the ad hoc committee on Surrogate Motherhood. She was an alternate member of the Justice Committee and served on Theme Committee 5 on Judiciary and Legal Systems. After serving in parliament, Gandhi developed a 24-hour program against [domestic violence](#), founded the Gandhi Development Trust, serves as a member of the Religious Affairs Committee, and oversees a monthly newspaper. She also chairs the Mahatma Gandhi Salt March Committee and the Mahatma Gandhi Development Trust. Ela Gandhi served as the Chancellor of Durban University of Technology for several years. In 2014, she was awarded the [Pravasi Bharatiya Samman](#), the highest honour for overseas Indians conferred by the President of India.



Indian Diaspora World Convention 2017

Celebration of 100th Anniversary of Abolition of Indian Indentureship

Shared heritage, aspirations and interests

www.IndianDiasporaCouncil.org

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Dates: March 17 – 20, 2017

Venue: Trinidad & Tobago

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