

A Biographical Event: Rev. Dr. King's Pilgrimage in India

Written by Dr. Panakal Ph.D
Thursday, 26 July 2012 15:12



People have been traveling to India for thousands of years; they were lured by its landscape, rich heritage and history. They were also fascinated by the globe's oldest culture, gems of classical wisdom, wealth on land and precious metals buried deep under the ground. The travelers included ancient Chinese, the Greek thinker Megasthene, the Persians, the Romans and today hordes of young people with backpacks from all over the world.

If in the past the long voyage to India had been limited to a coterie of individuals, in our times the situation has changed with safe and affordable air travel resulting in the increasing number of people visiting India. The long waiting lines at airport ticket counters, crowded airports and planes would attest to this fact.

“THE LAND OF GANDHI”

On February 10, 1959, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King landed in New Delhi prompted by his vehement desire to see Gandhiji's homeland, to gather relevant data on Satyagraha or the most enlightened political-spiritual ideology of the last century, in contrast to Nazism and Fascism

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ravaging Europe. He wanted also to hold discussions with India's leaders. Upon arrival at the Palam airport in New Delhi, he said: "To other countries I may go as a tourist, but I come to India as a pilgrim. It is because of Mahatma Gandhi, a truly great man of our times." The following is a compendium of his memorable visit to a vast region of the world, India; he termed "the land of Gandhi".

After months of negotiation, a generous grant from the American Friends Society or the Quaker community financed his travel to India, touring and benefiting from a ship-load of experience gained on the subcontinent, from February 10 to March 12, 1959. His busy travel schedule included a visit to Raj Ghat, a series of lectures at renowned Indian universities, interviews with journalists who gave him wide and objective press coverage. In addition, he went to Gandhi's village and two villages established by Vinobha Bhave as part of his Bhoodan Movement. "Bhave," according to Dr. King, "was a great spiritual man, moving in a humble way to keep the spirit of Gandhi's philosophy alive." The American leader benefited much from the humanitarian attitude of Bhave in the distribution of land to the landless as a part of Sarvodaya.

Rev. Dr. King had been Gandhiji's most renowned globally known disciple, even winning Nobel Prize for peace, and espousing the Gandhian ideology as the basis of his home-grown civil rights movement. African-Americans had no qualms in embracing the fundamental values of India's nonviolent ideology under the aegis of the Nobel laureate. Racism is violence of the mind that can have gory physical manifestations.

In the last century, the world had witnessed two highly significant nonviolent campaigns – one in India and the other in the United States. While Gandhiji had strengthened Satyagraha (a Sanskrit term generally known as *nonviolent resistance* or *civil resistance*) for India's freedom, Dr. King inaugurated 'Neethigraha'

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for justice for African Americans. Yet, these two pivotal events did not receive the significance they actually deserve in history books, nor did they become part of the educational curricula to underline the importance of employing nonviolent methods for conflict resolution. Consequently, many leaders always lean to the side of violence, as the leaning Tower of Pisa, to resolve problems prolonging violent agitations at various levels. In history leaning towers and buildings have tumbled down.

RESPONSE AND HOSPITALITY.

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While in India, the honorable guest said that his hosts in the subcontinent showered on him “the most generous hospitality imaginable.” Notwithstanding the fact that he was visibly moved by the poverty of many people, he also conceded: “They [the Indians] are kindly people. They do not abuse one another, verbally or physically as readily as we do. We saw but one fist fight during our entire stay.... The Indians who are rich, have luxurious houses, landed estates, wear fine clothes and show evidences of overeating.” (Large bellies).

Certain landmarks in the annals of India's vast and nonviolent record book such as the Gandhian Quit India Movement and Salt Satyagraha had profoundly influenced the late Rev. Dr. King and his philosophy. Gandhiji embarked on those two historic campaigns of the world's largest nonviolent movement, with the unprecedented endorsement by the Indian people whose political destination had been to end the unlawful British colonial policy of conquer, rob, divide and leave. The considerations of legal validity in the policy of the kingdom of colonizers had been as irrelevant as beauty and charm in a zoo keeper.

Visits to certain regions and conversations with other human beings can alter our outlook on life and its divergent aspects. Rev. Dr. King's memorable voyage and sojourn in India (including Kerala) as well as the impressions he had formed about the land of Gandhi need to be quoted in order to assess the full value and impact the visit had on his nonviolent struggle in Alabama and elsewhere in the United States.

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Dr. King's visit to India in 1959 was a significant event in his life. He was inspired by Gandhi's non-violent resistance and the concept of Satyagraha. This visit led to his famous "I Have a Dream" speech and his leadership in the American Civil Rights Movement. For more information, see panakal@vtdemocrats.org or visit www.vtdemocrats.org.