



In a first, protests mar Gandhi Jayanti

GEORGE JOSEPH

For the first time, protests marred Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary celebrations in the United States.

Calling Gandhi names like the enemy of untouchables and a friend of Hitler, about 40 people protested the installation of a Gandhi statue at the Wilson Park on the University of Michigan-Flint campus.

Organized by the Ambedkar Association of North America, leaders like Raju Kamble were part of the protest. Anand Balley, Ajit Lear, Banta Ram, Mark Vareda, Natin DuPare and Benjamin joined from Toronto, Canada. The organizers claimed that they wanted to reveal Gandhi's dark side to the world in a non-threatening way. Literature was distributed to raise awareness about Gandhi among the Americans.

Earlier the group had met Flint Mayor Dayne Walling, asking him not to allow the installation. The mayor said that the statue's location was the University of Michigan's property and a final decision lay with the university. He promised to write to the university about the issue.

The delegation then met Jennifer Hogan, executive director of university relations.

"The basic intent behind organizing the protest," Kamble said, "was to bring out the truth about policies of Gandhi, the ideals for which Gandhi stood in his life. And there are evidences readily available to demonstrate the claim. It was an extremely peaceful protest. We just showed some placards to the people who were present for the inauguration of the statue."

In a letter presented to the mayor, the delegation said, 'For the past 60 years, India has used the mythical image of Gandhi as a pacifist hero to promote its agenda. The reality is that Gandhi was a first-class racist committed to cloaking deception and violence in pacifist terminology. While he lived in South Africa, Gandhi regularly wrote diatribes against the black natives, describing them to his Indian readers as lazy, incompetent, sex-obsessed, and a danger to Indian society. He lobbied political and social bodies to expand segregation by removing blacks from proximity to the Indian population.'

Kamble said that while in India, Gandhi stood against the rights secured by Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar in favor of the untouchables, Dalits and tribals.

'The Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes are suffering even today because of this,' Kamble said. 'Gandhi was an ardent supporter of the *varna* system and the caste system in India. These facts the Western world must know. And hence the protest.'

Michael Thevar, a Pennsylvania-based activist, rejected the protest.

"I am really discouraged by these protests. Gandhiji embodies peace and nonviolence. He is the father of our nation and independence movement," Thevar said. "He had differences with Babasaheb Ambedkar, but we need to move forward and give respect to all our leaders in spite of the differences of opinion each one had about the ways to achieve independence, freedom and justice for our brethren."

Dr Marigowda Nagaraju, who worked to install the statue at the Flint campus, said the protesters were irrelevant.

"Nobody did as much as Gandhiji did for the Harijans (*untouchables then, called Dalits now*)," he said.

A CORRESPONDENT

When gastroenterologist Dr Marigowda Nagaraju started his practice in Flint, Michigan, 35 years ago, it was one of the most affluent cities in the United States. Now, it is one of the worst cities with high unemployment and crimes.

"Gandhi's philosophy of equitable distribution and peaceful living has much relevance here," Nagaraju said, explaining why a statue of the Mahatma was placed at the Wilson Park on the University of Michigan-Flint campus October 2. "When so many people are unhappy, we cannot be happy. Installing a Gandhi statue is a small attempt to remind his thinking to the people," he added.

The Dr M Nagaraju and Renuka Nagaraju Charitable Foundation sponsored the project. At a cost of \$29,500, the ground was prepared. The statue — sculpted by Ashok Gudigar of Bengaluru — and its transportation cost came to \$20,000.

Despite rain, more than 300 people came with flowers to the event October 2. The day is also celebrated as the annual Peace Day of the Genesee County's Committee for Community Peace. The CCP consists of the Chinmaya Seva Samithi, University of Michigan Flint Campus, and several other groups. People and religious leaders join the march and offer prayers on each peace day.

The statue was put up within a new, circular peace garden. People marched to the site from City Hall singing peace songs. Michigan Lieutenant Governor John Cherry, an alumnus of UM-Flint, said the statue will be a constant reminder of the importance of peace. "It offers the community a symbol of what we all should strive for," he said.



The Gandhi statue being garlanded in Wilson Park on the University of Michigan-Flint campus, October 2

Why the Nagarajus set up a Gandhi statue in Flint, Michigan

Ruth Person, president of the university, said the Nagarajus' "act of kindness is a lesson for us all. Speaking on behalf of our entire campus community, we are enormously appreciative of this gift to our university."

Kathi Horton, president, Community Foundation of Greater Flint, noted that the Nagarajus earlier donated funds to establish a peace park. "Their dream has come true now that the Wilson Park where Gandhi's statue is installed is the most appropriate and ideal place for peace park concept for

educating the students and the community on peace," Horton said.

Nagaraju said the Peace Day celebration began in 1994 as part of Gandhi's 125th birth anniversary. He has been active in the community for years. He was one of those who 23 years ago established the Genesee County Free Medical Clinic, which serves the uninsured.

Congress passed a resolution to recognize the CCP's work and the statue installation, thanks to the efforts of Representative Dale Kildee.

California State U celebrates

A CORRESPONDENT

October 2, the California State University, Fresno, and the Indian community of Central California celebrated the 20th anniversary of the university's Peace Garden and Mahatma Gandhi's 141st birthday.

Dr John D Welty, the university president, read a proclamation in honor of Gandhi. Pedro Ramirez, president, Associated Students, also addressed the gathering. Both garlanded the Gandhi statue in the Peace Garden. Fresno City Councilwoman Cynthia Sterling read a proclamation by the mayor and the city council, which declared October 2 as Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Day in Fresno.

The University High School Chamber Choir sang peace songs. A highlight was a re-enactment of Gandhi's 1930 Dandi March, led by children.

The celebration concluded a week of 'Stop the Hate, Stop the Violence, and Build a Culture of Peace' activities at the university, including discussions and a concert for peace, unity and harmony.



Dr Sudarshan Kapoor addresses the gathering