

2 October 1993

"DIE BURGER"

Saturday 2 October - Forum - Interviewed by Leopold Scholtz

MAHATMA GANDHI'S NON-VIOLENT POLITICS RELEVANT TO SOUTH AFRICA

Rajmohan Gandhi, Research Professor at the Centre for Policy Research in Chanakyapuri, India, is here on his first visit to South Africa. He wants to retrace the Mahatma Gandhi's time here when he, as an activist and lawyer, fought for the rights of the Indian minority in Natal and Transvaal (1913 - 1914).

He wishes to observe, at first hand, "the changing scene in South Africa." His knowledge of South Africa and clarity is impressive.

"There is hope, as well as anxiety and fear. There is also a search for new thinking and constructive planning. Whatever the existing problems, each group needs to accept the others' roots and identity. If you ignore these roots, you lay down a foundation for an inevitable struggle of neighbour against neighbour. The pertinent question is: can you divide your love of your own from hatred for the others? The tragedy is that people define their identity in terms of their fear and hatred of the others. Then the gun in the hand becomes an accepted norm and this is not a basis for peace. In this context he refers to the Dalai Lama, who fights for the rights of his people without arousing hatred in them against the Chinese.

Does he see a parallel in South Africa, with the AWB and APLA (AWB= extreme right-wing whites; APLA = extreme left-wing black). He agreed that there is no doubt about this.

He refers to his grandfather's principles of non-violence. Violence puts power into the hands of those who have weapons. India, despite ethnic divisions, remains a democracy, because of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent struggle. If the struggle had been violent, we would have had a dictatorship.

I am aware that the ANC has a militant wing. On this I am not prepared to say that South Africa is on its way to be ruled by a dictatorship. There is in the ANC, a willingness to accept all South Africans with their different identities and to renounce violence. There are good prospects for peace.

Where power is attained by violence, however justifiable the reasons, ideals tend to disappear. Violent movements are then inevitable.

On the question of democracy he said, "To grant absolute power to an elected Parliament would undoubtedly be a mistake because you have to satisfy and address the fears and hopes of diverse groups. Democracy must be structured in such a way that the security of all is assured. So a dictatorship of the majority would inevitably harm the majority.

Constitutional checks and balances cannot replace trust. I see a certain measure of trust but not enough because there is too much emphasis on illustrating how untrustworthy the other party is. The best constitutional checks and balances are worthless where there is no trust.

How can this be overcome? "By looking inwards and reaching out. Speak the truth, even the bitter truth, to your own people. Always try to see the problem from the point of view of your opponent.

The ordinary person needs a moral perception as a safeguard against the designs of divisive politicians who prey on anger and resentments in order to gain power.

What does he think of the failure of Socialism in India?

In India and elsewhere, state-owned industries have failed. A bureaucrat is not a businessman. The socialistic economy has not worked.

A free market will not create jobs for everyone overnight. The need is for an economic approach which will give the individual the opportunity to reach full potential. Merely saying that the free market is better than socialism will not work.

He refers to affirmative action in India. India's affirmative action. It certainly helped those on the lowest level of the social scale because opportunities had been denied to them. Elsewhere it caused great problems. People of high caste and talents were excluded from university and certain jobs because of the quota system. Now these people feel discriminated against for injustices which they have not committed. It remains a fact that affirmative action has caused bitterness in India. Affirmative action must go hand in hand with dialogue between parties.

We must look beyond affirmative action, because it can only benefit a limited number of people. The focus should be on the creation of new jobs through economic growth of black and white alike. Tension will be inevitable if only a few new jobs are created in the civil services and universities as a result of affirmative action.

What would his grandfather's message be for South Africa today?

He smiled and said: "If Mahatma Gandhi was alive today he would say to South Africa. "When I was in South Africa, I fought for the rights of the Indians. Now I want to fight for the rights of every South African. I want to see a South Africa which can be a model of partnership for the rest of Africa and for the rest of the world."