

The Other September 11

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September 11th is a date forever etched in our minds. The terrorist attacks on America in 2001 have inaugurated a new era of uncertainty, fear, and hatred. For some influential sections in the West, these attacks have reaffirmed a belief in an inevitable ‘clash of civilisations’. Such a binary view of the world has been coupled with an opportunism that has led to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and more recently Israel’s brazen assault on Lebanon. After decades of unprecedented peace, the mindless bombings in Madrid and London have introduced a new and gruesome dimension to European life. Given the political and economic preponderance of the West, the impact of these events is felt worldwide. Thus, at home, the terrible bombings of Mumbai’s trains are now viewed as a part of this global menace.

Despite the disbelief of its citizens and feigned innocence of its leaders, America’s international record has been far from simon-pure. It is in response to such duplicity that alert minds have reminded us of another 9-11. On the same date, in 1973, the democratically elected President of Chile, Salvador Allende, was overthrown in a coup that was aided and abetted by the American Government. With Allende dead, Chile rapidly descended into a long era of darkness under the right-wing Augusto Pinochet.

But the messy history of humankind also holds other lessons for those alive to its metaphors. In 1892, America commemorated four hundred years of Columbus’ ‘discovery’ by organising a year-long Exposition in Chicago. On the margins of this event a meeting of religious figures was organised. Addressing this gathering, on September 11 1893, Swami Vivekananda famously drew attention to the consequences of “sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendent, fanaticism”. While Vivekananda upheld tolerance as the key to humanity’s future, yet another 9-11 coincidence provides an even more edifying story of human dignity and freedom.

In September 1906, the Transvaal legislature in colonial South Africa sought to curb the growing economic influence of the Indian community through a racially motivated ‘Asiatic Ordinance’ that amongst other measures included mandatory fingerprinting. On September 11th, 1906 the Indian community in Johannesburg, gathered at the Empire Theatre, a Jewish institution, and vowed to resist the proposed legislation. Amidst vigorous discussions, Haji Habib, an elderly Muslim arose and made a solemn pledge of peaceful civil disobedience, with ‘God as witness’. That the Indian opposition to the proposed legislation would be entirely non-violent was never in question. However, Haji Habib’s solemn oath in the name of God was a moment of epiphany for a man who would change the course of history. That man was Mohandas Gandhi, the Mahatma.

Although known for leading the Freedom Movement in India, Gandhi’s philosophy and its practice were painstakingly crafted over a period of two decades in South Africa. The 9-11 meeting helped crystallise a nascent idea in his mind. Gandhi’s own form of non-violent direct action, Satyagraha, was born. An immensely significant idea, Satyagraha is notoriously difficult to translate into English. Etymologically, satya means Truth and agraha means insistence, implying a steadfast insistence of the Truth. Acting on the dictates of individual conscience in the cause of justice is an old idea present in various forms in all societies. However, it was Gandhi who elevated a personal, ethical tenet to a philosophy of large-scale social and political action that transcends time and geography.

Satyagraha has been much used, and abused, in the hundred years since Gandhi first formulated its basic tenets. While thousands took part in India’s struggle against British rule, many years later in distant America, Satyagraha found expression in the life of Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. In independent India itself, while Gandhi has been increasingly forgotten, Satyagraha has been frequently reinvented by a variety of movements for social and ecological justice.

Satyagraha has unfortunately been confused with Pacifism which has its roots in Western history. Ironically, such a conflation erases the very reason for the invention of the word. Gandhi, with help from his nephew Maganlal, coined the neologism as he felt the term used to describe his ideas, “passive resistance”, was wholly inadequate. In particular, Gandhi felt that the description of his method as a “weapon of the weak” was objectionable. Satyagraha is anything but passive or weak. It is no idle piety, or woolly-headed craving for peace with no reference to the

complexities of the real world. Rather it is a militant, but resolutely non-violent assertion of one's moral beliefs. Gandhi held that humans were inherently capable of both good and evil. Therefore, faced with injustice it was one's responsibility to rouse the moral sense of an opponent. While many thinkers acknowledge the inevitability of war and strife in society, Gandhi stubbornly refused to accept violent retribution as an answer to an evil act. "An eye for an eye makes the world blind", he famously declaimed. While a violent response would make us lose our intrinsic humanity, he did not imply silent acquiescence to injustice. In fact he held that violence was preferable to meek acceptance of oppression. However a better world was only possible by demanding and obtaining justice through peaceful means.

Application of this philosophy on a national scale was a stroke of rare genius and a courageous, often bordering on foolhardy, act of self-belief. It was hard enough for any individual to maintain a non-violent stand in the face of severe incitement and violence. To demand that of an entire mass struggle was unthinkable for many. But the virtue of a large-scale peaceful struggle in India triumphed and heralded the waves of decolonisation that swept across Asia and Africa. Colonial empires ultimately crumbled under the weight of the manifest truth that Freedom was everyone's birthright.

Unlike most forms of political organisation and action, Satyagraha yields no corner to realpolitik and our many daily compromises. This is so as one's loyalty is completely given over to the only principle worth upholding - Truth. For Gandhi, this was the highest form of religion. "Truth is God", he often said. Thus the creed of Satyagraha, also demanded that its practitioners freely accept their errors. Frequently, and always publicly, Gandhi would himself proclaim his errors, his "Himalayan blunders". In the process he infused a new sense of vitality and purpose into our public life that has sadly receded.

Gandhi provided humanity with a non-violent, moral weapon. In a world riven by unending violence, oppression, and conflict its relevance is self-evident. Beyond the symbolism of this 'other 9-11', Gandhi's insight that came to the fore a century ago holds the possibility of building a world based on genuine peace and justice, where genuinely 'enduring freedom' can prevail.