in the footsteps of Gandhi

Peter Ruhe's view on Gandhi and his interpretations of Gandhi's relevance in today's world are nothing if not controversial. Different people used Gandhi's and his ideas to suit their own purposes. But he was discarded by everyone after the purpose was achieved. There were very few who understood Gandhi (and what he espoused) during his lifetime, and now even less,” rue this Gandhi zealot. Peter Ruhe talks to MAYANK BHATT.

“GANDHI was not a mass leader. He became one, as host to the nation. In my opinion, he was not someone who could inspire a mass movement.” That is Peter Ruhe for you. Peter Ruhe is an unconventional man, with unconventional views. A German staying in Berlin, Ruhe is a computer engineer with the Institute of Theoretical Chemistry at the Technical University, Berlin. This, however, is only a minor facet of Ruhe's personality. The more important and interesting aspect of this young German's personality is his deep and passionate interest in the Life and Times of Mahatma Gandhi. This is the interest in Mahatma Gandhi that made him start the Gandhi Information Centre in Berlin, which today, eight years later, has grown into one of the biggest such centres outside India.

But Ruhe's views on Gandhi and his interpretation of Gandhi's message and relevance in today's world are not any less controversial. Speaking in short and measured sentences, in a slightly accented English, Ruhe observes with deep conviction: “He (Gandhi) was at his peak in 1930-31, during the salt satyagraha and during the second round table conference. At these times, the Indian nation followed Gandhi blindly. But later, different people used him and his ideas to suit their purposes. He was requested to come back to politics in the 1940s (after he had come out from party politics in 1934) because the nation was on the brink of independence and wanted Gandhi because he was an integrative figure who could talk to the British as well as the Indians. But he was discarded by everyone after the purpose was achieved.”

Elucidating his point further Ruhe says: “I have come to these conclusions after studying the period of Gandhi's life between 1940 and 1948, when he became increasingly sad and frustrated. His individual satyagraha in 1940 was perhaps an expression of his failure to establish the message of non-violence in the masses who were then involved in a grim battle to bring about socio-political changes in Indian society. He realised this and gave up his attempt to create mass awareness for his ideas. He concentrated only on individuals who he selected for initiating individual satyagrahas.”

He asked only those whom he could be sure would understand him properly and there were not many. This is the reason that there were very few who understood Gandhi (and what he espoused) during his lifetime; and now even less.

Ruhe's interest in the Mahatma goes back to 1983 when he visited India for the first time, along with an Indian colleague from the institute. What was essentially an ordinary visit as a tourist (where he spent most of his time on the mandatory sight-seeing tours) turned into a life's mission when he saw Richard Attenborough's film Gandhi and later visited Mani Bharat. “I saw the film with four or four days of its release at Regal. Impressed by the characterisation of Gandhi, I visited Mani Bhavan and began to read Gandhi's autobiography on the terrace of Mani Bhavan that impressed me immensely. I was searching for Gandhi initially was the manner in which he expressed himself about human society, tolerance, catering for the poor and uplifting the underprivileged.”

Ruhe, however, felt that the image of Gandhi in the West was quite insufficient and unsatisfactory. “The image of a politician who used non-violent means to get rid of the British, Ruhe rightly felt, did not do full justice to the more important aspects of Gandhi's personality and almost completely ignored his singular work pertaining to the social integration of the untouchables, tolerance of religions, his spirituality, combining the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount. It was primarily to fill this vacuum between public perception and the reality that was Gandhi, that Ruhe opened the Gandhi Information Centre in Berlin. Notes Ruhe: “I thought, if I was so fascinated by Gandhi, I would others be, provided, they got proper information.” After returning to Germany, Ruhe and his new established centre organised an exhibition on Gandhi's life and the Indian independence movement.

It was the first such exhibition in a German speaking country and expectedly, it was very well received. Through the years, the centre has organised many such exhibitions in many countries of Europe and also in Israel. Its collection of archival material like rare photographs, tape recordings, footage from films and other such material has kept pace with its growth from a purely private initiative when it started, to a public charity having 60 active members and over 1,500 associates.

According to Ruhe, Gandhi's thoughts were not allowed to take root in this country. “He (Gandhi) was idolised and thereby made irrelevant,” he says. But what about India and Indians? According to Ruhe, Gandhi's thoughts were not allowed to take root in this country, which was idolised and thereby made irrelevant. Today, there is political swaraj, but Gandhi wanted total swaraj, political, social and economic independence. His concept of “Unto the Last” (which he adopted from John Ruskin) has been discarded by India, the German Gandhi rues. But he is optimistic about the future. “In India and in the third world in general, the point of material satisfaction has not yet been reached, it will take another decade before this happens. It is then that people will realise that this kind of materialism and materialist society is a complete destruction of society. The teachings of Gandhi will come back to India, like yoga and meditation from the West. It is said that a prophet is not heard in his own country, this is also true in the case of Gandhi.”

Coming back to his pet theme of the relevance of Gandhi's teachings in today's world, he says: “Gandhi's teachings and ideas are increasingly being rediscovered in the West because the West has realised that material well-being alone will never lead to self-realisation. It is now admitted that the military-industrial superstructure has only led to the destruction of our eco-systems and the result of such activities have not been adequate to compensate the loss. The dissatisfaction and frustration stems from the reason that material pursuits have reduced the value and importance of human relationships. We are closer to our computers than to our neighbours. It is, hence, only natural that we in the West have come to agree with Gandhi's world view.”

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