NEW DELHI, Feb. 17 -- Fifty years after his parents, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, traveled to India to study Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, Martin Luther King III is in India to retrace his late father's footsteps.

"It is really a special mountaintop experience to be here," King said. "My parents had often shared with me how moving their experience in India was. My father said he came to many countries as a tourist, but he came to India as a pilgrim."

King Jr. came to India in February 1959, four year after Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott and 11 years after Gandhi was assassinated. He drew powerful lessons about the way the bony, bare-chested Gandhi had deployed the weapon of nonviolence in his fight to free India from more than 200 years of British rule. Gandhi's philosophy of peaceful resistance had a lasting impact on how King Jr. shaped the U.S. civil rights movement.

In India, King Jr. and his wife visited sites where Gandhi had lived, struggled and held prayer meetings. King Jr. gave a national address on All India Radio, met freedom fighters and stayed in a room where Gandhi had slept. He was draped with garlands in the traditional Indian style everywhere he went.

King III, his eldest son, now leads a delegation including civil rights leaders Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) and Andrew Young, as well as the jazz musician Herbie Hancock. King said this tour during Black History Month is more than nostalgia and pilgrimage. "Gandhi's work is not complete. Today, the world needs the message of nonviolence more than ever," King said after visiting New Delhi's Rajghat, a memorial to the Indian nationalist leader.

Recently, the U.S. House passed a resolution recognizing Gandhi's influence on King Jr. and the civil rights movement. In New Delhi, King III sat under a tree and listened to Gandhi's favorite hymn; visited museums on Gandhi's life, planted a sapling of India's Ashok, known as the "sorrow-less tree"; answered questions from students; and opened an exhibition about his father and Gandhi. He will retrace his father's journey to Sabarmati Ashram in the western city of Ahmedabad, along the Sabarmati River, the starting point of Gandhi's Salt March, a 200-mile walk with only a bamboo staff in hand to dig up handfuls of sea salt in defiance of British salt laws. King will also travel to Mumbai, the scene of recent terrorist attacks.

In a lecture at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, King denounced the war on Iraq and the Mumbai attacks. But violence, he said, is not always physical. It
can often be structural and institutional and can breed the powerlessness, poverty, racism and militarism that his father battled against, he said.

The New Delhi exhibition, "Journeys Towards Freedom," weaves the story of two journeys -- Gandhi's struggle for dignity, which began when he was thrown off a train in South Africa for not being white, and the Montgomery bus boycott, which gave momentum to the U.S. civil rights movement. The exhibit includes a replica of Gandhi's spinning wheel, a handwritten note by Scott King from her visit, archival photographs and an old black-and-white Indian postage stamp with King Jr.'s picture.

A few Indian college students gathered around a photograph of King Jr. giving the "I Have a Dream" speech. The photo showed two African American men wearing white, pointed caps in the style of Gandhi. "This visit is a wake-up call for young Indians, too," said Varsha Das, director of the National Gandhi Museum. "It reminds us once again that Gandhi was not just restricted to India."

Das presented the visiting dignitaries with a photograph of an old cartoon from a Chicago newspaper showing King Jr. and Gandhi meeting in heaven. The text under it read: "Our assassins think that they have killed us."

King III said he had a team of professionals at the King Center in Atlanta studying the possibility of collaboration with various Gandhi museums.

Long before King Jr.'s visit in 1959, Gandhi had reached out to African Americans in 1929, with a message in the publication "The Crisis," a civil rights journal.

"White liberals saw Gandhi as mystical," said Vijay Prashad, director of international studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., whose recent paper explored what Gandhi meant to blacks worldwide. "In the radical black community, led by W.E.B. Du Bois, the view of Gandhi was far more interesting. He was seen for his political skills, his ability to move millions into concerted, nonviolent struggle. This appeals to the black leadership, which pined for their Black Gandhi."

Another name arose in all the talk about King Jr. and Gandhi this week -- that of President Barack Obama. The exhibition, the talks and other events were peppered with questions about what Obama meant to the continuing legacy of shared struggles. "If it hadn't been for Martin Luther King and Gandhi, there would have been no Barack Obama today," said Lewis, the civil rights veteran, who was arrested about 40 times during the 1960s. "Many years ago, Gandhi showed the world that nonviolence was one of those immutable principles in the struggle for justice. Today, everybody in the world feels, 'If Barack Obama can do it, so can I.' "

The New Delhi exhibition ends with a picture of Obama, titled "The March Continues."

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