

## **Influence of Gandhian Nonviolence on the U.S. and African-American Civil Rights Movement 1905-1968 (pictorial argument)**

*There is today in the world but one living maker of miracles, and that is Mahatma Gandhi*  
--- Du Bois (1932)

*As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning love gradually diminished, and I came to see... its potency in the arena of social reform* — Dr Martin Luther King, Jr (1958)

*I have in my lifetime witnessed an almost unimaginable social and political revolution in our region of the American South brought about through the philosophies and strategies of nonviolent struggle .* -- Hon. Jimmy Carter (1999)

by Purushottama Bilimoria

### *Preamble*

In the year preceding the International Year of Reconciliation (2001), there was something of a Gandhian renaissance in much of metro-Atlanta, Georgia. This euphoria was evidenced, variously, in the visit by one of Gandhi's grandsons to Atlanta for the Indian Independence celebrations (in August, 1999) and a King-Gandhi Center Initiative Weekend in October 1999; another of Gandhi's prominent grandsons (Rajmohan Gandhi) arrived as a resident fellow at Emory University in February 2000, Bishop Tutu and Rev Andrew Young engaged in public dialogue with Mr Gandhi, in the spirit of an earlier symposium in Decatur, Atlanta, discussing Religion and Violence in the South, and another in November 1999 at the King International Chapel in Morehouse celebrating the anniversary of Dr Howard Thurman and Sue Bailey (whose parents' papers along with Sue Bailey's travel photographs are in the African American Collections in Woodruff Library at Emory University, where carried out some of my research). January to April 2000 was declared "A Season for Nonviolence", a public awareness campaign coordinated by a network of eight reconciliation and 'Kingandhian' nonviolence fellowships across the country. The high point of the Season occurred over the Spiritual Awareness Week in March-April (2000) with a spectacular ceremony conferring honorary degrees posthumously for Mahatma Gandhi and his wife, Kasturbai Gandhi at Morehouse College, one of the leading Black colleges in the U.S. with which Martin Luther King Jr's name also came to be associated. This gala occasion was marked also by the unveiling of the bronze busts, gifted by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in Delhi and part-sponsored by the local Indian community, of these two fresh "Drs" of Morehouse Graduate Alumni. The new Gandhi Institute for Reconciliation simultaneously with a massive plaque inscribing Dr Martin Luther King Jr's historic speech, "I have a Dream" were also launched at this occasion, in the presence of Coretta Scott King and Arun and Sunanda Gandhi (co-directors of the M K Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence based in Memphis, TN). Atlanta

now boasts two significant statues of M K Gandhi (the other, full body-in-stride also cast in bronze in India, stands at the M L K. Jr. National Historic Site (which was unveiled by Dr. Rev. Andrew Young in 1998) and one of Mrs Kasturbai Gandhi (in addition to numerous portraits dating back to the 1920's). There have been other public events too highlighting the triumph of the Gandhi-King Jr inspired nonviolent strategy and efforts towards minimizing community violence —not least, the mimetic healing model, The Thurman Reconciliation Initiative, and the International Colloquium on Violence Reduction in Theory and Practice launched from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

But why is Gandhi (rather, the Gandhis) being honored regularly, and increasingly within an African American ambience, or, for that matter, in metro-Atlanta more than anywhere else? There is a story crying out to be told, far from complete yet, which I have been investigating and from which I present a vignette here (which is being embellished with over 150 slides collected in his research while a Rockefeller Fellow and visiting professor with the Center for Public Scholarship (ILA) last academic year). This is only the beginnings of a major historiography in progress. But there is one book out (or out of print presently, but for a second edition in press right now) that has led the way, and I draw from this book for my discussion here, namely, Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet The African-American Encounter With Gandhi*. (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992)

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Little did the well-attired English-trained lawyer, fresh from India, thrown off the train at the Pietermaritzburg railway station in Natal Province (South Africa), in 1893, realize that his chance encounter the next day with an “an American Negro who happened to be there” (as later noted in his famous Autobiography), would have reverberations in years to come across two continents (America and India). Why? Because the generosity shown by a powerless Black American, in a land where he enjoyed no privileges or rights of his ancestors, to an equally disenfranchised and palpably shaken Indian immigrant, was to remain in the back of Gandhi's ever-alert mind as he learned more and more about the plight of the dispossessed, the marginalized, or the once-enslaved though now supposedly free people -- but who were still bound to other kinds of fetters and insufferable conditions, particularly those of rampant racism, exploitations under

imperial-colonial expropriations, and other subtler means by which a people's humanity is slighted or denigrated. While the successful young advocate went on to fight for the labor and residence rights of Indians, the image of the African American who helped him find a lodging in the otherwise whites-only town, followed him as his contacts with Black Africans increased, most hauntingly among the inmates in the goals he would be thrown into for his civil agitations on behalf of the Asian and colored workers in white South Africa. (There was a similar mix in inverse ratio some fifty years later with the Robben Island internment of Nelson Mandela.) Gandhi even led a neutral Indian ambulance corps in the Boer-British war rescuing injured blacks among the victims. This budding critic of imperialism recognized distinctive processes in the continuing enslavement of the people of color across the globe, namely, that while colonialism brings newer territories and their people under the yoke of modern-industrial oppression, the older forms of subjugation, particularly slavery, continue into the post-slavery era thanks to modernity's legacies of racial exclusivism, orientalism or its equivalent containment elsewhere, and a rabid urban capitalist economy. Hence it is that Gandhi never lost sight of the plight of the descendants of the former slave and colored people in America, while also acknowledging the more enlightened principles inscribed in the U.S. Constitution, or reflected in the pragmatism of leaders such as Theureau, Jefferson, Lincoln, and John Dewey.

In the deep south of the sub-Saharan African continent, Gandhi drew world attention in 1907 as he led the first ever-successful satyagraha, or active resistance ideology based on non-violent principles, - which was to gradually sweep across the rest of the world, beginning with its adoption for the nationalist freedom struggle in India under Gandhi's own leadership, motivating Black-led civil rights campaign in the U.S., and culminating just recently with South Africa's own emancipation from the reign of Apartheid. Nevertheless, whenever the opportunity presented itself, Gandhi made a point of inquiring with deep empathy about the struggles of the "Negroes" in America, who he thought suffered the same horrid social astigmatism and therefore conditions as did the

“untouchables” or those at the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy in his own beloved India. But he held high hopes for the spirit of the American “Negroes” to be able to overcome the obstructing social and political barriers (which in some ways were less traditionally or irredeemably textured than was the case with India’s own weighty past). And history has borne out his confidence, in this regard at least. But how did Gandhi reach, or reach out to, African America?

It happened over a period of time and through the convergent ingenuity of itinerant Indian freedom fighters and preacher-advocates of a home-grown peaceful voice against the proscription of “Negroes, Jews and women” from mainstream American life. Inspired by the ideas of Ruskin, Emerson and Thoreau (whose Jain-like work on Civil Disobedience was M.K.’s early bible), Gandhi’s radical journals from the humble printing press in Phoenix Settlement outside Durban (continued and expanded in India when he returned) reached America, usually through contacts in Britain and Europe. African Americans began to attend conferences in England and Paris on Pan-African and Colored Peoples Congresses (“Freedom for Darker Races”) where followers of Gandhi articulated the irrationality of the common plight of “brown and black races”. Among the U.S. participants was W E B Du Bois, whose acquaintance —as also that of the other flamboyant All-African leader, Marcus Garvey - with expatriate Indian nationalists led to a steady stream of them embarking on conference and lecture tours of America (usually to New York and thence to the South). Har Dayal, Taraknath Das, Haridas Mazumdar, Lala Rajpat Rai, Basant Kumar Roy, Vitthalbai Patel, Manilal Parikh, Sarojini Naidu, Lohia, R R Diwakar were among those who led the trail, and India’s Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (who conferred the title of Mahatma, Great Soul, onto Gandhi) stopped for a while in Urbana-Champaign Illinois in 1922. Independent of the localized “Negro” interest, a handful of white American clergy with leanings toward the Unitarians, Spiritualists, Quakers, and enlightened Methodists or Baptists whose congregations were largely Black, also followed Gandhi’s liberatory career and his message of nonviolent moral and political action against any and all forms

of oppression. They were joined in mid-1920's, by Rev C F Andrews and Mirabai (nee, Madeline Slade), two close English emissaries, followed by the American journalist-activist, Gertrude Emerson, who were sent abroad by Gandhi to correct the misleading polemics by the British (and their American imitators) about the motivation and universality of the cause he had embraced in India. A spate of Indian National Congress delegates also followed. It was lectures of such compatriots and time spent in Moorehouse or Spelman libraries, with Hubert Harrison in Harlem, or Booker T Washington in Tuskegee Institute, or Du Bois in New York, and passing through Howard University in Philadelphia, that also reinforced the African American intellectuals' growing admiration of and appeal to Mr Gandhi, the "lean agitator in loincloth", who the Black pacifist John Haynes Holmes as early as 1920 likened to a "Social Jesus" of modern times, fighting for the wretched of the earth. By 1932 Du Bois had declared that "there is today in the world but one living maker of miracles, and that is Mahatma Gandhi. He stops eating, and three hundred million Indians, together with the British Empire, hold their breath until they can talk together; yet all that America sees in Gandhi is a joke, but the real joke is America". Thus each major step in Gandhi's struggle - his imprisonment, virtual impeachment for sedition, jubilant court-case speeches, fasting, successful satyagrahas such as the Salt March, alongside his personal messages to "The Negroes of America" (reinforced by similar messages from Rabindranath Tagore), were printed and copied across the leading Black papers, magazines, and independent church newsletters. In particular, *The Crisis* (subtitled "A Record of Darker Races" and stamped with seven Hindu swastikas), edited since 1910 by Du Bois, along with (Garvey's) *The Negro World*, *Atlanta Daily World*, *Harlem Renaissance*, *The Chicago Defender*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Unity*, *Christian Century*, the *Norfolk Guide*, newsletters of the NAACP, the American Negro Labor Council, and the National Council of Churches, stepped up coverage of Gandhi in 1920's and 1930's, and featured articles from the increasing traffic between Gandhi's India and American South, beginning with the first African-American delegation to meet Mohandas Gandhi in 1936 (led by Howard Thurman). Gandhi's moving interview with

Sue Bailey Thurman is reported in Thurman's monograph "Head and Heart" alongside a rare pose, of a Gandhi now steeped deep in India's crisis, with Sue Bailey captured in a photograph (the original of which is in the Emory Special Collection). A delegation of Black students left in 1938 for a study tour of Mysore province. In 1947, Black America joined in the celebrations of India's hard-earned Independence with a delegation led by Mordecai Johnson and Benjamin Mays leaving for New Delhi.

A generation of civil rights movement leaders - Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, Whitney Young, Vincent Harding, and James Farmer —came under the spell of the powerful educator-cum-preacher in Thurman (whose personal library on Gandhiana was far ahead of any college library collection in the United States). Other recognizable names around metro-Atlanta who came under Gandhian influence were Ralph McGill (who had a photo of Kasturba on his office-wall), Richard Gregg, Devere Allen, Kirby Page, A. Philip Randolph, Nelson, Roy Wilkins, and Baynard Rustin. African Americans were the first observers outside of India also to appreciate Kasturba Gandhi's exemplary role as a woman in the struggle for justice. Vincent Harding later founded the Gandhi-Hamer King Center at The Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, where his close colleague and co-chairperson is Prof. Sudarshan Kapur (author of the ground-breaking book in this area: "Raising the Prophet"). King, Jr had a virtual conversion to the Gandhian way after hearing the sermons of Dr Mordecai W. Johnson of Howard University who too had visited Gandhi's ashram-headquarters. Pastor Dr King Jr., observed a fledgling group of student protestors (SNCC) versed in Gandhian tactics. Thus drawn to nonviolence, in 1957 he and Coretta Scott traveled extensively in India re-living Gandhi's memory (in a place where it is ironically fading away as rapidly as the glimmers at dusk -- but then these are post-colonial days, where hybrid celluloid images more than actions count.) King's absolute conviction in the efficacy of the Indian philosophy of nonviolence for struggle to achieve racial justice was set out in his 1958 book, *Stride Towards Freedom*. With young nonviolent activists, such as "Andy", Coretta, and Angela Davies in toe, King, Jr. eventually mobilized a mass movement, systematically enacting satyagraha-style sit-ins, nonviolent human

barricades, civil disobedience, marches, rallies, noncooperation strikes and pickets, spiced with passionate speeches, while risking arrests or police beating, all the way, from Atlanta to Albany, Montgomery to Birmingham, and the historic (Bloody Sunday) Selma March on Washington D.C., or at other sites of civil rights campaigns across the nation: “I have a dream...”.”Right On! Brother.” He also spoke out against the distracting and destructive American involvement in the Vietnam War.

In sum, in Dr Martin Luther King Jr., (Black) America found the matured spirit of an indigenous Mahatma, prepared to lay down his life for an all-out struggle against the continuing oppression of its “untouchables”; but the on-going process of reconciling nonviolence with violence-prone authorities and racist institutions was a long time in the making that also claimed the blood of many a soul or martyrs on the way to freedom, in racialized America as in colonial Africa and British India. This is how the fervently productive and politically significant threads were weaved between Indian freedom movement with its transnational advocates and a fledgling African-American liberatory consciousness, beginning with Pan-African advocates like W E Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, and “Black Preachers’ at Morehouse College and Howard University, that continued well into the post-Wars years, right through to Indian Independence and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, with which the names respectively of the two Doctors of Nonviolence, M.K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., have become isomorphic and inseparable. And ‘Kingandhi?’, in the spirit of Groucho Marx, one is tempted to say, you give me a King and a Gandhi, I will give you a *Kingandhi*, the New Era’s hybrid ‘**nonviolence**’ (I used this term first as a slippage for Peter Singer’s approach to Animal freedom, where this benign intentions are mixed in with just a little coercion, and it is apt for the describing the Gandhian-Black native-civil rights struggles as well)..