

## Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Tour of India in 1959

From the early days of the Montgomery bus boycott, King had pointed to the Indian independence struggle as a model for his own efforts in the South and had often considered visiting India to deepen his understanding of Gandhian principles.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, King knew and admired a number of African-American leaders who had met with Gandhi – notably Howard Thurman in 1935, Benjamin Mays the following year, and Howard University dean William Stuart Nelson in 1946. After Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru indicated in late 1956 that he would welcome a visit by King, prominent American Gandhians wrote to King in support of the idea.<sup>2</sup>

As he completed his convalescence in Montgomery during the fall of 1958, King decided that the time had finally come to undertake the long-awaited tour.<sup>3</sup> Securing funds from the Christopher Reynolds Foundation, the MIA, SCLC, and his own Dexter congregation, he invited Alabama State College professor Lawrence D. Reddick, author of the recently-completed King biography, *Crusader Without Violence*, to accompany him and Coretta and to assist in drafting public addresses and press releases while in India.<sup>4</sup>

While King made travel plans from Montgomery, representatives of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi (Gandhi Memorial Fund), the co-sponsors of the visit, began arranging for King to meet with Indian officials and Gandhian activists during the five-week tour.<sup>5</sup> Although the Indian government did not officially sponsor the visit, India's ambassador to the United States assisted with arrangements, and the Nidhi made its extensive resources and contacts available. Rustin, who had coordinated travel arrangements

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<sup>1</sup>Addressing the NAACP's national convention in 1956, King remarked that Gandhi confronted the British empire with "soul force" and "through this method he was able to free his people from the political domination, the economic exploitation, and the humiliation that had been inflicted upon them by Britain" (see "The Montgomery Story," Address Delivered at the Forty-seventh Annual NAACP Convention, 27 June 1956, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 3: *Birth of a New Age, December 1955-December 1956*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Peter Holloran, Dana L. H. Powell [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997], p. 307).

<sup>2</sup>See Homer Alexander Jack to King, 27 December 1956, in *Papers* 3:496, 498; King to Steere, 31 January 1957, in *Papers* 4:115-116.

<sup>3</sup>See Stewart Meacham to King, 11 November 1958, in *Papers* 4:531-533.

<sup>4</sup>Reddick's *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Brothers) would appear later in 1959. Although King initially considered extending his trip by meeting with Christian leaders in the Soviet Union on behalf of the American Baptist Convention, he changed his mind shortly before leaving the United States, citing "the state of his health and the urgency of the racial conflict in the South" (see "Dr. King Calls Off Russian Part of Trip," *Los Angeles Tribune*, 6 February 1959). In a later letter to the general secretary of the American Baptist Convention, King mentioned that his decision against visiting the Soviet Union came after failing to gain assurance "that the Russian Baptists were participating in my coming. Without this assurance, the visit to Russia would have taken on too many political connotations" (King to Reuben E. Nelson, 23 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume).

<sup>5</sup>See James E. Bristol to Corinne Johnson, 30 December 1958 and 16 January 1959.

with AFSC representatives, secured a letter of welcome from Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>6</sup> James E. Bristol, Director of the Quaker Centre in New Delhi, warned his AFSC colleagues in the United States that King's visit would attract considerable interest in India from "all sorts of forces and movements." He noted that the significance of King's tour was heightened by the possibility that it would coincide with the visit of controversial African-American entertainer Paul Robeson, who had been feted in the Soviet Union and other countries after the United States Supreme Court overturned a government decision denying him a passport due to his alleged Communist ties. Bristol explained that Robeson and King were "THE two most important American Negroes in Indian eyes."<sup>7</sup>

On the morning of 29 January, King departed Montgomery for a tightly-scheduled trip that lasted more than seven weeks. After spending three days making speeches and meeting with various friends and supporters, including United Automobile Workers (UAW) president Walter Reuther, King sat down with AFSC officials in Philadelphia on 2 February to work out last minute details of the trip. That evening he gave an address in New York to the War Resisters League (WRL). Speaking at the event in honor of pacifist leader A. J. Muste, King praised the League's work and linked the domestic struggle for racial justice with the campaign for global disarmament: "What will be the ultimate value of having established social justice in a context where all people, Negro and White, are merely free to face destruction by strontium 90 or atomic war?"<sup>8</sup> Late the following evening, King and his traveling companions boarded their overseas flight at New York's Idlewild Airport. Reddick recalled that they "chatted for an hour or so" before Coretta King noticed her husband dozing and cradled his head as he reclined over several seats on the uncrowded plane – "There she was: the serene Madonna, strong and protective."<sup>9</sup> After a brief stopover in London, the King party continued on 6 February to Paris where Reddick had arranged a meeting with Richard Wright, the expatriate African-American novelist he had known during his years in New York. Reddick recalled a far-reaching discussion – "about the Black movement, race relations, politics – and everything else" at Wright's apartment:

Coretta and I threw in a point now and then but we were content to observe the giants in intellectual action. Both were short and brown-skinned but Dick was intense, always reaching for a thought or phrase while Martin was relaxed and un-spirited. We were getting to know each other better, minute by minute. Soon we were giggling and cutting up, imitating first one, then another personal

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<sup>6</sup>Nehru to King, 14 January 1959, p. 000 in this volume; Johnson to Bristol, 31 December 1958.

<sup>7</sup>Robeson cancelled his trip to India after becoming ill in Moscow, however Bristol was still concerned about the repercussions of King's visit to a nation that was resolutely nonaligned in the Cold War. He met with two representatives from the American embassy to discuss how to manage the visit – "both were most emphatic that under no circumstances should I leave the King party," he related – and mulled the possibility of using United States Information Service personnel to help prepare press release (see Bristol to Johnson, 16 January 1959).

<sup>8</sup>See Address at the Thirty-sixth Annual Dinner of the War Resisters League, 2 February 1959, p. 000 in this volume; see also "Martin Luther King Addresses WRL Dinner," *WRL News*, March-April 1959.

<sup>9</sup>See Reddick, "With King Through India," 1968.

friend or public figure.<sup>10</sup>

Reddick recounted that Wright's response to King "was never more enthusiastic about any person that the two of us had known," because King lacked "that preacher fakery that I always look for in those sermon-on-the-mount boys." King later told Reddick of his own enthusiasm for Wright: "Now, I really understand his writings. He can tell a story as vividly as he writes it."<sup>11</sup> He asked Reddick to arrange a visit to Montgomery, but Wright died the following year.

From Paris the group traveled to Zurich, where they missed a connecting flight to New Delhi when fog prevented the plane from landing. While hundreds of Indians waited in vain for King's arrival in India's capital, a later flight took them to Bombay on 9 February. The three travelers were shocked by the hungry and homeless people they observed while driving to Bombay's Taj Mahal Hotel. "The sight of emaciated human beings wearing only a dirty loincloth, picking through garbage cans both angered and depressed my husband," Coretta King recounted in her memoir. "Never, even in Africa, had we seen such abject, despairing poverty."<sup>12</sup> Although told that the Indian government discouraged begging, Martin King remembered finding it difficult to resist pleas of desperation: "What can you do when an old haggard woman or a little crippled urchin comes up and motions to you that she is hungry?"<sup>13</sup> According to Coretta King, "Martin soon disobeyed these instructions and gave all the money he could to the forlorn humans who beseeched us."<sup>14</sup> As would often be the case in his comments about India, King combined his observations with implicit criticisms of his own country: "They are poor, jammed together and half starved but they do not take it out on each other," he generalized. "They do not abuse each other – verbally or physically – as readily as we do."<sup>15</sup>

By the time the King party arrived at New Delhi's Palam Airport on 10 February, there was a smaller crowd of well wishers and curious onlookers than had been waiting two days earlier, but the "press, news photographers, and news-reel cameramen were there in full force."<sup>16</sup> As they disembarked from their plane, G. Ramachandran and Sucheta Kripalani of the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi greeted the party with garlands. After being escorted to the Janpath Hotel, King conducted his first press conference. "To other countries I may go as a tourist," he

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<sup>10</sup>See Reddick, "With King Through India," 1968; see also King, "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," July 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>11</sup>See Reddick, "With King Through India," 1968.

<sup>12</sup>Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), p. 173.

<sup>13</sup>See Draft, "My Trip to India," April 1959.

<sup>14</sup>See *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 174.

<sup>15</sup>See King, "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," July 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>16</sup>See Bristol, "Notes from My Tour-Diary," in *With the Kings in India: A Souvenir of Dr. Martin Luther King's Visit to India, February - March 1959* (New Delhi, Gandhi National Memorial Fund, 1959), p. 8.

announced, “but to India I come as a pilgrim.”<sup>17</sup> King commented on the impact of Gandhi’s ideas on the Montgomery bus boycott and other southern protests. “We have found them to be effective and sustaining – they work!” he was quoted as saying. Although King conceded that not all African Americans shared his views on nonviolence, he affirmed, that he had “come to look at non-violence as a philosophy of life.”<sup>18</sup>

That evening the Kings and Reddick drove through guarded iron gates past flowered lawns to Nehru’s residence, Teen Murti Bhavan, a classic sandstone structure built by the British. Nehru had accommodated his delayed guests by inviting them to join a previously scheduled dinner with Lady Mountbatten, wife of the last viceroy of India, as well as her daughter and Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi.<sup>19</sup> Holding loosely to an agenda they had worked out beforehand, the Kings and Reddick spoke to Nehru about the potential for nonviolent resistance in the area of international politics.<sup>20</sup> Reddick recalled that the prime minister “responded by saying that as an individual and follower of Gandhi he favored non-violent resistance in every phase of life – between persons, groups and nations; but as a head of state, in a world that had not accepted the non-violent principle, it would be folly for one country to go very far down that road alone.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Nehru declared, India “should never give up trying to persuade other countries to adopt the non-violent approach to international affairs.” Following this discussion, Nehru pondered the possibility of offering scholarships for black students to attend Indian universities. The Indian leader acknowledged that he favored giving scholarships to African students but had not yet considered the notion of “poor” India offering scholarships to students from “rich” America.<sup>22</sup>

During the evening Nehru also informed his guests about India’s efforts to eliminate discrimination based on caste and defended the policy of giving preference to untouchables in competition for university admission. King recalled that when Reddick asked whether this

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<sup>17</sup>See Reddick, Account of Press Conference in New Delhi on 10 February 1959, 1959, p. 000 in this volume; see also “Martin Luther King, Negro Leader, Pays Tribute To Gandhi,” *American Reporter*, 13 February 1959.

<sup>18</sup>See “Dr King Will Make Study of Gandhism,” *The Hindustan Times*, 11 February 1959.

<sup>19</sup>See Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi, Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 22 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>20</sup>See “Notes for conversation between King and Nehru,” 10 February 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>21</sup>See Reddick, “With King through India,” 1968. For more on the differences between Gandhi’s belief in nonviolence and Nehru’s, see King, Interview on “Front Page Challenge,” 28 April 1959, pp. 000-000 in this volume. In an interview published before the India trip, King had commented on the implications of Nehru’s differences with Gandhi for African Americans: “It is quite possible, and even probable, that American Negroes will adopt non-violence as a means, an instrument, for the achievement of specific and limited ends. This was certainly true in the case of Gandhi himself, for many who followed him, like Nehru himself, did so on this kind of basis” (“The Negro Is Part of that Huge Community Who Seek New Freedom in Every Area of Life,” 1 February 1959, p. 000 in this volume).

<sup>22</sup>See Reddick, “With King through India,” 1968; see also “Notes for Conversation between King and Nehru,” 10 February 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

constituted discrimination, Nehru admitted, “Well, it may be, but this is our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people.”<sup>23</sup> King later remarked that he was “surprised and delighted” that Indian leaders had “placed their moral power” behind antidiscrimination laws protecting untouchables, while “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.”<sup>24</sup>

King came away from the discussion with a positive impression of Nehru as “an intellectual and a man charged with the practical responsibility of heading the government,” and someone seeking to “steer a middle course” between Gandhi’s emphasis on local economic self-sufficiency and western-style modernization. Nehru, he explained, “felt that some industrialization was absolutely necessary” and believed that “pitfalls” could be avoided “if the state keeps a watchful eye on the developments.”<sup>25</sup> Reddick remembered the four hours of conversation as “a wonderful evening” and contrasted the warm reception with the fact that “Martin had never been to dinner in the White House.”<sup>26</sup>

Continuing on their busy schedule, the following day the Kings went to Rajghat to lay a wreath on the site of Gandhi’s cremation. Bristol recalled that they were “obviously deeply moved” and that Martin “knelt in prayer” following the ceremony.<sup>27</sup> The King party also met with India’s president, Rajendra Prasad, and its vice-president, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.<sup>28</sup> Particularly impressed by the latter talk with the “philosopher-politician,” Coretta King noted that her husband remarked afterwards that the meetings with India’s leaders were “like these

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<sup>23</sup>See King, *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 135.

<sup>24</sup>See “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” July 1959, p. 000 in this volume. “India holds the view that there is a deep ethnical responsibility and obligation of the whole people toward the untouchables for the centuries of injustice they were made to suffer,” King explained after his return to the United States. “Consequently as atonement for society’s sins toward these people, they are granted special help and given special advantages to ensure their rapid advancement” (see draft, Address to Religious Leaders Conference, 11 May 1959). See also King’s description of Gandhi’s efforts to help untouchables: “This was the great contribution that Mahatma Gandhi brought about. And today, in India, untouchability is a crime punishable by the law. And if anybody practices untouchability, he can be put in prison for as long as three years” (Palm Sunday Sermon on Mohandas K. Gandhi, 22 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume).

<sup>25</sup>See “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” July 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>26</sup>Reddick “With King through India,” 1968.

<sup>27</sup>Bristol, “Notes from My Tour-Diary,” 1959. Reddick recalled of the wreath laying: “A picture of that went around the world and we were told that the ‘Today,’ morning TV show, had a five minutes clip about it” (“With King Through India,” 1968)

<sup>28</sup>See Bristol to Corinne Johnson, 20 March 1959. Swami Vishwananda recalled: “A delightful call on the President was made doubly memorable by a walk through the Moghul Gardens, where the feast of colour and the grandeur of flowers in full bloom were a breathtaking spectacle which the Kings, I dare say, will ever remember” (“I Go Round with the Kings,” in *With the Kings in India*, p. 4.)

initial meeting George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison in a single day.”<sup>29</sup> The pace of meetings proved difficult to maintain, however. Bristol expressed dismay that King’s party arrived late for one appointment and missed others due to an extended lunch with Kaka Kalelkar, who the Kings had hosted in Montgomery, and an unscheduled meeting with former New York governor Averill Harriman, who had visited King in Harlem Hospital after the stabbing.<sup>30</sup> When the group left New Delhi for a stop in Patna on 13 February, Bristol observed that King’s reception by college students was “one of the coldest ever,” and King’s later account confirms that African students studying in India often challenged him regarding the effectiveness of nonviolence. “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,” he later wrote in *Ebony* magazine. “We soon discovered that they, like many others, tended to confuse passive resistance with non-resistance.”<sup>31</sup>

During the next week the party visited a number of cities including Gaya, Calcutta, and Trivandrum. Bristol recounted that during a train ride from Patna to Gaya in northern India, King visited with socialist activist Jayaprakash Narayan, who outlined his ideas on decentralism. Bristol also reported on the visits to two Gramdan villages where the party experienced rural life – “we ate on the ground from banana leaves” – and commented that “the student meeting and the public meeting in Madras were among the best in the entire trip.”<sup>32</sup> Vishwananda’s narrative described Martin King as “impressed” and Coretta “moved” by their visit to Gandhigram, where five hundred “*Shantisena* in spotless white *khadi* received Dr. King and gave him a salute.” He also mentioned a meeting in Tyagarayanagar (near Madras) with Sri. Rajagopalachari, “monumental personality” and “the conscience keeper of the Mahatma.” Vishwananda noted that during King’s stay in Calcutta he “had his first taste of labour-union problems when he met the labour-union leaders of this sprawling city,” but Bristol, in contrast, recalled that he joined Reddick and Coretta for “tea with some labour union leaders while Martin was resting.”<sup>33</sup>

The enthusiastic reception King received in Trivandrum had special importance given its status as the capital of Kerala, the only India state with a Communist government (also the only state not governed by Nehru’s Congress Party). Bristol noticed the contrast between the warm reception accorded King and that given to Harriman’s arrival two days later: “Then there was only one government representative on hand; nobody else; no garlands, no bouquets, no photographers. King’s tour was popular and triumphal as Harriman’s was not.”<sup>34</sup> Unplanned

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<sup>29</sup>Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin*, p. 176.

<sup>30</sup>Bristol to Johnson, 20 March 1959.

<sup>31</sup>“My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” July 1959, p. 000 in this volume; see also Bristol to Johnson, 20 March 1959.

<sup>32</sup>See Bristol to Johnson, 20 March 1959.

<sup>33</sup>Vishwananda, “I Go Round with the Kings,” pp. 5-6; see also “Bristol to Johnson, 20 March 1959.

<sup>34</sup>See Bristol to Johnson, 20 March 1959. For coverage of the public meeting on 23 February, see “Emancipation of Negroes: ‘Non-violence the Only Way’,” [Madras] *The Hindu*, 25 February 1959; see also F. Krishnan Nair to King, 5 October 1959.

incidents made indelible impressions on King. Years later King recalled that when a principal of a school attended largely by children of former untouchables introduced him as “a fellow untouchable,” he was at first “a bit shock and peeved,” but he then reflected on the “airtight cage of poverty” that afflicted African Americans “in rat-infested, unendurable slums in the big cities of our nation, still attending inadequate schools faced with improper recreational facilities. And I said to myself, ‘Yes, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States of America is an untouchable.’”<sup>35</sup>

King also had lasting memories of his brief journey to nearby Cape Comorin late in the afternoon of 22 February. “It is one of the beautiful points of all the world,” he later told his Dexter congregation. Observing the convergence of the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean, he remembered sitting on a rock, watching the sun set – “like it was sinking in the very ocean itself.” After the sky darkened, he noticed a full moon rising in the east: “This is one of the few points in all the world that you could see the setting of the sun and the emergence of the moon simultaneously.”<sup>36</sup> King drew spiritual significance from the serene surroundings:

When it was dark and tragedy around, it seemed that the light of day had gone out, darkness all around and sunlight passing away, I got enough strength in my being to turn around and only to discover that God had another light. This would be a tragic universe if God had only one light.<sup>37</sup>

By the time King’s party flew to Bangalore on 24 February, Bristol recognized that the schedule arranged for King had been too ambitious, resulting in exhaustion and cancelled or delayed meetings. That evening he informed AFSC headquarters that he had changed the itinerary into “the sort of schedule King had in mind (tho he agrees we had no clear information on it prior to his arrival).” He related that the Bombay Smarak Nidhi representative was “unhappy” and “embarrassed” about the cancellation of events planned following King’s arrival on 26 February, “but there is nothing else to do.”<sup>38</sup> Bristol’s account of the three days in Bombay suggests that the reduced schedule suited King. Moving from the luxurious accommodations they had in Calcutta and other cities, the party chose Mani Bhavan, Gandhi’s residence in Bombay – “we enjoyed simple accommodations in an authentically Gandhian atmosphere,” Bristol reported. A public meeting on the 27<sup>th</sup> attracted “about 400 really top-calibre people” to King’s “inspired”

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<sup>35</sup>“The American Dream,” Sermon delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, 4 July 1965.

<sup>36</sup>King, “A Walk through the Holy Land,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 29 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>37</sup>King, “A Walk through the Holy Land,” 29 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume. Years later King interpreted this experience somewhat differently in “The Death of Evil upon the Seashore:” “We have experiences when the light of day vanishes, leaving us in some dark and desolate midnight–moments when our highest hopes are turned into shambles of despair or when we are the victims of some tragic injustices and some terrible exploitation. During such moments our spirits are almost overcome by gloom and despair, and we feel that there is no light anywhere. But ever and again, we look toward the east and discover that there is another light which shines even in the darkness, and ‘the spear of frustration’ is transformed ‘into a shaft of light’” (*Strength to Love* [New York: Harper and Row, 1963], pp. 65-66).

<sup>38</sup>See Bristol to Dorothy M. Bristol, 24 February-25 February 1959.

presentation, according to Bristol.<sup>39</sup> Traveling north to Ahmedabad on 1 March, the King party went to the Sabarmati Ashram, which had been founded by Gandhi and was where he began his 1930 Salt March to the sea to protest British taxation of salt. Vishwananda recalled, “The Kings had a great experience going round the hallowed place and meeting in prayer the six hundred or so inmates – most of them Harijans.”<sup>40</sup>

On 3 March, King rose in the early morning hours for a drive toward Kishingarh, where the party was scheduled to meet with Acharya Vinoba Bhave, the leader of the Bhoodan movement and Gandhi’s spiritual successor. King initially had experienced difficulty gaining an audience with the peripatetic Vinoba. Reddick recalled that Vinoba greeted King, and the two men walked together. After the marchers entered Kishingarh, Vinoba addressed local residents and then retired to his room in a school building, where King presented questions to him. During this structured exchange, which was later reported in the weekly *Bhoodan*, Vinoba replied to King’s query about his “hopes for the future,” by insisting, “Either there will be ‘Kingdom of Kindness’ or there will be no society.” Nevertheless Vinoba affirmed “full hope for the future of the movement not only so far as India is concerned but also, if I may say so, the whole world.”<sup>41</sup> According to Bristol’s account, Vinoba responded to King’s request for a message “for the United States in terms of racial justice and world peace” by stating that he was “not so presumptuous as to send a message to a Christian nation.” But Vinoba did advise Americans to “simply follow Jesus Christ” rather than “listen to flocks of sermons.”<sup>42</sup>

Although Vinoba peremptorily ended the morning interview by announcing, “I have finished your questions,” King was granted a less formal audience in the evening after Vinoba’s assistant, Dwarkoji Sundrani, intervened to insist that King should be treated as an important guest rather than as a journalist.<sup>43</sup> During this evening meeting, King talked about Montgomery and pressed Vinoba about the limitations of nonviolence. Given that totalitarian regimes “are composed of human beings” rather than people of “a different species,” Vinoba maintained that “non-violence and its effective appeal to others requires faith. Mere argument and persuasion is not enough.”<sup>44</sup>

Bristol recalled that Vinoba also related his views regarding interracial marriage (“Marriage will not solve the problem; if the problem is solved marriages will take place”); social organization (“That government is best which does not govern at all”); and the influence of the Western philosophy (“Tolstoy had exerted a slight influence” but otherwise “absolutely no Western philosopher, thinker, religious leader, or political figure had made an impact upon

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<sup>39</sup>Bristol to Johnson, 20 March 1959.

<sup>40</sup>Vishwananda, “I Go Round with the Kings,” p. 7.

<sup>41</sup>“Dr. Martin Luther King with Vinoba,” (18 March 1959): 369-370; see also Bristol’s account of the interview with Vinoba in his 16 and 17 April letters to Corinne Johnson.

<sup>42</sup>Bristol to Corinne Johnson, 17 April 1959.

<sup>43</sup>Sundrani interview with King Papers Project staff, 22 October 2002.

<sup>44</sup>See Bristol to Johnson, 17 April 1959.



him”).<sup>45</sup> King was greatly affected by the hours he spent with Vinoba, whom he later called “sainted,” and with his colleague Jayaprakash Narayan – “a highly sensitive intellectual.” While conceding that their ideas “sound strange and archaic to Western ears,” he was impressed that “millions of acres of land have been given up by rich landlords and additional millions of acres have been given up to cooperative management by small farmers.” He conceded that “the Bhoodanists shrink from giving their movement the organization and drive that we in America would venture to guess that it must have in order to keep pace with the magnitude of the problems that everybody is trying to solve,” but he was nevertheless convinced that India should be given the “capital and technical know-how” it needed.<sup>46</sup>

Although Bristol had hoped that the Kings and Reddick would spend two more days with Vinoba, the group went back to New Delhi ahead of schedule. Disappointed that other events that did not go as expected during the remaining four days of the tour, Bristol would conclude that the trip had been “arranged at too short notice” resulting in “insufficient communication (worse than that, practically no communication) between the Kings and AFSC.” He acknowledged that the Kings and Reddick resented “having to fit into previously arranged schedules.”<sup>47</sup> An AFSC report on the trip attributed the problems to the “last minute” changes made in the schedule and to the difficulty of scheduling because “communication had to be almost exclusively through a third person, Bayard Rustin.”<sup>48</sup> Despite Bristol’s disappointment with some aspects of the trip, however, he reported to the AFSC that “the net effect of the King trip seems to have been very, very Good!”<sup>49</sup> According to him, Indians did not regard King as an American but “as the champion of the oppressed peoples of the world – in America, Asia and Africa.”<sup>50</sup> Overall, he was pleased that “serious moments, difficult moments, light-hearted moments, and amusing incidents” had produced “fellowship and friendship.”<sup>51</sup> Although King later expressed

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<sup>45</sup>Bristol to Johnson, 17 April 1959.

<sup>46</sup>See “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” July 1959, p. 000 in this volume. At his farewell press reception the following week, King was quoted as calling Vinoba “a great spiritual man, moving in a humble way to keep the spirit of Gandhiji’s philosophy alive” (“Mahatma’s Spirit Lives in India,” *Hindustan Times*, 9 March 1959).

<sup>47</sup>See Bristol to Johnson, 10 March 1959, pp. 000-000 in this volume; Bristol to Johnson, 22 April 1959.

<sup>48</sup>AFSC, “Report on Martin Luther King’s Trip to India,” 4 May 1959.

<sup>49</sup>Bristol to Johnson, 27 March 1959.

<sup>50</sup>Bristol to Johnson, 11 March 1959.

<sup>51</sup>See “Notes from My Tour-Diary,” 1959. After King’s death, Bristol recalled positive memories of the Kings: “In addition to the beauty of the love which they bore towards each other and the marvelous and infectious sense of humour which Martin displayed in those moments when he was able to relax, I was most deeply impressed with two facets of his character: (1) his unswerving dedication to nonviolence, never considering even for a split second any deviation from his commitments thereto, and (2) his genuine love for his enemies, his ability to harbour no hatred in his heart” (*Nonviolence after Gandhi: A Study of Martin Luther King, Jr.* [New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1968], p. 58).

appreciation for the AFSC's assistance in planning the trip, he complained "that the schedule was rather heavy, and that more time should have been provided for an opportunity to reflect over our many experiences and to properly digest them." He added that his party "soon adjusted to the schedule and tried to make the best of it."<sup>52</sup>

On 9 March, on his last full day in India, King delivered his farewell statement to reporters gathered at the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi and then recorded remarks for broadcast on All India Radio. Thanking those who had made his "short stay both pleasant and instructive," he remarked that he and his traveling companions would not be "rash enough to presume that we know India." Nonetheless, he suggested "that the spirit of Gandhi is much stronger today than some people believe." King then offered his most controversial public pronouncement of the India tour by repeating Vinoba Bhave's suggestion that India disarm unilaterally: "It may be that just as India had to take the lead and show the world that national independence could be achieved nonviolently, so India may have to take the lead and call for universal disarmament."<sup>53</sup>

When reflecting on his time in India a few months later, King would reiterate his call for Western aid to India, "not as a part of an anti-communist campaign, even though the effect of this aid will help save one of the great nations of the World for democracy." Touched by India's reception of him "with open arms," King related that Gandhians "praised our experiment with the non-violent resistance technique at Montgomery." The tour party had been looked "upon as brothers with the color of our skins as something of an asset," but, according to King, "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."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>See King to Corinne B. Johnson, 23 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume; see also Johnson to King, 20 March 1959, and King to Bristol, 30 March 1959, p. 000 in this volume.

<sup>53</sup>Farewell Statement for All India Radio, 9 March 1959, pp. 000-000 in this volume. King's statement also appears in Bristol's "Notes from My Tour-Diary," (1959) and in shortened form in *Bhoodan* (18 March 1959): 376. King elaborated on his Gandhian insights in a short statement that appeared in several publications, including the 18 March issue of *Bhoodan*: "When I was in the theological school I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt. I felt that the Christian ethics of love were confined to individual relationship, I would not see how it could work in social conflicts. Then I read Gandhi's ethics of love as revealed in Jesus but raised to a social strategy for social transformation. This lifts love from individual relations to the place of social transformation" (King, "Gandhiji's Principle of Resistance," p. 372; see also King, "His Influence Speaks to World Conscience," 30 January 1958, in *Papers* 4:354-355).

<sup>54</sup>See "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," July 1959, p. 000 in this volume; see also Draft, "My Trip to India," April 1959. Reddick similarly returned convinced that King was "better understood in India than in America" and that King's experiences in India had caused him to "realize some of the changes that will be necessary if his movement in the South is to wipe out racial segregation without violence and bloodshed" (Press release, "Reddick Returns from India; Now Understands King," 18 March 1959-28 March 1959). In his later memoir, Reddick concluded that the India trip was "a turning point" in King's development. Previously King had "something of a reputation – especially with black folk and white liberals" but "he had reason to wonder how he would be received in Gandhi's homeland where the people really knew the meaning of non-violence." Rather than an "impostor," Reddick concluded that King "was accepted as the real thing" and had become "the leading, living exponent of the Mahatma's theory and practice" ("With King through India," 1968).

Buttressing his calls for nonviolence in the United States, King elaborated on his efforts to convince African students in India: “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.” King also gave implicit support to India’s effort to find a middle road between capitalism and communism, predicting that India could “be a boon to democracy” by proving “that it is possible to provide a good living for everyone without surrendering to a dictatorship of either the ‘right’ or ‘left.’” King depicted India as “a tremendous force for peace and non-violence” stating that “It is a land where the idealist and the intellectual are yet respected. We should want to help India preserve her soul and thus help to save our own.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>See King, “My Trip to the Land of Gandhi,” July 1959, p. 000 in this volume.