

TEROPONG

By Wahyuni Kamah

THE SPIRIT EXPANDS AS THE BODY LEAVES

He is a thin man as obviously seen on his slightly protruding ribs. He wears only shorts that cling to his slender thighs. Holding a stick on his right hand, he stands barefooted, and a pair of glasses rests on his wrinkled face. He might be deemed unattractive in terms of physical appearance, but he is a man of great wisdom. His principles had freed his nation from colonialism and have been pursued by his ardent followers around the globe. He is called Mahatma, a great man, who can be compared with a saint. I am referring to the statue of Mahatma Gandhi that I saw in front of Ashram Bali Gandhi Vidyapith in Denpasar. Sadly I cannot sense his spirit that radiates from his blissful face.

Gandhi passed away a long time ago, in 1948 to be exact. However, his spirit still expands. It also has illuminated and energized the existence of this ashram. Founded by Mrs. Gedong Bagoes Oka in 1996—popularly known as Ibu Gedong—Ashram Bali Gandhi Vidyapith was established to educate students at the local universities in the thinking of Gandhi.

Entering the ashram complex, one would not think it was an ashram. Centrally located on Jalan PB Sudirman, opposite to the University of Udayana campus, it is like any ordinary house. Only the signboard that hangs on the main house informs the visitor that it is an ashram. Compared to other neighboring houses that have been renovated in this housing complex of Udayana University lecturers, the main house remains as has been for years. Ibu Gedong who lectured in the Faculty of Letters, University of Udayana, resides in this simple house while she is in Denpasar.

The Ashram Gandhi Vidyapith is not the only one of it's kind. Other ashram include Ashram Gandhi Candi Dasa in East Bali, and Ashram Yoga Gyga Gandhi Vidyapith in Yogyakarta. All these ashrams were founded by Ibu Gedong and Gandhi Puri Ashram was founded by Agus Indraudayana, a close aid of Ibu Gedong.

The complex is simple. Floored with green grass and concrete blocks in the front yard, there is a place for puja in the front yard. The ashram houses 10 rooms in a two story house in the back of the complex. There is a small, open pavilion in the middle that functions as a place to discuss, study and meditate as well. The kitchen was being renovated when I visited. Distinct from other lodgings (ashram), in this Ashram Gandhi, eleven Gandhi principles (called Ekadasa Vrata) that are taken as Ashram's vows are clearly printed on the wall. Also on the wall are some remarkable quotes of Gandhi—all are in English. It is a way to remind the ashram members to be firm in their vows.

Because of it's 'strict' way of living, to lodge in Ashram Gandhi a strong self-motivation is absolutely required. "Some people who cannot afford such a way of life will resign in the middle of their stay," said Kadek, a student who lodges in Gandhi Puri Ashram. To make sure of candidates earnestness, Ibu Gedong herself will interview them. A recommendation from the inner circles of Ibu Gedong also supports the acceptance of a candidate.

The ashram aims at enhancing the spirituality of its members. The ashram members, many of whom are university students, begin their activity every early morning at 5. They must get up and perform the puja, frequently consisting of Gandhi's teachings with ashram members sharing one important point. They perform puja again in the evening. By 10 at night, all ashram members should be in the ashram, provided they have strong reasons, they are allowed to go out after 10.

The Ekadasa Vrata teachings, among others, espouse non-violence, truth, non-stealing, chastity and respect for all religions. Following its non-violence principle, for instance, food produced in the ashram's kitchen is vegetar-

ian and the ashram members are lacto-vegetarian. "Ibu gives the money to buy food and we cook the food in our way," said Suparti, an ashram member who formerly served in Ashram Candi Dasa, East Bali.

When asked whether entertainments such as TV or radio programs are allowed for ashram members, "Only certain programs, such as news, are allowed," Suparti replied. As I visited the ashram the TV in the main house was on playing the live coverage of the state's ceremony of independence. Ashram members who are students stay as long as their length of study in the university. The ashram alumni who have entered the work force usually support the ashram activity by making donations.

Because of the limited space, the ashram can accommodate eight persons only. It provides lodging and board for students. Donors, who are mostly Ibu Gedong's friends, donate money for students' tuitions. Despite it's Hindu atmosphere, the ashram is not exclusive for Hindus. Taken 'respect for all religions' as one of its vows, the ashram is basically open for other faiths. "The most important thing is they can abide by the ashram's eleven vows during their stay," said Kade.

"Ibu Gedong is busy. She always stays in Jakarta," Suparti said when asked whether Ibu Gedong herself watches the ashram. Ibu Gedong, who received Jamnalal Bajaj Peace Award from Bajaj Foundation in Bombay for continuously spreading the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi outside India, is active in the People's Consultative Assembly as a delegate from the Hindus. Loyal close aides of Ibu Gedong assist in running the ashram.

When the ashram was inaugurated on January 30, 1996, spiritualists from other faiths such as Islam, Catholics, Protestants and Buddhism attended the opening ceremony, along with the Ambassador of India and friends of Ibu Gedong. Former president Abdurrahman Wahid who is a good friend of Ibu Gedong visited the ashram on October 24, 1999 a few days before he took the oath of office as the 4th president. A few days following his second visit on July 18, 2001, he was unfortunately ousted from his presidential seat.

The ashram members are not only busy when prominent figures pay their visits to the ashram, but also on special occasions like performing joint prayers or when a lecture is given in the ashram. The commitment to the truth is reflected in this joint prayer where spiritual leaders from other faiths are invited to perform the prayer for peace. The event takes every three months.

Although the goal of the ashram is to be the center for Gandhi studies, the books in the ashram library are in miserable condition. The books, which are all the collection of Ibu Gedong, are kept in two bookshelves. One bookshelf holds books on Gandhi, Gandhi's teaching and translations of Gandhian books in Bahasa Indonesia. Using a pseudonym, Ibu Gedong translated some Gandhi's books from English into Bahasa Indonesia, one of which was prefaced by former president Abdurrahman Wahid, her long-time friend.

In this ashram, the spirit of Gandhi not only lives in the books, but in the hearts of the ashram members, who try to live their lives as Gandhi did-peacefully.

Wahyuni Kamah is an occasional contributor to Bali Advertiser. Watch for her again under the Teropong rubric.