

On his 140th birth anniversary, the Mahatma is still India's biggest brand

Gandhi lives on in luxury brands & tees

By Archana in New Delhi

MAHATMA Gandhi, a prolific writer, may not have ever used a Mont Blanc to write any of his soul-stirring words, nor did he flaunt any branded item of daily use even when he was a successful lawyer in South Africa, but that hasn't stopped him from becoming one of the most respected brands in the country, 140 years after he was born this day in the then princely state of Porbandar.

Mont Blanc, the Swiss luxury brand, unveiled a limited edition of 241 pens in Mumbai earlier this week to commemorate Gandhi's 241-mile-long Dandi March against the punitive salt tax in 1930. The pen, which has an 18-carat gold nib plated with rhodium, is priced at Rs 14 lakh. The company has also rolled out the 'Mahatma Gandhi 3000' pen (priced at Rs 1.5 lakh to Rs 1.7 lakh) with sterling silver mountings on its cap and the cone.

"We must learn to accept that Mont Blanc is not associated with being frugal as Bapu was. Still, they have felt the need to salute his image," says Tushar Gandhi, the Mahatma's great grandson. Mont Blanc, though, is not the first big brand that has wanted to get linked with the Mahatma.

Says Tushar Gandhi, "One of the most surprising cases was the campaign the makers of the Audi car had conceived of, exclusively for Spain, where they had wanted to use Bapu's image. I asked them how they would justify the use of Bapu's image in that campaign. They replied it was the 'long-lasting untarnished image of Mahatma Gandhi' that they wanted Audi to be identified with." But the campaign got shelved mid-way for some undisclosed reason.

People the world over continue to interpret the Mahatma and his ideology in ways that suit them, even for products and services that did not exist when Gandhi walked the earth. Tushar Gandhi recalls that two years back an Italian telecom ad made headlines and won important awards when it used the Mahatma's image to drive home the message: "If he had access to our technology, the world would have been different."

In the early 1990s, when Apple launched its Macintosh range of computers with the 'Think Different' campaign, its ads showed Gandhi sitting in meditation.

"That poster is now a collector's item," says Tushar Gandhi.

Closer home, his most visible presence in quotidian life is on the chests of young people. Gandhi tees may not be as commonly seen as those of the other popular icon, the Argentine-born revolutionary Che Guevara, but Tantra, the popular T-shirt brand with three shops in Delhi and Gurgaon, rates them among their fastest-selling tees. "We sell Gandhiji tees well throughout the year, irrespective of the season," informs Rajesh Gupta, who distributes Tantra products across northern India.

"At any time, we have three or

four varieties of Gandhiji T-shirts and they are equally popular among both men and women," says Gupta. The tees for men are priced at Rs 295; for women, they come for Rs 220.

Even Audi tried to appropriate Gandhi

However, there are certain international instances of the symbolic use of the Mahatma's image that Tushar Gandhi says should have been dealt with sternly. He recalls, "The US edition of the magazine *Maxim* had done a fe-

ature on fitness, sometime in 1999/2000-01 where they had showed an American jock kicking, beating and punching a dummy, which was a replica of Bapu. They got away with it; the next edition merely carried a half-baked apology."

The other instance that he cites is that of an Australian restaurant that called itself Handi Gandhi, an Indian food take-away franchise of an Australian fast food company. "An NRI from Australia brought this to my notice as he was directed to me by the Indian High Commissioner in Australia who himself couldn't do anything about it. The joint's logo showed

a chef, an image of Bapu, holding out dishes like Rogan Josh and Tandoori Chicken," informs Tushar Gandhi.

The above examples, in bad taste and rare, however, not in any way take away from the high respect that the man earned in his lifetime the world over and which continues to grow even 61 years after he passed away.

Icons don't invent themselves, what they do in their lifetime gives them that exalted status. Gandhi was one such icon. What's ironic, though, is that he is being reinvented in ways he would never have imagined.

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(Top) The Mahatma's great-grandson, Tushar Gandhi, at the Mumbai release of Mont Blanc's limited-edition pen commemorating the Dandi March; (above) Gandhi tees are best-sellers at the Tantra stores in Delhi/Gurgaon

From books to memorabilia Gandhi sells, and how

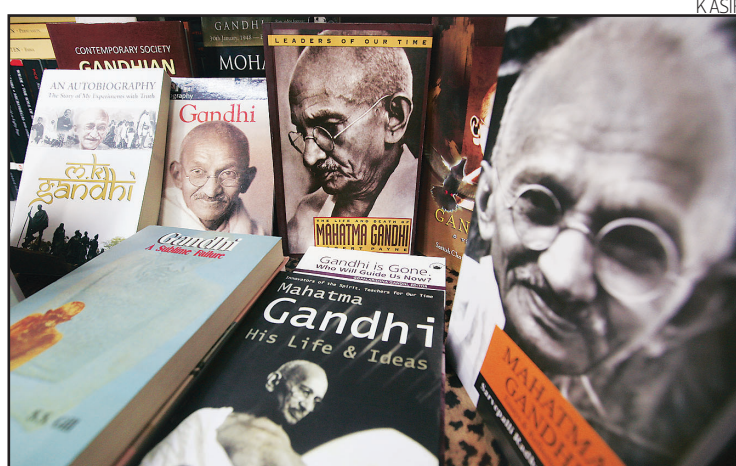
By Neha Tara Mehta in New Delhi

Sixty-one years after he breathed his last, everyone wants a piece of the man who couldn't care less for material possessions.

For the academically inclined, it's about possessing the Mahatma's writings. Says Ajit Vikram Singh, owner of Fact & Fiction at Vasant Vihar, "We have a shelf full of books by him and about him. Not a week goes by without someone coming and asking for these books."

Besides Gandhi's autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, the other titles that keep moving are *Hind Swaraj*, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, and his biographies by Romain Rolland (*The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being*) and Louis Fischer (*The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*).

Publishers are going the extra mile to cash in on the Gandhi frenzy. Jaico Books is rolling out an audio version of Gandhi's



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Books on and by Gandhi continue to fly off the shelves at bookstores

autobiography. "We have come out with leather-bound editions for gifts and libraries," says Priyanka Malhotra, managing director, Full Circle Books.

The Mahatma's autobiography has inspired, among others, US-based billionaire James Otis, and a hoarder-cum-auctioneer of

Gandhi mementos, to write his first book, *My Experiments with Silence*. Says Otis, who owned Gandhi's silver Zenith pocket watch, sandals, glasses, bowl and plate, which were auctioned for about Rs 10 crore amid high drama at Antiquorum in New York this March, "Inspired by

Gandhi, I practised not speaking on Sundays for nine years. My book is a result of my experiments with silence."

Otis, scion of the Otis elevator family, has possibly inherited his love for Gandhi's writings from his mother, Elsa Lambert, 69. "I read Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography when I was in college, and join millions of others who aspire to spread his message," says Lambert, who opposed her son's decision to auction off the

A lot of moolah clearly rides on the Mahatma

items in an online petition.

Gandhi went under the hammer this July as well. Britain's curry king Gulam Noon, along with another UK-based businessman, Nathuram 'Nat' Puri, bought three letters and two postcards handwritten by Gandhi in Urdu, along with a piece of khadi signed by him for Rs 6.9 lakh. More recently, a Bod-

hisatva statue, which had been gifted by Gandhi to his Irish friend Emma Harker, was sold for Rs 5.47 lakh at a Bonhams auction.

But the commodification of Gandhi doesn't stop with the auctions. This December, the Mahatma is being sold to the West in the form of a 'philanthropic adventure' trip to India costing \$2,750 (Rs 1.3 lakh).

Group members will commit \$1,000 (Rs 47,700) per person to raise \$10,000 (Rs 4.7 lakh) to support the Gandhi Worldwide Education Institute in Illinois, USA. The institute's stated objective is to work for the uplift of poor people around the world.

Tushar Gandhi, the Mahatma's great-grandson, who will shepherd the tourists, doesn't see the initiative as the 'commodification' of Gandhi. "Wherever Bapu travelled, he collected funds. How can Gandhi foundations run without funds?" With most seats sold out on the tour, it is apparent that a lot of moolah still rides on the Mahatma.

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