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CONTENTS

01 Editorial

Suhasini Das Gooptu

04 Two Marches: From Dandi to Selma

Cherry Hitkari

15 Surkh Posh: Non-violence, Dissent and the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement

Prantik Ali

22 Beyond the Barricades: The May ’68 Mayhem

Utsa Bose

29 The Cost of Culture: Bhadralok, Chhotolok and Battala’s ‘Obscene Renaissance’

Shafaque Rahman

39 The Language of Construction

47 About the Contributors

48 Team Tarikh
Editorial

We are living amidst the ruins of an extended present. One that doesn’t seem to have an end in vicinity. Caught in the maelstrom of a past that refuses to escape and a future that refuses to embrace, the aphorism that history is a continuum—an unending tug-of-war between remembering and forgetting, has never rung truer. Any interested reader will pause briefly here, and honestly enquire the purpose of these editorial reflections. In our defence, we concede our apprehension, regarding the unique circumstance we find ourselves to be in. This requires some brief elucidation. What can possibly justify the publication of an undergraduate history journal that hasn’t seen the light of the day for the past four years, at a time when the world is dealing with the deadliest pandemic since the outbreak of the Spanish Flu in 1918? The sceptics would say, nothing whatsoever. What difference can this journal possibly make at this moment of anguish? The instantaneous response would remain the same. Yet, we beg to differ, and differ substantially.

Catastrophes and calamities are more often than not viewed as natural phenomena, without regard to the possible human ability to prevent, resist, or mitigate them. We tend to be so allured by the grand narratives of history that we overlook the remarkable resistance latent in living mundane lives under extraordinary circumstances. Another instance of myopia that we, as students of history, tend to suffer from is viewing crises as events and not looking at the underlying processes which go into their making. The sufferings of migrant labourers in India, stuck away from their homes and without incomes, is not something new. This, among other things, has been the outcome of the historical processes of land-dispossession, degeneration of local employment, and rural indebtedness in the country. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing nationwide lockdown have merely lifted the veil from a fault-line that we all had chosen not to acknowledge despite being well-aware of it. Reading and rethinking history, therefore, is not without its value, even at times like these, when everything seems so blurry, fractured, and uncertain.

When we boldly decided, in December last year, that we would have a theme for Tarikh, we did not actually think that we would receive enough articles to publish a themed journal. As Tarikh had not come out for four years, we were even aware of the possibility of not receiving any submissions let alone ones that are on a particular theme. The enthusiastic response that we received from students from far and wide, however, expelled our misgivings and we embarked on the long process of putting together a selection of articles that would reflect the many facets and forms of dissent. We hoped that an exploration of different histories of dissent would find
sharp resonances in the contemporary political climate in India, which was extremely tumultuous with widespread protests taking place against the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act and its sinister implications. It only seemed a foregone conclusion that ‘Histories of Dissent’ was the incontrovertible choice as the theme of the journal. Nevertheless, when the bulk of work was underway in mid-March, it no longer seemed so obvious. Perhaps ‘Histories of Resilience’ would have been a better fit. Our doubts, however, have been cleared by what we have observed and experienced over the last two months. Dissent is but an enhanced metaphor of resilience. The former is predicated on the latter. Their possibilities are inextricably intertwined. To be resilient against all odds at present is to dissent against the old order of things, one that has made possible for this crisis to affect us in such an obscenely disproportionate manner. We are not in this together. But we are not alone either.

The five articles that we present to you engage with the theme, ‘Histories of Dissent’, in a variety of ways. Suhasini Das Gooptu and Cherry Hitkari attempt to analyse how non-violent methods have been used as powerful tools of dissent and why leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Abdul Ghaffar Khan have adhered to non-violence even in the face of indescribable violence. They, however, do not limit their analyses to the freedom struggle in India and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America and raise larger questions about the viability of non-violent methods of dissent in present times. Prantik Ali demonstrates the potency of student movements through his exploration of the events of May 1968 in France that started as a student agitation over the sharing of dormitories in universities, soon incorporated the workers’ causes, and snowballed into a cultural and social revolution promising to bring about widespread changes in French society. Ali also highlights the violent repressive measures adopted by the state to curb the students and the workers that instantaneously bring to mind another familiar picture—the violence that the state unleashed last year on students protesting in India. Utsa Bose shifts our gaze away from protest movements and shows that dissent can manifest itself in different ways. Bose looks at how counter print culture can be a source of dissent by arguing that the Battala books, published in nineteenth century Bengal and often denigrated for being bawdy, facilitated what he calls an “obscene Renaissance” against the “bhadralok Renaissance” and its hegemonic tendencies. While Bose looks at dissent against and resistance to cultural hegemony, Shafaque Rahman explores how the British sought to develop a language of authority by constructing a colonial capital at Calcutta, and represented it solely as a British creation, in order to signify their control over the empire as a whole. While Rahman’s article is not explicitly concerned with dissent, she engages with the theme by calling attention to the
‘other’ of dissent, namely, the construction of a language of authority and hegemony. While we acknowledge that our engagement with the theme is highly limited and many different dimensions of dissent remain unexplored, we do hope that the readers would enjoy engaging with the various themes explored in *Tarikh* and would carry the discussion forward. Behind every act of dissent, there lies the hope that there is a scope for change and challenge, and it is this feeling of hope that we would like *Tarikh* to elicit in its readers.

It would not have been possible to revive *Tarikh* without the enthusiastic response that we received from so many students, who submitted their articles. We could only select five in order to maintain parity and minimize printing costs. We have received every kind of cooperation from the five contributors who have stuck with us throughout the long-drawn editing process, notwithstanding our incessant (and often annoying) demands. We are monumentally indebted to our editorial and designing teams, whose dedication inspired us at times when we were doubting if *Tarikh* will ever be published again. They persevered in the face of our perpetual pestering, doing what was to be done efficiently and with an eye for detail. Our thanks are due to the executive council of the History Society, particularly Chaitanya Rawat and Karan Korgaonker, who kept their firm faith in us when we lacked it ourselves. We cannot possibly express our immense gratitude to our staff advisor, Dr. Naina Dayal, the terror of whose intensive scrutiny, made us proofread the drafts again and again. We would also like to thank Dr. Aditya Pratap Deo, whose loving concern for the History Society, often manifested itself in the form of encouraging enquiries about the progress of *Tarikh*. We would also like to acknowledge the unending guidance, unwavering support, and undiluted indulgence we received from our friends and families throughout the period during which we worked on this journal. We alone are responsible for all remaining printing errors that might have escaped our attention and seek forgiveness from the readers for the same.


St. Stephen’s College, Delhi.

Suchintan Das and Asmita Sarkar

Editors-in-Chief
Followed by a motley crowd of clergymen, blacks, whites and other ‘freedom loving’ people of America, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a march in Selma, Alabama, on the 9th of March, 1965. He marched to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where, on the ‘Bloody Sunday’ of March 7, 1965, some 600 civil rights marchers were brutally attacked with billy clubs, tear-gassed and driven back to Selma in a display of unimaginable inhumanity. The march marked the culmination of several protests against the Alabama administration that included those against racial discrimination during voter registration, the ban on night-time demonstrations, and the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson by a state trooper. On the 9th of March, those same state troopers cleared the way for Dr. King to lead the march. In an inexplicable move, Dr. King stopped, knelt, prayed and turned back.

A similar anti-climactic moment was witnessed in India during the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-31. On the 12th of March, 1930, Mahatma Gandhi with his 78 chosen followers began the historic march to Dandi, a village on the Gujarat sea-coast. Reaching Dandi on 6th April, Gandhi picked up a handful of salt to violate the colonial salt law as a symbol of civil disobedience. The movement took an unusual turn on the 5th of March, 1931, when Mahatma Gandhi suspended the immensely successful movement to engage in the Second Round Table Conference initiated by Lord Irwin. Both Dr. King and Gandhi were accused of foolhardiness, told that ‘that was our moment’ and that they, as leaders, had failed. In the 21st century, Gandhi and Dr. King’s legacy, martyrdom and relevance stand challenged and are debated all over the world. Today, in the context of contemporary non-violent movements, a critical study of the Selma and Dandi Marches, the pinnacle of Dr. King and Gandhi’s political careers, is imperative to understand the greater moral, philosophical and spiritual movement they led as there is considerable debate about the viability of non-violence as a method of protest. This essay intervenes to contradict the broader social narrative constructed.
to imply that the days of non-violence are gone and argues that passive resistance fundamentally altered the nature of both movements through its unique integrative capacity.

The Selma March and the Dandi March possess striking similarities. The leaders of both Marches enjoyed a unique mass appeal, uniting those divided by faith, race, class and caste. Both had a specific unifying ideology or cause which affected everyone individually while having a larger symbolic and practical significance. The colonial salt tax symbolised the oppressive, exploitative and self-serving nature of the colonial rule, shattering the colonial claim of being a civilising force in India. Similarly, the shibboleth behind the Selma March was to secure free and equal voting rights for minorities across the United States of America (USA) by overcoming the obstacles standing in the way of voter registration. The *raison d’être* of the March was to question the hypocrisy of the US Constitution that guaranteed equal voting rights irrespective of “race, colour, or previous conditions of servitude.” But, in spite of repeated registration attempts, only two percent of the blacks residing in Selma were on the voter rolls. The inability of blacks to vote affirmed the fact that in the USA blacks were considered second class citizens.

However, these pretexts, namely systemic crises such as the exploitative nature of colonialism, racial discrimination and widespread unrest among the masses were phenomena evident in both India and the USA long before Gandhi and Dr. King. So, what fostered the unprecedented mass appeal during the Dandi and Selma Marches? Can this be explained simply by circumstantial factors and charismatic leadership? Or, was there something truly unique, pioneering and transformative in the doctrine of *satyagraha*, non-violence and passive resistance, that transformed the Indian Freedom Struggle and later the American Civil Rights Movement into moral protests? In this era of Foucauldian intersubjective morality, does an appeal to conscience really amount to anything but rhetoric? Is it time to forget the power of truth in a post-truth world? Such pressing questions demand an explanation.

Going back to the incidents mentioned in the beginning of the essay, one may ponder over this question: why did Gandhi decide to halt the Civil Disobedience movement and engage in a dialogue with representatives of the British Empire? Halting the movement was inextricably linked with Gandhi’s idea of non-violence and *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* believes in offering the opponent an opportunity to repent and demonstrate a change of heart, thus, creating conditions for a transformative exercise not only for
the satyagrahi, but also for the oppressor. A mass movement involving the willing acceptance of suffering must, therefore, be of a short duration: a phase of extra-legal mass protest must be followed by a passive phase since an individual's ability to sacrifice isn't endless. Thus, driven by his belief in the power of reconciliation, Gandhi called off the movement. The Civil Disobedience Movement was a moral war, not one of might. As Gandhi puts it, “all my life through, the very insistence on truth has taught me to appreciate the beauty of compromise.”

Similarly, Dr. King knew he needed to be cautious to prevent retributive action by the state troopers. Confrontation at this juncture could have agitated and angered protesters leading to a violent movement. As Dr. King said, “I'd rather prefer people be upset and hate me, than be bleeding and dead.” Further, he had to create a space for his opponent to repent for his wrongdoings. The moral transformation of the opposition is the ultimate goal of a satyagrahi, which Dr. King reiterated in his speech in Montgomery at the conclusion of the March:

“...And so I plead with you this afternoon as we go ahead: remain committed to nonviolence. Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man.”

It would be unfair to disregard the unique charisma possessed by both these leaders. Yet, it was their admirable resolve to abide by the doctrine of nonviolence in the face of extreme adversity and challenge, coming from both their opponents and supporters, that cemented the effectiveness of their political method. It was their patience and persistence to abide by their political principles that differentiated them from their preceding or contemporary political activists. India's Moderate nationalists like Gokhale or leaders like Tilak were unable to formulate a protest method that would involve every individual personally yet could be powerful enough to rattle the foundational basis of the British Raj. The juxtaposition of a Rousseauian general will and the individual actual will became evident when “[Gandhi] realised that different sections of society...would come into the national movement through the experience of fighting for their own different demands and seeing that the alien regime stood in opposition to them.”

Passive resistance created a platform
powerful enough to incorporate individual demands while leaving a lasting impact on collective identity or conscience. The issue of the denial of voting rights or withdrawing the basic right to produce salt for consumption involved everyone individually, while at the same time it was a larger commentary on the political climate and the nature of democracy prevailing in the two countries. A strong cause that resonates with millions produces a strong leader. Gandhi became the man we know him to be, because of the immorality of colonialism which he witnessed all his life. It was this very cause that transformed an English-educated lawyer, a product of the Empire, to a man of peace who brought the Empire to its knees. When he was pushed out of a train for refusing to give up his first class ticket he spent a cold winter night shivering in the Pietermaritzburg station, thinking: “Should I fight for my rights or go back to India?” He decided it was cowardice to run away from his obligations.

Dr. King on a similar note, reminisced:

“I want you to follow me through here because this is very important to see the roots of racism and the denial of the right to vote. Through their (southern aristocracy) control of mass media, they revised the doctrine of white supremacy.

They saturated the thinking of the poor white masses with it, thus clouding their minds to the real issue involved in the Populist Movement. They then directed the placement on the books of the South of laws that made it a crime for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level. And that did it. That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist Movement of the nineteenth century.”

But, both Gandhi and Dr. King stood challenged by political personalities of their own times. They echoed the critique that the idea of non-violence faces today. Tropes posit it as the weapon of the privileged, confined to those who are able to articulate their anger, move beyond lived experiences and potentially own the luxury to be non-violent and patient. Passive resistance today is seen as the tool of the liberals, looked down upon by those who want to counter force with force, violence with violence. The younger leaders of the Indian National Congress like Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru echoed this sentiment. Subhas Bose believed war was the only way to achieve freedom; he was drawn closer to the Axis forces and believed India must exploit Britain’s vulnerability during the Second World War to defeat
them. Gandhi believed it was inherently unjust to harm an enemy in distress. The creation of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association and the mass appeal of revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad, that persists even today, proves that non-violence was challenged even during its heyday, as it is today. In the US, too, this contestation was manifested in the popularity of Malcolm X, a charismatic leader of the radical and violent sect, the Nation of Islam, started by members of the Black Muslim faith. He called Dr. King's followers “ignorant Negro creatures”, and him a “modern-day Uncle Tom.”

This reductionism of non-violence is what this essay challenges. Passive resistance as a doctrine may be harder to enact than recourse to violence and war, but it has an inherent exclusive precedential value that is undeniable. No one wishes to live in a world plagued by violence, war, and anarchy. Social Contractualists with the exception of Rousseau will tell you that the purpose of social consolidation is to exit the ‘solitary, cruel, nasty, brutish and short’ state of nature. But Hegelian idealism states that the dialectics of ideas through the cycle of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, weeds out inherent fallacies of society till a state of perfection is formed. The question we ask at this juncture is, what is the best mode of transition from one stage of thesis to another: through a bloody war, a Total Revolution or a gradual reshaping through a passive resistance? The fact is, this transition through dissent, opposition and reconceptualisation in the domain of ideas is inevitable as normative ideas, notions and visions of reality change. Yet, the problem with absolutism lies in its tendency to create such a hostile transitory stage that the hope of viewing a synthesised stage recedes, breeding apathy, which in the process sounds the death knell of any democracy. In this regard, the path of passive resistance provides a unique transitory doctrine that excludes violence from the calculus of social change.

The Selma-to-Montgomery March and the Dandi March put their leaders’ belief in non-violence to the ultimate test. The violent alternatives strengthened their resolve to adhere to the principle of non-violence. Both the Marches marked the zenith of Dr. King and Gandhi’s political careers and that of their protest methods. Less than five months after the last of the three Marches, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965—the best possible redressal for the grievances voiced by Dr. King. Similarly, the Gandhi-Irwin Pact made the British Government agree to the release of political prisoners, allow peaceful picketing and concede the right to produce salt for consumption. The Second Round Table Conference was
a failure as the question of independent India receded to the background and the question of community-wise division of legislative seats gained prominence. Yet, the events of the Civil Disobedience, such as, the defiance of salt laws in provinces like Bombay, Madras and the Central Provinces, refusal to pay the rural *chaukidari* tax, the mass strikes, and setting up of parallel governments in several places, reflected the emancipation of Indian minds from colonial hegemony. The British perceived this and passed The Government of India Act in 1935.

On several occasions, passive resistance has proved to be more effective and relevant. It clothes the vocabulary of protest with the bulletproof vest of popularly accepted morality and progressiveness, thereby adding an aspirational value to the cause. The other fascinating strength of passive resistance is its integrating capacity. Violence and radicalism cause political polarisation. They create an environment of fear and mutual suspicion—endangering processes of dialogue and the propensity of conflict resolution. This creates the breeding ground of demagoguery, misinformation and propaganda. If the end goal is integration because separation is unviable and undesirable, then passive resistance provides space for dialogue and deliberations that is absent in a violent mass struggle.

Moreover, while organizing a movement it is essential to recognise the power of social hierarchies—be it class, caste or race, which may cause the movement to dissipate. Therefore, a protest method that presents a space for all dissenters becomes more effective. Both Gandhi and Dr. King recognised the power of social cleavages and the possibility of resurgence of the oppressive structures against which their movements were directed. Thus, even while organizing mass movements Gandhi preferred to pursue constructive social work such as sanitation programmes, promotion of basic education, upliftment of the untouchables or ‘Harijans’ and Khadi to prepare his countrymen to fight the colonial regime. Dr. King, too, concerned himself with such works of social reconstruction such as the Poor People’s Campaign in 1967, to alleviate poverty among minorities and even got involved with anti-Vietnam War protests. Unfortunately, he was assassinated a year later.

The legacy of Gandhi and Dr. King has also provoked a debate regarding their appeal to religion and the discursive notion of morality it propagated. It is only inevitable that a discourse on morality will spiral down to tropes associated with religion, the most popular and accessible form of human morality. Christianity and Dr. King’s call to clergymen empowered
and unified the movement as clergymen and religious men and women from across the country came to participate in the second Selma March. The Unitarian Minister from Boston, Reverend James Reeb, home-maker and Unitarian laywoman, Viola Liuzzo, from Alabama were some of the white Christians who answered Dr. King’s call to march and provided an unprecedented unity and diversity to the Civil Rights Movement. However, Dr. King’s appeal to Christian morality, ethics and principles cannot be divorced from the oppressive and hierarchical institutions of Christianity, namely the Church, through which King is believed to have found a path to legitimacy. Similarly, it has been argued that Gandhi’s appeal to one’s religious consciousness strengthened religious identities in India which nullified the transformative, instructive and unifying nature of religion that Gandhi had aspired for. The British policy of ‘divide and rule’ effectively accelerated the process of widening the gap between the Hindus and the Muslims at a time when the force of nationalism was acquiring a coherent shape. The policy of community-wise allocation of legislative seats (Ramsay MacDonald’s Communal Award) aggravated the communal conflict. Soon the idea of undivided India receded, as the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress came to represent two divergent visions of an independent India during the final negotiations with Lord Mountbatten on the transfer of power. The Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 following the Direct-Action Day and the subsequent Noakhali, Tippera and Bihar Riots and the Punjab killings were the bloody manifestations of this communal tension. A distressed Gandhi spent the last years of his life trying to build a bridge of brotherhood between the Hindus and the Muslims in Noakhali and Kolkata. Ultimately, the communal divide and communal politics led to the partition of India in 1947 with far-reaching consequences.

The Dandi and Selma Marches proved the capability and ability of non-violent means, yet they were far from perfect. Both upheld the role played by the media and free press in affecting change. The photographs of a few hundred unarmed protesters meeting with violence at the hands of the local police force, being tear gassed and beaten during the Selma March were broadcast all over the world. Generation of an international public awareness and an element of ‘political drama’ were essential to make passive resistance work. The representation of assaults revealed the oppression and brutality present against communities of colour across the country (USA) and put to question the imagined notion of equality prevailing in America, thereby creating the conditions for producing the ‘white consciousnesses’.

Page 10
that Dr. King hoped for. One man’s ability to organise a movement and demonstrate to the world the oppression of the British Empire riveted the international audience. Media provided credibility to a movement, which organised and empowered the poor and the oppressed. Unfortunately, today, in the era of large-scale corporate media houses, the propensity of expressing dissent via the mainstream media has been significantly diminished as market considerations take precedence over the ethics of journalism. The dilution of a free and fearless media has considerably altered the calculus of expressing dissent in a modern nation-state.

Questions have been justifiably raised about the viability of non-violence. The doctrine of non-violence appeals to the conscience of the oppressor. Does anyone have a conscience today? The generation of public awareness informs the oppressor about the unacceptability of his/her misdeeds. But in this age of political apathy, where is the much sought-after public awareness? The principle of non-violence seeks consensus on the basis of reconciliation, often provoking the question: how do you reconcile two disparate ideas of a nation? Yet, non-violence remains the most powerful form of protest as it changes ideas, attitudes and mentalities. William Robert Miller’s book *Nonviolence* (1964) stated, “Non-violence is an idea whose time has come.” Some wonder whether the idea’s time has come and gone.

Gandhi and Dr. King have achieved their aims, although the immortality of non-violence does not lie in the pages of history but in the present. As millions of women march in America demanding women’s rights or seeking measures against climate-change, we see non-violence in action. When millions march to ensure justice for Nirbhaya or thousands sit in defiance of the state in Shaheen Bagh, we see non-violence in action. Protest and dissent are an integral part to the evolution of humankind. For the dialectics of ideas to persist in a democratic framework, passive resistance is indispensable. Violence threatens democracy, creating leeway for the rise of demagogues. The fact that passive resistance and civil disobedience continues to take precedence over violent alternatives, and is still the most powerful mode of protest, despite ample provocations, proves, that through their dedication to non-violence, Gandhi and King have laid the moral foundation of peaceful protest for the present and future democracies in the world.

Notes
1. The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Address at the Conclusion of
the Selma to Montgomery March.”

2. Selma.

3. Ibid.

4. U.S Constitution. Art. XV, Sec. 1: “right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, colour, or previous condition of servitude.”

5. The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, “Selma to Montgomery March.”


7. Selma.

8. The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March.”


10. Selma. Also see Gandhi.

11. B. Chandra, History of Modern India, 305.


14. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, “Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March.”

15. B. Chandra, History of Modern India, 298.

16. Established in 1928, it was Chandra Shekhar’s socialist reincarnation of the Hindustan Republican Association which was founded in 1924 to organise an armed rebellion and was also involved in the Kakori Conspiracy Case (1925).

17. B. Chandra, History of Modern India, 301.

18. Malcolm X- Dr. King is an Uncle Tom, YouTube video, posted by mrholthistory.

19. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 305.


25. The Huffington Post, “Remembering the Four People.”

26. Ibid.
27. B. Cosgrove, “Muslim-Hindu Riots of 1946.”
30. Selma.

Bibliography


*Selma*. Directed by Ava DuVernay. Paramount. 2015. DVD.


Surkh Posh: Non-violence, Dissent and the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement

Cherry Hitkari

“We are at war against the British for Independence, but we have no weapons, our only weapon is patience. If you can fight this war, then wear a red uniform and come and join us.”

— Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan

This paper is an attempt to deeply understand the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement which emerged as a non-violent movement in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) against the oppressive colonial regime in India. Led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also called ‘Frontier Gandhi’, the movement believed, as the name goes, in serving god by serving humanity. It aimed not just to overthrow the British regime peacefully but also strengthen the ties among Pashtuns (or Pathans), the local tribe which had been plagued by fratricidal conflicts for centuries. The Khudai Khidmatgars represent a vibrant moment in the modern history of the subcontinent as they did not just intensify the sense of political consciousness among the Pashtuns but also created a determined non-violent movement led by one of the ‘martial races’ of the Empire, unthinkable at the time.

The Pashtuns, mainly residing in Afghanistan and the NWFP of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, are a Muslim tribe who were often looked down upon and regarded as ‘backward’ and ‘brutal’. Although the North-West Frontier was the last province to be brought fully under British rule in 1849 when its settled administered districts were separated from Punjab by the then Viceroy Lord Curzon to constitute a Chief Commissioner’s Province (1901), there already existed a degree of anti-imperialist consciousness among its rural population, rare in any other part of India at the time. The discontent was such that even revered renouncers preached anti-colonial ideas. While the British had co-opted a section of the Khani elite (bigger landlords) into their administrative system, a large section of Pashtuns was left out. The colonial project necessitated that the British army had a steady supply of soldiers. Since the Pathans were understood as a ‘martial race’, born with certain ‘martial instincts’, the Empire made concerted efforts to deprive the
region of education. The unsettled districts were to act as a buffer zone between the British administered subcontinent and the outer world of Afghanistan and Russia.

In this context, the anti-imperialist feeling was sharpened by the Anglo-Afghan war of 1919, the rise of king Amanullah in Afghanistan, a Pashtun educational movement led by Ghaffar Khan’s Azad schools and the founding of the movement Anjuman-i-Islah-ul-Afaghinia, inculcating pride in the Afghan culture. However, it was only towards the late 1920s that there was a conscious move to bring together three movements, Anjuman-i-Afghania, the Khilafat movement led by Gandhi and the Ali brothers, and the various movements organized by local committees of the Indian National Congress. After political consolidation of the three movements, there was to emerge a new and innovative movement.

Birth of the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement

After successfully installing Azad schools across the NWFP and facing several imprisonments on charges of ‘sedition’, Ghaffar Khan, honoured with the title ‘Fakr-i-Afghan’ (Pride of Afghan, used synonymously with Pashtun), founded the Pashtun Jigra (Council) which was concerned with social, political, and educational matters. The Council began publishing a journal called Pashtun. In 1929, a new organisation called the Khudai Khidmatgar (Servants of God) was formed. Ghaffar Khan wrote, “There are two ways to national progress: one, the path of religion and the other is the road to patriotism.” Quoting the example of Europe and America, he said that even if one couldn’t acquire much education, one could still participate productively through a sense of patriotism. He stated that the reason for the backwardness of Pashtun society was because they lacked both the spirit of religion and the spirit of patriotism. Ghaffar Khan’s autobiography suggests he had deep respect for Gandhi’s ability to mobilise masses across class and gender divisions. He labelled the new strategy of struggle as a ‘flood’ which cultivated a transformed and more educated population. This, he contrasted with the erstwhile uneducated, ignorant and backward society which was deliberately sustained as a part of the colonial project of subordination. Local issues had left Pathans thirsty for the blood of their own kith and kin, and the resources which could have been used to develop agriculture and trade were used to finance court cases and fights against fellow countrymen. Ghaffar Khan realised that it was of utmost importance to sharpen the social consciousness of the Pathans and strengthen their relations by uniting them. It is from this idea that
Khudai Khidmatgar was born. Ghaffar Khan and his allies decided to call it so as they wanted to “awaken in Pathans the idea of serving their country and their people in the name of God, an idea that they sadly lacked.” Ghaffar Khan did not just want to eliminate the ill habits of the Pathans like drinking but also the habit of ‘badal’ or taking revenge. He stated that the Pathans were like ‘smoldering embers,’ always up for a fight to resolve disputes. He wanted to show that even they could employ non-violence, the idea once little known in their land, to voice their resentment.

A highly popular movement, the Khudai Khidmatgars’ main objectives were to completely free India of British rule by reforming the society along social, political and educational tangents, and concurrently maintaining Hindu-Muslim unity. It is interesting to note that both Hindus and Sikhs participated actively as volunteers. The Pashtun society traditionally viewed non-Muslims like Hindus and Sikhs as ‘hum saya’, under their protection, and had brotherly love for them. Though initially restricted to the NWFP, the movement gradually spread to other parts of India. For instance, in early 1930, the Peshawar Congress Committee announced themselves as partners of the Indian National Congress in the civil disobedience struggle. Ghaffar Khan wrote that ironically “the British brought us and the Congress together”—an alliance which lasted till the Partition in 1947.

**Functions of the Khudai Khidmatgars**

As to bringing changes in the socio-cultural life of the Pashtuns, it was important for them to be trained. First, meetings were conducted by Ghaffar Khan himself who introduced the essence of the movement to new recruits. The camps were also open for non-recruits of surrounding areas interested in reform. Khan emphasized the importance of physically demanding tasks like cleaning the houses, sweeping, weaving one’s own clothes, cooking, etc. to teach Pathans service to others and self-reliance. He believed that volunteer work would not just bind them together more strongly but would also prepare them for a non-violent fight against the British. More schools were opened to spread education. Ghaffar Khan highly emphasised the need to open schools for girls and even refused to take periodical funds from Congress, asking them to redirect the funds to the cause instead. Ghaffar Khan wanted the Pathans to achieve not just political but also economic independence from the British. The Khudai Khidmatgars distributed charkhas (spinning wheels) to people and taught them how to spin thread, while boycotting British cloth, as a means of strengthening the weavers. They also learnt...
to press oilseeds to produce cooking oil and grind wheat to feed fellow volunteers and the needy.

Mukulika Banerjee notes that poetry, music, skits, art and discussions became important ways for the Khidmatgars to spread anti-colonial ideas. All members were required to resolve all their internal disputes as a precondition before joining the organisation. Any act of violence was harshly treated with expulsion and the expelled member was only readmitted after displaying good behaviour for three years. Ghaffar Khan’s own son, Ghani, was expelled and he fasted for three days to repent for digressing from Khan’s ideas.

In order to ensure discipline and build resilience, Ghaffar Khan found it necessary to build the organisation along military lines with rank and file; there were units and sub-units. Military drills and physical exercise formed a major part of their daily routine for preparing them for long marches and protests. Ghaffar Khan wanted to show that contrary to the British perception, the Pashtuns were capable of leaving behind their internal divisions and determining their own future. Sanitation and cleanliness were of utmost importance. All members were expected to take certain vows as well.

Ghaffar Khan wrote that the Pashtuns could never evict the British militarily as neither did they have the military prowess nor would such an act provide them complete or even long-term independence. So, he chose the path of moral principles to uproot all internal barriers to self-rule. All members were to be treated equally once they joined the organisation. While some elites joined for economic benefits that would follow once the British were uprooted, others joined for helping the cause and to attain liberation. They, however, always faced the ridicule of the landed elites and certain religious leaders who complied with the British.

Mukulika Banerjee also notes that a striking feature of the Khidmatgars was their red uniform (surkh posh) which openly announced their presence rather than camouflaging them. Although the British attempted to degrade them by calling them ‘communists’ (based on their surkh posh), the reality was that the Khudai Khidmatgars were a religious organisation and not merely a political outfit. The British were threatened by the popularity, discipline and working of the Khidmatgars as is evident from their public shaming of the former. Likewise, all kinds of physical, psychological and sexual violence were inflicted on them. The Qasim Bazaar Massacre, where the Khidmatgars who opposed the arrest of Congress representatives were shot dead, in turn reflected the fear of the British. On May 3, the British declared the Provincial Congress and the Khudai Khidmatgars
as illegal. It was a period of widespread arrests, brutal torture and hunting down of the ‘rebels’ and ‘outlaws’. Despite this, the Khidmatgars continued their non-violent civil disobedience. In course of time, however, the movement waned.

**Why Non-Violence works?**

Though the British succeeded in crushing the movement, they failed to crush the spirit of the Khidmatgars who, even in the direst circumstances, refused to take up arms. Delighted and surprised to see the deep impact his ideas had on his countrymen, Ghaffar Khan asked Gandhi about the absolute refusal of Khidmatgars to take up arms, unlike the Indians, to which Gandhi replied that non-violence is the ‘weapon of the brave’.

Only a person strong in her determination could suppress the human instinct to not raise an arm against the oppressor. Gandhi said that the idea of non-violence was to force the oppressor to introspect by not reacting to any of their actions and let them be ashamed of their own actions because according to him, there was nothing as humiliating for a person as realising the redundancy of his own acts. Gene Sharp notes that non-violent protestors succeed by mainly three strategies: 1) acts of omission—here, by refusing to pay taxes, 2) acts of commission—by commissioning their own village councils and schools, i.e., self-reliance, 3) employing both. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan note that non-violence always works better than violence because it doesn’t lead to damage of life and property and hence has a wider outreach and support base. Non-violent movements tend to be more inclusive as they do not require any specific physical ability which makes violent movements exclusive to able-bodied young men. Moral, physical, informational and commitment barriers to participation are much lower for non-violent resistance as well.

**Conclusion**

Thus, the case of the Khudai Khidmatgar Movement proves that any society, even one plagued by internal divisions like that of the Pashtuns, could lead a determined peaceful movement to voice their concerns without stooping to violence which in the course of the struggle might appear very tempting. Many countries like India, Libya, Iran, USA, among others have had successful non-violent movements. The movement also proves that an eye-for-an-eye is definitely not a ‘human instinct’ and not all humans are liable to stoop to violence when faced with humiliation. There can be constructive ways to vent out anger and express dissent. This case also shows how little we have learnt from history. Violence still plagues our society even after centuries
of unpleasant experience with it. In the
globalised world and with access to better
technology today, it has become much
easier to make the masses more aware of
non-violence as a powerful strategy of
dissent. Building a culture of peace where
constructive dissent can be safely and
appreciatively channelised must be our
priority. We must remember that violence,
in any form, always begets violence. Non-
vioence is not just the absence of violence
but the elevation of one’s self to the level
of pragmatic and moral thinking where
complexities of situations are handled
without resorting to hatred. Perhaps, as
Ghaffar Khan himself stated, the best part
of leading a non-violent movement was
not just that the Pashtuns acquired a sense
of socio-political consciousness but that
they overcame the fear of the British.8
Ultimately, we know that on the other side
of every fear, there is freedom.

Notes
2. A.G. Khan, My Life and Struggles, 93.
3. Ibid., 94.
4. Ibid., 96.
6. Ibid., 87.
7. A.G. Khan, My Life and Struggles, 194.
8. Ibid., 145.

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Beyond the Barricades: The May ’68 Mayhem

Prantik Ali

‘Dans une société qui a aboli toute aventure, la seule aventure qui reste est celle d’abolir la société.’

(In a society that has abolished all adventures, the only adventure left is to abolish society.)

The events that follow began on the campus of the University of Paris, Nanterre, around March 1968. The youth of the university had a very simple demand—that they be allowed to share their dormitory rooms with one another. The authorities, however, struck down on the protestors with excessive repression, even arresting some students who had apparently overstepped the boundaries of acceptable behaviour by asking for their sexual rights as adults. Today, at a time when law enforcement arbitrariness seems to be on an unprecedented high, it is important to note that in this particular instance, dissent could not be curbed through the use of ‘lawful’ force, for the prevailing ethos of the time was rooted in the saying ‘Ni Dieu ni maître!’, which translates to ‘Neither God nor master’. If we decide to look around for ourselves, there are abundant signs that we too, are living in a society that is seething with rage, that with the right amount of push, will erupt into flames of dissent fanned by the hunger to attain justice at all costs.

Something as innocuous as asking for the right to sleep with fellow students, was to grow into a spectacular mass movement, which was multi-dimensional in the sense that it had political, economic and social aspects to it. The severe repression of the protests at Nanterre was met with equal, if not more, clamour from students at the Sorbonne University (also in Paris) on May 3rd, 1968. The youth who had thitherto been conditioned into adopting an Americanised way of life, shrugged off the last vestiges of hesitation about what kind of a future they wanted to walk into. Rejecting widespread commodification and mass-consumerism, they called for a total restructuring of the political system of France, besides calling America out on its hypocrisy in launching
wars against Vietnam as well as Algeria. They also accused the education ministry of overcrowding educational institutions, with no guarantee of employment once they were churned out of these institutions. As with the general political culture around this time in France, where all forms of mass media, from the radio to the television, were strictly controlled by the state, the environment around educational campuses was not much different either. Senior teachers often shied away from hosting debates and conversations on controversial topics and any banner of protest against the state’s activities was strictly banned within the campus.

The protests at Sorbonne, like the ones at Nanterre, were severely repressed. More than 350 students were arrested, and many more injured. This incident leaves a striking image in our minds, even if we haven’t had the opportunity yet to look at the awfully powerful images of the movement. The youth, clad in the university uniform—ties, shoes, shirts—were a sharp contrast to the police who stood against them. Wearing helmets, protection masks and stuffed gears, the police were ready for any kind of challenge from the students. In the end, they had to use tear bombs to dispel the clamouring crowd. Little did they know that tear bombs are limited to dispelling crowds, not ideologies.

The May 3rd incident propelled even larger sections of people into the movement, which by then had adopted anti-government sentiments and a call for the total renunciation of age-old patriarchal beliefs and irrelevant conservative ideals. The mention of the city of Paris will drive most of us into conjuring up images that strike us as being most characteristic of the city; the towering figure of the Eiffel Tower, the glittry reflection of the sun or the stars on the surface of the Seine, the innumerable and unsurpassable restaurants, and of course, the cobblestone streets, to name a few. In an overwhelmingly symbolic statement against the status quo, the protesters indulged in digging up the streets, and hurling stones, pebbles and rocks at the police. Paris was falling, and it was the next generation of Parisians who had taken the responsibility to uproot the old Paris and instil in its place a newer and fresher conception of the city that would respect, and allow liberty to bloom, instead of restricting the ideals to books and charters.

After the closing of the Sorbonne, France witnessed demonstrations of more than 800,000 people—a public outburst of dissatisfaction against the Charles de Gaulle government which had come to embody all the principles that they considered detrimental to the freedom of speech and expression. The political revolt had
galvanised into a social movement, which rejected patriarchy and sought to establish the freedom of gay rights and gender equality. Various radical groups sprang up around this time in France, which paved the way for the Gay Liberation Movement, announced by the famous Stonewall Riots in Manhattan, New York, in 1969. The queer community began challenging the various social, political, and generational hurdles that were suppressing their identity and denying them even the most fundamental of human rights. Although sexual relations between people of the same sex had been decriminalised in France in the eighteenth century, the queer community continued to face harassment, discrimination and violence. Centuries of unjustified oppression had resulted in the erosion of all credibility of the French political system, which came to be suitably expressed in the saying ‘*Pas de replâtrage, la structure est pourrie*’—‘No replastering, the structure is rotten.’

The government, which had so far been ostensibly engaged in curbing the protests, began to be seen as the binary opposite of all that the protestors stood for. As in any other instance of authoritarian governance, the hatred that was directed against the dissenters was rooted in a deep contempt of diverse natures, aspirations and ideals. The government had declared itself an enemy of the people, through its highly concentrated and centralised power, and the political repression and subsequent exclusion of any form of critique against it. Throughout the events, the police came to be used as an effective tool in the hands of the government, taking up arms against protestors and engaging in all forms of arbitrariness (unlawful detention without giving notice, police violence, etc. were horrifyingly common at that time, which had led the students, in particular, to aggressively defy their authority at every possible opportunity). The previous modes of censorship of press soon gave way to a total defiance of the opposition’s voice. Anyone who seemed to be challenging the authority of the state, was to the government no less than a political adversary, requiring repression at all costs.

On the night of May 10, students gathered once again in the streets and staged the final step in the insurrection against the government, setting ablaze cars, destroying public property and directly confronting the police. At this stage, the government deployed the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS), a special force of the French police that was specifically trained to handle riotous situations and establish law and order. It was a night of unforgettable terror for the demonstrators, for even as they hurled stones as projectiles and cried themselves hoarse the slogans that have been immortalised ever since, the
night ended with more than 600 people injured and 422 arrested. Barricades were erected on the streets for protection against the hostile police, leading the incident to be termed as the ‘Night of Barricades’.

To show their solidarity with the students, as well as to protest against the existing economic policies of France, which were pushing the working class to the periphery of the society besides overworking them and exploiting them at every conceivable opportunity in a system designed to benefit the privileged, the working class also joined the movement. Raising the banners of dissent, they organised strikes throughout France, often occupying factories and industries. This was also one of the first major wildcat strikes in history, which essentially means that the workers mobilised spontaneously to achieve their ends, instead of responding to a leader’s call or a collective decision by a union. Their protests were an embodiment of the general disdain towards the existing social structure. The students, who had been inspired by leftist ideologies like Maoism, readily supported the workers in a bid to completely uproot the status quo they were so fed up with.

In the government’s decision to directly interlink production with pay, the workers sensed a total disappearance of social security. Moreover, the eight-hour law was grossly undermined by the capitalists in order to increase production, putting the already-exploited workers under unimaginable stress. The workers conducted consistent marches, sit-ins, sloganeering and protests, which more often than not, culminated into violent riots. It managed to win support from almost all sections of the erstwhile Parisian society—bedecked with the privileged though it was, the hunger for justice of the excluded classes was simply too poignant to ignore at this point.

President Charles de Gaulle, whose legacy as one of France’s chief political stalwarts had already been built by then, chose to respond to this situation by following one of his own famous quotes: “A true leader always keeps an element of surprise up his sleeve, which others cannot grasp, but which keeps his public excited and breathless.” Sensing the anger on the streets, and the intensity of the protestors’ ambitions, de Gaulle fled the country in a helicopter amidst the nationwide unrest, to meet Jacques Massu, Chief of the French Forces in Germany. While this certainly was an unpredictable move that kept the public breathless, the insinuation of the quote with regard to this particular incident was, in all probability, incongruent with de Gaulle’s idea behind the statement. On returning, he addressed the country via radio, claiming that he would never bow to the unjustified actions of the ‘communists’
on the streets, while at the same time promising that he would dissolve the National Assembly, and that fresh elections would be held in the coming month of June.

The election resulted in a huge win for the de Gaulle government. Essentially, the contest was polarised between two groups: the protesting students and workers, who by resorting to civil disobedience had brought the nation to a standstill, and the largely conservative, upper-middle class citizens who had grown to dislike the way the non-unionised workers were revolting. The message was clear; social reforms would be supported by the upper classes as long as they were not directly inconvenienced. The protestors realised that while it was important to shake the throne de Gaulle sat on, it wouldn’t be conducive to their interests if the whole country remained locked in a state of emergency. The protestors could only concede to themselves the legacy that was sure to commemorate their ideals, and hope that their actions would be enough to instigate necessary reforms in the long run. The ideals of the youth, manifested in the graffiti, the slogans, and the artistic revolution that complemented their desire for a change in the system, were not enough to suggest a viable alternative to the socio-political structure.

The movement, which can very well be depicted by the supporters of the status quo as a large communion of unruly youth, coupled with the aspirations of masses of workers who also hailed from heterogeneous groups (some believed in Maoism, some in Trotskyism, Leninism, Anarchism, and Communism), was brushed off as merely an unorganised public outburst. Critics were also quick to point out that this so called ‘movement’ did not technically qualify as a movement to begin with. In spite of there being demands, there was no ‘political’ outline chalked out of the collective aspirations of the students and the workers. There was also no degree of leadership, besides a handful of representatives who were willing to face the media and answer questions. It was, thus, easy to dismiss the credibility of the protests.

For the few weeks that the movement lasted, the routine of everyday lives had come to a stop. The ordered hierarchy of the French society, and the prevalent sexism, homophobia, classism and casual apathy, had erupted into exuberant chaos that threatened to swallow the age-old irrationality—the residues of ignorance—and bring in the new. People marched on the streets, debated in meetings, and presented their demands.

Although one comes to the conclusion that the movement was indeed a political failure, it had profound social
implications. Subsequently, France saw a renewed vigour on part of the government machinery in properly addressing the grievances of the citizens, focusing mainly on socio-economic issues. Abortion laws were liberalised with the passing of the Veil Law in 1975. The minimum wages of the workers were raised by 35% and salaries by 10%. Besides, there was an increasing interest in the works of contemporary political theorists to better grasp the concept of ‘rights of citizens and obligations of the state.’ May 1968 also came to be the trigger that made people in France realise that sexual identity was, after all, a choice that rested with each individual, and no one could impose their opinions and values of what ‘proper’ sexuality implied. A joint appeal for cultural and social emancipation from the clutches of a repressive bourgeois government found credibility in this movement, as did the realisation that it would be difficult indeed, in the future, for any government to misuse its powers in suppressing the desires of the people.

Using the privilege that allows for dissent in a democratic society is nothing out of the ordinary—it is the first major step that establishes how the ordinary should be. Moreover, it is the privileged among the comparatively less privileged who must take upon themselves the onus of bringing about change. In any form of protest against oppression, the very interpretation of the cause which mobilises the people lies heavily upon those in power, or those who have the ambition, drive, and resources to bring about change. Complete liberation of humanity from the clutches of injustice and suppression is something that we all must strive for, and for that to take place, people must have the courage to stand up for what they believe in, which, more often than not, is synonymous with standing up against those in power. In a world that is grappling with more problems than it can handle, dissent, besides being a privilege, also becomes a necessity.

Hold the torch higher, the world stands behind you.

_Illegitimi non carborundum._

**Bibliography**


“Brandy, rendi, ganja, guli, yaar jutey katokguli,
Mukhetey sarboda buli, hoot boley dey ganjaye taan,
Pnodey thakey parer badi, hoye tader ajnayakari,
Holey tader monti bhari, hunkoti kolketi paanti jogan.”¹

(They are immersed in brandy, whores, hemp and opium along with their cronies.
Gabbing away all the time, and puffing away their hemp, they rot away in the houses
Of others, carrying out their orders. When their patrons are sullen, they pass on to them
Their hookah, the tobacco bowl or the betel leaf.)²

“Jaal, juochuri, mithyekotha,
Ei tin niye Kolikaata”³

(Forgery, gambling and lies,
These three make up Kolkata)

“Poshe jodi kakodor gorurer nire,
Firi shey ki jay kobhu apon bibore?”⁴

(If a cobra is to come to a garuda’s nest, Will it ever return to its own burrow?)

Bertolt Brecht, writing in 1939, at the height of exile, began his Svendborg Poems with a motto:

“In the dark times,” he asked, “will there be singing?”

The history of the Battala press is one of endurance, resistance and metamorphosis. In popular parlance, the utterance of the name invokes a rather pejorative, lip-curling response, ranging from “various badly printed items”⁵ to books of “doubtful content.”⁶ Carrying within itself an ascribed burden of obscenity, Battala (the press, the place) is metonymic of the “cheap book, bad book” syndrome. The correlation between the economic and the moral is, by no means new—one is reminded, of course, of Adam Smith’s observations in The Theory of Moral Sentiments⁸—and yet, in the case of Battala, the syndrome observes a peculiar inversion: the model turns
on its head. Battala’s books were ‘bad’ precisely because they sold in excruciatingly high numbers—the high saleability, in spite of being deemed improper, makes it a curious example of an exception to the aforementioned theorisation. This paper examines the brief history of the arrival and abrogation of print culture in the colonial metropolis of Calcutta. It works with the presupposition that there existed simultaneously two ‘Renaissances’ in nineteenth-century Calcutta—the 'pure' and the 'obscene'. It views counterculture—and specifically counter print culture—as dissent, and examines the varying and shifting axes through which this subversion took place.

By the early nineteenth century, Bengal had become a hub of mass printing. The advent of print culture, brought about by the efforts of eminent Bengalis such as Gangakishore Bhattacharya and the early printing presses in Serampore were pivotal for a remoulding of the Bengali literary tradition. This remoulding, however, was not uniform. It was characterised by cultural conflict, erasure and evolution. Significant in this regard was the mushrooming of several small presses in and around the metropolis of Calcutta, all of which specialised in the production of cheap books, published in serialised form. Their target audience was mainly the rising migrant and working classes, and this amorphous, metamorphosing, protean industry of small presses came to be collectively termed as the 'Battala Press'. The demographic of the Battala readers comprised a “heterogeneous group, composed of urban petty service people, small businessmen and traders, as well as a non-literate population displaced from traditional occupational structures of patronage, living or working in Calcutta.”

According to Sumit Sarkar, “the consumers of the tracts, farces and prints churned out from Battala quarter of north Calcutta did not necessarily exclude the most exalted among the bhadralok.” What is of interest here is his juxtaposition and eventual differentiation of the Battala press from the Bibliotheque-bleu of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, a divergence facilitated by the varying demographic of the Battala press, which eludes the correlation of consumption of the popular with the economically backward or lower-caste. By the mid-1850s, Battala sales were booming. Characterised by an expanding reader-base, the power of Battala lay in posing a challenge to the aristocratic and the nouveau riche presses. This ability to challenge made it instrumental in being the Other of the bhadra society; in essence, Battala facilitated what I term as the ‘obscene Renaissance.’

I draw the terminology used
above from Reverend James Long’s comments on works such as Bidyasundar, Rasamanjari and Ratibilas. With the creation of the new bhadralok class, there arose persistent anxiety of identity. Who were the bhadralok? What separated them from the others—termed as the chhotolok? It was not enough to be a bhadralok: one had to define oneself in opposition to who was not a bhadralok. An other had to be simultaneously created and denounced, made and separated, kept at a distance. With the advent of the ‘Black City,’ came the birth of the ‘chhotolok’ (literally “small man”). The chhotolok was a paradoxical creation—it was created solely for stratification. It was everything the bhadralok wasn’t—it was of inferior rank, its religion was animistic and ‘un-enlightened’, it did not match up to hegemonic ideas of sexuality and etiquette, and worse, it still read the ‘obscene!’ The anxiety over identity was a multi-headed demon, manifesting itself in culinary habits, sartorial choices—the confusion of the colonial encounter manifested itself, perhaps, best along this axis, and one is reminded of the caricatures and the lampooning dance of the Babus in Satyajit Ray’s Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne (1969)—and linguistic chauvinism.

The cultural hegemonising of the new Babu cult perpetuated itself through the careful manicuring of language. Historically, Bengal was a fertile cultural soil emblematising religious syncretism. The cult of Satyapir, the songs of Kalu Gazi and even the mangal-kavya tradition created a “variegated repertoire of syncretic tradition” and stand testament to the inclusionary ability intrinsic to and inherent, perhaps, in the Bengali cultural imagination. Prior to the advent of the proper primer, the Bengali spoken by the masses was a “dobhashi” Bengali (literally meaning duo lingual Bengali)—a vocabulary consisting of Perso-Arabic loan words. Sanskrit, in contrast, was debbhasha (literally “God’s language”), meant to be withdrawn from Shudras and women. With the coming of the ‘Renaissance’, an attempt was made to ‘purify’ (synonymous with Sanskritise) the Bengali language, to attune it towards the aforementioned debbhasha. Filtered through the sieve of hegemony, this purification ritual meant the careful removal of words of Perso-Arabic origin from the language itself. The language had prostituted itself, or so it was believed: it had to be reclaimed, cleaned, polished and brought back to its former glory. What followed was the rebirth of the language: a number of primers, including Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar’s influential Barna Parichay, were published in this period. Aided by the Orientalist-Sanskritists, the bhadralok-government nexus was instrumental in passing several anti-obscenity laws which
attempted to curb the growing popularity of populist texts such as the *panchalis*²⁴ and the *sawng*.²⁵ The efforts of Reverend James Long were instrumental in this regard. Mirroring Evangelical prudery and puritanism in England, the ‘Bowdlerization’ in the colonial space of Calcutta was “directed primarily against the expression of popular culture, like the cheap chapbooks of *Battala*.”²⁶ The countercultural backlash came from the *Battala*.

In an age where texts in the upper echelon of respectable society were judged by their ability to mime, mimic and draw upon Sanskritic and European literary traditions, *Battala* continued printing its stories in “dobhashi” Bengali. Michael Madhusudhan Dutt (1824—1873), one of the champions of reinvention of Bangla, wrote the *Meghnadbadh Kavya* (1861), a retelling of the Ramayana from Meghnad’s perspective. As evidenced by Dutt’s work, the ‘high art’ of this period represented a curious mix of double glorification and reverence toward two divergent literary traditions: the Sanskritic and the European. The *Meghnadbadh Kavya* did not merely draw upon ancient Sanskritic traditions and literary styles, it drew, also, upon the Miltonic form of the epic. Structurally, the *Meghnadbadh Kavya* closely mimicked the form of *Paradise Lost*, through its persistent use of the rhyming couplet. Important in this regard was also the birth of

the sonnet in Bangla by Dutt. What becomes clear, is the attempted “development of Bengali *bhadralok* culture” which “went hand in hand with the marginalisation of Calcutta folk culture.”²⁷ The valorisation of European and Sanskritic ‘high culture’, created its own ‘chhotolok’ literary other. An article on the *Krittibas Ramayan* in an English journal ran thus:

“…it *[the Krittibas Ramayan] is written…* in a jingling word-catching metre, that is far inferior even in harmony, to the sonorous march of the Sanskritic couplets *of the original*… its stories are more offensive, its language is more indecent than in the original; and the whole is tainted with an air of downright vulgarity, which would have made Vālmiki turn aside in disgust…”²⁸

And yet, *Battala* persisted in churning out huge volumes of almanacs, periodicals, chapbooks, serialized prints and mythological tales. A low printing cost, albeit at the cost of print quality, facilitated a large readership. As Anindita Ghosh argues, “for the people commuting daily to the city and back, the cheaper and more accessible item was the printed book. What was appreciated in particular were small books of perhaps 30 or 40 pages. Serial
publications of mysteries and adventures, pamphlet farces, cheap tracts and some of the less illustrious periodicals sold very well.”

It subverted the dominant by resisting and reinstating older subject matters for its books: in other words, as the bhadralk society tried to write “heroic tales, mythological stories, romances of classical heroes and heroines,” Battala continued printing the culturally appropriated forms of these classical stories—the Krittibas Ramayan instead of the Valmiki Ramayana, the Bidyasundar and the Annadamangal Kavya instead of Kalidas'a Meghdutam.

The conflict between the two different models of rebirth manifested itself further in the choice of the mode of narration. The “superiority of the written word over the oral, of printed literature over verbal folklore” was facilitated by widespread publicity given to poets such as Dutt and Nabinchandra Sen. There was, simultaneously, a “campaign against oral literature.” It is here that we observe an incredible act of abrogation by the ‘obscene’ presses of Battala. Conventionally, the oral and the written were polarised forms, one existing at the margin of the other; it was this dichotomy which was cashed on by the bhadralk society in their tirade against popular folk forms. The popular was oral, the pure, the higher form was written. Adapting to the situation and rising to the occasion, Battala presses now began printing oral narratives in serialized form. As Anindita Ghosh argues, “The oral tradition surfaces in the imitations of speech patterns and sung narratives—with liberal use of rustic humour, conversational topical digressions, songs, proverbial usage, elements of magic and fable, didactic reiterations—in the widely read works of the time. The impact of the new print literature can therefore only be situated within the primacy of these oral cultures.”

The conflation of these two apparently divergent forms caused an axiomatic rupture in the temporal fabric of the newly created sarkari time, and by extension, the bhadralk sensibility. Ranajit Guha has argued that imperial conquest perpetuated itself not just spatially, on the map, but also temporally, on the fiscal timetable. He argues that “life in the bungalow and cantonment kept itself scrupulously apart from that of the native settlement, both as a matter of official policy and cultural choice, a segregation well documented in Anglo-Indian literature.” The assertion of a “tangle of two braided temporalities, requiring each to resist as well as accommodate the other” finds itself transposed across and echoed in the radical activities of Battala. Oral narratives not only carried within them othered cultures, mores, customs and traditions, but also a different idea of time—the cyclical. The printed book,
in contrast, was a product of a different cultural tradition, and consequently, of a different temporal tradition—the linear. Printing the oral in the printed form, therefore, caused not only an axiomatic but also an ontological rupture in the fabric of bhadralok hegemony. The printed book was brought in for a purpose, but the masses, hitherto considered passive recipients, had quickly appropriated the form to not only use but also challenge attempts of cultural erasure.

Battala, therefore, challenged hegemony along three main axes: first, along the lines of language. By choosing to print in ‘dobhashi’ Bengali, Battala challenged efforts to ‘purify’ and homogenize a language. Second, along the axis of subject matter: by choosing to print the narratives of popular deities, popular stories and localised cultic figures, the Battala press resisted attempts to ally religion with culture. Lastly, along the axis of the narratorial technique: the Battala press printed oral narratives, and in doing so, problematised the field of the Oriental-Occidental. This dual-existence of different temporalities caused, as I argue, an axiomatic and ontological rupture in the fabric of the bhadralok sensibility.

Resistance, however, has its limits. Persistent, often brutal attempts by the government and the upper classes—perpetuated through high levels of taxation, western education, burning of presses—eventually led to the demise of the Battala press. The invention and flooding of the daguerreotype in the local markets was the last nail in the coffin: the patuas and the other local artisans soon fell prey to the onslaught of the captured image. Years and generations of prudery and class pride reduced Battala in the popular imagination as a place of pornographic excess and moral penury. Yet, as this paper argues, Battala did not completely die out. The ‘obscene Renaissance’ of the Battala presses was instrumental in keeping alive and holding together the syncretic religion embedded in the popular consciousness and folk cultures of Calcutta and its suburbs. The contestation that the low-life cheap printing press championed secularism may sound like a long shot at worst and ambitious at best, and perhaps it did not champion secularism per se, but the facts do reveal a certain attempt to not only resist but overrun attempts of Sanskritisation and Westernisation.

I began by claiming that Battala’s story is a story not only of resistance and endurance, but also of metamorphosis. As a parting statement, I contest further that Battala as a press did die out, but its ideological impact metamorphosed itself in the popular imagination, manifesting itself as popular cinema. With the coming
of the new medium in the fifties and the sixties, Bengali culture saw, yet again, the Battala resistance manifesting itself. But this time, not as the ‘obscene’, but as the B-Grade. The opening quotation from Meghnadbadh Kavya is uttered by Meghnad himself, who, on noticing Lakshman gaining in on him from behind in his cave, utters a rhetorical question. If a cobra (Lakshman) were to venture, quite voluntarily, into the nest of a ganuda (Meghnad), would it ever go back to its burrow? And yet, at the end of the epic, Meghnad lies slain; the cobra, by the use of deceit and guile, has defeated the

ganuda in his own nest. I read this image as a metaphor for abrogation. Battala, like the cobra, fought against the dominant presses in their domain; it, too, managed to keep the struggle alive. The only exception is that instead of guile, it used wit and invention.

Brecht, in the motto, answers his question.

“In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.”

Notes


2. Ibid., 109.

3. Ibid., 84.

4. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Meghnadbadh Kavya (Canto 6), 106.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 53. Smith talks about the “the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by the disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise and neglect persons of poor and mean condition.”

9. The dominant historiographical narrative has maintained that the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed a ‘Renaissance’ of a kind, brought about by western education, science and the birth of new ideas.

10. Gangakishore Bhattacharya is credited with introducing Annadamangal and


14. As quoted in Anindita Ghosh, ‘An Uncertain “Coming of the Book”),’ 29. Long is said to have mentioned a “hideously obscene book with its twenty most filthy pictures.”

15. Demographic studies of nineteenth century Calcutta suggest that the city was divided into two spatially separate zones, interestingly bifurcated along race lines, by a moat. The inner rung was called the “White City”, with the Europeans, upper castes and babus. Those on the literal other side of the moat comprised the “Black city”. They were mostly lower castes, Muslims, and migrant workers who would travel to the White City for work, commuting daily. The opening of the Barasat-Basirhat Light Railway and the Calcutta electric tramway joined the city to its suburbs, increasing daily traffic. One is moved to imagine an eclectic migratory milieu, with the city forming a melting pot at sunrise, and a gradual retreat, ebbing away of the “others” at sundown (as discussed in Sumanta Banerjee, “Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta,” 84)

16. For a detailed exploration of this theme see Rosinka Chaudhary, Freedom and Beef Steaks: Colonial Calcutta Culture.

17. Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne (1969) was Satyajit Ray’s screen adaptation of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhuri’s short story of the same name.


19. According to Sumanta Banerjee, Kalu Gazi was a “Muslim Pir worshipped by all for protection from tigers in the Sunderban area of south Bengal.” Ibid., 63.

20. Mangal-Kavya: (“Poems of Benediction”) is a group of Bengali Hindu religious texts, composed more or less between 13th and 18th centuries, notably consisting of narratives of indigenous deities of rural Bengal in the social scenario of the Middle Ages.


23. The obscenity laws under the Indian Penal Code of 1860, for instance, stated that:

   Whoever, to the annoyance of others–

   (a) does any obscene act in any public place, or
(b) sings, recites or utters any obscene song, ballad or words, in or near any public place, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine, or with both.


24. *Panchali* is an oral narrative form of songs and stories in Bengali culture. (*panchaligaan* collectively refers to Bengali ballad songs). During a *panchali* recitation, the singer walks among the listeners making gestures to accompany the story. The tradition is found among both Hindu and Muslim communities. The themes are typically religious and reflect a variety of impacts on the culture through a period of several centuries.


27. Ibid., 167.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


34. Ranajit Guha, “A Colonial City and Its Time(s),” 409.

35. Ibid.


**Bibliography**


“Gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.”

---William Shakespeare\textsuperscript{1}

When a civilised group of white men undertake the task of creating an empire on the model of western modernity and knowledge in ‘barbaric’ lands, where would they situate their capital? For the British in India, Calcutta was their answer. It then becomes imperative to ask: why Calcutta? Calcutta emerged around 1690 as a ‘contact zone’ between the English East India Company and its trading allies in north and east India. A straggling village described in the early British writings as a “city of swamps”,\textsuperscript{2} Calcutta was in Kipling’s description, a city “chance-erected, chance-directed”. However, to answer the question one needs to look at the prevalent assumptions among the British with regards to the origin of the city.

With the Battle of Plassey and more importantly with the granting of the Diwani, there was a gradual shift of power from the traditional centres into the hands of the British. This was accompanied by a re-construction of Calcutta as an English city. The city was no homeland for the natives. H. Blochmann, the principal of Calcutta Madrasa (1870-1878), goes further to “date modern Calcutta from 1757”.\textsuperscript{3} Thus in the English mind, a nascent empire created from scratch by the British could have only the anglicized Calcutta as its capital. For the colonials, the capital of their empire was to represent their power and manifest their control over the empire as a whole. Therefore, it became imperative for the capital to be seen as having been created ex-nihilo by the English. As highlighted above, Calcutta in the English eyes fitted these parameters. Similarly, in 1922 when the capital shifted to Delhi, it was not simply moved to the existing city but rather to ‘New Delhi’, designed afresh by British architects.

But was Calcutta an entirely ‘English construction’? Calcutta as an administrative unit indeed emerged only after the establishment of English control
over the three villages of Gobindapur, Sutanuti and Kalikata, but the English presumption of a colonial birth of the town tends to be eurocentric when it denies the native origin of the city. However, it would be equally incorrect to ascribe an indigenous beginning to the city. The territory existed but the city emerged only as a result of interactions between the native residents and the foreigners. In effect, then, the city belonged exclusively neither to the colonialists nor to the natives.

Mir Jafar’s alliance with the British in 1757 altered the role of the English as mere merchants—they were now the king-makers in the Nawabi of Bengal. Post-Plassey, the British were incorporated completely into the Mughal structure of administration. By 1759 Clive was offered the Diwani of Bengal by the Mughal emperor. Mir Jafar’s alliance with the British in 1757 altered the role of the English as mere merchants—they were now the king-makers in the Nawabi of Bengal. Post-Plassey, the British were incorporated completely into the Mughal structure of administration. By 1759 Clive was offered the Diwani of Bengal by the Mughal emperor.

The Mughal system of administration had always accommodated groups of varying nationalities; the English were no different. But with the transfer of power from the Company to the Crown in 1858, the British abandoned even the myth of their continuing incorporation within and subordination to the Mughal imperial hierarchy. It was then that the need for constructing an English rhetoric of power presented itself as an immediate priority.

From 1858, Lord Canning, the first viceroy of India, began conducting tours of the British Indian Empire. During this tour, he conducted several durbars where the Indian princes and nobles were presented with honours for their loyalty during the mutiny of 1857. Modelled on the Mughal court ritual of incorporation—the honouree presented a nazar of gold coins or peshkash (gifts) to the Emperor who in turn honoured the person by endowing khelat (a piece of cloth symbolizing the Emperor enwrapping and thus incorporating the receiver within his paramountcy)—the British durbars presented the English in the role of the Mughal Emperor and the native rulers as their subjects. But for the British, this symbolic ritual of incorporation transformed into a capitalistic exchange of buying an honour, represented by a piece of cloth.

The indigenous theory of kingship in India was centred on the act of incorporation where the most powerful rulers not only “outranked everyone but could also encompass those they ruled.” Even before the rule of the Crown, the company officials tried to counteract the existing system of hierarchy by placing the English in the shoes of the Mughals. William Bentinck suggested the construction of an ‘Imperial’ capital as against the commercial Calcutta and this imperial city was to be none other than Akbar’s capital at Agra. For Bentinck, there was almost no difference between the
political condition during the rule of Akbar and his own, as both were concerned with the “preservation of the empire”.

It was with the passage of the Royal Titles Act on 27th April 1876, that declared Queen Victoria the Empress of India, that the claim of the British as successors of the Mughals was firmly established in their language of authority. Hence, in the English mind, the legitimacy of the British rule in India was to be derived from inheriting the sovereignty of the Mughal Empire. The Indian rulers were to be treated as feudatories under the British paramountcy, an ideology which saw its reflection in Lord Wellesley’s Subsidiary Alliance system. This rhetoric of power was not merely restricted to administrative policies but was the perennial source of British authority and as such was manifested extensively in the initial years of the Raj.

These amalgamations and/or contestations between the colonial rhetoric of power with the indigenous theory of kingship are exemplified in the literal ‘construction’ of the Capital—in its architecture. Debates in the Society of Arts in 1873 with regards to the architectural art in India centred around two arguments—on the one hand, T. Roger Smith, a renowned English architect of his time, believed that the style should be purely European, providing a distinct symbol of their presence and to be held with respect by the native; on the other end, William Emerson, another noted figure in the field of architecture, argued in favour of following the footsteps of the Mughals in incorporating the indigenous art and adapting it to their own needs.

As the historian Thomas R. Metcalf states, these debates on architectural styles were not merely a contestation of artistic taste but in a colonial environment, architecture represented the vision of the empire. Ever since the conquest of Ireland in the sixteenth century, the British imagination had placed itself as the new Romans with the charge of ‘civilising’ the backward people. As such, in the context of construction too, Smith looked back to the Roman colonies and called for strict adherence to the colonisers’ traditions. The use of Neo-classical forms of architecture in the government offices was a means to claim this Greco-Roman legacy. Consequently, the monuments which were constructed by the British carried in itself specific articulation of their authority.

A perfect example of this process of establishing authority via brick and mortar is the construction of Victoria Memorial in Calcutta. Commenced in 1902 in honour of the late Queen Victoria, the purpose of constructing a Memorial was to create something visible and monumental...
to mark the prestige of the Queen in particular and the Raj in general. Lord Curzon, the primary force behind the Memorial, felt that:

“During the two years which I had already spent in India, nothing had struck me more painfully than the almost complete lack in that country of relics or memorials of the great events through which it had passed, the thrilling scenes it had witnessed, the famous men, English and Indian, by whom it had been served...I felt that the lack of this historical sense—the surest spring of national self-respect—was injurious in its effect both upon English and Indian interests.”¹¹

He then goes on to state the effect that such neglect was having over the Indians:

“The Indians, unconscious of what a century and a half of Anglo-Indian connection had effected, were disposed, in the rising tide of national feeling, to find a justification for the latter in the memory of a remote and largely unhistorical past. Was there not, I thought, in the history of India itself in the past two centuries sufficient to gratify the sentiments both of pride and of hope?”¹²

The construction of the Victoria Memorial began in 1902, just three years before one of the most important turning points of Indian history—the Partition of Bengal in 1905. The revolts against the partition marked a major change in the character of nationalism in India. The ways of the erstwhile moderate and elite ‘reformers’ now had to give way to mass revolutions and protests. The years before the partition saw the build-up of this tension and widespread angst against the colonial government. Hence the Memorial can be seen as Curzon’s reply to the growing dichotomy between the colonisers and the nationalists. These emerging aggressive nationalists had constantly been seeking legitimacy for their imagination of the nation in their historical glory. Curzon was now trying to make one point clear—if Indians were to commemorate ‘national’ history, then the British were a part of that history too.

With regards to choosing Calcutta as the site of the Memorial, for Curzon, there was no question of any other alternative, given that Calcutta was where the Government of India resided and an Imperial Memorial should naturally endow the capital of the Empire. On the question of the architectural style of the Memorial, Curzon made it explicitly clear that “Calcutta—a city of European origin and construction” possessed no traditional style of its own to emulate. Also, the Mughal architecture would, according to Curzon, stand out of place in a commercial
capital as well as one in honour of a British Sovereign.\footnote{13} Given Curzon’s assertion that the building be made following the Italian Renaissance style, it was ironic that the architect he finally selected to construct the monument was none other than William Emerson, of whom we have spoken earlier. The Memorial was filled to the brim with symbols of the power and sovereignty of the British Empire. The museum of the Memorial was to be of “incalculable value to the education and the patriotism of the nation.”\footnote{14} India’s history, as perceived by the British, was to be glorified within these walls. Philip Davies regards the Memorial as “the most potent symbol of Empire erected anywhere in the world” while Jan Morris puts it more strongly as “Britain’s answer to the Taj Mahal”. But how much of it was an answer to the Taj as against an homage to it?

Curzon’s stress on an exclusive European architectural tradition did not find its way into implementation. The external sculpture on the North side, for instance, depicted the head of a lion from the mouth of which water flowed out and was distributed into four troughs. The troughs, for Curzon, represented the four major rivers of India—Ganga, Krishna, Indus and Yamuna—and the lion symbolized the life-giving role of the British in India.\footnote{15} However, for anyone well-versed with the Mughal architectural traditions, the presence of a fountain distributing water into four channels will not be a unique British architectural rhetoric. The Mughal gardens or Chaharbagh were divided into four channels intersecting at the centre which was marked by either a pool or a fountain. In the Mughal tradition, as Ebba Koch highlights, the Chaharbagh symbolised the Islamic heaven—gardens of Paradise underneath which rivers flow—and was based on the Quran.\footnote{16} These rivers were believed to be filled with water, honey, milk and wine, thus the four channels.

Let us now divert slightly to look into the floor plan of Shah Jahan’s Taj Mahal—the Hasht-bihist plan (Fig 1.1). Used for the first time in Humayun’s tomb, the plan of Hasht-bihist (eight paradises) was first applied in the Timurid architecture for the mausoleum of Ishrat Khana in 1464 CE. The Mughal adaptation of this Timurid tradition consisted externally of a square or a rectangle with its corners fortified but often chamfered to form an irregular octagon which was known as Muthamman-i-Baghdadi. Internally the layout was divided into nine parts consisting of a domed chamber at the centre, rectangular halls in the middle of the sides and two-storied vaulted rooms in the corners. The eight adjoining rooms were linked to the centre by additional diagonal passages. A careful analysis of the floor plan of Victoria Memorial reveals a layout similar
to the Mughal plan of *Muthamann-i-Baghdadi* (Fig 1.2).

Thus, despite the repeated assertion of a Victorian India and an exclusive English identity of Calcutta, the British, in part knowingly, were unable to refrain from employing the Mughal symbols of authority and, if Victoria Memorial is to be taken as the embodiment of the empire, then, constructed its empire on the very foundational plan of the Mughals. The Victoria Memorial was as much a ‘memorial’ to Victoria in Curzon’s mind as Taj Mahal was a symbol of love for Mumtaz Mahal in Shah Jahan’s mind. And one need not forget Curzon’s affinity for the Taj and his special interest in its maintenance. Thus, the Victoria Memorial aimed to serve as a visual representation of the British inheriting the sovereignty of Mughal Empire, its grandeur seeking to create a parallel between the capital of that Empire with the capital of their own Empire.


Fig 1.2 - Floor Plan of Victoria Memorial


Notes

10. Ibid., 179.
11. Ibid., 189.
12. Ibid., 186.
13. Ibid., 200.
15. Ibid., 44–45.

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