

Discover India

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Discover India

CONTENTS

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4 Editorial

6 Gandhi The Eternal Flame

TEXT: OMESS SAIGAL,

12 In the Footprints of a Legend

TEXT: ARUNA PATEL
PHOTOGRAPHS: RAJEEV RASTIGI

16 A Gandhian in Action Life and Times of Deen Dayal Dashottar,

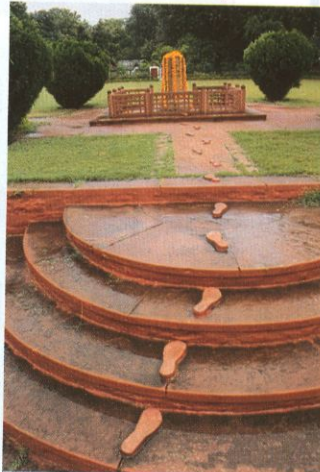
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: NIHAL MATHUR

19 Role of Women in India's Struggle for Freedom

TEXT: MEENAKSHI GROVER, PHOTOGRAPHS: PIB

23 Fort St. George South India's Fort by the Sea

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: USHA KRIS



59 Khadi-The Fabric of Freedom and Fashion

TEXT: MEHER CASTELINO

64 World Heritage Sites

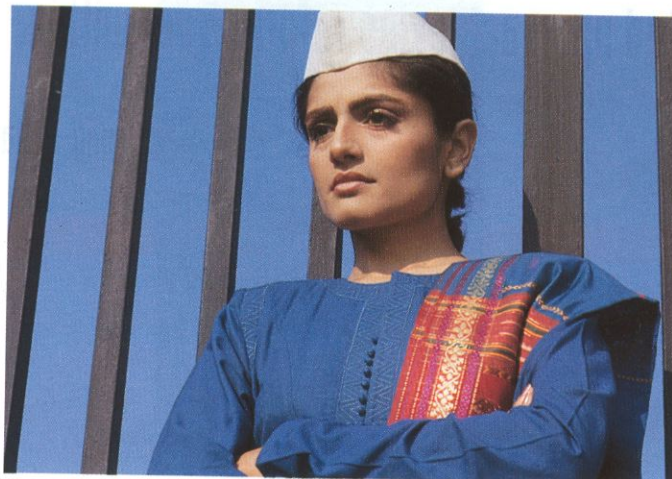
TEXT: ELIZABETH ACHAR

68 Mahatma on Celluloid

TEXT: AMITABH JHA,
PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY NFDC

72 Food for the Gods

TEXT: ASHOK PANT,
PHOTOGRAPHS: PALLEE



28 The Ban Gujjars Children of the Forest

TEXT: PRATIBHA NATH

52 Rajghat A Memorial

TEXT: KUHEI SEN

31 His Holiness the Dalai Lama Inspired by Gandhi's Philosophy of Non-violence

55 The Birth of a Mahatma

TEXT: SANDEEP SILAS,
ILLUSTRATIONS: SAROJ BODH

32 Discover India Indo File

34 Discover India Mail Box

35 IITF Window to the World

TEXT: SOMNATH SARKAR,
PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY IITPO

40 Laurie Baker Building Self Reliance

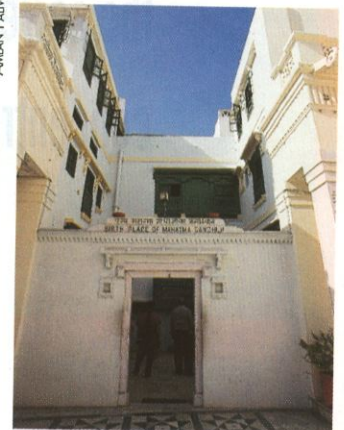
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: GAUTAM BHATIA

44 Correspondence Between Two Saints

TEXT: NAVIN PANT

48 The Continuity of Indian Crafts

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS: MARIE D'SOUZA



A GANDHIAN IN ACTION

Life and Times of Deen Dayal Dashottar

Text and Photographs: Nihal Mathur

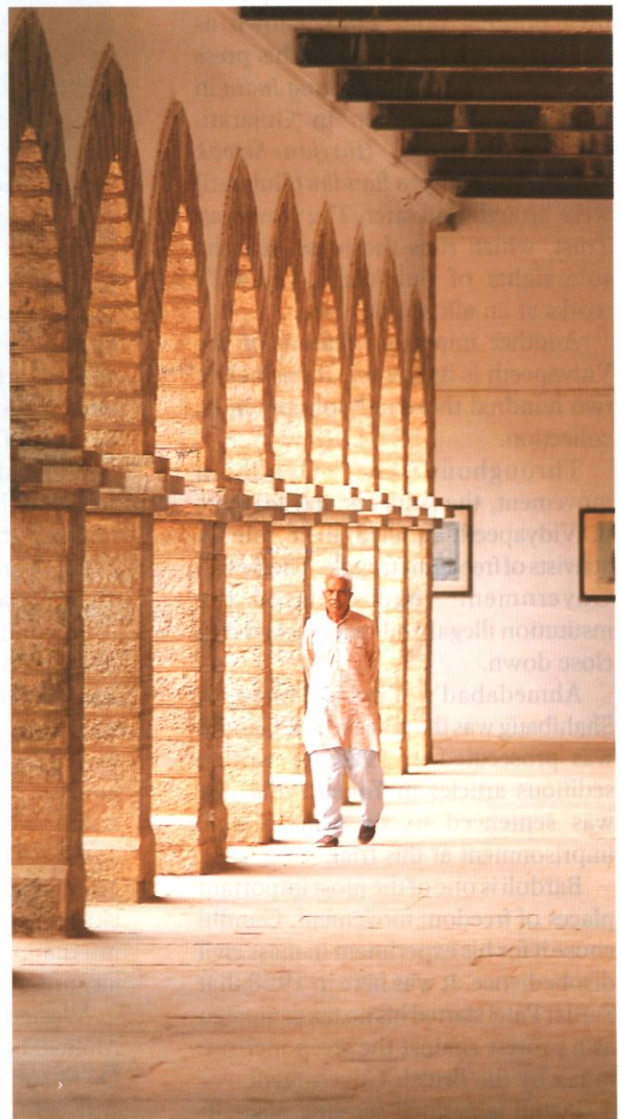
Deen Dayal Dashottar was inspired by Gandhi at the early age of 13 as a young man in the former Central Indian Province. Too young to join Gandhi's national movement he nevertheless resolved to take up Gandhi's call to boycott English cloth. Since then Deen Dayal has come to mould his life in Gandhian philosophy.



As a Gandhian Deen Dayal has undertaken an oath not only to wear homespun khadi but also to spin one's own requirement of yarn. Below: Deen Dayal walks down one of the corridors of Vidhya Bhawan school



Deen Dayal talking to a farmer in Kadia



I picked up the strand of my story the day I went to see Deen Dayal Dashottar. I found him sitting serenely in his study, spinning yarn at a hand operated contraption that seemed almost like a mini mill powered by a wooden *charka*—powerful symbol of self-reliance that Gandhi espoused.

“Gandhi was not against the use of machines, nor against industrialization.” Deen Dayal was quick to respond adding, “He was against machines that displaced human beings. And, instead of mass production, he advocated production by masses. In fact, Gandhi welcomed labour saving devices such as the sewing machine and like this *ambar charkha* that I am using.”

In the 30s when Deen Dayal was an impressionable young man, the atmosphere was charged with ideas and there was a whole range of ideologies to choose from. If there was a special appeal in Marxism, there was also the fascination for the intellectual traditions of Freud and Darwin. And of course, there was radical nationalism of Shaheed Bhagat Singh and his compatriots. But young Deen Dayal chose the silent path of non-violence advocated by Gandhi.

While Deen Dayal continued his formal schooling, he simultaneously educated himself in Gandhian literature. And after earning his Master’s degree in Philosophy in 1942, he joined Teacher’s Training College at Ajmer where his chief attraction was Basic Education propounded by Gandhi. Meanwhile, he had already married Sushila who had

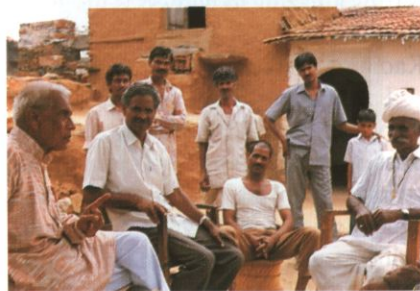
Deen Dayal talking to some children at Basic School



taken her training in infant education. In 1943, Deen Dayal along with his wife and one child, left his hometown, Ratlam, to go and settle in Udaipur, the City of Lakes in old Rajputana.

It was the premier institution of Vidya Bhawan — a progressive school at Udaipur that was attracting intellectual talent from around the country and abroad.

Vidya Bhawan had also established its own Basic School on the outskirts of the city. From its inception, Deen Dayal took keen interest in the work undertaken there and developed an



Animated discussion on Gram Swaraj between Deen Dayal and some residents of Kadia village

intimate relationship while continuing to teach at Vidya Bhawan. Then in 1956, Deen Dayal was called to head the Basic School where he served five long fruitful years. During his tenure he got the opportunity to be in touch

with the wider implementation of Gandhi’s Basic Education at provincial and national level and came to grips with many a pain and passions of putting precepts into practice.

Vinobha Bhave had inherited the mantle of Gandhi after the passing away of the



Deen Dayal’s grass roots level contact at Kadia

Mahatma. In the true mould of Gandhi, Vinoba had taken to long *padyatras* or foot-marches, going from one village to another, making personal appeal to landowners to voluntarily give up some of their surplus lands to the landless rural poor as acts of social justice called *Bhudan*. In January 1959, Vinoba came calling to Udaipur region for *Bhudan* and Deen Dayal along with the staff of Basic School joined his foot-march for the period of five days that Vinoba took to pass through this area. This was the first direct “social” experience Deen Dayal had of a Gandhian idea in action. He yearned to get involved in social work at a national level. But with three growing children, there were yet some domestic duties to fulfill. And while Sushila, his wife managed Vidya Bhawan’s, Bal Bhawan or Nursery, Deen Dayal continued his teaching career. As the years rolled by gently, a new restlessness began to pull Deen Dayal towards the centre stage of the *Bhudan* movement.

In 1967, a unit of Gandhi’s *Shanti Sena* or the Peace Brigade that sought to combat communal and social violence, was established in Udaipur with Deen Dayal as its Convener. In the same year, the whole country was caught in the throes of a terrible drought — Bihar being one of the worst affected states in the country. Taking leave from his school, Deen Dayal went to work in famine relief as a volunteer. Based in the state capital Patna, Deen Dayal worked under Jaya Prakash Narayan — another leading disciple of Gandhi and torch bearer of Gandhi’s *Sarvodaya* Movement that called for

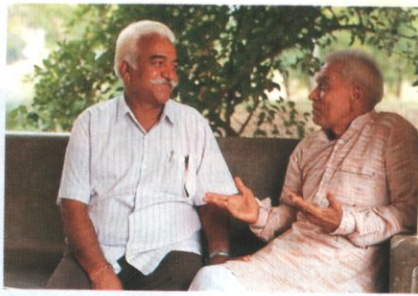
making a society, based on truth and non-violence. During the period of six months that he worked in famine relief administration, Deen Dayal came to be recognised for his organisational abilities. He also came in close contact with the organisation and workers of the *Sarvodaya* Movement that left a deep impression on him.

It wasn't surprising that in 1969, he prematurely resigned from his duties at Vidya Bhawan and became a full time voluntary worker of *Sarvodaya*. From time to time he was called upon to organize particular aspects of the movement at the national level. With his reputation of organisational wizardry, it was natural that Deen Dayal was invited to Wardha, to organize the national office of *Sarvodaya* at Gopuri.

Along with his work with *Sarvodaya*, he also found himself involved with *Bhudan* Movement which was in full swing under a renewed name of *Gramdan* signifying involvement of entire villages. For four continuous years Deen Dayal participated in about a score of intensive campaigns of *Gramdan* throughout the country.

In his twenty five odd years of work with the *Sarvodaya*, Deen Dayal has been organizing local, district and divisional level units while his main job is sorting out problems of *Gramdan* in some of the neighbouring districts of Udaipur. Since 1984, he has also been looking after *Gandhi Peace Foundation* work in Udaipur as its Chief Officer. In addition he has also been editing a monthly bulletin *Udaipur Sarvodaya Friend*, giving information about Gandhian and related activities from Udaipur region.

"*Sarvodaya* represented a holistic approach to life while I only got a piecemeal experience working for the organisation. I now wanted to experiment with the totality of the ideology," said Deen Dayal. His opportunity came in 1990 when he started work at Kadia — Sushila's ancestral village 22 kilometres north of Udaipur. Here he established a *Gram Seva Mandal* or a centre for village community service. With a little help from his friends and associates, he began to give shape to different aspects of Gandhian Philosophy.



Deen Dayal in an informal conversation with the present Principal of Basic School where he was once a Head Master himself

There are things that are apparent — as one does see a nursery for infants as also a *gau sadan* or a shelter for cows — a concept dear to the heart of the Mahatma. There are things that are not so apparent and become so, only when pointed out — the community water pump, the road under construction, the repairs in the village school building. And then there are things of the "attitude". How does one touch the minds of the people? What is truly amazing to witness is his grass-root level contact with the people of Kadia — farmers, artisans and others.

I accompanied him on his round of the village. At 81 I found him walking briskly. There was no doubt that for his years he looked remarkably fit and agile, meeting and greeting people, half his age. Soon a small gathering collected at the *mukhiya's* or the village headman's house and a lively discussion ensued on *Gram Swaraj* or village autonomy — a Gandhian dream yet to be fulfilled. Listening to the animated discussion, I realized that Deen Dayal's work at Kadia at once marked a new beginning as well as a culmination of his lifetime's devotion to Gandhian thought.

How does it feel to be married to a man wedded to Gandhian philosophy, I asked Sushila. Frail from fighting with cancer, she told me that she always supported her husband because

Deen Dayal opening the door to the meeting hall of Gandhi Peace Foundation and Sarvodaya office in Udaipur



he was a revolutionary in his own right. I could see she was not the submissive kind of wife. That strength of character I could see in the Dashottar daughters who said that they were proud of their "Gandhian parents".

Rekha, the elder daughter recalls her father's Gandhian eccentricity of meticulous account keeping of every paise spent. "This was an important habit I acquired since it now helps me to keep my salaried family budget within limits." But it is teenaged Megha, the Dashottar's granddaughter, who is most attached to the grandfather and his work. As Deen Dayal says with an infectious laugh, "She is my secretary."

How come there are no young followers of Gandhi? Has Gandhi lost relevance in our times? "Who says," retorts Deen Dayal. "This is not true. There are many young people working with Gandhi's ideas and not just in India but around the world. And the world recognizes the relevance of Gandhi." Deen Dayal went on to explain that firstly, the age of mass movement was over and only committed individuals journeyed on the path of Gandhi. And secondly, it was not necessary for two individuals to work together since Gandhian thought is interpreted by each individual in his or her own unique way. For Deen Dayal, ever clothed in homespun *khadi* and thinning white hair, Gandhism was touched with spirituality.

Before leaving Udaipur, I went to say goodbye and found him spinning yarn in the meditative silence of his study. It seemed like a deeply religious experience. "Surely, it is," Deen Dayal reiterated saying, "You see when I sit and spin, I actually see the non-manifest latent God hidden in cotton come out in the manifest shape of the yarn."

Now there are many other strands to Deen Dayal's story. Like his *upvaas* or fasting. His *padyatras* or foot-marches. His *maun* or silent prayers. His ecological farming or naturopathy. And of course, there were other more subtle shades of Gandhian attitudes, elements and ideas. I did not know how to weave them all to present the rich tapestry of the life and times of Deen Dayal Dashottar — a man who had anyway woven his own life in the fabric of Gandhian thought and philosophy.