

MLK's Visit to India

NOTE: This is an abbreviated version of the original article. The full original article is available [here](#).

My Trip to the Land of Gandhi

By The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

SOURCE: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/590701_my_trip_to_the_land_of_gandhi/

NOTE: some images are not part of the original article. (To see the original article click [here](#).)

In this account of his India tour published in Ebony magazine, King notes that Gandhi's spirit is still alive, though "some of his disciples have misgivings about this when . . . they look around and find nobody today who comes near the stature of the Mahatma."¹ Lamenting India's pervasive economic inequalities, King observes that "the bourgeoisie—white, black or brown—behaves about the same the world over," and he calls upon the West to aid India's development "in a spirit of international brotherhood, not national selfishness."

Being welcomed and adorned with garlands at the airport, New Delhi, India, February 10, 1959



For a long time I had wanted to take a trip to India. Even as a child the entire Orient held a strange fascination for me—the elephants, the tigers, the temples, the snake charmers and all the other storybook characters. While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India's Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of non-violent social change. We spoke of him often. So as soon as our victory over bus segregation

was won, some of my friends said: “Why don’t you go to India and see for yourself what the Mahatma, whom you so admire, has wrought.”

In 1956 when Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s Prime Minister, made a short visit to the United States, he was gracious enough to say that he wished that he and I had met and had his diplomatic representatives make inquiries as to the possibility of my visiting his country sometime soon. Our former American ambassador to India, Chester Bowles, wrote me along the same lines.²

But every time that I was about to make the trip, something would interfere. At one time it was my visit by prior commitment to Ghana.³ At another time my publishers were pressing me to finish writing *Stride Toward Freedom*. Then along came Mrs. Izola Ware Curry. When she struck me with that Japanese letter opener on that Saturday afternoon in September as I sat autographing books in a Harlem store, she not only knocked out the travel plans that I had but almost everything else as well.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King with Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru

After I recovered from this near-fatal encounter and was finally released by my doctors, it occurred to me that it might be better to get in the trip to India before plunging too deeply once again into the sea of the Southern segregation struggle.



I preferred not to take this long trip alone and asked my wife and my friend, Lawrence Reddick, to accompany me. Coretta was particularly interested in the women of India and Dr. Reddick in the history and government of that great country. He had written my biography, *Crusader Without Violence*, and said that my true test would come when the people who knew Gandhi looked me over and passed judgment upon me and the Montgomery movement. The three of us made up a sort of 3-headed team with six eyes and six ears for looking and listening.

The Christopher Reynolds Foundation made a grant through the American Friends Service Committee to cover most of the expenses of the trip and the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference and the Montgomery Improvement Association added their support.⁴ The Gandhi Memorial Trust of India extended an official invitation, through diplomatic channels, for our visit.⁵

And so on February 3, 1959, just before midnight, we left New York by plane. En route we stopped in Paris with Richard Wright, an old friend of Reddick's, who brought us up to date on European attitudes on the Negro question and gave us a taste of the best French cooking.⁶

We missed our plane connection in Switzerland because of fog, arriving in India after a roundabout route, two days late. But from the time we came down out of the clouds at Bombay on February 10, until March 10, when we waved goodbye at the New Delhi airport, we had one of the most concentrated and eye-opening experiences of our lives. There is so much to tell that I can only touch upon a few of the high points.

At the outset, let me say that we had a grand reception in India. The people showered upon us the most generous hospitality imaginable. We were graciously received by the Prime Minister, the President and the Vice-President of the nation; members of Parliament, Governors and Chief Ministers of various Indian states; writers, professors, social reformers and at least one saint.⁷ Since our pictures were in the newspapers very often it was not unusual for us to be recognized by crowds in public places and on public conveyances.⁸ Occasionally I would take a morning walk in the large cities, and out of the most unexpected places someone would emerge and ask: "Are you Martin Luther King?"

Virtually every door was open to us. We had hundreds of invitations that the limited time did not allow us to accept. We were looked upon as brothers with the color of our skins as something of an asset. But the strongest bond of fraternity was the common cause of minority and colonial peoples in America, Africa and Asia struggling to throw off racialism and imperialism.

We had the opportunity to share our views with thousands of Indian people through endless conversations and numerous discussion sessions. I spoke before university groups and public meetings all over India. Because of the keen interest that the Indian people have in the race problem these meetings were usually packed. Occasionally interpreters were used, but on the whole I spoke to audiences that understood English.

The Indian people love to listen to the Negro spirituals. Therefore, Coretta ended up singing as much as I lectured. We discovered that autograph seekers are not confined to America. After appearances in public meetings and while visiting villages we were often besieged for autographs. Even while riding planes, more than once pilots came into the cabin from the cockpit requesting our signatures.

We got a good press throughout our stay. Thanks to the Indian papers, the Montgomery bus boycott was already well known in that country. Indian publications perhaps gave a better continuity of our 381-day bus strike than did most of our papers in the United States. Occasionally I meet some American fellow citizen who even now asks me how the bus boycott is going, apparently never having read that our great day of bus integration, December 21, 1956, closed that chapter of our history.

We held press conferences in all of the larger cities—Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay—and talked with newspaper men almost everywhere we went. They asked sharp questions and at times appeared to be hostile but that was just their way of bringing out the story that they were after. As reporters, they were scrupulously fair with us and in their editorials showed an amazing grasp of what was going on in America and other parts of the world.

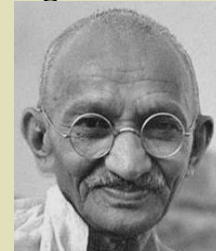
The trip had a great impact upon me personally. It was wonderful to be in Gandhi's land, to talk with his son, his grandsons, his cousin and other relatives; to share the reminiscences of his close comrades; to visit his ashrama, to see the countless memorials for him and finally to lay a wreath on his entombed ashes at Rajghat.² I left India more convinced than ever before that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.¹⁰ It was a marvelous thing to see the amazing results of a non-violent campaign. The aftermath of hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent campaign was found nowhere in India. Today a mutual friendship based on complete equality exists between the Indian and British people within the commonwealth. The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But, the way of non-violence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community.

The spirit of Gandhi is very much alive in India today. Some of his disciples have misgivings about this when they remember the drama of the fight for national independence and when they look around and find nobody today who comes near the stature of the Mahatma. But any objective observer must report that Gandhi is not only the greatest figure in India's history but that his influence is felt in almost every aspect of life and public policy today.

India can never forget Gandhi. For example, the Gandhi Memorial Trust (also known as the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi) collected some \$130 million soon after the death of "the father of the



"Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatsoever; and it ever insists upon truth.... There is no God higher than truth." ~



Mahatma Gandhi

nation." This was perhaps the largest, spontaneous, mass monetary contribution to the memory of a single individual in the history of the world. This fund, along with support from the Government and other institutions, is resulting in the spread and development of Gandhian philosophy, the implementing of his constructive program, the erection of libraries and the publication of works by and about the life and times of Gandhi. Posterity could not escape him even if it tried. By all standards of measurement, he is one of the half dozen greatest men in world history.

I was delighted that the Gandhians accepted us with open arms. They praised our experiment with the non-violent resistance technique at Montgomery. They seem to look upon it as an outstanding example of the possibilities of its use in western civilization. To them as to me it also suggests that non-violent resistance *when planned and positive in action* can work effectively even under totalitarian regimes.

We argued this point at some length with the groups of African students who are today studying in India.¹¹ They felt that non-violent resistance could only work in a situation where the resisters had a potential ally in the conscience of the opponent. We soon discovered that they, like many others,



tended to confuse passive resistance with non-resistance.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and wife Coretta Scott King lay a wreath at Rajghat [Gandhi Memorial].

This is completely wrong. True non-violent resistance is not unrealistic submission to evil power. It is rather a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, in the faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it, since the latter only multiplies the existence of

violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent, and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart.

Non-violent resistance does call for love, but it is not a sentimental love. It is a very stern love that would organize itself into collective action to right a wrong by taking on itself suffering. While I understand the reasons why oppressed people often turn to violence in their struggle for freedom, it is my firm belief that the crusade for independence and human dignity that is now reaching a climax in Africa will have a more positive effect on the world, if it is waged along the lines that were first demonstrated in that continent by Gandhi himself.¹²

[...]

We were surprised and delighted to see that India has made greater progress in the fight against caste "untouchability" than we have made here in our own country against race segregation. Both nations have federal laws against discrimination (acknowledging, of course, that the decision of our Supreme Court is the law of our land). But after this has been said, we must recognize that there are great differences between what India has done and what we have done on a problem that is very similar. The

leaders of India have placed their moral power behind their law. From the Prime Minister down to the village councilmen, everybody declares publicly that untouchability is wrong. But in the United States some of our highest officials decline to render a moral judgment on segregation and some from the South publicly

boast of their determination to maintain segregation. This would be unthinkable in India.

Moreover, Gandhi not only spoke against the caste system but he acted against it. He took "untouchables" by the hand and led them into the temples from which they had been excluded. To

“And the man who shot Gandhi only shot him into the hearts of humanity. And just as when Abraham Lincoln was shot—mark you, for the same reason that Mahatma Gandhi was shot, that is, the attempt to heal the wounds of a divided nation. When the great leader Abraham Lincoln was shot, Secretary Stanton stood by the body of this leader and said, “Now he belongs to the ages.” And that same thing can be said about Mahatma Gandhi now. He belongs to the ages, and he belongs especially to this age, an age drifting once more to its doom.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.—from his Palm Sunday Sermon on Mahatma Gandhi, 22 March 1959



equal that, President Eisenhower would take a Negro child by the hand and lead her into Central High School in Little Rock.

Gandhi also renamed the untouchables, calling them "Harijans" which means "children of God."

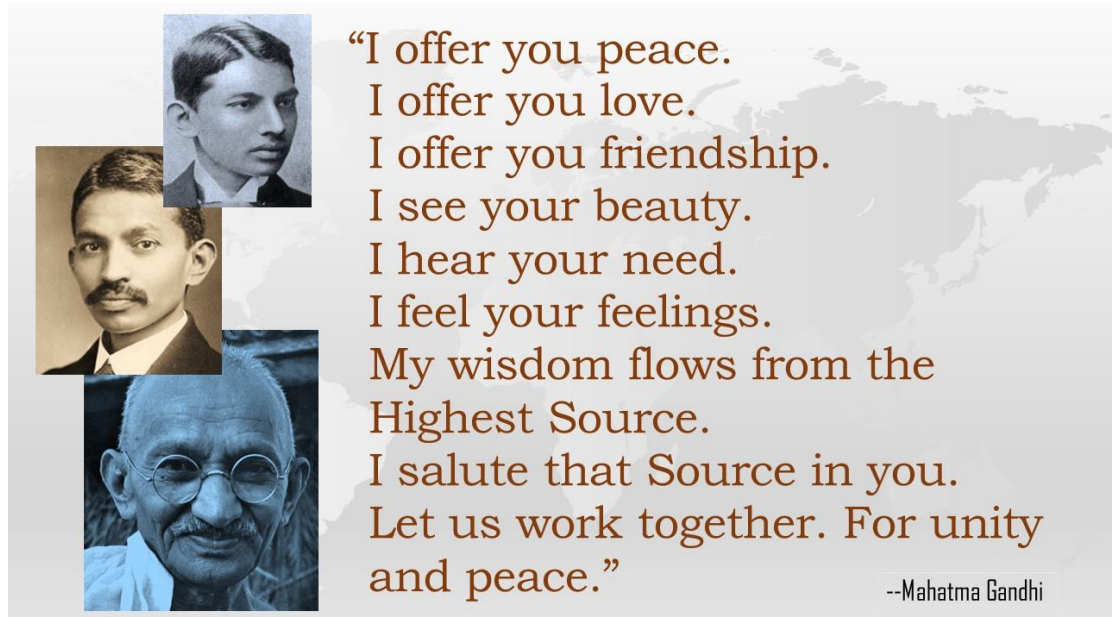
The government has thrown its full weight behind the program of giving the Harijans an equal chance in society—especially when it comes to job opportunities, education and housing.

[...]

Publication date: *Ebony*, July 1959, pp. 84-92.

[1.](#) Four weeks after returning from India, King prepared a draft of this article (Draft, "My trip to India," April 1959; see also Maude L. Ballou to Lerone Bennett, 17 April 1959). Nine photographs accompanied it,

including pictures of King meeting Prime Minister Nehru and the Kings and traveling companion Lawrence Reddick placing a wreath at the site of Gandhi's cremation.



[2.](#) Bowles to King, 28 January 1957; see

also Homer Alexander Jack to King, 27 December 1956, in *Papers* 3:496,498.

[3.](#) In March 1957 King attended the Ghanaian independence celebrations. For more on King's trip to Ghana, see Introduction in *Papers* 4:7-9.

[4.](#) The Reynolds Foundation provided \$4,000 for the trip, SCLC provided an additional \$500, and the MIA and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church presented the Kings with a money tree at a "bon voyage" celebration in their honor on 26 January (AFSC, "Budget: leadership intervisitation, visit to India by Martin Luther and Coretta King," February-March 1959, and "The Kings Leave Country," *Dexter Echo*, 11 February 1959).

[5.](#) See G. Ramachandran to King, 27 December 1958, in *Papers* 4:552-553.

[6.](#) Wright, an African American novelist, had lived in Paris since 1947. In a draft of this article, King had crossed out the reference to Wright. For more on King's visit with Wright, see Introduction, p. 4 in this volume.

[7.](#) Among those King met were Nehru, President Rajendra Prasad, Vice President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and member of Parliament Sucheta Kripalani. King also refers to Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave.

[8.](#) King's draft phrased this differently: "Our pictures were in the newspapers very often and we were recognized by crowds at the circus and by pilots on the planes." The draft did not include the subsequent sentence or the following two paragraphs.

[9.](#) See King to Ramdas M. Gandhi, 8 August 1959, pp. 255-256 in this volume.

[10.](#) This sentence and the remainder of the paragraph were not included in King's draft.

[11.](#) King's draft added the following sentence: "They, like many others, seem to feel that nonviolent resistance means non-resistance, do nothing." The remainder of the paragraph and the following paragraph were not included in the draft.

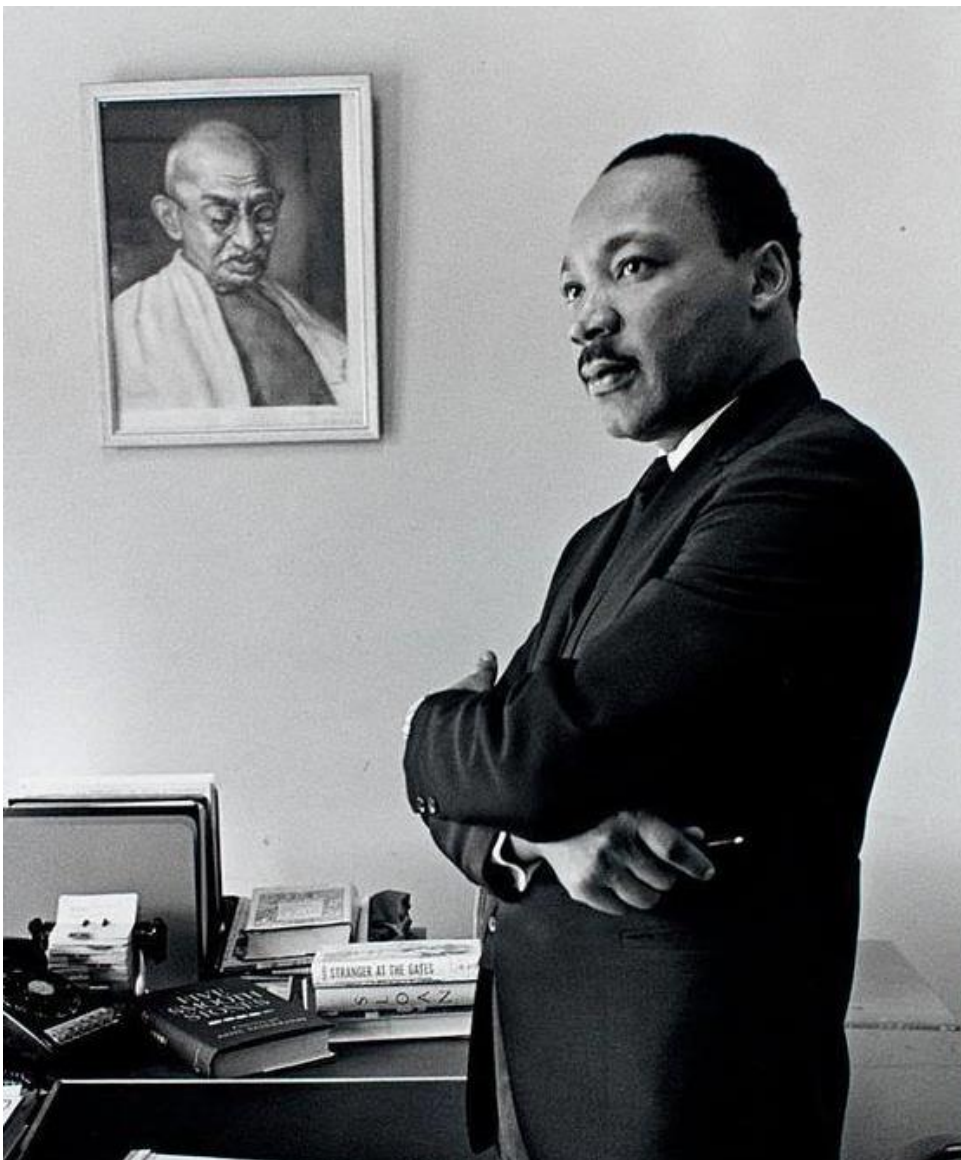
[12.](#) King's draft included the following paragraph: "We also learned a lot from the India journalists. Our practice was to divide the time of our press conferences between questions they asked us and questions we asked them."

[13.](#) King's draft added the following: "The people have a way of squatting, resting comfortably (it seemed) on their haunches. Many of the homes do not have chairs and most of the cities have very few park or street benches."

[14.](#) In King's draft, he had stricken the following two paragraphs: "There is great consideration for human life but little regard for labor and time. We saw men mending shoes almost without tools. Five persons may be sent to bring down a package that one could carry. Human muscles there do many jobs that our machines do here. Moreover, nobody seems to be in a hurry and it is surprising when arrangements and appointments come off according to schedule.

Young boys accost you everywhere, persistently offering to supply you with just about anything your heart could desire and your pocket book can pay for. Begging is widespread though the government has done much to discourage it. But what can you do when an old haggard woman or a little crippled urchin comes up and motions to you that she is hungry?"

[15.](#) For King's 1959 interview with Vinoba Bhave, see Vinoba, "Dr. Martin Luther King with



Vinoba," *Bhoodan* 3 (18 March 1959): 369-370; see also King to Narayan, 19 May 1959, pp. 209-211 in this volume.

[16.](#) King's draft indicated that ninety million more people would be looking for work.

[17.](#) In his draft, King marked the following sentence for deletion: "Her people are remarkably patient but many of them are looking toward their neighbor to the North and noting that China under the discipline of communism seems to be moving ahead more rapidly than India."