

Abstract:

In my talk, I shall be recollecting my impressions when I visited Gandhi Information Center, Berlin in 2019. I was able to visit two of the twenty-one exhibitions created by Gandhi Information Center on the history of the concept of nonviolent resistance at the Berlin Anti-War Museum. I also worked on a project of building a comprehensive anti-war map of Berlin, to map various locations and important sites that highlights the loss and destruction by war, the hope and struggle by the civil resistance movements, and the need for us to uncompromisingly adhere to peace and nonviolence. I visited a lot of museums, exhibitions and memorial sites across Berlin, like Topography of Terror, Wall Museum, Japanese Peace Bell, The Room of Silence, etc, and in my talk, I shall be sharing my thoughts following the visit and why peace research and museums are ever relevant to our times where xenophobia, islamophobia, casteism, anti-semitism, antiziganism, religious extremism, racism, State sponsored terrorism and many other kinds of discrimination and antagonism are on the rise.

Transcript of my video - Vishnu Varatharajan

A very good day to everyone, I'm happy to speak to you all through this video, giving my initial remarks for this panel discussion. I would start from this. There is a saying in Tamil language that I grew up listening to many times through my childhood. It's a couplet from the book of Thirukkural that dates back to nearly 2000 years. This is the statue of Thiruvalluvar located on the southernmost tip of mainland India, touching the Indian Ocean. The Kural says, "Innaa Seidhaarai Oruthal, Avarnaana Nannayam Seidhu Vidal". It means that when a person does something wrong to you, you should in return do so much good, that the person feels ashamed of the wrong deeds. Leo Tolstoy read this Kural and he quoted it in one of his prominent letters. And this letter eventually reached Gandhi, and became one of the core influences of his nonviolent political philosophy. Ideas are very powerful.

When I visited the Gandhi Information Center in 2019, I was impressed by Christian Bartolf's collection of rare books, audio and video documents that he had been collecting over the past four decades: from Russian painting catalogues to writings of Tolstoy, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Thoreau, it was very impressive and encouraging for young scholars like myself to introduce ourselves to peace education. I was particularly struck by its "Manifesto against conscription and the military system", that entrusts its signatories the responsibility to strive for peace through nonviolent expression, activism and conscientious objection to military service, during our time and beyond. Collaborating with the Berlin Anti-War Museum, Christian Bartolf and Dominique Miething, board members of the Gandhi Information Center has so far created twenty-one exhibitions on the history of the concept of nonviolent resistance. Among those, I was fortunate to visit two. One of them was the exhibition on Aldous Huxley and his commitment against war, and the other was "Die Revolution" a German language exhibition containing various voices against violence and war during the turbulent times of German Revolution of 1918-1919.

Gandhi Information Center has conceived a project to build a comprehensive anti-war map of Berlin, to map various locations and important sites that highlights the loss and destruction by war, highlights the hope and struggle by the civil resistance movements, and highlights the need for us to uncompromisingly adhere to peace and nonviolence. The documentation required to actualise this project lasted for six months, through a series of long footwork to various locations across Berlin, for instance, the grave of Carl von Ossietzky, a pacifist journalist who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1935, but was forbidden by the Nazi regime to accept it, and who died in 1938, after enduring years of imprisonment and torture in various concentration camps. During this footwork, I visited a lot of museums, exhibitions and memorial sites across Berlin, like Topography of Terror, Wall Museum, Japanese Peace Bell, The Room of Silence, etc, and this is how I came to this realisation that there is a very important function to these sites of nonviolence and peace. Along with creating lasting peace, the mission to ensure that the memories of the past violence is preserved, without being forgotten, is equally paramount. But how to do that? How to make the public educate themselves about it? How could museums make someone stop for a second in their daily routine and engage with the messages that these sites express? One of the good ways to draw the attention is through subversive art, that reveals a bitter irony in what we see and invites us to participate in the thinking process. I am reminded of Bebelplatz in Berlin, where the student union, inspired by Nazi ideals burnt many books in 1933. That place contains a very significant artwork that makes people stop and look below the ground, an empty bookshelf, ironically inverted, like seeing through a mirror, a manifestation of a past tragedy. What will happen when the last holocaust survivor dies? Then the memories of holocaust will cease to be recent, and goes into the distant past. We have colourisation artists like Marina Amaral from Brazil who are working to make sure the memories don't become distant. And what about memories of various other crimes against humanity that doesn't have enough oral history documented? This is why peace research and footwork and museums and such memorial sites are ever relevant to our times where xenophobia, islamophobia, casteism, anti-semitism, antiziganism, religious extremism, racism, State sponsored terrorism and many other kinds of discrimination and antagonism are on the rise.

I would like to reminisce one last memory, about how art could stun and shock, and reveal the fragility of the political order we live by, and remind us of our task to ensure a better world for us, and the future. It was a rainy night, and we climbed up from an underground metro station to a lonely street; it was raining heavily, and I was holding an umbrella on my hand. It was dark. Pitch dark. At a distance, we saw an old destroyed church, and from that distance we were able to see some letters glowing and scrolling in a small LED screen in the middle of the church. There were full of fallen bricks and debris around me due to the war, which hasn't been removed, and the letters weren't clear. We slowly went near it, making sure we don't fall due to the slippery floor in pitch darkness. We climbed down a few steps and reached the outer gate of the church. We clutched its metal bars and peeped inside. I focused my eyes hard to see what's scrolling, and in the middle of that rainy night, the letters revealed themselves to us. It was the words of Audre Lorde, Black American author. It said:

“Your silence won’t protect you”.

Moderator: You mentioned the important role subversive art can play in revealing the fragility of the political order we live by, ending with the wonderful example of the remnants of the church you saw in the rain with the words – “Your silence won’t protect you.” I wonder what message you may have to museums for peace today, as we all face an increasingly turbulent time, regarding these words and what museums for peace can do to ensure that the voice of peace and civil resistance resounds?

Vishnu: Yes, first of all, greetings from hot Chennai to hot Kyoto, I heard that Kyoto was one of the hottest places in Japan today. And thank you very much for your question. We who are present here did not come to this world equally. We were all dropped at a specific moment in history, inheriting various legacies our mothers and forefathers left behind. The legacies include both the positive aspects of culture for example, as well as the socio-political problems. We all face different demons, but what unites is the struggle itself. It's a human struggle. So in a way, I have so much to learn from the peace museums that were established by very distinguished people, some of whom are present here, than what I would say about the peace museums. We heard Ntinai talk about some of the cultural practices from his Maasai community, where he spoke about building links and giving opportunities for every community to grow together and about how every community needs to have a peace museum to tell their story. Peace museums are in different countries in different conditions, and the use of technology in knowledge sharing should be exponentially increased. For example since I worked with Gandhi-Information-Centre, I could tell you that there are exhibitions available for free online that could be downloaded and exhibited in various peace museums. By this, this network of peace museums coming together with mutual solidarity can be expanded further with collaborative efforts, this is not new, but with the evolution of communication technology, there should also be an evolution in solidarity. If I may, I could share in the chatbox the links of two exhibitions about Aldous Huxley and Albert Schweitzer, that all peacemuseums in the world can show and exhibit in full capacity and inform Gandhi-Information-Centre about it, no matter where the museum is, whether in Alaska or Madagascar, or India, or Japan or Australia. So I would say, we are divided by different enemies, like racism, casteism, dictatorship, censorship and many other things, but we are and should be united in the struggle against them. Mari Kumura, my fellow panelist for instance organised a black lives matter march in Japan. That's a good example of how actors for peace can really connect two societies. This is one way that I could think now.

Aldous Huxley: Alphabet of Peace - Commitment against War

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/hmsmelwbkt41g81/Huxley%20Exhibition.pdf?dl=0>

Dr. Albert Schweitzer: "My Address to the People" - Commitment against Nuclear War

<https://refubium.fu-berlin.de/handle/fub188/27820>

Question: What would be your favorite mode of communication between active members in peace museums?

Vishnu: Well, hello, Christian. I'm happy that we are somehow in touch today as well, so there is no gap in our conversation. Favourite mode of communication, well chess.com between you and I, but on a serious note, there are so many options. We both are living examples of how music can really connect people, from Heart Sutra of Japan, to Neil Young, to Pete Seeger and Phil Ochs, and Gana Stephen from Tamil Nadu, India... As of now we have civil societies that function within countries, intra-national communities, with the growth in communication technology we can really cultivate inter societal civil societies for cultural interaction and mutual understanding. Peace is very multidimensional as you know, the more we come together, the more meaning we attribute to peace. The more weight the meaning of peace get, for example Ntinai's Maasai community believe that Beauty is Peace, like Gandhi believed Truth is God. So our task is to collect these individual dove feathers and spin it together to make a very heavy idea, an unavoidable rich concept that is relatable to everyone.