

9. Mahatma Gandhi Media Lecture

Ela Gandhi

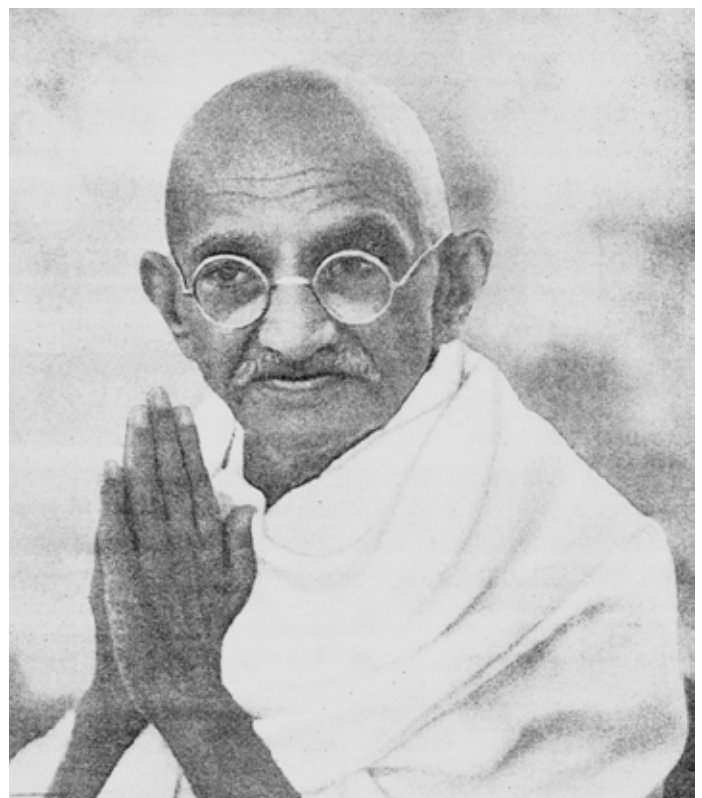
In celebrating 25 years of democracy, the transformation of the country needs to be looked at. While many strides have been made in terms of opening doors that were previously closed to black people and creating the possibility of changing the lives of millions of people, there is yet a long way to go for the fruits of a democratic order to be enjoyed by all. This is in line with the thought process that new orders are not just about access and wealth, but also about ideology as well as a new way of thinking and living. The quest is to pave the way for the building of a South Africa that can shine as a beacon of hope. To make our own small but meaningful contribution towards this end, an alternate media platform called *Satyagraha*, which means “in pursuit of truth”, was started in 2000 in Durban. It is premised on the Gandhian principles of non-violence, respect and harmony, with the aim being to inspire national and religious reconciliation and to promote universal values. In 2002, we were offered space at the Durban University of Technology, ML Sultan campus, and the opportunity to work with its community outreach programme. Since then, we have developed a close working relationship with the university. Many of our staff are drawn from the university, and we run joint programmes for mutual benefit.

The first meeting of the coordinating committee in respect of the Mahatma Gandhi Media Lecture (MGML) took place in 2005. The three main coordinators were DUT Journalism, Gandhi Development Trust (GDT), and the Office of the Consul General of India. The two issues discussed were media education in schools, and the lecture itself with the aim of promoting Gandhian ideals and values. Media literacy initiatives in schools were to be held to promote a greater understanding on the operation of the media and its contribution to society. The general thrust was the raising of awareness of the media industry at a school level. The schools’ programme was to target the disadvantaged to promote journalism as a career, develop a culture of reading and writing among the students, and to craft a code of ethics to govern the process of writing. The aim was to also promote intellectually-stimulating competitions, and encourage schools in the compilation of newsletters.

The purpose of the MGML is to take a deeper perspective from routine news reporting to a media focused on societal change. The ambitious plan for the first lecture was to have President Nelson Mandela as the keynote speaker. But this did not materialise. The MGML was inaugurated by former Minister of Communications Jay Naidoo. He initially spoke with journalism students, and then presented the lecture, sharing many thoughts about the profession itself, and the responsibilities of journalists. Through the years, many distinguished speakers addressed a range of topics that stimulated vibrant discussions. Some of the topics were *The power of non-violence in a violent*

world with special reference to North Africa by Advocate Vasu Gounden, executive director of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes and a GDT trustee. The lecture focused on the revolution in Egypt as well as on issues faced by students. Advocate Anil Nauriya, from India, presented a lecture on *Our legacy of nonviolence – a reflection on the ANC centenary with reference to the relationship with Gandhi*. He gave an extensive account of the various meetings between Gandhi and some of the African National Congress leaders.

In 2013, the lecture was aimed at raising critical issues facing journalists, and to help journalism students begin to contemplate the pivotal role that they would be playing in the development of the media industry, particularly in respect of gender issues. Angela Quintal, the first woman editor of the *Witness* in its 167-year history, was the guest speaker on *The role of journalists in promoting non-violence and challenging patriarchy*. The following year, Dr Yacoob Abba Omar, director: operations at the Mapungubwe Institute, a Johannesburg-based research institute focused on socio-economic, political and scientific challenges being faced in South Africa. The topic was *Going back to the future: Reflecting on twenty years of media freedom*. Pertinent issues were raised in respect of the role of journalists both at the time and in the future. Other prominent speakers included the executive director of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Dr Sello Hatang and the editor of *City Press*, Mondli Makhanya.



Mahatma Gandhi

Over the years, there have been controversial issues raised by students at the lectures about the image of Gandhi. He has been portrayed by some as “racist” and “sexist”. There are many with hard evidence that prove the contrary. However, the issue has never been the focus of the lecture as we believe that people are entitled to their views, and they should be subject to wider investigative journalism without a one-sided perspective. This is the essence of good journalism.

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The focus of the lectures has been on important issues, and not on personalities. While reference is made to some of the views espoused by Gandhiji, the lectures have not been to promote his life, but rather to concentrate on some of the universally-accepted and important thoughts he espoused.

The annual MGML offers a window of opportunity for journalism students to think deeply about their role in industry, and to prepare them for the challenges that surface. It also serves at building responsible journalism practices through raising awareness on the vital role and responsibilities of journalists. Dubbed the ‘fourth estate’, the media has the power to shape public opinion and influence society, making it imperative that journalists report on news responsibly. Responsibility is about reading widely, looking at issues from all angles, and being fair and just in the presentation of facts. It does not mean conformity, it does not mean accepting what others are saying, but rather being able to develop a critical perspective by building a strong knowledge base. Finally, a cornerstone of good journalism is being able to accept another view from our own, and being objective in our appraisal. The lectures are necessary to build such objectivity and independent thought especially for students who will be leading journalists of the future.

Ela Gandhi, was a social worker and political activist in South Africa. She retired after serving two terms in the South African Parliament as a member of the National Assembly representing the African National Congress. She has served as the chancellor of the Durban University of Technology, and presently works in an honorary capacity as chairperson of the Gandhi Development Trust as well as Phoenix Settlement Trust, and is co-president of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. Ela has received four honorary doctorates, and published many articles in international journals. She has received many awards, including a Bookchat Award as one of Jay Heale’s “1994 South African Books of the Year”, Community of Christ Award from Independent Missouri, Paul Harris Award by the Durban North Rotary Club, Living Legends Award from the KwaZulu-Natal province, Amadelakufa Award from the South African Veterans-Association, Premio Nueva Civilizacion award from Universitas Nueva Civilizacion in Santiago, Chile, and the Papal Medallion from His Holiness Pope Francis.

