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When Mont Blanc Ink Runs Through Father Of A Nation

Not many designers understand that meanings and interpretations are meaningless if the sole purpose of design is only to empower the elite and the powerful section of a society, argues Sethu Das of Design & People while presenting the case of **Mahatma Gandhi Limited Edition 241**.



MAY be a coincidence, but there are few things in common with Mahatma Gandhi, the 'Naked Fakir' who led India to freedom and August Eberstein, founder of Montblanc International GmbH. It was in 1909 Mahatma Gandhi wrote 'Hind Swaraj', a root text that sparked off the Indian Nationalist Movement and it was in 1909 August Eberstein fled to the United States after stealing the fortunes of Mont Blanc, a German company known for manufacturing luxury designer products to Hitler's Nazi Party members. Both led revolutions in their own ways — one among masses, other among leaders. Probably while Gandhi was busy writing to Herr Hitler to 'prevent a war that could reduce humanity to a savage state', Eberstein was busy manufacturing writing instruments for Adolf Hitler.

More than a century has passed. August Eberstein's Mont Blanc pays back its dues to Gandhi through design — the Mahatma Gandhi Limited Edition 241. The creative minds of Mont Blanc cautiously packaged the pen with every element of the Limited Edition representing a man who once worked for the hungry millions in India. The manufacturer claims that Mahatma Gandhi Limited Edition 241 is in fact their homage to Gandhi and the 241 dusty miles he travelled during the historic Salt March. The Limited Edition cap carries a golden thread inspired by Gandhi's 'charka' and its white appearance to symbolise truth, while a carefully-crafted precious orange gem on it represents the Indian National Flag. In addition, the rhodium-plated 18 carat golden nib carries an engraved image of 'Bapu' — the father of a nation — through which the specially-formulated Mont Blanc ink could run through.

Designers are known for their ability to find deeper meanings to relate and debate on elements with almost everything. But very few designers understand that meanings and interpretations are meaningless if the sole purpose of design is only to empower the elite and the powerful section of a society. Gandhi was not the only victim of Mont Blanc creativity. Ingrid Bergman, Earnest Hemingway, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde are also some of the known personalities who were featured in the Limited Edition, a tradition Mont Blanc started in 1992.

Worldwide, there will be only 241 fortunate individuals carrying the Mahatma in their pockets. The hand-crafted 241 comes with a price tag of Rs 11 Lakhs (approximately US\$ 25000) while the Limited Edition 3000 is sold for Rupees One Lakh. Probably what is considered an irony was the India launch of the pen on Gandhi's birthday on October 2, 2009 with Tushar Gandhi, great grandson of Mahatma as the brand ambassador for Mont Blanc who had no hesitation in accepting Rs 72-lakh donation to his Mahatma Gandhi Foundation in return.

Not everyone seems to be convinced about this mega deal. Rajiv Vora, Chairman of Swaraj Peeth Trust and a known interpreter of Gandhi's works disagrees with the way Mahatma Gandhi's name was used for commercial purposes of a private enterprise. "If someone, even Tushar Gandhi has taken donation from the company that hardly can justify the 'right' or the legitimacy of the blasphemy. Tushar has only cooperated with this blasphemous act. Being Gandhi's family does not give him any 'right'. Gandhiji gave all rights about his worldly possessions to Navjivan Trust. Tushar's trust was neither borne during the time of Mahatma, nor would the Mahatma have recognised it as a legitimate heir for the ownership of His name and Legacy," Rajiv Vora argued while speaking to Design & People.

"It would have been a different matter if Mont Blanc had dedicated all the money earned for any of the causes dear to the Mahatma. And that too, by making all its accounts public related to this particular item — making it clear that not even its staff has earned out of it, including overheads," suggests Rajiv Vora. A Design & People survey across 16 Mont Blanc India stores shows that the product launched in October 2009 failed to attract or create much enthusiasm among Indian buyers. Probably the manufacturer underestimated the buying habits of the masses in this country. The irony is that millions of illiterate Indians cannot afford this writing instrument, while the affluent do not have the habit of writing anything.



Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi remembers a story from his childhood about throwing away a three-inch pencil on his way back home thinking that he deserved a better pencil and grandfather would give him a new one. Instead Mahatma questioned his grandson and sent him back searching for the lost pencil in darkness. He returned with the pencil after almost three hours of search. This small incident taught young Arun two important sessions in life— 'violence against nature' by throwing away world's natural resources and 'overconsumption' of the affluent societies forcing many people to live in poverty'— which Gandhi called 'violence against humanity.'

What was Mahatma's own view on his image being used for commercial purposes? Rajiv Vora clarifies that Gandhi used to 'demand' a part of the profit from photographers and from those who wanted his signature to dedicate the amount to the Harijan fund. And knowing that people might use things associated with him for private and commercial purpose, he dedicated everything to Navjeevan Trust, the Constitution of which was his own making and no one else's.

If Mont Blanc supplied pens to Adolf Hitler, who supplied pens to Mahatma Gandhi?

In 1935 Gandhi was presented a 'swadeshi' pen by KV Ratnam and his brother, two goldsmiths from Rajahmundry in Andhra Pradesh — acting up on Gandhi's advise to make 'something' inexpensive and useful to the common man during the boycott movement. In return Gandhi did send a thanks note to Ratnam Pens from Wardha:

"Dear Ratnam,
I must thank you for the fountain pen you sent me. I have needed it and it seems to be a good substitute for the foreign pen.
Yours sincerely,
MK Gandhi
6-7-35, Wardha"

Ratnam Ball Pen Works and Mont Blanc continue to sell pens to their limited buyers. "Such a luxury item would be mostly owned by those who have got what the Mahatma called 'ill-gotten wealth'. How moral is it to put Mahatma's image on it! And to use such a pen with his image to write things which would be in most cases counter to Mahatma's message and his life," asks a concerned Rajiv Vora. While Mahatma Gandhi could shake the foundations of British Empire with his Ratnam Pen, his political successors could find no greater political purpose with their favourite Mont Blanc pens.

Any fresh ideas, Mont Blanc?

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