

# Commemorating Gandhi's Legacy of Peace and Justice in Houston

By Manuel Martinez Alvarenga

If you find yourself in the heart of Houston, chances are you have driven by Hermann Park, a green and interactive park with a large recreation area for picnics, casual strolls, and sightseeing nestled within an arm's reach of the Texas Medical Center, the Museum District, and Rice University. The park is the perfect place to enjoy a little taste of nature in the city's asphalt jungle and houses many eye-catching landmarks, such as the Houston Zoo, Miller Outdoor Theatre, the Japanese Garden, a golf course, pedal boats, public artworks, and a miniature railroad.

Located on the north side of Hermann Park, the McGovern Centennial Gardens is a serene enclosure of themed gardens and the Hawkins Sculpture Walk, a collection of statues and sculptures of historic figures from around the world, including Confucius, José Martí, Simon Bolívar, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and others.<sup>1</sup>

The year 2019 marks 150 years since Gandhi's birth and fifteen years since the venerable leader's statue was unveiled and welcomed into Houstonians' hearts. The story behind Hermann Park's Gandhi statue represents the best qualities attributed to Houston and Houstonians, and the statue's anniversary offers a fitting time to recognize the people who made its installation possible. Likewise, it seems fitting to meditate on the legacy of a great man who ushered India and Pakistan on the path to independence and then served as a role model for the many known and unknown heroes who risked their lives in the fight for equality. The work of Houstonian Krishna Vavilala proved crucial in the completion of the statue project and helped create a physical connection between the work of Gandhi and his influence on the U.S. civil rights movement.

## From Humble Beginnings

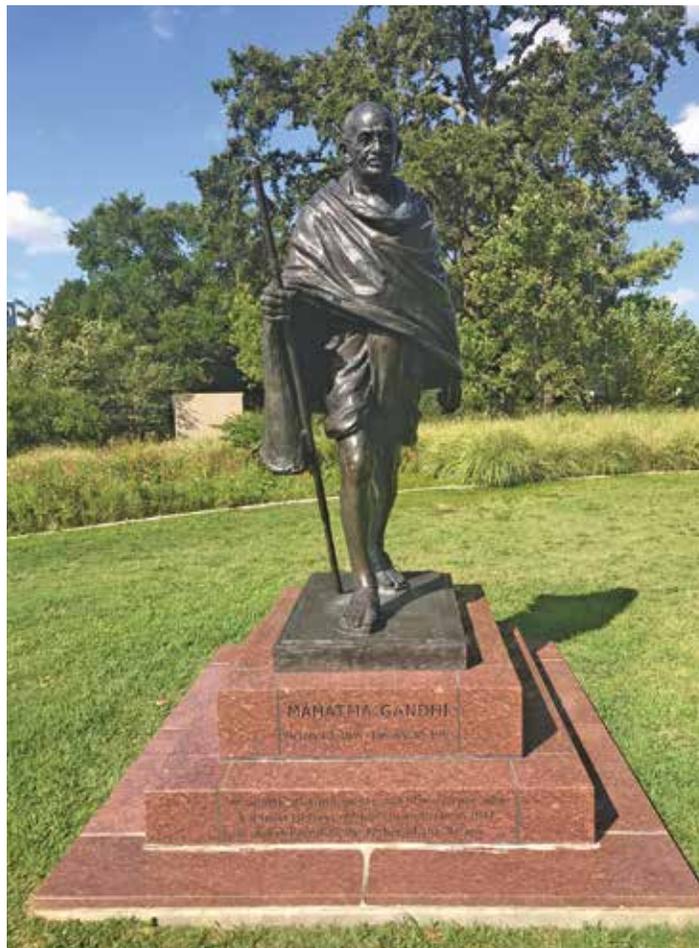
*The statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Hermann Park is a wonderful addition to the city's overall cultural landscape...[I]t is significant because the city of Houston takes such pride in its diversity and inclusion – traits that the great Indian leader also valued highly. That statue serves as a prominent reminder that we share those important ideals.<sup>2</sup>*

– Dr. Renu Khator,  
President and Chancellor of the  
University of Houston System

In 2001 members of Houston's Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi communities met with representatives of local nonprofit organizations to discuss and suggest ways that Houston could propagate a message of peace. With tensions between India and Pakistan having flared to a critical point, many worried that war between two of Asia's

nuclear powers was on the horizon. Representatives of the India Culture Center (ICC) attended the event to speak on behalf of the Indian Community. As fate would have it, the discussion finished earlier than expected, and the microphone opened for anyone wishing to speak.<sup>3</sup> Krishna Vavilala, who was an ICC board member but did not plan to speak, approached the microphone and proposed that a statue of Mahatma Gandhi be erected as a perfect symbol for peace.

In Vavilala's eyes, Gandhi represented the ideal figure to promote the message of peace in Houston and serve as a connection between the Indian American community and the city as a whole. He pointed out that Gandhi also represented the unity and brotherly love between Hindus and Muslims, reflecting his wish for a united India. Additionally, Vavilala wanted to promote Houston's



*The Mahatma Gandhi statue in Hermann Park.* Photo courtesy of author.



Krishna Vavilala and former Indian ambassador to the United States Ronen Sen with Mayor Bill White (left to right) at the Gandhi statue's unveiling ceremony in 2004.

All photos courtesy of Krishna Vavilala unless otherwise noted.

Indian American community and believed that a statue represented the best visual medium to bring “Gandhi into the mainstream” and convey his legacy and teachings to a broader audience.<sup>4</sup>

Vavilala wanted Houston’s Indian American community to feel a sense of ownership and pride towards the statue, so he proposed that the community gift the statue to the citizens of Houston. Following the meeting, the ICC endorsed the idea and named Vavilala project chair. The ICC’s endorsement gave the project the leverage it needed to receive the City of Houston’s approval. Founded to promote the Indian American community socially and culturally in Greater Houston, the ICC began as a student-led organization and rapidly grew into a professionally administered non-profit organization by 1973.<sup>5</sup> The installation of the Gandhi statue in Hermann Park became one of the ICC’s first major permanent projects.



The Gandhi statue was flown to Houston in a large crate, arriving at George Bush Intercontinental Airport in 2003. Shown from left to right, ICC president Ramesh Chirivirala, Lachhman Das, Krishna Vavilala, Mr. Malhotra of the Indian Consulate in Houston, and Dr. Durga Agarwal.

Under Vavilala’s direction, the ICC hoped to create a landmark around which the Indian American community could rally and find commonality with Houston’s diverse population. He saw this as one step in a multifaceted project to promote the Indian American community as an integral part of the Greater Houston area that eventually culminated with the creation of the Mahatma Gandhi District in 2010.<sup>6</sup>

### One Step at a Time

*... I’m delighted that Mahatma Gandhi and his teachings have found a home in Houston. India and the United States are the world’s largest and oldest democracies bound together...by our shared beliefs in openness, inclusiveness and tolerance. The Mahatma’s statue in Houston, to my mind, emphasizes these common values and aspirations that Indians and Americans share.<sup>7</sup>*

– Dr. Anupam Ray,  
Counsel General of India in Houston

The ICC coordinated with Mr. S. R. Tayal of the Consulate General of India in Houston and the office of outgoing mayor Lee P. Brown and incoming mayor Bill White to secure funds, rights, and city approval. Vavilala spearheaded the fundraising efforts, focusing on a grass-roots campaign. He “went from shop to shop” securing donations from Indian American residents and businesses to raise the bulk of the funds and give the local community a sense of ownership in the effort. The undertaking was challenging, but ICC members were adamant in pursuing their goal and succeeded in raising the necessary funds in record time. As a gesture of goodwill, the City of Houston donated land for the sculpture and agreed to maintain the statue in perpetuity.<sup>8</sup>



Mayor Lee P. Brown, center, attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the Mahatma Gandhi statue project in 2003. To his right, holding a shovel stands special guest, and former chairman of the upper house of the Indian Parliament, Dr. Najma Heptulla.

On October 14, 2003, the City of Houston hosted the groundbreaking ceremony. Those attending included prominent members of the Indian American community, ICC board members, Mayor Brown, Najma Heptulla representing India’s Parliament, India’s Consul General Skand Ranjan Tayal, and others.<sup>9</sup>



Former mayor Lee P. Brown throws flower petals at the statue of Mahatma Gandhi. In Indian culture, flowers are associated with purity and generosity in connection with deities in the Hindu pantheon.

A year later the statue was unveiled to a gathering of the Indian American community in a grand ceremony with a myriad of dignitaries present, including India's ambassador to the United States Ronen Sen and U.S. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, a large crowd gathered to witness the unveiling and pay their respects to the iconic figure it represented. The ceremony featured the presentation of both the United States and Indian flags followed by their respective national anthems. Special guests and key participants in the Gandhi statue project received commemorative awards to honor their contributions. Mayor Bill White recognized Ambassador Sen as an honorary citizen.

The work of renowned artist Ram V. Sutar, the life-sized bronze statue of Gandhi stands six feet tall over a three-tiered granite base in the McGovern Centennial Gardens



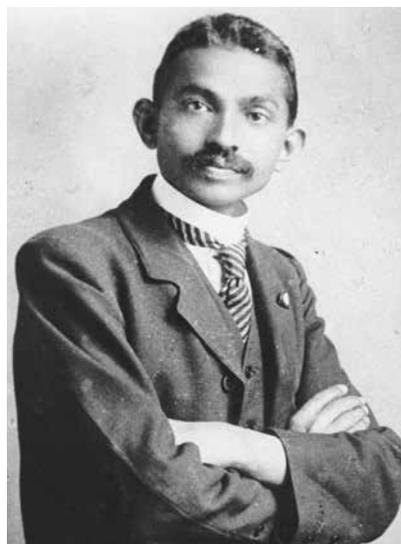
Former Indian ambassador to the U.S., Ronen Sen looks at the unveiled statue of Mahatma Gandhi at Hermann Park.

at Hermann Park. It portrays Gandhi in a simple dhoti and shawl holding a walking stick. Each side of the rectangular base showcases an engraving with Gandhi's words of wisdom.

## Remembering Gandhi and his Journey

*Mahatma Gandhi is an epitome of determination and strong will through his lifelong teaching & practice of "nonviolence and truth." Truly, Houston is blessed to have his presence in spirit and an edifice where we as mortals can pay homage to the torchbearer of "peace."*<sup>11</sup>

– Swapan Dhairyawan, President of the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Houston



A young Mohandas Gandhi in South Africa, 1906.

Photo courtesy of WikiCommons.

The 2019 sesquicentennial of Gandhi's birth is a solemn occasion for the Indian community and all people who struggled for social equality and world peace. The local Indo-American community organized celebrations at the Miller Outdoor Theatre on October 6th, and the Mahatma Gandhi Library of Houston organized a walk for peace that culminated with a ceremony called One Thousand Lights for Peace. The Gandhi sculpture stands in the

Centennial Gardens as a testament to the leader's legacy for Houstonians and all who visit there.

Gandhi's early life and his struggles in South Africa parallel the hardship faced by many Americans during the time of Jim Crow. As an inexperienced lawyer, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi struggled to establish a practice in India, until he accepted an offer to work in South Africa as a consultant for Dada Abdulla & Co., which marked a turning point in his life. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity seemingly provided a young Gandhi with the perfect medium to succeed in life but also showed him the heavy hand of colonial racism.<sup>12</sup>

After arriving in South Africa by boat in 1893, Gandhi boarded a train in Durban heading inland to Pretoria. Having studied law in Britain, he felt confident in his ability to speak and write English, which had helped him secure the job in South Africa. His hosts had procured a first-class ticket for his trip, which initially passed without incident. The attendants treated Gandhi well and offered him the same level of service as the other first-class passengers. However, when the train reached its first stop at Maritzburg, one passenger noticed Gandhi and fetched the onboard officials.<sup>13</sup>

The aggravated passenger and two officials approached Gandhi and told him that he had to move to the back of the train in the van compartment. Gandhi protested, stating

that he had a first-class ticket, which gave him the right to be in the first-class compartment. The officials insisted he had to move or the constable would remove him from the train. Despite the threats, Gandhi remained resolute, reiterating his argument about the ticket and refusing to relocate. Tensions escalated, and the officials repeatedly threatened to forcefully remove him with the help of police if he continued to resist. Emboldened, Gandhi again refused to leave and dared the officials to follow through on their threats. Soon after, officials onboard the train along with a police constable escorted him off the train into Maritzburg station leaving him stranded for the night in the cold winter in South Africa's alpine region.<sup>14</sup> Gandhi learned that in South Africa, he and other Indians like him were seen as "colored people" and, thus, subjected to discrimination with impunity.

Shaken by his experience and without proper clothing for winter in the mountains, Gandhi spent the night enduring the frigid temperatures at the train station and contemplating his next course of action. He concluded that giving up, going back to India, abandoning his case, and overlooking the wrongdoing would be "cowardice." Although the event tarnished his pride, his spirit was emboldened, and he committed himself "to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process" to end "color prejudice."<sup>15</sup> This event became a cornerstone that led Gandhi down a path of spiritual and political awakening that placed him at the forefront of activism against discrimination and segregation against people of color in South Africa.

Upon his return to India in 1915, Gandhi used the experience he gained in South Africa to push for reforms in upholding the individual rights of the less fortunate. While in South Africa, Gandhi developed methods of passive, non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*), combining elements of truth (*satya*) and nonviolence (*ahimsa*) to challenge British rule in India. Gandhi also campaigned for the rights of the poor in India and pressured the British authorities through the use of boycotts of goods (*swadeshi*) and the implementation of a non-cooperation movement against British authority.<sup>16</sup> His activism earned him the love of his people and catapulted him to the forefront of India's struggle for independence.

Through his modest and charming appearance, Gandhi earned the admiration and respect of those around him. At some point during his return to India, he received the title of Mahatma, or "great soul." Although the exact time and way in which Gandhi received the title remains a point of argument, Gandhi embodied the qualities of the Mahatmas in his deeds, piety, and conviction.<sup>17</sup>

Thanks to Gandhi's consistent activism over four decades, the British Empire agreed to negotiations for India's independence. Gandhi strongly supported a united India that welcomed Hindus and Muslims with open arms within a unified country; thus, he opposed the British plan to create separate states for each group. In the latter days of his life, Gandhi campaigned for peace between Hindus and Muslims, even threatening to fast until he died if ethnic riots and violence continued as fears of separating India and Pakistan flared. To his dismay, they became independent countries in 1947. A year later, a Hindu religious fanatic who resented Gandhi's calls for unity and brotherly relations

between India and Pakistan shot and killed Gandhi, ending the great man's life but not his influence.

## Relishing a Man's Legacy

*The statue is a symbol, which represents many things to many people, including the Indian diaspora...It also symbolizes peace, harmony and concepts such as unity in diversity. While Houston is wonderfully diverse, the statue in Hermann Park reminds us that we are interconnected, and have more in common with each other than we think.*<sup>18</sup>

– Dr. Anjali Kanoji,

Former Director of India Studies, University of Houston



*The life-size, bronze casted statue of Martin Luther King Jr. stands on a granite base with its left hand reaching out as if talking or engaging in conversation.*

Photo courtesy of author.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to the "land of Gandhi" in the spring of 1959. Before the trip, he spoke of how Gandhi inspired him and others in the U.S. civil rights movement. He claimed that "Gandhi was the guiding light of [their] technique of non-violent social change" and traveling to India would serve as a pilgrimage of sorts to pay homage to the man and his legacy.<sup>19</sup>

While in India Dr. King visited major cities, met with Gandhi's son and other relatives, and visited Gandhi's remains at Rajghat. The trip reinforced King's belief that nonviolence "is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom."<sup>20</sup>

Today, the statue of Gandhi at the McGovern

Centennial Gardens stands looking ever forward, as if in motion, moving towards the future. To his left, across the yard stands a sculpture of Martin Luther King Jr. looking at the people who walk by, as if he is admiring the openness and diversity of Houston. Perhaps the two men would rejoice at seeing the multitudes of people that visit the Centennial Gardens on a daily basis and delight in seeing the freedoms we gained thanks to their sacrifices. It is fitting that both men share the same space, both united under the ideals of *ahimsa* and *satya*, within the overarching action of *satyagraha*.<sup>21</sup>

**Manuel Martinez Alvarenga** is a senior history major at the University of Houston. An intern with *Houston History* and a Mellon Scholar, he is writing his Honors thesis on Salvadoran Americans in Houston. Having studied nonviolence and one's duty to challenge society's wrongs, he plans to pursue a doctorate in Latin American studies focusing on Central America.