Reconstruction of society on spiritual foundation is our mission

Natwar Thakkar

Given below is the English translation of the inaugural speech in Hindi delivered at the 40th Sarvodaya Sammelan at Ahmednagar held from the 24th to the 26th of May this year.

Sarvodaya Samaj came into being soon after the death of Mahatma Gandhi. The idea of loose fraternity and naming it as Sarvodaya Samaj was conceived by late Gandhian stalwart, Acharya Vinoba Bhave and was elaborately discussed at an Assembly of the Associates of Gandhi that was held at Sevagram from March 13 to 15, 1948.

Sarvodaya Samaj is designed to be a loose fraternity of those who believe in the Gandhian values of Truth and Non-violence. It is non-political and it has no executive body. It is expected to assemble once in a year where main issues faced by the country and the world are to be deliberated upon. Similarly, the participants at the Sammelan are expected to exchange their experiences of working for the well being of the society.

The convening of the Sammelan and the responsibility of making necessary arrangements are entrusted to a convener who holds office for a limited number of years only.

It is a unique body wedded to building society on the foundation of Truth and Non-violence as practised by Mahatma Gandhi during his life’s mission. We are publishing some material on the idea of Sarvodaya Samaj elsewhere in this issue. It consists of the views of Gandhian stalwarts who were closely associated with Gandhiji and were also connected with the creation of Sarvodaya Samaj.

— Editor

Esteemed Chairperson, Dr. Lavanam, distinguished invitees on the dais and friends! I deem it a great privilege to stand before this august assembly of Sarvodaya workers to deliver my inaugural address. When I received the telephone call from Rahiji nearly a month back I found myself faced with a dilemma. I was not sure if I should accept the invitation. I felt I did not deserve this honor but at the same time I found that if I accept the invitation I would have the great opportunity to be in fellowship with the like-minded pilgrims of Sarvodaya path after a very long interval. It will also enable me to share my thoughts with this fellowship. I finally yielded to the affectionate invitation from Rahiji, the Convener of the Samaj and here I am before you with all humility but also with a sense of happiness to be blessed with the Darshan of Sarvodaya Sevaks from all over the country.

I also have a sentimental attachment with the Sarvodaya Sammelan. I can say that my life long association with the Gandhian fraternity began at the Sammelan that was held 54 years back in 1951 at Sivarampally near Hyderabad. It was here that I had a glimpse of many Gandhian stalwarts of the day. I was there on the advice of veteran Khadi and Nai Talim worker of Gujarat, late Dilkushbhai Diwanji. I had approached him for guidance to get trained as a Gandhian social worker. He advised that the best way to get trained was to join a senior person and stay and work with him on GuruKul pattern. He also gave me a bunch of introductory letter addressed to a number of elders. I met all of them and finally requested late Acharya Kakasaheb Kalelkar to accept me as his student inmate. He was kind enough to accept my request and I joined him a few months later.

My experience at that Sammelan was highly inspiring and enlightening. I instinctively felt that I had reached the right destination! Unknowingly my membership of this noble and blessed Gandhian brotherhood is 54 years old now! I thank Almighty for enabling me to avail of this blessed association. It was at Sivarampally Sammelan that I had the first ever glimpse of Poojya Vinobaji. There were other venerable elders there such as Professor J.C.Kumarappa, Jaju ji,
Professor Shrimannarayan, Dada Dharmadhikari and Vimala Bahan Thakkar. I had the good fortune of briefly interacting with each of them, thanks to the introductory letters from late Dilkushbhai. The memory of these meetings and the entire experience of participating in that Sammelan is a precious treasure of my life. My resolve to devote my life to the cause of national service on Gandhian lines had brought me to Sivarampally. My participation there further strengthened this resolve.

### MAHATMA GANDHI ON SPIRITUAL VALUES

Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can be done only by service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity.

My countrymen are my nearest neighbours. They have become so helpless, so resourceless, so inert that I must concentrate myself on serving them. If I could persuade myself that I could find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity.

My God is myriad-formed and, while sometimes I see Him in the spinning wheel, at other times I see Him in communal unity; then again in the removal of untouchability and that is how I establish communion with Him according as the spirit moves me.

M.K. Gandhi

Source: “The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi” (1967)

I remained as a member of Kakasaheb entourage as a student inmate for four years. This grooming under him was the best gain of my life. It is noteworthy that I joined Kakasaheb during a difficult period of our recent history. Our freedom from foreign domination was just four years old. One of the themes on which Kakasaheb generally spoke during those days was about our large frontiers with neighboring nations and the need to make them secure. He used to say that borders cannot be made secure with the help of army alone. The people dwelling on the frontiers only can be the best guardians of the borderland. There was the need to integrate them emotionally with the rest of the country through Gandhian means of rendering selfless service. He used to appeal that the young volunteers should come forward to dedicate their lives to this cause. I felt attracted to this mission and volunteered to work in a border area.

I proposed to settle in Himachal Pradesh and start working there. On learning about such a move, late L.M. Shrikant suggested that I should go to Assam and work in Naga Hills district, the home of the Nagas. He was then a vice president of the Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangha (BAJSS) and offered all support by the Sangha to start the work. Shri Shrikant was also the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes at the national level then.

An agitation demanding sovereign status for the Nagas had already started and their district was considered to be disturbed. That did not deter me. In fact my youthful spirit liked the idea of working in such an atmosphere. One regret that I had harbored in my heart was that I could not play any significant role in India’s struggle for freedom. But I felt that by working for the Nagas I play a role in promoting emotional integration.

I went to the Naga Hills when I was 23 years old. Time really runs fast and I am now 73 years old! The life in Nagaland was really tough. Apart from the physical hardships of working in an undeveloped hilly terrain lacking in all amenities, I had to survive in a socio-politically hostile climate. My fate was identical to that of a person who had to construct his dwelling hut during a stormy climate and manage to see that it does not get blown away! Holding tight to that hut and keeping it functional was the most important preoccupation. Thank God! It is still standing, however incomplete and inadequate it may be! This is perhaps my major achievement!

There are other aspects of my life and work in Nagaland that I would like to share, but let me do so later in course of this speech.
**Sarvodaya Samaj**

One of the most important developments in the sphere of Gandhian world, to my mind, is the emergence of Sarvodaya Samaj, which took place after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. One qualification that is required to be its member is to have faith in the principles of Truth and Non-Violence. We are aware how Sarvodaya Samaj, conceived and presented by Vinobaji, came into being. It is one of his best gifts to all who want to change the society. As I understand Gandhi, he aimed at developing the society on spiritual foundation. Mahatma Gandhi was the first world teacher who held that even a sphere like politics must be governed by spiritual values. Spiritualising all aspects of human existence was his main concern. Nothing was more important to him than this objective. The Sarvodaya Samaj is the fraternity of individuals who have accepted the validity of this objective and who voluntarily share Gandhi’s passion on this account. It is a fraternity with a future. This fraternity, at present, seems to have shrunk in size. Let us apply our heart and mind to see that we multiply the number of Sarvodaya adherents manifold.

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**OUTLINE OF SARVODAYA**

The villages of India must become self-supporting and they must be saved from fluctuations as much as possible. They must manufacture the finished goods which they require, in their own villages if the requisite raw material for them is produced locally. Machines should belong to society at large. There should be no intervening agency between production and ultimate distribution. A society based on Ahimsa cannot function through intermediate agencies. To bring about such a society village industries should thrive. All should get food and all must work. The economy of the nation should be planned on the lines of a joint family. If the Charkha can provide employment to all it should be used. If you cannot plan for the whole nation but have to discriminate, posing myself as a Communist, I say, in that case, you should discriminate in favour of the poor in making your plan. This is my outline of Sarvodaya in brief.

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Vinoba

(Collection of Gandhiji’s writings on the subject; edited by Dr. Bharatan Kumarappa) Published by Navajivan Publication house, Ahmedabad.

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One item of Gandhian Constructive program to which we did not pay adequate attention is the item of communal harmony. In fact, Gandhiji sacrificed his life in upholding his belief in Hindu-Muslim unity. The horrible developments that took place in Gujarat in the wake of the burning of a rail compartment near Godhra are an eye opener. It happened in spite of the existence of Sarvodaya Samaj and the entire Gandhian fraternity. It also reminds us that we have to strive hard to eliminate religious fanaticism. This fanaticism is also a threat to the entire world. The cruel attack on the World Trade Centre in New York has shocked the mankind. Various other acts of violence in the name of religion have taken place in other parts of the world also. Religious fanaticism is one of the major threats before the humanity. We of the Sarvodaya fraternity cannot remain silent spectators to the doings of Communal and Fascist forces in India. We must plan a vigorous drive and carry it on in all parts of the country. This can be our major preoccupation till we drive away communalism from all parts of the country.

Mahatma Gandhi gave us the slogan of **Sarva Dharma Samabhav** (cultivate equal respect for all religions). My mentor, Kakasaheb Kalelkar, asked us to proceed further and cultivate **Sarva Dharma Mamabhava** (accept all religions as ‘my own religions’). Vinobaji made a monumental contribution in drawing out the essence of different religions and compiling them into valuable books. I am also reminded here of his prophetic utterance to the effect that ‘the days of politics and religion are over. The future belongs to science and spirituality’. With advance of science and technology and opening of the frontiers of knowledge of all kinds, organized religions have outlived their utility. The mankind will have to learn to absorb good things in all religions. This vision is our heritage, the Gandhian heritage. We in the Sarvodaya fraternity must carry this message to every home and every heart.
Working in Nagaland and the significance of Gandhi.

Let me turn back to my Nagaland experiences. They helped me to understand Gandhi more clearly. Within a few weeks of my reaching Nagaland I noticed a very interesting system in existence. Even as late as 1955, all villages were self-sufficient in all the primary needs of life i.e. food, clothing and shelter. Each village produced enough food for every member; each household had a portable loom where the housewife wove the cloth for the family. All the building materials, which mainly consisted of bamboo, thatch and jungle timber, were also procured from within the outskirts of the village. Hence they were fully self-supporting. In view of the tradition of inter-village head hunting raids, the villages are built on hilltops and they used to be strongly fortified. The village functioned as a kind of commune. My reaction was that this is the kind of self-reliant and self-governing village republic of which references are there in some of the writings of Gandhi. But when I thought about human characteristics I noticed that this system did not in any way make them into human beings nobler than others. I searched for an answer.

A Gandhi mela was organized near Jorhat in Assam where late Dhirenbhai Mazumdar had come as the chief guest. I discussed with him my dilemma about Naga villages. His answer satisfied me. He said that the structure was there, but human or spiritual values were lacking! Hence these self-reliant villages were different in spirit from the Gandhian vision.

I gained further light when I discussed the structure of Naga villages with the friends from the academic world. I learnt that the system similar to Naga villages exists in other parts of the world and it is known in technical terms as Primitive Communism. This made me think about the modern Communism as it was being experimented in Soviet Russia. There are identical aspects in both kinds. From my point of view both lacked the base of spiritual values. Within my lifetime one could see the collapse of the most important experiment of Modern communism. There was concentration of power in the state and it lacked the spiritual foundation. I cannot explain, but my instinct says that the latest move of promoting market economy all over the world will also collapse as it too lacks the base of human and spiritual values.

My understanding of Gandhi

I am in the habit of quoting two anecdotes whenever I speak on Gandhi. The first relates to venerated late Kripalani ji. He met Gandhiji for the first time in 1915 at Shantiniketan, which was soon after Gandhiji returned from South Africa for good. They together discussed many things, including non-violence. At one stage Kripalani ji stated that he did not believe in non-violence. To this Gandhiji replied that ‘History’ had not written its last word yet! We now know how correct Gandhiji was in his response. Gandhi did write a new and unique chapter in human history.

The second apt anecdote I recall is the landing of man on the moon. On landing on the moon and stepping out of his spacecraft, the first words Astronaut Neil Armstrong uttered were: ‘One step for an individual, a gigantic leap for the mankind.’ We can similarly say about life and work of Mahatma Gandhi: One life time of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and the entire humanity took a gigantic leap and climbed higher on the ladder of human civilization. This leap was a leap in the sphere of human civilization. In no way less important than any achievements in the material sphere

In my younger days we were still ruled by the British. We were taught in schools: “The Sun never sets on the British empire”. Their empire was vast and spread over in many parts of the world and hence the sun was always visible in one part or the other. Such an empire was made to abdicate power willingly through the impact of Non-violence. It was an extraordinary parting where there was no victor and no vanquished. The Mahatma was able to make violence outdated.

Let me now return to the education I derived through my work in Nagaland and how I could understand Gandhi better. I have already stated that I was just 23 when I reached Nagaland. That land is my adopted home. I have spent my entire life there in the climate of ongoing violence. This climate has taught how life gets distorted and causes deep injury to human sentiments and values.
I see that those who take to arms cannot do real good to the people. Violence may create illusion of having achieved something, but in reality it creates new problems in its wake. The characteristics of leadership also suffer from distortions. We have armed groups in parts of the Northeast other than Nagaland and the experience there is also no different. Having witnessed these experiences my conviction about adherence to spiritual values of life for healthy progress of human society has become stronger. In other words my faith in Gandhi and Gandhian path has become stronger.

**Gandhian Fraternity today**

In post Gandhi era the Gandhian fraternity took many strides. Creation of Sarvodaya Samaj was one major achievement. But most impressive was the Bhoodan and Gramdan movement. There were other developments too. Khadi institutions and Gandhian Ashrams in various states also continued their commendable work. The attendance at Sarvodaya Sammelans also used to be much larger than it is today. Our size appears to be shrinking. We must carefully and patiently examine this situation and plan improvements. I would like to share my thoughts with you on this aspect.

Most of our institutions engaged in different activities of ‘constructive programme’ as Gandhiji charted it out during our freedom struggle appear to be growing weaker. Some are closed down. We must apply our mind and find solutions. It is these institutions, which are the media for mass contact. The need is to promote voluntarism to higher degree and create more voluntary organizations of the Gandhian stream.

A unique gift of Gandhi to the nation was Khadi and Khadi institutions which have highly commendable achievements to their credit. But Khadi appears to be passing through a crisis. What has happened is that we have grown wholly dependent on Government support. The time has come to take away Khadi from Government fold.

In post independent India Khadi production increased to a higher level. The sales too increased. This also enabled to provide relief to a chunk of population below poverty line and provided supplementary employment. The tendency grew to produce Khadi for market. But that was not the purpose of Khadi. Gandhiji during his later days emphasized on self-support in villages in its requirement for clothing. Let us now exhort Khadi institutions to aim at achieving 20 to 30 percent of self-support in their requirement of clothing. They can gradually increase the quantum.

In order to develop society on the foundation of Truth and Non-violence we have to aim at decentralization of power and wealth. Our villages have to become as self-reliant in all respects as the Naga villages were, but with spiritual foundation. Khadi was visualized to be a potent medium for such an achievement. Our fraternity must take up this programme of decentralization and self-sufficiency of villages in right earnest and recruit young volunteers to join such a campaign.

Out of all the Gandhian organizations today an organization, which is spread out mostly in villages and is functioning in most of the states is Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (KGNMNT). It is learnt that it has 600 centers all over the country out of which 400 are more active. It will be prudent to request the Trust to take a decision to implement a program of Vastra-Swavalamban (self-reliance in cloth requirement) in all the 400 centers. Such a campaign can be treated as collective responsibility of the entire Gandhian fraternity and all should join hands in providing all kinds of facilitation to the Trust. If we take up such a program earnestly, it has the potential of generating enthusiasm as well as opening the right direction for us to follow.

**Achyutrao Patawardhan Birth Centenary.**

I am nearing the conclusion of my speech, but before I take leave I would like to pay my tribute to late Achyutrao Patawardhan, whose birth centenary conclusion program is synchronized with the 40th Sarvodaya Sammelan at Ahmednagar. I feel doubly blessed to get an opportunity today to pay my tribute to late Achyutrao ji. The names of Achyutrao, Jaiprakash Narayan, Ashok Mehta, Yusuf Meherali, Lohiaji, Usha Mehta and Aruna Asafali were a source of our inspiration in our
younger days. They were our heroes. Achyutraoji was a truly great patriot and one deeply concerned for the betterment of the lot of the downtrodden. As we all know he was wholly preoccupied in his later days with the pursuit of spiritual Sadhana. I am glad I got the opportunity to spend 3 days at Ahmednagar, the birthplace of Achyutraoji. I once again pay my respects to his hallowed memory.

I salute all of you present today and express my sincere thanks for giving me the opportunity to share my thought on a theme to which all of us are committed. I must once again thank the convener of Sarvodaya Samaj for his kind invitation.

Jai Jagat!