



Dr. Thomas Panakal was born in India. He studied Economics, Political Science and World History in his homeland. He received his Ph.D from the School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies at the Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam (in the state of Kerala, India). Dr. Panakal immigrated to Canada. He completed his post-graduate studies in Canada and the U.S.A. in Political Science, International Relations and Education. He also studied Anthropology. In other words, Dr. Thomas Panakal is a multidisciplinary. He taught World History and English for many years in Montreal (Canada). Dr. Panakal received a Gold Medal from the Rotary International for the best essay on the United Nations Organization, and he is the recipient of the largest number of prizes in the graduating class at college, Kerala University. He has written several books and more than 300 articles published in *The Journal of Gandhian Studies* (New Delhi), *Canadian-India Times* (Ottawa), *Vancouver Sun*

Exclusive Interview With The Prominent Historian Dr. Thomas Panakal, Ph.D

Written by Patricia Turnier

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(Vancouver, Canada),

Femina and Youth Times

(Mumbai), Alive (New Delhi),

Guardian

(Trinidad, West Indies) and others. Dr. Thomas Panakal has served as a visiting member of the Faculty of Mary Mata College in India and has conducted classes and seminars at Mahatma Gandhi University attended by students from outside India. The historian has been interviewed on many occasions on radio and television stations in Montreal such as CJNT (Indo-Montreal Magazine programme). Presently, Dr. Panakal works on the editorial board of

Bharat Times

(an Indian newspaper from Montreal). It is important to note that he is a regular columnist for this publication. In 2009, Dr. Panakal received an award (for his articles) from

Bharat Times

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Dr. Panakal is an expert on subjects related to India's heritage and its link to the present. The historian is an ardent believer in the powerful Gandhian non-violent ideology and the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. Panakal has given speeches on Gandhian ideology at Concordia University (Montreal), in Germany, Switzerland, the United States and the West Indies. The historian is partially handicapped after a serious car accident in New York; he suffers from a neurological condition called syringomyelia which affects nerves. Dr. Panakal has 1.5 use of his hands. However, his condition hasn't prevented him from being involved in the community and sharing his knowledge with other people. The 8th of February 2010 we had the honor to meet him in Montreal for this interview.

Interview

conducted by Patricia Turnier, Editor-In-Chief, LL.M (Master's degree in law)

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Patricia Turnier, LL.M talks to Dr. Panakal, Ph.D :



P.T. Your interest in Indian history and its heritage started to take roots in high school. Can you tell us more about that?

Dr. P. My interest in the history of India started to develop at home, in high school and college. The interests we develop early in our lives can have a lasting impact on our existence and can channel us in specific directions. We had to study Vedas or the world's oldest known literature, in addition to the lives of kings and benevolent rulers. The history and activities of Emperor Ashoka, (304 BC to 232 BC) a noble king, had left a deep imprint on my early mental development. Human minds require good nutrition for proper growth. Emperor Ashoka was a noble man, nonviolent and believed in just administration of his subjects who had nothing but admiration for his sense of equity. India's official symbol on the flag and government buildings is Ashoka Chakra (Ashoka Wheel) that symbolizes justice, order and peace. The more I read about the great Emperor, the more I became engrossed in his life and philosophy. He ruled almost all of India. After witnessing the destruction and violence during the Kalinga War (261 BC), he had embraced Buddhism and became a true devotee of ahimsa or nonviolence, love, truth and vegetarianism. Emperor Ashoka's (Ashoka Maharaj) crucial role in Indian history cannot be erased. It still remains a part of the educational curriculum. Furthermore, the ideas of hermits, Indian mathematicians, astronomers, Nobel Prize winners, philosophers and pundits have been pivotal in my appreciation of Indian history and heritage. In our own times, Mahatma Gandhi led the world's largest nonviolent campaign to end colonial molestation of the subcontinent. The nonviolent campaign is a part of the modern history of India.

P.T. Jewish people never encountered anti-Semitism in India and it has been said that it is the only place in the world where they have been able to live peacefully for thousands of years. Dr. Panakal, you strongly believe in India's highly peaceful heritage and its major contributions to the progress and harmonious existence of mankind. Can you elaborate on that?

Dr. P. This is an interesting question. Let me try to answer it in two distinct parts. One is from an historical perspective and the other, from the contemporary angle. Now, from ancient times India has kept its doors open to refugees irrespective of their national or ethnic roots, and yes, devoid of economic motives. The policy had always been humanitarian, pure and simple. Zoroastrians, Jews and others came to India in the bygone era searching for a safe haven. Even today Jews live in different parts of India. Look at history. Different groups of people, and not just Jews, have been persecuted in the world, persecuted in their own lands of birth. In 1959, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and a great peacemaker, welcomed Dalai Lama and his disciples who fled Tibet to India to escape Chinese incursions into Tibet. Turning refugees away is against Indian ethos. And you will find Tibetan people in Delhi living and working in India facing no social barriers. Look at it this way. In the wee hours of night your neighbour's house is on fire. There is absolutely no doubt that other neighbours will gladly open their doors to the victims fleeing from the rising flames. This is the same case with refugees who flee from rising political flames caused by ethnic imbalances or political differences. The refugee problem is old and worldwide.

P.T. In 2001, you wrote your thesis based on how Dr. MLK was influenced by Gandhi for the Civil Rights Movement. Why was it important for you to write about this topic and how your thesis was received among the readers?

Dr. P. The title of the doctoral dissertation was *The Triumph of Satyagraha: An Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi's Influence on the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America*

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I was fortunate to receive the degree from Mahatma Gandhi University in India. The university has 150,000 students enrolled in 232 affiliated colleges in different part of Kerala (a state in India). I received help and support from several individuals, not to mention my own family. Why was the topic important? Gandhiji led the world's largest nonviolent campaign to free India from the grip of colonialism. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King led the world's second largest nonviolent campaign to free African-Americans from the grip of racism. Colonialism and racism are close relatives as they both deny freedom and justice to individuals. In 1959, Rev. Dr. King arrived in India. At the airport in Delhi he said: "To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim. It is because of Mahatma Gandhi, a truly great man of our age."

Together, they demonstrated the power and efficacy of nonviolence to resist widespread social injustice, to transform society in a peaceful manner. Society grows. Society evolves. We cannot stop the wheels of growth and evolution. Society needs constant repair to fix many of its mechanical problems. It requires oiling. Really, I do not know how people have responded to

Written by Patricia Turnier

Wednesday, 11 August 2010 21:27

the thesis. But I hope the reaction would be positive.

"Gandhiji led the world's largest nonviolent campaign to free India from the grip of colonialism." Re

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P.T. I am very surprised that you didn't receive any feedback from your readers. They are probably shy to express themselves. My next question is: Why do you think we don't hear enough about how Gandhi was against other kind of oppressions such as the ones regarding women?

Dr. P. This is an another good question. I hope my answer would in some way remove the lack of understanding of Gandhiji's views on another relevant problem, the problem of gender equality. The renowned Indian leader is known to the world as the greatest advocate of nonviolent resistance. Nevertheless, individuals have only a modicum of understanding of Gandhiji's persistent attempts to seal wide cracks in gender inequalities. Mindful of the dark side of gender inequality, the renowned Indian leader said :

"Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal to me as his abuse of the better half of humanity, the female sex, not the weaker sex ".

He also said. *"A loving mother will sleep on wet bed for the sake of her children".*

"Gandhiji inaugurated his nonviolent movement in South Africa for justice for the Indian settlers livi

Dr. Panakal

P.T. These adages are really moving, beautiful and powerful.

Dr. P. Yes, definitely! Gandhiji inaugurated his nonviolent movement in South Africa for justice for the Indian settlers living in that part of the world. Under his stewardship he encouraged women to be proactive and they were in the forefront of his campaigns. Gandhiji once stated "their charm" worked well. Later in India Gandhiji's anti-colonial campaigns, on regional and national levels, included numerous women one of whom was Sarojini Naidu, a female politician (also a political leader and a poetess), his great supporter and the first female Governor of Uttar Pradesh, a large Indian province. Equally Gandhiji was also opposed to colonial exploitation and to any form of discrimination based on religious differences or castes.

P.T. You wrote about Gandhi's activism in South Africa in your article *Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa* (Journal of Gandhian Studies, 2006). Can you share with us the main work that Gandhi accomplished over there and how this experience influenced him for the colossal combat he did afterward in India?

Dr. P. Gandhiji, the lawyer, went to South Africa to put an end to unlawful attitude toward the Indian merchants and other Indian settlers who were not permitted to travel to certain provinces in that part of the world. He defied the unjust laws. The primary objective of laws is justice. But we have iniquitous laws in circulation in society. The punishment he received for questioning the flawed law was to dig holes in public parks under blazing sun. The Indian leader, a highly successful lawyer, had suffered a great deal in South Africa for the welfare of Indian people who showered him with gifts including costly jewelry before he set sail to India. Based on his successful campaigns in South Africa, he later galvanized millions of people in India which became free from colonial mismanagement on August 15, 1947.

P.T. Can you talk to us about your latest book which has been released : *Quotes of Mahatma Gandhi* ?

Dr. P. The book titled, *Quotes of Mahatma Gandhi*, was published a few weeks ago in Delhi. It is a great honour for me to have the book published with the collaboration of Dr. Anil Dutta Mishra in Delhi and two other academics: Dr. A.B.S.V. Ranga Rao, programme-director

(Gandhian Study Centre, Andhra University, Vishakhapatnam) and Dr. Sohan Raj Tater, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Singhania University, Rajasthan).

Gandhi's quotations contained in the book, or a wide range of views, offer an insight into Gandhian philosophy –and his mind. Our words, views and actions are a true reflection of our minds.

P.T. In 1961, Dag Hammarskjöld received a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize in 1961. Since the end of 2009, Michael Jackson's fans have an online petition for a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize. As an historian, do you think that Gandhi deserves also a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize?

Dr. P. History, with or without our knowledge, is in the making every day everywhere. Although Gandhiji was a genuine candidate for any peace award, ironically he never received a Nobel Prize for Peace. We have to remember another aspect. So far, more than 1,000 books have been written on his life and activities in South Africa and India with the focus on his nonviolent philosophy. Furthermore, as a tribute to his enduring legacy of peace, the United Nations organization has declared October 2, his birthday, as the International Day of Nonviolence. After his death hundreds of institutions have been named after him and his statues can be found in several cities of the world. Attempts have been made to give Gandhiji posthumous Nobel Prize for Peace. Even Gen. D MacArthur had praise for Gandhiji and his pragmatic ideology rooted in nonviolence. So did Nobel laureates such as novelist Pearl S. Buck, playwright Bernard Shaw, physicist Dr. C.V. Raman and Albert Einstein who had admired Gandhiji. Others, who were shocked at his assassination and expressed condolences, were Chiang Kaishek, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Dalai Lama, Jawahar Lal Nehru, King Farooq of Egypt, Harry S. Truman, M.A. Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, Pope Pius XII and Lord Mountbatten. The Mahatma did a colossal work for peace in his lifetime. In this regard, I definitely think that a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize would be appropriate.

P.T. If Gandhi was still alive, what do you think he would say about the ongoing religious conflicts between India and the Pakistan state created in 1947 which occurred before his death, the partial lost of Kashmir to Pakistan (including China later)?

Dr. P. Gandhiji would have continued his attempts in a peaceful manner to resolve the difficult issue which has been plaguing Indo-Pakistan relationships for the last several decades. We should take note of the fact that India has had Muslim presidents, judges, lawyers and wealthy

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Wednesday, 11 August 2010 21:27

Muslims living in India facing no opposition, living freely. Who does not want normal relations between Pakistan and India? But the present political situation will not result in any major conflict unless there is outside interference. Both India and Pakistan want to prevent major conflicts which can give rise to additional problems. The diagnosis is going on albeit with no effective remedy.

"If we believe that eternal peace is a pious dream, eternal warfare is a long nightmare." This is the

Dr. Panakal

P.T. In 1989, you wrote « Abolition of War ». What are your main recommendation to abolish war in the world and what can you say to people who think that it is utopian?

Dr. P. This is an important question. War is not a part of our nature, but war is a part of our culture. The society that glorifies violence creates violence and vice versa. The entire universe heaved a collective sigh of relief when pacts were signed to end the history's two major wars, one in 1918 and the other in 1945. If we have also prepared blueprints for wars, we have also forged additional blueprints to put an end to wars. Peace is thousand miles far from a utopian ideal. Some utopian ideals become realities faster than we seem to think while others come at a slow pace. Even two decades ago, no one was able to buy a phone card for four dollars and talk to a member of the family or a friend four thousand miles far from the living room. Women and men in outer space sending messages and pictures back to earth was beyond the wildest imagination of our ancestors traveling in covered wagons pulled by horses.

If we believe that eternal peace is a pious dream, eternal warfare is a long nightmare. This is the reality. Mankind can live without war. But mankind cannot live without peace. Soldiers are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan with serious emotional problems. Peaceful conditions do not result in tragic nervous conditions. Taking time to appreciate the universality of human nature would help us find common grounds to resolve common problems. We are human beings from the womb to the tomb, human beings unto one another. No infant anywhere in the globe is born holding passports and visas from the embassy in her/his soft and pink palms.

P.T. This is a powerful answer.

Dr. P. Powerful questions require powerful answers.

P.T. [Laughs] To finish, can you talk to us about your new book which will be published soon regarding the study of human development in nationalism war and peace?

Dr. P. The title of the new book is, *Ananta Bhoomi* (Sanskrit), *Terra Eterna* (Latin) or *Eternal Globe* is a 610-pages book in text, the culmination of 9-10 years of research, reflection, travels to different parts of the world, conversations with people on land, ships from diverse backgrounds in different locations and observations. In travels, I have been struck by the common threads of human nature. As I speak to you, the book is in print. The book has made a modest attempt to explain the nature of war, its prodigious and tragic economic consequences, the need to prevent its use as a medium to end conflict situations leading to wars and the unavoidable need to strengthen international laws. Presently, we have only one World Court at the Hague and its storage capacity is limited to resolve conflicts. We can establish its benches –branches- in a few volatile areas of the world. Nations in the conventional legal and political sense may no longer be considered nations, but DISTAS

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or geographical units of the world, with their distinct rules and regulations as opposed to laws in strict national entities. Our universality is older and deeper than our nationality.

P.T. Thank you Dr. Panakal for this fabulous and informative interview!

Dr. P. I also thank you for this opportunity.

Comments on the book *India – Eternal Light: Heritage for Modern Age*.

"This is an interesting and good book." *Professor James T. Crown –Retd- New York University, New York, N.Y.*

"A beautiful book on India" *Dawn T. Watson, Canadian songwriter and entertainer*

"Dr. Panakal's book is informative and touching. It is a beautifully written book with great insight—especially the chapter recognizing the place of women in society. " *Mrs. A. Day, housewife, Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

"The author deserves credit for his work and interest for writing this thought provoking book." *Dr. S. Gill, Indo-Canadian poet and writer, Cornwall, Ontario, Canada*

"A marvelous book with an inspiring collection of thoughts. I enjoyed "India, Eternal Light (Heritage for Modern Age)" by Dr. Thomas Panakal, the first time I read it. I became thoroughly absorbed in it the second time I read it. The book has three dimensions: length, width, and its content has depth. Every page of the book is worth its price. This book is better than 10 documentary specials on television." *Stan Schwartz, School of Extended Learning, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

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[1] For further information, go to: <http://www.mgutheses.in/page/?q=T%200875&search=&page=&rad=#>

[2] DISTA is the new term for nation to reduce the strength of nationalism. Thus, the term nation has traditionally been highly responsible for divisions in the world community.