

Gandhi in the changing world

by Peter Rühle

Why do we live in a *changing world*? What has definitely not changed is the nature of man: He / She was always full of hate, attachment, compassion, love and lust. Man always wanted to rule over others, had therefore fought numerous battles and wars. The weapons used in earlier days were comparatively simple: axes, fists, knives, spears and later on guns, rifles and bombs. What is different today is the power of our nuclear, biological and chemical weapons which have a destructive potential above all imagination. What has also not changed over the centuries is man's desire to kill animals, to fell trees as well as the tendency to make mistakes. What is different today is that the mistakes we are making are not correctable anymore: 1) Several animal races are extinguished from mother earth forever. 2) Widespread deforestation in the Himalaya region, in the Amazonas rainforests and elsewhere lead to a global climate change, supported by a damaged ozone layer of tremendous - still growing - size. 3) Pollution of the environment in general, especially the nuclear pollution, become health hazards of unknown dimension all over.

What else makes these days different to earlier decades? For many years 20% of the world population consumed 80% of the world's energy resources. Due to two factors this situation has changed: The awareness programmes in the Western world for consuming lesser energy plus drastic price hikes have led to a lesser growth of consumption in private households as well as in industries. Many people turn to a simpler way of life, i.e. they use bicycles instead of cars, they share households or do organic farming. This further leads to an active care for the protection of environment, human rights, resistance of war service (conscientious objection) and informal education programmes, like free schools etc. In these days knowingly or unknowingly a good number of people turn Gandhians in the Western world. Over 30 institutions outside India carry Gandhi's name and propagate his life and work as well as his ethics of non-violence. Altogether a few hundred institutions outside India work in Gandhi's spirit for a more humane, liveable and peaceful world. At the same time the above mentioned 80% of the world population, which belong to developing countries, adopt fast the same craze for consumerism which is predominant in the industrialised countries. One need not be a prophet in order to realise how soon the conservative energy resources will be finished.

The situation in general can be described by the words of the great black American social reformer and fighter for human rights and social justice, the late Dr. Martin Luther King jr., who himself found much inspiration and encouragement by the study of Gandhi's life and work. He said: "There is no choice between violence or non-violence. The only choice we have is between non-violence and perish." A turn towards a non-violent, peaceful life in harmony with man, nature and God is the need of the hour. An increasing number of individuals and institutions all over the world are implementing Gandhi's spirit, his constructive programme for human rights, protection of environment, decentralised industries and a more meaningful life by serving the poor, in their respective countries. Though the destructive powers, such as centralised industries and the multinationals, are still mightier, a considerable and growing counter movement against consumerism and destruction of mother earth - led by Gandhian ideals - can be observed.

Therefore Gandhi's thoughts are highly relevant in the *changing world* and a thorough study of his life and work - according to his saying *My life is my message* - is more important than ever before. Gandhians are not *survivors of the good, old days* but they are the avantgarde of the future society!

“The world of tomorrow will be, must be, a society based on non-violence. That is the first law; out of it all other blessings will flow. It may seem a distant goal, an impractical Utopia. But it is not in the least unobtainable, since it can be worked for here and now. An individual can adopt the way of life of the future - the non-violent way - without having to wait for others to do so. And if an individual can do it, cannot whole groups of individuals? Whole nations? Men often hesitate to make a beginning because they feel that the objective cannot be achieved in its entirety. This attitude of mind is precisely our greatest obstacle to progress - an obstacle that each man, if he only will it, can clear away.”

- Mahatma Gandhi
Harijan, 10 February 1946