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WHY GANDHI MATTERS

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I

The 11th of September, or 9/11 for short, is a date commemorated with great sentiment and feeling in the city of New York. It is also remembered and marked all over the world. 9/11 is a day, and date, that signifies both the depths of human barbarity as well as the heights of human resilience. The barbarity was represented by the men who bombed the World Trade Centre, the resilience by the men and women of many nationalities who lost their loved ones on that day, and yet, with an exemplary patience and courage, have since rebuilt their lives.

This essay remembers another 9/11, that took place in another city and another continent. The 9/11 I now speak of strove to nurture rather than destroy, to enrich and dignify human life rather than debase and degrade it. This was a 9/11 which, if we understand its message correctly and apply it sincerely, has the power and the potential to deepen democracy, diminish violence, and help construct a more just and caring society.

Let us go back then to Sunday, the 11th of September 1906 – mark the day and month, the 11th of September – a 9/11 that took place ninety-five years before the other, better-known 9/11. On this day, some three thousand men and women assembled in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg. Mostly Indians and Chinese, they had come to protest a new, racial law imposed by the Government of the Transvaal, which sought to deny those who were not white-skinned the elementary rights of citizenship.

The Transvaal government had passed an Ordinance seeking to end Asian immigration and to place sharp restrictions on Asians already in the colony. They were to produce fingerprints, carry an identity card at all times, and be confined to locations, so that they would not, so to say, ‘contaminate’ the ruling whites. The resistance to the Ordinance was led by Mohandas K. Gandhi. Once a lawyer, Gandhi was now a full-time activist, and a figure of considerable authority in the immigrant community.

¹ This essay is a lightly revised version of an address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, to mark the International Day of Non-Violence, observed every year on Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday, 2nd October.

To protest the Ordinance, the Indians of the Transvaal organised a public meeting on the 11th of September. On the day, shops and stalls run by Indians stopped work at 10am. The meeting began at three in the afternoon; however, the doors were opened at noon, to accommodate the people coming in from the suburbs and the countryside. By 1.30pm the theatre was packed to overflowing. The scene inside was described by a correspondent of the Rand Daily Mail:

‘Even in its palmiest days [wrote the journalist], the old variety theatre could never have boasted of a larger audience than that which assembled yesterday. From the back row of the gallery to the front row of the stalls there was not a vacant seat, the boxes were crowded as surely they had never been crowded before, and even the stage was invaded. Wherever the eye lighted was fez and turban, and it needed but little stretch of the imagination to fancy that one was thousands of miles from Johannesburg and in the heart of India’s teeming millions.’

Five resolutions were presented to and passed by the meeting. One outlined what in the ordinance was repugnant; a second asked the Transvaal Government to withdraw it. Two others conveyed the sentiments of those present to the Imperial authorities in London. The crucial resolution enjoined the audience to court arrest if their demands were not met. It said that

‘In the event of the Legislative Council, the local Government, and the Imperial Authorities rejecting the humble prayer of the British Indian community of the Transvaal in connection with the Draft Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, this mass meeting of British Indians here assembled solemnly and regretfully resolves that, rather than submit to the galling, tyrannous, and un-British requirements laid down in the above Draft Ordinance, every British Indian in the Transvaal shall submit himself to imprisonment and shall continue to do so until it shall please His Gracious Majesty the King-Emperor to grant relief.’

Speaking to the audience, Gandhi said the responsibility for advising them to go to prison was his. ‘The step was grave, but unavoidable’, he remarked: ‘In doing so, they did not hold a threat, but showed that the time for action – over and above making speeches and submitting petitions – had arrived.’ Gandhi added that he had ‘full confidence in his countrymen’. He ‘knew he could trust them, and he knew also that, when occasion required an heroic step to be taken, he knew that every man among them would take it.’ Gandhi warned his compatriots of the hardships along the way. ‘It is quite possible,’ he said, ‘that some of those who pledge themselves may weaken at the very first trial.’ For ‘we may have to remain hungry and suffer from extreme heat and cold. Hard labour is likely to be imposed upon us in prison. We may even be flogged by the warders.’ Gandhi nonetheless urged his colleagues to join him ‘in pledging ourselves, knowing full well that we shall have to suffer things like these’. The leader was clear that the ‘struggle will be prolonged’. But, ‘provided the entire community manfully stands the test’, he foresaw that ‘there can only be one end to the struggle, and that is victory’.

Thus far, the movement to get the Indians a fair deal in South Africa had followed a strictly legalistic route. Letters, petitions, court cases, delegations – these were the means by which Gandhi and his fellows had attempted to challenge policies which bore down unfairly on them. Now, however, they were threatening to defy this new law and go to jail.

The meeting of 11th September 1906 rejected the cautious incrementalism of petition-writers. But it also rejected the violent methods then very fashionable among revolutionaries. In Europe, anarchists and socialists sought to bring about political change by assassinating kings, generals, and prime ministers. These methods were being emulated in India, where young radicals sought likewise to kill colonial administrators in a bid to frighten the British into leaving the country.

When the Transvaal Government refused to yield, Gandhi and his colleagues courted arrest. They declined to carry passes – or burnt them – defied night-time curfews, and hawked without a license. Between 1907 and 1914, several thousand Indians were put in jail by the South African authorities. Gandhi himself served three long prison sentences.

The methods of protest mandated by that other 9/11, the first 9/11, were given a particular name by Gandhi. He called them *satyagraha*, or truth force. After he returned to India in 1915, he applied them with even greater force, and as much truth, to mobilise public opinion in favour of political freedom. Gandhi led three major, countrywide campaigns of civil disobedience against British colonial rule. These scrupulously eschewed violence. Millions of Indians participated in these protests. They came from all strata of society – in His Majesty's prisons, lawyers rubbed shoulders with peasants, artisans with mill-owners.

II

In India, Gandhi is known as the Father of the Nation. This is just – for he did more than anyone else to prepare Indians for freedom, to make them aware of the cleavages of religion, caste, and gender, to nurture the democratic and plural ethos of the Indian Constitution. India's debt to Gandhi is immense. Gandhi's own debts, however, ranged beyond India. While influenced by indigenous traditions of non-violence, his ideas were modified and refined through reading the works of the Russian Leo Tolstoy, the Englishman John Ruskin, and the American Henry David Thoreau. And it was South Africa, not India, that was the first, crucial crucible of his experiments in non-violent resistance.

Gandhi was, and remains, a genuinely trans-national figure. He was trans-national in the range of his influences and in the reach of his thought. After his death, his techniques of non-violent protest have been successfully used in several continents. Martin Luther King and his colleagues applied the force of truth to shame the American Government into over-turning racial legislation. Across Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, and their comrades used the power of non-violence to replace Communist

dictatorships with democratic regimes. The heritage and methods of Gandhi can also be discerned in the movements for democracy currently underway in the Arab world. Even when they are not immediately successful, non-violent protests along Gandhian lines have sharply highlighted the arbitrary use of power by authoritarian governments. The National League of Democracy, led by the indefatigable Aung Saan Suu Kyi, and the movement for Tibetan autonomy, led by the dignified and resolute Dalai Lama, are justly admired across the world. When democracy and pluralism finally come to Myanmar and China – as they will, and must – the citizens of these countries will have reason to recall, and gratefully remember, the sacrifices of these non-violent resisters.

That meeting in Johannesburg in September 1906 thus sowed many seeds – seeds of resistance to colonial or authoritarian rule that helped usher in the end of imperialism and the emergence of democratic regimes. Even when countries are formally free, and formally democratic, non-violence can play a crucial role in challenging injustice and discrimination. Such was the case in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, when the denial of equal rights of citizenship for African-Americans was confronted, and overcome, by the civil rights movement. And such is the case in India today, where multi-party democracy and an independent judiciary exist side-by-side with pervasive social inequalities.

In his own country, Gandhi's methods of *satyagraha* have been applied in different ways and to different ends. In the 1970s, peasants in the Himalaya launched the Chipko movement, protesting deforestation caused by timber merchants by threatening to hug the trees. In the 1980s, tribals in central India launched a series of *satyagrahas* in protest against a massive dam that would submerge their homes, lands, and shrines, and devastate large areas of forest as well. Most recently, this past year in New Delhi, tens of thousands of Indians have held rallies and fasts to protest against the large-scale corruption of the country's political class. These movements have all drawn inspiration from Gandhi, carrying his portrait, humming the hymns he liked, starting or ending their campaigns on the day he was born, 2nd October, or the day he died, 30th January.

Those two days are important in the life of an individual, any individual, who whether famous or obscure, is known by when he or she entered this world and when he or she left it. However, when considered as a historical figure, as a figure of past importance and contemporary relevance, a third day is perhaps as significant in Gandhi's life. This is the 9th of September, 1906, the day when, speaking to a crowd of merchants, hawkers, and labourers in Johannesburg, Gandhi gave birth to the idea of protesting against unjust laws and against authoritarian rulers, but doing so non-violently.

May the 9/11 that destroyed the World Trade Centre never be repeated; but may the 9/11 whose ripples and echoes helped hasten the end of apartheid, bestowed freedom on India, enabled African-Americans to claim equal rights, and ended Communist rule in Eastern Europe live on in public memory, to animate the non-violent struggles for democracy and social justice that have still to be waged in our imperfect and insecure world.

III

The theory and practice of non-violence was undoubtedly Gandhi's greatest contribution to public affairs. But there were other contributions too. One such was to the theory and practice of inter-faith harmony.

Gandhi was born in 1869, a decade after the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. This was a time of widespread skepticism among the educated classes in Europe, a sentiment captured in the title of Thomas Hardy's poem, 'God's Funeral'. Outside the Continent, this was also a time of heightened missionary activity. In their new colonies in Africa and Asia, European priests sought to claim the heathen for Christianity.

For his part, Gandhi rejected both the atheism of the intellectuals as well as the arrogance of the missionaries. He did not think science had all the answers to the mysteries of the universe. Faith answered to a deep human need. Yet Gandhi did not think that there was one privileged path to God either. He believed that every religious tradition was an unstable mixture of truth and error. From these three beliefs followed a fourth, which was that Gandhi rejected conversion and missionary work. He encouraged inter-religious dialogue, so that individuals could see their faith in the critical reflections of another.

Gandhi once said of his own faith that he had 'broaden[ed] my Hinduism by loving other religions as my own'. He invented the inter-faith prayer meeting, where texts of different religions were read and sung to a mixed audience. At an International Fellowship of Religions, held at his *ashram* in Sabarmati in January 1928, he said that 'We can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu or a Christian should become a Mussalman, nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted [to our faith], but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship.'

What does it mean to be a better Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian? The sacred texts of all religions have contradictory trends and impulses; sanctioning one thing, but also its opposite. Gandhi asked that we affirm those trends that oppose violence and discrimination or which promote non-violence and justice. The high priests of Hinduism claimed that the practice of Untouchability was sanctioned by the scriptures; Gandhi answered that in that case the scriptures did not represent the true traditions of the faith. Islamic texts might speak of women in condescending or disparaging terms in one place and in terms of reverence and respect in another; surely a Muslim committed to justice would value the second above the first? Likewise, a Christian must privilege the pacifism of Jesus's life above passages in the Bible calling for retribution against people of other faiths.

There was, in Gandhi's life and work, an inseparable bond between non-violence and religious pluralism. When, in the late 1930s, violent conflicts erupted between Jewish settlers and Palestinian peasants, with both sides claiming to act in the name of their faith, Gandhi remarked that 'a religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb'. A decade later, aged seventy-seven, Gandhi walked through the riot-torn districts of eastern Bengal, healing the wounds. When independence came to India the following August, Gandhi refused to celebrate, for political freedom had come on the back of sectarian violence. When the violence would not abate, Gandhi began a fast-unto-death in Calcutta. His act shocked and shamed the people of the city, who came around, slowly. A group of representative Hindus and Muslims met him with a written promise 'that peace and quiet have been restored in Calcutta once again.' The undertaking added: 'We shall never again allow communal strife in the city. And shall strive unto death to prevent it'.

Gandhi now called off his fast, and proceeded to Delhi. The Muslims of this city had been savagely attacked by Hindus and Sikhs, themselves inflamed by pogroms against their co-religionists in Pakistan. Gandhi abhorred this politics of revenge and retribution. He went on another fast in protest. His health rapidly declined. He was persuaded to break his fast after an all-party delegation pledged that 'we shall protect the life, property and faith of Muslims and that the incidents which have taken place in Delhi will not happen again.'

An old, frail, man, had, by the force of moral example, helped bring peace to two very large cities. He now wished to proceed to the Punjab, where the rioting had been especially fierce. Before he could go, he was murdered by a religious fanatic. But his example, and achievements, lie before us. For, we live now in a time marked by arrogant atheism on the one side and religious bigotry on the other. Bookshops are awash with titles proclaiming that God does not exist; the streets are muddied and bloodied by wars between competing fundamentalisms. Gandhi's faith may be of vital assistance here, in promoting peace and harmony between people who worship different Gods or no God at all.

Back in 1919, while seeking to forge an *entente cordiale* between India's two major religious groupings, Gandhi asked them to collectively take this vow:

'With God as witness we Hindus and Mahomedans declare that we shall behave towards one another as children of the same parents, that we shall have no differences, that the sorrows of each will be the sorrows of the other and that each shall help the other in removing them. We shall respect each other's religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion'.

It only remains for me to add: what Gandhi asked of Hindus and Muslims in India in 1919 should be asked again of them today, asked also of Jews and Arabs in Palestine, of Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, and of Christians and Muslims in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Africa.

IV

Gandhi was, so to say, a serial or multiple reconciler. He sought to reconcile Hindus and Muslims, but also men and women, low castes and high castes, and North Indians and South Indians. Through his *satyagraha* campaigns, Gandhi brought more women into public life than any other modern politician. Apart from the great Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, no one did more than Gandhi to delegitimise the practice of Untouchability. And Gandhi vigorously promoted linguistic pluralism.

India today is a flawed and fault-ridden democracy. But is a democracy nonetheless. That, unlike so many ex-colonial countries, the Government of India regularly conducts free and fair elections; that women have equal rights under the Constitution; that it has successfully nurtured linguistic diversity; that the state is not identified with a particular religion; that it has extensive programmes of affirmative action for those of underprivileged background – these achievements are owed to a generation of visionary nation-builders, among whom Gandhi was – in all senses – pre-eminent.

Other countries may do well to avoid India's many failures, which include widespread poverty, massive environmental degradation, political corruption, and crony capitalism. But they may yet learn a lesson or two from India's successes. Indeed, some already have. For a full fifty years after its founding in 1912, the African National Congress followed the path of non-violence. It was with some reluctance and much deliberation that it decided that the white racist regime was too deeply entrenched to be shaken by *satyagraha*. Still, the violence the ANC used was highly focused, designed to minimise the loss of human life. State offices and state infrastructure projects were attacked, but not state officials, and never civilians. In some thirty years of 'armed struggle' perhaps a few hundred people were killed. It was not violence, but the cumulative impact of decades of mass struggle, that finally ended apartheid and brought in a democratic political order.

As a resister, Nelson Mandela did not strictly follow the Gandhian method. But as a ruler he unquestionably did. After the ending of apartheid, he too promoted the path of reconciliation – with the white race, and among the different sections of South African society. That the Constitution of democratic South Africa refused to privilege a particular race, religion, or linguistic group owed something to the Indian, or one might even say, Gandhian, experience.

Freedom and justice, but with reconciliation – that is the message of Gandhi and Mandela, King and Havel, the Dalai Lama and Aung Saan Suu Kyi. It is a message that must resonate with the democrats of Tunisia and Syria, Libya and Yemen – so that authoritarian rule in those countries is not succeeded, as has been the case so often in the past, by sectarian conflict.

V

In 1998, the editors of *Time Magazine* chose the scientist Albert Einstein as the 'Person of the Century'. They ranked Gandhi joint second, along with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. One doesn't know about FDR, but Einstein would have been both appalled and embarrassed at being placed above Gandhi. He venerated Gandhi, writing to him in September 1931 that 'you have shown through your works, that it is possible to succeed without violence even with those who have not discarded the method of violence. We may hope that your example will spread beyond the borders of your country, and will help to establish an international authority, respected by all, that will take decisions and replace war conflicts.'

The last line of this letter seems to anticipate the creation of the United Nations. Eight years later, Einstein expressed his admiration for Gandhi in even more extravagant terms. This is what he wrote about him:

'A leader of his People, unsupported by any outward authority, a politician whose success rests not upon craft nor the mastery of technical devices, but simply on the convincing power of his personality; a victorious fighter who has always scorned the use of force; a man of wisdom and humility, armed with resolve and inflexible consistency, who has devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people and the betterment of their lot; a man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human being, and thus at all times rises superior. Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.'

Einstein had no doubt that Gandhi was the greatest person of his age; perhaps of any age. In the early 1930s, when he was teaching in Berlin, portraits of three icons hung in his study. These were the physicists Max Planck and Michael Faraday, and Mohandas K. Gandhi. In the early 1950s, when Einstein was based in Princeton, a photograph of Gandhi was still displayed in his office. But Planck and Faraday had disappeared. When asked about this, Einstein replied that the discoveries of physics had recently resulted in the atom bomb. On the other hand, the reputation of Gandhi had been further enhanced in the last decades of his life.

What remains of Gandhi today? What *should* remain of Gandhi today? Some of his teachings are plainly irrelevant. For example, his ideas on food (his diet consisted chiefly of nuts and fruits and boiled vegetables), medicine (he wished to treat cancer with water baths), and sex (he imposed a strict celibacy on his followers) can hardly find favour with the majority of humans. That said, there are at least four areas in which Gandhi's ideas remain of interest and importance.

The first (and perhaps most obvious) area is non-violent resistance. That social change is both less harmful and more sustainable when achieved by non-violent means is now widely recognised. A study of some sixty transitions to democratic rule since World War II, by the think-tank Freedom House, found that ‘far more often than is generally understood, the change agent is broad-based, non-violent civic resistance – which employs tactics such as boycotts, mass protests, blockades, strikes, and civil disobedience to de-legitimate authoritarian rulers and erode their sources of support, including the loyalty of their armed defenders.’ These, of course, were all methods of protest pioneered by Gandhi.

The second area is faith. Gandhi was at odds both with secularists who confidently looked forward to God’s funeral, and with monotheists who insisted that theirs was the one and true God. Gandhi believed that no religion had a monopoly on the truth. He argued that one should accept the faith into which one was born (hence his opposition to conversion), but seek always to practice it in the most broad-minded and non-violent way. And he actively encouraged friendships across religions. His own best friend was a Christian priest, C. F. Andrews. At the time, his position appeared eccentric; in retrospect, it seems to be precocious. In a world riven by religious misunderstanding, it can help cultivate mutual respect and recognition, and thereby diminish conflict and violence.

The third area is the environment. The rise of China and India has brought a long suppressed, and quintessentially Gandhian, question to the fore: How much should a person consume? So long as the West had a monopoly on modern lifestyles, the question simply did not arise. But if most Chinese and most Indians come, like most Americans and most Englishmen, to own and drive a car, this will place unbearable burdens on the earth. Back in 1928, Gandhi had warned about the unsustainability, on the global scale, of Western patterns of production and consumption. ‘God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West’, he said. ‘The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom [England] is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts’.

Gandhi’s life and legacy have profound implications for the way we live and relate to the environment today. An aphorism attributed to him runs as follows: ‘The world has enough for everybody’s need, but not enough for everybody’s greed’. Recent scholarship suggests that he never said these precise words in this exact order. However, the sentiments they convey and contain are undoubtedly his own.

Gandhi’s respect for other religions, other races, other species, was intimately connected with his philosophy (and practice) of non-violence. He opposed injustice and authoritarian rule, but without arms. He reached out to people of other faiths, with understanding and respect. Where the proselytiser took his book to the heathen – backed sometimes with the bayonet and the bomb – Gandhi chose rather to study Islamic and Christian texts, bringing

to them the same open, yet not uncritical, mind that he brought to Hindu scriptures. And in promoting a resource-conserving lifestyle, Gandhi sought to eschew violence to the earth itself.

The fourth area where Gandhi matters is public life. In his 'Reflections on Gandhi', George Orwell wrote that 'regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!' In an age of terror, politicians may not be able to live as open a life as Gandhi. There were no security men posted outside his ashram; visitors of any creed and nationality would walk in when they chose. Still, the politicians of today might at least emulate his lack of dissembling and his utter lack of reliance on 'spin'. His campaigns of civil disobedience were always announced in advance. His social experiments were minutely dissected in the pages of his newspapers, the comments of his critics placed alongside his own.

Gandhi's political practice holds a salutary lesson (or two) for those who seek to change the world today. Gandhi once spoke of making a 'Himalayan Blunder'; but contemporary activists, as much as contemporary politicians, are loath ever to admit to a mistake. Gandhi's heightened self-awareness and openness to self-criticism stands in striking contrast to the arrogance of those in position of power, who, in this decade after the more famous (and more notorious) 9/11, have promoted the politics of revenge and retribution, contributing to an escalating cycle of violence and counter-violence which may at last, and not a day too soon, be finally ebbing. This might then be the time then to recall the other 9/11, the 9/11 in Johannesburg which mandated non-violence as a means of securing justice, the 9/11 whose best exemplars have seen their adversary not as a demon or enemy but as being as human, and as fallible, as themselves.

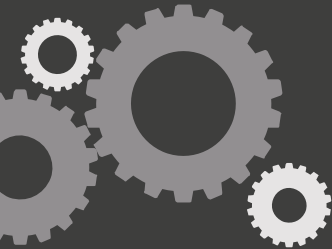
Gandhi was a prophet, of sorts, but by no means a joyless one. On a visit to London in 1931 he met a British monarch for the first and last time. When he came out of Buckingham Palace after speaking with George VI, a reporter asked whether he had not felt cold in his loin-cloth. Gandhi answered: 'The King had enough on for both of us.' Another version has Gandhi saying: 'The King wears plus-fours; I wear minus-fours'. In those self-deprecatory jokes lies a good deal of (still enduring) wisdom.

Sixty-three years after his death, Gandhi matters for his pioneering of non-violent techniques of protest, or *satyagraha*; for his willingness to stake his life in the cause of religious peace and religious pluralism; for his respect for other living beings and for the earth; for the transparency and honesty of his personal and public life. For these reasons, and more, Gandhi matters, still.

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