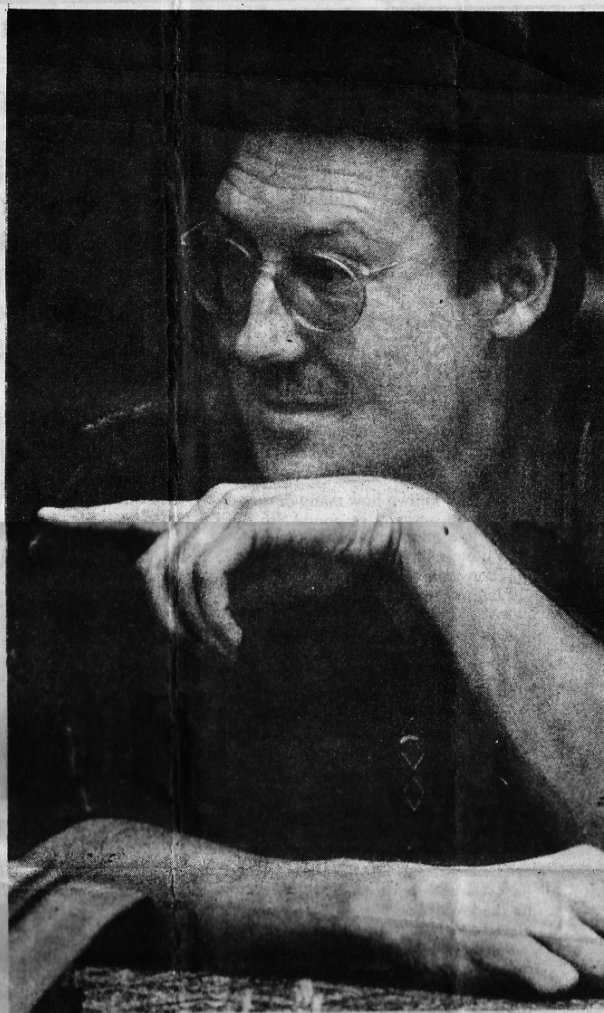


In the footsteps of Gandhi

Peter Ruhe's view on Gandhiji and his interpretations of Gandhiji's relevance in today's world are nothing if not controversial. "Different people used Gandhiji 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 Gandhiji (and what he espoused) during his lifetime, and now even less," rues this Gandhi zealot. Peter Ruhe talks to MAYANK BHATT.



the film was irreparable. Then I got in touch with the Film Conservation Centre, London (affiliated to the British Film Institute). After a few months, they got back to me and informed they had completed the work. And in acknowledgement of the historical value of the film they did not charge any fees."

During his current visit, Ruhe was busy organising an international Gandhi memorial bicycle tour to coincide with the Mahatma's 125th birth anniversary in 1994. The tour will commence from Porbander on October 2, 1994, and culminate at Rajghat, New Delhi on January 30, 1995. It will traverse through places associated with Mahatma Gandhi, like Wardha, Yedchi and the many other towns and villages along the salt march route. The purpose of this tour will be to facilitate and enhance the understandings of the work that Gandhian institutions are doing in the country.

According to Ruhe, Gandhian thoughts were not allowed to take root in this country. "He (Gandhi) was idolised and thereby made irrelevant," he says.

Coming back to his pet theme of the relevance of Gandhiji's teachings in today's world, Ruhe explains: "His teachings and ideas are increasingly being accepted 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 super structure has only led to the destruction of our eco-systems and the returns 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 Gandhiji's worldview."

But what about India and Indians? According to Ruhe, Gandhian thoughts were not allowed to take root in this country. "He was idolised and thereby made irrelevant. Today, there is political *swaraj*, but Gandhiji 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 Gandhian rues. But he is optimistic about the future. "In India and in the third world in general, the point of material saturation has not yet been reached, it will take another decade before this happens. It is then that people will realise that this kind of living is actually leading to the 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."

"GANDHIJI was not a mass leader. I don't see him as the father of independent India, or as someone who led the country to Independence. And although he understood his people so well and offered for each and everyone a way of self-realisation through his ideas, Gandhiji, in my opinion, 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 definitely more interesting aspect of this young German's personality is his deep and passionate interest in the *Life and Times of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. It is this interest in Mahatma Gandhi that made him start a 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 Gandhiji and his interpretation of Gandhiji's message and relevance in today's world are nothing if not controversial. Speaking in short and measured sentences, in slightly accented English, Ruhe observes with deep conviction:

"He (Gandhiji) 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 Gandhiji blindly. But later, different people used him and his ideas to suit their own purposes. He was requested to come back to politics in the 1940s (after he had resigned from party politics in 1934) because the nation was on the brink of independence and wanted Gandhiji because he was an

integrative figure who could talk to Jinnah, the British as well as the Congress. 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 Gandhiji'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 inculcate 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 *satyagraha*."

He asked only those whom he could be sure would understand him properly and there were not many. This proves that there were very few who understood Gandhiji (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 Bhavan. "I saw the film within three 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. What impressed me immensely about Gandhiji initially was the manner in which he expressed himself about human society, tolerance, caring for the poor and uplifting the underprivileged."

Ruhe, however, felt that the image

of Gandhi in the West was quite insufficient and unidimensional. 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 Gandhiji'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 *Bhagwad Gita* and the Sermon on the Mount. It was primarily to fill this chasm between public perception and the reality that was Gandhi, that Ruhe opened his Gandhi Information Centre in Berlin.

Notes Ruhe: "I thought, if I was so fascinated by Gandhi, so would others be, provided, they too got proper information." After returning to Germany, Ruhe and his newly established centre organised an exhibition on Gandhiji'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 1,000 associates.

SINCE his first visit to the country, Ruhe has made it a point to be in India for three to four months every winter. When here, he immerses himself thoroughly in Gandhian studies, looking for fresh material, meeting contemporaries and associates of Gandhi and involving himself in collecting more material for his centre. He also provides technical assistance to individuals and institutions possessing invaluable archival material which needs to be preserved.

"In India today, it is a dark period as far as interest in Gandhi is concerned. It is very difficult to predict what interest the future generations would have in Gandhi, hence it is necessary to hold onto whatever material we have on Gandhiji," Ruhe says.

His concern for preserving archival material on Gandhiji takes on a messianic zeal, periodically. Narrating one such incident, Ruhe says: "On my last visit I came across some rare film footage on Gandhiji, it was the only copy of the film but almost irretrievably damaged. The film was to be transferred on magnetape for preservation. This could not be done here, neither could the German labs do it. They all threw up their hands saying