Only one word, properly altered: Gandhi and the question of the prostitute

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In a foreword in 1919 to the first Indian edition in English of Indian Home Rule (as many early English translations of Hind Swaraj were titled), Gandhi wrote:

if I had to revise it, there is only one word I would alter in accordance with a promise made to an English friend. She took exception to my use of the word ‘prostitute’ in speaking of the Parliament. Her fine taste recoiled from the indelicacy of the expression.2

As the ‘only’ suggests, Gandhi did not think of the change that he suggested as major—it was merely a matter of making the book a little less indelicate [gramya—also rural] so that it would not upset fine tastes (such as that of Annie Besant, whom Anthony Parel speculates was the ‘English friend’) [komal dil—sensitive minds]. Effectively, he seemed to contemplate an alteration that retained the argument signalled by the word—the argument that more robust minds would already have muscled onto, brushing past the word.

What is at stake in this word, and in the desire to alter it?

Here, I would like to argue that the word is not only a forceful manifestation of the sexism which pervades Hind Swaraj, and that the proposed alteration is not only an ineffectual attempt to mute this sexism. More, the word and the desire to alter it are a symptom of a trembling in the texture of Hind Swaraj itself.3

The word veshya (prostitute) marks the moment when a certain tension within Hind Swaraj over the question of the proper becomes especially fraught. It occurs at a crucial turn in the book’s argument. Hind Swaraj is organised as a dialogue between a nationalist Reader who is willing to use violence to drive the British out of India, and an Editor who, ventriloquising Gandhi’s explicit positions, argues that such violence would not bring about swaraj [home rule]. For the Reader, initially, swaraj is a self-evident term: it involves driving out the British but retaining British institutions. By the fourth chapter, the Editor has problematised this understanding, suggesting that ‘this means that we want English rule, but don’t want the English’.5 With this rejection, swaraj is no longer a self-evident term. Now the question can be seriously asked: what is swaraj?
The fourth chapter draws to a close with the Reader asking the Editor this question. The Editor refuses an immediate answer. ‘There is still time […] I find it just as difficult to understand swaraj as you find it easy.’

What makes the question of swaraj so vertiginous in Hind Swaraj is that it is meticulously attentive to the prefix swa in Gandhi’s writing—for instance, swadharma, swadeshi, swaadhyaya, swaroop. But what is one’s own? To ask this question seriously is to insist that the own is not transparent, it is to ask: what is proper to the own? Etymologically, this questioning nature of the own, which always transforms a thoughtful consideration of the own into a concern for the proper, is marked in both the swa and its European cognate se—both carry connotations of the proper.

In the word swaraj, furthermore, the swa is conjoined with raj—a term conventionally rendered as rule. Hind Swaraj: involved in this title is the question of the proper nature of rule for India or Hind. And attending to this question is itself impossible without attention to the ownmost or proper nature of the proper—what it is (if indeed the proper ‘is’), and what its rule would entail.

This insistence on thinking the proper produces Gandhi’s attack on ‘civilisation’, which he also sometimes describes as ‘modern civilisation’ [aadhunik sudhaaraa]. To such ‘modern civilisation’, he opposes ‘true civilisation’ [kharu sudhaara], which stays with the question of the proper. For the Reader, because the swa is transparent, not worth hesitating over, swaraj is simply self-rule—an Indian sovereignty instead of British sovereignty, best achieved by adopting ‘modern civilisation’.

For Gandhi, in contrast, the sovereignty involved in ‘modern civilisation’ cannot be swaraj since it is not attentive to the swa. Indeed, Gandhi thought only one thought about ‘modern civilisation’—that it erased and forgot the swa or proper. For Gandhi, ‘modern civilisation’ eschewed the finitude of the proper and claimed infinity and godliness for itself. Within its terms the question of the proper and thus of swaraj could not even be raised. Thus the remark at the end of Chapter Four: ‘when viewed truly, what you call swaraj is not swaraj’. Viewed truly, which is to say viewed in terms of the swa that it did not attend to, ‘modern civilisation’ was not swaraj.

Through attentiveness to the word veshya and its alteration, this essay seeks to elicit not only this thought about the swa and ‘modern civilisation’, but its unthought.

While Hind Swaraj criticises ‘modern civilisation’ for not staying with the proper, and while it affirms a staying with the proper, it nevertheless remains profoundly fractured in its own thinking of the proper, and of swaraj. The word veshya and the desire to alter it are particularly forceful, even violent, symptoms of this fracture. The term occurs during the discussion of swaraj in Chapter Five. When the Reader describes the English Parliament as the mother of Parliaments, as effectively the model of the swaraj for Indians, the Editor says: ‘That which you call the mother of Parliaments, that Parliament is a vaanjani [sterile woman] and a veshya [prostitute].’
In this use of the term *veshya* to describe Parliament, and in the later desire to alter it, two heterogeneous and even antithetical ways of thinking the *swa* or the proper clash. One of these ways—the one that Gandhi most evidently affirms—is, in a sense that I will soon indicate, conservative: it is disturbed by the impropriety of the Parliament as *veshya* and seeks to re-establish a properly substantive order.

The other way (and why I describe it as Gandhi’s unthought will emerge) breaks with this conservative critique of ‘modern civilisation’, and stays with the question of the ownmost or proper nature of the proper. It is the insistent force of this question that makes Gandhi’s unthought press so urgently on us today. In this essay, I shall be considering two registers of this question.

First, there is the register of violence. It is surely a striking feature of modern thought—or more precisely of the ontotheological tradition—that its concept of violence is that of abstraction from presence (and the even more impoverished statist idea, derived from this concept, of violence as wrong measure). To the extent that the concept is inseparable from measure, violence is thought of as constitutive of the order of the concept. This is why the ontotheological tradition has often regarded measure itself as the primary violence. In its most explicit (and conservative) thinking of the *swa*, *Hind Swaraj* remains within this tradition. Here, violence is rejected by emphasising a constitutive and substantive *separateness* which is heterogeneous to measure and is therefore non-violent. Yet on closer scrutiny, we will see, this separateness turns out to be founded on its own measure and violence.

This closer scrutiny, I will argue, also yields *Hind Swaraj*’s unthought—another thinking where the *swa* is marked not by a constitutive separateness but a constitutive *separation* produced by a giving without measure, where the *swa* is a separation which does not allow oneself to be constituted as one, as present. Concomitantly, violence (and not just the violence of colonialism) here comes to be thought not as measure that abstracts from substantive presence, but as the measure of what can only be given without measure, the *swa* or proper, as the measure which itself organises the ontotheological opposition of abstraction and presence.

Second, it would be very easy (and justified) to view Gandhi’s questioning of Parliament as produced by a conservative suspicion of representative democracy. But I would like to suggest that this questioning also, in its unthought, pushes the stakes of democratic thinking to a point where the name democracy is itself no longer appropriate. Trying to think an equality and empowerment of the people, democratic thinking—whether it proceeds to emphasise the majority, minority or the part that has no part—proceeds, as the suffix ‘cracy’ suggests, within the thought of sovereignty.

*Hind Swaraj*, in contrast, insists on an equality and separation that cannot be subsumed under sovereignty. *What would be a democratic politics that remains heterogeneous to democratic sovereignty? Would it even still go under the name democracy?*—this is another question raised by Gandhi’s insistence on the proper. *Swaraj*: this does not mean only the rule of the proper, it also asks questions about the proper of rule itself. Can this proper of rule be thought under the concept-suffix ‘cracy’? What is the violence that this
concept-suffix practises? What would be a politics (if we can still call it a politics) that breaks with this concept-suffix?

_Hind Swaraj_ reaches these questions because it breaks with the modern tradition of conceptualising domination as the taking away of power and agency, and of conceptualising resistance as the recovery of agency. Instead, it questions domination by insisting on a subaltern responsibility for sub-ordination. Here, subordination is thought not as the loss of power but as the loss of the _swa_. A politics of resistance, such as that involved in _satyagraha_, attempts to redress this loss by staying in a constitutive separation, and by giving this separation also to the dominant. To trace this unthought of a subaltern responsibility for subordination—this is the most pressing concern of this article.

Two more prefatory remarks on my mode of proceeding, both in this essay and in my other writings on the question of Gandhi, need to be addressed. First, in fidelity to the distinctive subaltern responsibility that I pointed to above, I will be eliciting arguments from _Hind Swaraj_ not to dismiss them, overcome them, or move beyond them, but rather to set them aside. That which is thus set aside, need it be said, is not nothing. Only that can be set aside which gives not only itself but more than itself, and is in this sense oriented towards what it is not, towards what is given from. It is against the finitude of that which thus sets itself aside that other arguments and positions can emerge. Conversely, it is only in emerging from this setting aside that these other arguments and positions can practise their distinctive responsibility.

Second, the arguments that I shall be developing turn crucially on issues of translation. Gandhi wrote almost all his major essays first in Gujarati, and then either himself translated them into English (as in the case of _Hind Swaraj_) or had his close associates do the translation under his supervision. But in _Hind Swaraj_, as in other writings, the texts in the two languages diverge significantly from each other: entire words and phrases are missing in the English translation, or carry quite different connotations. These diversions cannot be adequately explained as caused by bad translation, or by the texts being addressed to different audiences. Rather, as I hope to indicate, they are symptomatic of a certain trembling in Gandhi’s text, where an unthought disrupts the conservative vocabulary that Gandhi’s critique of ‘modern civilisation’ inhabits. It is by focusing on the gap between the English and the Gujarati texts (rather than by any attempt to produce a correct translation), then, that the arguments here are developed.8

_Not restraint but thekaana_

Let me begin by considering, in order to set aside and apart, the conservative ordering of the _swa_. This ordering is signalled by the word _thekaana_. The Editor says in Chapter Five: ‘I said _vaanjani_ [sterile woman] because the Parliament has not till now, of its own, done a single good work. That it can do nothing if there is nobody putting pressure on it is its proper condition
A paradoxical formulation, thus: to not have a proper condition is the proper condition of the Parliament. The Reader protests: ‘The word vaanjani does not yet apply to the Parliament. The Parliament is made of the people [lokoni bane], so it must doubtless work under the pressure of the people. This is its very quality, the ankush [restraint] on it.’ But the Editor insists: ‘It is not possible to see a single instance till now of Parliament taking even one thing [vastu; matter] to its thekaaney [finality].’

In this exchange between the Reader and the Editor, there emerges a distinction between the Reader’s ankush and the Editor’s thekaana. The two come to name heterogeneous orderings of productivity and fertility.

Both these terms prove difficult for Gandhi to translate into English. There is simply no equivalent for the word ankush in the English sentence, which is truncated to only read: ‘This is its quality.’ But ankush or restraint is distinctive as a quality: it is a force. Not only that, it is for the Reader a legitimate force, a force that is not a violence, a force that produces swaraj or self-rule. This legitimacy is signalled by the genitive ni (in the word lokoni, of the people), poised as it is between the two senses where people make the Parliament (thus perhaps Gandhi’s English translation, ‘by the people’), and where a transformation of the people makes the Parliament. Furthermore, unlike Gandhi’s swaraj, the Reader’s swaraj is not organised around the swa or the thekaana. In the Reader’s conception, the Parliament cannot have a swa or proper that is independent of the people. It achieves its goals only under the restraint of the people, who are, as the genitive ni suggests, the true figures of fertility. For the Reader, that the Parliament should be productive only under such restraint is its distinctive quality—the quality that makes it more like a productive mother than a sterile woman.

Concomitantly, here the fertility and productivity of the people (and ministers) are constituted by their ability to be sovereign, without restraint. Elsewhere in Hind Swaraj, the Editor remarks of the English people, they ‘cannot stay at a thekaana’ [thekaaney sar besi shakta nathi; are never steadfast]. But for the Reader, it is precisely this refusal of a thekaana that constitutes the sovereignty of the people (or ministers and Prime Ministers). Indeed, as the sovereign subject who exercises restraint and knows no proper bounds, for whom boundaries and finitudes are contingent and fluid, the English people can only assert the irrelevance of the question of proper itself.

We need little reminder that such a rendering of boundaries (which is also the founding gesture of modern cosmopolitanism) has often been powerfully enabling. Over and again, this insistence on a sovereign subject has allowed a questioning of the conservative insistence on a substantive proper, whether that proper take the form of gender, class, caste or civilisational hierarchies.

Perhaps this is also indicative of the stakes for the Reader of insisting on restraint: by producing the Parliament as a sovereign body that is nevertheless of the people [loko-ni], it institutionalises that conception that takes democracy to be the sovereignty of the people. Ankush or restraint: condensed in this word is an argument that the democratic state embodies a
force measured so correctly that it is not a violence, a force that because it represents the people need not be bound by any proper.11

For the Reader, to reiterate, neither the people nor the Parliament has a swa—the former because their nature is to act, and the latter because its nature is to be acted upon. Through restraint, both a masculine and a feminine fertility and productivity outside the proper are affirmed—the Parliament as wife-mother, and the people or ministers as masters.

Against restraint, Gandhi develops the thought of thekaaney. Unlike ankush, this word is at least translated, though very unusually, as ‘finality’. Etymologically, thekaana is related to sthaan, place. A thekaana is a place that is a dwelling or home, including one within some hierarchy or order. A thekaana is not externally assigned; it is a destination that is a thing’s or being’s own. Objects cannot have a thekaana; only that can come home which has a proper.

It needs to be said right away that the Editor’s insistence on things being governed by and brought to their thekaana is symptomatic of a conservatism. Here, the proper is elided into a thekaana thought substantively; furthermore, this substantive thekaana is presumed to be already inherent in the swa of the things themselves. Hence the disquiet about Parliament—for the Editor, it raises the spectre of the rule of empty representation, one that does not have any proper in itself, and that takes its content from whatever the electorate or ministers give it. Hence also the description of the Parliament as a veshya—the figure who has no thekaana and therefore no proper.

Nevertheless this conservatism provides, first, as I shall argue in the rest of this section, an initial critique of the violence involved in the representative democracy of ankush or restraint. Second, as I shall argue from the next section onwards, when we set aside the conservative thinking of the swa or proper through an insistence on the substantivity and separateness of the thekaana, there emerges another thinking of democracy that Hind Swaraj undertakes. This thinking is both initiated and repressed by the figure of the veshya. When this thinking is attended to, an abyssal distance opens up between the proper and the thekaana, such that the thekaana itself is interrogated, and it becomes of the nature of the proper to not reside in the proper and yet be oriented towards it, to raise questions about the proper as the manner of being oriented towards it.

To return, with this anticipation of later arguments, to the Editor’s reserve about ankush. The Editor questions, first, the productivity of Parliament (‘[i]t has not till now, of its own, done a single good work […]’). To not do anything of its own—this is its ownmost condition. Furthermore, not doing anything of its own, it cannot take things (and a thing, we don’t need to be told, is not an object) to their thekaana. The converse of this argument would be that for Parliament to do a good work on its own would be to take things to their own place. Initiated here, in other words, is a thinking of a constitutive separateness. To insist on an own thekaana—this is to insist that true productivity would result in a constitutive separateness, where that which gives a thekaana separates from that which is given a thekaana.
Such separateness presumes an irreducible multiplicity that cannot be encountered through number. In number, separateness is rendered through the multiplicity of abstract equivalence, of homogenous and interchangeable units. It is of the nature of the thekaana that it can never be homogenised this way, can separate from itself only through and in a giving without measure, or a giving outside number. And yet, it is only through the multiplicity of number and equivalence that the basic categories of representative democracy (of which Parliament is the institutional apex) such as the electorate, or majority and minority, can be constituted. The insistence on separateness, thus, signals also profound reserve about representative democracy.

Second, the Editor questions the sovereignty that the people exercise through restraint. For one, the sovereign of restraint, instead of recognising that things have their own thekaana and are therefore constitutively separate, asserts sovereignty over them and denies their separateness. Also, because the sovereign has no thekaana, this sovereignty is not truly sovereignty. Drawing on his English translation: ‘These people [the English] change their views frequently. It is said that they change them every seven years. These views swing like the pendulum of a clock and are never steadfast [thekaaneysar]. The people would follow a powerful orator or a man who gives them parties, receptions, etc.’

Lacking a thekaana that can constitute their separateness, the people and the ministers are here themselves mastered. ‘These Parliaments are a mark of the slavery of the people.’12 Not sovereigns, thus, but slaves: such an assertion would well describe the stakes of the critique of representative democracy that takes place here in the name of thekaana.

From the perspective of thekaana, it can now be ventured, the sovereignty exercised through the restraint of a democratic state is violent in the sense of disordering by taking from any place, by disrupting boundaries. In opposition to such sovereignty, thekaana is proposed as a force that is not violent—because it keeps things and beings at their own place, in their separateness. As such, the nonviolence claimed by thekaana is not that of a more correct measure, but that of not requiring measure: it is in this sense that it can claim to be a force on the other side of violence.

**Keeping as control: the exclusions of thekaana**

It is because of this conservative insistence on thekaana that the veshya and the sterile woman have to be rejected with such force. The sterile woman is not capable of playing a proper role as a fertile mother. And the veshya, even more constitutively than the ‘sterile woman’, is without thekaana. Unlike the sterile woman, whose proper orientation it is not to be able to bring things to their thekaana, the veshya is the figure who as her ownmost orientation refuses a thekaana, and practises a mobility that is outside the thekaana.

But what is the thekaana that the veshya is outside?

This thekaana is embodied by the dhani (a word that Gandhi usually translates as husband, but which is etymologically related to dhan or wealth, and carries connotations also of proprietor, owner, lord, possessor). Both the
ministers and the Prime Minister are identified as the dhani in relation to the veshya: ‘And it is [like] a veshya because which(ever) ministry keeps [raakhe] it, it stays with [paase te rahe] that ministry. Today its dhani is Asquith, tomorrow Balfour, and the next day a third.’ And also:

It is appropriate that Parliament has been given the name of veshya. It does not have any dhani. It cannot have a one dhani. But the essence of what I am saying is not only this. When somebody does become its dhani—such as a Prime Minister—even then its gait is not steady [eksarkhi]. Like a ruined veshya—so does Parliament always remain.13

And as indicated by the metaphor of enslavement that we encountered in an earlier passage, the ‘people’ too retain the potential of being something other than slaves—they can become masters or dhani.14

Such, then, is the most evident ordering articulated in Hind Swaraj. In this economy, the veshya can only be a figure of ruin, necessarily kept outside every thekaana. Yet, though pushed to the margins, the veshya comes to ruin not just any particular thekaana but the thought of thekaana itself, most of all by raising questions about the violence that constitutes the separateness of the thekaana, or more precisely about the separation that the separateness of the thekaana must disallow. What emerges in attending to such questions is that the thought of thekaana cannot carry through the critique of representative democracy which it initiates.

We can begin attending to these questions by paying attention to one word, raakhe or keep (recall: ‘it is a veshya because which(ever) ministry keeps [jey pan raakhe] it, it stays with [paase te rahe] that ministry [...]’).15 The word can be used to describe the relationship of the dhani with both the veshya and the wife [dhaniyani, or more usually, baaydi]. (The phrase ‘baaydi raakhvii’, ‘keep a wife’, though no longer polite, was apparently common in at least central Gujarat till the mid-twentieth century.) The proper of the dhani, then, is thought primarily through keeping—the dhani keeps both the wife and the veshya.

Also, raakhe is related to raakh, raakheli or raakhel—a courtesan, concubine or mistress. The root of raakh as of raakhvii: raksha—protect, save or rescue (an English cognate?). Involved here, as this suggests, is a protecting that is a keeping outside, an exclusion. The raakhel is the figure who is protected only by the dhani, and who in this protection is excluded from legal institutions. Such exclusion is quite in contrast to the wife, who despite her subordination can in principle at least be the dhaniyani—the wife as a female dhani. In this sense, the concubine stands as a figure of absolute subordination: kept only by the dhani, and incapable of being independent of the dhani. Raakhvii, then, is a distinctive kind of raksha or rescuing. As rescuing, it is a giving in the sense of patronage. But this giving of protection is not that of the gift: it is a keeping through domination. It is not surprising that, on two occasions, raakhe is translated as control, and that the English are described as keeping India.
Furthermore, the Parliament is not a *veshya* because it is kept, for one can be kept at one’s *thekaana*, as the wife is supposed to be. Rather, it is a *veshya* because it resists being kept any *thekaana*—unlike, say, the concubine or mistress. Resisting such keeping, the *veshya* moves from one *thekaana* to another (Asquith, Balfour and then a third), ruining these *thekaana* themselves.

For Gandhi, such promiscuity makes the Parliament as *veshya* incapable of separateness. Staying now with one and then with another, it nevertheless cannot give itself to that which it stays with because it does not have any *thekaana* (or consequently a *swa*) of its own, an itself to give. It can only give the measure of interest (which measures the immeasurable) or the heat of passion (which unites with that which it is passionate about); and both these forms of giving do not allow for separateness. Giving in this way, without having an itself to give, the Parliament as *veshya* pulls the *dhani* into a measure and unicity that threatens the immeasurable separateness of the *thekaana*; it makes the *dhani* a weak master.

There are thus two ways of being outside the *thekaana*—that of the *veshya* and that of the weak master. Because her constitutive possibility raises the spectre of that which resists recuperation, because she threatens the *dhani*, the *veshya* is especially worrisome. Symptomatic of this is the attenuation that the word *veshya* already undergoes in Gandhi’s English translation. Here, the entire passage cited earlier (‘It is appropriate [...] always remain’) is severely truncated: ‘Parliament is without a real master. Under the Prime Minister, its movement is not steady but it is buffeted about like a prostitute.’

In this formulation, the focus shifts away from the *veshya*’s irrecuperability for any *thekaana* to the absence of a ‘real master’. Like the *veshya*, the weak master also cannot stay at *thekaana*; unlike the *veshya*, however, he is not constitutively without a *thekaana*, and can be brought back to the *thekaana*. The *veshya* is thus always potentially only the pretext for a focus on the weak *dhani*.

This shift from the *veshya* to a stress on the lack of mastery and masculinity is not exclusive to the English translation—recall that in the Gujarati text the people, ministers and prime ministers are all cast as weak masters. And the emphasis on a weak masculinity resurfaces in Chapter Eight, where the Editor insists that the peace imposed by the English had made Indians *abada* [without strength, also at the time a word for women], ‘emasculated, effeminate, and cowardly’. This lack of masculinity is especially significant since *Hind Swaraj* sometimes seems to suggest that only a real master can practise *satyagraha*. Rejecting in Chapter Seventeen the Reader’s suggestion that *satyagraha* is an appropriate weapon for ‘weak men’ [*nabada manas*], the Editor insists: ‘The strength and manliness that is required for *satyagraha*—that a cannon-force person can never have. Do you believe that a person without substance [*namaal; maal*—substance, *na*—not; coward] can ever violate a law that he dislikes.’

Even the English are admirable to the extent that, in their masculinity, they keep England. Thus in Chapter Seven the Editor says about them ‘one thing’
[ek vastu; one quality very strongly developed]: they will not let their country ‘be lost’ [java na de]. ‘If any person were to cast an evil eye on it, they would make him stone-blind.’ Here, java na de or to lose is the inverse of raakhe or control. Only that which is possessed in the modality of raakhe as control can be lost in this sense.

In all of this, there emerges the precise sense in which the thekaana is conservative and substantive. Since a thekaana is constituted by control, to stay at a thekaana is necessarily to do a keeping, most evidently of other thekaanas but also of one’s own thekaana. The dhani, for example, stays at his thekaana by keeping his wife at her thekaana, and by excluding the veshya. Only through such a violent keeping in domination can the separateness of the thekaana be maintained. Thus, even though Hind Swaraj intimates that thekaanas give each other their own separateness, this giving turns out to be founded on relations of domination, and in that sense is a measured giving. Despite its profound commitment to a constitutive multiplicity beyond the abstract equivalence of parliamentary democracy, the thought of thekaana necessarily practises its own measured violence rather than being a force on the other side of violence.

The translation of thekaana as finality is symptomatic of this surreptitious violence. As a keeping or raakhe, a thekaana is indeed final. It is incapable of that radical giving which—to anticipate the argument below—loses the thekaana itself, which keeps itself only in this radical giving. And perhaps even the desire to alter the word veshya belonged to this violence of thekaana. Perhaps it was an effort (futile, of course) to banish the threat to the thekaana from that which constitutively resists recuperation. Perhaps, by altering the word veshya, Gandhi sought to affirm the program of converting the weak master into the strong master of thekaana in the sense of control.

If this effort to institute thekaana as control had been successful and ‘final’, then the alteration of the word veshya would have little to give us. It could not be set aside; it would have to be simply ignored as a minor quirk. But the alteration of the word veshya ruins the concept of thekaana, and in this ruining opens up other possibilities.

Indeed, raakhe as control or keeping is already explicitly questioned in Hind Swaraj. For though the keeping of England by the English is affirmed as ‘one quality very strongly developed’, there is a rejection of control itself as the mode in which Indians should keep India. Thus, when the Reader suggests that ‘if they [the English] go, then I feel that we should keep [raakhiye] the constitution they created […]’, the Editor famously describes such government as ‘English rule without the Englishman’.

Hence the question that presses in on us: what is the relation between the veshya who rejects raakhe in the sense of ‘control’, and that Editor who, rejecting the nationalist vision of the Reader, also rejects raakhe as control, even when that control will keep Hindustan to its thekaana? And how would an alteration of the word veshya have altered this relation?
Keeping as letting stay: subaltern responsibility for subordination

To raise these questions is to open the possibility of thinking the swa otherwise than through the conservatism of thekaana; it is to think a proper that is heterogeneous to any thekaana or place. In order to pursue that possibility, consider the Editor’s response in Chapter Seven to the Reader’s question of how the English could take India. The Editor insists, ‘The English have not taken Hindustan, we have given it to them. They have not lasted in India on their own strength; we have kept [raakhya] them. Hence it is more true to say that we gave [aapyo] Hindustan to the English than that Hindustan was lost [gayu].’ When the Reader asks, repeating the sense of raakhe as control, ‘Now tell me how the English could keep [raakh] India’, the Editor responds by multiplying the emphasis on the other sense of raakhe:

Just as we gave [it] to them, so do we let Hindustan stay with [paase raheva daiye] them. Many amongst them say that they took Hindustan by the sword, and they even say they keep it by the sword. Both these statements [vaat] are wrong. In keeping [raakhvama] Hindustan, the sword will be of little use; we alone let them stay [raheva daiye chhe].

[Gandhi’s English translation: The sword is entirely useless for holding India. We alone keep them [...] So if we keep [raakhiiye] the English in India, this is only for our self-interest. To blame them is to perpetuate their power [...] we are the ones who help keep [raakhvama] them.]

What is involved in raakhe in this second sense? A first clue could be this: Gandhi uses the English word ‘keep’ to translate not only raakhiiye but also raheva daiye, ‘let stay’. But daiye is also from devu, give. Here, to let stay also means to give staying. Raakhe in the second sense is to let stay or give staying—but what is this?

To begin, what it is not. Let us start with the statement, ‘we have given it to them’. On too quick a reading of the Editor’s reply, it would be easy to (mis)understand the giving or letting in this and other remarks in terms of agency—to think that the Editor suggests that Indians were agential in their subordination, that it was not the greater power of the British that allowed them to take India. Rather, Indians let India be taken, even giving it to the British in exchange for material benefits. And Indians still ‘keep’ the British in the sense that they continue to exercise agency in an undesirable manner—they operate only with the measure of self-interest, and let the British stay.

If the letting is indeed that of agency, then the Reader and the Editor share the same vocabulary. The only difference would be the minor one that where the Reader blames the British, the Editor more judiciously blames Indians themselves; that where the Reader says that India was taken away by the British, the Editor disagrees and says that India was taken by the British because Indians gave it quite freely. If this is so, furthermore, the Editor’s argument could rightly be regarded as a precursor of that influential
revisionist formulation in Indian historiography that has over the last few decades insisted that the colonised participated in their own colonisation, that India was ruled by the English because of support from significant sections of Indians.21

But the distinction that sets the terms of debate in the problematic of agency—that between taking what is given freely and taking away—is not tenable here. To begin with, it is simply not faithful to the text: the Editor does not say that the British did not take India away; he says that they did not take India.

If we nevertheless habitually practise this very crude infidelity to the text, and do not even notice it, this is because to not do so makes his argument seem preposterous, even ridiculous. After all, he does also say that Indians gave India to the British. How can India not be taken by the British even though it has been given by Indians? How can India be given such that it cannot be taken even in giving? And in what sense do the British rule India if they have not even taken India when it was given to them?

But if, rather than dismissing these questions, we take seriously what they give, this allows us to encounter the force of the phrase ‘let stay’.

In the problematic of agency, the unstated assumption—regardless of whether the British took Hindustan by force, or Indians gave Hindustan to the English—is that Hindustan is an object. Only an object—that which we have a hold over—can be taken by force or taken and given in exchange. To give an object is simply to let go of it—which as remarked earlier is simply the inverse of raakhe as control.

But for the Editor, Hindustan is not an object. This is the crux of his disagreement with the Reader’s nationalism in Chapter Nine. For the Reader, ‘because there are railways, today we see the spirit of one people [ek praja; new spirit of nationalism] in Hindustan’. For the Editor, however, ‘if there had been no railways, the English could not have such control over [kaabu] Hindustan’.22 Furthermore, he insists that ‘the English have taught you that you were not one people [praja; nation] before […] [But] when the English were not in Hindustan, at that time [too] we were one people.’ ‘One people does not mean that we had no differences between us; but our leading men would travel throughout India either on foot or bullock-carts, they would learn each others’ languages […]’.23

Contested here is the Reader’s constructivist idea of Hindustan, where the railways create the abstract time and space within which nationalism can emerge, or Hindustan can be made into an object of desire. The Editor’s hostility to the railways is because, enabling a control over the subcontinent, it facilitates and accelerates the making of Hindustan into an object.

What then is Hindustan for the Editor? If we stress the suffix, Hindustan is a sthaan (etymologically associated also with thekaana) or place rather than an object. Furthermore, praja, the word that Gandhi here translates as ‘nation’, was earlier translated as ‘people’. Hindustan, then, is the thekaana of the praja or people.
Here, the tension between thekaana as control and as the home of the proper flares up. The swa is the ownmost. As such a thekaana, Hindustan always remains one’s own. As such a thekaana, can it be given or taken at all, and how?

When the Editor says, ‘The English have not taken Hindustan, we have given it to them’, it is this question (rather than that of agency, where a measurably finite amount of responsibility—the degrees of accountability of various actors in the conquest of India—is distributed) that he struggles with. ‘We have given it to them’—this giving is neither of the gift, nor that of exchange of objects. What then is this giving?

‘We have given it to them’: here, the Editor ventures a thought of raakhe (‘we keep the English’) as a subaltern responsibility for subordination. Unlike agency, which, as the property of the agent, can be taken away, such subaltern responsibility cannot be taken away or lost. True, responsibility here concerns a loss, as the chapter’s title (‘Why was India lost’) intimates. But India has not been lost in the sense of being taken away. Because taking away involves measure, and because Hindustan is immeasurable, there is no circumstance in which the English can forcibly take Hindustan away from Indians—Hindustan can never be taken (though, as later discussion will suggest, it can be accepted as a gift). Through the term raakhiye, the Editor tries to think a loss that is not a loss of agency (or of thekaana) but rather a loss of responsibility—a subaltern responsibility for subordination.

Considered too quickly, this emphasis on a subaltern responsibility for subordination, and for the loss that such subordination necessarily entails, might seem an extremely dangerous move, a case of blaming the victim and exonerating the dominant. But this appears so only because in the commonsensical understanding (such as that of the Reader in Hind Swaraj), responsibility is a measurably finite totality, where if one party is responsible, then the other is less so.

Yet that is far from being the case here. In this insistence on subaltern responsibility for subordination, the violences practised by the dominant and the subaltern are both infinitely greater. For the Editor, the violence of ‘modern civilisation’ is so great that, unlike the Reader, he is not willing to countenance the continuation of any colonial institutions. Then again, while the Reader sees colonial violence as a zero sum situation where the British have gained and Indians have lost, for the Editor colonial violence is also directed at the English themselves. It has caused the latter too to lose their swa or themselves (because they too have in trying to take Hindustan resorted to a logic of measure; and perhaps even because they keep or control not just Hindustan but England itself). In a similar vein, while for the Reader the loss of India can be redressed by taking back Hindustan, for the Editor a taking back of Hindustan through violence would get nothing back.

(And, to point to an argument in Hind Swaraj that will not be elicited here, swaraj or the rule of the proper is possible only through a subaltern responsibility for subordination—and not through the dominant taking responsibility for domination. It is surely not accidental that it is when Gandhi effectively denies such subaltern responsibility—as he does often enough for women and Dalits—that he also articulates some of his most
conservative positions.\textsuperscript{24} Without such subaltern responsibility, the unilateral obligation of satyagraha would become impossible.)\textsuperscript{25}

In the absence of any explicit discussion of subaltern responsibility for subordination in \textit{Hind Swaraj}, we can elicit this concept only by being faithful to that essay’s unthought (which is always the ownmost of a thought, and perhaps never more so than when fidelity to the unthought involves betraying the thought).

Let us start once again with the remark, ‘we have given it to them’. If we understood this statement in the terms of \textit{thekaana}, then we might say: Hindustan is a \textit{thekaana}, and is characterised by having a \textit{swa}. A \textit{thekaana} cannot be given—the \textit{swa} belongs to the \textit{thekaana} in finality. ‘We have given it to them’—this means, ‘that which cannot and should not be given has been given’.

But what we are attempting to elicit here is not the problematic of \textit{thekaana}, any more than it is that of agency. We are rather attempting to elicit that thinking which is \textit{thekaana}’s own unthought. In this unthought, the \textit{swa} not only can be given, but can exist only in this giving. As such, the argument here must be understood differently. The argument is not ‘that which cannot and should not be given has been given’, but rather: \textit{the swa or proper has not been given in the manner proper to it}.

To explicate this argument, let us consider two questions. To begin with: what is the manner of giving proper to the \textit{swa}?

Very briefly, in anticipation of a more extended consideration on some other occasion, let me only insist for now on this axiom that organises \textit{Hind Swaraj}’s unthought: \textit{that a giving proper to the \textit{swa} involves, before anything else, the giving of separation itself. (It is this giving of separation that is arrested in the constative separateness of the \textit{thekaana}.)} This separation makes what is properly given into a gift.

We can think of this separation on two registers. First, there is what seems to be the separation of the giver from the receiver. But the other who is the receiver of the gift cannot be constituted empirically, and is always instituted through the separation that passes through oneself. Gifting is possible only as the other that one always is. (This is also why one can gift to oneself—because one is never only oneself. One cannot gift to oneself as oneself—that would be only a taking or a keeping as control.)

Second, there is the separation of what is given from both the giver and the receiver. Now, only what is of oneself can be given—the proper of the gift is always oneself, the giver. But to gift is also to separate oneself from what is given—which means to acknowledge that the giver cannot and will not control or revoke the gift. Since a gift is never an object (an object in itself if such a contrary phrase may be momentarily entertained—cannot be gifted), to separate oneself from it is to let its proper or \textit{swa} emerge (which is why the gift is the giver’s proper and more, thus revealing the productivity proper to the \textit{swa}). As such, to not control the gift does not mean to put the gift at the disposal of the receiver (as though the gift were empty); it is to give the proper of the gift to the receiver.

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Having indicated the two registers of separation that constitute the manner of giving proper to the swa, we can now turn to the second question: how does the giving proper to the swa differ from the raheva daiye or giving of staying that has occurred with the British?

The latter giving has to be thought, it seems to me, as a transformation (or more precisely, in another kind of fidelity to sudhaara, Hind Swaraj’s Gujarati term for ‘civilisation’, a re-form) of the gift of separation that is proper to the swa. This re-form is what is questioned in the emphasis on the subaltern responsibility for subordination—on how ‘we keep the British’. Struggling with the relation between the two forms of giving, Hind Swaraj effectively produces an argument about violence: violence or re-form occurs when the proper, which can be given or taken only as a gift, without measure, has been given in measure. What is thus given in measure, however, can also be taken by the receiver only in measure.

To think violence in this manner is to set aside the conventionally radical perspective that understands domination and subordination primarily in terms of reason and power. What power acts on has to be thought not only empirically, in its objectness, but rather in terms of how this power re-forms the proper or swa. Without the swa, in other words, there can be no sustained thinking of violence. This is why ‘modern civilisation’ cannot have a concept of violence that is anything more than a statism.

How or in what manner does this re-form act upon the gift, or on the giving without measure proper to the swa?

By not allowing the separations that constitute giving without measure. Indians seek to give Hindustan to the English in exchange. But Hindustan can be given in exchange only as an object—that which can be given and taken in measure, that with which Indians would have no constitutive relation. In the exchange of objects, nothing has a swa—not the giver, nor the receiver, and certainly not what is given—and no constitutive separation is therefore allowed.

The paradoxical attempt to disallow what cannot be disallowed—this is what the Editor struggles to think when he says, ‘we keep [raakhiye] the English’. Now we can ask once again, more attentively: what does this phrase say? Thought in light of what has been argued above, does it not say this: Indians tried to give Hindustan as an object to the English. But Hindustan could not be separated out as an object from Indians, because it is their swa. Unable to separate themselves from the Hindustan that they give to the English, they give themselves to the English. Giving themselves to the English—this is how ‘we keep the English’.

A further question: who keeps—or, who is the ‘we’ that is the subject of ‘keep’?

In a giving of oneself, no keeping as control is possible. In control, there is a oneself who stays apart from the giving, and does a keeping. In the giving of oneself all of oneself is given; here, the oneself who stays apart and keeps is annihilated. Therefore, if Indians give all of themselves, and still keep the British, then the oneself who is keeping can only be the swa—which cannot be given in exchange, and which stays distinct even in the giving of all.
But how or in what manner does the swa keep the English?

This keeping (which names nothing less than Gandhi’s unthought concept of subordination) occurs, paradoxically, in the losing of the swa. ‘We keep the English’—does not the phrase then say also this: we lose ourselves. Giving themselves to the English, giving in exchange what cannot be so given, the swa is lost (let us not forget that the title of the chapter in which this discussion occurs is, ‘Why was India lost?’). Indians lose their swa not in the sense that the English take it, but in the sense that they lose themselves by giving themselves without their swa.

To lose oneself: what this means is that the swa is separated from itself. We should not confuse this separation, which is the violence of ‘modern civilisation’, either with the separateness of thekaana or with the two other separations that have figured in the argument so far—the separation that sustains the gift, and the separation from power. Indeed, it is absolutely crucial to understand both the difference and the relation between these three separations.

To lose oneself: here the separation is from separation itself—which is to say from the separation that sustains the proper gift. By giving in exchange that which cannot be so given, what is lost is precisely this separation that is constitutive of the gift. As such, this loss of oneself is abyssally separated from the separation that founds the gift, where separation itself comes as a gift, where separation is not a loss.

To lose oneself: this separation is also separated, though in quite a different way, from the separation as loss invoked in the problematic of agency. In the latter, loss comes as a separation from power—as disempowerment and marginalisation. Put in the terms of the argument ‘we lose ourselves’, we might say that the problematic of agency erroneously and in forgetting (and I will elsewhere return to this error-forgetting that Gandhi calls bhool) thinks of the separation as passing not through oneself but between oneself and what one gives of oneself as an object (and an object, recall, is defined by the logic of equivalence and can be possessed or controlled). Because of this error-forgetting, where Hindustan and ‘we’ are converted into objects and subjects, the problematic of agency thinks of separation not as from separation itself, but from power. The argument ‘we lose ourselves’ does not simply reject this agential problematic; rather, it sets this problematic aside as a forgetting, and thinks the loss more originarily as a separation from separation.

‘We keep the English’: to insist on a loss that is of ourselves, of our swa—this is to insist on the primacy of the separation that passes through ourselves. As such, it is also to insist that we are always capable of being responsible for our subordination, our loss of ourselves. Where there is no proper, there can also be no such responsibility—there can at most be agency, which can be taken away. To be possessed by a swa that cannot be erased even when it is gifted or lost—such is the mark of the figure who is responsible for the letting involved in both the gift and its re-form.

‘We lose ourselves’—this is a vertiginous thought, and in some formulations of Hind Swaraj, there is a drawing back from it. It is in this drawing
back from *Hind Swaraj*’s own thought that the *thekaana*, with its constitutive exclusion of the *veshya*, is instituted.

In this drawing back emerges the distinction also between the *veshya*, the figure who has no *swa*, and the *dhani*, the figure who has lost his *swa*. In the violence of this insistence, however, what comes undone is nothing less than *Hind Swaraj*’s own thought of a subaltern responsibility for subordination. Central to that responsibility was the questioning of subordination through an insistence on the pervasiveness of a *swa* that even when lost remained one’s own. But the case of the *veshya* suggests that the *swa* is not pervasive. Lacking a *swa*, incapable of the separation that passes through oneself, the *veshya* is incapable of responsibility for subordination, and thus incapable of subalternity itself.

This exclusion authorises an immense violence against the *veshya*. For since violence is possible only against those with a *swa*, against those capable of the separation of gifting, no force used against those who lack a *swa* would be a violence. The *veshya* is excluded from the concept of violence itself—such is the violence practised on her.

This violence is conceptually underwritten by the opposition, evident in earlier passages, of the *veshya*’s ‘staying with’ (the *veshya* stays with whoever/whichever) to ‘letting stay’ (the *dhani* lets Hindustan stay with the British). But ‘staying with’ can be opposed to ‘letting stay’ only so long as the latter is thought through a substantive *thekaana*. When letting stay is thought as a loss of *swa*, as it is in the thought of a subaltern responsibility for subordination, then it is not only that opposition which crumbles. It is also the very concept of *thekaana* which crumbles, for the constitutive exception of the *veshya* which sustained that concept is no longer tenable.

An alteration of the word *veshya*—would it have concealed the ruin of *thekaana*, and the thought of a subaltern responsibility for subordination that emerges from that ruin?

**The question of resistance**

With the thought of a subaltern responsibility for subordination, of subordination as a loss of the proper, we have seen, the *thekaana* itself crumbles. This thought is heterogeneous both to the *thekaana* and to the *veshya*, but is given by the *veshya*’s ruin of the *thekaana*, by the emergence of the *swa* into the space left free by (and in) that ruin. This thought raises a new sheaf of questions. Most of all, there is this question: In the problematic of agency, subordination is resisted by seizing power back. In the problematic of *thekaana*, it is resisted by bringing things and beings back to their *thekaana*. But how is subordination resisted in the thought of subaltern responsibility for subordination? Is *satyagraha* the name of that resistance? This question, which is given to us by the insistence on a subaltern responsibility for subordination, will have to be explored on another occasion.
Notes

1 This paper is an attempt to respond to some questions asked by students—especially Papori Bora, Emily Rook-Koepsel, Priti Misra and Julietta Singh—during my Spring 2005 course on Gandhi at the University of Minnesota. I thank them for the gift of their scepticism. I also thank Leela Gandhi, David Hardiman, Qadri Ismail, Thomas Pantham, Akhilshwar Pathak, Simona Sawhney, Sanjay Seth, Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan, Mrinalini Sinha, Tridip Suhrud and Babu Suthar for discussions of the paper. I especially thank Vinay Gidwani for giving me meticulous and extensive comments on an earlier version. The very prose of his comments has often become part of this version.

2 The Gujarati text uses both 'sudhaara' and 'badal' to translate 'alter'. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 2nd edn (henceforth *CWMG*), vol. 18, 28 May, 1919, p 69; *Akshardeha* [collectors works in Gujarati], vol. 15, p 317. All my citations of *Hind Swaraj* are to the editions published as part of the English *CWMG* and the Gujarati *Akshardeha*. To help readers working with other editions, I have usually indicated the relevant chapters also. I provide citations from both the Gujarati and English texts, and unless otherwise indicated I cite first from the language in which it was originally written.

3 *Hind Swaraj* [henceforth *HS*]. *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 23; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 255.

4 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 23; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 255. In cases where the writing was originally in Gujarati, as with *Hind Swaraj*, I have provided my own translation. In cases where there is a significant difference in translation, I have also provided Gandhi's translation.

5 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 23; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 255.

6 Gandhi consistently translated aadshnik sudhaara or aajkaalnu sudhaara as 'modern civilisation'. But a more common meaning of sudhaara, then as now, would be reform. By the late nineteenth century, as now, sudhaara had overwhelmingly come to mean social reform, and one could be for or against sudhaara. In this essay, I will not explore Gandhi's concept of 'modern civilisation', but it should be evident that the phrase cannot be understood here in its usual commonsensical sense.

7 Gandhi's English translation goes: 'That which you consider to be the Mother of Parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute.' *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 23; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 256.

8 A caveat too may be in order. What will and should be abundantly evident in what follows is the unavoidable traces of my obligations to the many thinkers who have written specifically on Gandhi, and those who have stayed with the questions that are the concern of this essay. But I have not explicitly acknowledged these obligations for two reasons. First, such explicit referencing would involve a violence towards Gandhi's thought, which would then be even more likely to be understood by analogy to these thinkers. Second, a responsible accounting of either my obligation to them or their thinking would require an engagement with these thinkers far more sustained than I can attempt within the limits of this essay.

9 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 23f; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 256.

10 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 24; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 256. [*CWMG*: 'It is not possible to recall a single instance in which finality can be predicted for its work'.]

11 The relation of human rights, so central to this conception of liberal democracy, to a thinking of the proper is too complex an issue for me to address here. But could it be that the concept of human rights is an attempt to produce, through the state, a conception of the human that can take the place of the swa?

12 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 28; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 261.

13 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 24f; *CWMG*, vol. 10, pp 256, 257.

14 On too quick a reading of Gandhi's writings, it might seem that the mother is an even more powerful organising thekaana than the dhani. Thus, even in the passage in *HS* (cf. note 5), the veshya seems to be contrasted to the mother. And Gandhi did celebrate the mother as a figure who exemplified love and suffering, even himself adopting that persona. Thus the title of Manu Gandhi's autobiography—*Bapu, my mother*. But motherhood as a political principle involved a male figure, the *brahmachari* or celibate. It is surely not accidental that Gandhi insisted that it was his 'celibacy' that allowed women to trust him and regard him as a mother.

True, significant differences remain between Gandhi's mother and the restrained mother of mainstream nationalism. The latter was pre-social and needed protection from the English. Gandhi's mother, in contrast, is quite active: she has a thekaana and brings things to their proper places.

15 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 24f; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 255.

16 *HS*, *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 257 (cf. the passage corresponding to note 11).

17 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 31; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 266.

18 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 53; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 294.

19 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 25; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 258.

20 *HS*, *Akshardeha*, vol. 10, p 29; *CWMG*, vol. 10, p 263.
Both this revisionist formulation and most criticism of it is conducted within the problematic of agency. By insisting that the colonised participated in their own colonisation, by insisting on the miscibility of colonialism with both a precolonial past and with the colonised, the wound of colonialism is naturalised and denied, and colonialism is made an extension of what preceded it. (Because this mitigation of colonial domination stresses also the agency of the colonised, it has predictably found enthusiasts in a liberalising middle-class India looking for a prehistory to Indian agency.) Conversely, many of those who fiercely attack such revisionist formulations understand the wound of colonialism as a loss of agency— which, as I shall be suggesting, is not Gandhi’s argument.

Gandhi was hostile to the idea of both women and Dalits undertaking satyagrahas against their subordination; he tried rather to bring about reforms among the dominant to redress their problems.


Cf. the passages corresponding to notes 11 and 18.