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NON-VIOLENCE: A LIBERATING POWER

GITA DHARAMPAL-FRICK

9/11 conjures up images of the 21st century's most notorious event – devastating attacks in the United States that killed nearly 3,000 people on 11 September 2001. But almost 100 years earlier, another 9/11 saw the birth of modern *satyagraha* – a peaceful force sparked by Indian immigrants in Johannesburg who came together to protest against prejudice and discrimination. Led by Mahatma Gandhi, the congregation on 11 September 1906 went on to inspire a global movement of passive resistance that rejected violence in conflict resolution. Reflecting on this first 9/11 presents an opportunity to rethink our conventional approaches to war and peace.

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Modernity exemplifies the Enlightenment truths of rationality, secular progress, individualism and humanism, and underlies progress, particularly in science and technology. However, since the 19th century, our modern world has also witnessed the emergence of imperialism, militarism, and the simultaneous exploitation of large parts of the planet. Partly in reaction against these historical forces, a

number of 20th century social movements – in the East and West – adopted strategies opposed to social-economic injustice, racial inequality and violent confrontation. Above all, it was Mahatma Gandhi, a major critic of industrial modernity, who either shaped or symbolically inspired these strategies.

As the main protagonist of the Indian independence movement, Gandhi is considered a driving force behind three momentous revolutions of the 20th century – the categorical condemnation of racism, the resistance to colonialism and the rejection of political violence. Hence it is of great symbolic portent that Gandhi led a modern *satyagraha* – a 'truth force' movement committed to non-violent ways to address wrongs – on 11 September 1906, in what should now be remembered as the first 9/11. The event brought together 3,000 Indians in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg to pledge non-violent protest against discrimination. It sparked a movement that provided hope in breaking the vicious cycle of economic, political and cultural violence that characterised the heyday of imperialism. It did so by appealing, through non-violent means, to the force of moral conscience. Gandhi's ultimate goal was to empower the politically disadvantaged, unite people, and promote understanding between rulers and ruled, on a global level.

The emergence of *satyagraha* – a liberating, democratic vision of deliverance from fear, hatred and aggression – lies in diametric opposition to the infamous 9/11 that occurred nearly 100 years later. The 11 September 2001 attacks, which killed almost 3,000 people in the USA, were used as a pretext for counter-violence, war and new forms of authoritarian power that corrode justice and freedom – the very foundations of true democracy. Could it then be that by a twist of historical fate not one but two 9/11s – set apart by almost a century – reveal the defining choice of modern times?

The historical coincidence of these very different responses to aggression presents an ideal opportunity, and underscores an urgent need, to resuscitate this non-violent force in order to instigate a paradigm shift in political agendas. This short historical essay sets out to 'reclaim' 9/11 through *satyagraha* by elucidating its genesis and tracing its legacy as a beacon of hope amidst decades dominated by world wars, genocide and imperialism.

Truth and non-violence

Though *satyagraha* was developed by Gandhi as a strategy of non-violent resistance, as a concept and practice it is ontologically rooted in Indian tradition. Gandhi reiterated time and again that *satya* (truth, goodness, real existence) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) represented two sides of the same coin, and that the practice of *satyagraha* encompassed



PROF. DR. GITA DHARAMPAL-FRICK has been Head of the Department of History at the South Asia Institute at the University of Heidelberg since 2002. Before moving to Heidelberg, her scientific career was spent at the Universities of Manchester, Cambridge, Paris (Sorbonne III), Augsburg, Freiburg and Stanford (USA), as well as in India for several research sabbaticals. Her research and writing addresses topics ranging from pre-modern transcultural interactions between Europe and India, to religious and ritual transformations and the socio-cultural and political history of the colonial period. She is particularly interested in Gandhi's movement of political and cultural resurgence.

Contact: dharampal-frick@
sai.uni-heidelberg.de

two other foundational Indian concepts, namely *tapas* (self-sacrifice) and *yagna* (selfless service). In this synergetic union, Gandhi maintained that satyagraha constituted “the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man.”

So, while Gandhi coined the term satyagraha, he was not creating something completely new. Not only was he reinstating foundational Indian concepts, but more significantly he was reinvigorating the practice of non-violent resistance that he himself proclaimed to be “as old as the hills”, with which Indian society had traditionally been familiar but whose public use had been forgotten. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909, Gandhi acknowledged being inspired by narratives from his youth of local peasants protesting on the Kathiawar peninsula in western India which, in the second half of the 19th century, was under the regency of local princes and only peripherally touched by colonial policies. Consequently the relationship between ruler and ruled was more balanced, and allowed conflicts to be addressed without resorting to violence, but rather through arbitration and compromise. Gandhi wrote:

“I remember an incident when, in a small principality, the villagers were offended by some command issued by the prince. The former immediately began vacating the village. The prince became nervous, apologised to his subjects and withdrew his command. Many such instances can be found in India. Real home rule is possible only where satyagraha is the guiding force of the people. Any other rule is foreign rule.”

Gandhi reinvigorated this traditionally exercised moral right to oppose unjust actions of state authorities and applied it in the context of modern politics and colonialism. He wanted to enhance the power of the people vis-à-vis the rulers through the implementation of satyagraha, with the goal of attaining *swaraj* (independence) and, ultimately, world peace. In 1926 Gandhi wrote in the weekly journal *Young India*:

“But there is no doubt that if India succeeds in regaining her liberty through non-violent means, she would have delivered her message to the others who are fighting for it, and what is perhaps more, she would have made the largest contribution yet known to world peace.”

Besides highlighting the indigenous roots of satyagraha, Gandhi did acknowledge other authorities and proponents of so-called ‘passive resistance’ and civil disobedience such as David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy. However, the inspiration he drew from their writings served primarily to confirm his own convictions, drawn from his cultural inheritance. By closely connecting satyagraha with the

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Christian doctrine of compassion described in the *Sermon on the Mount*, Gandhi wanted to underscore the universal validity and inter-religious appeal of this 'truth-force' or 'soul-force'. But he also aimed to refocus attention on the intrinsic cultural traffic between imperial centres and colonial peripheries in order to help forge links between diverse cultures with the aim of mitigating global conflicts.

The making of a visionary

His path to regenerating satyagraha came from a fortuitous combination of circumstance and character. Gandhi was born and raised as the son of a *diwan* (prime minister) in a small princely state in Gujarat, sheltered from the worst effects of colonial rule. His cultural self-assurance, coupled with intellectual curiosity, a spirit of adventure, great will-power and, above all, a strong sense of defiance in the face of injustice, enabled him to 'stand his ground' in an era rife with prejudice, and even strengthen his cultural identity during three years' studying law in London between 1888 and 1891. And soon after, these qualities helped him to secure a job as legal advisor for a Gujarati Muslim business firm in Durban, South Africa, where he landed in May 1893.

While he planned on staying just one year, his time in South Africa turned into a 21-year fight against imperial injustice – a tough apprenticeship that transformed him into a true *satyagrahi*. At several junctures he could have given up and gone home. Perhaps the most infamous incident happened just one week after his arrival. While en route to Pretoria, first-class at the bequest of his client, he was asked to move to the third-class compartment for being a 'coloured' person of Asian origin. After refusing, Gandhi was thrown off the train. Standing in the bitter cold, humiliated and insulted, at the mountain station of Pietermaritzburg, he describes how this personal affront inspired "the most creative night of his life". From then on, he decided to dedicate his attention to far larger issues of racial prejudice, injustice and exploitation affecting 100,000 fellow Indians in South Africa.

In accordance with his deeply engrained principles of justice, and reinforced by a strong sense of racial self-esteem, he was determined to use his legal acumen to eradicate what he termed "the deep disease of colour prejudice". He launched a campaign against the suppression of electoral franchise of Indian merchants in Natal and, in 1894, established the Natal Indian Congress – one of the first political organisations in the world to enroll women and which later served as a model for the African National Congress.

Gandhi also believed strongly in the power of the written word; he coordinated the first ever petition submitted by Indians to the South African government and, in 1903, founded *Indian Opinion*, the first of many journals he launched in Tamil, Hindi, English and Gujarati. Articles –

aimed at a cosmopolitan, non-European audience – discussed emerging changes in global power constellations, in particular the astounding Japanese defeat of Russian military and naval forces, the subsequent Russian Revolution of 1905, and the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, from which he drew lessons for his own political strategy. He also set up his first inter-cultural ashram in Phoenix (near Durban) – a socialist-back-to-nature, and spiritual-pacifist oriented experiment. But far from becoming an ascetic recluse, Gandhi remained in close touch with Indian political developments, as well as with the colonial metropolis, visiting both India and London intermittently on strategic missions of colonial reform.

However, a brutal colonial massacre that took place following the Zulu uprising in Natal in June 1906 shook him to his core. It induced Gandhi – a family man with four sons – to take a vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) so that, in his own words, he could devote all his energy to the service of humanity. This change in lifestyle signalled a major shift towards more intense socio-political commitment governed by principles of morality and justice.

Campaign for justice

In August 1906, the Transvaal Boer-dominated government, led by Prime Minister Louis Botha and Colonial Secretary Jan Christiaan Smuts, published the draft Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, which later became known as the 'Black Act'. It was a humiliating and discriminating law that required Asians to surrender permits to trade, provide fingerprints, and carry a certificate of registration at all times. Its underlying objective was to drastically restrict immigration from India. But this provocation invoked a profound and unexpected response from the people it affected. On 11 September 1906, intent on lobbying against this legislation, Gandhi summoned a meeting at the Jewish Empire Theatre in Johannesburg. He called on the 3,000 Indians present – Hindu and Muslim, 'free' and indentured – to pledge peaceful non-cooperation with the proposed law, irrespective of any penalties they might face.

Writing in his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Gandhi describes how a Muslim merchant, Seth Haji Habib, sprang to his feet during the meeting and declared that the resolution must be passed "with God as a witness" and that "Indians would never yield in cowardly submission to such a law". This spiritual commitment on the part of a Muslim caught Gandhi's imagination and he underlined this religious oath with a pledge to non-violence, which all the assembled Indians took most solemnly.

It is important to remember that the forceful spiritual dimension for this first mass non-violent campaign in South Africa came from a Muslim. Indeed, the Islamic influence on Gandhi's definition of satyagraha as a spiritual struggle

“The odd thing about assassins, Dr King, is that they think they’ve killed you.”

Mahatma Gandhi is considered the main protagonist of the Indian independence movement. After his assassination, Gandhi’s global influence seemed to intensify.



against structural violence is a feature that is seldom mentioned. However, the image of Gandhi serving as a spokesperson for an inner spiritual *jihad* would revolutionise both our understanding of him as a person, and indeed shake up our clichés of violence being inherent to Islam.

Gandhi’s organisational skills and immense charisma enabled him to instill self-confidence and a sense of dignified self-respect into the amorphous and previously submissive Indian immigrants, to unite them in determined opposition to political injustice. Emphasis was placed on remaining open to negotiations and developing friendly relations with the Europeans in South Africa; however the struggle was not easy. In August 1908, General Smuts went back on his word to repeal the ‘Black Act’, which impelled Gandhi to organise the public burning of more than 2,000 certificates of registration at the Hamidia mosque in Johannesburg. The event evoked comparisons with the Boston Tea party of 1773, when American colonies challenged Britain’s right to levy taxes on them, underscoring the politico-historical significance of Gandhi’s actions. This was the first of many bonfires during his political career; satyagraha campaigns continued for many years, with numerous setbacks and imprisonments failing to break the underlying spirit of the movement.

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The first biography of Gandhi – written by the English clergyman Joseph Doke – was published in 1909, which made Gandhi famous beyond South Africa. In the same year, he seized the opportunity to make a powerful political statement, with an unerring commitment to non-violence in *Hind Swarai*. Widely considered as his political manifesto, and published in Gujarati and English, it was a powerful attack on modern civilisation, colonialism and their adverse effects on India. The book also criticised colonised Indians for wallowing in their victimised role. Gandhi continued to mobilise people using the power of satyagraha and his last years of struggle in South Africa culminated in a march of 2,000 striking miners from Natal to Transvaal. This led to a last, relatively successful, round of negotiations with General Smuts in July 1914.

Return to India

Upon his return to India in January 1915, Gandhi received a hero’s welcome from the masses who had learned of his dedicated campaigns for justice and now saw him as a *Mahatma* (great soul). However, his reception amongst the political and business elite, somewhat wary of his radical reputation, was more subdued. Whereas colonial authorities were largely ambivalent, many in the British hierarchy expected him to act as a conciliatory mediator. During

GEWALTFREIHEIT ALS BEFREIENDE KRAFT

WAFFE DER STARKEN

GITA DHARAMPAL-FRICK

Jedes Jahr am 11. September gedenken wir der Terroranschläge auf die USA. Gleichzeitig aber ist dieser Tag ein wichtiges Datum für die Friedensbewegung: Am 11. September 1906 protestierten in Südafrika 3.000 indische Einwanderer mit einem gewaltfreien Aufmarsch gegen die Rassendiskriminierung – angeführt wurden sie von Mahatma Gandhi. Es war die erste große Demonstration im Sinne seines Konzepts „Satyagraha“, einer Strategie des zivilen Ungehorsams und des moralischen Appells an das Gewissen des Gegners. Gandhi betrachtete die Völkerverständigung über kulturelle und religiöse Grenzen hinweg als Königsweg, Konflikte zu entschärfen. Sein Name gilt heute als Synonym für den gewaltfreien Widerstand für soziale Gerechtigkeit und Frieden.

Als Sohn eines Kaufmanns wird Gandhi in seiner indischen Heimatregion Gujarat nur wenig mit den negativen Auswirkungen der Kolonialherrschaft konfrontiert, zu Beginn seiner beruflichen Karriere in Südafrika erfährt er den dortigen Rassismus jedoch unmittelbar. Zunehmend setzt er sich für die Rechte der Inder ein – und organisiert dabei auch die Versammlung gegen das Meldegesetz für indische Immigranten im September 1906. Durch seine Aktivitäten gewinnen der Charismatiker Gandhi und seine Satyagraha-Bewegung auch jenseits von Südafrika an Bekanntheit. Nach seiner Rückkehr nach Indien im Januar 1915, wo Gandhi von den Massen als Held gefeiert wird, mobilisiert er auch hier den Widerstand gegen die Kolonialmacht und gegen soziale Ungerechtigkeit. Selbst nach den Atombomben von Hiroshima und Nagasaki im Zweiten Weltkrieg bleibt Gandhi seiner Strategie treu und bekennt sich weiterhin zu Wahrheit und Gewaltlosigkeit. Dass Gandhi 1948 einem Attentat zum Opfer fiel, hat seinen Einfluss noch verstärkt – vielleicht ein Hinweis darauf, dass Satyagraha letztlich stärker ist als Hass und Gewalt. ●

PROF. DR. GITA DHARAMPAL-FRICK wurde 2002 an das Südasien-Institut der Universität Heidelberg berufen und leitet dort die Abteilung Geschichte Südasiens. Ihre wissenschaftliche Laufbahn brachte sie von Manchester über Cambridge nach Paris, danach nach Augsburg, Freiburg und Stanford (USA) sowie zu wiederholten Forschungsaufenthalten nach Indien. Im Zentrum ihres Forschungsinteresses stehen unter anderem die transkulturellen Beziehungen zwischen Asien und Europa in der Frühen Neuzeit, religiöse und rituelle Transformationen sowie die sozio-kulturelle und politische Geschichte der Kolonialzeit, insbesondere Mahatma Gandhis Satyagraha-Bewegung.

Kontakt: dharampal-frick@sai.uni-heidelberg.de

„Mit seinem Charisma gelang es Gandhi, die Menschen von seiner Strategie des zivilen Ungehorsams zu überzeugen und sie im Widerstand gegen politische Ungerechtigkeit zu vereinen.“

World War I, the political situation in India had reached a stand-still: neither constitutional petition and protest, nor violent acts of terrorism had been able to command popular support, unite nationalist leaders, or mitigate the adverse effects of imperial policies. But the ‘weapon’ of satyagraha managed to achieve all three.

Crucially, Gandhi’s campaigns used satyagraha in response to issues of significant concern to large numbers of people. This included landlord oppression on the Indigo plantations in Champaran, urban labour grievances in Ahmedabad, exorbitant land tax rates in Kheda and unjust punitive state legislation brought about through the Rowlatt Act. His campaigns mobilised masses against socio-political injustice and violence, and brought people together in a nationalist struggle, through strikes, fasting, suspension of business operations and other non-violent activities. Above all, Gandhi’s strategy involved the combination of cultural values deeply embedded in a popular idiom, combined with a sincere personal commitment to the oppressed masses. At the heart of his politics was a forceful definition of courage and a deep-seated belief in well-proven strategies of conflict resolution, reinforced by an unswerving dedication to the welfare of the poor and community regeneration.

Bellicose talk

However, while Gandhi was committed to non-violent resistance, paradoxically he often articulated himself most forcefully using militaristic language, as is explicit from the following statement made in the wake of the Amritsar massacre in 1921:

“Let it be remembered that violence is the keystone of the Government edifice. Since violence is its sheet-anchor and its final refuge, it has rendered itself almost immune from violence on our side by having prepared itself to frustrate all violent effort by the people. We therefore co-operate with the Government in the most active manner when we resort to violence. Any violence on our part must be a token of our stupidity, ignorance and impotent rage. To exercise restraint under the gravest provocation is the truest mark of soldiership. The veriest tyro [i.e. novice] in the art of war knows that he must avoid the ambushes of his adversary. And every provocation is a dangerous ambush into which we must resolutely refuse to walk.”

Beyond a mere semantic use of militarism, Gandhi also employed this idiom to define his own role: he considered himself to be a ‘general’ of an ‘army’ of satyagrahis, demanding strict discipline and order from his ‘troops’ who received rigorous training in his ashrams, which functioned to a certain extent as ‘army camps’. This non-violent beligerence troubled European pacifists. However, the incredible political influence of his non-violent revolution –

from the dramatic 240-mile march in defiance of British salt laws in 1930, to the story of a modest man who was idolised for his role in the struggle against oppression – attracted international attention to the power of what Gandhi described as “a battle of right against might”.

Indeed, Gandhi remained unflinching in upholding satyagraha, even in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to boost the morale of European pacifists he expressed his staunch faith as follows:

“There have been cataclysmic changes in the world. Do I still adhere to my faith in truth and non-violence? Has not the atom bomb exploded that faith? Not only has it not done so, but it has clearly demonstrated to me that the twins constitute the mightiest force in the world. Before it the bomb is of no effect. The two opposing forces are wholly different in kind, the one moral and spiritual, the other physical and material. The one is infinitely superior to the other, which by its very nature has an end. The force of the spirit is ever progressive and endless. Its full expression makes it unconquerable in the world.”

Most people today associate 9/11 with the horror and violence during and after the 11 September 2001 attacks. But the date also marks one of the most significant steps in mankind’s quest for peace. Tragically, Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948; yet the supreme irony was the tribute paid to him by the warmonger General Douglas MacArthur who described him as “the very symbol and apotheosis of peace”. But as a martyr his influence seemed to intensify. This may be salutary to bear in mind as we reflect on the consequences of more recent challenges to our collective resolve. Indeed history has proven that the effectiveness of satyagraha, even in the face of extreme aggression and provocation, is manifest. ●

“Mankind has to get out of violence only through non-violence”

Mahatma Gandhi 1946