



Destaque Semanal

## Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism refers to the conviction that all Africans and descendants of Africans in the diaspora share a common history, common interests and, ultimately, a common fate which thus(...)

**Jihan El-Tahri**

## Ashram

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The meaning of ashram dates back to the beginnings of traditional Hinduism and the spirituality of ancient India. The concept of ashram has also been part of different nationalist projects that have been aimed at revitalising Indian roots. It refers to a space, generally isolated, where a community of seekers build a physical and moral constituency around a spiritual master (yogi or guru) to learn from her teachings. It also identifies a place of peaceful retreat that serves to strengthen asceticism or artistic qualities and enhance the harmony of the mind and body for spiritual undertaking. Life in the ashram is simple, with frugal furniture and infrastructure, regulated around the rhythm of the day. Rudimentary and natural food is served and the days respect precise timing while collective activities are disciplined.

With the rise of international appeal of Indian philosophy, since the 1960s, especially in the west, ashrams have become more popular and have collected an increased number of visitors both in India and abroad. On the one hand foreign visitors travel to India seeking places to undergo a spiritual, mental and physical regenerating experience. On the other hand, ashrams have been created in different parts of the world. In both cases, there is a diversification of ashrams, with some exploiting the exotic commodification of spirituality through intensive courses and natural outskirts. The commodification is also present in the touristic appeal of urban centres where trainings are part of a melting pot of mental and physical activities, body wellbeing and holistic health. The term has become what Santos defines a 'globalised localism'.

In Indian tradition, ashrams are places for the self-realisation of individuals, spiritual development, maturation and education. They were also part of different nationalist projects such as the gurukuls (school-ashrams) set up

by the Arya Samaj (Hindu organisation) that were aimed at indoctrinating the pupils in Hindu religion (Vedas texts), culture and languages (Sanskrit and Hindi). A different perspective had the teaching and life style as being the core of residence, as was embodied by the poet and Nobel Prize winner (1913) Rabindranath Tagore in Santiniketan (current west Bengal). His ashram was characterised by a cosmopolitan seeking of Indian popular roots to magnify poetic imagination and achieve universal transcendentalism. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi entered in contact with both these realities before refurbishing the idea of ashrams in his own fashion, where he combined the individual experience in collective emancipatory processes pragmatically linked to social and political reforms.

Gandhi proposed a spiritual path based on truth and nonviolence (see also satyagraha) that eventually resulted in two pragmatic consequences. First of all, Gandhi's ashrams trained non-violent freedom fighters that led the country to independence. Secondly, they were laboratories of an alternative socialisation, social relations and social regulation with respect to western liberal democracies. 'Satyagraha ashram' at Sabarmati – Ahmedabad – is where Gandhi lived between 1915 and 1930 and from where he started the renowned salt march with a group of trained satyagrahis. He had already founded other ashrams in South Africa (Phoenix settlement and Tolstoy farm) and would later found Sevagram close to Wardha in central India. Gandhi used to live and experience both simple and austere ashram life conditions with his family and fellow 'ashramites' who were then prepared for the struggle as well as for vocational civil service in rural India in what became a project of a radicalised grassroots service. Gandhi elaborated his 'constructive programme' on the base of the ashram experience and ashramites served to disseminate it in villages. The programme included a simple and concrete set of social measures to promote social emancipation, self-reliance and democracy for India. The ashram provided an equal space for men and women reinforcing the role of women in Indian society and public life. They were also places of inter-religious and inter-caste living, and contributed to the struggle against communalism and caste oppression.

Gandhi's ashram life was devoted to the personal and communitarian 'search for truth' through the method of non-violence. Gandhi admitted that this path is narrow and straight, it requires dedication and constancy, and is based on courage, patient self-restraint and self-suffering. Ashramites had to respect a number of vows that regulated their individual moral conduct. These touched upon: truth, nonviolence, *Brahmacharya* (sexual abstinence and control of all senses in Gandhi's acceptance), non-stealing (broadly implying restraint from desire), non-possession (poverty and self-restraint), bread labour (social service and working for living, non-accumulation), control of the palate (separated from other senses because it is the more complicated to control), courage or fearlessness, inter-religious equality, swadeshi (use of local products and care for the community), and removal of untouchability (inter-caste living).

During and after Gandhi's life a number of ashrams emerged, especially those with pedagogic objectives. These welcome children and young pupils to provide a comprehensive educational scheme combining schooling and social service.

### References and Further Readings:

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### Como citar

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