

The Tavistock Square Gandhi and the War on Terror, War on Non-violence

Gandhi's statue at Tavistock Square dates back to the 1960s but in the wake of the recent bomb attacks in London, its presence has a somewhat ironical significance. That a proponent of non-violence could provide an answer to violence seems ominously fitting, but what Gandhi divined about colonialism – that it is a 'pact' between the coloniser and the colonised – is something that can shed light on the modern culture of violence, which in some perverse way has come to link perpetrator and victim alike.

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In the midst of the horrific carnage and mayhem created by coordinated bomb attacks in London, it is doubtful that very many people are thinking of the fate of a statue. On my very first visit to London in 1989, once I had checked into my lodgings on Upper Woburn Place, I hastened to make my way to Tavistock Square – and it is here that one of the bombs blew apart a bus, taking 13 lives and perhaps more.

Central London has many beautiful squares, oases of rest, reflection and rumination. Nearly every square has historical associations, but Tavistock Square is uniquely significant. In the centre of the square is installed one of the most moving statues of Mohandas Gandhi anywhere in the world. Gifted to London by the Indian high commissioner for Great Britain in 1966, the statue, by the British sculptor Fredda Brilliant, was unveiled by prime minister Harold Wilson. Tavistock Square soon thereafter became the site for various peace

memorials. The victims of the Hiroshima bombings are remembered at the square by a cherry tree, and in 1986 the League of Jewish Women planted a field maple in the square to mark the United Nations International Year of Peace. More recently, a granite memorial was installed at the square to honour conscientious objectors, always a minuscule number and now, one fears, a dying breed. One can understand why, among Londoners, Tavistock Square has been dubbed 'the peace park'.

Gandhi's Way

One might say that the statue lent the square a certain serenity: the Gandhi represented here is a seated figure, ponderous and meditative, not the Gandhi with the walking stick, a searing image made popular by Gandhi's famous march to the sea, which is more commonly encountered in statues of the chief architect of the Indian independence movement. It is the image of this seated Gandhi with which, for a long

period through the 1970s and 1980s, the state-owned television channel, Door-darshan, commenced its news. Tavistock Square is a short walk from University College, London, whose web site claims Gandhi as one of its graduates. Gandhi arrived in London in 1888 shortly after his 19th birthday to study law. What better subject to master than law if one aimed to unseat an empire that, above all, claimed it had brought the rule of law to unruly natives? In those days, however, disassociating from the empire, or bringing the empire to its knees, was the furthest thing from Gandhi's mind. Gandhi's foreign sojourns started in London, and ended there; but where he had first come to London to, in his own words, "play the English gentleman" and render the homage that the subjugated customarily accord to their oppressors, on his last trip, after parleying with the Viceroy on equal terms, he came to negotiate India's independence. On the way, Gandhi shed a great deal: a top hat, coat-tails, the native's awe for the white man, and western civilisation's addiction to violence.

The unflinching advocate of non-violence that Gandhi was, he knew many a thing about violence. It is not necessary to be schooled in violence to embrace non-violence, but one would have had to sleep-walk through life not to be touched by violence. Gandhi would come face-to-face with the sheer ugliness of racial violence in South Africa on numerous occasions. He raised an ambulance corps to assist the British when the Boer War broke out in 1898, and he did so again a few years later at the commencement of the Zulu rebellion. Most commentators have, rightly, seen these as expressions of Gandhi's ardent belief that Indians could only claim their rights within the British empire if they were prepared to defend the empire against its opponents. In an era when the language of rights was already becoming part of the vocabulary of political conduct and discussion, Gandhi still insisted on the importance of retaining a conception of one's duties. But it is characteristic of Gandhi that, rather than running away from violence, or becoming paralysed by its brutalities, or claiming a pacifist sensibility, he entered the battlefield of violence in the capacity of a healer, bearing truth (as he then saw it) on the stretcher of non-violence. He would henceforth have a dialectical, dialogic, and hermeneutic awareness of non-violence. The advocates of violence seldom if ever speak to the

votaries of non-violence, and one of the many reasons why Gandhi held non-violence to be superior to violence is that its proponents extend an invitation to those who swear by violence to enter into a dialogue. The advocates of non-violence are always in a conversation with the adherents of violence. This relationship brought Gandhi to an awareness of the fact that some forms of non-violence are tantamount to violence, that avoidance of violence is not necessarily a form of non-violent action, and that there may be occasions when the practice of violence is the only way of honouring the spirit of non-violence.

Non-violence vs Terror

It would be wishful thinking to suppose that the London bomber who chose to explode a bomb in London's peace park, outside the statue of Gandhi, was seeking in his own macabre way to enter into a dialogue with Gandhi and the advocates of non-violence. In Gandhi's own time, he was nearly alone among the principal theorists and practitioners of revolutionary change in arguing for the primacy of non-violence, and he stands ranged against a whole galaxy of figures – Lenin, Trotsky, Fanon, Mao, Castro, Che Guevara – who did not only glorify violence but dismissed non-violence as a chimera. Gandhi had held up the later Tolstoy as a figure worthy of emulation, but Lenin spoke with open contempt of his countryman's "imbecile preaching about not resisting evil with force". One hears even less of non-violence these days. It may be argued, of course, that Trotsky, Fanon, and Che are just as much foreign figures to jihadists or suicide bombers as Gandhi, and that the schooling terrorists receive is of a different order. One will hear, no doubt, of the 'sleepers cells' that Al Qaida is said to have formed in Britain, of the madrasas at which Muslim men are believed to be indoctrinated to hate the west and (in Bush's language) its freedoms, and of the experts in terrorist warfare who are one species, altogether unintended, of the iconic transnational figure of the 21st century.

Whatever the precise training required to strap explosives together into a bomb, plan and orchestrate an attack in heavily monitored areas, and eventually to steel oneself to explode devices along with oneself in a busy public space, the perpetrators of the Tavistock Square and tube bombings required no schooling in madrasas or radical

mosques. They are more likely (as has been established in the case of the London attacks) to have attended secular institutions of higher learning in the west than universities in the Islamic world. They received their training, one might say, in streets – not as street urchins or as deprived children of the third world, but as careful observers of America's prosecution of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have taken their cues from history books, from the culture of violence to which they are deeply inured, and from the architects of the war on terror. The perpetrators of terrorism have also understood that there are numerous ways in which one can enlist oneself as a member of that profession. The culture of terror is all-pervasive.

It remains to be seen whether Tavistock Square will continue to be known as London's 'Peace Park'. Quite likely it will be, if only because the legend of the grit, resilience, and resolve of Londoners, about which we have heard so much, will need to be preserved. Such consolations are soothing but they disguise more than they reveal about the culture of violence which stitches together modern society. Gandhi, as we might recall, was felled by an assassin's bullet – as was, two decades later, Martin Luther King, Jr. It is supremely fitting that the reply to non-violence should always be given by a proponent of violence. One of the most disturbing aspects of violence is that it is irreversible, just as its perpetrators, through

their very act, claim to be in possession of a superior version or account of truth. What Gandhi divined about colonialism, namely, that it is a pact – and pacts are not without their element of deception, coercion, and attraction – between the colonised and the coloniser, is something that can be brought to our awareness of the pact that drives the modern culture of violence. The colonised were, to be sure, exploited and beaten; but they were also lured by the glitter of the modern west. The leaders and good samaritans of the west are, to be sure, repulsed by savage and brute acts of violence; but they also breathlessly await such acts, as it is the only language that they themselves understand. How else can one explain that stupefyingly idiotic, obscene, and terror-laden phrase – indeed ambition, 'the war on terror'? Terrorism is manna to the prosecutors of the 'war on terror'.

We have entered into a phase of brutal and unending violence. Terrorists and advocates of the war on terror are bound together in a horrifying pact. Violence has a ravenous maw. It countenances no opposition. The assassin of Gandhi and his numerous patrons, having done away with the old man, have been determined ever since to install violence as the supreme monarch. One wonders whether, once the assassins of non-violence are finished with their work, any statues of Gandhi will remain. ❏

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V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA

Workshop on Labour History Research (October 3-7, 2005)

V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA invites applications from young researchers, teachers and activists concerned with labour issues for participating in a **Workshop on Labour History Research**, during **October 3-7, 2005**. The objective of the workshop is to discuss methods of research and theoretical approaches as well as historiography of labour in India and abroad. The course is also intended to provide a historical context to the contemporary issues concerning the Indian Working Class. The workshop would be organised around lectures and interactive presentations by a team of eminent scholars led by **Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya**, Honorary Fellow of the Institute. The participants are also required to make presentations on the themes of their individual research work as part of the workshop activity. No programme fee will be charged and VVGNNLI will provide to and fro sleeper class fare and free boarding and lodging in the Institute's Campus. In the selection of applicants, preference would be given to those with postgraduate degree in history and allied social sciences and to those who are actively involved in labour organisations. Application along with the bio-data and a brief statement of the participant's research interests in labour studies may be sent to **Mr. Babu P. Remesh**, Associate Fellow, **V.V. Giri National Labour Institute**, Sector-24, NOIDA-201301, (0120-2411469 Fax: 0120-2411474, 2411536; E-mail: shram_nli@vsnl.com).