

## OBITUARY

# Narayan Desai: A Blissful Life of Total Revolution

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The 15 March 2015 passing of Gandhian educator Narayan Desai, as has been pointed out in numerous obituaries, signals the death of the last of a generation of elders who literally grew up with the “Mahatma/great soul” so often iconized as the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century saint. As the son of Mahadev Desai – Gandhi’s personal secretary, close friend, and biographer – Narayan was brought up in the Ashrams at Sabarmarti, Ahmedabad and Sevagram, and spoke often of his childhood experiences as a student of India’s founding father. Much of Narayan’s work did include retelling the high points of his youth and completing the work of his father, which he accomplished in part through the publication of several books. But it would be a vast mistake to freeze Narayan’s contributions to the shadow of his early years. The ninety-year story of Narayan Desai is a rich chronicle of resistance movements and radical campaigns, of organization and institution-building for nothing short of what he and others would boldly call “total revolution.”

The title of Narayan’s 1988 book aptly summarizes his feelings about the movements that would characterize his life: *Bliss Was It to be Young with Gandhi* (Desai, 1988). The slim and highly accessible volume relates his reminiscences and reveals some foundational experiences which would shape Narayan for years to come. An overheard conversation between his parents, for example, led Narayan to realize that both had decided they believed he was old enough for them to risk their lives in an almost certain-death scenario on the eastern border,

where the WWII Japanese army had been lobbing bombs into India. Gandhi's own opinions about how best to respond to the war had gone through several permutations, from not giving even moral support to the Allies because war itself makes criminals of all sides, to praise and support for the Polish armed resistance to Nazism, which Gandhi felt was futile but heroic.

Narayan reiterated, in *Bliss* as well as other sources, Gandhi's long-standing precept that resisting injustice violently was far better than not resisting at all – but also noted that Gandhi was working out an alternative nonviolent response. He vividly recalled the detailed response to foreign army occupation that his parents, under Gandhi's direction, were readying for:

“Beforehand, the would-be aggressors might be weaned from their intention by acts of good will and kinship, service, and a counterforce of love. During the invasion, unarmed volunteers would mass themselves at the border and offer themselves as cannon fodder, hoping to awaken the invaders consciences. If the aggressors pressed on into the country, they would be met by an entire nation that resisted them by such means as refusal to cooperate, or total boycott (Desai, 1988).”

Though the end of World War Two took place without the anticipated Japanese invasion of India and the need for his parents to prepare for their ultimate sacrifice, Narayan's father died of a heart attack in 1942 – several years before Indian independence and while still incarcerated with Gandhi. Following Gandhi's assassination in 1948, piecemeal attempts at building Gandhian constructive programs were developed by the *Sarvodaya* (Welfare of All) movement, led by Vinoba Bhavé and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) and gained momentum throughout the 1950s and 1960s. JP in particular believed that people must be directly involved in all aspects of social change, and asserted that all the youth of the world should join together for total revolution – deciding for themselves what form of action they needed to take (Ostergaard, 1985). Deeply affected by JP's combination of Gandhian principles and militant political practicalities, Narayan Desai became a strong supporter of JP's total revolution campaigns.

Total revolution, in JP's conception, was made up of at least seven distinct elements within the larger project of radically

transforming society. These elements were: economic (including tradition class, natural, and moral components), political, social, cultural, ideological or intellectual, educational, and spiritual change. Without all seven components, JP concluded, the total revolutionary potential of a society could not be complete (Narayan, 1978). This overt mixture of Marxist and Gandhian philosophies began to forge a new, people's power approach to liberation theory (Girdner, 2013), and – as a core organizer in both the Boodhan land gift movement of the 1950s and a leader of the Shanti Sena Peace Army of the early 1960s – Narayan Desai became closely affiliated with these attempts at implementing revolutionary aspects of the nonviolent campaigns.

The work of Shanti Sena, building a highly disciplined peace force to stand up against actual military opposition, was the leading Indian version of an idea being taken up globally at the time. The founding of the World Peace Brigade (WPB), which took place in Lebanon over the 1961/62 New Year, saw Narayan as the youngest of the Indian delegates – but one who quickly emerged in a role far beyond that of liaison with the Shanti Sena. He traveled to Pakistan, the USA, Russia, England, Japan, and throughout Scandinavia in those early years; he had already visited youth colleagues in West Africa (Hare, 2008). The idea for a WPB grew out of discussions during a Triennial conference of the secular pacifist War Resisters International (WRI), and Narayan also came to work in those years with WRI Pan African spokesperson Bill Sutherland (who was now based in Tanzania), and with Vietnamese Buddhist leader Vo Van Ai (War Resisters International, 1969).

Out of these Indian and international experiences, Narayan compiled one of his earliest influential books – *Towards a Nonviolent Revolution* (Desai, 1972). In it, he laid down some basic thoughts on the nature of nonviolence training, including the inter-related aspects of work – community, field, and theoretical – which adherents must become adept in. The structures, curriculum, and schedules of peace schools, youth camps, and adult training sessions were all explored. They foreshadowed a conversation held years later at a 1983 meeting of the WRI Council. “Activists in the US didn’t seem to want to spend the time preparing for nonviolent actions,” recalled Joanne Sheehan, who was later to follow Narayan as a Chair of the WRI. I asked Narayan what he thought a proper length of time was for nonviolence trainings.

Narayan quickly responded, ‘I think 16 years is a good beginning!’ (Sheehan, 2015).” Training for nonviolent revolution was surely a life-long process.

By 1975, the post-Gandhian movement in India split along several lines. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, daughter of Gandhian disciple and first independence Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, had ruled for almost ten years, and though considered generally progressive by some she was also criticized for widespread corruption and continued militarism – especially in regards to neighboring Pakistan. JP, with Narayan Desai’s assistance, helped set up the Janata People’s Party – calling for Prime Minister Gandhi’s resignation and eventually winning the 1977 national elections against the Indian Congress Party. Though the victory was short-lived, as the leftist coalition government itself divided into a number of factions, it signaled the potential power of a mobilized, politicized, and strategically flexible population. Upon JP’s death in 1979, Narayan returned to Gujurat province and set up the Institute for Total Revolution that would seek to systematize the trainings and consciousness necessary for multi-faceted social change. The idea that nonviolence and total revolution were essentially ways of life was reiterated in Desai’s *Handbook for Satyagrahis* (Desai, 1980), written as a manual for volunteers of the Total Revolution programs.

“The [Institute for Total Revolution],” Narayan explained, “signified not the achievement but the aspiration” and should be understood as a counter-point to the “total crisis that the society was facing (Hare, 2008, pp. 23-24).” With Narayan’s wife Uttara serving as the informal administrator of the Institute, Narayan was able to concentrate on teaching and leading seminars – one or more daily – and to lead short-term training camps which would be held on the grounds. Student enrollment and course work was completely individualized; people would come to learn, stay for the time they could, and create (with the on-sight teachers) the course of study that would suit them best. Teachers and students would together decide and create the curriculum, duration, and level of study – and embark on the work cooperatively. From the outset, Narayan and Uttara Desai also decided that the Institute would accept no money from any Indian governmental agencies, nor from foreign aid organizations. Their small budget was entirely raised through local contributions.

In 1981, picking up where WPB had left off and taking inspiration from the Shanti Sena movement. Narayan helped found Peace Brigades International (PBI), which began its tenure as a hand-on, grassroots solidarity mechanism for the Central American movements in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Ultimately expanding work to include Sri Lanka, Haiti, Colombia, the Balkans, Mexico, Kenya and beyond (Peace Brigades International, Retrieved 2015), PBI continues to work as an unarmed interventionary force inserting itself in conflict situations. Serving for some years as PBI's Director, Narayan used these opportunities, in the words of PBI International Secretary Mary Link, "to bring Gandhian nonviolence to the next generation and those younger than us as well (Link, 2015)."

In 1983, Narayan joined the Council of the War Resisters International, working closely with WRI former Chair and Indian artist and writer Devi Presad. Together they urged the WRI to hold their triennial conferences somewhere in the developing world – harkening back on the work Narayan and others had focused upon two decades before. With some difficulty, and ultimately due to the promises made by the two of the tremendous work they would put into it, the 1985-1986 WRI Triennial (held over New Year's Eve) took place in Vedcchi with the Institute as host and sponsor. Calling that conference "one of the highlights of the Institute's success," Narayan noted that representatives from thirty-two countries and six continents were in attendance, with greater Asian participation than at any previous WRI proceeding (Hare, 2008). Three year later, Narayan was elected Chair of the WRI, and continued working with the organization for twenty-five years until the next time WRI held a major conference in India, in Ahmedabad in 2010. By this time Narayan had been selected Chancellor of the Gujarat Vidyapith, the Ahmedabad-based university which Gandhi himself had founded in 1920. Again serving as host for the WRI conference, Narayan's focus on radical work within the so-called developing world remained undeterred – and that conference brought together significant delegations from Africa and Latin America as well.

Perhaps the most significant project Narayan embarked on as WRI Chair was a 1991 tour of eleven Latin America countries, sponsored by Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAZ, the continent-wide nonviolence network founded by Nobel peace laureate Adolfo Perez

Esquivel). The points of unity and collaborative possibilities uncovered by the coming together of these coalition-building giants helped set a course for international peace work for years to come. With direct communication, it became clear that there was fertile ground for strong cooperation and that – as Narayan put it, “We must share much more of our experience...and we will find not only many things in common but also understand our problems much better than what we can in isolation (Meyer N. D., 1991).” Organized as a bilateral, mutual exchange program, the three months of conversations exploded a number of myths that Desai had been prepared for, including that Latin Americans would not be interested in Gandhi or nonviolence *per se* (only “relentless persistence” as the Brazilian peace and landless movement put it). The need for greater South-South work came into even sharper perspective for him, as did the more substantial differences between the movements of the North and South.

As Narayan stated:

“A sort of violence which is not generally perceived in the west is the structural violence of the society. During the past years, many Latin American countries have seen political change from dictatorship to so-called democracy – that political change has not satisfied most people and they want deeper change. And they associate that deeper change with Total Revolution...The exploitation, the colonization, the insults, their dignity being attacked is something that they thought was violence much more than the killing of a few people here or there...We in the South have so many things in common and yet know so little about each other...I always begin: ‘My objective is south-to-south dialogue’... and they say ‘That is exactly what we want.’ (Meyer N. D., 1991).”

An international nonviolence training for trainers, dominated by Western European and US trainers, led Narayan to call for a distinctly Southern trainers gathering, which took place in Vedcchi in 1993. The following year, WRI as an entire network held their Triennial in Brazil with Perez Esquivel as a speaker, deepening the ties with SERPAZ that Narayan had established. At the 1994 Brazil Triennial, a WRI Africa Working Group was formed to focus more consistent and intentional work with nonviolence leaders on that continent. A second Southern Trainers gathering took place in Thailand in 1996, and in the same year a WRI-influenced International Conscientious Objectors Movement

conference took place in the central African nation of Chad, bringing together elders such as Bill Sutherland and new peace practitioners from central and West Africa (Sutherland, 2000).

By the time the 2010 WRI conference took place in Ahmedabad, Narayan Desai had completed two major projects which occupied most of his life and time since the turn of the new century. The five-day “Gandhi Katha” was a public rendering of the Story of Gandhi, using music, pictures, and Narayan’s detailed reminiscences and analysis. Though well into his 80s, Desai’s passionate energy for the topic and extensive teaching skills made the long event a much-acclaimed must-see production through Gujarat, India, and much of the world. Over the course of ten years, from 2004-2013, Desai performed the Katha well over 100 times in at least three languages (The Times of India, 2013). Perhaps even more impressive was the completion of his father’s life-project, authoring a comprehensive biography of Gandhi that would serve both as a whole life overview as well as an insightful text looking deeply into the contradictions and controversies taken on by “the great soul.” The four-volume, 2300 page *My Life Is My Message* (Desai, 2009) is nothing short of an attempt to provide a loving, careful, and comprehensive look at the life of a man revered by so many.

The WRI Ahmedabad conference was also noteworthy for the concluding message that Desai gave to the gathering. Reiterating many themes that he had long shared, his emphasis was on the ways in which total revolution and satyagraha in particular were often misunderstood and limited, especially in their international applications. Too often defined only as “soul force” and practiced as a quasi-religious ritual, satyagraha was not only meant by Gandhi to describe “truth-force” but also to assert “love-force” and the transformative, revolutionary power of love (Ndura, 2013). In addition, WRI Ahmedabad saw the earnest beginning of another of Narayan’s long-standing visions which became reality at Cape Town, South Africa’s City Hall in 2014: the development of a major revolutionary nonviolence network and WRI conference in Africa (D’Almeida, 2014). Desai’s vision of South-South cooperation building a force for total revolution was bearing tangible fruit.

“At least three generations of Indians benefitted” from Narayan Desai’s unique work and perspective, noted National Alliance of

People's Movements leader and Saathi of the Association of India's Development Anand Mazgoankar, himself one of the key organizers of the 2010 conference. "He travelled around the world, absorbed the best that he saw everywhere, and in that way enriched his repertoire." (Mazgoankar, 2015)." International Peace Research Association Nonviolence Commission convener Vidya Jain, who also directs the Centre for Gandhian Studies at the University of Rajasthan in Jaipur, India, added that Narayan Desai had become a living legend among Gandhians in India, admired and loved in part because of his life-long practice but also because "in spite of his old age, he has continued to regularly hold training camps for the youth." As Jain noted: "all peace scholars across the globe salute him (Jain, 2015)."

Beyond the Global South, Narayan Desai's life and work has inspired leaders in a multitude of ways. WRI Chair Jørgen Johansen, a Scandinavian total resister who followed Desai at the helm of the WRI, noted that Narayan's near-constant spinning of cotton became the symbol of total revolution for him. Johansen was able to observe firsthand "the combination of constructive work and political activities which were for many years in good balance (Johansen, 2015)." US pacifist and Socialist Party leader David McReynolds, also noted Narayan's undeniable influence. Though Narayan was "remarkable in many ways," it was his bliss and love of life, and the ways in which he developed his own community in Vedecchi decades after Gandhi's passing, which most struck McReynolds: "His smiling face remains with me: a man whose village shoed what could be done, who could give a glimpse of the alternatives which are possible (McReynolds, 2015)."

Narayan Desai's well-lived life – as a devoted satyagrahi and Gandhian disciple, as a devout revolutionary organizer and theoretician, as a decorated educator and story-teller, as a much-quoted author and coordinator of international organizations – helps lay a foundation for the much-needed conceptual reinvention of both revolution and nonviolence. Though Narayan's mortal body is now gone, the ideals for which he stood must surely live on. Perhaps now is the time to build an International Institute for Total Revolution, which incorporates an increasing number of indigenous ideologies and practices, including feminist and transgendered non-binary ways of looking at the world and at ourselves. Building on the diverse work of Narayan Desai, we could begin to re-imagine and reconstruct a truly revolutionary praxis.



With a sense of hope and even bliss, such a revolution might indeed be total.

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