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Author(s): Om Dikshit

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# The Impact of Mahatma Gandhi on Martin Luther King, Jr.

Om Dikshit\*

The names of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as peace makers in the 20th century for the people of this world will never be forgotten. It is true that the national heroes and great souls of world all over have been loved and respected by their country men, but it is different in the case of these two who have been given love and respect in greater abundance than most.<sup>1</sup> Both of these peace makers were alike in many aspects of their dreams, visions, and ideals; they were also alike in dedicating their lives and souls to the deepest concern for mankind—the feeling of benevolence and brotherhood which people must have for each other. They were born to love people not to hate people, and they always believed in building and uniting.

Mahatma Gandhi was a political leader and a philosopher. His teachings supplied the world with the philosophy of non-violent social change based on SATYAGRAHA (firm grasp of the truth) and ATMBAL (soul force) and spiritual leadership. In one of the articles entitled "The Doctrine of the Sword" he said:<sup>2</sup>

*"... I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. . . . Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute, and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law to the strength of the spirit."*

Dr. King felt a profound impact of Mahatma Gandhi on his philosophy. His speeches, his writings show the tenets of nonviolence and Gandhian philosophy. Once Mahatma Gandhi said:<sup>3</sup>

*"I am, indeed a practical dreamer. My dreams are not airy nothings. I want to convert my dreams into realities, as far as possible."*

The "I Have a Dream" speech given in front of Lincoln Memorial during the march on Washington, on August 28, 1963,

proves that he was moved by the Gandhian philosophy a great deal. Dr. King repeated the phrase "I have a Dream" several times in his speech.

Professors George W. Davis and M. W. Johnson have been the greatest inspiring source in paving Dr. King's path toward the Gandhian Philosophy. Professor Davis gave a course on "the Psychology of Religious Personalities" and it was he who encountered Dr. King with the Gandhian philosophy on nonviolence. He initiated Dr. King into Gandhi's concept of SATYAGRAHA, Gandhi's beliefs and Gandhi's spiritual leadership. Dr. Johnson<sup>4</sup> had made a trip to India in connection with a world pacifist meeting and had admired the land of Gandhi in his lecture that he gave at Howard University's Fellowship House. Dr. Johnson's discourse about Gandhi's spiritual leadership and pacifistic techniques was of a very high order. He presented the Gandhian philosophy and his pacifism in such an impressive fashion that Dr. King could not escape being influenced by it himself. The pacifism of Gandhi contented Dr. King and he soon converted himself to Gandhism. Dr. King said:<sup>5</sup>

*"His message was so profound and electrifying that I left the meeting and bought a half dozen books on Gandhi's life and works."*

Dr. King was a good seeker of knowledge and truth. He read the literature on Gandhi, Gandhian nonviolence, Indian spiritualism and soul force, while at Crozer Theological Seminary. He began to have a keen interest in philosophy and started outside reading on Gandhiji. Dr. King said:<sup>6</sup>

*"We began to think more deeply about the whole philosophy of nonviolence. We talked about how superficial and shallow our knowledge of the whole thing was."*

Slow but sure and by dint of hard labor, tremendous hardships and bitter experiences, he at last smoothed his way toward formal acceptance of Gandhian philosophy

of nonviolence. Mrs. King observed:<sup>7</sup>

*"... he was consciously emulating the Gandhian technique, and many people outside of the south were beginning to realize that something new was taking place in Montgomery: Black people, on their own, were creating a new instrument of social change; they were building and developing a totally new kind of structure."*

She further observed:<sup>8</sup>

*"Martin was responding to the influence of Gandhi and his techniques of non-violence."*

As early as 1932, Reinhold Niebuhr had offered suggestions toward the aptness of the Gandhian methods to struggle for racial equality in the U.S.A. He pushed hard for the adoption of Gandhi's beliefs on nonviolence and felt:<sup>9</sup>

*"That Gandhian way would be the very means needed to extricate blacks from their lowly position in the American caste system."*

Mahatma Gandhi was brilliant and imaginative, he had studied British Raj and therefore knew how to play nonviolent and Satyagraha-drama on the Indian Political stage. But Dr. King was not sure how to use and practice the Gandhian Satyagraha effectively in American conditions.<sup>10</sup> Dr. King kept on reading the literature on Gandhi's life and works. Hanes Walton, Jr. in "The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr." states:<sup>11</sup>

*"Gandhi's message had an immediate and profound impact upon King and it was in reading the works of Gandhi that he lost his skepticism of the power of love and began to appreciate its usefulness and potency in the area of social reform."*

*"The Gandhian techniques of love and nonviolence gave him a potent instrument for social and collective transformation which blacks could be taught to*

\*Central State University, Wilberforce, Ohio.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressing a huge crowd during the 1963 March on Washington.



*use in their struggle against oppression and injustice.”*

Dr. King began to say:<sup>12</sup>

*“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed.”*

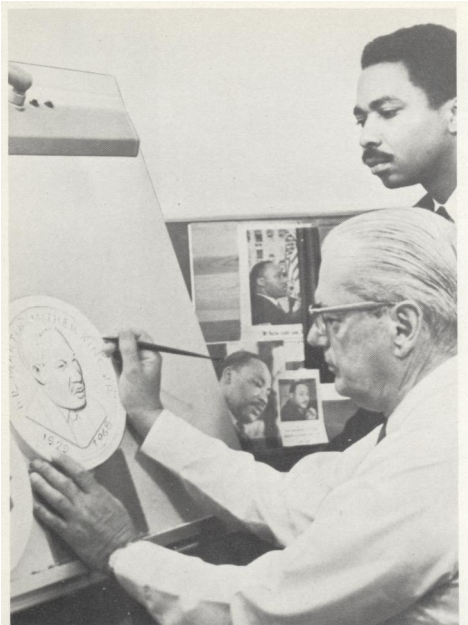
And the heartiest demands of Dr. King have been well exemplified in his speech “I Have a Dream.” This speech reveals his innermost feelings for his people and for his countrymen. Gandhi’s fasts, prayers, salt march to the sea, and boycott of British goods and honor offered even nobler guides to nonviolent resistance to evil and unequal justice. This was the reason that Dr. King always accepted imprisonment rather than compromise with an evil law and unequal justice. He emphasized:<sup>13</sup>

*“The beauty of nonviolence is that you can struggle without violence. It says that the organized codes of dedicated souls possess more power than Molotov cocktails or atom bombs.”*

On February 10, 1959, he arrived at Palam Airport, New Delhi with a heart burning desire to visit Gandhi’s land. There was an extended invitation from GANDHI SMARAK NIDHI (Gandhi Memorial Fund) for him to visit India. Dr. King, his beloved wife Coretta Scott King and Professor Lawrence Reddick were in the party. They were very warmly welcomed and enthusiastically greeted. The whole party was surprised by the enthusiasm and the realistic reception paid to them by the Indian people. Dr. King was overwhelmed and in his first speech he said:<sup>14</sup>

*“To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I came as a pilgrim. This is because India means to me Mahatma Gandhi, a truly great man of the age.”*

He visited the whole of India from coast to coast and from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari. He visited all big cities and all the places associated with the life and works of Mahatma Gandhi. He had interviews with



George A. Beach, president of the American Negro Commemorative Society, looks on approvingly as Gilroy Roberts of the Franklin Mint sculpts the medal for the Society's first commemorative medal which will honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jawaharlal Nehru, Vinoba Bhave and many more Indian leaders. He was deeply influenced by Vinoba's ideas of SHANTI SENA (army of peace volunteers), BHUDAN (voluntary land gift) and SHRAMDAN (voluntary labor gift) and Nehru's PANCHSHIL (five tenets of peaceful coexistence). Nehru emphasized the importance of the usefulness of nonviolence to Dr. King. He also praised Dr. King for the leadership he had given with regard to Gandhian ideals of nonviolence and simplicity of living in the U.S.A. Dr. King said to Nehru:<sup>15</sup>

*"I have read so much about Gandhi and the success of the nonviolent movement here that I wanted to come and see for myself."*

On March 10, 1959, Dr. King and the party arrived back to the United States with such effective weapons such as soul force, civil disobedience, noncooperation, social and economic boycott, negotiation and arbitration, and above all nonviolent resistance. Dr. King himself said:<sup>16</sup>

*"I left India more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. It was a marvelous thing to see the results of a nonviolent campaign."*

Mrs. King was herself fascinated with the Gandhian crew and with the companionship of the Indian leaders. She said:<sup>17</sup>

*"We loved the Indian people for the warmth and the spiritual quality they possessed. . . .Most of the people we*

*met were dedicated Gandhians, and in our talks with them we gained a deeper insight into the principles of Satyagraha, or soul force, which was the basic concept of Gandhi's nonviolent movement."*

She further emphasized:<sup>18</sup>

*"Martin made speeches all over India, always emphasizing his debt to Gandhian thinking. . . .The Indian experience had a terrific impact on Martin's mind."*

The roots of nonviolent social change in Gandhian philosophy had so deeply penetrated into his bones and tissues that it can be seen in a letter which he wrote to Chester Bowles, ambassador to India at that time.<sup>19</sup>

*"It is my hope that as the Negro plunges into the quest for freedom and justice he will plunge even deeper into the philosophy of nonviolence. The Negro all over the south must come to the point that he can say to his white brother: We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. We will not hate you, but we will not obey your evil laws. We will soon wear you down by our pure capacity to suffer'."*

Elsewhere he said:<sup>20</sup>

*"Our goal is not to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and love."*

It is a fact that Dr. King derived much benefit and encouragement from Gandhi's path of meekness and domestication of Gandhian nonviolent concepts and dialectics. The Gandhian philosophy and techniques have been a great and far-reaching force to the needs of the black Americans and that have been beautifully dramatized in the Montgomery and Selma struggle. The Selma-to-Montgomery March was as important an event in the American history as was Gandhi's salt march to the sea in the Indian history.<sup>21</sup>

*"Moral courage was one of his noblest virtues. As Mahatma Gandhi challenged the British Empire without a sword and won, Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged the interracial wrongs of his country without a gun. And he had the faith to believe that he would win the battle for social justice."*

Dr. King will always be remembered as an apostle of nonviolence and the Mahatma Gandhi of the West. He will also be remembered as a beloved, bright and

brilliant brother of the Blacks. In the Commencement Address at Lincoln University on June 6, 1961, Dr. King said:<sup>23</sup>

*"I will never forget the experiences that came to us as we moved around that great country, or the opportunity of meeting and talking with great leaders of India and with people all over the cities and villages throughout India. Certainly this was an experience that I will never forget."*

#### Footnotes and References:

<sup>1</sup> "Of all the leaders of the U.S.'s Negro Revolution, none has become more respected by his own people or more reviled by segregationists than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. . . .Last week King, 35, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 1964. He is the twelfth American, and the youngest person ever to be honored." See *Time*, the Weekly News Magazine, Oct. 23, 1964 (Vol. 84, No. 17) p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the Editorial, *Negro History Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 5, May 1968, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by David L. Lewis, *King, a Critical Biography*, New York: Praeger, 1970, p. 210.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. M. W. Johnson has worked as the President of Howard University. He visited India in 1950 as a participant in the world pacifist Meeting held in New Delhi.

<sup>5</sup> See David L. Lewis, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1969, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 163.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960, p. 251-54.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, New York: Pocket Books, 1964. 141.

<sup>11</sup> Hanes Walton, Jr., *The Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1971, p. 42, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Editorial, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi", *Negro History Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 5, May 1968, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> See David L. Lewis, p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> See Coretta Scott King, p. 174.

<sup>16</sup> See David L. Lewis, p. 105.

<sup>17</sup> Coretta Scott King, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178.

<sup>19</sup> *Capacity to Suffer: Martin Luther King, Jr. to Chester Bowles*, October 28, 1957, Boston University Collection, III, 10 B.

<sup>20</sup> Editorial, *Negro History Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 5, May 1968 p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> William Robert Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968, p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, *Eulogy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Atlanta: Georgia, April, 1964.

<sup>23</sup> See the Commencement Address entitled "The American Dream" delivered by Dr. King at Lincoln University on June 6, 1961; see also *Negro History Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 5, pp. 10-15.