

Was it one, or two?

LATHI. One *lathi* or two *lathis*. What's all this about? And what is so 'big' about a *lathi* anyway? Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi. Anything that touches Mahatma Gandhi is, or becomes 'big'.

Dear reader, look carefully at the picture published along with this piece. True, the picture is not published in as large a size as you and I would have wished but try and decipher whether there is one *lathi* or two *lathis*.

Over the decades, I used to think that there was just one *lathi* and that it was the 'little boy' who was leading the Mahatma. Until... until a German Gandhian set me right.

Peter Ruhe is a 30-year-old West Berlin-based computer programmer who turned Gandhian a few years ago. He was visiting Bombay recently and I got to chatting with him.

Suddenly he turned around and said: 'Did you know that between Mahatma Gandhi and the little

boy - in the celebrated and well-known picture - there were two *lathis*, and not just one.'

While I was still trying to grasp that, he added: 'And, did you know that it was not the little boy 'leading' the Mahatma but it was the Mahatma 'pushing' the little boy.'

I did not believe him and I cross-checked this with several of the people who, I thought, should know. These included journalists, Gandhians and some lay persons. They all said the German must be joking.

Peter - the German - and I then strolled into the picture gallery at Mani Bhavan in Bombay which was Mahatma Gandhi's residence from 1917 to 1934 and is now a national memorial.

Sure enough, Peter and I found the celebrated and much-publicised large-sized picture which clearly shows that there are two *lathis* and not just one. I then shot the picture - published along with this piece

- showing Peter pointing out the two *lathis*.

Dear reader, if you do not believe me, take a trip to Mani Bhavan and find out for yourself. As I said, the picture taken by me is far too small to indicate that there are indeed two *lathis*. Want to lay any bets?

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Hiro Shroff

Peter says he had seen this picture years ago and was always intrigued by the caption which generally said that the little boy was 'leading' or 'pulling' the Mahatma. Peter says it all looked odd to him. He could not figure how the two of them - Mahatma Gandhi and the little boy - could walk in such unison and yet have just one *lathi* between them. The *lathi* had to bend at some point.

Quite by chance, just a few weeks ago, Peter ran into Kanu, the little boy in the famous picture, at Rajkot.

Kanu, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, is, of course, now a grown-up man.

Peter says Kanu told him that it was not he 'leading' the Mahatma but it was the Mahatma pushing him. Kanu explains that originally he used to go for walks with Mahatma Gandhi and walk alongside him. Both the Mahatma and Kanu had their own *lathis*.

And then, Kanu slowly started trailing behind the Mahatma. At this point, Mahatma Gandhi dubbed Kanu as a 'lazy boy' and pushed Kanu in front of him and pushed him along.

So that's it. It now explains all - at any rate, I am now convinced that there were two *lathis* and that it was the Mahatma pushing Kanu and not Kanu 'pulling' the Mahatma.

It is also quite interesting how Peter turned a Gandhian. Peter says that, in West Berlin, where he was working as a computer programmer he had an Indian colleague. This colleague used to pay periodic visits to his family near Chandigarh.

One day, five years ago, this colleague asked Peter if he would like to go to India with him. Peter recalls: 'I was not particularly interested but said okay, why not.'

Peter came to India with his colleague, toured the country and stayed with Indian families. That, says Peter, was a 'very good way to know the people and life in India.'

This helped Peter turn into a Gandhian and, on his return to West Berlin in 1983, he founded the Gandhi Information Centre.

Peter says: 'The Gandhi Information Centre was founded in West Berlin in 1983 during the time of nuclear arms race and devastation of the ecological foundation for human life.'



Peter Ruhe, German Gandhian, at the Mani Bhavan, Bombay pointing to a picture showing Mahatma Gandhi and the 'little boy' out for a walk.