Why Resistance is at the Heart of Decolonisation in India and Aotearoa

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Histories of colonisation ought to be remembered, including the horrors and atrocities, but also the endurance and empowerment found in trenchant resistance and the fight for sovereignty, writes Radhika Reddy.

India and Aotearoa are both grappling with decolonisation. In this ongoing struggle to wrest free from the legacies of colonialism, each society can learn from the other.

A recent piece published by The Spinoff uncovered some of these lessons, but in my view gave a rather disempowering view of both Māori and Indian experiences. It emphasised tragedy, brutality and suffering, but overlooked trenchant resistance efforts seeking sovereignty, where we might find the most useful stories to exchange.

Common ground

The previous article began with common ground, but only focused on Māori and Hindu ecological values, so let's broaden the picture with some Indian traditions beyond Hinduism, and decolonising Māori values.

Papatūānuku and Kaitiakitanga: Khalifa, Amana (from Islam)

An "ethos of living in harmony in nature" is found in Islam, India's second-largest religion. The Quranic approach is based on Khalifa and Amana (trusteeship of nature) in which humans have guardianship over nature, to appreciate and care for it, pass it unspoiled to future generations, and manage sustainably.

Manaakitanga: Seva (from Sikhism)

A spirit of hospitality pointedly appears in the centuries-old Sikh tradition of Guru Ka Langar (communal meal), an act of Seva (selfless service). Langar serves food freely and equally to all-comers, regardless of religion, caste, wealth, gender or age, overcoming divisions exploited by colonialism.

Tino rangatiratanga: Swaraj (from secularism)

Māori notions of self-government and Gandhi's credo of Swaraj (self-rule) share an essence of seeking self-determination, with social structures and values separate from colonial interference.

Besides principles, there are common experiences and episodes of resistance shared in history:

Parihaka

The events of Parihaka came long before India's independence movement gained momentum, but the spirit of non-violent resistance echoes across centuries, possibly having influenced Gandhi.

Redcoats

British regiments frequently rotated through India and New Zealand. Waves of veterans, after plundering India or suppressing its rebellions, came to fight the New Zealand Wars, or left to police India. British statues as well as town, street and suburb names across Aotearoa are familiar to students of Indian history — Empress Victoria, Governor-General Auckland, Colonel then Commander-in-Chief Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington), and places like Bombay or Khyber Pass. These are connected histories.

Lessons India has to offer for Māori

Among decolonisation projects, India's imperfect story of independence still has interesting lessons.

Non-violent resistance works

Māori have led non-violent resistance in Aotearoa for generations, from Parihaka to Ihumātao, and may find the example of India's liberation a hopeful landmark victory in global history.

The practice of Indian non-violent resistance continues to this day, as protests rage against likely unconstitutional policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens, with assemblies, marches, sit-ins, and art, despite state violence.

Coexistence

Although India ejected British occupation and suffers internal divisions, there is still a firm thread running through the ages demonstrating coexistence between different cultures.

Look to chapters in history like the peaceful inclusion of Muslims in South India since the seventh century, the religious tolerance of Akbar in the 16th century, the joint Hindu-Muslim Indian Rebellion of 1857, and the secular Indian constitution. They contrast with divisive ideologies like Hindutva founder V.D Savarkar's two-nation theory that promoted a dominant Hindu nation. The daily lives of many Indians today embody inter-cultural acceptance, the norm across much of the country, most of the time.

Whereas Aotearoa may not return its settler society for a full refund, multicultural coexistence is possible.

Overcoming divide-and-rule

Whether it was the East India Companies or the British Raj, a small minority of power brokers ran the show — infamously, 35 staff in an East India Company office. They relied on divide-and-rule, recruiting vast numbers of Indian foot soldiers (Sepoys) to do the hard work. But a highly-leveraged organisational arrangement is weak to united resistance (like Kotahitanga). Today it appears in gig economies or the criminal justice industry, which pit marginalised people against each other.

Self-government is not always good government

Today's India shows how things can get wobbly even 70 years after independence, as a homegrown blood-and-soil movement undermines equality and reproduces colonial hierarchies atop a diverse society.

Take the word "decolonisation". It probably looks straightforward, but it is a co-opted term in India. In the name of decolonisation, the Hindutva movement promotes discriminatory reforms, such as ending affirmative action for lower-caste people, and passing the exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act.

There are regions under Indian rule seeking greater autonomy or Azaadi (freedom) today – resisting occupation by a central Indian state, as Assam endures detention centres, and Kashmir a militarised siege.

It takes eternal vigilance to protect hard-won sovereignty from sabotage.

What India can learn from Māori

Colonialism is now

It is tempting to think colonialism must belong only to museums and history books. But settler-colonial societies still persist. In Aotearoa, settlers may have settled but the nation remains unsettled. As Treaty negotiations, claims and protests unfold, Indians can reflect on how the colonial legacy is fed by continuous re-colonisation – a risk India is prone to, not from Britain, but from, say, supremacists within.

Indians in Aotearoa can also respond by allying with Māori in decolonisation efforts.

Overcoming casteism and anti-indigeneity

While there is no comparing two complex societies, there are still parallels between the institutional discrimination that Māori have endured, and the discrimination against Dalit, Other Backward Class, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Adivasi (indigenous) people. As Indians in Aotearoa can find solidarity with Māori in undoing colonial oppression, so too can India find equality for its systematically disadvantaged classes.

Protecting taonga like language

While India is blessed with a diversity of cultures, a tendency to homogenise society with one language and identity sometimes rears its head. Whether under well-meaning secularism, or Hindutva rule, language imposition threatens diversity. South Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada are spoken by large minorities but are often in tension with a Hindi regime pushed by central governments. The experience of Te Reo Māori shows the value in preserving languages, and the perils of erasure.

Common struggles

Supremacism

Whether it is white supremacy or Hindu supremacy (sharing traits like Islamophobia), countering dangerous ideologies is vital to fulfill the egalitarian promise of the constitutions of both Aotearoa and India.

Climate change

A global challenge like climate change demands a variety of solutions, but most importantly by centering indigenous people in decision-making — something Aotearoa has yet to fully embrace. For all the "harmony with nature" embedded in dominant Indian cultures such as Hinduism, the ruling BJP government has much to answer for when it comes to emissions, environmental degradation and deregulation.

Feminism, LGBT and disability equality

Achieving equality for women, non-binary, LGBT and disabled people in India and Aotearoa is an ongoing struggle. Threats like sexual abuse, domestic violence, inadequate healthcare, colourism, repressive gender roles, limited autonomy, inaccessiblity, and economic inequality, are common concerns.

Patriarchal British norms echo in Indian laws, as with Section 377 that criminalised homosexuality until recently. Despite decriminalisation in 2018, there is not yet recognition of same-sex or gender-diverse marriage, protection against discrimination, or adequate healthcare. Trans Indians are targeted by the new Transgender Persons Act which sanctions second-class treatment — for instance, it provides for lower sentences in cases of violent crimes against trans women. The new Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens especially threaten women, non-binary, LGBT and disabled people.

In Aotearoa, amendments to laws like the Birth, Deaths, Marriages, and Relationships Registration Bill, letting trans people more easily update birth certificates, still face transphobic opposition. Abortion decriminalisation remains under consideration. Māori may be worst affected by settler-colonial sexism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism.

These are signs that our societies have a long way to go, to enact systemic reforms, and to lift the veil of everyday shame and silence surrounding marginalised lives in our cultures.

Remembering

Histories of colonisation ought to be remembered, including the horrors and atrocities, but also the endurance and empowerment found in resistance. The previous Spinoff article proposed a museum dedicated to New Zealand colonisation, and praised changes to the curriculum teaching New Zealand history in all schools.

Both of these are laudable goals, but must be conducted with care to avoid the kind of revisionism seen in India under Hindutva rule. Any museum of New Zealand colonisation should seek to share with

all New Zealanders the narratives Māori have learned and developed, to centre Māori self-determination and agency, and to emphasise coexistence under a Treaty framework that respects Tino Rangatiratanga.

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