

## **Gandhi's Not History**

Vinay Lal

First published in *Hindustan Times* (24 August 2006), p. 10. Also published in *Satyagraha 100 Years, 1906-2006: In Pursuit of Truth* (Durban: Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2006), pp. 29-33.

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In the immediate aftermath of the ferocious fighting that raged along the border between Lebanon and Israel for close to a month, and as the streets of Baghdad are daily strewn with the remains of bodies of innocent children and civilians, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most significant events of recent human history is not likely to be remembered. In 1906, an Indian-born lawyer in South Africa, Mohandas Gandhi, not yet the Mahatma, encountered the draft Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance proposed by the Transvaal Government in the August 22<sup>nd</sup> issue of the government gazette, and at once decided that this legislation would have to be opposed. He saw, Gandhi later wrote, nothing “except hatred of Indians” in the proposed legislation, which, if passed, “would spell absolute ruin for the Indians in South Africa.” The Ordinance required all Indians in the Transvaal region of South Africa, eight years and older, to report to the Registrar of Asiatics and obtain, upon the submission of a complete set of fingerprints, a certificate which would then have to be produced upon demand. The Ordinance proposed stiff penalties, including deportation, for Indians who failed to comply with the terms of the Ordinance.

Fingerprints were then demanded only from criminals, and the subjection of women to such a requirement had no other objective but the humiliation of Indians. Gandhi understood well that the Ordinance effectively criminalized the entire community and must be challenged. He mobilized the Indians, who had first arrived in South Africa as indentured laborers in 1860, to offer resistance. At a meeting held in Johannesburg, 3000 Indians took an oath not to submit to a degrading and discriminatory piece of legislation, and Gandhi spoke at length on the obligation to never repudiate a pledge. Thus was born satyagraha, or non-violent resistance, and over the course of the next four decades, first in South Africa and then in India where Gandhi spent the last three decades of his life, he endeavored to perfect it, offering satyagraha not only to the British but to the world as a form of ethical politics and as a consummate lifestyle. Many in Gandhi's own lifetime

doubted its efficacy, and some claimed that satyagraha could only have succeeded against an allegedly gentlemanly opponent such as the British; many more have since claimed that the unspeakable cruelties of the twentieth century render nonviolent resistance into an effete if noble idea, and that though the world loves romantics there is little use for them in real life.

India's resounding experiment with democracy, for all its shortcomings and the one major relapse of the mid-1970s, when an internal emergency was imposed and constitutional safeguards suspended, may owe much more to Gandhi than is commonly conceded. However, South Africa, which Gandhi claimed as his second home and which he left for good in 1914, may present a more complex case of the assessment of his legacy. The most pressing charge against Gandhi is that he did little to improve the situation of black Africans and did not draw them into the struggle against racism and the ideology of white supremacy. By what right Gandhi could have claimed to act as a spokesperson for black and colored Africans is a question that the critics have not adequately addressed. The Natal Indian Congress, in the founding of which in 1894 Gandhi had a hand, became the model for the African National Congress (ANC), and it is equally striking that black South African nationalists, from Chief Albert Luthuli to Nelson Mandela, have been forthright in pronouncing Gandhi as having exercised an incalculable influence on their thinking and on the moral tenor of the struggle against apartheid. The word satyagraha is derived from satya (truth) and agraha (firmness), and it is not implausible that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not only post-apartheid South Africa's homage to Gandhi but a way of extending satyagraha into the twenty-first century.

If one of the first principles of Gandhian thinking is that a moral politics rests upon consideration of means rather than ends, then we are not even called upon to assess the consequences or efficacy of embracing nonviolent resistance and, more broadly, the entire worldview associated with satyagraha. The advocates of nonviolent resistance who are dismissed as woolly-headed idealists should, on the contrary, be more aggressive in requiring the proponents of violence to demonstrate that violence can produce enduring good. Just how far we have traveled in the last one hundred years is transparent from the ease with which fingerprinting, once demanded only of criminals, has now been normalized in most societies as part of the surveillance regime of the modern nation-state. There was some slight indignation when the United States, shortly after 9/11, began to require

fingerprints from every adult visitor, but what was once seen as a form of oppression is now viewed as a routine activity. One of the least appreciated aspects of Gandhi's worldview is his construal of deception, secrecy, and perpetration of falsehoods as forms of violence. The advocate of satyagraha may no more resort to secrecy than to violence, and it is remarkable that, before undertaking his famous salt satyagraha of 1930, Gandhi addressed a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, informing him of his plans to resist an iniquitous piece of legislation and inviting Irwin to arrest him. Gandhi would have seen a long thread that not only ties the secret surveillance of American citizens and residents to American aggression in Iraq and the brutal culture of violence amidst which we are now living, but that knots together terrorists and their antagonists in mutual admiration for nefarious secrecy and violence. At the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of satyagraha, even a modicum of reflection on the debased state of our politics might assist in recuperating a place for nonviolent resistance.