

Manmohan gets Gandhigiri

None | By Chaitanya Kalbag, Durban

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But Gandhigiri aside, for a moment at Durban's Kingsmead Stadium it began to look like a Congress party rally. The prime minister, Culture and Tourism Minister Ambika Soni, and Minister of State for External Affairs Anand Sharma sat stoically on one dais while a procession of dancers and singers kept the crowds entertained on another. But there was a difference.

South African President Thabo Mbeki was seated beside the prime minister, and the crowd was certainly far smaller than any the Congress can rustle up on a Sunday afternoon. In fact, Durbanites were distinctly underwhelmed by the celebrations of a century of Satyagraha, preferring to watch their favourite football teams at a nearby match.

There were fewer than a thousand people in the 25,000-seat stadium. Prime Minister Singh is an unusual politician, and he doesn't let a small and inattentive crowd take away from his sense of history in coming to South Africa to breathe the air of incipient sainthood that greeted Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in May 1893 when the young lawyer travelled from England on a year's contract on behalf of a wealthy client.

Earlier on Sunday the prime minister and President Mbeki celebrated the “umbilical cord” of Gandhian values that links their nations at a simple ceremony at the spot where, 102 years ago, Mahatma Gandhi set up a unique commune of people of all faiths and colours to put into practice, as the prime minister said, “the values that he followed and preached for the rest of his life — self-help, dignity of labour, community living and Sarvodaya”.

The Phoenix Settlement was nearly razed to the ground during riots in 1985, but has been largely reconstructed. Gandhi set up Phoenix to house a community that initially published his paper, the Indian Opinion, in four languages.

Phoenix quickly became a magnet for people who were drawn to Gandhi’s message of steadfast opposition to injustice — a credo that led him to launch the concept of civil disobedience, or Satvagraha, two years later in 1906.

Singh said he could feel the Mahatma's "compassion and serenity" permeating the simple, rough-hewn commune that was to be the precursor to the Tolstoy Farm that he also set up in South Africa, and later Sabarmati Ashram in India.

Mbeki summed up the relationship by saying: "I do not know of any other two countries in the world that share a leader, a hero, in the same way that India and South Africa share a leader and a hero." He said this defined the special relationship between the two countries, and likened New Delhi to a friend whom Pretoria could turn to whenever it needed to.

Both Mbeki and South Africa's Minister of Arts and Culture Z. Pallo Jordan noted that India had firmly put apartheid on the agenda of the United Nations immediately after the world body was set up in 1945, and that India had stayed its course until apartheid was finally destroyed.

The prime minister was eloquent at the stadium about Gandhism in today's world. "In an age when people worry about the so-called 'clash of civilisations', Gandhiji's message would have been that it is indeed possible for us to work for the 'confluence of civilisations,'" he said.

It was only by recapturing the essence of Gandhi's "trinity of values" that we can build the world of Gandhi's dreams, the prime minister said. He was echoing Mewa Ramgobin, a leader of the Natal Indian Congress and anti-apartheid leader, who said at Phoenix that satyagraha had been discussed and debated in South Africa's parliament. "Your parliament (in India) hasn't discussed satyagraha," he said.

"The trinity of ahimsa, satyagraha and sarvoda is linked to the indigenous South African philosophy of ubuntu, which means basically 'I am because you are.'"

Ramgobin's ex-wife Ela Gandhi, the Mahatma's granddaughter, stood near him. The two had garlands in their hands as they waited to greet the Indian leader. Did she feel close to Gandhi? "Very close," she said with a touch of asperity. "He is my grandfather."

Was Gandhi relevant in today's South Africa? "If you look at the number of organisations that work on the principles of Gandhiji, you will have a different view," Ela Gandhi said. "But you have to be on the ground to learn this."

She said a recent conference in South Africa of 107 Gandhian organisations was attended by delegates from seven African countries, "which shows that his relevance is felt all over Africa, not just in South Africa".

But the poor turnout at the stadium, where South Africa gave India a six-wicket drubbing in a one-day cricket match almost exactly five years ago, was a quiet sign that the two countries may be linked by Gandhi, but don't see eye to eye on every issue.

On Monday, Gandhiji's 137th birth anniversary, the prime minister and the president will sit down in Pretoria for the substantive part of the trip.

The prime minister is at the mid-point of his term, and the US-India nuclear deal has become a cornerstone of his foreign policy. He still has to name a new foreign minister, but on Monday he will speak with Mbeki about cooperation in civilian nuclear technology. India is a major buyer of South African arms. Bilateral trade totalled 6.24 billion rands in the first six months of 2006, and the total of 14.44 billion in 2005 marked a 74 per cent jump over 2004.

But South Africa, which controls about 10 per cent of the world's uranium output and is a key member of the NSG, takes a staunch anti-proliferation stand, and Delhi must persuade Pretoria to put its apprehensions aside and become a partner in this energy source. These issues are quite far from the sentimentality and oratory that marked the weekend. They will sorely test the umbilical cord.