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## Conferencing the International at the World Pacifist Meeting in India, 1949

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### **Introduction**

On the first of December 1949 ninety-three pacifists, from thirty-one countries, met in the small town of Santiniketan, India, 160km north of Calcutta. After a week the delegates split into small groups, travelled around India along prepared itineraries, and visited sites associated with the life and work of Mohandas Gandhi. They reconvened two weeks later, over 1000km away, among the gently rolling hills of the Central Provinces at Gandhi's home village of Sevagram. It "was certainly an unusual gathering," wrote the organising committee chairman Horace Alexander (1949: 1), "I've attended a good many international conferences, Western variety. These usually consist of numbers of Europeans and Americans, with a small scattering of Westernized Indians, Chinese, Africans and others... international conferences are always influenced by their environment. If you meet in Washington or Paris or Geneva the world looks quite a different place from the picture you get in Santiniketan."

This essay considers how the practice of international conferencing was central to imagining, negotiating and contesting the broader construction of post-war internationalism. It shows how, like the conference, internationalism was also in Alexander's words 'always influenced by its environment'. It is a transformative and world-making pursuit who's universalist claims are invariably, "partial, multiple and fractured; they are never finished or fully formed, but rather can be generated or articulated in different ways." (Featherstone 2012: 38) An

examination of conferencing demonstrates that internationalism, and ‘the international’, was not a given category or scale, but a way of encasing different conceptions of the world which are tied to the places in which it was debated and sustained. It has therefore both a history and a geography which belies its otherwise transcendent claims, and requires greater interrogation by geographers. As Stephen Legg (2014) has questioned of India’s princely geographies, in what follows I also ask, quite simply, for the pacifists meeting in Santiniketan where was the international?

The task of placing internationalism prompts the two key contributions of this paper. Firstly, whilst many accounts of internationalism draw explicitly on the role of international conferences, few examine the practice of conferencing itself. This paper shows how the conference operated as a stage-managed event through which to negotiate, perform and project an alternative vision of internationalism. Half conference, half pilgrimage, total immersion in India was offered to delegates as an opportunity to absorb the Gandhian non-violent tradition. The paper uses the conference to (re)map the contours of the pacifist internationalist imagination. This was not supposedly embedded in the conventional sites of liberal internationalism (Washington, Paris or Geneva as Alexander put it), but linked to a reading of a so-called ‘exotic’ Eastern spiritualism. As such, far from inconsequential or trivial, the cultural and historical context of India was at the heart of the conference’s enactment of global pacifist citizenship. Like the Soviet Union to world Communism, or more accurately Jerusalem to world Christianity, pacifists imagined an uneven geographical arena which, whilst ostensibly universal in scope, held India (or ‘the Land of Gandhi’) with unequalled reverence.

Secondly, the paper argues that whilst geographers have turned to considering conferences as geopolitical events, this has almost exclusively been reserved to ‘summitry’, or state-

accredited spaces of ‘high diplomacy’, which is necessarily represented by Heads of State or formal diplomatic corps. This paper posits that an examination of the full-array of conferencing (of gatherings, assemblies, retreats and meetings) has tended to be neglected, along with the wider and rather different geographies that these entail. I contend that studying ‘other conferences’ by necessity opens up consideration of other forms of internationalism. Whilst not Versailles, the diffuse impacts and after-lives of these ‘other conferences’, often difficult to map, draw our attention to a struggling genealogy of counter-internationalisms. As historians and geographers alike show how conferencing is tied to elaborate displays of power and wealth (Shimazu, 2013; Craggs, 2014a), the World Pacifist Meeting was purposefully oppositional in every sense, reflecting instead an anti-statist internationalism staged in an austere pacifist minimalism.

The first part of the paper explores how conferences can be examined, metaphorically, as theatrical events understood “through a closer look at the particular stages, scripts, casts and audiences they produced.” (Death 2011a: 8) This is followed by an introduction to the case study of the 1949 World Pacifist Meeting. By examining the choice of conference delegates and location, the paper argues that the event’s staging was inexorably tied to its wider internationalist claims. Delegates imagined a post-war world in which warring nations would be displaced by international authority, world community and global citizenship; ostensibly a form of internationalism which did not foretell greater collaboration between borders, but dismantling them entirely. Yet internationalism sits within a context. The terms of the conference were paradoxically arranged as both ‘singularly free from any sense of geographical limitation’, and yet almost mythically ‘scattered over the earth of India’. The conference’s Indian (and specifically Gandhian) symbolism was not only figurative however, but shaped the delegates’ own politics of reconciling pacifism with state-craft; of violent

nationalisms and non-violent internationalisms. Ultimately the paper examines how the organisers' attempts to conceptualise a different kind of internationalism, exemplified by a different kind of international conference, had to confront the everyday challenges of organising and paying for a large, credible, international, political event.

### **Internationalism, Stage Managed**

In recent years, increasing academic attention has been given to both conferencing and internationalism. Work has shown how, from the start of the twentieth century, internationalism became a core objective across a wide range of political perspectives. These extended from building an international apparatus of leagues and institutions for cultural, intellectual and scientific collaboration (Laqua, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Iriye, 1997, 2002; Weindling, 1995; Neumann, 2012) to radical political programmes associated with anti-colonialism and the rights of oppressed groups (Lake and Reynolds, 2008; Makalani, 2011; Singh, 2004).

Whilst the durability and versatility of internationalism testifies to the transcendent power of what Denis Cosgrove (2001: 6) termed the “poetics of global space”, research on the conferences in which internationalism was a central concern has worked to ground them in rich cultural, historical and political contexts. In particular, academics have shown how international conferences operate as stage-managed events by drawing on a growing literature of how both conferences (Craggs, 2014a; Craggs and Mahony, 2014) and international systems more widely (Ringmar, 2012) are presented, scripted and performed, and the role that techniques of theatricality play in the conduct of global affairs. Carl Death has shown, for example, how analysing conferences as moments of political theatre is critical to understanding how international legitimacy is enacted (2011a), and how modern forms of governmentality are exercised (2011b). By re-centring spaces of hospitality and association

as key sites in the making of political geographies (Craggs, 2012, 2014b; also see Baker, 2013), work has examined the culturally varied spaces in which diplomacy happens and ‘the international’ is brought into being (Neumann, 2012; McConnell, Moreau & Dittmer, 2012). Specific attention, for example, has focussed on the way in which events are scripted and cities staged for performing certain kinds of internationalist claims whilst silencing others (see Burton, 2010 and Shimazu, 2013 on the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung).

Conferences are thereby rich analytical examples of what Paul Routledge (2003) terms ‘convergence space’, enmeshed in wider geographies of travel, mobility and circulation which sustain ‘the international’ as a political and social construction. They provide intermediate spaces for intellectual encounter and exchange between those whose political trajectories may otherwise be vastly dissimilar. Conferencing the international, therefore, refocuses our frame onto the “concrete sphere of the local milieu in which the performance takes place.” (Shimazu, 2012: 335) It encourages a reading of internationalism which is sensitive to moments of meeting and interchange which are fractured by power; at times making borders as much as transcending them.

Yet whilst methodologically the study of conferencing has been reassessed, there has not been a comparable empirical broadening of the range of conferences under consideration. An emphasis on conferences as political theatre, whilst valuable in situating events within wider circuits of privilege and resistance, also risks resigning internationalism to traditional diplomatic networks or nationalistic ‘high politics’. To date, the study of conferences has remained largely contained to those of the highest order, exemplified by the term ‘summitry’ (Constantinou, 1998; Reynolds, 2009). Recent attention has addressed how our modern globalised world is shaped by the likes of G20 meetings (Cooper, 2010), Climate Change Summits (Mintzer and Leonard, 1994; Giorgetti, 1999; Death 2011a) and World Economic

Forums (Graz, 2003), with places like Davos and Kyoto holding widespread register. Similarly, work on counter-globalisation movements has been equally informed by elite conferencing as a target of protest against the vision of (neo-)liberal internationalism which these events are seen to encapsulate (Bunnell, 2007; Death 2011b; Featherstone, 2008; see “summit hopping” in Wood, 2012: 84). This has tended to preclude analysis of how alternative conferencing spaces and practices have been forged, by whom and for what purposes (Mueller, 2001).

Consequently, much of the focus of twentieth century internationalism has been shaped by the discussions held in places like Washington, Paris or Geneva. These helped craft a form of, in Fred Halliday’s (1988) typology, ‘liberal internationalism’ – a vision of the world where national interests could be most effectively served by pooling resources across borders. They encouraged exchange, trade and a spirit of cooperation which not only failed to challenge the underlying legitimacy of national sovereignty, but as Glenda Sluga (2013) has shown, was born out of the same historical processes of race, modernity and progress which underpinned the rise of modern nationhood (Iriye, 2002; Davies, 2014). Accordingly work on the entangled histories of internationalism and the international conference, has placed emphasis on a worldview which was promulgated first and foremost by large intergovernmental organisations and international nongovernmental ones. This precludes the full gamut of conferencing forms and spaces, as well as the diverse range of internationalism as a political project in the twentieth century.

The case for expanding the study of conferencing beyond traditional spaces of ‘high summitry’ parallels a similar call being made of political geographers (specifically those interested in issues of conflict) to expand their remit to include conceptualising ‘peace’ (e.g. Megoran, 2011; Williams and McConnell, 2011). Yet work undertaken in this direction has,

as yet, almost wholly lacked a historical engagement with the history of pacifism or the peace movement itself (excluding Herb, 2005). Situating internationalism shares striking similarities with the task of situating peace(s): both are traditionally homogenous concepts which are scantily conceptualised but in practice, as Sara Koopman (2011: 194) notes, they mean very “different things at different scales, as well as to different groups, and at different times and places.” A conference of leading pacifists charged with the task of defining peace and sketching its practical application in the post-war world, provides just one example of how a broader empirical engagement with the varied practices and spaces of conferencing can also widen other areas of political-geographical enquiry.

The paper draws on a series of published and unpublished sources. The former includes the 181 page Reports of the World Pacifist Meeting, published in Calcutta and entitled *The Task of Peace Making* (1951). These official accounts are read alongside publicity in an eclectic selection of international newspapers and periodicals including *Peace News*, *Harijan*, *Aryan Path* and *the Nation* as well as a range of published memoirs and papers by delegates such as Reginald Reynolds (1951) and Rajendra Prasad (Choudhary, 1987). Moreover, the archival records of the World Pacifist Meeting collection at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, have been consulted along with those of leading pacifist organisations connected to the meeting, such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation Papers also at Swarthmore and the American Friends Service Committee archive in Philadelphia. Collectively these sources demonstrate how the conference was organised and financed, by whom and for what purposes. The juxtaposition of personal reflections, internal memorandum and official publicity reveals how the conference was staged with specific political and symbolic intentions and how these were, in turn, (re)presented to wider pacifist publics.



## “World Pacifists Meet in India”

In the first nine days of December 1949 pacifists met in the small college-town of Santiniketan, in West Bengal, India, before travelling around the country in small groups visiting centres of Gandhian work. They reconvened for the last week of December in Gandhi’s home village of Sevagram in the Central Provinces. The aim of the conference was to provide a space to debate the strategy and future direction of the world peace movement. It sought to explore the possibility of incorporating Gandhian ideas as the “first step in developing a genuine worldwide movement” and cooperation between pacifists in a global campaign (Newton 1948, February 5).

The idea of a world conference of pacifists in India went back several years. Conceived of in 1946 by British Quakers, it was initially thought to be an opportunity for peace workers from around the world to have “intimate conference” with Gandhi, which would allow them to “absorb something of his attitude of mind and his fundamental approach.” (*World pacifist meeting invitation* 1948; Alexander, 1946, August 16) Yet, the meeting was first postponed in the wake of political instability brought by Indian independence, and then again by Gandhi’s assassination in January 1948. The organising committee, based in Calcutta and headed by India’s president Dr Rajendra Prasad, believed the meeting to be of considerable worth even without Gandhi’s attendance and proceeded ahead with planning (Alexander 1948, February 19; Choudhary, 1987).

Many of those involved (especially in the West) were already familiar with international pacifist conferences hosted by some of the world’s largest pacifist groups, these included the Friends World Committee, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the War Resisters’ International. Each of these had an active conferencing programme, but they were predominantly institutional affairs (concerned as much with organisational questions as

intellectual or strategic discussion), they were almost exclusively attended by Western delegates, and took place wholly in the United States or Europe. Contemporaneous conferences, for example, included Swarthmore, PA (1937) and Oxford, UK (1942) by the World Conference of Friends; the International Fellowship of Reconciliation's council met in Stockholm (1946), Le Chambon (1948), and Woudschoten, Netherlands (1950); and the War Resisters' International conferences were in Copenhagen (1937), Shrewsbury, UK (1948), Braunschweig, Germany (1950) and Paris (1954). Accordingly, Friends' Committees in England and the United States keenly supported the decision to proceed ahead with a non-institutional Indian conference, firm in the belief that it had already advanced well-beyond its limited initial appeal of meeting Gandhi, into a unique opening to develop a world-wide pacifist movement with global representation (Newton 1948, February 2).

The ninety-three pacifists which attended the conference represented a broad geographical spectrum of thirty-one countries. Seventy-one delegates came from outside of India, sixteen came from the USA, nine from the UK and then (in order of representation) France, Japan, Malaya, East Pakistan, Switzerland, Burma, Denmark, Finland, Hong Kong, Iran, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Australia, Canada, Ceylon, Egypt, Germany, the Gold Coast, Holland, Iraq, Ireland, Lebanon, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway and the Philippines. Seventy-five delegates were men and eighteen women and their age ranged from their early twenties to mid-seventies. Most of the delegates had a good working knowledge of English which was used as the language of the Conference and all major religions were represented, including Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 7).

[Figure 1 here]

The eclectic mix of delegates featured many prominent figures. The United States delegation included A. J. Muste (who *Time* magazine had termed America's No. 1 pacifist in 1939), the famed nonviolent theorist Richard Gregg and Mordecai Johnson a renowned African American preacher. The British delegation included Rev. Michael Scott and Vera Brittain, the prominent Quakers Reginald Reynolds and Maude Brayshaw as well as the Labour MP Wilfred Wellock. More widely, attendees included some of Europe's most prominent pacifists like Henri Roser and Magda Trocmé of France, Heinz Kraschutzki for Germany, Rene Bovard for Switzerland, Diderich Lund of Norway and the former Defence Minister of Finland, Yrjo Kallinen. From South Africa came the noted politician D. D. T. Jabavu along with Manilal Gandhi, Mohandas Gandhi's second son, and from Asia the female psychologist and member of the upper house of the Japanese Legislature, Tomiko Kora, the Buddhist monk Rev. Riri Nakayama and the first president of Tunghai University in Taiwan, Beauson Tseng.

In some respects the meeting was rather conventional in terms of both the history of conferencing and of the mid-twentieth century. Delegates attended sessions and adopted resolutions which, in turn, had been formulated by a range of commissions tasked with addressing key contemporary global challenges: World citizenship and government; nationalism; the relations between pacifists and communists; disarmament; India and Pakistan; Palestine; South Africa and colonialism; and American-Soviet relations. Yet, the inaugural session held in Santiniketan's *Amra-Kunja* (or mango-grove) alludes to a more peculiar variety of international conference. In the absence of the Indian president Rajendra Prasad, who missed the start of the session from illness, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the eminent Gandhian freedom fighter and female health minister, beside the governor of West Bengal

welcomed the garlanded delegates with a simple ceremony, which included the chanting of a Vedic hymn, ceremonial *mantras* and Rabindranath Tagore's famous song of invocation to the Buddha (see *The task of peace making*, 1951: 10). Virtually all the delegates were accommodated in a large camp with a rough track through its centre "along which peasants and labourers, sometimes with bullock carts, passed on their way, bringing with them the rural life of India." (ibid: 7-8) Most of the delegates slept on beds of bamboo and rope made by the villagers, they washed communally with a tank of water and a tin cup and ate in a large tent with a cloth roof and no sides (Newton, 1949, December 7).

From opening to close, the World Pacifist Meeting was carefully staged to embody and project the shape of pacifist post-war internationalism. If conferences in Washington, Paris or Geneva were characterised by elaborate displays of power and wealth, these were emblematic of a wider faith in an international machinery of laws and organisations to preserve peace. Instead the delegates in Santiniketan, who travelled modestly and were accommodated simply, were cautious of state-run institutions in favour of fostering a more organic sense of world community and global citizenship. This internationalist vision was woven into the conference's staging of an austere and rooted pacifist minimalism which was diametrically opposed to the perceived decadence of spaces of state-led diplomacy. Gandhi provided the inspiration for fusing the political with the spiritual. From the iconic attire of white home-spun cloth (or *khadi*) to the spiritual hermitage of the self-sufficient village collective, Gandhism was built on a life of self-enforced paucity and counter modernity. Simplicity and spirituality were foundational to this spectacle and at the heart of the World Pacifist Meeting's re-enactment.

This staging however, and the internationalism it sought to represent, was inherently paradoxical. The concourse of delegates from around the world was supposedly a microcosm

of a transcendent pacifist internationalism rooted in the shared ‘oneness’ of mankind, and which was free from geographical constraints. Yet, the rich cultural and historical specificity of India was key to the conference’s functioning as a symbolic exercise, and intimately tied it to the longer role played by the ‘Land of Gandhi’ in the pacifist geographical imagination.

### **‘Singularly Free of Geographical Limitation’**

In his welcoming address, Alexander argued that the meeting challenged Western ‘international’ conferences which were dominated by the “Anglo-Saxon point of view” (Alexander, 1949: 1). The meeting’s inclusivity, a space for the ‘global community’ to meet in equality, was essential to how its importance was scripted and presented. Though delegates were invited in an individual capacity, the conference papers proudly recount a space where “Finland talked politics with Burma, New Zealand discussed conscription with France, and Malaya shared experiences with Mexico.” (*The task of peace making*, 8) The chair of the British Peace Pledge Union and delegate, Vera Brittain (1950: 12) reported that finding “delegates from totally different countries, cultures, and backgrounds speaking the same spiritual language... [gave] the supporting sense of a ‘cloud of witness’ which no one present will ever forget.”

It was this ‘supporting sense’ that the conference was “truly international,” that they “were not there as representatives of their nations but a common humanity” which purportedly forged a common, global pacifist identity (Brittain, 1950: 12). The conference could not therefore be judged, we are told, on resolutions alone, but the profound impact of the “amazing concourse of active pacifists from the most distant parts of the world, from which every one of us drew a vast store of information and a great deal of inspiration.” (Reynolds, n.d. [ca. 1950])

The breadth of delegates' nationalities and backgrounds reflected the way in which they had been carefully selected to ensure, in Alexander's words, that "the spirit of the conference was a universal spirit" (*The task of peace making*, 1951: xviii). Efforts were made to keep attendance low and delegates were selected to maximise representation from 'ordinary occupations', including "anthropologists, artists, an astronomer, authors, business men, farmers, housewives, ministers of religion, publishers, social workers, teachers and university professors" (ibid.: 7). Substantial financial support was also offered, largely contributed by the Gandhi Memorial Fund.

The choice of delegates was made collaboratively between an Indian committee and Quaker committees in the UK and the USA. Whilst special invitations were sketched up for the likes of Albert Einstein, Gerald Heard and Albert Schweitzer, most invitations were issued through pre-existing international pacifist networks. They were sent in bulk to Friends Committees in London and Philadelphia who distributed them among prominent peace groups to select their own candidates. Invitations to Asian delegates were sent directly from the conference committee in Calcutta (Choudhary, 1987: 107-108).

These invitations identified that candidates should be pacifists with some form of religious conviction. Even when the principally secular *War Resisters' International* was invited, for example, it was emphasised that they should not select someone "to whom the spiritual realm is a closed book." (Newton 1949, June 2) As such, a substantial portion of the programme was devoted to meditation and spiritual reflection, with collective worship undertaken every morning and evening. Indeed, though universally understood as a conference, even the title 'meeting' emphasised informality and sociality, and had specific Quaker associations with the longer tradition of 'meetings' and the 'meeting house' (Newton, 1948, February 2; *World pacifists meet in India*, 1949).

Accordingly, the pacifist press keenly reported that the conference was an exemplary model of worldwide inclusivity. *The Aryan Path*, an Anglo-Indian theosophical journal published out of Bombay, argued that the delegates demonstrated “what it is to be loyal, first and foremost, to all mankind, seeing in all men, whatever the color of their skin... members of one brotherhood.” (*The way of peace for mankind*, 1949) Similarly *Peace News*, the pre-eminent publication of the British peace movement, noted the proclivity of many to label events as ‘world conferences’ when there “was one Chinese, one Indian and one Negro present... This time the world really was represented. Here [at the World Pacifist Meeting] all races met in equality and fraternity.” The delegates were said to understand therefore the far-reaching significance of a global community; they felt the full “force of the new creative idea that was bringing in the new age – the idea that mankind was all one family.” (*Back from India*, 1951: 11) As the leading Gandhian G. Ramachandran stated, “the World Pacifist Meeting was more truly a ‘United Nations’ than the gathering at Lake Success.” (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 9)

The desire to forge a global conference reflected the intention of organisers to avoid forms of internationalism (exemplified by the United Nations) which, as Amiya Chakravarty told the conference, were resigned to fierce nationalistic diplomacy represented by the most “wily and tough customers from foreign offices.” (*Santiniketan session of the World Pacifist Meeting*, 1949: 7) He wrote that: “In international conferences the people had little voice, least of all in colonies where they were ‘represented’... Even many educated people had blind spots, which made them think of the world in terms of predominant power groups, excluding or dismissing in a single phrase millions of voiceless human beings.” (*World Pacifist Meeting*, 1950: 4) In contrast, the World Pacifist Meeting supposedly created a space where, as A. J. Muste (n.d. [1950, January 28]) wrote back to Fellowship of Reconciliation members in the United

States, you could “find half a dozen Muslims from Egypt, Irak [sic], Iran, and Lebanon... Siam, Malaya, West Africa, Burma, Ceylon are all represented.”

Muste’s assortment of countries reflects how pacifists from the West saw the meeting as opening the borders of international conferencing (and the international peace movement), to include those previously excluded in colonial and newly post-colonial countries. Yet, the logistical and financial demands of organising a significant international event, along with ensuring its credibility and profile, meant that it was often confined within similar parameters to the sorts of conferences which its advocates openly admonished. Despite delegates being purportedly invited from ‘ordinary’ professions and under-represented countries, it was to a considerable extent an elite exercise, dominated by a global, pacifist, travelling class who were largely privy to already pre-existing international networks. How everyday people experienced the conference taking place in their own village, region or country is scantily recalled in papers, archive documents and news reports alike. We know for example that the waiters and cleaners in Santiniketan were local college students and that a public meeting held in Calcutta by some twenty of the delegates, attracted a crowd of over 3000 local people, but we know little else (Carnell 2010, 222; *The task of peace making*, 8, 37). As one reviewer in *The Nation* passionately recorded, the delegates’ “high-sounding talks on sublime Utopian ideals” are useless in changing the “stony callous hearts of the capitalist-imperialist war-mongers.” What was required was a practical programme for millions of workers and peasants rather than “mere idealistic talks to well-to-do cultured people.” (Ghosh, 1949: 32). Similarly, an article the following day read: if pacifists were serious about their concerns they should start small, locally and immediately by proposing concrete solutions to the Kashmir problem rather than vague gestures of world fellowship (Sanyal, 1949).



Despite their best intentions, anti-elitist claims were a convenient fiction for the delegates of a conference with an eight person organising committee which included the first three President's of India, the Indian health minister and the son of a Nobel Laureate. In a characteristically uninhibited closing speech to the conference, the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru warned, "If you think by sitting in Sevagram you have seen India, you are wrong. You have seen selected people, excellent people, who have done good work. But there are ten thousand other groups who... represent ten thousand other ways." (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 159).

The invitations, issued through committees in Calcutta, London and Philadelphia, led to an over-representation of American and British delegates. The emphasis placed on the global range of attendees belied obvious, and patently significant, geographical blind-spots. Extraordinarily, for example, despite having not a single delegate from the Soviet Union (or its Satellite states), South America or West Pakistan the conference was still, according to Horace Alexander (1949: 1), "singularly free from any sense of geographical limitation." Such statements were unequivocal farce, but nonetheless they reveal how the pureness of the conference's internationalist vision was not seen to be something outside, beyond or after the conference, but enmeshed within its composition. The geography and backgrounds of the delegates was critical to the perceived legitimacy of its alternative and all-inclusive internationalist aspirations, even if it often relied on more traditional forms of political credibility. Yet, as I now go on to argue, the conference's symbolic strength was firmly rooted in the more spatially discrete cultural and historical geographies of India.

### **'Scattered Over the Earth of India'**

The famed novelist and Nobel laureate, Pearl Buck (1948), wrote a eulogy for Mohandas Gandhi in the American pacifist periodical *The Fellowship* in which she told readers that Gandhi's "ashes are scattered in the waters and over the earth of India." For world pacifists meeting in Santiniketan and Sevagram, its history and geography were indivisible from its association with the 'Land of Gandhi'. Yet whilst the place of conferencing is ostensibly important (the location alone becoming synonymous with many meetings: e.g. Bandung, Bretton Woods, Davos), Shimazu (2012) has argued that work has still had relatively little interest to-date in conferencing sites in their own right. As I show here, placing conferencing, by necessity, brings into question the wider political, cultural and imaginative geographies in which conferences happen.

The perception of pacifism and nonviolence as something materially rooted in India's land and soil meant that for delegates the conference was "a place of pilgrimage" (*World pacifists meet in India*, 1949: 10). This was tied to a longer Western and orientalist reading of the Gandhian movement as a relic of an 'exotic', and geographically specific, Eastern spiritualism. *Peace News* (*Peacemakers meet at Gandhi's home*, 1950: 12) noted that the conference's success was an outcome of the "strong undercurrent of belief which had resided in the Indian people from time immemorial," and the delegates would be able to observe and absorb some of the spirit of that "ancient background of belief." Such readings were characteristic of the Westernisation or 'Americanisation' of Gandhi (Chatfield, 1976; also see Gordon, 2002), which came to depict him as a pan-humanist couched in Christian religious iconography and often depicted as a saintly, or Jesus-like, figure. This was exacerbated by the dramatic nature of Gandhi's death. Members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation were told that "he has been killed and removed from the path, as Jesus long ago was killed and removed" (Muste, n.d. [1948]), Fellowship member Milton Mayer (1948) told audiences on

CBS that “he was the first Christian politician since Jesus,” and Pearl Buck famously referred to it as “another crucifixion.” (cited in Chadha, 1997: 467)

Half conference, half pilgrimage, the opportunity to confer with Gandhi’s followers on “their native soil” held an intoxicating appeal for funders and organisers (Newton, 1948, August 30). As the Indian President Rajendra Prasad (1948, July 19) told listeners on All-India radio: “It is very fitting that India should be the venue of this World Pacifist Meeting; for, is not India the country where the message of Truth and Ahimsa first dawned and where in some form or other this tradition has been carried on through the centuries... We believe that India, with her many seeming shortcomings, has still a message for mankind”.

The six-week conference was designed, therefore, to be a complete sensual immersion in Gandhi’s India. Considerable time was ring-fenced for travel around the country in small groups visiting centres of Gandhian work (*Proposed pacifist conference in India*, 1946). When the delegates reconvened in Sevagram, between them, they had covered most of the country. Whilst one group had headed north and seen the “peaks of Tibet from Darjeeling” another had ventured south to Cape Comorin. One group had traversed from Calcutta, through Banaras, Lucknow, Allahabad and Agra to Delhi, and others had gone West to Bombay and East to Orissa (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 43). Reginald Reynolds (n.d. [ca. 1950]) noted that “All this travelling was an important part of the whole plan. It was not mere sight-seeing.” India was a rich plain of cultural and historical symbolism to world pacifists, and nowhere was this clearer than in conference’s two meeting centres of Santiniketan and Sevegram.

Santiniketan was a small village and the seat of Rabindranath Tagore’s experimental Visva-Bharati University, which was then a college of around 200 students and a school of 300. The college’s founding in 1921 was entwined with Tagore’s wider internationalist politics, which

was characterised by the belief that, as he wrote in the *New York Times* in 1916, “The self-interest of nations is the same. A new readjustment of things is necessary, a new age, when the idea of nationalism will be discarded.” (cited in Kundu, 2010: 81) Yet, he was equally critical of the liberal internationalism advanced by the League of Nations. He wrote in the British newspaper *The Times* that “Organisation is not brotherhood.” (ibid.: 82) Santiniketan was woven into this internationalist politics, envisaged as a space where the best minds from around the world would exchange ideas and develop new forms of global citizenship.

Santiniketan was also an unorthodox place of teaching and learning: Tagore, like Gandhi, was critical of Western forms of education which had been introduced by the British in India. He believed in the complete emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development of students; a holistic approach which the conference shared. Santiniketan, therefore, was an emblematic site for a conference which self-consciously sort to reject the trappings of liberal internationalism, and the ‘Western-style’ international conference which propounded them. It was deeply rooted in Indian cultural and intellectual history but yet also simultaneously seen to supersede it and have broader universal value. Tagore, like the conference organisers, sought to "make Santiniketan the connecting thread between India and the world [and] a world center for the study of humanity somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography." (cited in Dutta and Robinson, 1995: 204)

The choice to host the second part of the conference in Sevagram, the place of Mohandas Gandhi’s *ashram* (Sevagram itself meaning ‘village of service’), and his residence from 1936 until his death in 1948, had been agreed from its earliest conception. This reflected an almost mystical belief, that immersion in Gandhi’s home-village would allow delegates to absorb his legacy as something which was tied to the land and its people; something which could be felt, touched, sensed and embodied. Alexander wrote of Sevagram that it was Gandhi’s:

proper environment. As you know, Gandhi's pacifism is much more than an intellectual formulation... To begin to understand it, you must meet him in his own surroundings, among his friends and disciples. In fact, you must be prepared to expost [sic] yourself to the full blast of the Gandhian gales, or the full heat of the Gandhian sunshine. (Alexander, 1946, August 16)

Accordingly, Sevagram was imagined as both a conferencing space and a pilgrimage site. Although Gandhi had died by the time the conference finally met in Sevagram, his presence and spirit pervaded its modest geographies. Vera Brittain (1950) described a place frozen in time where delegates started the day with silent spinning in the prayer ground, on either side of which stood thatched and tiled huts of bamboo and mud where Gandhi had lived. They remained almost "exactly as it was in his lifetime... Inside was the couch on which he lay, the books that he read still lined the shelves, the table which still holds the small brass vessel in which the Mahatma burnt his incense." Likewise, the conference bulletin noted that the "picture of Gandhiji which was placed beneath the tamarind tree in the middle of the gathering seemed to emphasize the fact that the spirit of the Mahatma still presided over the village and the visitors from so many lands." (*Santiniketan session of the World Pacifist Meeting*, 1949)

Santiniketan and Sevagram both occupied a particular place in India's historical and cultural geographies. The first was an unorthodox space of internationalism and the latter was directly connected to Gandhi. Both sites, accordingly, had powerful symbolic and imaginative associations which conference organisers purposefully encouraged. If the internationalist imagination of Santiniketan inspired delegates to think of pacifism, the conference and its resolutions in global terms, then the role of Sevagram was somewhat more modest. Here, it was claimed, delegates learned how Gandhi regarded peace first and foremost as a pursuit of non-violent daily living, which was the foundation block to world citizenship. Amiya Chakravarty reflected, for example, that it was arriving in Sevagram which focussed his mind

“not only of the multiple threads that contributed to Gandhiji’s pacifism, but on the character of a Satyagrahi, a truth-worker, which gave unity to his life.” (Chakravarty, 1950: 12) Sites like these broaden our understanding of the spaces of conferencing and, so too, can they broaden our understanding of the historical and political geographies of internationalism. In the final part of this paper I show how the place of the World Pacifist Meeting informed and performed the distinctive form of internationalism which was articulated there.

### **Between Violent Nationalisms and Nonviolent Internationalisms**

Among the huts of Santiniketan and Sevagram, the World Pacifist Meeting’s delegates debated the prospects of a radically altered post-war world; not the geographical expansion or circumvention of national sovereignty, but dismantling it entirely. This internationalist focus was reflected in at least four of the meeting’s six key discussion themes:

Pacifism and imperialism, new and old

Race and color problems and their solution

Pacifist approach to world government

Planning for a world union of pacifists (*World Pacifist Meeting – aims and objectives*, n.d.)

Delegates were told how Gandhi believed it “better to perish than to lose one’s humanity, and this humanity was threatened by the Nation-state.” (*Santiniketan session of the World Pacifist Meeting*, 1949: 7) The task before the delegates was to conceptualise a political space nestled between, what Santiniketan’s founder Rabindranath Tagore (1918: 6) called, the “colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism” and the “fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship.”

The delegates shared this common belief that a disarmed world would be accompanied by global forms of affiliation and community. The conference passed statements calling for pacifists to develop a deeper understanding of world citizenship based on peace and

nonviolence which could supersede loyalties to nationalism. The received statement made clear that pacifists “will always be loyal to the whole human family.” (*Statement on World Citizenship* 1950, January 11)

These sentiments reflected a wider critique of violence which was inescapably a critique of the nation-state itself; that one who affirms the state by necessity affirms the use of force. For many attendees, pacifism was as much a geographical enterprise as an ethical or theological one. They were morally tasked with developing a counter-internationalist vision which would cure what A. J. Muste (n.d. [ca. 1948]), delegate and head of the American Fellowship of Reconciliation, had termed the “disease of nationalism.” Or, as Nevin Sayre (n.d. [1951]) another delegate noted, nationhood is “antiquated in the ‘one world’ of the atomic age. Realistic pacifism sees the people of all nations as inextricably linked in the one body of humanity.”

At the conference, Horace Alexander asked: “How can we claim to be indeed serving non-violence if we allow seeds of nationalism to remain in our hearts?” (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 123) Arguing that “Reverence for the person is a fundamental tenet of pacifism” (ibid.: 72), the conference resolved to retrace a path back to a “lost human heritage.” (ibid.: 122) If nation-states and their governments were a chief cause of violence, the emphasis was placed on presenting the delegates as everyday people: in a radio address from Gandhi’s hut in Sevagram, Rajendra Prasad made clear that the delegates “do not claim to represent their States or Governments... [they] are ordinary men and women following different avocations in life but anxious for peace... Their appeal is to the common men and women of the world” (ibid.: 117).

The rich tapestry of the conference’s political and historical geographies therefore shaped the delegates’ internationalist claims; Santiniketan/Sevagram imbued them with universal truths

which transcended their restricted geography. Yet the conference's Gandhian symbolism had an obvious inconsistency rooted in the gap between Gandhi as a world (non-violent) figure and an Indian (nationalist) one. In confronting this, delegates sought to conceptualise a geographically transcendent pacifism, and yet also think of internationalism in politically relevant terms. Consideration of the interplay between nationalism and internationalism, violence and nonviolence, at the conference was complex and contradictory. Whilst the delegates agreed that the pursuit of post-national internationalism was an overarching goal, Vera Brittain believed that cultural nationalism (opposed to aggressive economic nationalism) had real value and that regionalism could combat the idea of the political nation-state (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 27) Similarly, the Iraqi delegate Zaki Saleh argued, if nationalism could not be eradicated then pacifists needed to direct it towards issues of culture, and the African American delegate Mordecai Johnson believed that Gandhi had shown how nationalism could be shot through with a deep, shared, global ethical conviction (ibid.: 23). As Gandhi's son Manilal told the conference, unless "we were truly national, we could not be international." (ibid.: 27)

Besides vague resolutions, however, delegates were keen to discuss internationalism in terms conversant with contemporary political affairs; discussion needed to be "concrete, rather than abstract, in its approach to the world problem." (Alexander 1947, February 10) There was a belief among organisers that although Gandhi's philosophy and followers had lost influence, "the young state will still be deliberating on policies of whether or not to enter the power politics race." (*India meeting of World Pacifist Meeting delegates*, 1949: 6) Writing to Nehru, A. J. Muste argued that the fact "that Gandhiji lived, taught, and worked in India places a great responsibility upon the government and people of India." (Muste 1950, April 10) Yet, current Gandhians had no programme, he argued, "which aims at the elimination or



transformation of the war-making national power-state,” and are reluctant to stand “against their own government and capitalist class”. His anxieties concerning militarisation and Kashmir reflected the wider fears of delegates that “the future of the entire cause of non-violence, the world pacifist movement, hinges largely on the resolution of this situation in India.” (Muste 1950: 2).

The conference helped craft a relationship between a newly independent India and the emerging Cold War world. Ideas of global pacifism gave the strategy of non-alignment a different hue, which was less rooted in ideological blocs than Gandhian ideals of transcendence through simplicity, individual daily practice and collective village life. Nehru addressed the closing session of the conference stating, whilst no true pacifist “can at the same time be connected with modern government, so long as it retains the character of a Government or remains a modern State such as this,” India remained untied to doctrinal international relations and that a different approach to internationalism flowed from Gandhi’s leadership over the past twenty or so years (*The task of peace making*, 1951: 155).

The delegates political aspirations exemplified how the conference sought relevance within wider geopolitical and nationalist contexts. In this sense, the meeting was comparable to the Asian Relations conference in 1947 (see Stolte 2014). Both were largely unofficial, cultural event-style meetings which, nonetheless, sought to address self-evidently political questions of defence, security and economics. Yet the Asian Relations conference saw the international or, more specifically, Asian unity through a broadly state-centric lens which was rooted in a common colonial legacy. It emphasised the hope of inter-national collaboration across new state borders, even if many of the delegates came from countries which were not yet independent (Keenleyside, 1982). Nowhere was this more evident than the geography of the conference itself; presided over in the national political centre of New Delhi and hosted by

Nehru, head of the then provisional government, invitations were sent to fellow Asian Heads of State and leading political figures.

Yet, Gandhi's speech to the closing session of the conference was particularly revealing: "you are not meeting in conference in the midst of real India. Delhi, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta, Lahore – all these are big cities and are, therefore, influenced by the West," he said, "If you really want to see India at its best, you have to find it in the villages and the humble *bhangi* [Indian caste previously treated as untouchable] home." (Gandhi, 1947: 116) For the organisers of the World Pacifist Meeting, unlike the Asian Relations conference, village life was the key to an authentically Eastern conferencing experience, exemplified in the humble geographies of Santiniketan and Sevagram. Here the value delegates placed on principles of world community through simplicity and counter-modernity (which were compromised by Western industrialism and materialism) could be symbolically typified. One characteristic article in the South African journal *Indian Opinion* for example, painted a rich scene where the delegates sat, sung, ate and drank with large numbers from the surrounding villages, totally embedded in the rural culture and traditions (*World Pacifist Meeting*, 1950).

The staging of the World Pacifist Meeting, therefore, reflected a romantic and counter-intuitive belief: an all-inclusive alternative internationalism could be excavated in the most localised forms of indigenusness. In this paradoxical pursuit the delegates most closely reflected the conference's Gandhian associations. Indeed, that Gandhi is remembered as both the great 'prophet of nonviolence' and the pre-eminent anti-colonial nationalist is so widely recognised as to obscure its incongruity. As Aldous Huxley's (2005 [1948]: 6) narrator in *Ape and Essence* commented:

'Gandhi was a reactionary who believed only in people. Squalid little individuals governing themselves, village by village... It was intolerable. No wonder we bumped him off.' But even as I

spoke, I was thinking that that wasn't the whole story. The whole story included an inconsistency, almost a betrayal. This man who believed only in people had got himself involved in the subhuman mass-madness of nationalism, in the would-be superhuman, but actually diabolic, institutions of the nation-state. He got himself involved in these things, imagining that he could mitigate the madness and convert what was satanic in the state to something like humanity.

This contradiction has been variously identified as that between Gandhi's nonviolence and his nationalism (Steger, 2000), between this-worldly and other-worldly (Weber, 1994), or between his Noble Folly and *Realpolitik* (Chatterjee, 1986). In essence it is the same struggle that the delegates met in Santiniketan/Sevagram of how to situate the global in the local, of crafting a provincial international. The times when Gandhi's techniques proved closest to political gains were often at the expense of his nonviolent ideology (Weber 1994). Gandhi's services in the British military exemplify this difficult compromise, what Paul Power (1960: 35) called the "flexible adjustment of his idealism to the demands of his nationalism," or Reinhold Niebuhr (1932: 243) as, "a pardonable confusion in the soul of a man who is trying to harmonize the insights of a saint with the necessities of statecraft."

Gandhi's nationalism held a belief (to which Huxley's narrator alludes) that India could forge a new kind of "composite nationalism." (Hardiman 2004: 23; also see Brock 1983) It would blend Western conceptions of (inter)nationalism (cf. Chatterjee, 1986) with an 'ancient' Indian tradition of *ahimsa*, tolerance and spirituality, and ultimately decentralized self-governance would supersede the state. If the great challenge for Gandhi was to construct a political weaponry and nationalist discourse which would not limit the purity and universalism of nonviolence (see Steger 2000), then similarly for the delegates it was how one could meaningfully shape (inter-)national political culture in a way which maintained the moral and religious conviction of their collective pacifist beliefs.

Meeting in ‘the East’, and especially the ‘Land of Gandhi’, was intertwined with the need to steer a path between the political world and One World which Gandhi himself had struggled to plot. Bringing together a cast of delegates from (ostensibly) around the world to conference in Santiniketan/Sevagram, represented a symbolic manoeuvre to overcome these challenges, and project a form of internationalism in which the primacy of the nation vis-à-vis the individual was overturned. Quoting Rabindranath Tagore (1949), the conference’s opening address gave a rich description of the obscure West Bengali village: “Let us have at least one little spot in India which will break down false geographical barriers, a place where the whole world will find its home... For us there will be only one country and that will comprise the whole world. We shall know of only one nation and that will comprise the whole human race.”

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how the political and historical geographies of internationalism were imagined, negotiated and contested through the practice of conferencing. Whilst in one sense rejecting nationhood in favour of developing a global pacifist consciousness, delegates to the World Pacifist Meeting nonetheless relied on a situated reading of Gandhi’s India, and the ways in which internationalism and pacifism were almost mystically woven into its land and ancient culture. The paper has shown how the international has a geography that can be followed, mapped and reconstructed through the conferencing archive. Moreover, broadening that archive to include a range of ‘other’ conferences nuances our understanding of internationalism as a political project. The staging of the World Pacifist Meeting is emblematic of the wider assortment of internationalist practices which are often obscured in analyses of large intergovernmental summits.

The importance of the World Pacifist Meeting can be understood in two ways: firstly, how important the conference was itself as an event, its resolutions and its after-lives (i.e. its impact), and secondly the value of the conference as a case study to the wider conceptual claims of this paper (i.e. the relationship between internationalism and conferencing). In the case of the former, the conference played an important role in the history of the peace movement. Even if its most promising potential outcome of a manifesto for an international ‘Peace Army’ of world citizens (or ‘*Satyagraha* units’) fizzled out within a year. It was a formative stage in the development of range of unarmed, interpositionary, peacekeeping experiments including the World Peace Brigade, the Cyprus Resettlement Project, and Peace Brigades International (*Satyagraha units*, n.d. [1950]; Weber, 1996). Equally, as the first large non-Western pacifist conference it was a key moment in the internationalisation of the peace movement in the post-war years where prominent leaders developed personal relationships – like that between A. J. Muste, Rev. Michael Scott and Jayaprakash Narayan who would later take up the co-chairmanship of the World Peace Brigade from the USA, the UK and India respectively.

Whilst, without doubt, much of the content was speculative with limited apparent application to the political world – the nature of the gathering itself is also of principal relevance. A key aim of this paper has been to show how internationalism, and the international, is not something extraneous to the international conference, but materially manifest through it. In short, conferencing the international is an end in and of itself. As Naoko Shimazu (2012: 335) has suggested, conferencing connects “seemingly disparate cities of the world into a common global space.” Virtually all attendees, for example, arrived by ship which from the United States would conventionally take between four or five weeks. This, alongside the prohibitively high cost of travel, made it reasonable for delegates to extend trips far beyond

the time and place of the conference alone. As the American Friends Service Committee argued, “if pacifists are going half-way around the world they might just as well go all the way around and take time to really get acquainted with other pacifists.” (Newton, 1947, March 11) In his memoir Reginald Reynolds reflected that these long ship passages were important meeting sites: “Among the fourteen delegates there is a great sense of exhilaration – a sense that the work of our [World Pacifist] Conference has begun here and now.” (Reynolds, 1951: 103) In these transitory spaces, the idea of the international and a wider global community seemed neither remote nor foreign. Whilst to a non-pacifist therefore the meeting’s success is difficult to gauge, as the War Resisters’ League delegate reported, no pacifist conference had been more successful, more influential or had more bearing on the course of the movement. Despite ideological differences, he noted, for the first time pacifism exists as a wholly global entity (Roodenko, 1950). “I wonder,” G. Ramachandran questioned, “if there has ever been a gathering of this kind in India so truly international in spirit.” (*The task of peace keeping*, 1951: 30)

Secondly, the conference is a valuable case study for political and historical geographers because it points to a complex genealogy of counter-internationalisms which require greater critical interrogation. The World Pacifist Meeting raises broader questions of, firstly, the limited range of conferences on which we choose to focus and, secondly, which forms of internationalism are made visible (and invisible) through these. As Carl Death (2011a) has argued, irrelevant of their often diffuse material impacts, conferences are nonetheless key performative spaces in which to enact and fashion legitimacy within the global political sphere. They are symbolically important in reinforcing or challenging the conduct of global governance and modern forms of governmentality (see Death 2011b). I argue that in bringing together leading pacifists from around the world, what the organisers of the World Pacifist

Meeting hoped to achieve was, less a tangible change in the world balance of power, than a basic challenge to the primacy of “state-centric constellations of global power relations” (Death 2011a: 10). As the Indian President Rajendra Prasad argued, “The meeting did not consider it necessary to lay down any clear-cut programme of work... It is true that those who were assembled there were not men and women who had any determinant or even important voice in the governance of their own countries, but they were just men and women who can influence the ordinary people, and after all it is not governments but the masses... who ultimately decide.” (*The task of peace making*, 1951: xii-xii)

This raises pertinent questions for geographers who have only recently started to engage with the concept of peace as a politically contested process (for the most recent example see McConnell, Megoran & Williams, 2014). For the delegates meeting in 1949, peace was not something above or beyond politics but enmeshed with the total transformation of social, political and economic systems (cf. Williams, 2013). The pursuit of a supposedly abstract form of pacifist internationalism was, from the outset, profoundly spatially constituted and politically contested.

In short, the World Pacifist Meeting can be read as a stage-managed event – framed, performed and scripted to project a particular vision of internationalism. The paper has shown how broadening our engagement with a wider range of conferences by necessity opens up consideration of alternative historical geographies of internationalism. A fuller consideration of the varied manifestations of conferencing can help us better understand its remarkable continued appeal in a digital world, where communication at a distance is virtually instantaneous. The recent and pivotal role of the likes of the G8 or G20, “Earth Summits”, Climate Change Conferences or World Economic Forums testify to the persistent attraction and unfinished potential of conferencing the international.

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## FIGURES



MEMBERS OF THE WORLD PACIFIST MEETING

Sevagram, December 1949

Figure 1 – Delegates of the World Pacifist Meeting, Sevagram, India, December 1949.  
Source: *The task of peace making*, 1951