We have assembled here in Gandhi’s Sevagram Ashram to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the meeting of Lanza del Vasto with Gandhi at Wardha, in 1937. I look upon this celebration as a precursor of a great event, that is, 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi. India and the world are preparing for ‘Gandhi 150’. The question is why we should celebrate the encounter between Gandhi and Lanza? This encounter was not an ordinary one. It was a turning point in the life of an Italian aristocrat, philosopher, poet and nonviolent activist who dedicated his entire life for spreading Gandhi’s message in the West. In spite of having all pleasures of life and having pursued doctoral education from the University of Pisa, Lanza was looking for a person who can guide him and make him understand the very mission of his life. He was very fond of travelling and finally he decided to go on a pilgrimage to India. His meeting with Gandhi and his three months stay at Wardha was a God send opportunity which changed the very course of his life. His search for alternatives and the establishment of the Community of Ark in Southern France in 1948 after his marriage can be seen as a direct result of his meeting and the stay with Mahatma Gandhi. It is to be noted that it was Gandhi who had given the name Shantidas to Lanza del Vasto, which precisely set the goal and mission of his life. His Community of Ark in France could be described rightly as a creative expression of his search for alternative living. The Ark communities could be looked upon as a European model of ashram on Gandhian lines.

His commitment to Gandhian principles was a life long one. It gave him direction and solutions to the problems confronting the western society due to the ills of modern industrial civilization. Being disillusioned with his community experiment, he decided to undergo his second pilgrimage to India and subsequently participated in Bhoodan movement led by Acharya Vinoba Bhave. His participation in Bhoodan movement was in itself a unique step. In India, we call agriculture as our culture. This movement was for providing land to the poor people who could earn their livelihood through agriculture. Our culture is marked by a spirit of sharing with others. ‘The others’ include not only the human beings but also the animal and plant kingdom or nature. The Universe includes human beings, nature and the animal world. Therefore, sharing with nature and animals should become a part and parcel of nonviolent and peaceful world. It should be a face to face society. The lifestyle of society should be based on need and not on greed. Need has an end but the greed is endless. Moreover, the distribution among people and other species should be equal. Equality here does not mean distribution in absolute terms. It is according to ones need. My hunger can be satisfied with two chapattis or two pieces of bread. A young person may need four pieces of bread or more than that. Therefore, in the name of equality, we cannot deny such requirements. The distribution or sharing should be equitable also.
According to both Gandhi and Shantidas, exploitation in any form amounts to violence. Shantidas' participation in Bhoodan was an expression of his commitment against exploitation of peasants by big land holders. The experience of Bhoodan for Shantidas was something like rejuvenation of his conviction on nonviolence and exploitation free society. His enriching experience during the Bhoodan Movement helped him to work with greater conviction, determination and enthusiasm and to reestablish his community experiment once again in France. He continued his relation with India and visited Gujarat Vidyapith in 1977. He delivered the Kamalnayan Bajaj lectures on ‘Science and Nonviolence’ at the Vidyapith as a tribute to his Master - Mahatma Gandhi. Today we are republishing these lectures as a part of the celebration. It is also befitting that an English translation of the book written by Frédéric Rognon viz. “Lanza del Vasto or Community Experimentation” along with other essays are being published for wider dissemination on this occasion. I understand that this book was originally published in 2013 in French by “Le Passager Clandestinas” a part of the series “the Precursors of Degrowth”?

Shantidas has used the word ‘community’ to represent his experiment or organization and movement. Can we say that there is proper communication and community feeling among the people or among the organizations in the present day society? In cities like Bombay, there is no community feeling. It can be rightly described as neighbourhood without relationship. Are we living together? At the most, we can say that we are following the principle “live and let live”. Gandhi’s Ashram and Shantidas’ ‘community experiment’ were based on the idea of “live and help others to live”. The ashram or community believes in sharing with others and helping each other.

His community shares a deep ecological consciousness. We use the word “mother earth”. Do we treat earth as our mother? If we are treating earth as our mother, how we can exploit it? Our mother earth is facing a crisis due to pollution of different forms. In India, at least 25 lakh people die every year due to pollution related diseases. Pollution leads to global warming and various forms of natural disasters. Therefore, protection of mother earth or environment is a social responsibility of every one of us. It should not be confined to environmentalists alone. What is required is to think globally and act locally. Our vision should be global, but our action should start from our locality or neighbourhood. It makes sense because we know the problems of our local people very well. Science and technology have brought people closure to each other. Is it for increasing friendship or using weapons against our neighbours? The fact is that, gradually neighbours are becoming enemies of each other.

Due to the consistent efforts of Lanza del Vasto, the Community of Ark took an international character having Friends and allies in different parts of the globe. He conducted a number of nonviolent struggles including the well known campaign of Larzac which was against the encroaching agricultural land by the French Army meant for military expansion. Due to his unique technique of nonviolent mobilization, this struggle will be ever remembered in the annals not only of French history but also that of Europe. Lanza del Vasto, popularly known as the French Gandhi, was an epitome of peace and non-violence.

Gandhi adopted nonviolence as a principle creed not because he has no weapons or arms. He adopted nonviolence as a principle and creed because he shed all fears of arms and futility of armaments in resolving the issues. Thus Gandhi’s concept of nonviolence is a positive one demanding changes in ones own life. Nonviolence is not a negative concept, though the prefix ‘non’ is used. Similarly, peace is also not a negative concept. We use the word ‘shanti’ or ‘peace’ in the sense of deep silence and calmness. It doesn’t mean that peace is a negative concept. It is an irony that one of the government departments dealing with arms is known as department of defence. But it is really an offence department. It is said that every nation develops armaments
and weaponry systems for self defence. This is so, why we develop weapons like atom bomb, which can destroy the nation and people as a whole. How can we justify the stop-piling of nuclear weapons? Gandhi and Shantidas fought against all kinds of weapons including the nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

Anyone who undertakes the study of lives of Mahatma and Lanza del Vasto could easily see the common grounds in the thoughts and actions of these two great personalities. As a part of the celebration we have chosen two important areas viz. ‘nonviolent economy’ and ‘peaceful world’. These two areas were close to their hearts and they were lifetime concerns for both Gandhi and Lanza. In fact in their lifetime, they tried their level best for the realisation of these goals.

The whole world is going through a global economic crisis. The crisis is too profound and ever-intensifying one. The poor people all over the globe are exposed to harmful effects of consumerism, cut-throat competition and profit oriented society created by globalization, liberalization and privatization. It is resulting in widening gap between the rich and the poor. It is very clear that globalisation only takes into account the interests of multinational companies and global financial institutions of developed countries. The welfare of the common person or what Gandhi called ‘Daridra Narayan’ was always kept away from its purview. Our markets are flooded with the products of multinational companies. Let us not forget that the multinational companies are neither working for any particular nation nor for the benefit of people in countries in which they are expanding their business empires. Capturing the market by ‘hook or crook’ is the main aim of multinational companies. Exploitation, dominations and selfishness are the main driving forces behind their activities all over the globe.

‘Consumerism’ has become almost a catchword of globalised economy. In this globalised and liberalised economic context, we have to place the nonviolent economy in the forefront as an alternative mode of economic development. There is a growing realisation among sensitive minds all over the world that we can no longer go ahead with the present kind of unjust and unquotable economic system. That is the reason why the UN set Sustainable Development Goals which needs to be achieved by 2030. It aims to end poverty and hunger, protect the ecosystem, peace and prosperity for the future generations. Therefore, it is quite appropriate that we discuss about the nonviolent economy visualized by Mahatma Gandhi and Lanza del Vasto. New thinking is absolutely necessary, if we want to understand or traverse the path shown by Gandhi and Lanza.

Today, unfortunately, in our market economy, horse power has greater value than man power. As a result, man is becoming a stranger in his own world. The nonviolent economy visualised by Gandhi and Lanza del Vasto was not an economy based on exchange values. Exchange value depends upon price of a commodity. There is a saying that cynic is a person who knows the price of everything and the value of none. In the present capitalist economy, we are also becoming like cynics. The term Capitalism in itself is a misnomer. Today, capitalist is a person who has the least capital of his own. His capital is borrowed from banks, money lenders and from the society. Thus, the market economy of today is based on money power, muscle power and mafia power. What is needed is a Gandhian economy based on ethics and morality or what Kumarappa called ‘the Economy of Permanence.’ It is nothing but an economy of peace based on justice and equity.

The need for a peaceful society and peaceful world order could not be over emphasised. We are living in a world in which there is a permanent threat to peace in the form of international and cross-border terrorism, nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. The
whole humanity now realises the danger posed by nuclear weapons. The treaty of banning nuclear weapons initiated by the UN which opened for signature on 20th September 2017 is a move in right direction. It should be signed and ratified by all countries including those possessing nuclear weapons and their partners. I hope this conference will appeal to the whole humanity to put pressure on respective governments to act upon this goal. This conference should not end with mere academic discussions. It should come up with a programme of action for the whole world to attain the goals of 'nonviolent economy and peaceful world'. I need not have to elaborate on these aspects because a number of experts in the field are here to elaborate and work upon it. The soil in which Mahatma moved gives us inspiration and food for thought and action. I am sure that this conference will be a precursor for a global nonviolent movement which could be a real tribute to Lanza and Mahatma. I wish this Conference all the success.