

Mani Bhavan and Gandhi

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I visited Mani Bhavan (name of Gandhi museum in Mumbai) recently. It is the place where the Mahatma (the great soul), our Mahatma, or rather the Mahatma of the world was staying, whenever in then Bombay, for about seventeen years – from 1917 to 1934. From Mani Bhavan, some of the historic movements including the Satygraha (literally meaning love for truth, it may also imply peaceful resistance) against the Rowlatt Act (a repressive British law) in 1919, non-cooperation movement 1921-1922, the Civil Disobedience movement 1932 were conceived.

It was indeed a novel experience. This part of Bombay (now Mumbai), where Mani Bhavan is located, was the real Bombay as it was originally developed by the British. Hence, while walking one will definitely come across old buildings, bearing marks of old construction, old style, perhaps the Victorian style. After getting down at Grant Road railway station, I crossed over to the west and walked on the newly constructed foot bridge and walked around some hundred meters to the left (there is a short route which I discovered later, when I visited later) and then getting down near August Kranti Maidan (revolution garden), famous as from here Mahatma Gandhi had in August 1942 given the call for ‘Quit India’ against the British. I strolled in the garden for about few minutes, and saw the memorial constructed in 1970 in one corner of the garden. It was the garden which witnessed some 70 years ago, one of the most powerful movements in the world, finally convincing the British to give up the Indian empire. I could visualize, though in my own way, how the Mahatma might have stood in the centre of the garden and calling the Indians to throw the mighty yoke of colonialism and imperialism, though in a particular Gandhian way. Gandhi from here gave that final call ‘Do or Die.’

Mani Bhavan is something which, I recommend, everyone across divides should visit at least once. It is a kind of pilgrimage. It opens one’s eyes to the message of that great soul. I remember while reading the copy of his letter dated 23 July 1939 to Adolph Hitler in the first floor of the museum in a plea to stop the war during the second world war, Gandhi was in his usual self, polite, humble and even his language showed no antipathy or dislike of Hitler. He wrote the letter very carefully, and with a powerful peaceful mind, and pleading to the dictator to stop the violence. One must read the letter not to read the style of Gandhi, but even how the powerful message can be conveyed in simple ways. I am reproducing the letter here:

“Dear Friend,

Friends have been urging me to write to you for the sake of humanity. But I have resisted their request, because of the feeling that any letter from me would be an impertinence. Something tells me that I must not calculate and that I must make my appeal for whatever it my worth.

It is quite clear that you are today the one person in the world who can prevent a war which may reduce humanity to the savage state. Must you pay that price for an object however worthy it may appear to you to be? Will you listen to the appeal of one who has deliberately shunned the method of war not without considerable success? Any way I anticipate your forgiveness, if I have erred in writing to you."

Below that letter, there was copy of another letter of Gandhi dated 1 July 1942 to then US president Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is a big letter in comparison to letter to Hitler. Gandhi expressed his appreciation of some of the values of the West, recounted how he was influenced by the ideas of Thoreau and Ruskin, and how he was educated in London, etc. However, he did not fully support the policies of the Allies during the second world war. In a way, he appealed Roosevelt to use his power on the British to withdraw from India. To quote him,

"I venture to think that the Allied declaration that the Allies are fighting to make the world safe for freedom of the individual and for democracy sounds hollow, so long as India and, for that matter, Africa are exploited by Great Britain, and America has the Negro problem in her home. But in order to avoid all complications, in my proposal I have confined myself only to India. If India becomes free, the rest must follow, if it does not happen simultaneously."

Gandhi's message is crystal clear throughout the photographs and paintings and other items in the museum. At one place, he says that 'if I die from the bullet of a mad man, then I will rather smile with name of God on my lips.' Such courage, I think, few human beings can display, or shelter in heart. Indeed he followed his words. When killed by a fanatic on 30 January 1948, Gandhi joined his palms as in prayer and uttered the name of God! And he says cowardice is a crime! I read the message of Albert Einstein on Gandhi, and he rightly says, hardly future generation will believe that such a man of flesh and blood ever walked on earth!

Below is reproduced the message (undated) of Einstein:

"A leader of his people, unsupported by any outward authority; a politician whose success rests not upon craft or mastery of technical devices, but simply on the convincing power of his personality; a victorious fighter who has always scorned the use of force; a man of wisdom and humility, armed with resolve and inflexible consistency, who has devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people and the betterment of their lot; a man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human being, and thus at all times risen superior.

Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

The photographs portrayed various aspects of life of Gandhi. I saw medals he was awarded for his services in Africa, particularly during the Boer war, 1899-1900, and the Service Medal, 1906. The paintings displaying his humiliation as he was thrown out from his

first class rail car in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa (well portrayed in Shyam Benegal's film *Making of the Mahatma*), his fight there against the discrimination, his Tolstoy farm (including his letter exchanges with Leo Tolstoy), are well preserved in that museum. His role in Indian freedom struggle, his arrest from the terrace-tent of Mani Bhavan, his visit to communal violence affected areas in Bengal, Bihar, are well depicted in the museum. I was moved by that particular painting, belonging to both Hindu and Muslim fanatics in Bengal, surrendering their arms before Mahatma Gandhi as he was on fast unto death to stop communal violence. Such was his personality! His power was his simplicity, honesty and conviction. Similarly his Dandi March in 1930 to break discriminatory salt law was equally heart thrilling. Gandhi, then 61 years old, along with some of his followers walked about 261 miles from Sabaramati Ashram in Ahmadabad to Dandi in the west coast of India to break discriminatory salt law. Another picture, in which another great stalwart of Indian freedom struggle, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, also called Frontier Gandhi, was sitting on the bed side of Gandhi before departing for his home place in Pakistan after the partition of the British India. About Nehru, Gandhi is full of praise and says when he dies, Jawaharlal will speak his voice. Perhaps that conviction and that trust in Nehru, led Gandhi to choose him to be independent India's first prime minister. And, I believe, Nehru lived up to Gandhi's trust on him.

At one place, I saw copies of front pages of various news papers such as *Young India*, *Indian Opinion*, *Harijan*, *Harijan Sewak*, which Gandhi during the Indian freedom struggle. Gandhi took over *Navjivan* weekly and *Young India* in Gujarati and English respectively in this building in 1919. We all know how Gandhi's heart was always concerned for the upliftment of Harijans (a name meaning people of God, which Gandhi used to call lower caste people or Dalits). One can imagine from the life of Gandhi how much he was active. It is written somewhere in the museum that while writing whenever his right hand was tired, Gandhi used to write in his left hand without taking rest. In the thick of action, as he was actively involved in the freedom struggle, he could manage to read and write volumes after volumes.

In the museum I saw the painting of Srimad Rajchandra (1867-1901), an ascetic who influenced Gandhi so deeply. Gandhi wrote in 1930 about this ascetic who died at a young age of 34, "Srimad Rajchandra captivated my heart in religious matters as no other man has till now. In moulding my inner life Tolstoy and Ruskin vied with Kavi (poet) Rajchandra. But Kavi's influence was undoubtedly deeper."

I could see postal stamps from almost every country of the world to mark the birthday centenary of Gandhi in 1969-1970. There are also posters, pamphlets, some quoting Gandhi, to mark the occasion. Some of those quotations are very powerful and much relevant today. They are perhaps powerful antidotes to communal violence and parochialism that have wrecked havoc in India in recent years. Gandhi in these messages exhorts countrymen to think from a wider Indian identity and perspective rather than as a Hindu or Muslim, or Marathi or Gujarati, or any such other narrow divisions.

Gandhi's love for his wife and parents is well depicted in the paintings and pictures in the museum. At one place, after the death of his wife and great companion for 62 years Kasturba Gandhi (whom Gandhi called Ba), Gandhi said 'it is difficult to imagine life

without Ba.' In a painting, the head of deceased Kasturba was lying in rest on the lap of Gandhi. Before going to London for study, Gandhi took an oath before his mother. His mother allowed him to go but on the condition that 'he will not touch wine, woman and meat.' And Gandhi kept the promise. In this, he was in the image of his mother, whom he describes as a woman who keeps all the promises, even the toughest. At some place he says during his service to his father for about five years when he was ill, Gandhi used to discuss many issues with him. There is a painting in which the teenage Gandhi kneels down before his father asking forgiveness for theft, which his father accepted, in fact appreciated the confession of his son.

There are many other interesting things as well in the museum. Gandhi's meeting with famous personalities like Romain Rolland, Charlie Chaplin, Rabindranath Tagore, his stay with working class people of London for about eight weeks are well depicted in the paintings and pictures in the museum. In one of the photographs it is shown that Rolland was playing Beethoven's symphony at the request of Gandhi in Geneva.

Some very interesting things I also found in the galleries. In the first floor, one can see a copy of Gandhi's passport to visit to London in 1931 to attend Round Table Conference. In the passport his citizenship was written as 'British protected subject' (perhaps that was the status of all Indians then), his height five feet four inches, his occupation as 'farmer (bar-at-law) non practicing.' There are many such interesting things one can find in Mani Bhavan. In one picture Gandhi was sitting like a stone as one of the renowned sculptors Joe Davidson was drawing his painting in 1931. There are in the museum replicas such as bowels, utensils, knives, etc. which Gandhi was using while staying in jail.

In Gandhi's living room on the second floor, one can see from the glass the original Charkha (the spinning wheel, Gandhi's symbol of self-dependence) he was using, his bed on the floor, his Kadam (wooden slipper), his book stand, and many other things. I imagined Gandhi while viewing that room. The room is still there, the great soul has departed, but his ideas still reverberate in the world. We all know how great leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela and many others were influenced by him. I remember reading somewhere how one of the great peace activists of our time Johan Galtung started crying at the news of the departure of the great soul.

The US President, Barack Obama during his visit to Mumbai last year in November paid tribute to Gandhi in Mani Bhavan. In the museum is adorned a stone (stone of hope, from Martin Luther King Jr. memorial) presented by Barack and Michelle Obama to the museum.

It was a great experience indeed! I wish every person believing in peace must visit the museum and feel Gandhi and learn to follow his messages. Hope, people with radical ideas come to the museum and learn from the ideas of the great soul. If this happens, which I pray, we will not have wars and violence. Gandhi, the visit to museum made me further convinced, is much more relevant in today's world in which we are witnessing violence almost on daily basis almost in every place. Which peace loving citizen will not agree with Gandhi when he says in peace lies the salvation of mankind, not in violence!

About the Author

Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra is a Ph.D. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is author of *India Russia Partnership: Kashmir, Chechnya and Issues of Convergence* (2006) and *Central Eurasia: Geopolitics, Compulsions and Connections* (2008) and co-author of *Conflict in Kashmir and Chechnya: Political and Humanitarian Dimensions* (2007) and *Kashmir Across LOC* (2008). He has also co-edited *Afro-Asian Conflicts: Changing Contours, Costs and Consequences* (2008). His other published works include *Mapping Transitional Justice in Kashmir: Drivers, Initiatives and Challenges* (2010, OTJR, University of Oxford, UK), *Contested Border and Division of Families in Kashmir: Contextualizing the Ordeal of the Kargil Women* (2009, Co-author) and *Kargil Displaced of Akhnoor in Jammu and Kashmir: Enduring Ordeal and Bleak Future* (2006, Co-author) funded by Internal Displacement and Monitoring Centre, Geneva. He is on the Editorial Board of *Journal of Eurasian Studies* and *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in Social Sciences*. Aurobinda is member of many international networks including Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Network, Action Asia, International Mediating and Negotiating Operational Agency and Transcend International. Aurobinda visited Moscow University in 2003-2004. From 2005 to 2007, he was Fellow at the University of Jammu and the editor of quarterly *Across LOC*. He was a Visiting Fellow at Institute for Conflict Research, Belfast in November 2008. In 2010 Aurobinda was Charles Wallace Fellow at Queen's University, Belfast. He is currently associated with the Centre for Central Eurasian Studies, University of Mumbai, India.