

“Freedom Struggle Has to Go On...”

[Nirmala Deshpande is a name, which does not require any introduction. A widely acclaimed social activist Nirmala is one of the flagbearers of non-violence in the country. Born in 1929, she joined Acharya Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan Padyatra in 1952, and covered more than 40 thousand miles touching all nooks and corners of India. She has been the president of Harijan Sevak Sangh, founded by Mahatma Gandhi. In 2005 Nirmala was nominated for Nobel Peace Prize and in 2006 she was awarded with Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavana Award. She has been working in troubled areas of Kashmir valley for peace since long. Currently she is a member of Rajya Sabha. Nirmala Deshdande talked to Santosh H K Narayan of Headlinesindia on various issues ranging from politics to Naxalite movement in India. Excerpts :]

Q: How much relevant is the 'Gandhian Value' in the present scenario?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: We know that UN (United Nations) has declared the Mahatma Gandhi's birthday — October 2 as an International Day for Non-violence. It reveals that not only India but the whole world recognises Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy. His actions and programmes are becoming more and more relevant for the contemporary world.

Q: But it is seen that in India, we are neglecting him in each and every aspect.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: I think, it is the perception of those who are metro centric (Urbanites). Go to rural areas and countryside, you would come across a general change in perception. I have been to almost all places in India and discovered that Gandhi is becoming more and more relevant. His principles have influenced the people there. You will very well find it if you visit rural areas.

Q: Actually, I was talking about the government policies.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Why are we so much concerned about government policies?

Q: Because we are a democracy.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: No. People are supreme in democracy. Government has a role to play. But it's the people who shape the country; the society and I can talk about the people who are fighting. We have to follow his (Gandhi's) ideas and philosophies in order to solve many of our problems as well as shape the way of life that leads to peace and harmony. Government is trying to follow many of his ideas, eg employment guarantee scheme. The idea is to help the poorest of the poor and those who are not much qualified. They also have the right to live. Right to live with dignity. Such schemes really give a kind of instrument to the people to live a better life. Well, I agree with you that many areas are underdeveloped but I will also say that it's not the government but the people who are responsible for that. We as social activists find that wherever our friends try to mobilise people for the implementation of policies properly, we get very good results. So government plus social activists have to work together. And I am very hopeful that in the near future, these schemes would be properly implemented.

“New York Times has written an article as its editorial that after the disintegration of Soviet Union, only one super power was left. But now another super power is emerging. That is world public opinion for peace. The editor saw this peoples movement as another super power.”

Q: But if you see at the other side of the story, big companies and corporate houses are coming in large scale to grasp what was considered as profession of

poor, like vegetable and retail marketing. We have seen disturbances in Singur and Nandigram.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Well, there are different streams of life altogether. That is also there what you said is happening. But I would like to assure you that those who are working with people are very much hopeful to assert a dignified life for them.

Q: It means that you are justifying what people did at Singur and Nandigram.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: I would only like to say that whatever policy the government is bringing should be implemented in a proper way and will be implemented. I would also like to tell you that some policies are not in tune with the people. And it has to be changed. Now who is going to change? It is the people. In a democracy, it is the people who have the last say.

Q: But if we look into the 60 years of our independence, the fate of our people has not changed much. So called poverty line is not practical.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: As far as the independence is concerned, much has been done and a lot more remains to be done. Gandhiji said that we had achieved the political independence but we have to achieve social and economic independence and it is a more difficult task. Working at the grassroots level is very difficult but we don't have other way left. We have to do that for changing the way of life of the people. Participation of people in that process is necessary. We, social activists, are just a facilitator. I would like to give you an example. In Vidarva, Maharastra there were suicide cases by farmers. Some of our friends met representatives of people in that area. They facilitated the meeting with the Prime Minister and he was very sympathetic and immediately went to villages and talked to the people. He announced a package for them last year. But we know, very less reached to the people. We did not stop there. We continuously worked in the area with local social organisations. Bhave, Shivajee and other cooperatives are already there in that area for training, awakening and organising the people and we find that there was a tremendous change in the attitude of the people. We have organised presentations in every Tehsils and people decided that they would not leave their rights and change their future. It was a tremendous change and I can give one more example. We organised camps on Tehsil level and one marginalised lady farmer heard that government was giving Rs 185 for each family but she was getting only Rs 120. She straightway walked to the Tehsildar and enquired about the amount. He replied that 185 is given. She told that the Patwari gave her only 120. We would not tolerate this injustice and would take our rights, she said. You know, what happened then? The Tehsildar immediately sent the Patwari to the village and he apologised for his deeds and assured that she would get Rs 185. It happened when people organised themselves, asserted themselves. Officials have to change. They are changing. If you go to the people, organise them for good reasons you can see good results. If you don't do anything and only criticise them then what will happen? Nothing.

Another piece of legislation is RTI Act. In Muzzafarnagar district of UP, our young friends organised people at grassroots level and now on the basis of RTI they are able to achieve what they want.

Q: This is the input coming from the people. But I wanted to know that how much competent is our political system?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: If the people take the initiative, the entire political system and other setups will have to change. Who is making the change? It is not the so-called political leaders but it is the people. Gandhiji mobilised the people, the common man and British were forced to leave.

Q: Do we need another freedom struggle?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: As I told you, Gandhiji said that 'freedom is not complete'. We have got political freedom only. In 1947 he used to say that what we achieved was a part. Battle is still on. Freedom struggle has *to go on* and *it is going on*.

Q: But irony is that we have to fight against our own people now.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Yes. That is more difficult. But we have to do that. But the means should be non-violent as the country has to realise that and in fact it is realising. As social activists, we can only say that if you follow non-violent means, the target can be achieved.

Q: Do you relate these things with Naxalite movement?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: You know, Vinoba Bhave was Mahatma Gandhi's spiritual successor. He started *Bhudan Andolan* and to some extent I was part of it and walked with him. In days when Bhudan was succeeding 40 lakh acres of land was acquired. At that time you could see the decrease in violence. However, down the line, we could not continue that tempo. We all are responsible for that and then Naxalite movement started. But I would like to tell you that I am a friend of Naxalites. They are fighting for the rights of the people but it should be with non-violent means if it has to succeed. I have been telling this and exchanging my views. Sometimes, some of them join us but it is a big challenge. I am still hopeful that Naxalite leaders and cadres who really want to change the society will realise that a revolutionary change can be brought only by non-violent methods. I am quite hopeful.

Q: Like what Maoists achieved in Nepal.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Yes. I would like to tell you they are also my friends. I told them that please don't take arms. When will you succeed? When you organise a peaceful movement. In 90s, in Kathmandu they organised a peaceful movement and they succeeded. Only peaceful methods crop success. And now I am very happy that they have joined the Parliament and let us hope that with other friends of Nepal they will be able to solve the problem together. They will be able to give justice to the poor and the Naxalites of India would take a cue from them. They may also start thinking about that. I hope so and pray for that.

Q: What are your further plans for the society?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: We are doing everything, what one can do. Today (July 6) is the birth day of His Holiness Dalai Lama and lakhs of trees would be planted. Our friends from all over India are doing that. We have started a signature campaign for Aung San Suu Kyi for her release. The message has gone to the people. In a short period of time we are expecting to collect 10 lakh signatures.

Q: We have seen that some parts of our country are lagging behind like Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa. And Naxal problem is on the rise there.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: In some areas people are not enjoying the fruits of growth. These are neglected areas. We have to concentrate more on such areas and we are trying to do that.

Q: Are you persuading the government for that as a Rajya Sabha member?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Both. I have collected 1500 signatures of my fellow parliamentarians and urged the government to change its policy for those areas and implement it.

Q: At present, whatever our political system is, are you satisfied with that or would you like to change it?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Of course we are for a change; we are for revolution. As a Gandhian we want to bring revolution but by nonviolent means. We don't want this system to continue. Not at all. But who would bring the change? Its the People.

Q: And for what?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: For better, peaceful, harmonious and just society.

Q: Will you suggest any framework for the change?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: We have a framework. It is evolving. The revolution is going on but I must say that media doesn't have time and mind to see these good things happening. Lots of people are doing good work. We are moving ahead.

Q: But I was talking about parliamentary system.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Parliamentary system has its limitations and the system also needs a change. But who is going to bring the change. Again, the people. People are the instrument to change the system.

Q: But people's voice is being suppressed.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: No. People's voice is heard and has to be heard.

Q: With life becoming materialistic and government adopting policies leading to commercialisation with every passing day, do you think it is going to change.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: It is changing. It has to change. You might have heard about Social Forum. The movement is bringing a new hope. Another world is possible. We are not happy with this world. We want to change it. It is prevailing all over the world. It is a beginning. When the bombings started at Iraq, huge peace marches were out in New York, London, Paris, Kolkata, Rome. People walked all over the world. 'Say yes to peace, say no to war. No blood for oil.' Those were the slogans. But all by peaceful means.

Q: Kashmir is an important issue between India and Pakistan. Whatever the ongoing process may be, do you suggest any solution that could be the win-win situation for both?

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: Well, solution will emerge. I worked in Kashmir. The people there are peace loving. They respond to a call of peace and Gandhi's thought. I am quite hopeful. I think something will emerge from the dialogue process.

Q: Do you want to say something on Jihadi groups. Like we saw Glasgow bombing plot and many others and some particular groups are being targeted.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: As His Holiness Dalai Lama wrote to US President after 9/11 that in Buddhist philosophy there is no effect without a cause. So, why this happened? Try to find out the cause and remove that cause. That is same for

all those Jehadis and militants. Everybody knows whatever activities they do but why they take such an extreme step, that the whole world is yet to find out. There is some injustice somewhere. Like what happened in Gujarat five years back. There is hardly any justice given to victims of Gujarat. Who is responsible? Extremists have to be condemned but we have to find out the reasons behind.

Q: In that way we can say that 'Gandhian Value' is in jeopardy. Jehadis are taking violent roots for the sake of their considerable demands.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: We believe in non-violent system but have not been able to convince them not to take violent methods for their demands. But in Kashmir, you will find extremists who have discarded guns and taken peaceful means to protest, to express their feelings. The change is taking place in Kashmir.

Q: On the other hand if we take the example of Suu Kyi and Dalai Lama, their efforts are not bearing fruits.

NIRMALA DESHPANDE: It will take time. Do not go by timetable. We fought for more than 150 years for our independence. So they have to fight for a longer time. They will also get justice. Those who believe in non-violence are quite sure about that. Those are ought to succeed but when? We don't know. We have to continue the struggle and remain hopeful. □□□