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Gandhian Ghostliness

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Review of David Hardiman, *Gandhi in his Times and Ours* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

Gandhi punctuated several of his major political pronouncements with invocations of good and evil, religion and irreligion, God and Satan. His pious language of sin, virtue, sacrifice and devotion, culled from major religious traditions, transfigured the lexicon of modern politics. By the early twentieth century, this confluence of different moral and political languages with its mix of new and old ways of thinking attained a steady balance and a self-contained economy in its own right. Gandhism produced a way of seeing that acknowledged its own contradictions. This way of seeing understood that the proper reasons for living would arise primarily from two simultaneous activities: bringing these contradictions into conversation and attempting to enter into dialogue with all those that differed from or opposed one's own outlook. With this general principle, Gandhi's vision sought to spiritualize politics with the simultaneous reform of religions. He wanted to establish a new moral state by positing the perfectibility of each future citizen. He thought that "political life must be an echo of private life" and that "there cannot be any divorce between the two."¹ Ultimately, Gandhi's aim was to circumvent the pull toward a modern civilization that he saw as diseased, corrupt and spiritually irredeemable, though the conditions of this very civilization forged the tools of his own mission and made it intelligible. This "civilization" has over the course of the last several decades overcome many barriers to practically soak the entire globe in its values. As Gandhi himself has begun to appear on Apple Computer advertisements, one may rightly wonder what exactly made up his project in the first place, what has become of it since his assassination, and what claim it might have now to any future.

The means Gandhi assembled for his program against the modern socio-political dispensation included nothing less than an innovative adoption and transposition of ascetic practices and otherworldly goals onto the domain of politics. The legacy of this development of religious thought and political practice remains uncertain, contradictory, even troubling in our contemporary context. Was Gandhi a political mastermind who employed religious symbols for political gain? So argues one body of scholarship. Or was he primarily a spiritual figure whose doctrine of Truth and truthful living in the modern world makes his political career seem negligible in comparison? Thus insinuates the Vintage Spiritual Classics series **alongside another body of literature**. (By including Gandhi with major religious thinkers of the world the series' view accords well with the Hindu Right's own sanctification of Gandhi as a means for neutralizing his political message.)

The legacy of Gandhi's bringing religion and politics together raises other questions as well. Is it possible for moral forms of critique to ever enter into and sustain an impact on politics without either becoming compromised or losing political efficacy? Does not morality act within political contexts to blind its exponents to their own will to power? Does it not, in its strongest forms, help rationalize the most abusive means for attaining its enshrined ends? Does not the predominance of the moral code in political rhetoric and practice more often than not maintain a

¹ Raghaven Iyer (ed.), *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993) ?.

particular status quo in which the powerful remain cynically in control and the powerless remain righteously outside it? These are difficult, yet pressing questions that Gandhism along with a slew of other morally motivated movements of both the Left and Right have brought about in more recent years. How one might go about grappling with such questions with respect to Gandhism obviously depends on how one understands the overall purport of the Gandhian message and how one makes sense of its legacy.

No guide better than David Hardiman's *Gandhi in his Times and Ours* currently exists for addressing these questions or comprehending the formation of the Gandhian message and legacy on a global scale. The merits of the work may be attributed to what the author describes as his own "troubled dialogue" (11) with Gandhi. His relationship with Gandhism, he writes, has run back and forth between emotional commitment and profound disillusionment. For the current moment, Hardiman has arrived at a critical appreciation of what Gandhi stood for, especially "in the light of many horrific developments in India and the world in recent years." (11) Hardiman's assessment of Gandhism comes at a moment when the Gandhian voice seems to have been drowned completely in the blood of communal pogroms, the blasts of nuclear bomb tests, the screams of belligerent political speeches, the hammering of new development schemes and the flurry of consumerist hedonism. Among the generation of Indians coming of age today, Adolph Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is more avidly taken to heart than anything Gandhi left behind. (Popular Indian bookstores are ever more likely to stock works on or by Hitler than soul-searching studies of Gandhism.) The current grimness in India seems to be the culmination of politicians reducing the Gandhian legacy to tokenism and lip service for decades while increasing the powers of the state to such a degree that authoritarianism becomes ever more an option for stifling political resistance and reducing social turmoil. As Hardiman observes, in "post-colonial India, it was acceptable for leading politicians to invoke Gandhi in symbolic ways, with *padyatras* [processions] and the like, but not for poor people to apply his methods of assertive non-violent protest," (199) without that resulting in beatings and police atrocities.

The burden on Gandhism – or any moral form of critique – to provide some practical strategy vis-à-vis such a situation on a global level is certainly heavy. Hardiman is conscious of this. For that reason, he consistently tries – with mixed results – to dissociate Gandhian movements from any type of impractical or futile – or what he dubs "utopian" – agenda. Rather than a simple narration of the painful atrophy of Gandhism, Hardiman's story is one that seeks to demonstrate the manner in which Gandhian principles and styles of activism have permeated the new social movements of recent decades. In becoming braided with these far flung movements, it appears that Gandhism has great potential in tying them together and having them become a "fulcrum for a critique of a whole system of rule," (233) as Hardiman at one point puts it. Gandhism appears thus like some kind of moral integument holding within a promise of a pure politics.

Hardiman begins his account by weaving together the various strains that resulted in Gandhi's moral principle of dialogue as the foundation of a non-violent politics. He then continues to trace the links that allowed this principle to stir within a number of political movements around the world. Dialogue in Gandhism serves as a regulatory principle for breaking down the artificial divisions of "self" and "other", the distances between different religious creeds, the dogmas hardened by habit, the illusion of positive eternal authorities. It posits instead the possibility of arriving at truths that would transcend religion, politics and culture. Dialogue remains open to transformations of the self and seeks them out in the other as it consists chiefly of a pragmatic philosophy of knowledge much more oriented toward a dynamic "becoming" through experimentation or improvisation than a stagnant "being" through representation or reflection. As Hardiman recognizes, Gandhi "worked out his theory – his

‘truth’ – as praxis, and understood that it had to evolve constantly in relation to his and other people’s experiences.” (7) As Gandhi himself famously put it, “My life is my message.”

Hardiman approaches Gandhi’s thinking and practice dialogically as well, showing its particular economy of transformation and stasis in the process. For this reason, Gandhism attains a definitive edge in Hardiman’s account, especially through the ways in which it came into contact with others such as tribals, untouchables, fascists and members of different religions; or the way it grappled with divergent styles of thinking such as communism, liberalism and theocracy; or the way it underwent particular changes in thought and practice by reflecting on questions of the state, patriarchy, women and ways to ameliorate the conditions of the lower orders of Indian society. Hardiman’s mix of historical narration and synoptic analyses, in other words, illuminates many obscure, yet crucial edges of Gandhian thinking and practice. For example, one understands that the popular civil resistance that became the signature of Gandhian politics took shape through a variety of dialogical processes. Mass non-violent demonstrations reworked the element of revenge in traditional forms of Indian protest and de-linked Indian notions of shame and honor from particularities of family, clan and caste. Its articulation as a political philosophy also involved overthrowing the individualism of Tolstoy’s or Thoreau’s moral frameworks while retaining their understanding of the paramountcy of conscience over law. The collective demands of shame, Hardiman wants to say but never quite arrives at to conceptualize, remain embedded in Gandhi’s moral understanding. Shame is too crucial to Gandhism, as it turns out, to be so neglected.

Considering the potential here, it is unfortunate, one could say, that Gandhi’s dialogical approach was quite halting when it came to less collective or public realms. In the sphere of the family and the domestic life of women, patriarchy was little questioned. But nevertheless by the end of his life, Gandhi modified his views on caste marriage (stating that compatibility was much more important) and stopped blaming women for being raped (as he did callously on earlier occasions). Likewise, on the issue of untouchability, Gandhi began to see the need for the state to guarantee the protection of the rights of society’s most vulnerable. This insight, the result of his conflicted relationship with the untouchable leader B.R. Ambedkar, pushed Gandhi to rethink his prescription of enlightened anarchy as the best solution to social ills. In some cases, things did not change at all in his outlook. Gandhi maintained views against religious conversion, discouraged contraception, despised orphans and saw little possibility for a moral life outside marriage. Hardiman is conscientious about pointing out the mixed results of Gandhi’s dialogical principle in both public and private realms during his lifetime. (Sometimes one wishes Hardiman would try to get at what is at stake in the inconsistencies of Gandhism, what is the logic of the transformations within and to what may be attributed such ambivalences.)

As a combination of political thought and praxis, much light is shed on the nature and promise of Gandhism after Gandhi. It has been the task of Gandhi’s successors to further the application of the dialogic approach, to diversify the uses of mass civil disobedience and to focus political discontent in a variety of locations around the world. The course that the Gandhian spirit has taken along these lines since his assassination in 1948 has, according to Hardiman’s account, been curious. It seems to have done better in inspiring, sustaining and bringing to victory socio-political struggles of the downtrodden outside India than within it.

In postcolonial India, two major Gandhians, Vinoba Bhave and Jayprakash Narayan (JP), continued to carry the mantle into public life and ultimately into obscurity. By the close of the seventies, the Gandhism of these two figures began to differ from one another substantially and dissolve nominally. Bhave, who arose from relative obscurity in Gandhi’s constructive work projects, became the standard bearer of a Gandhism that undermined class struggles with a clear

anti-communist platform. He turned Gandhism away from direct political confrontation toward a program of changing landlords' hearts so that they would hand out acres to impoverished and struggling masses. Bhave's own increasing quietism hampered the efforts of his organizations and squelched the political energies of lower orders. His disposition toward discipline led him to abandon progressive social causes for the reactionary one of protecting cows, landing him ultimately into the supporting camp for Indira Gandhi's Emergency, all in the name of Gandhism. JP, on the other hand, had moved back and forth between Gandhism and socialism throughout his life. The break with Bhave early on was only inevitable as JP wanted Gandhian politics to conform as much as possible to a language of class struggle and a policy of "total revolution." His non-violent campaigns to create self-governing and egalitarian village communities and to dismantle the monopoly of landed estates under the control of Hindu monasteries ultimately petered out once some concessions were attained. JP was also unable to check the advances of Naxalite forces as his campaigns increasingly lost ground to the more extreme Maoist alternative.

Gandhian energies seem to have so dwindled in the confusion of the Emergency as to never quite recover since. Instead, as Hardiman demonstrates, Gandhian principles and tactics have only informed, not defined, the more recent movements. With the exception of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada River Movement), whose chief goal is to create "an alternative political culture based on Gandhian principles," (225) the other movements that Hardiman discusses are only vaguely Gandhian in spirit. What one witnesses in these movements focusing on the prohibition of alcohol, nuclear disarmament, protection of the environment and the extension of rights to women laborers is the manner in which these struggles have begun to open up, albeit in small measure, the frontiers of a Gandhian future. Despite their merely local victories, these movements seem to be overcoming the limitations of their postcolonial forbearers and, in the process, transforming the ways in which Gandhi envisioned politics during his own lifetime. Those features that defined apolitical everyday life – masculine domination, caste discrimination, traditional domestic arrangements – are themselves emerging through Gandhian methods in India to transform the nature of particular political conflicts. Gandhism seems to have supported quite diverse political tendencies which seem to diverge – as in the case of JP and Bhave – on moral questions as well. What it is that Hardiman sees as the common referent for the name "Gandhism" becomes thus an increasingly relevant question throughout the book, for it certainly does not seem to be anything that itself claims to be "Gandhian". Hardiman, to his credit, never loses sight of the fact that the movements he discusses for the most part distance themselves from the increasingly hegemonic reduction of Gandhi's legacy to a new idol in the Hindu pantheon with the rise of the Hindu right. Something much more visceral and worldly – a concern with justice, dignity and nature – seems to be driving the movements that Hardiman discusses.

Paralleling the Indian scene is a story of Gandhism becoming a great inspiration on the global stage. Here it provided an alternative to the violent methods of revolution and redemption of the sixties devised by the likes of Che Guevarra and Frantz Fanon. Hardiman is again at his best in bringing to light the many obscure figures and events that link Gandhism directly with a variety of struggles in Europe, South Africa and the USA. His labors reveal the hearty, sometimes even humorous, welcome that Gandhi often received from common folk in the West alongside the usual adulation showered upon him by Western elites disenchanted with their own civilization. Hardiman traces as well the manifold ways in which diverse thinkers such as the economist E.F. Shumacher, the social critic Ivan Illich, the political activist Joseph Jean Lanza Del Vasto, the pacifist Bart de Ligt, and the theologian Howard Thurman became struck by the ethical power of Gandhi's message. All of them reworked Gandhism for their own particular contexts and allowed it to fire the imagination for conceiving a different modernity. Hardiman concentrates his investigation of the global reception of Gandhism on the Civil Rights Struggle

led by Martin Luther King Jr., the revolt against Apartheid in South Africa conducted by Nelson Mandela and the German Green Party under the leadership of Petra Kelly.

As with the social movements that took hold in India after the Emergency, the Gandhism of these struggles appears as a steady undercurrent, fading in and out of the picture. It sustains their ethical visions, energizing them with positive historical precedents and indicating direction for the future. For King's assimilation of Gandhian principles and tactics, the stage was already set by figures senior to him in Afro-American politics. The activist Bayard Rustin's collaboration with the wily Gandhian émigré Krishnalal Shridharani as well as the Gandhian teachings of mentors such as Thurman at Boston University informed King's political and moral thinking. King's role was not merely to become the charismatic counterpart to Gandhi in the struggle against America's own domestic brand of colonialism. For him, the moral power of Gandhism became primarily a means for generating a strategy of direct confrontation with opponents such that the seething frustration of blacks could take a positive outlet through "creative tension" and thus reconfigure the entire political sphere. In South Africa, Gandhi's public campaigns for equal citizenship for non-whites during his residence there had a lasting impact on anti-apartheid politics. Non-violent political resistance here underwent perhaps the greatest trials in trying to shake a governing establishment whose extreme policy of all-out repression of the black movement, violent or non-violent, brought about the deaths of many Gandhi-inspired activists such as Steve Biko. The very different context of West Germany in the eighties involved tests of a very different sort for Gandhian politics. Here the Green Party under Kelly struggled with the contradictory pulls in Gandhian politics between strong charismatic leadership and institutional decentralization. She had to do this within a parliamentary system restricted to humdrum party politics. King, Biko and Kelly, as well as many other Gandhians in these struggles, all met their ends by murder. In the West especially, murder is what is most commonly meted out to Gandhian leaders as a measure of the success of their movements. Death and defeats accumulate, memories form like a vapor such that Gandhism begins to appear in our present like a diffuse spirit informing different political strategies in different parts of the world. As something increasingly embedded in practices and visions more often than anything named or defended directly, Gandhism is in danger today of either vanishing or becoming co-opted by non-Gandhian elements. The threat is that all of its component parts may come apart and dissolve back into their respective modern and traditional origins.

Considering this rather bleak picture of the Gandhian legacy in the present and the chances that it may wane even more in the future, what may one infer about a politics succored by moral imaginings in our contemporary context? The fact that Gandhian politics has non-violence as its most definitive trait, its relations to ethical and moral issues distinguish it from a politics that sanctions warfare, terrorism and even bloodlust. When it comes to its own survival, Gandhism has its own problems to deal with. Hardiman's own ambivalent grappling with the political advantages and moral strengths of Gandhism, which does more to raise awareness of problems than resolve them once and for all, makes clear the distinction. He points out the political benefits of Gandhism on various occasions. For example, he sees that the mechanisms and logic of the modern state, equipped best for dealing with the escalation of violence, seemed to be easily undermined, even crippled, by the conscience of peaceful protest. This feature of non-violent protest can inspire, in turn, a destabilizing dignity among the most humble in society. Hardiman's analysis makes clear that this form of protest was viable as long as civil society was itself sustained in principle and practice. As the civil society of the sort that propped up Gandhian struggles has shattered and begun to lose political efficacy in polities where it existed and as the powers that be have become adept at co-opting and defusing such protests, one may wonder what viable bases may remain for launching Gandhian campaigns today.

There may be some promise in the fact that contemporary Gandhian movements do not need to burden themselves with Gandhi's own eugenicist thinking, stereotypical assertions and patriarchal prescriptions that characterized his era. Yet for contemporary generations that have become one with technology, governed by statist programs, and enthralled with creature comforts of all sorts, one may wonder how Gandhian visions of a romantic return to nature, enlightened anarchy, self-imposed austerities, and small scale technologies could possibly find broad support, let alone be re-articulated. A new sort of dialogue would have to be entertained within Gandhism to accommodate the cyber age, video-game-like military combat, and the end of nature as it existed in Gandhi's time. The issues raised above may all actually be adequately dealt with from a Gandhian perspective. It is possible that with respect to the environment especially a Gandhian perspective could still get the upper hand. But, as Hardiman points out, this would be the case only as long as the environmentally focused campaigns can bring into the frame the larger social and political conflicts that are at the bottom of environmental issues.

Other aspects of the work urge other kinds of resolution. One is the possibility intimated in the work that the moral and political moments of Gandhism may clash. Hardiman draws attention to the masochism that Gandhi's morality may inspire in his followers. Though he indicates that Gandhi was himself critical of defeatism and masochism, he brings his book to a close with a conclusion that seems symptomatic of this defeatism: his celebration of the moral righteousness of the doomed charismatic leader. These concluding thoughts do not quite do justice to the interlinked issues that arose over the course of his narration and analyses: the question of the state, Gandhian forms of protest, the generative nature of Gandhian dialogism, the scope of the Gandhian critique of modernity, the relation between moral formulations and political strategy. Much is left hanging by the end, much that needed to be drawn together and elaborated into some particular conceptual shape. What is at question by the end of the book is: In what form will Gandhism survive?

In a moment of conflict, when Gandhism has aided in the crucial task of mapping the terrain of political struggle, when the moment of political conflict is imminent and violence of some sort is inevitable, when, in other words, non-violence no longer remains a viable option, the masochistic moral solution will, it seems, inevitably contend with the purely political one within the Gandhian framework. Gandhi himself, as Hardiman reminds us, did not rule out violence altogether: it was better to resist violently than act cowardly, he said, and violence was acceptable as the last resort for survival. In the moment of political turbulence, when questions of ends and means no longer seem pertinent, what will be at stake is the very form in which Gandhism survives – whether as a viable politics or as a quaint old morality – whether in flesh and blood, or in spirit only.