

Fast, Counter-Fast, Anti-Fast

Gandhi was the modern master of the fast. He taught modern India how to use the power of self denial in the political battleground. But his fasts were more than a gesture of defiance, they were a tool he used to create a universe of equanimity and silence within his body and mind. On the eve of Gandhi Jayanti, TOI-Crest looks at how 'anshan' fashioned the Gandhian world

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An epidemic of fasting has of late engulfed India. Some months ago, the social reformer Anna Hazare, whose activities over the last three decades had been largely confined to his village Ralegan Siddhi or the area around it, or at most to his native Maharashtra, burst upon the national scene with a five-day fast at Delhi's Jantar Mantar to highlight the problem of corruption. Hazare again pressed his demand for a Jan Lokpal Bill with a spectacular show of force at the Ramlila Grounds in August, and much of India's attention was riveted on the 74-year old man who, having put his body on the line with an indefinite fast, seemed to have stunned the government into submission. Many decades ago, in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi, George Orwell, in an appreciative if critical assessment of his life, marveled at the fact that Gandhi would take a public decision to fast and, as it seemed to Orwell, the entire country would come to a standstill — not once, or twice, but on a dozen or more occasions. Not for nothing was Gandhi the Mahatma. Some in our times have marveled at the fact that a former truck driver who has something of the appearance of a country bumpkin, and who seems to have little in his personal appearance, demeanor, oratorical skill, or worldview that might resonate with the middle classes, should be the one to revive memories of a time when Gandhian nonviolent resistance rewrote the rules governing dissent.

THE ANNA EFFECT

When Hazare went on a fast, so did 65 other men and women at Azad Maidan in Mumbai. Seventeen of them persisted to the end, breaking their fast on the thirteenth day alongside Hazare. One other who followed in Hazare's wake has now come into the limelight: Anna Hazare and Narendra Modi, the detractors of both say, are joined at the hip. They have openly expressed admiration for each other, though Hazare has stated that his advocacy of Modi does not extend beyond the chief minister's apparent skills in



OLD WONDER: Analysts marvel at the fact that Hazare, a former truck driver with little charisma, has assumed the Gandhian mantle

Sharmila, by contrast, has often been force-fed, released, and then re-arrested on her resumption of fasting. Her long struggle is more reminiscent of the 'cat and mouse' game waged between English suffragettes, led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, and the British government which led to the imposition of the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act in 1913, popularly dubbed the 'Cat and Mouse Act'. Nevertheless, in India the comparison with Gandhi is almost always unavoidable.

SANCTIONED BY HISTORY

Gandhi was the modern master of the fast; and, yet, he did not just stumble upon fasting, nor was he the first to come to an awareness of how the body could be inserted into the body politic and create waves. In one of his lesser-known plays, *"The King's Threshold"*, William Butler Yeats wrote about a practice long extant in Ireland (and, though Yeats was not entirely aware of this, in India). When a creditor was unable to collect an outstanding loan from a debtor, and found himself unable to call upon the forces of the state to help in the redressal of his grievance, he would come and sit outside the debtor's door and refuse to move — and thus refuse to eat. To sit dharna in India similarly means to render oneself into an obstacle; and this act of 'door-sitting', as more than one Indian medieval text informs us, has fasting as its necessary concomitant. India even had its own form of the medieval duel. It was not unknown for the debtor to commence fasting when the creditor refused to partake of food at his doorstep. We speak today of surrogate mothers and fathers, but India had long pioneered the idea of surrogate hunger strikers. If, as was often the case, the creditor was a moneylender, he occasionally hired a Brahmin to sit and fast in his place. Whoever prevailed could claim justice on his side.

There can scarcely be as dramatic a text for insights into traditions of political fasting in India as Kalhana's 12th century chronicle of the kings of Kashmir known as the *Rajatarangini*. This book by a Kashmiri Brahmin furnishes incontrovertible evidence of the widespread recourse to fasting. King Chandrapida himself fasted as a form of penance, in atonement for his inability to bring to justice the murderer of a man whose widow sought death by starvation unless punishment were inflicted on the guilty man (IV:82-99). The remedy of fasting, however, appears generally to have been available only to Brahmins, and Kalhana was not averse to passing sharp remarks on the ease with which members of his community would, singly or collectively, stage a hunger strike to safeguard their interests. As an illustration, Kalhana describes the events that transpired in the year 1143, in the reign of Jayasimha. Enraged by a plot to overthrow the king, in which they suspected the hand of the ministers Trillaka and Jayaraja, 'and anxious to safeguard the country', the Brahmins commenced a hunger strike 'directed against', notes Kalhana, 'the king' — the king because he had, through his weakness and inaction, permitted the kingdom to fall into ruins. Kalhana suggests that the Brahmins may at first have been moved by noble intentions; but, 'intoxicated with their own knavery', they 'obstinately persisted in their perfidious course' until they had prevailed upon the king to dismiss his honest minister Alamkara and promise them that he would 'uproot Trillaka after he had disposed of the pretenders to the crown' (VIII:2737). Elsewhere Kalhana describes the contagion of fasting: in 1211 AD, when the Brahmins at Aksosuva 'held a solemn fast directed against the king' to protest against the pillage of their monastery, the Brahmins 'in the capital' followed suit, and were in turn emulated by 'the members of the Temple Purohit Association' (VIII:898-900). Hunger strikes had become so common, if Kalhana is to be believed, that officials were appointed to be especially 'in charge of hunger-strikes' (VI:14).

Though there is nothing to suggest that Gandhi was aware of the *Rajatarangini*, there is but no question that he had some familiarity with Indian traditions of hunger striking. He termed most hunger strikes, which he distinguished from fasts, as a form of *duragraha* — a distinction that today is upheld in the contrast between *anshan* and *upvasa*. Gandhi would have been the first to recognize that there may never be anything like a pure fast, entirely free of coercion — certainly not if one's fast is in the public domain, or likely to have political consequences. Many of the principles of fasting to which he adhered are now common knowledge, and everyone recognizes, for example, Gandhi's insistence on listening to one's inner voice, or his idea that fasting is a form of communion between oneself and one's own God. Rather than trying to resolve whether Hazare, Modi, Vaghela, and others meet the standards that Gandhi set for himself when he embarked on a fast, we might try to aim at a different comprehension of the Gandhian universe itself. Gandhi's many fasts, his enemas, his weekly day of silence, and much more: all this was a way of emptying himself, reducing himself to zero, silencing the noise within, rejuvenating his tired limbs and mind — all the more so that he could lead life to the fullest. How does one begin to comprehend the enormity of a life where one's own body becomes the site of ecological homage to mother Earth? ■

THE WRITER IS A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND CULTURAL CRITIC WHO DIVIDES HIS TIME BETWEEN DELHI AND LOS ANGELES

shepherding Gujarat to the model 'development state' in India. Two weeks ago, Modi commenced his 'Sadbhavana' mission, and his letter to the public, issued as a full-page advertisement in newspapers across India and featured on his slick website, which is available in five languages, described his 72-hour fast as 'a prayer for togetherness'.

The 21st century first century, wrote Modi, 'did not begin well for Gujarat. In 2001, the devastating earthquake on our Republic Day, took a very heavy toll. In the subsequent year, Gujarat became the victim of communal violence. We lost innocent lives, suffered devastation of property and endured lot of pain.' Many see this statement as the first expression of atonement by Modi in the nearly 10 years since the pogrom against Muslims, in which Modi and many senior officials in his government are believed to be implicated, took over 2,000 lives and rendered tens of thousands more homeless. 'I am grateful to all those', Modi adds, 'who pointed out my genuine mistakes during [the] last 10 years.' Modi does not, of course, admit that it was largely the Muslims who were the victims; indeed, like any good officer of the law, he is careful not to mention any community by name. It is Gujarat that became 'the victim of communal violence': the passive construction encourages the reader to believe that there was no agency in the killings; no responsibility can be assigned for the crimes that occurred.

MAN VS FOOD

Every action, Modi had famously said when the killings were taking place, leads to a reaction, '*Kriya pratikriya ki chain chal rahi hai*'; as Donald Rumsfeld put it, apropos of the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad and other atrocities following the American invasion of Iraq, 'Stuff happens.' When the Supreme Court ruled that it would send the case against Modi back to the High Court, Modi and his friends swiftly interpreted the gesture as a vindication of the chief minister. 'God is great', Modi had tweeted, but his public letter on the eve of his fast does not even remotely advert to this background. His letter concludes with the rationale for his fast: Modi will 'continue to pray to the Almighty' so that he develops the strength that prevents him from harbouring 'any ill-feeling or bitterness' towards those who defamed the state of Gujarat and maligned him personally.

No sooner had Modi announced his fast than he began to be taken to task. The Congress, not surprisingly, described it as a 'gimmick', and it was soon characterised as a 'five-star' fast and public 'spectacle' when it surfaced that Modi would hold the fast in Gujarat University's Convention Hall amidst 2,000 policemen, elaborate media arrangements, LCD screens, 10 counters to receive bouquets and gifts, and teams of medical specialists. Meanwhile, Shankersinh Vaghela, a one-time BJP leader who is now one of the more prominent faces of the Congress in Gujarat, announced that he would counter Modi with his fast at Ahmedabad's Sabarmati Ashram. The Sabarmati Ashram is a hugely symbolic site, but not only for the obvious reason that it was here that Gandhi established a foothold upon his return from South Africa or that it is from the ashram that Gandhi launched his

march to Dandi. Sabarmati Ashram, in a shocking repudiation of everything that Gandhi stood for, shut its doors to Muslims seeking refuge from marauding bands of killers in 2002. Even if Gandhi's legacy has been mercilessly dumped in his home state, even if at every turn middle class Gujaratis have rejected him as the very antithesis of what a modern, developed, and respected nation-state ought to look like, Modi and Vaghela have not been slow to understand that Gandhi's name still carries immense cultural capital.

Hazare, Modi, Vaghela: these are only the more visible faces among countless numbers who in India have taken to fasting, and in their midst are the likes of Irom Sharmila, a 38-year-old woman from Manipur who has been fasting since 2000 in her quest to have the state repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), a draconian piece of legislation that activists describe as the death-knell of democracy. Gandhi never had to suffer the indignity of being force-fed; Irom



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FIVE-STAR FAST: The Congress dubbed Modi's fast a 'gimmick' when it surfaced that it would take place in Gujarat University's premises amidst 2,000 policemen, LCDs, ten counters to receive gifts, and medical specialists

