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Please Address All Mail To:

The Book Review Literary Trust
239, Vasant Enclave
New Delhi 110 057

Telephone:

91-11-26141887 / 41034635

Website:

www.thebookreviewindia.org

email:

thebookreview@hotmail.com
chandrachari44@gmail.com
uma.iyengar@gmail.com
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It was not so long ago that Mohandas Gandhi was, at least to the academic world, a largely forgotten figure. In the 1980s and 1990s, as postcolonial thought in its various inflections became quite the rage in significant sectors of the Anglo-American (and Indian) academy, and the 'master narratives' of the Enlightenment, as they were called, came under sustained interrogation and assault, attention would come to be lavished upon those figures who were viewed as the torchbearers of resistance, critical of deeply embedded frameworks of interpretation that had given succour to elites, and harbingers of a politics of emancipation for those, especially, relegated to the margins. Curiously, though Gandhi is a critical figure in the histories of struggles against colonialism, racism, and the oppression of women and minorities, he remained singularly unattractive to the most prominent postcolonial theorists and intellectuals of other stripes. He was seen as a distinctly unsexy figure, dismissed as a 'doer' rather than 'thinker', scarcely worthy of the company of Aime Cesaire, C.L.R. James, or the much lionized Fanon. The stately Edward Said was habituated to giving lists of the great figures of anti-colonial resistance, but in the thousands of pages of his writings there is barely any mention of Gandhi's name. When at all attention was

THE IMPOSSIBLE INDIAN: GANDHI AND THE TEMPTATION OF VIOLENCE

By Faisal Devji

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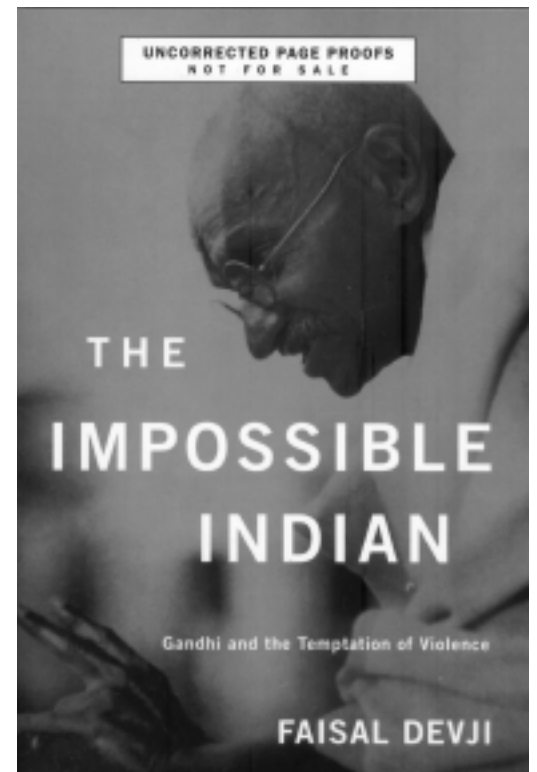
bestowed on Gandhi by a famous intellectual, it was more for effect than out of any serious consideration of his thought, perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's extraordinary and one should say careless attempt, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), to suggest that *sati* could be associated with 'Mahatma Gandhi's reinscription of the notion of *satyagraha*, or hunger strike, as resistance.' As she adds, 'I would merely invite the reader to compare the auras of widow sacrifice and Gandhian resistance. The root in the first part of *satyagraha* and *sati* are the same' (p. 298). Since when did *satyagraha* and 'hunger strike' become synonymous? Fasting is no doubt part of the grammar of *satyagraha*, but does anyone suppose that *satyagraha* can be reduced to hunger strike? And is there no distinction to be made between fasting and hunger strike? One would have expected a great deal more from someone who has been a relentless advocate of careful and hermeneutic readings of texts.

Reading Gandhi and Avowing the Impossible

Vinay Lal

Much, however, has changed in the course of the last decade. Gandhi has found favour in the most unusual circles, though for reasons that are far from apparent, and scholarship on him is flourishing. It surely cannot be that the world is in the throes of violence—indeed it is, but not demonstrably more so than in previous decades—and that Gandhi now appears not only eminently sane and reasonable but prophetic in his insistence on nonviolent social and political transformation. It may be that many of the most widely admired figures of our times, among them Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi, have openly declared themselves as beholden to Gandhi in helping shape their worldview. Even the Commander in Chief of the greatest military force in the world, Barack Obama, has described Gandhi as his spiritual and political mentor, and he once went so far as to tell American schoolchildren that if there is one figure from the past with whom he could have dinner, it would have to be Gandhi. (We need not pause here to reflect on how the evening might have shaped up, since Gandhi ate very little and well before sundown—yet Obama's observation seems to have been offered without any pinch of salt.) It is certainly possible to entertain the idea that, at least from the scholarly standpoint, other ideologies—liberalism, conservatism, Marxism, constitutionalism—are seen as having run their full course, and that some indulgence towards Gandhi's ideas is seen as permissible. All too often, of course, non-violence has been the last rather than the first option for those who style themselves revolutionaries.

Faisal Devji's *The Impossible Indian* is easily both one of the most stimulating and disturbing books in the Gandhian cornucopia. Devji proposes to set forth 'a new case for Gandhi 'to be considered one of the greatest political thinkers of our times' (p. vii), just as the analytical philosopher Akeel Bilgrami, another relatively recent convert to Gandhi's ideas, has argued that Gandhi was 'the greatest anti-imperialist theorist who ever wrote'.¹ Much has been written on the subject of nationality, but Devji's reading is altogether fresh: considering the role of Indians within the empire, he argues that 'it



was neither India nor South Africa that provided Indians with a nationality, but *satyagraha*, considered as a practice without origin or destination of any territorial sort' (p. 49). Gandhi in this fashion also controverted the usual assumptions about 'minorities' and 'majorities', a language born of modern political arithmetic, and a letter to Jinnah in 1944 reinforces the notion of nationality wrought in the crucible of struggle: 'The only real though awful test of our nationhood arises out of our common subjection. If you and I throw off this subjection by our combined effort, we shall be born a politically free nation out of our travail' (cited at p. 64). Devji writes with considerable elegance and even panache, to be sure, but also with the aim of unsettling conventional readings and what we deem to be 'common sense'. One of the more fruitful results of this intellectual exercise is the chapter tellingly entitled, 'In Praise of Prejudice'—shades here, as throughout this book, though hardly acknowledged, of the impress on Devji of the seminal readings of Gandhi, and more broadly of Indian political culture, advanced by Ashis Nandy. Gandhi worked to develop 'the prejudice that remained between Indians there into a basis of friendship' (p. 70): neither friendship nor prejudice are amenable to a calculus of interests. Though both

friendship and brotherhood furnish models of egalitarian relations, Devji argues convincingly that Gandhi was ‘an advocate of the former against the latter’ (p. 71). Unlike brotherhood, which may be ‘flouted a hundred times without ceasing to remain brotherhood’, friendship rests on a much more fragile foundation, having ‘to remain disinterested to be itself’ (p. 69). Devji weaves into this discussion a consideration of Gandhi’s stance on the Khilafat Movement and pan-Islamic politics, a subject on which even Gandhi’s most ardent admirers have often found themselves parting company from the Mahatma. Devji’s complex interpretive moves cannot be rehearsed here, but suffice to say that he does not agree that the ‘Khilafat episode’ must be reckoned as one of Gandhi’s greatest failures. Quite to the contrary, it is here that Gandhi demonstrated the true meaning of friendship, and it is only a cheap calculus of interests which makes us suppose, quite erroneously, that Gandhi sought reciprocity from Muslims—for example, a promise to refrain from cow slaughter—in exchange for his support of the Khilafat cause.

The six chapters that have been patched together to comprise this book thus bristle, to varying degrees, with arresting insights—even if, as is sometimes the case, our understanding of Gandhi is not visibly advanced. A case in point is the chapter entitled ‘Bastard History’, where Devji tackles the question of Gandhi’s ‘intellectual and political antecedents.’ Brushing aside those conventional histories which invoke the names of Tolstoy, Ruskin, and Thoreau, or Raychandbhai and Gokhale, Devji avers that, with the possible exception of the Swadeshi Movement, ‘it is impossible to point to any historical example that might provide a precedent for Gandhi’s use’ of nonviolent practices and his deployment of the ideas of ahimsa, satya, and so on. If Devji is unfamiliar with the work of, say, Howard Spodek on the antecedents of Gandhian satyagraha in Gujarati political culture, or of Dharampal’s treatise on the history of civil disobedience in Benares, it would be a severe shortcoming; but if he has deliberately chosen to ignore these histories, and many more come to mind, the reader would certainly profit from understanding why they are of no consequence. But this is scarcely the worst of the matter: Devji then makes bold to suggest that ‘Gandhi’s ideas and practices emerged instead from a past of conflict and violence’ (p. 11), and he suggests that the ‘Indian Mutiny of 1857 . . . provides the only historical precedent for several of the practices by which Gandhi’s politics was

known, including non-cooperation, encouraging native manufactures and the working out of new moral relationship between Hindus and Muslims’ (p. 11). The Rebellion of 1857-58 gave rise to Hindu-Muslim fraternal relations, much to the consternation of colonial authorities; Gandhi similarly championed Hindu-Muslim unity. Muslim soldiers in 1857 were keenly aware of Hindu concerns about ritual pollution without believing in them; and, in a similar vein, Hindus supported the cause of the Caliphate under Gandhi’s leadership (p. 29). But, apropos Gandhi, the argument borders on the bizarre. Devji has established absolutely nothing: he admits that ‘Gandhi’s own references to the Mutiny were invariably negative’ (p. 11), though, in truth, Gandhi scarcely mentioned the Rebellion. It is not accidental that though elsewhere in the book Devji routinely cites Gandhi, as he must, this chapter does not have a single reference to Gandhi’s writings or pronouncements. What Devji has to say of the Rebellion is interesting enough, but as an exercise in the genealogy of ideas that informed the worldview of Gandhi, the chapter is utterly unconvincing.

Devji’s book bears the subtitle, ‘Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence’, and it is to this that we may finally turn for the centerpiece of Devji’s argument. There is no gainsaying the fact that the question of violence is central to any assessment of Gandhi’s moral, spiritual, and intellectual outlook, even if the instinct of most people has naturally led them to *ahimsa* in thinking of Gandhi. There are some commonplace arguments that are now firmly established in the scholarship, among them Gandhi’s distinction between nonviolence of the strong and the nonviolence of the weak, his avowed preference for violence over cowardice (p. 134), and his frequently voiced claim, especially towards the last several years of his life, that he preferred that India be left to anarchy rather than continue to have the country subjected to British rule. The notion that the British were there to mediate between the Hindus and Muslims is one for which Gandhi rightfully had absolutely no respect. Gandhi entertained a suspicion of the ‘third party’ (p. 169), whether the colonial state, the national state, or any other body—an idea first seeded in *Hind Swaraj* (1909): the doctor, for example, comes between the patient and her own body. Here, however, Devji becomes too entranced by his own argument, and cleverness lords it over judiciousness and wisdom. Thus, we are assured, Gandhi had ‘a desire for civil war’ (p. 161), he was despondent over the refusal of

the Congress, the League, and the British ‘to heed his advice about the desirability of internecine warfare’ (p. 164), and that he remained ‘cheerful’ as the violence raged all around him (p. 168). Indeed, there may have always been the ‘temptation of violence’ for Gandhi, but we might just as well accept Oscar Wilde’s aphorism, ‘I can resist everything except temptation.’

Why, then, the ‘impossible’ Indian? Each reader will make her own interpretive moves, and some will no doubt gravitate towards the view, held among others by Ambedkar, that Gandhi was one ‘impossible’ person, cunning, disingenuous, and a master of manipulation. Others will surely embrace the view that stands at the other extreme, and is best typified by Einstein’s admission that it was nearly impossible to believe that someone such as Gandhi ‘ever in flesh and blood had walked upon this earth’. The Gandhians are likely to suggest that the Mahatma made no impossible demands upon others that he did not first impose upon himself. Yet what Devji has in mind in describing Gandhi as ‘the impossible Indian’ seems to be far removed from all of this, and may even extend well beyond the reading that he himself explicitly puts forth, namely that an impossible tension exists between Gandhi’s stern advocacy of nonviolence and his keen sense that the most genuine embrace of nonviolence resided in the confrontation with, rather than mere repudiation of, violence. In invoking Gandhi as ‘the impossible Indian’, Devji appears to be gesturing at the kind of possibilities suggested by Derrida in his essay, ‘Avowing the Impossible: “Returns”, Repentance, and Reconciliation.’ The impossible enhances the potential of what exists; or, put differently, the possible only revels in its full potential in the face of the impossible. There is no wise and ethical politics without the impossible. Whatever its other limitations, Devji’s *The Impossible Indian* suggests as much about Gandhi and in this respect has opened up new avenues of exploration into the rich politics and inner life of a person whose contribution to contemporary political and ethical life by any measure was *sui generis*.

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¹ Akeel Bilgrami, ‘Gandhi’s Religion and its Relation to his Politics’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi*, eds. Judith M. Brown & Anthony Parel (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 107.

Vinay Lal teaches history at University of California, Los Angeles and can be reached at vlal@history.ucla.edu