

ADDRESS BY THE MEC FOR FINANCE, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TOURISM, MR VUSI MKHATSHWA, MPL, ON THE OCCASION OF THE MEMORIAL LECTURE OF RICHARD GERT SIBANDE AND MAHATMA GANDHI HELD AT THE CIVIC CENTRE, ERMELO, MSUKALIGWA LOCAL MUNICIPALITY

Saturday, 23 October 2021

Programme Director;

Executive Mayor of Gert Sibande District Municipality;

Executive Mayor of Msukaligwa Local Municipality;

Chairperson of the MTPA Board, Mr Victor Mashego;

Other Board members present;

CEO of the MTPA, Mr Johannes Nobunga;

Government and MTPA officials present;

Members of the media;

Ladies and gentlemen;

San'bonani!

1. Programme Director; I am deeply honoured to deliver the **Memorial Lecture of Richard Gert Sibande and Mahatma Gandhi**, as organised by the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA), to mark the Gert Sibande Liberation Heritage Route celebrations of 2021.
2. This is a significant programme of the MTPA, under the auspices of the Mpumalanga Provincial Government, which will surely linger for posterity given that future generations, must know where we come from as a nation.

3. This programme is targeting an audience of adults and the youth, who are not necessary historians and story tellers, about the '*Othering*' and valuable contributions made by the people's heroes, but of course, whose understanding of history will better shape and enhance their role as important influencers of society in many respects.
4. Programme Director; the critical significance of this programme also defines the dialectical relationship of cultural heritage and tourism, because they are closely related, since historic monuments constitute basic resources to attract visitors, both domestic and in-bound tourists.
5. I might not be able to be comprehensive due to time constraints, in terms of giving the chronological events, which aptly characterises the role played by these two (2) progressive giants and iconic struggle icons of the people's liberation.
6. However, I shall hasten to provide an overall outline of their salient contribution to resistance against the apartheid and colonial disorder, and introduce our audience to a picture that can obviously be augmented and supplemented by further interrogation, and wide reading.
7. But before I venture into that, let me remind our beloved audience that we are **left with only eight (08) days before the much-anticipated Local Government Elections**, which are scheduled to take place on November 1.

8. And as we approach that day, we must be cognisant of the significant contribution made by the two (2) icons, we are celebrating today, in making sure that we have the right to vote.
9. They, like other struggle icons, have fought immensely for the universal suffrage of one man one vote; they have devoted their lives to the struggle for the total emancipation, freedom and democracy; thusly, we encourage you and other eligible voters out there, to use this right appropriately, and vote on November 1.
10. We must also be mindful that all these events, happen under conditions which are not of our own making, as we live under the dictates of the COVID-19 pandemic. These pandemic dictates that we should keep appropriate social distance from each other, wear masks, regularly sanitise or wash our hands with water and soap.
11. And, for us to change these dictates, it requires us to **take advantage of the vaccination programme**, that has been rolled-out by our government, with a quest to flatten the curve of this invincible virus, and ultimately undermine its aggressiveness.
12. Programme Director; coming back to the actual business of the day, it is important to note that both **Gert Sibande and Mahatma Gandhi**, were outstanding individuals who are part of the significant footnotes of our history, as the black nation of South Africa.
13. According to the biography of Gandhi, who was born in October 2, 1869, he was an Indian lawyer, politician, social activist, and a writer who became the leader of the nationalist movement against the British rule.

His fame as an activist made him to increasingly enjoy the universal recognition.

14. Notably, Gandhi has a rich extraordinary history of being a global icon, as he partook in a number of struggles worldwide, but for the purposes of this lecture, I shall focus briefly on his years in South Africa.
15. History teaches us that Gandhi was exposed to the racial discrimination practiced in South Africa, to an extent that when he was instructed to take off his turban during an appearance at a Durban magistrate court, he refused and instead left the courtroom. He faced many discriminations in the hands of white racists, one of which resulted in him being thrown out of a train travelling from Durban to Pretoria. He was beaten up by a white driver of a stagecoach because he would not travel by footboard to make room for a European passenger.
16. The said ordeal was a daily humiliation of Indians traders and labourers, and these were the permutations which shaped his social and political activism; hence history tells us Gandhi would not accept injustices as part of the natural or unnatural order in South Africa since then. He had since vowed to defend his dignity as an Indian, and as a man.
17. Programme Director; history tells us that Gandhi hardly ever read a newspaper; and neither as a student in both England and India, had he evinced interest in politics; thusly, he was always overwhelmed by stage fright whenever he took the podium or stood up in social gatherings or representing a client in court.

18. However, as he grew up, he blossomed almost overnight, into a proficient political campaigner, such that he was persuaded not to return to India, as his contract in South Africa was coming to an end; it was during that period, when he founded the Natal Indian Congress in 1894.
19. He united the Indians from different communities, languages and religions, who had settled in South Africa, and most importantly, he used the Natal India Congress as an effective political instrument, to fight for the rights of Indians against white and British ruling authorities.
20. Gandhi, as a full-blown political activist, didn't only fight for Indians but also fought against black discrimination and oppression against the General Smuts regime; and the repeal of the Black Act was one of the defining political struggles he waged against the white ruling authorities in favour of the black folks.
21. He fought against Smuts until he was released from jail to negotiate over the Indian Relief Bill; a Bill which fundamentally oppressed Indians in South Africa, such that the Supreme Court ruled that only Christian marriages were legal in South Africa; and turning at one stroke, all Indian marriages in South Africa were regarded as invalid and turned all married Indian women into concubines.
22. This provoked Indian women and united Indians around one common programme, which subsequently mobilised Indian mineworkers from Transvaal to Natal, to vociferously fight against the Bill. Arguably, this marked one of the biggest episodes in the South African history, and Gandhi features significantly into this rolling Indian mass action.

23. He fought for his people until he left South Africa, when a provisional agreement was reached between him and Smuts in 1914; and his work in South Africa was now over, as in July 1914, he sailed with his wife to England.
24. Another prominent political figure, by the name of **Richard “Gert” Sibande**, emerged in the firmament of history to mark another important episode of resistance. Born in 1907 around Emelo, where we are today, Sibande was an outstanding revolutionary, and one of the ANC co-accused to stand in the treason trial of 1956 to 1961, alongside Nelson Mandela and 154 other political activists.
25. Programme Director; this outstanding revolutionary giant was immersed into grass-roots political activism; he was a revered organiser and a leader of farm workers in the Eastern Transvaal, and he ultimately founded the farm workers association in the 1930s.
26. He led the famous Potato Boycott in Bethal District, and we are told that he was the local Spokesperson of the ANC. In 1947, he helped Michael Scott and Ruth First (Leader of the Young Communist League) in their press exposure of the slavery conditions of farm workers in the Bethal farms. He had the interests of farm workers at heart, and the people of Bethal will cherish him forever as their genuine voice.
27. He acquired his nickname, ‘The Lion of the East’, because of his outstanding and extraordinary political activism, and his activities made him to be hounded by authorities until he was deported from Bethal in 1953. He was charged with treason in 1956, and as already indicated, he was part of the political activists in the treason trial with Mandela and

others. At that time, he was the member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC.

28. Programme Director; while Sibande was still defiant in the trial, his comrades acknowledged his capacity as a leader, and elected him the Provincial President of the ANC in Transvaal in 1958, a position which we are told he was re-elected into by a narrow margin in 1959.
29. He was also one amongst the few accused to take the stand, as a witness during the Treason trial, and as an upright man who subscribed to revolutionary discipline and principle of his movement, he displayed his directness and unwavering conviction.
30. Later on, the lion of the East left Bethal to the Vaal, and was banished to Komatipoort closer to the border with Mozambique in the Ehlanzeni District of our Province, until he skipped the country to Swaziland, now Eswatini, until his demise in 1987.
31. In his memory, this District Municipality was aptly named after him, and for as long as we live, his name will never die!
32. Programme Director; indeed, history does not have blank pages, as those pages were filled by selfless deeds of the giants we are celebrating today. Those who refuse to drink from the fountain of our country's rich history, are indeed lost. We must continue to pay homage to all our struggle icons for their selfless contribution towards our liberation, freedom and democracy.

33. As I close, let me once again thank the MTPA, for having organised this Liberation Heritage Route celebration, and for also affording me this platform to contribute to the narration of the history of the liberation of South Africa and her people, through these two (2) towering outstanding figures we are celebrating today.
34. We do this, to contribute to the scant knowledge the youth and visitors of to this District and Province have, in terms of the versions of the history of our liberation, and to the actors who were engaged in these episodes of resistance. We salute Gert Sibande and Mahatma Gandhi!
35. *Let's grow Mpumalanga together* through tourism!

I thank you for listening!