We are at the most important cross-roads in our history. If we do not change quickly and radically much of humanity runs the risk of perishing by the end of this century.

In this paper, I propose to explore the reasons why we are undergoing a perilous ostrich-syndrome, burying our heads in the sand and pretending to take an attitude of ‘business as usual’ in the face of unprecedented crises. Personal and collective amnesia has become such a fine art that they have been faultlessly integrated into our psyche.

I will also attempt to show what Gandhi has to offer us in terms of arriving at a new consciousness. But let me hasten to add that this paper is not going to put an excessive burden on Gandhi, since some of the problems we face today had not been the foci of concern in his day.

But let us begin with the crisis in this part of the world.
Global Warming: The Melting of the Himalayan Glaciers

In Gandhi’s time, there was no awareness at all that we would one day come to face a very serious ecological crisis. The Gandhian model of development would not have led us to this impasse. Today, we see that the Himalayan glaciers seem to be melting faster than most others. Except for the polar ice caps the Himalayan glaciers are the storehouses for the largest amount of water.

Seven of our great Asian rivers are dependent on these glaciers. These are the Ganges, the Indus, the Brahmaputra, the Mekong, the Thanlwin, the Yangtze and the Yellow river. The glaciers feeding these rivers are retreating at a rate of about 10-15 m (33-49 ft) each year, according to the WWF. India's Gangotri glacier is moving back by 23m (75ft) each year. Hundreds of millions of people in India, China and Nepal will be affected by floods followed by droughts in the coming decades.

Temperatures would rise by several degrees in India, making many places unlivable. Mass migrations would be a normal fact of life, making the expression ‘environmental refugees’ a commonly used term.

Poverty in India

Despite high growth rates no country in the world has as many poor people as India does. The number of those living below the poverty
line is estimated to be 350-400 million. Most of these people, about 75 per cent, live in rural areas. About 40 per cent of the population is illiterate, mainly representing women, tribals and scheduled castes. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing at an alarming rate. Farmers are led to commit suicide when their crops fail and they are unable to pay off their debts. The Gandhian notion that there is enough for everybody’s need but not for everybody’s greed is played out on a regular basis when the poor are being disenfranchised by the new SEZ’s and industrial projects.

The Ostrich-syndrome

Gandhi believed in truth force. He was guided by what could be called ‘relative’ truth since ‘absolute’ truth could not be attained by any human being. The quest for truthful reflection and action was central to his philosophy, unlike the ostrich-syndrome that we are witnessing today, where we bury our head in the sand to avoid seeing the truth.

In countries like India (and in many parts of the world) the ostrich-syndrome is evident in our page three media culture, which is all about film stars, cricket, shopping, eating out and celebrities. The ostrich-syndrome leads to a depoliticisation of daily life, where we do not take responsibility for what is happening around us, where we are unable to become engaged citizens. This is happening to large number of the middle classes who are largely unconnected with the major problems that the country is facing.

Of course there is the well meaning minority of people who feel that we have gone too far down the road to perdition to reverse the trend
of ecological catastrophe and social chaos. There are other small sections that believe they have to oppose the present form of globalization, and in small ways they are creating an awareness of issues, even if they have not thrown up a sufficient range of workable alternatives. Yet, it is they that matter, for as the crisis deepens the alternatives they are grappling with will come under sympathetic scrutiny and serve as the cornerstones for new directions in our social, political and economic life.

But let us dwell a little more on the ostrich-syndrome and the culture of indifference that it spawns.

**Mutation of Human consciousness**

A few days after the twin towers of the World Trade Centre were demolished President Bush famously said: “We can’t let the terrorists stop us from shopping.”

Nine-Eleven was a great human tragedy, but that should not prevent human beings from shopping. The system depends on shopping. So put aside your grief and return to the shopping mall. Of course, a part of you must keep your anger on a slow boil... and keep supporting President Bush.

Shopping is a form of amnesia. The practice of citizenship is consumed by the consumer. You no longer take your social and political responsibilities seriously. In India the middle classes do not go and vote. Consumerism has deformed human consciousness; some might
argue that a mutation has already taken place. If a mutation has already happened, then the ostrich is not even capable of knowing that it has buried its head in the sand, and that it has a distorted view of reality.

Consumerism is not about fulfilling human wants, but the attempt to satisfy ‘created’ needs. New desires are invented and a feeling of inadequacy haunts a person unless he tries to gratify these desires. Individual material satisfaction overtakes social responsibility and political action. Everything may be going wrong in the world from a social and ecological perspective, but the consumer is cocooned in his world of material gratification.

For the middle and upper classes particularly, the shopping mall has become the new temple. This might sound like a cliché, but its underlying truth is being further consolidated day by day.

Most types of modern employment end up being alienating. The production process itself has not become less mechanical. Most people feel alienated in their work situations. Consumerism steps in to create a world of fantasy and lessen your alienation. But it cannot lessen your alienation since it is based on the creation of inadequacies. The moment you buy something you feel it is insufficient and the feeling of inadequacy returns. Not only does consumer society produce human needs, it produces the consumer itself. We experience our identity as consumers over and above all other forms of identities.
Gandhi: the Role of Consciousness

The possibility of personal choice is offered so that the human being is better integrated in the system. You may buy a particular brand of cell phone, thus personalizing your purchase. But in the end, objects and beliefs are personalized so that you may get better integrated in the system.

Commodification has desacralised the world. Nothing is sacred anymore. We are free to destroy forests if we find minerals there. We will pollute earth, sea and air because consumerism is the new ideal of society. We do not read much poetry anymore, not because we do not have time, but because dwelling on intimate feelings and sensibilities that do not contribute to the consumer weltanschauung is a waste of time.

One reaction to this situation of the wasteland of the soul is the emergence of religious fundamentalism. Another form of reaction is joining charismatic religious movements which can compensate for the appearance of meaninglessness through the forgetfulness that chanting, singing, dancing and spiritual euphoria brings. For some, particularly in the west, drugs like ecstasy help tide through the drudgery of social life.

Rediscovering fulfillment and celebration

When I was traveling in Brazil a few years ago I was told by the great humanist and civil society activist Betinho that Brazilians had a memory of fifteen days. He could have said the same thing of much of the world. We move on to new pastures and new experiences every day. There is little time to remember and savour anything valuable for
Human beings have lived on the planet for thousands of years, and we can learn much from the past, even if there is a lot that we have to discard. Socrates was right when he said: “Learning consists of remembering knowledge that has lived in the soul of human beings for many generations.”

There is an awareness that comes from the sages of the past that has to do with a better understanding of the human self. The inward journey enriches the outward one, and the other way around. Today there is only an outward journey with little or no inner ones. And that may be a central reason why we find ourselves in a ‘civilisational’ crisis of such enormous magnitude.

Indigenous societies speak of the inter-connectedness of all things. We are connected with water, mountains, animals and each other. In a somewhat similar vein Buddhism talks about dependent-origination. Nothing is autonomous in itself. All things are dependent on other things. The story of Indra’s net bears witness to this. There is a net where each of the knots is a sparkling diamond. A superficial observance may conclude that the thousands of diamonds in the net are showing off their individual dazzle. But on closer examination we realize that each diamond represents the reflection of the reflection of all the other diamonds in the net. The individual origin of the glitter was only an illusion. Hinduism talks about love of the personal God overflowing into love for all human beings. Gandhi was influenced by this strain of spirituality. Hinduism also talks about the oneness of
human reality with cosmic reality. ‘All the world is one human family’, is an ancient Indian expression that emphasises the unity of humankind.

The role of spirituality in Gandhi’s social praxis

It would be impossible to visualize Gandhi without spirituality. As he himself put it:

“There is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses.”

To begin with Gandhi saw God as Truth. He was to later change that to “Truth is God”. For Gandhi the spiritual dimension was a horizontal one where he discovered God in suffering people. It was not a vertical escape to a God out there, in the heavens, who was unconcerned with the plight of the poor and the oppressed peoples on the planet. As he wrote:

“I am endeavoring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor in down below, but in every one.

“I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity. My countrymen are my nearest neighbours. They have become so helpless, so resourceless, so inert that I must concentrate on serving them. If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity.”
I am led to conclude that a horizontal spirituality, such as the one Gandhi practiced, may be of vital importance to deal with the ostrich-syndrome that we discussed earlier. We need to develop a consciousness and vision that is different from what consumer society offers us. As long as the ostrich-syndrome persists the ‘malling of the world’ will continue with its dreadful social and ecological consequences.

**Hope as the basis of continuing with alternatives**

I have always felt that it is easy to be pessimistic in today’s world. One has only to look at the figures on social exclusion and ecological damage, not to mention personal stress and lack of meaning in the lives of millions of people. But to be hopeful is a personal discipline, and a spiritual exercise. One has to work at it every day.

Many may be tempted to throw up their hands in despair and give up the quest with the exclamation “What’s the use! We are doomed anyway! Everything we do is too little, too late.”

From a Christian perspective Jurgen Moltmann insists that Christianity is all about hope for the future. The resurrection of Christ means just this. This hope also stands for an alternative future for oppressed peoples.

Likewise Gandhi was a ‘prisoner of hope’, to use the title of Judith Brown’s book on him. Hope was an integral part of Gandhi’s philosophy and is contained in the different meanings he ascribed to
the word ‘Swaraj’: freedom, liberation, self-determination, Hindu-Muslim unity and the removal of untouchability.

For Gandhi, there was little cause of despair since he was wedded to the notion of nishkama karma. (karma-action-, nis-without-, kama-desire). The sage Karunakara Guru, from Kerala, described this notion in the following terms: “You must never be attached to action itself. Detachment means non-ego involvement, freedom from the bonds of desire. Actions must be performed in a state of perfect detachment and consecrating their fruit to the Almighty. This means that you must abandon yourself to the Will of God. However you should never be conformist, always try to do your best in order to attain success in everything you do, want or need in life, but at all times try to accept your destiny as part of God’s Will.”

But nishkama karma has a long history. In the Bhagvad Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna:

Therefore, without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment one attains the Supreme.

We act because it is right to act, not because we may live to see the fruits of our actions. Changing the world is an ongoing process and involves the efforts of millions and millions of people all over the world. It would really be an act of arrogance to expect to see instant results. This arrogance ultimately leads to despair, as we find that so little of what we wanted to achieve has been achieved. But if the end result is in the hands of the supreme we only need to act and reflect
and act again. The well-known intellectual-activist Paulo Freire referred to this praxis as action that is enriched by reflection, that in turn leads to further action, that in turn leads to reflection, and so on.

It is true that as human beings we may sometimes find this philosophy insufficient and we get close to despair. Gandhi himself went through his bouts of near despair. But his spiritual strength was further bolstered by his understanding of *nishkama karma*, ‘action without attachment to the fruits of one’s action’. It took him back to his activities with renewed vigor.