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International Webinar On Gandhi as a Global Leader (Chapter-2)

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„Lead Kindly Light“ - Gandhi as a Global Guide

"Lead, Kindly Light, Amid the encircling gloom" is a hymn with words written in 1833 by Saint John Henry Newman as a poem titled "the Pillar of the Cloud", which was first published in the British Magazine in 1834.

John Henry Newman (1801 – 1890) was an English theologian and poet, first an Anglican priest and later a Catholic priest and cardinal, who was ... canonised as a saint in the Catholic Church in 2019. As a young priest, John Henry Newman became sick while in Italy and was unable to travel for almost three weeks. In his own words:

“Before starting from my inn, I sat down on my bed and began to sob bitterly. My servant, who had acted as my nurse, asked what ailed me. I could only answer, "I have a work to do in England." I was aching to get home, yet for want of a vessel I was kept at Palermo for three weeks. I began to visit the churches, and they calmed my impatience, though I did not attend any services. At last I got off in an orange boat, bound for Marseilles. We were becalmed for whole week in the Straits of Bonifacio, and it was there that I wrote the lines, Lead, Kindly Light, which have since become so well known.”

“The largest mining disaster in the Durham Coalfield in England was at West Stanley Colliery, known locally as "The Burns Pit", when 168 men and boys lost their lives as the result of two underground explosions at 3:45pm on Tuesday 16 February 1909. In the Towneley Seam 63 lay dead, in the Tilley Seam 18 lay dead, in the Busty Seam 33 lay dead and in the Brockwell Seam 48 lay dead. But incredibly, there were still men alive underground. A group of 34 men and boys in the Tilley Seam had found a pocket of clean air. They were led by Deputy Mark Henderson. A few of them panicked and left the group, they died instantly after inhaling the poison gas. The remainder sat in almost total darkness, when one of them began humming the Hymn "Lead Kindly Light". In no time at all, the rest of the miners joined in with the words, "Lead kindly light amidst the encircling gloom, lead thou me on, The night is dark, and I am far from home". This was probably sung to the tune "Sandon" by C. H. Purday, popular with miners in the Durham coalfield. Before the hymn ended, young Jimmy Gardner died of injuries. These 26 men were rescued after 14 hours, four others were later rescued.”

This hymn became a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi:

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,

Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home,

Lead Thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou

Shouldst lead me on;

I loved to choose and see my path; but now

Lead Thou me on!

I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,

Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still

Will lead me on.

O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till

The night is gone,

And with the morn those angel faces smile,

Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!

In "Young India", on 29 December 1920, Gandhi wrote 'One Step Enough For Me' on a certain Mr. Stokes:

"Mr. Stokes is a Christian who wants to follow the light that God gives him. He has adopted India as his home. He is watching the non-co-operation movement from the Kotagiri hills where he is living in isolation from the India of the plains, and serving the hillmen. He has contributed three articles on non-co-operation to the columns of the Servant of Calcutta and other papers. I had the pleasure of reading them during my Bengal tour. Mr. Stokes approves of non-co-operation but dreads the consequences that may follow complete success, i.e., evacuation of India by the British. He conjures up before his mind a picture of India invaded by the Afghans from the North-West, plundered by the Gurkhas from the hills. For me, I say with Cardinal Newman: "I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me." The movement is essentially religious. The business of every godfearing man is to dissociate himself from evil in total disregard of consequences. He must have faith in a good deed producing only a good result: that in my opinion is the Gita doctrine of work without attachment. God does not permit him to peep into the future. He follows truth although the following of it may endanger his very life. He knows that it is better to die in the way of God than to live in the way of Satan. Therefore, whoever is satisfied that this Government represents the activity of Satan has no choice left to him but to dissociate himself from it."

"... And we cannot do better than following out fearlessly and with confidence the open and honourable programme of non-violence and sacrifice that we have mapped for ourselves."

M. K. Gandhi: 'One Step Enough For Me'. Young India, 29-12-1920, In: The Collected Works of Mahatma

Gandhi. Volume 19, pp. 173 f.

In an article called "Tyranny of Words", published in Young India on 14 October 1926, Gandhi wrote about Reason and Faith or Prayer:

"Experience has humbled me enough to let me realize the specific limitations of reason. Just as matter misplaced becomes dirt, reason misused becomes lunacy. If we would but render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, all would be well.

Rationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence. Attribution of omnipotence to reason is as bad a piece of idolatry as is worship of stock and stone believing it to be God.

Who has reasoned out the use of prayer? Its use is felt after practice. Such is the world's testimony. Cardinal Newman never surrendered his reason, but he yielded a better place to prayer when he humbly sang "one step enough for me". Sankara was a prince among reasoners. There is hardly anything in the world's literature to surpass Sankara's rationalism. But he yielded the first place to prayer and faith.

... [E]verything on this earth lends itself to abuse. It seems to be a law governing everything pertaining to man. No doubt religion has to answer for some of the most terrible crimes in history. But that is the fault not of religion but of the ungovernable brute in man. He has not yet shed the effects of his brute ancestry.

I do not know a single rationalist who has never done anything in simple faith and has based everyone of his acts on reason. But we all know millions of human beings living their more or less orderly lives because of their childlike faith in the Maker of us all. That very faith is a prayer."

M. K. Gandhi: Tyranny of Words. Young India, 14-10-1926, In: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Volume 31, pp. 496 f.

Gandhiji made a statement on Art and Religion in conversation with the Editor of "The Island", Joseph Bard:

"Indian art symbolizes this relationship and at the same time expresses the ritual of religious worship. If an artist who thinks he is surrounded by people without any religious sentiment chooses to become a scoffer, he will inevitably frustrate his own vocation. On the other hand if he feels that his is a mission, then a poet or artist has a right to oppose the prevalent creed or lack of creed and he will be justified by the greater value of his own revelation. I do not pretend to know anything about art, but I believe firmly that both religion and art have to serve the identical aims of moral and spiritual elevation. The central experience of life will for ever remain the relationship which man has to God and it will never be superseded or replaced by anything else, just as human bodies will never free themselves from the law of gravitation. In this relationship of man to God it is the mysterious forces which matter, not the meagre texts expressed in words. There may be changes in this relationship of man to God as represented by the various and successive religions of mankind; but to quote Cardinal Newman: "One step enough for me."

M. K. Gandhi: Statement to "The Island", London [on or before October 14, 1931], In: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Volume 48, pp. 149 f.

In his letter to Narasinhrao B. Divatia on October 18, 1932, Gandhi wrote about the meaning and significance of this hymn for himself, his friends all over the globe and his ashram inmates:

"Instead of praying silently, we will sing your translation ["Premal Jyoti"] of "Lead Kindly Light". Does it not give as much peace as both of you would desire?

Your children of course enjoy eternal peace. But are not all the children in this world your children? You have taught plenty of such wisdom to others. May it help you in your present plight.

You will like this story about "Premal Jyoti". When Father Elwin was leaving, he thought that it would be a good thing if my Christian friends could mentally be in communion with me once every week. For that purpose, he asked me to suggest a hymn which all of them might sing at a fixed hour one day every week. I selected Newman's hymn. It is now sung by friends in America, Europe, India and other countries on every Friday at 7.30 p.m. We here, the inmates of the Ashram at Sabarmati and some other people, sing "Premal Jyoti" at the evening prayer on Fridays. Thus the life which you have poured into this *bhajan* is increasing in its power. May this gift of yours bear fruit for you too.

Yours sincerely,

Mohandas"

M. K. Gandhi: Letter to Narasinhrao B. Divatia. October 18, 1932. [From Gujarati: Mahadevbhaini Diary, Vol. 11, p. 147] In: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Volume 51, p. 254.

In one of his letters from Noakhali, dated 5 February 1947 (to Edmond Théophile Privat from Geneva, Switzerland, a promoter of the world language Esperanto), Gandhi wrote about his walking pilgrimage at Noakhali and associated this with the hymn:

"That the real non-violent conduct of a person may well be followed in practice by the multitude is perfectly true. Such was my case and is today. But the prime mover has to be *au fait* with the science of non-violence. [...] My walking pilgrimage is going on steadily and it certainly gives me immense peace of mind. The upshot I do not know, nor do I care to know. Man has no control over results. That is the sole prerogative of God. Hence I can sing with Cardinal Newman:

One step enough for me

I do not choose to see the distant scene

Lead Thou me on.

You know the hymn, don't you? The initial verse of the hymn is: "Lead Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom."

M. K. Gandhi: Letter to Edmond and Yvonne Privat. Srinagar Camp. Address as at Kazirkhil, P. O. Ramganj, Noakhali. February 5, 1947. In: The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Volume 86, pp. 429 f.

Quakers take this idea of the Inward Light walking in the Light of Christ to refer to God's presence within a person. The term inward light was first used by early Friends to refer to Christ's light shining on them; the term inner light has also been used since the twentieth century to describe this Quaker doctrine. A Quaker, Rufus Jones, in 1904, wrote that: "The Inner Light is the doctrine that there is something Divine, 'Something of God' in the human soul" resembling "that of God in everyone", which was first used by one of the co-founders of the Society of Friends, George Fox.

"Having made a ceaseless effort to attain self-purification, I have developed some little capacity to hear correctly and clearly the 'still small voice within'."

(The Epic Fast: Pyarelal; Mohanlal Maganlal Bhatt; Ahmedabad, 1932, p. 34)

"There are moments in your life when you must act, even though you cannot carry your best friends with you. The 'still small voice' within you must always be the final arbiter when there is a conflict of duty."

(Young India, 4-8-1920, p.3)

The Inward Light and the Voice of Conscience – audible and visible after self-purification through fasting, prayer and silence – this is the global guide Gandhi reminded us of. Let us recollect the ethical and spiritual heritage Gandhi recollects for us so we can rediscover this step by step: "one step enough for me" - "Keep Thou my feet" - "Lead Thou me on"!