

Following the Footprints of Mahatma Gandhi in India

by Peter Ruhe

"The study of Gandhian thought is and will remain important for ages. However, it seems to be particularly important in the present-day world threatened as it is by a nuclear war and total destruction. The understanding and application of the Gandhian technique of nonviolence to the many problems facing the world today will go a long way in leading it to peace."

Vithalbhai K. Jhaveri, 19.1.1963
(eminent biographer of Mahatma Gandhi; 1910 – 1985)

"An exhibition (read here: peace museum) should be such as to prompt people to visit it once, twice, three times, even four times with their eyes and ears open and if possible with the eyes and the ears of their souls open. We should endeavour to make the exhibition (peace museum) a sacred and holy place, a feast for eyes and ears, a spiritual feast capable of purifying the senses. Not a spectacular show but a kind of fairy land."

Mahatma Gandhi

When it comes to the question of how to solve the numerous conflicts we face in today's world, peace activists and researchers, the common man and sometimes even politicians consider nonviolent means. Since Mahatma Gandhi is known as the *Apostle of Nonviolence*, his thoughts on love, truth and nonviolence are discussed in almost all parts of the world. Without belittling the achievements of other nonviolent fighters for human rights, it can be said that Gandhi is the representative of peacemakers and peacekeepers. That by his deeds he has influenced many peace-, ecological-, social and human rights movements the world over.

Many people in the industrialized countries feel that Gandhi's message crosses the boundaries of time and geography and, is therefore, extremely pertinent today. Due to individual efforts, several institutions have been founded in the recent years. Mainly found in Europe but also in the USA, Australia and other countries, they share the aim of popularizing Gandhi's life and work. Since they tend to be rather small institutions with limited means, they are not necessarily able to provide fundamental in depth media on Gandhi.

In stark contrast there are more than 2,000 Gandhian institutions in India putting Gandhi's ideas into practice in the political, social and educational field. The major institution co-ordinating most of these activities is the *Gandhi Memorial Trust* with its headquarter in New Delhi. Under the umbrella of the *Gandhi Memorial Trust* six Gandhi-Museums operate in various parts of the country. These museums, as well as related similar institutions, are fairly well equipped with material relating to Mahatma Gandhi. Generally, they have large libraries and possess many annual sets of old magazines, films, photographs, audio-tapes, exhibitions, as well as personal belongings of Mahatma Gandhi or replicas. In the 1950s and 60s

considerable monetary and manpower effort was put into establishing these museums. Today, however, most of them are in a neglected condition due to a lack of interest shown by the present generation. Furthermore, the institutions have not kept up with the technical development in the museum world and many of them use the same equipment they used 40 years ago. Valuable material which could be used to convey a realistic picture of Gandhi, his times and the circumstances under which he lived and worked, is disintegrating, due to mishandling and pure neglect. For many years, I have visited the Gandhi-Museums and Gandhi research institutions and have maintained good contact with the people working there. From my point of view there is a very urgent need for Western people and institutions, particularly the Peace- and Human Rights Museums to establish contact with the Indian Gandhi Museums and similiar institutions, in order to enter into a constructive exchange of views, experiences, material and technical equipment. Both sides would definitely benefit a great deal!

One area to which Indian and non-Indian institutions interested in Gandhi must pay more attention is the identification and conservation of yet unknown material on and by Mahatma Gandhi. Experts guess that approximately 30% of all existing material have not yet seen the light of day! This apprehension was confirmed during my own research spread over the last 15 years. Hence I strongly feel that a systematic approach to the known and unknown sources should be taken which would eventually benefit the whole world. I refer to this process as *Search-n-Research*.

Search-n-Research has become the theme for an ongoing project of systematic oral history and search for yet unknown material on and by Mahatma Gandhi. Every year I visit numerous associates and relatives of Gandhi, photographers, collectors and contemporaries of the Mahatma all over India and abroad. I purchased a mobile repro-unit in Germany which allows me to produce high quality reprenegetives on the spot. By this method the owners need not part with their treasured material. If desired, help is provided for conservation of the material. In many cases the material is loaned to a suitable place such as the *Dinodia Picture Agency* in Mumbai or an appropriate Gandhi Museum. Which ever approach is favoured, the owners receive a copy of the newly prepared negatives, often replacing the lost or damaged original negatives. In turn a request is made to the owners to allow the material to be used by the subscribers of the *Search-n-Research* project. Visiting the owners of material at their homes and offering a constructive equitable approach they overcome any concerns, and thus the foundation for the co-operation and thus the success of the project is created. Peace related institutions in India and abroad may subscribe to the collateral of the *Search-n-Research* project. For an annual fee they receive copies of all newly found

material as well as a detailed annual report at the end of *each Search-n-Research* term, which lasts from each 1st January until 31st December.

To illustrate the success of the *Search-n-Research* project I shall provide the following example. After Mahatma Gandhi's death in 1948, his youngest son Devdas began to collect photographs and films in order to produce a detailed document of his father's life and work. Eventually, he handed over this material to Shri Vithalbhai Jhaveri who also had begun to collect visuals on Gandhi from sources all over the world.

Together these photographs were then used for Shri Jhaveri's various publications, exhibitions and films. After his death in 1985 his collection of over 9,000 photographs were sent to me in Germany for scientific treatment which involved cleaning, captioning, computerisation, the preparation of new negatives and filing. The archive was returned to its Mumbai-based owner, the family of Shri Jhaveri, and a collections' trust was founded in his name. Today this, the largest photo collection on Gandhi and India's freedom movement, is available through the *Dinodia Picture Agency* in Mumbai. Of about 400 of the photographs slides were made which then were used in an audio visual show entitled *A journey across India following the footprints of Mahatma Gandhi*. This 100-minutes show is now available in English, German, French and Hindi and is presented in various countries.

Another example is the photo collection of Gandhi's grandnephew Kanu Gandhi (1917 – 1986). Kanu Gandhi was brought up and lived with his granduncle, the Mahatma, in his various ashrams. Kanu was a member of Gandhi's personal staff and they worked closely together until the assassination in 1948. Since 1936, when Kanu was presented with a camera, he took photographs of the Mahatma, who became his favourite subject. Fortunately for Kanu, Gandhi allowed to photograph him in any situation on three conditions, that no flash would be used, that he would not finance it and that he would not pose. Kanu Gandhi was the only one allowed to take his granduncle's photograph at any time. He was thus able to capture Mahatma Gandhi in all his moods and moments. I first visited Kanu and his wife Abha, in 1985 at their home in Rajkot (Gujarat / India). Kanu's photographs of the Mahatma left a deep impression on me. After his death in 1986, I helped Abha to organise the large photographic collection, unique in terms of content and quality. As Kanu used to remember details of each photograph he never felt the need to record them. Fortunately, his wife Abha was often with him when he took the photographs. She not only remembered where and when the photograph was taken but also recollected incidents of their time with Gandhi. As well as original negatives and albums of his photographs, Kanu also had several thousand loose photographs overflowing numerous shelves and cupboards in his darkroom. I was lucky enough to obtain these photographs and safeguard their future. Over the years I have gathered a complete set of

Kanu Gandhi's photographs consisting of over 1,300 images and completed the organisation of these into a proper photoarchive. This collection is of tremendous value for all peace oriented institutions, as most of them promote Gandhi's life and work, in one form or another. With Abha Gandhi's consent I prepared 10 sets of negatives of the entire collection in order to make them available for constructive work. Each 24 x 36 mm negative is individually packed in a protective archival wallet and displayed in an attractive presentation case. The negatives are collated in line with Kanu's own numbering system with a list of captions included for each photograph. Now this collection is exclusively available to museums and centres for peace and human rights. Furthermore, a pictorial exhibition of the best 99 images was compiled and is available for lending. This exhibition is entitled *Kanu Gandhi's Mahatma* and was shown successfully at various places in England.

Before finishing I would like to talk about the internet. At the beginning I said that it's extremely important to have access to authentic information and suitable media in order to get a realistic picture of the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi. This importance is further enhanced by keeping in mind the fact that the many surveys undertaken in order to identify the most influential person of the 20th century constantly rank the Mahatma near the top. Moreover, his influence on the world can be judged when you examine the other personalities appearing in the top ranks of the surveys. For instance: Mother Teresa, Michael Gorbachov, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa and Dr. Martin Luther King jr. All these people have declared themselves deeply influenced by Gandhi and his mass nonviolent movement. In spite of this, it is very difficult to obtain appropriate media on Gandhi outside India.

With all its critics and problems, the internet provides a channel to reach out to potentially interested people throughout the world in a much more efficient way than any other means available to us today. Surfing the web in search for sites on Mahatma Gandhi one can visit hundreds of homepages or entries which are nearly all fairly mediocre, in terms of quality and quantity. None of the websites dedicated to the Mahatma offers books, films, photographs or CD-Rom's for sale. This has now ended! Having undertaken a careful survey of what is necessary to promote Gandhi's life and work most suitably, I came to the conclusion that a highly sophisticated website is needed to bridge the gap between owners of material on Gandhi and the many people interested in Gandhi throughout the world.

Recently I launched a *MAHATMA GANDHI Research and Media Service* under its brandname **GANDHISERVE** which caters to those needs. In co-operation with all Gandhi-Museums in India, especially the *National Gandhi Museum* in New Delhi, all archival and current materials on Gandhi are made available on this website. The materials are not only listed but, by using internet shopping facilities, can be ordered

and are shipped in shortest possible time by an international courier service. GANDHISERVE is an internet-based non-profit enterprise which aims to popularize Mahatma Gandhi's life and work and thus spread the ethics of nonviolence. GANDHISERVE offers an online information service about Mahatma Gandhi and seeks to promote the sale of media, such as books, photographs, audio/videotapes, CD-Rom's, as well as other items like stamps, greeting cards, spinning wheels, t-shirts, mousepads, jigsaw puzzles etc. Here visitors find profound and rare material on Gandhi as well as services in the areas of media consultancy, research and travelling. Any profit will be used by GANDHISERVE to support the production of quality media on Mahatma Gandhi by establishing an annual *Gandhi Media Award* and also by supporting the application of Gandhian thought through a specific *Support Scheme*.

The two latter activities were incorporated following my own experiences working for the promotion of Mahatma Gandhi's life and work since 1983. During the course of my engagement I realised – sometimes painfully – how difficult it is to work for what I believe is a good cause. Although my work is recognised and appreciated around the globe it remains extremely difficult to get any other than moral support. I know that a large number of like-minded people and groups are facing the same problem. Therefore GANDHISERVE has made it its policy that all profit is to be used exclusively to support initiatives which are dedicated to the promotion of Gandhian values. GANDHISERVE's *MAHATMA GANDHI Research and Media Service* can be found at the webaddress **www.gandhiserve.com**.

I shall close with two quotations which I feel characterise the spirit in which this work is undertaken.

The late Dr. Martin Luther King jr. said:
"There is no choice between violence or nonviolence. The only choice we have is between nonviolence and perish."

And the Christian reformer Martin Luther said:
"If I knew that the world would perish tomorrow I would still plant an apple tree today."

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