

“Gandhian Philosophy and Practice; Relevance for Contemporary Sri Lanka”

Mahathma Gandhi Oration – 2022

Delivered by Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne

on 5th October, 2022

held at the Bandaranaike Center for International Studies Auditorium, Colombo

Organized by the Sri Lanka – India Society in Collaboration with the Swami Vevekananda Cultural Center, High Commission of India in Colombo,

and the Bandaranaike Center for International Studies

His Excellency Gopal Baglay, High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka, Mr. Kishor Reddy, Chairman of Sri Lanka – India Society and the Board Members, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, Founder and Emeritus President of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka, Dear Elders, Brothers and Sisters.

I am grateful to the Sri Lanka India Society for inviting me to deliver this year’s Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Oration and I consider it a great privilege and an honour.

At the outset let me mention that I am not a scholar of Gandhian philosophy, nor am I an expert on some of the key Gandhian discourses such as spirituality, non-violence, civil disobedience, governance, and politics. My own understanding of Gandhian philosophy and practice is derived from my lifelong association with the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka. I grew up in a home which was filled with books, pamphlets, photos, and printed posters with quotes from Mahatma Gandhi. In 1969, when the Gandhi Centenary was celebrated (*and I was only 7 years old!*), I vividly remember how it was celebrated with my father Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, Founder of the Sarvodaya Movement, with his band of volunteers, organizing commemorations in various parts of the country.

There was this “Exhibition Box” which was donated by the Indian High Commission if I am not mistaken, which contained a full pictorial depiction of Mahatma Gandhi’s life. I was so fascinated when Sarvodaya teams were carrying this “Magic Box” to a Hall and set up a full exhibition to be viewed by hundreds of people including school children.

The interaction with Gandhian philosophy and teachings were very intense during the first two decades of our lives as a family, this is particularly true for myself and my elder sister Charika (*who is in the audience and who delivered the very same Oration nearly a decade ago*). Some of the basic principles such as Truth, Non-violence, and Self-Denial I suppose became ingrained in our personalities in those formative years of our lives.

The next two decades (*up until early 40s of my life*), due to my involvement with higher studies and practicing a profession seemingly distanced from Gandhian thinking (*which was proven wrong subsequently, and I am going to touch on this very subject later in my speech*), my association with Gandhian philosophy at an intellectual or a practical level was minimal.

However, during the last two decades of my life, I returned to a much closer association with the principles and practice of Gandhi as I had by then taken up a fulltime position in the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.

One of the most memorable events of my life had been attending the main celebration of 'Hundred Years of Satyagraha' held in New Delhi in January 2007. There I had the good fortune of listening to world leaders who related their work to the teachings of Gandhi and meeting in-person champions of non-violence such as Bishop Desmond Tutu and Kenneth Kaunda.

In my reflection on the topic today "Gandhian principles and practice; Relevance for contemporary Sri Lanka", I will dwell on this theme in three parts.

Firstly, I will explore the relevance of core philosophies of Gandhian principles and practice in relation to the current situation in Sri Lanka. Secondly, I will wish to present to you how these principles have been put into practice in Sri Lanka giving some specific examples from the Sarvodaya experience. I will then discuss and explore the possible future directions that the country can take deriving inspiration from the Gandhian principles and practice.

Relevance of Gandhian principles and practice would have been the topic for all times and seasons. Yet I chose to reflect on this theme for an important reason. We are at a pivotal point in our country's history. We are faced with an unprecedented crisis. We see no clear sign understanding on how and over what period we are going to overcome this crisis.

Yet, at the same time, during this very same crisis period, we have witnessed the most unprecedented and an overwhelmingly non-violent people's uprising led by the youth of this country. We are meeting here today just a few months after this mass protest Movement what was known as the *Aragalaya*, or uprising/struggle.

This type of non-violent resistance is at the core of Gandhian principles, and the current crisis offers us a new space and opportunity to reflect deeply on what we can learn from that experience and plan our way forward as a Nation.

In my talk, I take the liberty to only select a few of the Gandhian principles and practice that I firmly believe as most relevant to the Sri Lankan context in finding solutions to the present crisis. I am trying to see in which way we can get benefited from the life and vision of Mahathma Gandhi. I do not intend to suggest Gandhian solutions to macro problems in this country. I leave it to the politicians and those who are competent in the subject to deal with it. I am confining my talk only to the extent as to how we as people of Sri Lanka can adopt certain principles and practices he demonstrated to overcome this crisis and build a new Sri Lanka.

Current Situation in Sri Lanka

When one explores the relevance of Gandhian philosophy and practice for contemporary Sri Lanka, we need to first analyze the challenges that we face as a Nation today. There will be differences of opinion on the kinds of challenges the country faces, their scale, magnitude

and impact, depending on one's own professional affiliation or more often the political view one holds.

However, no one can deny the fact that we are in a deep crisis and it undoubtedly is the worst economic crisis that Sri Lanka had to face since Independence. Today, we are officially a bankrupt nation.

What we face today is a multidimensional crisis – meaning, it's a social, economic and a political crisis.

If we look at the past 5 year period, we can analyze the country's situation in 3 different phase – the pre-covid-19 period, the 2 years of COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021) and the present economic crisis period starting early this year, 2022. If we look at the pre-COVID-19 period, our social and health indicators were satisfactory but there were significant disparities between districts and population groups. Also, importantly, the status of nutrition particularly amongst children and pregnant mothers hasn't been satisfactory.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) conducted in 2016, the Percentage of under five children who were under-weight (weight-for-age) was 20.5%, percentage of children with wasting (indicating acute malnutrition) (weight-for-height) was 15.1% those the percentage of children who were stunted (indicating chronic malnutrition) (height-for-age) was 17.3%.

If one looks at the levels of poverty, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2019 (HIES) indicate that an estimated 14.3% of the population of Sri Lanka or over 3 million people live below the poverty line. Here again there were significant disparities observed between districts.

This social and economic crisis is having a disproportionate and disastrous impact on the most vulnerable and the marginalized populations in the country. There itself lies the first relevance to Gandhian thinking and practice. Mahatma Gandhi's life work has been focused on the most downtrodden and the deprived communities of Colonial India. How do we protect the poor in a crisis of this magnitude?

So one can imagine the catastrophic impact COVID-19 would have had on this segment of our population which is exacerbated by the present crisis.

Let's examine the current situation a little closely.

- Sri Lanka is facing a **multidimensional crisis** compounded by food insecurity, threatened livelihoods, shortages of vital and essential medicines, and rising protection concerns for children, women and other socially vulnerable groups.
- Despite ongoing efforts by the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), UN and development partners, humanitarian needs in Sri Lanka continue to deteriorate.
- About 73% of households report either losing their source of income or having their income reduced.

- The majority of households (61%) are regularly resorting to coping strategies such as eating less nutritious food and cutting back on food portions.

The Need

- An estimated 960,000 people are in need of protection services. Data shows an increase in high-risk child protection incidents such as sexual assault, physical abuse, and child negligence. The police, shelters and other protection services are reporting increased incidence of domestic violence and corporal punishment
- Girls, women, and other marginalized groups are facing increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA).
- Hospitals report shortages of essential medicines and other health items, while frequent power outages are affecting the delivery of health services.
- People are experiencing difficulty accessing health facilities due to the fuel crisis and high cost of transportation.
- Psycho-social impact – Rising number of persons needing mental health support and psychiatric services.

Food Crisis

- According to the latest Crop and Food Security Assessment (September, 2022) carried out jointly by FAO and WFP, 6.2 million people nationally have been found to be food insecure (28% of the population).
- Of these, at least 66,000 people are severely food insecure. The report further states that the situation is likely to deteriorate during the lean harvest season from October 2022 to February 2023.

Inflation

- **Headline inflation**, as measured by the year-on-year (Y-o-Y) change in the Colombo Consumer Price Index (CCPI, **2013=100**) **increased to 64.3% in August 2022 from 60.8% in July 2022**. This increase in Y-o-Y inflation was driven by the monthly increases of both Non-Food and Food categories.
- Food inflation (Y-o-Y) increased to **93.7% in August 2022 from 90.9% in July 2022**, while Non-Food inflation (Y-o-Y) increased to 50.2% in July 2022 from 46.5% in July 2022

There are alarming levels of food insecurity in many provinces and districts in Sri Lanka.

We need solutions

We need to have immediate, medium term and long term solutions to the crisis. As we all know, the crisis we face today is the result of multiple causes which include - decades of bad governance, following a wrong economic model, corruption and also geo-politics.

As depicted in this Unicef – USAID Framework for Multisectoral Nutrition Action Framework, there are many causes of chronic undernutrition, which stem from multiple sectors. The consequences of undernutrition are both short- and long-term, often having an impact throughout the lifecycle and on future generations. Ultimately, socio-cultural, environmental, economic and political context play a determining role in the nutritional status of the population.

The Key Gandhian Principles

As I have said at the outset, I wish to confine my discussion only on a few selected Gandhian principles and practices which I consider as most relevant and critical to finding solutions to solve the present crisis. Some of these solutions have already been successfully experimented and implemented in Sri Lanka by the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.

They are; Truth and Non-violence (including Sathyagraha) and the concept of Gramswaraj. I have selected the concept of gramswaraj as I consider it is as the most relevant Gandhian concept which also incorporates the ideals of truth and non-violence.

Concept of Gram Swaraj

Gram Swaraj - an idea of the self-reliant village is a unique concept of rural development proposed by Mahatma Gandhi much before India's independence that he developed over a period of times. Gram Swaraj is considered an ideal development approach, yet Indian planners and policymakers emphasised economic development over an individual's moral and ethical values after independence.ⁱ On the other hand, with gaining more importance to sustainable development, the Gandhian concept of Gram Swaraj starts gaining importance as his approach gave importance to the human being's overall development.

According to Gandhian thought, Gram Swaraj could be understood as twin beacons of truth and nonviolence . The concept of Gram Swaraj states that every village should be independent and should be its only republic. The village should be independent of its neighboring villages and should not be dependent on them for any of its vital needs and wants. However, the villages can be dependent on each other for some needs and wants in which dependency is a must. Basically, Gandhi wanted that each village should be self-sufficient and self-sustaining as far as basic necessities of life were concerned which included clean water, sanitation, housing, education, food, clothing, and so on. It also included self-defense and the government and all other societal needs which a man wants. For example, this also includes having a movie theatre in the village for its self-sufficiency. Gandhi wanted that in the country of India, every village should be self-reliant and should be a republic having full powers of its own. Then, as now, these were revolutionary ideas.ⁱⁱ

Grama Swarajya Concept in Practice in Sri Lanka

Grama Swarajya has also been the ultimate goal of village empowerment process practiced by the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka (www.sarvodaya.org). For over 6 decades, Sarvodaya has effectively mobilized thousands of grassroots communities in rural Sri Lanka promoting self-reliance and organized participatory action towards poverty eradication. Today, Sarvodaya has reached around 15,000 villages in Sri Lanka through holistic approach based on Gandhian and

Buddhist thinking but successfully transcending divisions of religion, ethnicity, caste, social class and geography. Out of this number, 5200 villages have now formed legally independent village entities known as *Sarvodaya Shramadana Societies* (SSS) to manage their own affairs. These village societies are going to be the basis of the formation of Gramswaraj and towards this end, Sarvodaya follows a 5-stage village development model which is graphically depicted and explained below.

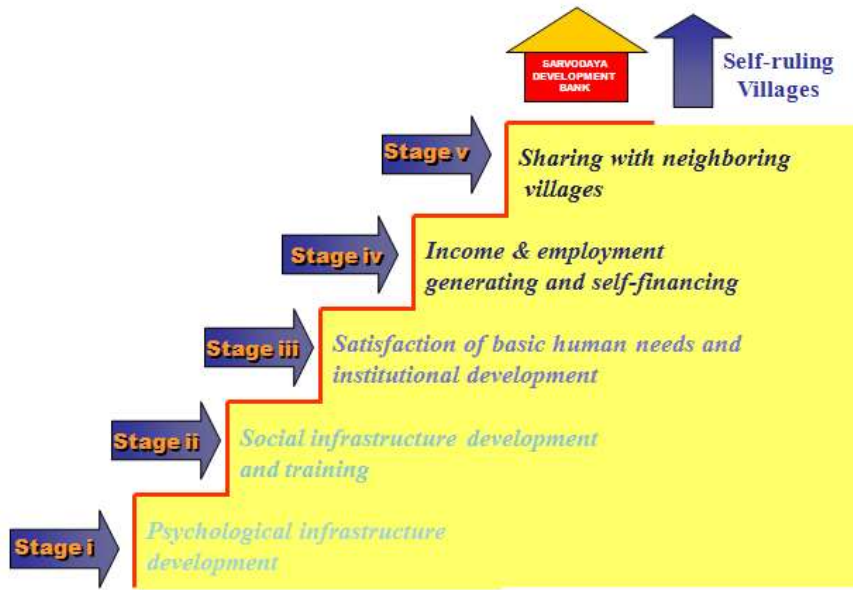


Figure: Sarvodaya village development process

Starting from psychological infrastructure development, it gradually leads village communities through a process of *social, technological, economic empowerment* and towards *political empowerment*, ultimately creating *Gramaswaraj* (self-governing) villages.

The Sarvodaya organization which consists of an extensive infrastructure of trained and dedicated development workers and a set of coordinating and educational centers from national to village levels, provides the necessary technical and resource inputs to lift a given village from one level to the next.

Sarvodaya intends to affect a change in the spheres of *consciousness, economy and power* of the individuals and communities across the country. While seeking a *society with no-poverty and no-affluence* as its vision, Sarvodaya has worked with villages and communities to gradually reach sustainable development in the dimensions of *spiritual, moral, cultural, social, economic and political* development of the individuals as well as the society. After working for 54 years in 4 levels of *awakening* namely, personality awakening (*paurushodaya*), family awakening (*kutumbodaya*), village awakening (*gramodaya*), urban awakening (*nagarodaya*), Sarvodaya is now poised to mobilize all its energies to achieve the goal of national re-awakening (*deshodaya*).

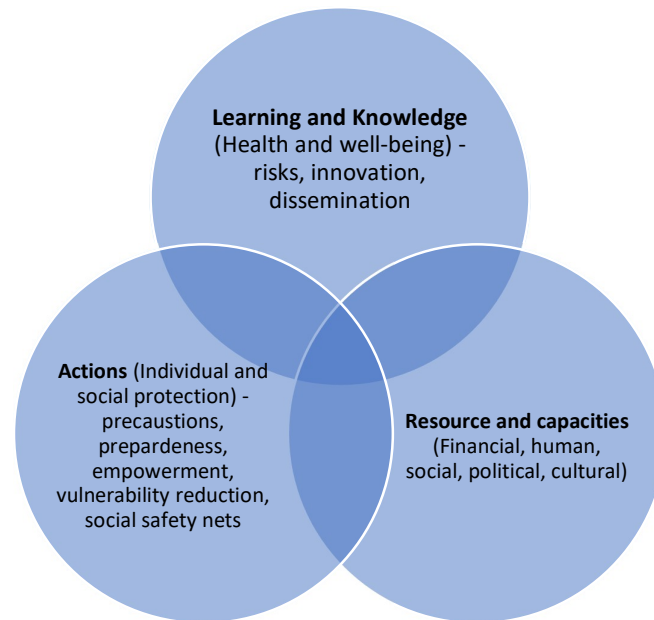
The cornerstone of *Deshodaya* is *gramswaraj*. Sarvodaya now firmly believes that there are around 3000 strong SSSs which are ready to transform themselves as *gramswarajs*.

These villages which have chosen a path of alternative development and have achieved a greater degree of financial independence by way of effective micro-finance and enterprise promotion programs, are now ready to play active role in governance related issues affecting the lives of the

community. Sarvodaya organizational structure will provide the support capacity building of these SSSs towards self-governance and devolution of power, and in long-term political development of the communities. This will strengthen their capacity to engage with State structures.

Framework for Resilient villages

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, adopted a resilient framework in the Sarvodaya services villages building on the gram swarajyaya concept.



At the centre of this action is the development of a COVID Ready Village framework as a community level model that will have elements and effects of being replicated outside of the COVID pandemic too, towards creating a “village of wellbeing”. This will not only be confined to a pandemic situation and could also feed into a broader national development framework. This encapsulates well with the Gram Swaraj concept (village self-governance) that Sarvodaya is advocating for, that implies the foundation of an independent, resilient and a self-sustaining village.

While health will be considered at the centre of its application, broadly the village will have elements of wellbeing that consist of social and mental health, economic, religious and cultural wellbeing which transcends through positive and accurate health actions and information specially in a pandemic situation as the present COVID 19.

It refers to a village that is ready and has found solution through collective action to problems occurred relating to wellbeing and specially health, and one that improves the quality of life. This will address some of the underlying issues faced by the local communities that includes, low level of action knowledge and awareness, limited access to technology, access to information and services, food security and availability of resources, that are critical to face an unforeseen pandemic with minimum distractions.

The model aspires to have the following key elements.

- A resilient and knowledge -based Community Health champions on aspects of health and wellbeing towards improving quality of life through evidence-based community owned interventions
- Access to and availability of right information and knowledge on the pandemics and most specifically the COVID 19
- Action groups and champions at the community that advocates for prevention measures, remedial action (based on health directives) and promotes social cohesion and harmony
- Ensuring safety and the well-being of the most vulnerable groups in the community
- Use of innovative technological tools and platforms that are most suitable and effective for better community engagements and exchange of knowledge and information on the pandemic and reduce negative health effects, stigma due to mis and disinformation.

My discussion would be incomplete if I do not also refer to attempts by various Government to adopt the concept of Gram Swaraj in Sri Lanka.

State level interventions to set up Gram Swarajya in Sri Lanka

- While the Sarvodaya Movement has been trying to evolve the Gram Swaraj Model through a truly participatory bottom-up process, the different Governments at different times also made attempts to set up formal village level structures within this broad concept of Gram Swaraj.
- The first model was the Gramodaya Mandalaya scheme was introduced by President Premadasa in the mid 1980s. It was a mechanism to unite the different voluntary organizations operating at village level and mobilizing them towards an integrated program of development. Due to a multitude of reasons, Gramodaya Mandala scheme was a failure though it was legally enacted by an Act of Parliament.
- Then during President Rajapaksha's 2nd term, another attempt was made to set up what was known as "Jana Sabha" under the Ministry of Economic Development. Even a draft Act was prepared and this exercise again didn't see the light of the day.
- This was then followed by the proposal put forward by the Sirisena Government in 2015 again to set up "Grama Rajyas". There was extensive consultations and deliberations involving different stakeholders including the President's Secretariat, Prime Ministers Office, Parliamentarians, Government Administrators and Civil Society. That exercise also didn't produce any results.
- The present Government has also started a fresh process to set up Grama Rajya's and a draft of the concept has been shared with selected experts to get their inputs.

However, it is obvious that the core principle of Gandhi-ji's Gram Swaraj – the of notion of **empowering the community to govern their own affairs** is missing in the conceptualization.

Conclusion

Being a community development organisation and a movement, Sarvodaya from its very genesis and throughout the past six decades dedicated time, commitment, and resources to strengthen a village centred, people-led community development model. Much of the work we do has been largely influenced by Gandhian philosophy and therefore largely modelled on the ideals of 'Swaraj'. Gram Swaraj – is an idea of the self-reliant village and is a unique concept of rural reconstruction proposed by Mahatma Gandhi much before India's independence that he developed over a period of time.ⁱⁱⁱ It was identified as an alternative holistic development model spanning from the very individual level to the larger communal context. The very basic model was to enable village communities to decide for themselves and to encourage ideals of self-help enabling them to govern the village communities with greater independence.

Taking to account the holistic nature of the concept, Sarvodaya innovatively designed initiatives to address personal awakening (*Paurshodaya*) and recognised that individuals and most importantly Sarvodaya workers and volunteers should undergo spiritual and moral transformation before they embark on community development activities. The Gandhian values of truth, non-violence and selflessness is therefore cherished and practiced when Sarvodaya engages in the scope of awakening individuals with the greater aim of awakening communities.

Followed by individual awakening, Sarvodaya largely embarks into the area of collective awakening which excels from the individual to the community level founded on realising the ideals of Gramswaraj. During the past six decades, Sarvodaya has inspired and co-developed more than fifteen-thousand village communities across Sri Lanka and out of them inspired numerous communities to reach the stages of Gramswaraj. Looking back at the past six-decades, our programme design and organisational strategy has always emphasised on the importance to bring about awakening at the very individual level to the very community level on this holistic development narrative which wholly promotes people centred and led community development at the very grassroots level.

I believe the needs and demands for Gramswaraj were strongly expressed by the recent wave of large-scale non-violent protests across the country led by the Country's youth and active citizens. They have proposed setups such as 'Peoples' Councils' a fresh indicator that people and particularly the country's next generation yearn and aspire a better say in governance, transparency, accountability and effective utilisation of public assets and resources and most importantly that they want to play an active role in key decisions affecting public life and governance. The ideals of Gramswaraj and its pragmatism since its inception has always been revolutionary^{iv}. Being aware of the scale and magnitude of this, the Sarvodaya Movement is in the process of re-imagining how Gramswaraj could enhance human and community development in the country when there is an organic demand at the very community level.

Thank you!

References

- ⁱ Gram Swaraj: Its relevance in the present context. Dr. Bhaskar Kumar Kakati, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gram-swaraj-its-relevance-in-present-context.html>
- ⁱⁱ Gram Swaraj and Local Self Government, Stuti Agarwal, School of Law, Christ (Deemed to be University)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gram Swaraj: Its relevance in the present context. Dr. Bhaskar Kumar Kakati, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gram-swaraj-its-relevance-in-present-context.html>
- ^{iv} Gram Swaraj and Local Self Government, Stuti Agarwal, School of Law, Christ (Deemed to be University)