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Renunciation, dissent, and *satyagraha*

Romila Thapar

- 1 I shall be dealing with a subject that was of general interest in the past but although the interest may have declined, the theme is of crucial importance to the present. I am referring to the right of the citizen to dissent as part of the right to free speech. The right to dissent has come to be recognised in modern times, but its practice goes back many centuries. To deny its earlier existence comes from the preference to project Indian society as having been a seamless harmonious unity where dissent was hardly to be found. Its presence is conceded for philosophical discourse as there would not be any philosophy without dissenting opinions. I would like to argue that it was a much wider articulation more prevalent in the past than in the immediate present.
- 2 Varied forms of dissent and protest have always existed. Violent forms featured in warfare and in punishments are only too evident. Non-violent forms require conscious recognition. That may be one reason why we have failed to recognise that the forms adopted by Gandhi had some links with the past. As with all civilisation and multiple cultures, we have had our share of intolerance and violence. That may be one of many explanations for our continuous need to debate *ahimsa*/non-violence, frequently treated as dissent.

I. The question

- 3 Let me briefly clarify what I mean by dissent. It is in essence the disagreement that a person or persons may have with either others or more publicly with the way the institutions of society are organised and function. Kautilya and Manu constructed their version of ideal institutions and these were challenged by a range of opinions. Institutions are not modern but what is, is the right to question them. This right is not confined to the elite as it was in the past but extends today to all citizens. In earlier times it was embedded, argued over but did not become an issue of rights since such rights were not universal.

- 4 We now recognise a relationship between citizen and state partly because of the historical change we have experienced through nationalism. Coinciding with the emergence of industrialisation and capitalism, and through the evolving of the middle-class controlling the new technology, we have now entered the modern era.
- 5 This phase therefore also marks an alteration of governance where monarchical systems are generally replaced by secular democracies. These involve representatives from all sections of society who now have equal status. The maintenance of the secular, the democratic, and the national are inter-dependent. For democracy, the right to dissent and the demand for social justice are core concepts. The freedom to express dissent fosters democratic citizenship, registers complaints against injustice and improves social conditions. Since it includes all citizens, its inclusiveness demands that it be secular.
- 6 Citizens assert their freedom through claiming their rights and accepting their duties. The state will only be respected if it honours these rights and its obligations towards all citizens as recorded in the constitution. Many countries today do not grasp the implications of this historical change. To convert nationalism into a method of control fails to recognise that it is linked to democracy and therefore resists this control. In India, the overwhelming form of nationalism was anti-colonial nationalism, common to most colonies. This implied the assertion of the new identity of the free citizen emerging from the challenging of orthodoxies of various kinds. The construction of this identity seeks legitimacy from the patterns of life in the past. So history becomes crucial. As was common to most colonies, the colonial reading of the colony's earlier history that formulated its identity was from the perspective of the coloniser. This in India was the two-nation theory. James Mill argued in 1818 that the history of India was that of two nations –the Hindu and the Muslim– and that the two had been permanently hostile to each other. Colonial scholarship founded itself on this idea, loyally followed by both religious nationalisms –Hindu and Muslim. The concept of the Islamic state and of the Hindu Rashtra, the latter based on the Hindutva version of history, are each rooted in the colonial perspective. Each excludes the other and each opposed anti-colonial nationalism.

II. Anti-colonial nationalism

- 7 Anti-colonial nationalism projected a nation of Indian citizens, all of equal status irrespective of origins and identities, all coming together in the demand for independence. The nation too was to be a nation for all with no primary or exclusive citizens as in the two so-called religious nationalisms. This term that we all use so frequently, is something of an oxymoron. Nationalism strictly speaking cannot be defined by a single identity. It is all-inclusive and secular in its demand for a nation-state. It is quite distinct from majoritarianism in which a pre-determined majority identified by a single criterion, negates democracy and justice. The rule of that particular majority is asserted. The important factor of dissent on issues affecting the nation is not permitted. But dissent has a historical continuity even if its forms have changed and has to be acknowledged.
- 8 I now propose to turn to anti-colonial nationalism as a major expression of dissent and suggest that some of its forms seem to have a few echoes from the past. In our times,

the most striking example of dissent is of course the *satyagraha* of Gandhi and from the historical past I shall be looking at the ideas of the *Shramanas* and later the *Bhakti sants*.

- 9 I would like to begin on a personal note by speaking about how it all began for me. There was one occasion a lifetime ago, when I very briefly met Gandhi and exchanged half a sentence on a simple matter. In a curious way, it came to symbolise for me the need to go beyond the obvious, to go to what for me is the context of thought and action.
- 10 I was in school in Pune in the early 1940s. Gandhi, when not in jail would hold prayer meetings that we as budding nationalists made a point to attend. One evening I took my autograph album to the meeting and with much trepidation requested Gandhi to sign in it. (There were no mobile phones in those days or else I might have asked for a selfie). He signed in the book and when handing it back to me asked me why I was wearing a silk *salvar-kameez*, adding that I should only wear *khadi*. I readily agreed and assured him that I would do so. But what did *khadi* mean other than its being a kind of textile, and in some way symbolic of Gandhi's ideas? This question remained unanswered until many years later when, searching for the context, I began to comprehend the meaning of *satyagraha* –and not just the concept but how it became relevant to anti-colonial nationalism, and even more important for me, as to how and why it did resonate with the many who participated in the national movement. Without this resonance, it would have remained just a slogan. The events of the 1940s had their own message. The Quit India call resounded in every corner and was the subject of much debate. The mutiny of the naval ratings of the Royal Indian Navy was about to happen. Independence was imminent and the form of the future was enveloped in discussion. One obvious question was related to the kind of society we aspired to –how would a colony be transformed into a secular democracy? Another significant question was the assertion of our identity as Indians –no longer subjects of the colonial power but free citizens. There was talk that as free citizens we would now have a new relationship with the state –a state of our making. The constitution was in a sense the covenant between the citizen and the state. It documented the rights and obligations of each towards the other. Hovering over all these questions were those concerning the methods that we had used to attain independence and whether they would continue. We kept hearing that what marked our movement as distinctive was the concept of *satyagraha*.
- 11 Over the years, I have asked myself why this concept became such a bed-rock specifically in Indian anti-colonial nationalism. As was to be expected, it failed to find a place in the two religious nationalisms –the Hindu and the Muslim. These religious nationalisms converted the two religions into political agencies –the Muslim League supporting an Islamic state and the *Hindutva* version of Hinduism becoming the base for a Hindu *Rashtra*. In this, the chickens of the colonial interpretation of Indian history and culture have come home to roost.

III. Religion

- 12 To try and understand the context, let me go back a little in time and briefly trace the flow of some ideas that I would regard as foundational to Indian civilisation. These had a noticeable presence in Indian society for two millennia. This might suggest some

worthwhile connections with more recent ideas. It stems in part from the way in which we in modern times have projected the role of religion in India.

- 13 In the last two centuries, Indian religions have been reconstructed largely along the lines suggested by colonial scholarship. This was seldom challenged and therefore came to be accepted. The focus has been on belief, ritual and religious texts with little space being given to analysing the social concerns of these religions. What form does it take and how might this have differed from the cultural articulation of other major religions: the discussion of Indian religions demands this space.
- 14 When a religious teaching acquires a following, it establishes institutions that are initially places of worship –*chaityas*, *viharas*, *mandirs*, *mathas*, *masjids*, *madrassas*, *gurdwaras*, churches. Gradually as its control over society increases, the institutions that it establishes take up social functions and these become agencies of its propagation. Educational institutions are probably the most obvious. At this point, ideological support or opposition becomes a matter of asserting domination. This can be met by acceptance from some and dissent and disagreement from others. The latter can take the form of protest. We do not know enough about the reaction of sections of society to religious ideas, and especially if the ideas become influential.
- 15 Religions in India have generally not been monolithic, and especially not so in their practice. Religion is articulated more often in the form of a range of juxtaposed sects, some marginally linked with others and some distant. In pre-modern times, the religion of a person was identified more often by sect or caste and less frequently by an over-arching label.
- 16 The 19th century reading of Indian religion bonded together a large number of sects and included them under a few labels. Thus Hinduism included Buddhists, Jinas, Charvakas, Sikhs and others, some of which were born out of opposition to Hindu belief and worship. The middle-class interest in religion was confined to its own social boundaries, virtually unconcerned with the religions of what we call Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. Interest in the religion of these *avarnas*, those outside castes, was casual and of little importance. Hinduism emerged as the religion of the largest number, of the majority, in the sub-continent. Minority religions had smaller numbers. Included under the label of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, etc. was a range of beliefs and rituals, not all of which were uniformly observed within the same label.
- 17 Religion was not understood in terms of sects and their inter-connections but as conglomerations of sects, treated as monolithic religions. The search was for uniformities. Nor was it recognised that religions everywhere have their adherents but also those who question the belief and practice. In some religions, a serious contradiction in belief and practice has been resolved by a change in its code and creed. However, a characteristic difference in Indian religions is that opposed or divergent opinions are not violently suppressed in each case. Buddhism when it could not be suppressed was exiled. Dissenting opinions to this day can evolve into marginal sects that can find an almost unnoticed place in the spectrum of religious sects. One of the consequences of this is that the contrary opinion is neither assimilated nor rejected but remains an articulation of dissent.
- 18 Sects shape the nature of Indian religions. Each incorporates a range of sects, some of which are proximate to the orthodoxy and some are far removed from it. Belief can be accommodative, going beyond those forms of religion where identity demands a strict

adherence to code and creed. I am not suggesting that such an identity is absent, but rather that it has not been the dominant form of religion for the larger number of people. This may now be changing. Hence the easy mixing of religious observances until recently, when all religious festivals were open to everyone, barring of course the Dalits. This militates against a unified, monolithic religious structure. Why this happened in India may have many explanations but the most obvious could have resulted from the interface of religion with caste and with region. Such a structure of religion assumes the shading off from orthodoxy at the core and dissenting sects at the periphery. Some degree of dissent is characteristic of Indian religion.

IV. Dissent

- 19 Dissent took various forms. It is described in the early pattern of philosophical argument. Dissenting opinions are necessary if theories are to be tested and advanced. The presence of the dissenter was acknowledged, and in more sophisticated discussions, it has a definitive place in the argument. Indian philosophy recommends a procedure. The argument has first to state as fully and correctly as possible the views of the opponent –the *purvapaksha*. Then follow the views of the proponent –the *pratipaksha*. After this comes the debate and a possible resolution or *siddhanta*. This would have been the pattern in the many debates between the Buddhists and the *Brahmanas* referred to in texts.
- 20 Since early times historical references to *dharma* in India mention two parallel and distinctively different *dharmas*, that of the *Brahmanas* and that of the *Shramanas*. Scholars have given the collective name of Shramanism to the many heterodox sects such as the Buddhists, *Jainas*, *Ajivikas*, and some include the *Charvakas*. These were the dissident sects that were in disagreement with the fundamentals of Vedic Brahmanism and later Hinduism. They denied the Vedic deities, the divine revelation of the texts, and the ritual of sacrifice. Brahman texts refer to the *Shramanas* as the *nastikas*, the non-believers.
- 21 The Shramana *dharmas* focused on social ethics. This was expressed in their absolute commitment to *ahimsa*/non-violence, to compassion, and to working towards the social good. Social ethics were not absent in Brahmanism but became increasingly ambivalent with the control of caste laws. As the *Gita* states, violence is legitimate for the *kshatriya* since he is the ruler and can use it to protect society.
- 22 For the first few centuries up to the Christian era, Buddhist and Jaina sects had a well-respected social presence and received royal and elite patronage. This however changed when in the post-Gupta period Brahmanism came to dominate the political scene. By medieval times, Buddhism had been exiled from India and became a powerful religion in Asia. Jainism was limited to western India and parts of the peninsula. In colonial times almost all non-Muslim sects were labeled as Hindu, even those that were not.
- 23 The dissenting ideas of the *Shramanas* were expressed in part by their opting out of society. They created or joined Shramana sects, and lived in monasteries setting up a lifestyle that was alternate to established society. As monks, they conformed to various identities according to their sect. The monasteries as institutions flourished on handsome royal donations, on grants from merchant donors and support from lay

followers. These lay followers were those for whom renunciation may have been unattainable but nevertheless was the ultimate ideal.

V. Renunciation

- 24 Renunciation should not be confused with asceticism. The true *sannyasi* undergoes his funeral rituals declaring himself dead to family and social connections and goes away to live in solitude seeking wisdom through meditation and searching for a release from rebirth. It is a moot point whether Gandhi can properly be called an ascetic. To suggest that he was influenced by the philosophy of the renunciators would seem to be more accurate, and that is what I would like to argue.
- 25 Let me try and explain what I mean by the renunciators. There were two streams of religious ideas and forms on the Indian landscape in the period from the 4th century BC, a period of major debates. The two are repeatedly referred to as *Brahmana* and *Shramana* in various sources, and said to be distinctly different in thought and activity. The Greek visitor to Mauryan India at that time, Megasthenes, in his observations of India refers to two groups –the *Brachmanes* and the *Sarmanes*. The edicts of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka have many references to *bahmanam-samanam*, a compound term for the sects. The grammarian of Sanskrit, Patanjali, when referring to *dharma* mentions only the two, the *Brahmanas* and the *Shramanas*, and compares their relationship to that between the snake and the mongoose.
- 26 The early *Puranas* demonstrate this antagonism in their hostile remarks on the *Shramanas*. In the 11th century AD, Al-Biruni speaks at length about the Brahmana religion and also mentions those that oppose it as the *Sammaniyas*. Then came a series of sects –the Bhakti *sants* of a range of Vaishnava and Shaiva persuasions, the Sufis, the Sikhs, among many others of diverse opinions, whose views on the interface of religion and society were not supportive of orthodoxy. They did however eventually evolve their own orthodoxies.
- 27 Few founded renunciatory orders but their dissent was directed to what they found confining both in religious belief and its interface with social norms. The dissent of the renunciators, although it took a different form, was in diverse ways continued by the Bhakti *sants*, especially in their concern about social ethics. The views of Kabir, Dadu and Ravidas underlined the need for social justice. We tend to set this aside in the single-minded focus on religious worship. Historically therefore, it is evident that there was a duality in religious beliefs in pre-modern India, with some sects clearly dissenting from established views.
- 28 As part of the religious experience, renunciation became a parallel stream to the orthodox, ritual-based patterns of religious expression –until a time when it developed its own. Religious institutions mushroomed through the patronage of the elite, as is evident from the *agraharas*, *mathas* and rich temples of the late first millennium AD. But where religion had a more accessible form, often through the teaching of a variety of renunciators and Bhakti teachers, it was these sects that were closer to the larger population. This becomes apparent from folk literature and the mythology of local deities. The familiar figures are still present among us as *sadhus*, *yogis*, *faqirs* and more. Renunciation of various kinds seems to represent something of a continuing counter-culture from earlier times.

- 29 Since renunciation questioned the *dharma-shastra* rules central to Brahmanism, it was open to all. The alternate society did not arise out of a violent social revolution but envisaged the social change that it advocated as coming from a process of osmosis. It was essentially a way of stating and legitimising dissent by persuading people to its ways of thinking, with an emphasis on social ethics and freedom in religious belief. This was out of choice and not from the enforcing of a variant code. The act of opting out of society and taking on the hardship of renunciation in order to search for release from rebirth, and to ensure the social good, imbued renouncers with a degree of moral authority in the eyes of people at large. Social equality and justice were demands that dissented from established religion. Dissent is not a necessary component of renunciation, but in the act of renouncing it is present either more or less.

VI. Non-violent protest

- 30 Foremost in the ethical code of such sects was abjuring violence of any kind. The concept of *ahimsa* as physical violence is variously discussed and continues to be discussed. Is non-violence tied to bodily needs that might discourage violence? What was consumed as food therefore was important to some, for whom the diet had to be vegetarian. Fasting was a form of bodily purification and control. This could sometimes be taken to the point of its programming the moment of death, as in the Jaina notion of *sallekhana* –the graduated fast that ends with death. But undertaking a fast even to death for personal reasons was not the same as a fast in support of social protest.
- 31 The articulation of protest took diverse forms in different societies. Unlike China, where peasant revolts of a violent kind were known, in India, peasant protest in earlier times resorted to migrating away from the kingdom to a neighbouring kingdom where land and facilities were available. We are told that rulers of the original kingdom feared such migrations resulting in a loss of revenue. This was effective in rural areas where migration meant cultivating new lands.
- 32 Urban protests took different forms, one that was included in the repertoire of Gandhi. It was known by various names, one among which was *dharna*. Its success lay in its being undertaken by a particular body of people –the *charan*, *bhat*, or *bharot*. These were bards, regarded as repositories of knowledge crucial to legitimising the power of the ruler. This is another instance of people investing authority not in an officially designated person but someone viewed as respected and integral to society. Today with social change, they no longer perform their earlier functions, but recognising their role gives a glimpse of how societies functioned not so long ago.
- 33 These bards had some functions that were essential to power. They maintained the descent lists –the genealogies– of the rulers and occasionally of the important functionaries, through which they became the keepers of the history of the dynasty. They legitimised the dynasty through a claim to genealogical history. The bard had to insist that the descent lists were accurate else he would lose face, as also would the ruler. The status of those in authority was asserted by the *charan* through alluding to the believed historical evidence of clan and caste. The *charans* had a low social status, but since early times were inviolate, and were called upon to arbitrate in disputes.
- 34 Authority is of various kinds. In some situations, moral authority takes precedence over the political. It goes with the belief that a particular kind of person being what he

is and does, has moral authority. The *charan* would take up the protest of the subjects of a *raja*, once he was convinced of its legitimacy. To support the protest, he would position himself at the threshold of the royal residence, refusing to go away, and go on a hunger strike until there was a resolution of the conflict or alternatively the nearness of his death by voluntary starvation. It was effective only if the person fasting commanded moral authority and was respected by both rulers and subjects. His power was intangible, but based on this respect. His protest was legitimate if it focused on a demand for justice. If the *charan* lost his life owing to the fast, the ruler was doomed. That the fast carried a severe threat was feared. To use the fast both as an expression of dissent and as a moral threat was not unknown in earlier forms of registering protest. The fast subsumed the protest and diverted it from becoming violent.

- 35 Can one see here parallels to the use of the fast by Gandhi? The British Raj may not have admitted it publicly but each of his fasts was a matter of anxiety to their political control, he being the leading nationalist. The title of *mahatma* in turn recognised his moral authority with the people. The fast was a protest against injustice but also carried a grave threat should it have taken its toll. This was understood by all.

VII. *Satyagraha*

- 36 But let me turn to that which is of greater interest. Dissent to various degrees was at the core of the renunciatory tradition. Can we then ask whether Gandhi's *satyagraha* drew from this tradition, either consciously or subconsciously? And more central to my argument is that this feature may have encouraged the massive public response to *satyagraha*. Is this a link between the essence of Shramana renunciation and the central focus of Gandhi's *satyagraha*?
- 37 This concept drew from the ideas of the authors he read and wrote about and these have been much discussed: Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Ruskin in particular. There has been an interest in his conversations with Raichandbhai, with whom he discussed the Jaina religion, as he would also have done with his mother who was a Jaina, not to mention many others in Gujarat. My concern is with trying to understand what it was that struck a public chord in this seemingly unusual form of protest.
- 38 I would like to suggest that apart from his obvious sources, he also drew instinctively from the presence of dissenters that have shaped Indian thought and action almost invisibly but most creatively, and throughout history. Much has been said about his reading of the *Gita* and his ascetic ways. Perhaps the influence from the alternative cultural patterns of the past may have had a deeper although less apparent imprint than we have realised. The *Gita* after all was countering other points of view. Did the form of and justification for *satyagraha* delve deeper into the past tradition of expressing dissent?
- 39 The parallels are noticeable. To be an effective *satyagrahi* a period of training was preferred, although there were exceptions. There is mention of some taking vows and consenting to observe certain rules. Once accepted, the discipline of living in the *ashrama* was reasonably strict. *Satyagraha* was not a monastic order, nevertheless it had its own rules, relationships and identity. Gandhi himself was demanding and firm even about rules relating to routine living.

- 40 To assert a greater moral force, it was preferable that the *satyagrahi* be celibate, although this was not insisted upon. Protest included the non-violent *swadeshi* movement –the boycott of foreign goods, especially cloth. This was a part of the civil disobedience movement that had much broader concerns. Objections to mill-made cloth and the wearing of *khadi*, was not intended as a Luddite movement, but as registering another form of dissent and explaining why it was necessary.
- 41 Some symbols of renunciation also surface. Underlying *satyagraha* is the force of moral authority –soul force, as it came to be known, of the person calling for civil disobedience– in a sense echoing what also gave authority to renouncers of various kinds, and in diverse ways. That Gandhi was named a *mahatma*, an honour that interestingly he did not reject, can be viewed as, in part, his recognition of his moral authority. Equally important, a crucial requirement of *satyagraha* was to refrain completely from using brute force or violence. Non-violence faced two kinds of opposition: the colonial power that continued its violence against nationalist protestors; and those Indians in authority who were not convinced of its effectiveness in directing protest.
- 42 The commitment to non-violence and truth drew in the idea of tolerance. All religions were to be equally respected. This came from *satyagraha* not having a singular religious identity, although one religion was perhaps more equal than others. However, there was a moral right to break the law if it caused wide-spread suffering. But who had the right to judge? Was Gandhi assuming the right strengthened by being called a *mahatma*? The dilemma becomes more acute if one accepts what I call contingent *ahimsa* of the *Gita*, that where evil prevails it can be fought with violence. Yet the *satyagrahi* tried to persuade the other to his view in non-violent ways and through a system where the means and the ends are not contradictory. Persuasion is a reminder of the original semi-dialectical philosophical argument as is the non-violent resolution of conflict.
- 43 A more complicated issue was present not only in the practice of *satyagraha* but also in the functioning of different groups. This was the question of the equality of all castes including the outcastes. Did the equal status of all castes as frequently maintained among dissenting sects apply to both the *varna* and *avarna* members of society or only to the former? How was the hierarchy to be countered in practice? Gandhi tried but to little effect. The actions of one's previous life *karma* determine one's birth in this life, as many sects maintained. But if these activities are prescribed in the *dharma-shastra* codes, then the codes would have to be discarded if the hierarchy is to be annulled.
- 44 The Shramana sects claimed that the monasteries did not observe caste. On a wider social scale, it was some of the Bhakti *sants* who opposed caste as is evident in the teachings of Ravidas. Gandhi tried to obviate the distinction by maintaining that the demeaning jobs of the *avarnas* should be done by the *varnas* as well. But this was not effective in challenging caste that by now had many other ramifications needing attention. Unlike the renouncer, the *satyagrahi* was not required to set aside his caste identity.
- 45 That *satyagraha* had an appeal is evident from the large numbers that responded when the call was given for civil disobedience. We have to ask what went into the making of this form of defiance. Could there have been an echo of the persistence of dissent that still surfaced when injustice was experienced? It galvanised national sentiment, but it also diverted this sentiment away from violent revolution, when it came to channelling

it into protest. This was true to type as such movements even in the past steered away from violent revolution. In the colonial situation, *satyagraha* forced both the protestors and the authority against whom they were protesting – be it over salt, or cloth, or the freedom of a people – to give the protest visibility. It underlined a claim to status by the colonised by fore-fronting moral authority against colonial power. This was outside the experience of the coloniser.

VIII. Gandhi and the *Bhagvad-Gita*

- 46 Curiously Gandhi, in his readings, lists little that goes back to the texts of the *Shramanas*. His formal interest in such sources seems marginal, especially compared to his intensive study of the *Bhagvad-Gita*. However, that *satyagraha* could envelop dissent rather than violent protest suggests that these ideas did have a presence, and could continue. Given the complexities of thought, society and politics, in the first half of the 20th century in India, to suggest that a major player on the scene may have held on to the truth of some forms of dissent from the Indian past, and used them almost instinctively to recreate a new form of dissent, may not be pure speculation.
- 47 It would seem that Gandhi's endorsement of the *Gita* was a seeming contradiction of the insistence on non-violence in *satyagraha*. The translation he chose to read frequently – apart from the Gujarati – was curiously the English translation by Edwin Arnold, *The Song Celestial*, published in 1885. Its potential as being the single sacred book of Hinduism, the equivalent of the Bible and the Quran was being discussed. If treated as such, it would have to be viewed as the location of the teachings of many sects.
- 48 The *Gita* and the additions to it are thought to date to around the turn of the Christian era. It surfaced in a big way in the 19th century and rode the European Orientalist wave that was searching for the wisdom of the East. The Theosophists adopted it as their central text and gave it wide diffusion. Inevitably many Indians wrote on it as a representative text. Many saw it as an allegory, and this excluded questions of historicity. W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and Christopher Isherwood, all flirted with its ideas. It could be argued that it was attractive to Gandhi because it emphasised *nishkama-karma*/non-attachment, a necessary component of *satyagraha*. Its appropriation by many nationalists was possible because it could be used to endorse even violent political action as the duty of those fighting for rightful demands and justice. If colonial rule was evil, then violence against it was justified. This justification could be drawn from such action in past centuries, except of course that it would seem to cast something of a shadow on the validity of *satyagraha*.
- 49 What is perhaps curious is that the focus in relation to the question of violence and political action should have been so centred on interpreting the *Gita*. It seems to me that there is a far more challenging text in the twelfth book of the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata* that focuses precisely on this subject and with less ambiguity. Subsequent to the battle at Kurushetra, Yudhisthira was expected to take up the kingship, but he refused initially to do so, rejecting this demand and in protest preferring to go to the forest. His objection to ruling was because kingship involves many levels of violence and he was averse to these.
- 50 He asked how any war can be called *dharmic* when it is the duty of the *kshatriya* to kill others where need be? War is evil because it kills so many and this killing cannot be justified. His grandfather Bhishma still lying on a bed of arrows from the battle,

justified killing in a war and by the ruler defending the realm. This is a fine example of dissent explored through debate. Yudhisthira eventually agreed and I like to think he did so with a very heavy heart.

- 51 The *Gita's* position is one of contingent *ahimsa*, that is, that violence is resorted to when conditions demand it. This was opposed by the *Shraman* for whom *ahimsa* was absolute. Yudhisthira has a moral and ethical objection to violence. The debate reflected the discussions on violence at this time as suggested by the sources I have quoted, and was probably enhanced by the views of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka in support of *ahimsa*. This has been argued by a number of scholars of the *Mahabharata*. Was the centrality of *ahimsa* in this conversation a concession to Shramanic thought?
- 52 Buddhism had been exiled from India some centuries prior to the 20th. But other Shramana sects such as those of the Jainas were preaching *ahimsa*. Unlike Nehru, Gandhi had a perfunctory interest in Buddhism. Nor was he particularly interested in a sequential study of the past. History, it would seem, was not a subject of great intellectual interest for Gandhi.
- 53 That there were violent protests and intolerant actions as part of our past is undeniable. That there were also legitimate traditions of non-violent dissent has to be conceded. The forms of the latter changed in conformity with a changing society and we have to recognise the forms and how they were used and when. Gandhi created new forms of dissent. Yudhisthira's implications of political violence argued that when religious ideas and implications become agencies of political mobilisation, their fundamental purpose changes and the political and social determine thoughts and actions. The right to dissent has continued. In fact, it has been highlighted precisely by the coming of the nation-state in our history. It remains open to the citizen immersed in the ideology of secular democratic nationalism to articulate the new relationship of citizen to state, by reiterating the rights of the citizen, by asserting the right to dissent.

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