

WALKING THROUGH GANDHI'S TOLSTOY FARM

According to the Indian embassy in Johannesburg, India has offered to help preserve all Mahatma Gandhi-related sites in South Africa. On the occasion of the 154th birth anniversary of global peace icon Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, High Commissioner Prabhat Kumar paid floral tribute to Gandhi's bust at the Constitutional Court premises, which was unveiled in 2012 by then-President Pratibha Patil during a visit to South Africa. Between 1908 and 1913, Mahatma Gandhi was imprisoned there four times for his opposition to discriminatory legislation. The ambassador also visited permanent installations at the venue related to Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela's lives and reaffirmed India's sustained support for the restoration of Tolstoy Farm, a commune created by Mahatma Gandhi approximately 30 km outside of Johannesburg. High Commissioner Kumar went on to remark on Mahatma Gandhi's particular relationship with the African National Congress (ANC) led by Nelson Mandela.

As a young lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi moved from India to Natal, South Africa, in 1893 and spent the next 21 years there. He founded Tolstoy Farm in the 1900s, named after the Russian writer and philosopher Leo Tolstoy. The ashram eventually became the headquarters for the Satyagraha campaign, which was launched in response to prejudice against Indians in Transvaal, where it was located. The goal was to establish a self-sustaining agricultural commune capable of meeting basic necessities. Mahatma Gandhi was concerned on a deeper spiritual level with attempting to improve himself and others in terms of personal growth, spiritual insight, and character strength through hard efforts. Tolstoy Farm was a significant location, particularly for adherents of Gandhian philosophy. However, it was destroyed under Apartheid. Apartheid authorities purposefully suppressed Gandhi-related material. No Gandhian structure or institution was supported. As part of the official apartheid regime, blacks, whites, Indians, and coloured people were compelled to live in racially segregated neighbourhoods and townships.

Vandalism had left only the foundation of Gandhi's original zinc and wood structure, which was surrounded by tall grass, until eighty-four-year-old Indian-origin Gandhian activist Mohan Hira and the Mahatma Gandhi Remembrance Organization (MGRO) intervened and worked to restore Tolstoy Farm with a fruit orchard, a peace garden with flowers and shrubs, and a library. An eight-foot-tall statue of Mahatma Gandhi has also been recently unveiled at the farm. The larger-than-life clay statue, inaugurated on October 10 by the High Commissioner Kumar, now joins colossal busts of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela from the Sevagram Ashram in India, both commissioned by artist Jalandharnath Rajaram Channole. Mr. Hira, the man who spent over two decades restoring Tolstoy Farm, has petitioned the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to designate it as a world heritage site in recognition of Gandhi's legacy there. Recently, Mohan Hira was honoured for his efforts at the Mumbai Press Club.

*Views are personal.



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