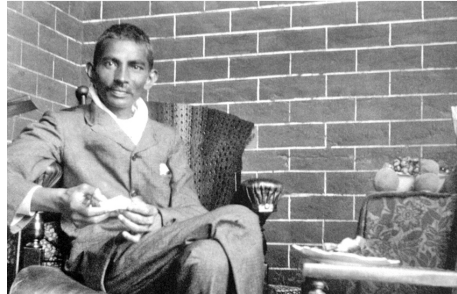




Gandhi at the spinning wheel.



Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa.



Mahatma Gandhi

152ND BIRTH ANNIVERSARY FALLS TODAY

MAHATMA GANDHI, THE GREAT SON OF INDIA

WAJIRA ABEYWARDENA

Mahatma Gandhi is a gem of a humane personality who is not confined to a single country or a single religion. He belongs to the whole universe. Mother India has produced a world renowned genius calibre of personalities. The great Gautama Buddha, Emperor Dharmashoka, Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Nehru, Sarva Palli Radhakrishnan and Sathya Sri Sai Baba are among them. Mohandas Gandhi is the glittering pearl of that garland.

Mohandas Karmchand Gandhi was born on October 02, 1869, that is 152 years ago. He was named as Mahatma Gandhi by Rabindranath Tagore. That means the person with a super soul. He was venerated as if he was a god and acclaimed for his remarkable philosophy and his committed dedication for its practice.

On one occasion, he was charged by the British government and the case was heard. The Attorney General charged that Gandhi is responsible for all the killings that took place in India. Gandhi was unmoved and smiled at him.

Simple and humble

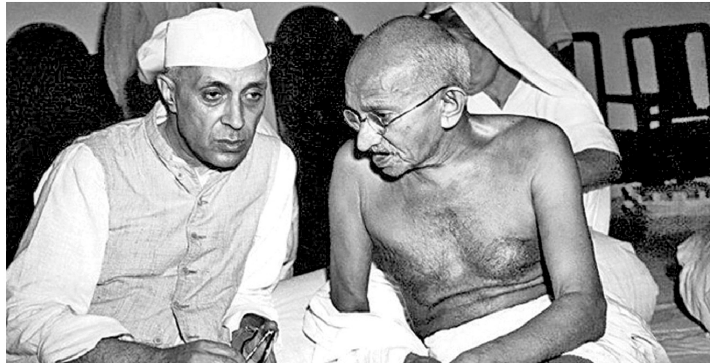
Finally, the judge from the bench proclaimed as follows.

"Sir, I recognize you as a great man in the world. You are beyond a man, a saint. However, my duty is to mete out justice. Therefore, I have to treat you as a common man".

"I appear before your honour, as the weakest man in the world," Gandhi began his statement. He never took the accolades of the world to appear as a powerful man. He had always been a simple and humble personality. An elite once asked Gandhi as to why he moved about wearing a simple attire of a rustic man. Then, Gandhi had replied, "the villagers recognize me whatever my attire may be". "No, I have seen you were in that simple attire even when you travel outside the village as well," that person queried.

"Oh! Is that so? They don't know me and so there is no issue", Gandhi said. He never travelled in the 1st class or the 2nd class compartments. He used to travel with the common people in the 3rd class. Gandhi was eligible to travel in the 1st class of the train. Once a friend of his enquired as to why he used to travel in the 3rd class compartment. That friend was shocked by the reply. "Because, there is no 4th class in the train," Gandhi replied.

Gandhi was that humble because he was a leader who had an awareness of the plight of Indian society. The children were almost naked and people were half naked as they were very poor. Gandhi believed that it was a shame to go before such a poor majority of the masses in full attire. Most of the masses could not make their ends meet. Children were



Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi

starving and mal-nourished. Although they were starving and appeared as if walking skeletons, they never tended to slaughter animals for their survival. Gandhi was a vegetarian. Dates, a glass of goat milk, lemon or fruit juice were in it. He rejected cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. He was a pious Hindu. He also had faith in Buddhist philosophy. He condemned Marxism.

Sentiments such as "break", "kill", "down with", and "fight for rights" were not among his jargon. He strongly advocated non-violence. He equally treated his friend as well as the enemy in non-violence. His idea was to teach that virtue to all Indians. He requested Great Britain to be non-violent against the Germans in World War II.

Non-violence was the most powerful weapon introduced by Gandhi to get independence from the British Empire. India came under the rule of Queen Victoria in 1858. Gandhi was born 11 years later. English rule was never welcome by the Indians. They ridiculed the dignity of India.

It was Gandhi who pioneered the freedom struggle by giving it spiritual and philosophical leadership. Sri Nehru came forward to support Gandhi in his endeavour. Sri Nehru once told the Indians that paying tribute to India means that they pay tribute to Gandhi. Gandhi and Nehru were the parents of independent India. Gandhi was imprisoned during the freedom struggle. Prisoner Gandhi was more powerful than Gandhi at large. The British called him, the half-naked Sanyasi. All Indian communities and their leaders rallied around Gandhi. His voice was the voice of the Indian nation. Yet, Gandhi never took up politics.

Non-violent strategies

He said that politics is a battlefield that tries to win over an enemy. Gandhi's non-violent strategies were Fasting, Sitting down protest and the protest march. The colonial mas-

ters could not crush those three powerful weapons.

Ceylon also felt the spirit of the Indian freedom struggle. The establishment of Ceylon National Congress may be an Indian inspiration. Dr. N.M. Perera, Dr. Colvin R. De Silva, Philip Gunawardena, Leslie Gunawardena, Celina Perera were the Leftist leaders of Sri Lanka who supported the Indian freedom struggle.

J.R. Jayewardene, followed by Bernard Aluwihare, Mudiyanse Tennakoon and several other Sri Lankan political leaders inspired by the Indian national movement took to the national attire.

India became independent due to the patriotic, non-violent revolution launched by Mahatma Gandhi in August 1947. Gandhi lived in independent India only for a few months. He was shot at by a Hindu extremist on January 30, 1948. The first bullet hit his leg, the next felled him and the third shot ended his life.

Although he left us, Gandhi has always been a citizen of our universe. Even today he lives among the hearts of the people in every country as a gem of a human.

Gandhi visited Sri Lanka and motivated the freedom struggle here. The United National Party, the most powerful political organisation was formed by the Gandhi followers one year prior to gain independence in India. Former President J.R. Jayewardene who was a leader of the UNP was a Gandhi follower. He had the ability to quote from India's freedom struggle by his memory. He cited incidents of freedom movement of India in his speeches inspired by the nationalistic ideology of Gandhi.

The UNP leaders understood that the Motherland must prosper in rice, clothing, and in education. Gandhi was treated and welcomed as a local by our leaders. Gandhi never engaged in politics. He never

wanted to be the leader of the independent India. He allowed Nehru to do so. Nehru treated Gandhi as the father of the nation. Sri Nehru had a strong respect towards Sri Lanka. Although he was a Hindu, he honoured the five precepts (*Panchaseela*) of Buddhism. History proves the fact that Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Nehru and Sri Lanka were in a strong bondage those days.

Freedom struggle in Ceylon

It is said that Gandhi visited some important places and residences of some leaders who led the freedom struggle in Ceylon. I take pride in being a student of the Mahinda Vidyalaya of Galle, an important site that Gandhi visited and being a member of the United National Party, nourished by his political philosophy, to pay tribute to his valuable, commendable service.

The great philosophy pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi was adopted by many political parties and political groups in the world. The UNP was a major political party that followed his philosophy. That is because of the influence of the Ceylon National Congress. J.R. Jayewardene followed the Gandhian principles to the letter. He organised the first ever protest march from Colombo to Kandy against the policies of the Bandaranaike Government in 1956. All leaders of the UNP were inspired by Gandhian philosophy.

Mahatma Gandhi advocated power sharing in governance. He believed in the Grama Rajya concept by which the country will be developed through awakening the village. While I was the Minister of the Home Affairs in the previous government, I planned to introduce the Grama Rajya Sabha under the Grama Rajya concept as I was inspired by Gandhi's philosophy.

(Former Minister Wajira Abeywardena is Chairman of the United National Party)