

Gandhi in spotlight at I-Day function in South Africa

Mahatma Gandhi and his role in securing freedom for India and his fight for the rights of the South African people were the focus of the Indian Independence Day celebrations here Friday.

'Significantly, as we all know, the Mahatma spent over two decades in South Africa. He left an indelible imprint of his thinking and action on this country, on India, on the relationship between the two, and indeed the entire world,' Indian High Commissioner Rajiv Bhatia said at the lunch hosted by him on the occasion.

Indian Tourism and Culture Minister Ambika Soni and South African Minister of Arts and Culture Pallo Jordan also joined in the celebrations on India's 62nd Independence Day.

'Our struggle was a unique one because of the unique weapon of Satyagraha, a people's movement fuelled by truth and non-violence, was employed under the command of a truly unique leader, Mahatma Gandhi,' Bhatia said as he reflected on the birth of the leader's theories during his time in South Africa as a young lawyer.

The centenary of a historic event that helped shaped Gandhi's philosophies - the mass burning of registration certificates required of people of Indian and Chinese origin in the then Transvaal province, will be celebrated in Johannesburg Saturday, just a day after India's Independence Day.

Bhatia noted that India had come a long way in the past six decades since Gandhi's assassination in 1948, marching forward on the path of peace, progress and prosperity, while confidently coping with many challenges.

He also stressed on the growing India-South Africa relations over the past decades.

'It is heartening to note that India-South Africa relations have been blossoming in an exceptionally satisfactory manner. In 1995, Mr. Nelson Mandela called it 'a unique partnership forged in the crucible of history, common cultural attributes and common struggle'. We now call it a strategic partnership, reinforced in recent years by a steady consolidation of the political, economic and other pillars of this relationship,' Bhatia said.

This is highlighted by the fact that Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited South Africa twice within a year. And within a few months President Thabo Mbeki would be travelling to India for the third IBSA (India-Brazil-South Africa) Summit in October.

Bhatia also noted that IBSA had now come of age.

'The world has been taking note of IBSA as it reaches the next significant milestone, namely the third summit to be held in Delhi in October.

Proposing a toast to the continued well-being of the peoples of South Africa and India, Bhatia re-affirmed the comments of President Pratibha Patil in her Independence Day address: 'We take this opportunity to renew our commitment to continue playing our role as a mature and responsible democracy which contributes immensely to the cause of peace, security and development in the world today.'

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