

Note To The Readers

The following write up is a compilation of my thoughts on Mahatma Gandhi which I had carried with me for years together. Finally I have been able to give some shape to those thoughts. I considered it appropriate to publish the write up in the year marking 150th birth anniversaries of both Mahatma and Kasturba Gandhi. This is essentially meant for young readers who do not know much about the Mahatma.

It is possible that there are some factual errors and mistakes in the write up. I shall, therefore, be grateful for corrections and suggestions, if any, from the readers.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE MAHATMA

I have never seen Gandhi; nor I have heard him speak while he was alive. My generation was born after Gandhi was assassinated. I came to know of Gandhi mainly through the eyes and ears of others. However, I distinctly recall his voice through 'Gandhi Marg" broadcasted by Akashvani long ago, waking us children in the mornings.

It has always puzzled me as to how a shy, awkward and self-conscious boy would be transformed as Mahatma later. /m How did 'truth' and ' non violence' come to occupy a central position in Gandhi's life? Gandhi was born in a prosperous family ,but how did he come to work for the poor and become their voice? To find answers to these questions one has to closely study his thoughts and actions at every stage of his life. To understand him and what he stood for, nothing was better than visiting some of the places associated with the Mahatma, as I realized myself.

1. Early Years

Porbandar: I visited Gandhi's ancestral home in Porbandar , Gujarat, last year, where he was born 150 years ago. It is a three storied *haveli*, large and spacious and is adjacent to Kirti Mandir, a museum dedicated to both Mahatma and Kasturba Gandhi. While visiting the spot where he was born and the room he used for studies, one is overcome with a sense of reverence and deep emotion.

Childhood influences Gandhi's father, Karamchand Gandhi, served as a *Diwan* (Chief Minister) in Porbandar and Rajkot states in western India. His mother, Putlibai, was a deeply religious woman. She fasted regularly. Gandhi's life too was

rooted in religion. Like her, he too undertook fasts for spiritual and physical purification during his *Satyagrahas*. Fasting was a weapon used by Gandhi as part of his philosophy of non-violence as well as *satyagraha*. He is reported to have undertaken 17 fasts during India's freedom movement, the longest lasting **21 days**. His mother was caring and nursed sick members of the family. Gandhi likewise used to nurse his father who was bedridden, after his school hours. This stood him in good stead; later on, Gandhi would nurse Kasturba, his children and his brother-in-law in times of their illnesses. He, along with his team, offered medical help to the sick and wounded during the Boer War and Zulu rebellion, nursed those affected by black plague, and also worked in makeshift hospitals in South Africa to serve the poor and the needy. **Gandhi** had a lifelong compassion for people affected by **leprosy**. He had known closely a person cured of leprosy visiting his home regularly, when he was a young child.. Gandhi admitted his former co-prisoner who was suffering from leprosy into Sevagram Ashram and used to dress his wounds personally.

According to Gandhi both his grandfather and father were fearless and did not hesitate to take a stand before their rulers. His father was ---' incorruptible and had earned a name for strict impartiality in his family as well as outside'. Gandhi's early self-identification with truth and love as supreme ideals is traceable to the values upheld by his parents.

I recollect that Gandhi's birth place in Porbandar had a separate stair case leading to a room near the terrace. I was told that it was here that his father used to deal with the public. According to Gandhi, his father had no formal education, save that of experience. But his rich experience of practical affairs stood him in good stead in the resolution of the most intricate questions and in managing hundreds of men'. It is possible that Gandhi might have carried those impressions with him and put them to practice in later years. He realized that the true practice of law was in finding out the better side of human nature and to enter men's hearts. He is said to have brought about private compromises of hundreds of cases in South Africa.

In later life he visited Porbandar once or twice; but never lived there for long . Today Porbandar is a district (created in 1998) and its head quarters is a prosperous town. The road outside Gandhi's home is congested and used as a

parking space for cars and other vehicles. Sadly, to a visitor, the imprints left by Gandhi are not visible anywhere.

Rajkot too is a place associated with the life of the Mahatma. At that time it was a princely state. When he was seven, Gandhi's father was appointed to the court of the state of Rajkot. Therefore, Gandhi continued his studies up to matriculation in Rajkot. In May, 1883 he was married to Kasturba Gandhi at the age of 13. Their marriage lasted for 62 years. They were of the same age. This year we celebrate the 150th birth anniversaries of both Mahatma and Kasurba Gandhi.

During his school days, as is nothing unusual with the boys of his age, he fell into bad company - he tried smoking, eating meat against his vows, visiting a brothel etc. As noted by Gandhi although he strayed from his chosen path on a few occasions, he was able to come back, in time, without any harm. The most memorable one was an incident of stealing and atonement reported by Gandhi himself. He has described the emotion expressed by his father in silent tears, after reading Gandhi's letter of confession. "---- those pearl drops of love cleansed my heart, and washed my sin away---This was for me , an object lesson in *Ahimsa*--this sort of *sublime forgiveness* was not natural to my father---But he was wonderfully peaceful-". This was perhaps his first encounter face to face with Ahimsa.

Today Rajkot is the third-most advanced district in Gujarat and the fourth most populous. Alfred School (M.G School -later named after him) and the house where his family lived, are still there in Rajkot. I visited Rajkot; but could not visit the school, as it was late in the day. Gandhi graduated from Rajkot High School in 1887 at age of 18. Breaking conventions and defying ex-communication by his community, he sailed to England to become a barrister. It may be noted that though still very shy, he had the tenacity to pursue his own goals even at that young age.

Part-11. Gandhi in England

In England, after an initial period of lavish spending trying to imitate the English life style , he opted for a life of simplicity and frugal spending. His habit of meticulously keeping daily accounts came handy while he carried on his struggles in South Africa, with public funding. According to Gandhi the change he brought

to his life was not a dreary affair; on the contrary, he said it harmonized his inward and outward life.

Vegetarianism was a new cult in England at that time. He was a staunch vegetarian. The shy Gandhi could communicate well with others on this subject. Gandhi's experiments in Dietetics are well known. According to Gandhi, these experiments were conducted not from the point of view of religion, but from the point of view of economy and hygiene. Gandhi himself explained the philosophy behind vegetarianism-- "Man's supremacy over the lower animals meant not that the former should prey upon the latter, but that the higher should protect the lower, and that there should be mutual aid between the two as man and man.---man eats not for enjoyment, but to live".

He had many self doubts about religion, even as a school boy. As he said, one thing took deep root in him-the conviction that morality is the basis of things and that truth is the substance of morality. He used the opportunity of his stay in England to study other religions, especially Christianity. Gandhi had confessed that his book reading was limited. But the according to him, limited reading of books enabled him to thoroughly digest what he read. He read religious books and had discussions with those who practiced Christianity. The New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount, had a lasting influence on his mind. Writings of Tolstoy, especially the book 'The Kingdom of God is Within You' expanded his religious vision. Reading 'The Light of Asia' and 'The Song Celestial' by Sir Edwin Arnold while he was in England, also had made a deep impression in him.

Part-111. Gandhi in South Africa

In a meeting in New Delhi, Gandhi said he was born in India, but was made in South Africa. After returning to India from England, he failed miserably to establish himself as a successful lawyer. Therefore, Gandhi at the age of 23, set sail for South Africa in April 1893, at the invitation of Dada Abdullah and Company to assist them in a case. From 1893 to 1914, Gandhi worked as an attorney and a public worker in South Africa for 21 years.. In South Africa he was supported by the wealthy and generous Seth. Dada's support was invaluable to Gandhi during his stay in South Africa, especially in early years of his stay.

Although from a conservative Hindu family Gandhi had no hesitation in accepting the hospitality and support of Muslim brethren.

To Gandhi who got used to civil behavior by the English while he lived in England, their attitude towards Indians in South Africa came as a rude shock. Indians comprising of indentured and freed laborers were called 'coolies'. Gandhi was known as the 'coolie barrister'. Those Indians entering a court were to take off their turbans as a rule. They could not dine with the whites in hotels nor travel with whites in the same compartment. Gandhi himself had to face several instances of discrimination and insults. But the most shocking incident was one that took place during a rail journey he undertook from Durban to Pretoria on the night of June 7, 1893 in connection with the court case of Dada Abdulla. He was thrown off the train's first class "whites-only" compartment at Pietermaritzburg station for refusing to give up his seat. This incident changed the course of his life. He faced further hardships on way to Pretoria.

I had always wanted to visit South Africa due to its association with the Mahatma. A chance came in 2009 to visit Johannesburg, Durban and Pretoria in that country. On reaching Durban, I requested my hosts to take me to Pieter Maritzberg, the capital city of KwaZulu-Natal. Gandhi had spent eleven years of his life in Natal.

The drive from Durban to Maritzberg takes about an hour by road. We proceeded to Pieter Maritzberg railway station wherein Gandhi was pushed out of the train. The train station in Victorian style was constructed in the 19th century. It was spotlessly clean and well maintained, but was deserted at the time of our visit. I stood staring at the spot where Gandhi had fallen over 100 years ago. It was a momentous incident that changed the course of his life, as also that of the world history. Nearby was the waiting room where Gandhi spent that night shivering in intense cold, afraid and shocked. Although his mind was in turmoil, he then made the decision not to return to India. His *active non violence* was said to have started from that date. A plaque commemorating the event is installed in the main foyer of the station. At the time of our visit no board was seen installed near the spot to provide information on life of Gandhi to those visiting the train station. Now, I understand that the station houses a small museum about his life in South Africa and his struggles against racial discrimination. To commemorate its 125th birth

anniversary, a double-sided bust of Gandhi which shows both the young and old Gandhi, was unveiled at the entrance of the station, in June, 2018.

About 10 min away from the station, in front of the courthouse, in Pietermaritzburg city center, a bronze statue of Gandhi has been installed, depicting Gandhi, striding forward. The statue was unveiled in 1993 by Archbishop Desmond Tutu marking the centenary of the event.

During the first, second and third phases of his stay in South Africa, he continued his religious explorations, reading a translation of Holy Koran , leaning about Islam from Dada Abdulla, reading about Parsee religion, reading and holding discussions with practitioners of Christianity . These forays into different religions and their comparative study with Hinduism had their impact on his understanding of true religion. The Sermon on the Mount reinforced his ideal on Ahimsa; Islam, fasting and self purification, Buddhism and Jainism compassion for all beings. He came to the conclusion that self realization could be achieved only through service to all.

Gandhi reflected deeply on concepts of *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability) discussed in the Bhagvad Gita (Song Divine). He came to the conclusion that the two can be reconciled by practicing the principle of Trusteeship. A friend of Gandhi presented to him the book 'Unto This Last' by John Ruskins. Gandhi acknowledged the transformation it brought about in his life, as he found his deepest convictions reflected in that great book. The principals laid down in the book chiefly were that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all ; that that a lawyers' work has the same value as the barbers'; that a life of labor is the life worth living.

The book inspired Gandhi to establish the Phoenix Settlement near Durban, in June 1904. The Order of Trappist monks living at Mariam Hill near Pinetown, sixteen miles from Durban, provided him with 'a functioning example of a micro-community living on the basis of voluntary poverty, self-renunciation and constructive work'. The Settlement- the first Ashram of Gandhi -was an experiment in community living, teaching the values of self-reliance, dignity of labor and simple living preached by him. Gandhi moved the printing press of his newspaper, the Indian Opinion (name later changed to "Opinion") established in June 1903 and its workers to the Phoenix Settlement, as well as his own family, sometime later. Initially Gandhi tried to persuade those who worked for him and others to

settle down in Phoenix. Most were unwilling. Over a period of time the settlement grew in population. The settlers grew vegetables and fruits.

My hosts in Durban took me to see the settlement. The settlement is at a distance of about 20 kms from Durban, The Phoenix Settlement comprised of 100 acres of land purchased by Gandhiji in 1904. The property, which cost £1000, apparently had once been a sugar farm and had many fruit trees growing on it. I was told that on August 9, 1985, the settlement was damaged in riots and some African squatters forcibly occupied much of the settlement. According to reports it was right wing vigilantes prompted by the Apartheid regime, who resorted to violence and rampant destruction in the area. The Trust authorities refrained from seeking the forcible eviction of the squatters. It was rebuilt and formally reopened on February 27, 2000, at a ceremony attended by the President of South Africa.

We went around the settlement. The whole place was deserted at the time of our visit. Gandhi's, home called *Sarvodaya* was the chief attraction. The building is noted for its simplicity and peaceful ambience. I sat on the stone steps which were not destroyed in the fire. A stone which was used for washing clothes by the family is the only thing left of the old home. A hall where Gandhi used to conduct his prayers now displays depicting his life and that of other great men. We could see the printing press from where he published the news paper Indian Opinion. Gandhi in his autobiography described the excitement and difficulty faced by the inmates in setting up the press there. The campus also has the home where his son Manilal and his family lived after he had left South Africa. Manilal Gandhi's daughter Ela Gandhi, who is now in her 80s still heads the Phoenix Development Trust. She, in fact, grew up in this house. She is at present, an important public figure in South Africa.

Phoenix today is said to be 'thwarted by the everyday lived-experiences of crime, drugs and domestic violence'. I came to know that the areas surrounding the Gandhi settlement were thickly populated. The youth were addicted to alcohol and drugs. Crimes are rampant in the area. The population is afflicted by poverty and unemployment. Obviously, the settlement cannot remain insulated, oblivious of the misery of people living around it.

The Phoenix Settlement Trust, with financial assistance from the Government of India, restored Gandhi's house and established a health clinic, a HIV/Aids Centre and other facilities to serve all the people in the area, African and Indian . About 1,390 children reportedly study in the Kasturba Gandhi School now, a free eye and

dental clinic operates out of the Printing Press building; a crèche takes care of 135 colored children; school outreach programs cover another 60, the orphanage is home for 60 children, while 25 health workers go out to people and address their problems at their doorsteps. The challenge lies in sustaining these programs and transforming the life of people living in the surrounding areas.

Gandhi was sentenced to four terms imprisonment in South Africa during his Satyagraha campaigns. Phoenix Farm is considered as the birthplace of Satyagraha. However, he made Satyagraha a weapon of peaceful protest at the Tolstoy Farm, his second camp in South Africa. Inspired by Tolstoy's ideas, **Tolstoy Farm** was started by Gandhi in Transvaal, South Africa, in 1910. It became the headquarters of the campaign of *satyagraha* which he led at that time. The colony comprising 1,100 acres (4.5 km²) was gifted by Herman Kallenbach, Gandhi's friend, for housing the protesters, who had no place to live at that time. The farm had children of all communities, including Muslims and Christians.

Apartheid Museum In South Africa Gandhi settled first in Durban, before moving to Johannesburg, where he lived during 1903-1913. Racial segregation or Apartheid (literally "apart-hood" in Afrikaans) used to be enforced by the rulers of South Africa from 1948-1994. The sufferings of the people are nowhere depicted more poignantly than in the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. I visited the Museum which dramatizes the history of racial segregation and oppression under the colonial rule. The Museum was opened in November, 2001.

From the outside, the Museum looked exactly like a prison to me. The pillars of the constitution are seen erected in the front part of the Museum. It was obvious that a lot of care and thought have gone into its design. One is made to actually experience the effect of racial segregation while entering the Museum. Walking along its corridors viewing the photographs, videos, press clips, personal artifacts and stories of oppression is in itself a chilling experience. I cannot express the emotion that engulfed me when I saw the trauma of segregation and repression of the natives of South Africa, depicted so powerfully in the Museum. I remembered Gandhi's own words 'It has always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honored by the humiliation of their fellow beings.'

Gandhi Statue Although Gandhi was a brief less lawyer at the time of his first visit to South Africa, later on, he became an established lawyer and attorney. He could set up a good practice in Johannesburg. In this city I could see a unique statue of Gandhi depicted as a lawyer in Gandhi Square, Johannesburg, installed by the local Municipality. It is a bronze sculpture that depicts Gandhi as a young lawyer in Johannesburg. He is wearing his lawyer's gown, with his cloak blown by the wind. Gandhi has a book in his hand and is looking ahead. It was indeed a surprise for me to see a statue of Gandhi as a young man, for I have seen only statues of the older Gandhi till then. This statue was reportedly vandalized by some miscreants in recent times.

Robben Island Nelson Mandela, renowned for his fight against Apartheid, drew inspiration from the life of the Mahatma. I, therefore, thought it fit to visit the prison where he was incarcerated during South Africa's freedom struggle. In **Pretoria** I visited Robben Island (named after Seals in Dutch language) in Table Bay, off the coast of Cape Town. It is declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The island, which was once part of the mainland, is said to be actually the peak of a mountain. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison, out of which 18 were spent on Robben Island i.e. from 1964 to 1990. Today the prison is a museum.

I boarded a ferry departing for Robben Island from Nelson Mandela Gateway . The tourists are guided by former prisoners sharing their memories of prison life. It was learned that they underwent severe beatings, hunger and solitary confinement. Mandela was kept along with many others, mostly political prisoners, in Section B; but he was confined to a solitary cell in order to avoid contact with others. Mandela's cell, a 7-by-9-foot room, had no bed or toilet. He used to sleep on a mat on the floor. He was provided a stool, a plate and cup. A bucket used by him (not the original) was also seen kept in the room. An improvised book shelf was made for him by a co-prisoner which used to occupy most of the space within the cell. Blankets were kept neatly folded, in a corner.

About his cell wrote Mandela --"I could walk the length of my cell in three paces. When I lay down, I could feel the wall with my feet and my head grazed the concrete at the other side."About his prison life he wrote"-- Prison life is about routine: each day like the one before; each week like the one before it, so that the

months and years blend into each other," . He was forced to do hard labor in a lime quarry nearby, along with others. I visited this quarry which is still there. Mandela resorted to civil disobedience in the prison for improvement of the prison conditions . He was later moved to Victor Verster Prison, also in Cape Town, where he lived under house arrest. He was released from prison on February 11, 1990. Like Gandhi, Mandela too led South Africa's freedom struggle through non-violent means. Visiting his prison was indeed a moving experience.

Criticisms I came to know that the University of Ghana removed a statue of Mahatma Gandhi recently, citing complaints from the faculty and students that he practiced racism towards black Africans. I was pained to see criticism of Gandhi for confining his struggles against racial discrimination in South Africa to only within the Indian community. It was alleged that he had referred to native Africans as savages and sided with the rulers to oppress them. However, a careful reading of his autobiography would dispel all such doubts. When Gandhi first went to South Africa, he had no plans to stay there beyond one year. But situation demanded his continued presence there. Although small, he found it difficult to organize the heterogeneous Indian community comprising Hindi, Gujarati, Telugu and Tamil population. He had to put in hard labor along with his regular work, to organize the *Satyagraha campaigns*, coordinate with Government officials, draft memorials and petitions, write letters, send telegrams, with limited human and financial resources.. To spend the same effort in organizing all South Africans probably would have been a Herculean task for him. Moreover, barriers of language, culture and tradition certainly could have come in the way. Perhaps there were no leaders amongst the African communities at that time with whom he could effectively communicate and coordinate.

When the Boer war broke out in South Africa he stated that his sympathies were with the Boers, but he decided to assist the Natal Government, as he felt that it was the duty of every citizen to assist the government in times of crisis. He followed this policy even in India. This was in conformity with his principle "Hate the sin not the sinner." He and his band of volunteers formed an Ambulance Corps to assist the efforts of the Natal government by way of providing medical care to the sick and wounded. When the Zulu rebellion broke out, he once again offered

his help to the Government and raised the Indian Ambulance Corps. He was happy that he and his men had to nurse the sick and dying Zulus whom the white doctors and nurses were unwilling to touch. It is, therefore, difficult to believe that Gandhi could refer to any community in a derogatory manner. Responding to criticisms against Gandhi, Nelson Mandela himself had pointed out that, Gandhi was new to South Africa when he used certain expressions against the native Africans "The term *kaffir* was not considered offensive at that time in South Africa, as it became in later years. He knew nothing about what was happening in the country at the time. Gandhi must be forgiven and those prejudices ought to be judged in the context of the time and circumstances'. Gandhi took up the cause of native Africans through his news paper 'Indian Opinion'. ***In fact, his critiques forget that Mandela was the gift of Gandhi to South Africa.*** His granddaughter Ela Gandhi pointed out that Gandhi fought all his life against the compartmentalization of people and the labeling of individuals.

The doctrine of *samabhavana* which finds a mention in *Bhagavat Gita* deeply influenced Gandhi. His relation with Muslims was interpreted as appeasement of that community later on in India..In South Africa he was generously supported by Dada Abdulla and others. He stood by the Ansari brothers during the freedom struggle and led the *Khilafat* (*The **Khilafat movement** (1919-1924) was organized by Indian Muslims allied with Indian nationalism in the years following World War I to pressurize the British government to preserve the authority of the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph of Islam following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war.*) movement against the British. Although he was a strict vegetarian, he had no hesitation accepting the hospitality of Muslims and sometimes stayed in their houses. He was dead against the partition of India. After independence he staged a *satyagraha* for giving Pakistan its rightful dues by Indian Government. His one man army tried to pacify the Muslims in Calcutta and Naokhali . Finally, he gave up his life for Hindu-Muslim unity. Today, we have forgotten the all inclusive interpretation of Hinduism by Gandhi and try to exclude Muslims and other vulnerable sections of the population from mainstream life of the country.

Part-IV Return to India While still in South Africa Gandhi visited India in 1896, after three years of his stay in South Africa . During his second visit, he participated in the 1901 session of the Indian National Congress. He finally

returned to India in 1914. Gandhi's life after his return to India is synonymous with the story of India's freedom struggle.

The Champaran Satyagraha

After his return from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi, on the advice of his mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, embarked on a journey to discover India. He travelled to Calcutta and Shantiniketan in Bengal, to Rangoon, Cawnpore and Rishikesh.

The Champaran Satyagraha in Bihar was the first active involvement of Gandhi in the Indian freedom struggle. In 1916, at the 31st session of the Congress in Lucknow, Gandhi met Raj Kumar Shukla, a representative of farmers from Champaran, who requested him to see for himself the condition of the indigo farmers there. A system called *Tinkathia* was imposed by the British in the area under which the tenants were mandated by law to plant three parts (Kathas) out of every 20 parts (Bigha) of their land with indigo. Farmers got poor compensation or faced heavy taxation, if they refused to plant indigo. The Planters (mostly British) enforced this system with a heavy hand, through their agents. As a result, production of food crops was affected, which led to a famine-like situation.

It was reported that the news of 'Gandhi's arrival spread in the area like wildfire and he was greeted by large crowds of peasants everywhere'. Gandhi's intention to meet the farmers irked the administration and he was restrained from moving forward. But Gandhi defied the prohibitory orders issued by the administration and courted arrest. The British were forced to release him, fearing repercussion. Thereafter, he went to the villages, met the suffering farmers, painstakingly recorded statements and testimonies of around 8000 indigo cultivators and gave his report to British administration. Seeing his earnestness, he was notified a member of an inquiry committee that submitted its report, with recommendations, to the Government, which were accepted by the British government. With the passage of Champaran Agrarian Bill by the Bihar Legislative Council, the *Tinkathia* system was abolished. The Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 was the first Satyagraha movement inspired by Gandhi. It is stated that it was Champaran that turned Mohandas into the Mahatma.

After the success of Champaran Satyagraha, Gandhi then did not consider his work to be over. Moved by the plight of the local people, he decided to stay there along

with Kasturba and his supporters. Bhitiharwa Ashram was founded by Gandhi on 20th November 1917 near Narkatiaganj in Champaran. He established three schools in the area one each in Baharwa, Bhitiharva and Madhuban. Gandhi requested Kasturba Gandhi, Durga Behen and Somen Bhai to run those schools for children. He paid attention to their healthcare and sanitation too. To bridge the gap between education and work, he also set up 'Buniyadi' (basic) schools where training in spinning, carpentry, farming and weaving were imparted as a part of school education. However, he could not stay there for long, as his presence was needed elsewhere to take up another urgent issue.

I had visited Gandhi Ashram at Champaran when I was young. I remember only some old buildings of the Ashram. I was told that it was renovated in 2012 and a Gandhi Museum has been set up. On April 10, 2017 100th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's Champaran Satyagraha was celebrated there. The celebrations unfortunately remained confined only to Bihar. The Ashram is no longer said to be a living entity. The Ashram once had 103 bigha land, but a major portion was reportedly assigned to public institutions. Original land records relating to the Ashram are said to be not available. There were reports that Gandhi statue installed in front of Motihari railway station had his walking stick missing (hopefully it might have been restored by now). Bhitiharva school founded by Gandhi which was in a neglected state has been rebuilt at a cost of Rs 22 lakh as part of the state government's special plan to mark the centenary year of Champaran Satyagraha. Vrindavan Ashram from where Gandhi inaugurated 29 educational institutes to promote vocational education is said to be in a decaying state. The state government has plans to revive and develop a cluster of 12 middle schools in Gaunaha block of West Champaran district while keeping in mind the concept of the Buniyadi Vidyalaya at Bhitiharwa where Kasturba Gandhi stayed for a long period during the Champaran Satyagrah. Embroiled in a court case, the Hazarimal Dharamshala where Gandhi stayed in Champaran is said to be in a dilapidated condition. Gandhi circuit project to connect all places visited by him remains to be fully implemented yet. The demand for a Mahatma Gandhi university in Champaran still remains on paper..

The second struggle that Gandhi led was the Ahmedabad Mills Strike in 1918, Ahmedabad, the second largest city of Bombay Presidency at that time. A dispute arose between cotton mill owners and the workers who demand for a 50% wage

hike. A settlement was reached with the owners, conceding a 35% raise after a non-violent movement was led by Gandhi on the issue.

Hardly was the Ahmedabad mill-hands' strike over, when Gandhi had to plunge into the Kheda *Satyagraha* struggle in Gujarat. People of Kheda were unable to pay a 23% tax imposed on them by the British, due to crop failure and a plague epidemic. The government rejected their demand for waiver and issued orders for confiscation of land, homes, and cattle belonging to the farmers. It was here that two great souls met and worked together--Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhai Patel. Gandhi, along with Sardar Patel, Mahadev Desai and others travelled across the countryside and raised awareness about the rights of the farmers. Despite the coercive steps taken by the administration, including confiscation of their lands, the movement remained non-violent and the community stood firm on the plea for a cancellation of taxes that year. After a five month long agitation, the tax for the year was suspended, and the increase in rate reduced, while all confiscated property were ordered to be returned. In effect, only the richer Patidars ended in paying tax, while the poor farmers were exempted. Gandhi, however, did not consider the outcome of the *Satyagraha* as a complete success; nevertheless, he observed that the Kheda movement was “the beginning of an awakening of the peasants of Gujarat and the beginning of their true education”.

I visited Kheda district last year. Formerly known as **Kaira**, the district was bifurcated in 1997, with the southern part forming the new district of Anand. Having good irrigation facilities, the *Charotar* region spread across both the districts, is agriculturally very advanced. A net work of milk cooperatives set up by the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. (GCMMF) form the backbone of economy of farmers in the two districts. I had visited Anand some years ago and was inspired by the dedicated work of late Dr. Kurien and others for creating a world class dairy net work.

I read in the media that farmers in the area are today opposed to the move for acquisition of their farmlands for the Ahmedabad-Mumbai Bullet train project. The main grievance of the farmers is perhaps related to the quantum of compensation.

The centenary of the Kheda *Satyagraha* was celebrated on 22 March 2018. *The historic event passed of unnoticed in rest of India.*

Sabarmati Ashram After his return to India, Gandhi was looking for a place to settle down along with 25 inmates of the Phoenix settlement, who had accompanied him to India. He finally chose Ahmedabad as his base. The *Satyagraha* Ashram was founded on May 25, 1915 at Kochrab, a small village near Ahmedabad which served as his base camp. When plague broke out in the village, the Ashram was shifted to the bank of river Sabarmati in July 1917, and

then, it came to be known as 'Sabarmati Ashram'. The inmates of the Ashram lived as one family, in accordance with the principles of truth and nonviolence. Gandhi stayed in the Ashram from 1915 to 1933; later on, the Ashram was disbanded.

Since childhood, I have been hearing about both Sabarmati Ashram and Sevagram, but I actually knew very little about them. I visited Sabarmati Ashram in 2006 which is situated about 5 km from Ahmedabad, on the west bank of Sabarmati river. It became one of the epicenters of Indian Freedom Struggle. The ashram is a major tourist attraction and receives around 700,000 visitors a year.

The Ashram premises houses Hridaya Kunj, Gandhi's own cottage, Vinoba Kutir the cottage named after Acharya Vinoba Bhave who stayed there (also known as Mira Kutir after Gandhiji's disciple Mirabehn who later lived there), Upasana Mandir, an open-air prayer ground, Magan Niwas the cottage that used to be the home of the ashram manager, Maganlal Gandhi, a close relative of Gandhi. The most famous among them is the museum 'Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya' which has some of Gandhi's personal letters and photographs on display. The museum was initially located in Hridaya Kunj, Gandhi's own hut in the ashram, but was formally shifted here when the museum was built in 1963. The museum has five units, office, library, two photo galleries and an auditorium. While at the ashram, Gandhi set up a school that focused on manual labor, agriculture and literacy.

It was from his base here that Gandhi led the Dandi March on 12 March 1930. This mass civil disobedience in turn led to the imprisonment by British of around 60,000 of those who participated in the March. Gandhi, in sympathy with them, responded by asking the Government to forfeit the Ashram. He had by then already decided on 22 July 1933 to disband the ashram, Then Government, however, did not oblige. It was deserted after the detention of many freedom fighters, and then some local citizens decided to preserve it. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi had vowed that he would not return to the ashram until India had gained independence. Although this was won on 15 August 1947, when India was declared a free nation, Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948 and he never returned. After independence the Indian government recognized the Ashram as a national monument.

I went around the Ashram. Like all places associated with Gandhi, peace and tranquility prevailed in the Ashram. Efforts have been made to preserve the earlier atmosphere when Gandhi was alive. I was moved to see the charkha that was used by Gandhi for spinning. For most of us Charkha is an outdated tool that holds no value in a technological age. But for him it was a symbol of unity and self reliance. In the silence that followed spinning, he communicated with self and God. A song sung in full throated voice by renowned South Indian singer late P. Leela "-- Let the wheels of Bapu's Charkha go round and round to spin people flying around as cotton wool into a single yarn' heard every day still haunts me.

Gandhi prided in wearing home spun clothes; he had given up his Katiawad headgear in Kheda and started wearing only a dhoti, like the farmers whom he saw in Tamil Nadu working under the hot sun. It occurred to me that at least the old people in the country could keep a charkha with them, to help them do something worthwhile, get peace and mental happiness. If most of us decide to wear Khadi, at least women in large numbers could be gainfully employed. With these thoughts I left the Ashram.

The Dandi March The Civil disobedience movement was a vital part of Indian freedom struggle. The movement began with the 400 km Dandi March led by Gandhi on 12th March 1930 from his base Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal village of **Dandi**, a small town in Navsari, Gujarat, to produce salt, without paying the tax. At first the British establishment did not take Gandhi's plans of civil resistance against the salt tax seriously. In fact, Lord Irwin, then Viceroy wrote to London--- "At present the prospect of a salt campaign does not keep me awake at night." Explaining his choice, Gandhi said, "Next to air and water, salt is perhaps the greatest necessity of life." He knew that masses could relate to an article of daily use rather than an abstract demand for greater political rights. The salt tax formed 8.2% of the British Raj tax revenue.

After reaching Dandi, Gandhi and his followers violated the salt laws by making salt from sea water. Growing numbers of Indians joined them along the way. The March ended on 5th April, 1930. This simple act of picking up salt in symbolic defiance of an alien authority, electrified the nation at that time.

Dandi beach is located around 20 kms from Navsari railway station. Navsari is one of the first few places the Parsees in early 16th century made their homes. Gandhi had good contacts with some of them.. Hence he was said to have chosen Dandi as

his destination. The only monument reminiscent of the historical salt march in Dandi is the Saifee Villa, near the Dandi beach. This was the place where Gandhiji stayed in Dandi at the end of the Salt March. In 1961 Syedna Taher Saifuddin, its owner, dedicated Saifee Villa to the Indian Government in the presence of Prime Minister Nehru. The villa was in a neglected condition at the time of my visit. Some of the rare photographs and artifacts relating to Gandhi were exhibited there. I was told that Gandhi did not pick up salt in the beach but from a stream of sea water which formed a channel a little away, in front of the villa. A Gandhi statue is seen installed near the spot.

Dandi beach was deserted at the time of my visit at dusk. I could meet an old man who picked up plastics and other wastes and kept the beach clean. I stood there in meditation overlooking the sea, paying homage to the Mahatma. I was told that all Parsees who used to live here have left for foreign shores; so also most of others. I was also told that one person who had accompanied Gandhi as a child in the March died nearly two years ago. Later on, I read in papers that the project "National Salt Satyagraha Memorial' recreating the Dandi March, sponsored by Ministry of Culture, Government of India, has been executed in Dandi recently.

Navsari district was carved out of the erstwhile Valsad district in 1997 and today it is leading in the cultivation of horticultural crops. Valsad district is now industrially most advanced.

Sevagram When Gandhi started his March in 1930 from Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmadabad to Dandi, he decided not to return to Sabarmati till India achieved independence. Gandhi was imprisoned for more than two years. On his release, he spent some time travelling around India. He decided to make a village in Central India his headquarters. He came to Wardha, near Nagpur in Maharashtra in 1934, at the invitation of his follower and industrialist, Jamnalal Bajaj. He made available to the Ashram about 300 acres of land. Gandhi with his help set up the Sevagram Ashram in Wardha.. Sevagram located at a distance of 8 km from Wardha town in Maharashtra and 75 km from Nagpur was his residence from 1936 until his death in 1948. Vinoba Bhave's Param Dham Ashram is located on the banks of the Dham river close by. Many decisions on important national matters were taken at Sevagram. Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement in August 1942 from there, demanding immediate end to the British rule.

The Ashrams was an abode of calm and quietude. Near the Ashram there is a museum where artifacts of India's freedom struggle are preserved. The Ashram comprises different cottages namely Adi Nivas, Bapu Kuti, Ba Kuti, Gandhi's secretariat, Bapu's kitchen, Parchure Kuti, Akhiri Niwas and a prayer ground. Adi Niwas was the first hutment built in the Ashram premises, where Gandhi lived with other members. Akhiri Niwas, initially used as a hospital, was where he stayed for curing his cough and cold, before he left for Noakhali. Within the Ashram a small hut was constructed for Parchure Shastri, who was suffering from severe leprosy for a number of years had come to Sevagram to die in peace. Parchure Shastri was a co-prisoner of Gandhiji in jail. Shastri afflicted with leprosy and was in an abandoned state. Gandhi was deeply touched by his plight and got Shastri moved to the Ashram for shelter. Gandhi himself started attending to Shastri's wounds with his own hands. Inspired by Gandhi's example, several co-workers took up the work in right earnest. I remember reading the story of a girl from Kerala who joined the Gandhi Ashram. She was assigned the task of attending a leprosy patient and cleaning his wounds. On hearing about her reluctance to do the job, Gandhi assigned her some other task. However, the very next day she found Gandhi himself quietly attending to the patient. She felt ashamed and readily agreed to cleaning the patient's wounds. She learned a life changing lesson.

Gandhi ensured that people of all classes and castes were admitted to the Ashram. The Ashram employed *dalits* in the common kitchen to break the caste barrier. I read in the Lucknow edition of 'The Hindu' newspaper dated 2nd October, 2009 about Afza Begum, a Muslim woman, who used to reside in the Ashram. According to the news item she (now an octogenarian) was merely 12 when she was sent to the Ashram to study by her family based in Moradabad, at the insistence of an associate of her father, who was a follower of Gandhi. She was not allowed in the kitchen of the Ashram due to opposition by some; Gandhi insisted that he would not take any food if she was not allowed in the kitchen. Eventually she was given the task of chopping vegetables. Gandhi asked her to lead the prayers in the Ashram in his absence. She continued to stay at the Ashram even after Gandhi's death and contributed towards Vinoba Bhave's Bhudan Yagya later.

Gandhi had laid down strict rules for admission into the Ashram as members. An inmate of the Ashram should cease to have any worldly relation - a relation

involving monetary interests . He/she has no other needs save those of food and clothing and who is ever watchful in the observance of the eleven cardinal vows. It may be remembered that Gandhi never hesitated to take help from others, including donations, to set up and run his ashrams during the freedom struggle.

"Simplicity is the essence of universality" Gandhi had said. While going around the Ashram, I was moved by its simplicity. Gandhi had insisted that the Ashram should be built only with local materials and by local people, at a cost not exceeding Rs.100/-. Gandhi used to be visited by the high and mighty in his humble abode. The ashram provides evidence that as far as Gandhi was concerned, there was no difference between what he preached and practiced. The Ashram with plenty of greenery around, had natural settings, which totally merged with nature. The rooms were bare; there were no tables or chairs or any other furnishings. *Gandhi had led a full life with so little* . One is struck by the fact that human beings could live their life with a bare minimum of needs. It was difficult to believe that 'Quit India' was proclaimed from his hut. About his life in the Ashram Gandhi wrote ""You may be sure I am living now just the way I wish to live----- Study my way of living here, study my surroundings, if you wish to know what I am".

The Kasturba Hospital, Wardha is the only place where I found Gandhi's memory is still kept alive, by practicing his principles.. It was started in 1945 with the help of Dr. Sushila Nayyar, a close associate of Gandhi and his personal physician. Managed by the Kasturba Health Society, the hospital near the Sevagram, is the only hospital started by the Father of the Nation himself. Although it teaches modern medicine, it is set in rural pattern and has a Naturopathy wing to provide simple and cheap treatments to people, in deference to Gandhi's wishes. The Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences (MGIMS) was started in 1969, the Gandhi centenary year. The institute is unique in following the Gandhian principles. I wished Champaran and Kheda too had Rural Medical Colleges, similar to ones in Wardha.

Gandhi Smriti Sometime in 1995 while walking along Tees January Marg, New Delhi, I strayed into a large mansion with a well maintained garden. This was Gandhi Smriti, formerly known as Birla House or **Birla Bhavan**. Gandhi lived the last 144 days of his life in this house. He was assassinated on 30th January, 1948 in the garden, behind the house.

Birla House was acquired by the Government of India in 1971 and opened for the public on August 15, 1973, renaming it as the Gandhi Smriti. It now houses the Eternal Gandhi Multimedia Museum established in 2005. A large collection of photographs with a few personal belongings (including Gandhi's walking stick and spectacles) and a series of mini doll houses and terracotta dolls illustrating Gandhi's life are displayed in this museum. The Museum is unique; it shows how technology could be successfully used to bring to life symbols and thoughts associated with Gandhi in a user-friendly and interesting manner. The building, including the room Gandhi lived, and the landscape have been preserved just as they were in those days. The room where Gandhi lived, is of Spartan simplicity, sparsely furnished, having only the bare essentials like his mattress, a pillow, a low stool, and a writing desk.

From 1934 onwards, over a period of 14 years on, as many as six attempts were said to have been made to kill Gandhi. Finally Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fanatic, was successful in his attempt. Gandhi was shot during his prayers at the place where Martyr's Column now stands.

Margaret Bourke White, the famous photographer of the Life magazine interviewed Gandhi on the last day of his life. On asking him what gave him hope that he would like to live up to the age of 125, as he had wanted, Gandhi surprised her by answering that he no longer entertained that hope. On asking why he thought so, he replied:“---Because of the terrible happenings in the world. I do not want to live in darkness”..

Footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi on his last walk to the back garden for prayers have been replicated in stones. They are a poignant reminder of his last walk. Such was the attraction of this place for me that I kept visiting the Smriti from time to time, till the time I lived in Delhi .

Rajghat. I have visited the memorial dedicated to Gandhi at Rajghat many times in the past. The flow of visitors from different parts of India and other countries in the world to Rajghat continues to amaze me. Why do so many ordinary people still flock to visit his Samadhi?

Relevance of Gandhi I had undertaken these visits without any prior purpose. The visits were random, not in a chronological sequence and spread over a

considerable length of time. It was undertaken as a journey through the mindscape of Gandhi. It seemed to me that Gandhi outgrew each of the places where he stayed; his life moved from one level to the next higher level like a wave in a pond spreading outwards. He adhered to truth and non-violence from childhood, but not without deep introspection and reflection. Learning from mistakes was an inherent quality in him. His religious views were influenced by foraying into other religions, through selective reading, dialogue and discussions. He experimented with many things, which included perfecting a user-friendly spinning wheel! His principle of Trusteeship is a practical solution to reduce inequality through voluntary effort. Satyagraha, which for him became a vehicle in the pursuit of truth, was an innovation of his genius. Learning from his wife Kasturba, his lady secretary and other women he appreciated the role of women in society and treated them equally and with respect. He consciously included people from all classes including women, Muslims, dalits and indentured labor, in his struggles against racial discrimination and oppression. No wonder all his struggles turned out to be mass movements.

It remains a sad fact that whenever I ask people about Gandhi, they reply that he was a great man, but he is no more relevant! In over hundred government schools I visited, barring one or two, the students did not know who Gandhi was; nor had they heard about him!. Most people believe that in a technology- driven world, Gandhi has no place. They forget that technology is double edged; while it has made life more comfortable, it has also made violence more ferocious and deadly today than in any other time in human history. The seven blunders he identified -- Wealth without Work, Pleasure without Conscience, Knowledge without Character, Commerce without Morality, Science without Humanity, Worship without Sacrifice and Politics without Principles, are relevant today as they were, when written. His experiments on preventive health, combining education with vocational training to prepare students to face the world, his advice on avoiding wastage and simple living, respecting all forms of life, shunning violence by words deeds and action, his emphasis on probity in public life, respecting all faiths, respecting women, uplifting the downtrodden, especially the *dalits*, advocacy for prohibition etc have not been made irrelevant by passage of time. The contradiction of individual vs. society, a serious concern through the ages, is resolved by Gandhi through his principle of Trusteeship. It requires self discipline,

hard work and determination even to remotely imitate him, which normally people are averse to. No wonder they simply dismiss him as irrelevant, without making any serious effort to understand him or his teachings.

Like all other great men, Gandhi too was human. He was obstinate in certain matters (e.g. diet, medicine). Kasturba was an independent woman and had a mind of her own. He tried to dominate over her and forced his views on her and their children. Later on, he developed better relations with Kasturba, and their relationship blossomed into lifelong companionship. She participated in Gandhi's struggles and underwent imprisonment, both in South Africa and India. Gandhi deprived formal education to his children, as he believed that schools do not provide holistic education and prepare them to face the world. His eldest son rebelled against him and challenged him in many ways. Being a disciplinarian Gandhi continued to be stern with him, instead of showing any empathy, understanding or affection towards him. His views on caste system, replacement of human labor with machines, focus on village development, experiments with celibacy etc were criticized even when he was alive. His differences with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (especially on caste system/village development) are well known. Despite these criticisms, I, through my own studies, visits, thoughts and reflection believe that Gandhi is not just a memory, *but is a prophet, for all times*. If you do not agree, you could read the following abstract from an article by Dr. K Bhaskaran Nair, scholar, in 'Matrubhumi' Weekly written on the day of his assassination and decide for yourself. "--In the not so distant future, the stories filled with compassion about this half-clad old man who travelled across India, (served by mountains and oceans), from one end to the other end many a time, wiping the tears of every fellow being, will delight our children; in distant villages, on those silent winter nights, sitting by the fire side under the gentle glow of snow clad moonlight, after the sun has burnt out, fathers mothers and their children will fold their hands remembering the compassion of this man who admitted that 'I am a scavenger'.

References: The Story of My Experiments with Truth-M.K Gandhi; Remembering Gandhi: Gandhi's Human Touch-Lecture by Prof. Madhu Dandavate; In Search of Gandhi: Essays and Reflections; various articles/write ups on Gandhi.

