

Towards a History of Non-violent Resistance

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Following on from Gandhi, peace activists have created a large body of work on the strategy of non-violent protest that brings out both its strengths and advantages over and above violent insurrection. This literature has not, however, constructed a convincing history of the non-violent method. Most have depicted it as a timeless phenomenon, found in all historical societies in one form or another. Rather, it is, as this essay suggests, a method rooted in modernity, arising out of a particular strategic reaction to the coercive and legal apparatuses of the modern state.

In the past six years, I have been teaching a course at Warwick University, “Nonviolent Resistance: A Global History 1830-2000”. This course, which I devised, seeks to trace the worldwide history of the development of a clearly stated method of political action – one that involves protest that restricts itself to non-violent methods, even in the face of counter-violence by the state or the local elite.

My focus on non-violence might in many ways seem surprising, in that I gained a reputation originally as a *Subaltern Studies* historian. The group was known for its studies of peasant insurgency; as seen particularly in the work of Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. The violence of peasant revolt was legitimised as a necessary counter “in the last resort” to the violence of semi-feudal oppression (Guha 1983: 9).

Subaltern Studies was known also for its critique of Gandhi’s non-violent leadership of the nationalist movement, the argument being that he sought constantly through his emphasis on non-violence to channel the discontent of the poor and oppressed into movements that posed no real challenge to India’s elite. This was the subject of Ranajit Guha’s chapter in Volume 7, “Discipline and Mobilize”. Gandhi, he argued, had contempt and fear for the masses, labelling them a violence-prone “mob”. In 1921, the Mahatma had railed against what he called “mobocracy”, which he said was undermining the Non-Cooperation Movement of that year. In a memorable phrase, Guha described this “an ugly word greased with loathing, a sign of craving for control and its frustration, [that] is lifted directly out of the lexicon of elitist usage” (Guha 1992: 107).

The Subaltern Studies evaluation of Gandhian non-violence was rooted in the critique of Gandhian politics by the Marxist activist and historian, R P Dutt. Following a long-standing Marxian line of thought, Dutt saw such protest as essentially reformist and in the interests of the elite. He described Gandhian “non-violence” as a “seemingly innocent humanitarian or expedient term [that] contained concealed within it, not only the refusal of the final struggle, but the thwarting also of the immediate struggle by the attempt to conciliate the interests of the masses with the big bourgeoisie and landlord interests which were inevitably opposed to any decisive mass struggle” (Dutt 1940: 307-08).

Passive Resistance

Originally, in Karl Marx’s own day, the critique had been of what was then known as “passive resistance”. Writing on the events in Germany in 1848, Marx talked of the passive resistance (*passiver Widerstand*) by the bourgeoisie to the

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demands of the radical revolutionaries and working class. In acting thus, the bourgeoisie represented:

A stratum of the old state that had failed to break through and was thrown up on the surface of the new state by the force of an earthquake; without faith in itself, without faith in the people, grumbling at those above, trembling before those below, egoistic towards both sides and aware of its egoism; revolutionary in relation to the conservatives and conservative in relation to the revolutionaries (Marx 1977a: 163).

Once they had in 1848 gained nominal power in Prussia under the banker-turned-politician Gottfried Ludolf Camphausen, the bourgeoisie protected their class interest by passively resisting the revolution of the lower classes. With the failure of this tactic, Camphausen resigned, and was replaced by David Hansemann, who set about actively smashing the revolution. He headed “a government which was to turn passive resistance to the people into an *active offensive* on the people, the *Government of Action*” (Marx 1977b: 168).

Marx therefore understood passive resistance as, essentially, a counter-revolutionary strategy of the bourgeois. He wrote about it in the very specific context of Prussia, rather than as a form of resistance used by the more “advanced” bourgeoisie of Britain or France. In the following year, the German socialist and disciple of Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, denounced passive resistance particularly strongly in a speech in Düsseldorf on 3 May 1849 that was delivered during his trial on charges of revolutionary incitement. He stated that passiver Widerstand was an absurd invention and a betrayal. It was a contradiction, being resistance that was no resistance, and arising out of the fear of the bourgeoisie of resistance, while acknowledging that it is necessary (Huxley 1990: 54).

Passive resistance came to be associated in Marxist theory with a bourgeois gradualism that adopted a high-sounding rhetoric of struggle and unity against oppression, while always keeping revolution at bay. As it was, once the class interests of the bourgeoisie were challenged, they reacted strongly, branding radical revolt as a criminal offence subject to fines and imprisonment. To believe that any dominant class would yield significant power without violence was an illusion. Friedrich Engels argued similarly, if anything, raising the tempo by stating that a revolution entailed exemplary violence, in which

...one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon, all of which are highly authoritarian means. And the victorious party must maintain its rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionaries.¹

This revolutionary strategy – seen during most notably the French Revolution – was reinforced once more in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Marxian valorisation of tactical violence was augmented in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the rhetoric of violence for its own sake. As Hannah Arendt (1970) noted, this went far beyond anything advocated by Marx. For him, the contradictions in a system brought about its end, not violence as such. He regarded the state as an instrument of violence in the command of the ruling class, but the actual power of that

class did not consist of or rely on violence. It was defined by the role that the ruling class played in society, or, more exactly, its role in the process of production.

It was Frantz Fanon, and his valorisation by leading western intellectuals, notably Jean-Paul Sartre, that changed attitudes on the left in this respect. Indeed, Sartre, in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, goes further than Fanon himself, stating that “irrepressible violence...is man recreating himself”, and that it is through “mad fury” that “the wretched of the earth” can “become men”. He claimed: “Violence, like Achilles’ lance, can heal the wounds that it has inflicted”. As Arendt comments in her book *On Violence*: “If this were true, then revenge would be the cure-all for most of our ills” (1970: 11-12).

Student Protests

This was all reinforced by the successes of the Chinese Revolution (with Mao’s famous dictum that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun”), the Vietnam resistance to first the French and then the US military, and the Cuban Revolution. US students protesting against the Vietnam War were met by excess violence on the part of the police, which saw many calling for a violent response. The whole climate was stoked at that time also by the violent rhetoric of the Black Power movement.

This all fed into the student politics of the late 1960s. It began in the US, where students were radicalised in a violent direction when the police overreacted with brutality to non-violent student protests. The new advocates of violence claimed to speak in the name of Marx, but in fact glorified the sort of brutality hitherto associated in Marxism with the lumpenproletariat and gangsters – something that would have been abhorrent to Marx and Engels. The students, Arendt goes on to say, made “irresponsible grandiose statements...[and]...calls for Mao, Castro, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh are like pseudo-religious incantations for saviours from another world” (ibid: 18-21). As it was, as soon as the radical students began to use violence, they lost support, both within the student community and with the wider public.

This is not to say that their grievances were unjustified. The Vietnam War was clearly an imperialist adventure, and young people were right to refuse to play any part in it. The Black revolt had emerged when the Civil Rights movement seemed to be stalling in its homeland in the south, and failing almost entirely in the ghettos of the north. The students were also right to protest against universities that had become complicit with corporate interests and government-funded war-related research and technological development.

Universities were politicised first by governments, and the students were reacting to this. The students rightly demanded greater participation in the affairs of their institutions. They also understood, again rightly, that western parliamentary democracy gave very little power to the people, and indeed was giving less and less as party political machines oiled by corporate money extended their stifling control.

This was all compatible with orthodox Marxism – the demand for democratic councils had been a feature of

revolutionary politics since the 18th century, and Marx had celebrated the Paris Commune of 1871 for its achievements in this respect. Lenin had also stated his aim to give full power to the Soviets, something he refused to implement in actual practice (ibid: 22-23).

Indian History of Non-violent Protest

India had at this time its own student radicals who provided a powerful critique of the reactionary politicians who controlled the nominally-democratic political system of India, with their contradictory and generally hypocritical appeals to “socialism” laced with authoritarian demands for “discipline” as “the need of the hour”. Many of them began to valorise the “exemplary” and “cathartic” violence deployed by the Naxalites. This spirit came to inform the corpus of work associated with Subaltern Studies. Ranajit Guha (1976), for example, held that the modern Indian state had inherited from the British a police apparatus that it continued to use ruthlessly to crush any dissent. If this was the case, then the only effective counter was revolutionary violence.

As a founding-member of the Subaltern Studies group, and a regular contributor to its volumes in the early years, I largely endorsed this position, even though my own research and writing in the 1970s and 1980s was on non-violent protests – namely, on peasant nationalism in Gujarat, and social protests by adivasis in south Gujarat.² This was at a time when peasant insurrection was seen widely as an emancipatory force in the world.

During the 1980s this optimism began to be challenged as a new politics of protest emerged in India – that of a squeezed middle class that resented the reservation of positions for subaltern groups, and a politics that created solidarities by whipping up hatred against minority religious groups. These new politics found their expression first in Gujarat – in 1981 and 1985 – where I was living and working at that time. They assumed a national presence from 1990 onwards, with the launch of an explosive national-level anti-reservation movement that led to considerable violence.

The Hindu right responded to this fighting between high- and low-caste Hindus by launching a *rath yatra* to Ayodhya, which had the aim of destroying the Babri Masjid and replacing it with a Ram temple. This rath yatra largely succeeded in its aims, with large numbers of Hindus being mobilised (Bharti 1991: 91). The campaign culminated in the violent destruction of the mosque in December 1992, while state forces stood by watching.

Amidst all this, Subaltern Studies was faced with a very different political climate in India. People who observed the events in Ayodhya commented on how it appeared to be a genuinely popular movement, however much they may have deplored its sentiments. Critics of Subaltern Studies argued that this either revealed the dangers of the celebration of popular militancy, or even that Subaltern Studies was complicit with such a politics of hatred (Sarkar 1993: 165 and fn 6, 167). The latter argument was not, I believed, tenable – every member of the collective clearly and unambiguously abhorred the crimes of the Sangh Parivar. The point about the

ambiguous quality of subaltern militancy was however justified – it could not be assumed that it would always be a progressive force.

Subaltern Studies and Non-violence

This all created a certain sense of pessimism within the Subaltern Studies project. The early Subaltern Studies had been informed by a politics of hope – a belief that a democratic liberation might come from the subaltern classes. This dwindled as subaltern resistance was crushed to be replaced by an increasingly fascistic politics that managed to mobilise even the most subaltern groups, such as adivasis, in attacks on Muslims during the Gujarat pogrom in 2002. While this led some to question the politics of violence, they tended to be at a loss to suggest any convincing alternative.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has, for example, reflected on the futility and dubious morality of violence, stating:

I am a pacifist. I cannot and do not condone violence, practised by the state or otherwise. I therefore also believe that violence cannot be brought to an end by ruthless extermination. I believe that we must be able to imagine our opponent as a human being, and to understand the significance of his or her action (Spivak 2004: 93).

She, nonetheless, has written elsewhere of her pessimism about certain forms of modern protest, such as the anti-globalisation movement, which she describes as “the desperate and hardly perceptible effort at faking subaltern collective initiative by the leaders of the counter-globalist resistances. I have called this ‘feudality’ without ‘feudalism’”. The bleak sadness that comes from this observation concludes by her adding: “I do not think it is a good idea at this point to take a real position against it, because I know where the inspiration comes from” (Spivak 2005: 484). In other words, such resistance is well-meaning, but going nowhere.

My own personal response has been to turn back to Gandhi, and revisit the comments he had made about “mobocracy”. Although I would never use such a term – or indeed the word “mob” – I felt that we needed to place Gandhi’s feelings in the context here of his lifelong campaign against all politics of hate, particularly communal violence. This was indeed the most difficult of his campaigns in India, one in which he made some poor moves, and had his greatest failures. Even then, his courage to the end brought some remarkable successes, as in his subduing the violence in Calcutta after Partition in 1947, and his battle for the Muslims of Delhi in late 1947 and January 1948, which led directly to his assassination on 30 January 1948.³

My feelings in these respects informed the book I wrote in the early 2000s on Gandhi and his legacy in India and the world, published in 2004 as *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*. Research for this book revealed a history that I had not paid much attention to previously – that of the history of non-violent resistance. After the Civil Rights Movement in the US had both embraced Gandhian methods and developed them in new directions appropriate for American society, a number of scholars with a background in such direct action protest had begun to look at this history. They analysed the structure of

this politics in a way that sought to bring Gandhian political methods – hitherto largely relegated to what was seen as an idiosyncratic Oriental margin – into the mainstream of western political analysis.

Literature on Non-violence

One of the most compelling arguments of the non-violence theorists was that means determine ends. Unleashing violence is like letting a genie out of a bottle; once released, it is not easy to put back. Violent revolutions often have to be maintained by the continuing application of violence by the new rulers. Revolutionaries who have learned to settle matters using violence frequently find it hard to adapt to more peaceable means after a change of power has occurred.

Violence as a method is most suited to able-bodied males, with women, the elderly and the very young unable, as a rule, to play much part. The need for arms and training similarly excludes many. Violence is either the method preferred by small and secretive terrorist cells that can ignore the need for mass mobilisation in its politics of terror, or it is the method of relatively isolated groups such as the *adivasis* of central India, who may create liberated zones in their forest and mountain tracts, but have little or no capability of extending such a politics into the wider society beyond. Non-violence also encourages dialogue and negotiation, and does not alienate potential allies. It is, thus, a far more effective force for building a future democracy.⁴

What the literature on non-violent resistance reveals, moreover, is that this method has proven highly effective time and again at a purely pragmatic level all over the world in the 20th century and beyond. A recent survey within this tradition of writing has examined 323 major campaigns that occurred between 1900 and 2006 that have sought regime change, the end to foreign occupation, or secession. Of these, 232 were mainly violent, while 100 were predominantly non-violent. The authors found that the frequency of non-violent movements has increased over that period, and that their success rate has improved over time. By contrast, the success rate of violent insurgencies has declined. In fact, during this period, non-violent movements were twice as likely to succeed as violent ones (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 6-7). We can no doubt query how profound the change brought about by such movements has been, but this is by any standards a remarkable record, and one that gives, I believe, grounds for hope.

One of the main problems that I encountered in looking at this literature was the lack of any dialogue between authors writing in the non-violent tradition, and historians and social scientists who had studied movements by workers and peasants. While the latter drew strongly on Marxist theory and radical-socialist traditions of history-writing, the former were mainly from a background in non-violent and peace activism; they engaged with Gandhian theory, and their work was published in the field of peace studies. The non-violent literature was geared primarily towards activists rather than academics.

A non-violence theorist like Gene Sharp (1973) used terms in ways different than the social scientists. For example, when he talked of “power”, he meant the power of the masses to

refuse to consent to their own oppression, not the coercive force used by oppressors to command obedience, or – in the Gramscian and Foucauldian senses – the ideological or hegemonic forms of control that permeate society. Sharp held that a government’s power over its subjects is based on their obedience and cooperation. Power is thus derived from resources within society, rather than imposed on people from above through sanctions, repression or ideology. Political power depends on obedience by subjects, rather than in any central way by state violence, and if this obedience is withdrawn, a state cannot survive in a viable way.

In contrast to Marxian beliefs that the state apparatus must be captured by force, or the guerrilla warfare theory that argues that the state must be worn down over time through a long “peoples’ war”, the non-violence approach argued that revolutionary change can be brought about by non-violent means. It focused on the social roots of the power of the state, and refused to challenge the state on its own terms, that is with violence.⁵

Though the literature on non-violence makes a strong case for the strategic power of such techniques, if applied in a conscious and well thought-through manner, it tends to cite past examples in an overly propagandist way. Movements that one might stretch to call “non-violent” are included within the canon, such as the Russian revolution of 1905, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Ackerman and DuVall 2000: 13-59, 335-68).

The analysis of the Indian nationalist movement led by Gandhi focuses on his great successes, notably the Salt Satyagraha, but marginalises or ignores his failures, such as the ongoing attraction of terrorism, and the communal violence that gripped the subcontinent as it was split into India and Pakistan in 1946-47. The overall impression conveyed by such literature is that Indian Independence was won through Gandhian protest – when the actual reasons are far more complex (ibid: 60-111).

We needed a history, I felt, that embraced both the successes and failures. A triumphalist history was a naïve one, and came to grief when confronted by the obvious failures of the non-violent method, as in Burma in 1988, and again in 2007, and China in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The recent events in the Arab world have again shown how such protest can in certain cases achieve remarkable success, and in others fail with tragic consequences for those who have put their lives on the line in coming out openly against an oppressive regime.

When I had to search for material to use for teaching this topic, I found that there were relatively few histories that took account of and analysed the ups and downs of such a method of resistance over time. Most were very ahistorical, wrenching past protests out of context to make them exemplars of non-violent protests. Reading the work of someone like Mark Kurlansky (2006) one could be excused for thinking that this form of protest had been around for two millennia or more.

Civil Resistance

The only book that put forward a strong historical argument was that by Michael Randle on *Civil Resistance* (1994). What he defines as “civil resistance” is – as discussed by him in this

book – to all intents and purposes the same as what I am describing as “non-violent resistance”. He finds two essential characteristics in such resistance; first, it involves collective action, and second, it avoids “any systematic recourse to violence”. It thus differs from individual acts of dissent on the one hand, and military action on the other. He argues that in classical political theory, the ultimate sanction against the abuse of power is armed revolt. However, the modern state commands such an overwhelming control of force that in most cases this is hardly an option. Only a weak and divided state will fall to such insurgency.

He states that mass civil resistance became a significant political force only in the 19th century. This was, he argues, largely due to the spread of industrial capitalism and the various social and political developments that went with it. Urbanisation and the concentration of manufacture in factories gave workers a new power to work in concert to achieve their goals. Dislocation, impoverishment and exploitation made concerted action more necessary for the artisan and working classes. Increased literacy also played its part. This period saw also the growing assertion of an articulate manufacturing and professional middle class that demanded a greater say in government. The middle class utilised improved methods of organisation and mobilisation, and allied with artisans and workers to demand a broadening of the electorate and constitutional reform.

The 18th and 19th centuries also saw the consolidation of the modern bureaucratic state and the rise of nationalism. The modern nation was built on the idea that the polity was an expression of the will of the people, and that the people thus had a right to dissent if they felt that the state was not working in their interests. Nationalist struggles overlapped in many cases with liberal constitutional struggles against authoritarian governments. Both were spearheaded by the middle classes, with support from other classes. Civil resistance, thus, evolved out of various emancipatory struggles of that time. The politics of protest that thus resulted was at times violent, at other times non-violent. Randle focuses in his book on the latter (ibid: xiii, 8, 10, 21-22).

Although this argument made much sense in a European and American context, it did not explain why the most powerful campaign had been in India – a largely pre-industrial country. Literacy, for example, had hardly been a determining element in the participation of many poor people in Gandhi’s campaigns. It was often stated that Indian non-violence grew from its particular culture and history (Dharampal 1971). Either Randle’s argument was Eurocentric and did not apply here – or perhaps it did in a form that needed modification. This had to be engaged with.

Civil Resistance in India

My own investigations of the history of non-violent protest in India have revealed that many of the methods deployed by Gandhi and other activists in the early 20th century were certainly long-standing. There were *hartals*, or the closure of shops in a city. There was *dharna*, which involved sitting in

protest before the door of a person who had wronged you, until that person was shamed into giving justice. There were marches on royal palaces by protesting peasants demanding the redress of grievances. Often these were about the abuse of power by local officials and landlords – it was believed that the ruler was somehow above such abuse himself, and that he would intervene in their favour. Sometimes, he indeed did.

There were mass migrations in protest against oppression, as by the merchants of Surat against an oppressive *qazi* in 1665-66. After his appointment by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, the *qazi* had tried to convert the merchants of the city to Islam. Eight thousand Baniyas left the city in protest in September 1669, going to Bharuch. All trade and business in the city came to a halt. The *qazi* threatened that unless they returned he would destroy the Baniya’s temples and circumcise any who remained in Surat. The Baniyas replied defiantly, saying that they would go to the emperor for justice. A lengthy correspondence followed between the merchants, the *qazi* and Aurangzeb. In the end, the emperor dismissed the *qazi* and wrote a letter to the Baniyas promising them security and greater religious freedom. They then returned to Surat (Hardiman 2004: 41-51).

Protest could also in the past have given rise to what we may label retrospectively as a non-violent ethos. For example, in protests against the levying of a house tax by the colonial state in north India in 1810, the urban crowds were reported by the British to have chosen deliberately to reject violence. In the words of the Collector of Banaras:

At present open violence does not seem to be their aim, they seem rather to vaunt their security in being unarmed in that a military force would not use deadly weapons against such inoffensive foes. And in this confidence they collect and increase knowing that the civil power cannot disperse them, and thinking that the military will not.⁶

Likewise, in Bhagalpur, the British army commander, sent to crush the same protest, reported that the crowd appeared to have no dread of being fired on, but rather sought it (Dharampal 1971: xxxv, xlvii-iii).

There are a number of examples of predominantly non-violent resistance during the 19th century in both British India and in the states of princely India. Some of these are as follows:

- 1852 – Khandesh peasants protested against a land revenue survey and settlement. Thousands of peasants gathered in front of the tent of the chief survey officer and demanded that he abandon the work. He did so, moving elsewhere, and the protest was repeated in the same way after he resumed the survey there. On this occasion there was some stray violence, which gave an excuse for the British to bring in the military and arrest the ringleaders. A no-tax campaign was then launched, but this was subdued by a display of armed might by the British and further arrests.⁷
- 1859 – The *dum* in Kinnaur, where the peasants refused to cultivate their fields until the land-tax levied by the Maharaja was lowered. The ruler capitulated (Mamgain 1971: 62).

- 1859-60 – Successful protest by peasants of Bengal against indigo planters. The Lieutenant-Governor reported that when he travelled through Nadia and Jessore districts, many peasants:

...appeared at various places, whose whole prayer was for an order of Government that they should not cultivate indigo...all were most respectful and orderly...the organization and capacity for combined and simultaneous action in this cause...over so large an extent of the country...[is] worthy of much consideration.⁸

- 1873 – The Pabna no-rent campaign against zamindars. This resulted in the abolition of many cesses placed on the peasants by the landlord. K K Sen Gupta (1974: 57), in his detailed study of the movement, states that the peasants resisted in a largely non-violent manner, even in the face of much violence by the zamindars.

- 1873-74 – Campaign by Maharashtrian peasants to refuse to pay new rates of tax after they were raised in the new land revenue settlement. The government compromised by ruling that tax rises should be modified in certain cases in favour of the peasants (Kumar 1968: 180-84).

- 1885 – The *dhandak* in Tehri-Garhwal, which entailed aggrieved people marching to the capital city of the state and demanding an audience with the monarch. The people believed that they were helping their ruler by drawing his attention to a particular rotteness within his state. The ruler appeared before them and promised to look into the matter, after which they dispersed (Guha 1989: 67-68, 70).

It is easy enough to define such protests retrospectively as examples of “non-violent resistance”, and go on to argue that the method was thriving in early-modern India – long before any industrialisation or the development of a sense of Indian nationalism. This is the argument of Dharampal in *Civil Disobedience and Indian Tradition* (1971). The problem, however, in applying such a label is that such protests did not give rise to a politics of non-violence that was rooted in a stated method, theory and vocabulary that served to link up protests from all over India, as was to be the case in the 20th century. Nor was there a global dialogue on such a strategy, as there is today, with a protest in one part of the world quickly informing protest cultures and methods elsewhere.

My argument is that, to have any useful analytical meaning, “non-violent resistance” must entail a self-conscious choice by those involved, with the non-violent path being a clear strategic preference that is chosen over and above the other possible path, that of violent resistance. I would maintain that this – and here I agree with Randle – is a consciously modern move.

In the past, political protestors resisted in the way that they were used to, and in whatever way came to hand. If we look at earlier protests, we find that, as a rule, they were not informed by any stated principle of non-violence as such. Protestors acted pragmatically, according to circumstance. If many felt the need for violence, and they could get away with it to a greater or lesser degree, then they were quite prepared to be violent.

Additionally, in many cases, popular resistance took the form of what James Scott (1985) calls “everyday resistance”, in which the poor and oppressed acted in a clandestine manner,

avoiding any statement of their grievances in an explicit way. Otherwise, when overt, popular protest was commonly accompanied by rioting and other forms of violence. It is only in modern times that non-violence has thus become a strong informing ethos of many protest movements.

The Role of Gandhi

Indeed, the very word “non-violence” is new to the English language. It is a direct translation of the Sanskrit term *ahimsa*, a concept that had hitherto been applied mainly in the context of refusing to carry out animal sacrifices, and by extension, not injuring animals in any way. Gandhi gave the concept a political dimension – meaning a refusal to harm another physically in any way. By extending *ahimsa* into the sphere of politics, and then translating it into English in the context of such a practice, Gandhi created a new political language for the English-speaking world.⁹

The task for the historian, therefore, becomes one of tracing the evolution of a very specific form of political action. In India, this process was linked to the disarming of the population by the British – which made violent revolt much more difficult – coupled with the establishment of firmly codified regulations and laws that legitimised, on paper at least, peaceful forms of dissent and the arbitration of disputes through due legal process. For example, during the protest by tenants against zamindars in Pabna in 1873, the government made it known that it would permit peaceful protest against oppression by zamindars, but that the least hint of violence on the part of the peasants, they would be punished harshly – and the district officers were as good as their word in this respect (Sen Gupta 1974: 66, 70). Here, the terms of the struggle were largely determined by the state, and the peasants responded astutely by acting non-violently. As I have argued elsewhere:

The colonial state claimed for itself a monopoly of the use of disciplinary violence of all sorts. It was able increasingly to enforce this claim as local warlords and chiefs were subjugated and the populace systematically disarmed, while at the same time it extended the power of the police into even the most remote areas. Any protest that involved violence, even of a relatively petty kind, was considered illegitimate, to be legitimately crushed with what were described as ‘salutary’ measures, which meant the use of an overwhelming violence however feeble the resistance might be (Hardiman 2004: 48).

Increasingly, the subaltern classes became aware that there was very little to be gained by violence, while non-violent protest that advanced a claim to accord with British liberal principles had a much greater chance of success. In other words, the structure of colonial rule increasingly encouraged the subaltern to embrace non-violent rather than violent forms of resistance. The process was however as yet uneven, with popular protests in many regions at times becoming violent when faced with the aggression of the state or the local elites.

On his return to India in 1915, Gandhi tapped into this trend within mass politics, in the process systemising a new politics for India, that of principled non-violent protest. The first peasant movement that he led was in 1917 in Champaran district of north Bihar. Earlier protests by the peasants against the oppressive practices of the white indigo planters had been

accompanied by a considerable degree of low-level petty violence. This had led to police repression, arrests and jail sentences. When Gandhi took over the leadership of these peasants in 1917, he insisted on strict non-violence, which in the context of a society in which landlord violence and peasant counter-violence was an everyday fact of rural life, was a novel principle. He brought in his followers from Gujarat and recruited like-minded members of the local middle class to work amongst the people to ensure that there was no violence. As a result, the 1917 protest was characterised by a much lower degree of violence than previous agitations, and it was also far more successful in achieving its aims. The satyagraha was seen throughout India as a triumph for Gandhi's methods and a shining example for others to follow (Pouchepadass 2000: 220-29).

We can thus see that Gandhian non-violence provided a potent means for a legitimate and effective form of resistance within the new political order. Under Gandhian leadership, the down-trodden were able to advance their cause by adopting a position of superior morality – that of non-violence – in a situation in which the rich and powerful routinely deployed forms of violence that were considered by colonial law to be – in principle – criminal acts. This allowed for an appeal to higher authority over and against the representatives of the state at the local level, who tended to connive at the extra-legal violence of superordinate groups.¹⁰

Gandhi similarly sought to reshape the politics of shame and honour that involved, typically, vendettas and blood feuds of a most violent type. Gandhi agreed that the preservation of honour was crucial for self-respect, stating that: “My honour is the only thing worth preserving” (Gandhi 1999b: 90). This, however, was to be achieved through a non-violent refusal to cooperate, rather than through any counter-violence. In fact, it was better to accept death rather than retaliate with force (Gandhi 1999a: 59).

He also sought to expand the question of honour beyond the realm of the family and local community or caste into a defence of the honour of the people as a whole against the state,

through his campaigns of civil disobedience (Baviskar 1995: 17-18). He advocated a self-imposed suffering that was free from any feeling of hatred of the opponent. This might involve the taking of vows to abstain from the use of foreign cloth or liquor and the like, as well as other forms of self-imposed discipline. In his case, this included fasting, though he argued that even a fast could be violent in intent if deployed wrongly (Gandhi 1999c: 137). It was best used only in cases in which the two parties knew each other personally and enjoyed a mutual respect (Gandhi 1999d: 295). All of this struck a chord with the popular belief – seen in such practices as dharna, or sitting on fast before the door of someone against whom one had a grievance – that self-suffering, in itself, legitimised protest.

In these various ways, Gandhi forged a new language of protest for India by both building on older forms of resistance, while at the same time accepting the colonial censure of all forms of violent protest. In time, his new methods were to become as ritualised as the older forms of resistance. Part of their efficacy lay in the strong theoretical underpinnings that Gandhi gave to this form of protest through his doctrine of satyagraha. Through his practice and writing on the subject over the next decade and more, Gandhi gained widespread attention globally. In particular, American Christian dissidents such as Richard Gregg came to India to learn the new method at first hand. Gregg wrote a series of influential books on the subject in the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹¹

As Sean Scalmer (2011) has shown, non-violent forms of protest were taken up and developed in both the US and Britain subsequently, so that the method became a new part of the political landscape in the west. This, however, is another history, which goes beyond the scope of this present article, except inasmuch as to say that non-violent resistance is now played out on a global stage – with news from places such as Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu (Ramdas and Ramdas 2011) sitting side-by-side with the latest dispatches from Tahrir Square. Each protest now informs and encourages the others in their diverse challenges to the hegemony of the ruling classes.

NOTES

- 1 We may note that Engels was quoted here with obvious approval by Lenin (1977: 61).
- 2 For a statement that endorsed Guha's position in this respect, see Hardiman (1981: 253-55).
- 3 On this, see Dalton (1993: 150-59) and Pandey (2001: 141-46).
- 4 For a detailed elucidation of these principles, see Sharp (1973: 594-810).
- 5 For a good explication of this issue, see Schock (2005: 35-38).
- 6 W O Salmon to Government, Banaras, 2 January 1811, British Library, India Office Library, Board's Collection, F/A/323, collection no 7407.
- 7 Khandesh District Gazetteer (1880: 261-62, 269, 293). Guha (1983: 120-21) describes this protest, but categorises it as a series of “riots”, which is exactly the same term used by the Governor of Bombay at that time. In fact, it was an almost entirely peaceful protest. The Collector of Khandesh stated initially that he could do little as the action did not break the law. It was only after some stray acts of violence committed as

the movement progressed that the state felt that it had the excuse to act forcibly, with the army then being called in to crush it.

- 8 O'Malley (1912: 40-42). See also Kling (1966) and Guha (1974).
- 9 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED Online 2011), the first use of this term dates to 1920. If we examine the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, we find that he never used the English term “non-violence” in South Africa, but did so occasionally after his return to India in 1915. It appears to have become common currency only during the 1920s, however.
- 10 This paragraph owes much to Vidal (1997: 16-17).
- 11 The most important of these was Gregg (1934).

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