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Peace in His Time

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Peace in his time

A history of India under British rule highlights the significance of Mahatma Gandhi’s radical new politics, which transformed the struggle against empire, Ananya Vajpeyi writes

Mohandas Gandhi remains one of the great enigmas of the 20th century. Was he a politician or a saint, a leader or an ascetic? He mobilised millions but never held political office; his style of non-violent politics flourished in an era of violence dominated by men like Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and Mao. His popular title – “Mahatma” or “Great Soul”, given currency by India’s national poet, Rabindranath Tagore – suggests a capacity to rise above the ethical compromises necessitated by power, while preserving the aspiration to create a perfect moral commonwealth.

Indians consider him the father of their nation, even as he set in motion a wave of freedom throughout the colonised world and among oppressed people everywhere, including segregation-era America. If not for Gandhi, the concept of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, first articulated in the Jaina and Buddhist texts of India 2,500 years ago, would have no place in the repertoire of modernity’s murderous politics.

Gandhi’s *ahimsa*, literally “absence of the desire to harm”, was about a difficult, complex and deeply personal effort to achieve freedom from fear, and cultivate a stance towards others not premised on the mutual capacity for harm. To be non-violent is to change the basis of the social contract, from harm held in check and traded for interests to a shared vulnerability that allows fearlessness for all. In a world whose parameters were described by Machiavelli, Hobbes and Carl Schmitt, where politics is war by other means, it is nearly impossible to find a concep-

tual or practical space for *ahimsa*.

Gandhi, who was born in 1869, lived through the might of the British Raj, the World Wars, Europe’s totalitarian catastrophe, and the first atomic bombs dropped in Asia; he understood perfectly the disconnect between his non-violence and the brute force driving human affairs all around him. That’s why he advocated *ahimsa* first and foremost as a practice of the self, an individual journey that would change the world only by changing every person in it, self by self.

Consider the escalating violence between the Indian state and the Maoist rebels known as Naxalites in parts of central India rich in forest and mineral resources, inhabited mostly by tribal populations. Shouting to be heard above the crossfire between the government and the insurgents, the writer and activist Arundhati Roy has questioned whether Gandhian non-violence can still be a viable mode of resistance against the military might of an overwhelmingly powerful state or its trigger-happy enemies. Outraged Indian commentators have reacted by accusing Roy of defending the way of the gun for the Naxalites and the tribal communities they come from; the Indian government, meanwhile, has issued oblique threats to “intellectuals” who support the Maoists. Roy, for her part, insists that Gandhian protest requires an audience, which people don’t have in the jungle, and that “you can’t ask the hungry to go on a hunger strike”.

Roy sounds persuasive, at least about the inefficacy of Gandhian

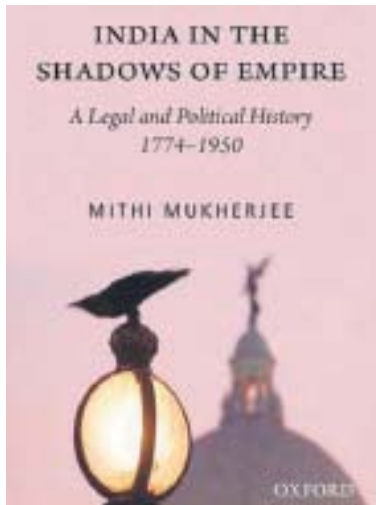
tactics if not about the efficacy of Naxalite armed struggle. But if Gandhi’s non-violence is to be challenged, history has repeatedly taken Roy’s side: Gandhi himself was assassinated (in 1948), as was Martin Luther King, who was inspired by him. India’s independence in 1947 came at the cost of Partition, mass violence affecting an estimated 20 million people across the subcontinent. Gandhian-style leaders like Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama must battle terrible odds, and non-violence seems as precarious in its Indian home as it does abroad.

This judgement of failure, of course, arises from the expectation that non-violence ought to deliver an outcome, that it can in principle be used as a weapon of the weak to defeat unjust and violent regimes. To expect such results and be disappointed at their lack, to my mind, reflects a profound misunderstanding of Gandhian thought. The question should not be “Who will prevail?” – the Indian state, the Naxalites or the mining companies. The achievement of a truly non-violent solution would be to help all these actors find freedom from mutual harm and consider their options for peaceful coexistence. In an India that has long forgotten its founding father, no one remembers this language – not even the talented Ms Roy.

Mithi Mukherjee’s *India in the Shadows of Empire* takes the long-awaited step, in Indian historiography, of exploring how Gandhi married the Western idea of political freedom, liberty, with the Indic idea of renunciatory freedom

this week’s essential reading

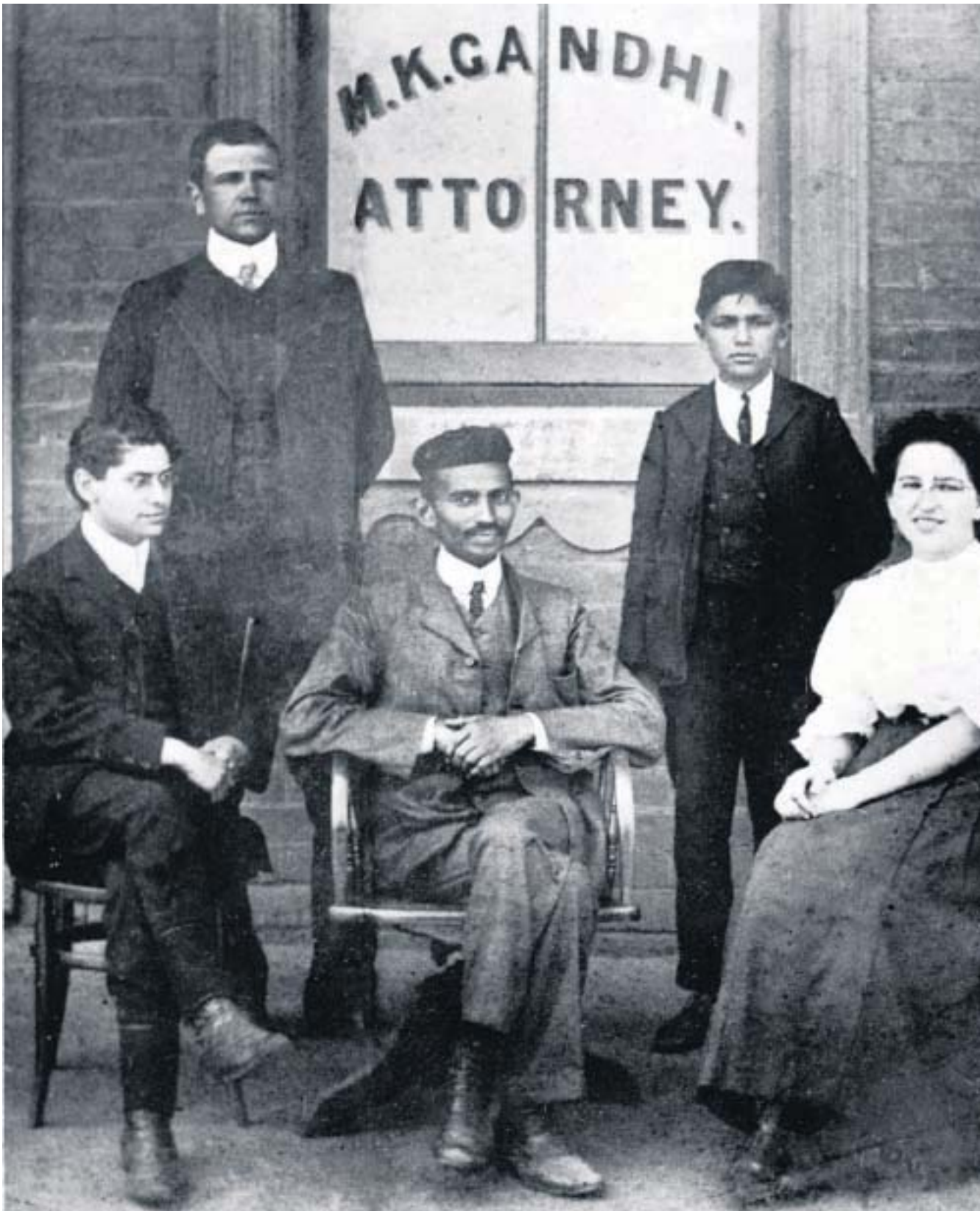
{ ‘Affluent Afghans Make Their Homes in Opulent Poppy Palaces’ by Karen Brulliard, Washington Post



India in the Shadows of Empire: A Legal and Political History 1774-1950 Mithi Mukherjee Oxford University Press Dh145

(*moksha*), thereby coining a new type of political action to which the Empire had no counter. Prominent historians in have traced Gandhi’s debts to British liberalism, American transcendentalism and Russian anarchism, and to world religions like Christianity and Islam. But until now there has been very little by way of what Mukherjee calls the “genealogy of democracy” in India, to explain how Gandhi introduced or invented Indic categories like non-violence (*ahimsa*), truth (*satya*), soul force (*satyagraha*) and self-rule (*swaraj*) for a new and effective lexicon of anti-colonial resistance.

Important Indian belief systems like Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism share a sort of liberation theology, the idea that man’s ultimate quest ought to be for freedom from the ego, from identity and its constraints, from worldly desires, from suffering and ultimately from mortality as such. These Indic understandings of freedom, expressed through terms like *moksha* and



Gandhi, centre, at his Johannesburg law office in in 1902. AP Photo

nirvana, had a long history but evidently no political traction – until Gandhi. The Mahatma, Mukherjee argues, transformed India’s search for equity within the British Empire into a search for freedom from colonial rule, by creatively fusing the metaphysical and political meanings of freedom. Indians identified with Gandhi’s interpretation of freedom, in part because he referred not just to imported concepts but to ideas familiar from India’s own spiritual traditions.

An eye-opening dispatch from Kabul’s Sherpur neighbourhood, where former warlords and corrupt officials live in grandiose mansions known locally as ‘narco-itecture’

square the ideal of imperial justice with the reality of a rapacious colonial state.

The critical break from this moribund pattern came around 1920, when Gandhi urged the Congress to abandon its attachment to legal negotiation with the British, and exhorted his colleagues to stop practicing the law. The protagonist of nationalism was no longer to be the lawyer (*vakil*), but the renunciant (*samnyasin*), a transformation exemplified by and embodied in Gandhi. India, lost for a century and a half in what Mukherjee calls “the labyrinth of imperial justice”, was at last launched into its final lap towards democratic self-rule.

Ironically, once independence was achieved and Gandhi was dead, India adopted, in 1950, a Constitution that Mukherjee calls “imperialist”, owing to its emphasis on equity as the embodiment of justice and its drafting under the leadership of lawyers like BR Ambedkar. The window of Gandhian self-rule (*swaraj*), thrown open by the imaginative grafting of liberty and *moksha* – transcendental freedom – closed once again, and it has yet to be reopened in post-colonial India. Perhaps those vainly expecting justice from the Indian state today, whether through violence, like the Naxalites, or through passivity, like the tribals, ought to consider afresh the lesson in Gandhi’s historic breakthrough, and look for the possibility of a different politics in the *ahimsa* he advocated. After all, the pursuit of liberty as liberation is an old story in India, and Gandhi is but the latest in a long line of great souls who have reminded us that there is, in non-violence, freedom from fear.

Ananya Vajpeyi’s first book, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*, is forthcoming from Harvard University Press.

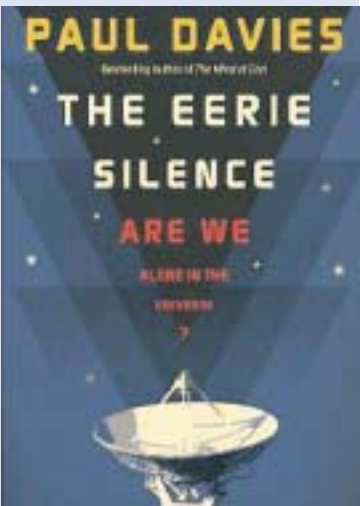
new non-fiction

Tracking the void

So are we alone? Yes, concludes Davies, a theoretical physicist, but that hasn’t stopped him dedicating much of the past couple of decades to the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence project. Nor should the fact that this fascinating book is littered with unanswerable questions deter anyone from reading it.

SETI began in 1960 when a bored astronomer at the US National Radio Astronomy Observatory started fooling around with a 26-metre dish to see if he could pick up an alien broadcast. Almost immediately, he tracked a signal. This could have been Earth’s real-life *Contact* moment, but he was no Jodie Foster and the signal was from a secret military radar.

As it celebrates its golden anniversary, that’s the SETI story in a nutshell: 50 years of eerie silence. Perhaps, muses Davies, the search is hampered by our anthropocentric outlook; maybe microbial aliens are here, under our noses, “or even in our noses”. SETI’s true achievement



The Eerie Silence: Are We Alone in the Universe? Paul Davies Allen Lane Dh130

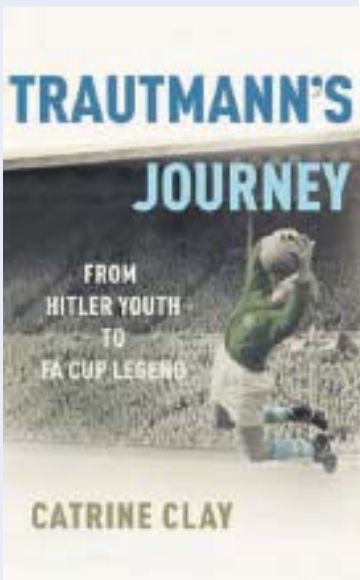
is the celebration of human optimism – all that the project’s thousands of volunteers have really discovered is just how badly we don’t want to be alone.

‘The good German’

Bert Trautmann’s story is arguably one of football’s greatest redemption tales. Captured by Allied forces as they swept through Germany in the final days of the Second World War, Trautmann would later be shipped to England as a prisoner of war before becoming a professional footballer of some distinction at Manchester City.

He would appear in successive FA Cup finals for City in the 1950s and remains one of the finest goalkeepers to have represented the club. More remarkable still, he broke his neck in the second of those finals in 1956 but played on heroically, determined to help City claim the famous Wembley victory that had eluded the club the previous year. It is a tale so extraordinary it needs little embellishment.

In Clay’s hands, Trautmann’s formative years are reconsidered. An outstanding young athlete, he was fast-tracked into the Hitler Youth movement before joining the Luftwaffe as a 17-year-old and then being sent out to war.



Trautmann’s Journey Catrine Clay Yellow Jersey Press Dh110

Clay admits that Trautmann’s path “was no matter of choice” yet persists with a wholly unnecessary remaking of the “good” German’s already incredible story.