8. Gandhi’s Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram

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I am not ashamed to repeat before you that this is a religious battle… to revolutionize the political outlook — … to spiritualize our politics.

M.K. Gandhi.¹

A curious category in Indian nationalist thought is the ashram. Amongst nationalist ashrams were the poet Rabindranath Tagore’s Santiniketan; and the gurukuls (school-ashrams) set up by the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization. Most famously, there were the Gandhian ashrams. Already in South Africa, Gandhi set up the Phoenix settlement and the Tolstoy farm. On his return to India in 1914, he set up the Satyagraha ashram in Ahmedabad, and made that his base. Later, he was involved in and often based at the ashrams at Wardha and Sevagram.²

My question here is a simple one: what was the politics of the Gandhian ashram?

Mainstream nationalists such as Nehru, frustrated about the amount of time that the principal leader of the nationalist movement spent on the tiny ashrams, had a simple answer: eccentricity. Gandhi, obviously, did not feel this way. He said of the Satyagraha Ashram that it ‘set out to eliminate what it thought were defects in our national life’. He even devoted a book, and another in manuscript, to discussing the vows (vrat) involved in ashram life — Mangal Prabhat [Tuesday Dawn/Auspicious Dawn, published in English as From Yeravada Mandir], and the posthumously published Satyagraha Ashramno itihas [A History of the Satyagraha Ashram, published in English as Ashram Observances in Action]. His arguments here suggest the inadequacy of understanding these ashrams in terms of the two major conventionally understood
meanings: as a place where Hindu religious austerities are performed, and as a Hindu philosophy which organized individual life as a series of four stages or ashrams — those of the student (brahmacharya), the householder (grahastya), the renouncer (vanaprasthaya), and hermit (sanyas).

In the larger project of which this essay is part, I explore, through the ashram, Gandhi’s critique of liberal modernity, and his alternative politics. I argue that the former constituted the nation through a logic of secular transcendence, where the locality was transcended to arrive at the generality of the nation. The nation, constituted by a shared history or culture, required and demanded the loyalty of its inhabitants. The liberal nation could not allow for absolute difference or antagonism within it; antagonists were always outside it. This logic is more broadly constitutive of liberal thought itself. When faced with difference, liberal thought has, at its finest, responded by a process of transcendence that seeks to produce a neutral shared space — civil society or the public sphere — where differences can be reconciled. But, as we have become increasingly aware over the last two decades, there is an abiding paradox to this process. Briefly put, such transcendence operates, first, always by a process of partition that separates the particular from the general; the latter — religion, for instance — has to be confined to the private sphere. As such, liberal thought, in creating the neutral shared space where difference can be tolerated, can only apprehend difference through a process of simultaneous impoverishment and hierarchization: one part of the latter is translated into the public sphere, while another is denied any political salience and thus rendered subordinate. Second, the part that cannot be translated into the general, that remains unredeemably particular, can only be condemned to irrelevance or apprehended as the Other. At its most tolerant, liberal thought converts this Other into an object of knowledge (as in anthropology); as such, it can be known and understood as long as it does not seriously threaten civil society.
But there can be no serious conversation with it. In this sense, the Other is an unavoidable and even constitutive figure of liberal thought.

In the Gandhian vows of the ashram — which constituted it as a set of political practices, not simply a place — we can read an opposition to this logic of transcendence, a constituting of the nation through a politics of *ahimsa*, (literally, non-violence; better understood as neighbourliness). Neighbourliness was not simply a practice that could be arrived at simply by rejecting colonial power, liberalism or the transcendent nation; the neighbour was not simply an empirical figure or category whose existence only had to be affirmed. Rather, the neighbour, and neighbourliness, had to be produced through a rigorous politics — *ahimsa*.

Here, in this paper, I shall limit myself to exploring, unfortunately in an extremely condensed manner, the tension between liberal nationalism and Gandhi’s neighbourly nationalism. Neighbours shared nothing less (or more) than the kinship of all life; beyond this, the neighbour was marked by an absolute difference that could not be overcome by shared history or culture. In the face of such absolute difference, relations were created through *tapasya* or suffering. The *tapasya* of neighbourliness differed depending on the kind of absolute difference being addressed: the equal was met with *mitrata* or friendship, the subordinate with *seva* or service, and the superior with *satyagraha* or civil disobedience. These practices of neighbourliness sought to sustain a friendship with the world based on distinctive Gandhian notions of justice and equality.

My concern here is not with Gandhi as an author or thinker who adopted certain positions — his views, say, on caste, gender, Hindu-Muslim relations, sexuality, economics and so on — but with the problematic of neighbourliness as it can be read in his voluminous writings. Such a problematic encompasses a range of positions, including those seriously inimical to the ones that Gandhi espoused. This problematic emerges most forcefully by putting to work the contrapuntal tension between Gandhi’s Gujarati and English writings. Gandhi insisted on writing in Gujarati
wherever possible, and also on supervising the translation into other languages, especially English. He treated his writings in English as ‘faithful renderings’ rather than literal translations; and considered them to be to a large degree addressed to his English friends. Because of these distinctive practices of writing and translation, his precise critique of liberalism or conservatism (the latter being one powerful perspective from which liberal thought has been criticized) is often more difficult, though by no means impossible, to discern in either his English or Gujarati writings alone. The first foregrounds his convergences with liberalism; consequently, the radicalism of his conceptual challenge to it are muted, rendered into another liberal-communitarian intervention. In his Gujarati writings, similarly, while his conceptual distance from liberalism is more forcefully emphasized, this is done in a manner that foregrounds his convergences with Gujarati and Hindu traditions; it can thus be easily read as a conservative ‘Hindu’ response to liberalism. But, set beside each other, the curious interplay between the English and Gujarati writings allows us to argue for a problematic which, through ahimsa understood as neighbourliness, mounts a searching and fundamental critique of both liberalism and conservatism.4

In the very first sentence of Satyagrahashramno itihas, Gandhi stipulated: ‘Ashram here means a religious community.’ Then, towards the end of the book, after an extended discussion of ashram practices, he remarked: ‘Last, when you have observed these rules, think that then, and not till then, you may come to politics and dabble in them to your heart’s content…. Politics, divorced of religion, has absolutely no meaning’.

A religious politics: this is a very succinct way of describing Gandhi’s departure from liberal thought, a departure which remains as astonishing today as it was in his time. As Connolly notes, one of the key elements of liberalism remains precisely the ‘secular division of labour between “religious faith” and “secular argument” where faith and ritual are to be contained in a
protected private preserve and rational argument is said to exhaust public life’. And this internment of religion within private life is, in the most common secularist narrative, the result of efforts to reduce the violence — the sectarian wars amongst Catholic and Protestant sects — between opposed religious truths. By making these deeply contentious issues a matter of private belief, secularism made possible a peaceful public life. In the narrative of secularists, the ‘secularization of public life is thus crucial to private freedom, pluralistic democracy, individual rights, public reason, and the primacy of the state. The key to its success is the separation of church and state and general acceptance of a conception of public reason (or some surrogate) through which to reach public agreement on non-religious issues.’ Secularism today remains the overwhelmingly dominant mode of political practice — even modern religious fundamentalisms operate within secular presumptions. Connolly, who insists that it is ‘coming apart at the seams’, sees no alternative to it. Indeed, he insists that he does not wish to suggest that ‘a common religion needs to be reinstated in public life or that the separation of church and state in some sense of that phrase needs to be reversed. Such attempts would intensify cultural wars already in motion. Secularism needs refashioning, not elimination.’

This is a fear that we all grapple with: that any attempt to abandon secularism would lead back to the wars that secularism sought to overcome. And surely in India today, facing as we do the routinized viciousness of the BJP and its likes, we cannot dismiss that fear. However attenuated and troubled, an affirmation of secularism seems to us necessary.

Gandhi, in contrast, completely rejected secularism as the basis for his politics. Simultaneously, he rejected the secular characterization of religious politics as necessarily undemocratic and intolerant. Instead, he insisted that this was true only of that religious politics which modeled itself on ‘modern civilisation’ — as he would surely have described Hindu nationalism today. Unlike this nationalism’s attacks on secularism for being too tolerant of minorities, his disquiet with secularism was because of its intolerance of minorities, and of
difference more broadly. He tried to practice, seriously and systematically, a modern religious politics that was more tolerant of difference and less tolerant of injustice than liberalism.

So, what was involved in this religious politics? Above all, the pursuit of Truth — the one-word title of the first chapter of both Mangal Prabhat and Satyagraha Ashramno itihas. He began Mangal Prabhat thus: ‘Our institution [Satyagraha Ashram] owes its existence to the desire for truth. So I deal first with Truth’. And this truth was inseparable from God: ‘Sat or truth is perhaps the most important name of God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth’. This truth, moreover, was deeply connected with knowledge. ‘And where there is Truth, there also is knowledge which is pure [shuddh]. Where there is no Truth, there can be no pure knowledge’.  

By staking the claim of the ashram to truth and knowledge, Gandhi signaled the seriousness of his challenge to secular, liberal thought. The question of truth was the crux of the secular emphasis on the need to keep religion and politics apart. Secular thought has been willing to tolerate and even affirm only a certain kind of spiritual and religious truth — one that is personal, apolitical and operates within an extremely constricted field. The question of a broader religious truth has always presented an intractable problem to secular thought: how is compromise, negotiation, and rational discussion — the crux of liberal politics — possible with a religious truth? The answer has always been that it is not. Thus, secular thought is founded on the opposition between religious, private truth and secular, public, knowledge; it is characterized by the insistence that only the latter can provide the basis for politics. This, after all, is why Connolly wishes only to refashion secularism, not abandon it.

We can see the working of these regimes of secular truth in the argument made in 1926 by a correspondent who wrote to Gandhi’s Gujarati magazine Navjivan, insisting that the latter’s emphasis on religious education was misplaced, that religious faith was at the root of Hindu-Muslim tensions, and that ‘secular education is the remedy for Hindu-Muslim riots’. Here, quite
clearly, if religion is confined to the private sphere and excluded from knowledge, this is because of the conviction that religion cannot produce neutral truths or a neutral medium — whether positivist facts or constructivism’s limited, workable truths — into which intemperate passions such as those of religion may be transformed in order to find commonality with others and anchor a polity.

In his reply, Gandhi denied the relevance of the secular liberal answer not by rejecting it, but by pointing to how it was a parochialism claiming universal provenance.

But the correspondent has yet another word that holds him in its chains. It is the mighty word “rationalism” [buddhivad]. Well, I had a full dose of it. Experience has humbled me enough to let me realize the distinct limitations of reason. Just as matter misplaced becomes dirt, reason misused becomes lunacy….

Rationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster [rakshas] when it claims for itself omnipotence. ….

I plead not for the suppression of reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason itself.7

‘That in us which sanctifies reason itself’ — an allusion to Truth.

Here, then, Truth rather than the secular-liberal fact was to be the means of thinking through difference. But how could a religious Truth that was absolute (and Gandhi was emphatic about the absolute nature of truth) deal with difference and dissension? To this question, Gandhi wended his way over and again.

Like secularism, modern nationalism is marked by the interplay of two regimes of modern truth, one which makes the (experiencing) subject — the local — a closed realm, a bounded entity, and another that a process of transcendence subsumes the subject within increasing levels of generality.8 In one of the most often quoted passages in Nehru’s Discovery of India, he remarks:
Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai — ‘Victory to Mother India’. I would ask them unexpectedly who was this Bharat Mata, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? … At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the dharti, the good earth of India, that they meant. What earth? Their particular village patch, or all the patches in the district or province, or in the whole of India? And so question and answer went on, till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it. I would endeavour to do so and explain that India was all this that they had thought, but it was much more. The mountains and the rivers, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made a great discovery.

It is not only that India is constituted in this passage as a particular kind of locality — a locality where people and rivers and land fuse. This is a peculiar kind of constitution, one which insists on a distinctive relationship between the national and the local. On the one hand, there is the vigorous Jat wedded to the soil for immemorial generations is India, the village, and millions of people. This local already is India; it already is the national; it is the fact which makes India possible. On the other hand, there is also a gap between this local and Bharat Mata; the two have to be constantly brought together in a fusion; the local has to realize itself as Bharat Mata, as the national. Much of the work that nationalist thought set itself involved bringing about this fusion; hence, of course, the repeated emphasis on building patriotism and national awareness.
What characterizes this form of invoking the local can be described as a logic of transcendence. This logic of transcendence does not reject or disregard the local. Rather, it affirms the centrality of the local. At the same time, the focus is on how the local is historically transcended into higher levels of generality and abstraction; the insistence is that it is only through attention to these higher levels that the meanings of the local become clear. Premissed on a unity of historical process, space and time, this logic of transcendence assumes that as the scale of observation grows larger, so does the explanatory significance. It is in this fairly precise sense of transcendence that mainstream nationalist thought is cosmopolitan. This is not so in the sense that nationalist thought seeks to embrace or subsume humanity within it (quite the contrary, obviously); it is so, rather, in the sense that it is constituted by a logic which subsumes identities designated as local, contingent or particular within more general identities. (Thus also that intellectually consistent amongst the statist nationalists, such as Nehru, have worried over the parochial nature of nationalism, affirming instead a universal identity.)

Much scholarship on nationalism has stayed within the field of these two regimes of truth. One crucial innovation of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* lay in specifying, very precisely, the work of the register of transcendence: how the locality was transformed into a nation through transformation by the ‘empty homogenous time of history’. Here, the characteristic technologies of nationalism — the map, the museum, the census, and of course print capitalism — are understood primarily as mechanisms to relate the local to abstract time and space. And much of the more recent historical literature criticizing Anderson has simply insisted that the locality of the experiencing subject cannot be transcended so easily.

As a theme in colonial thought, the ashram was produced by the fascination with *varnasramdharma* — or the dharma (a concept sometimes glossed as duty) of *varna* and *ashram*. *Varna*, transmogrified
into the colonial construct, ‘caste’, enabled colonial governance, and specified the premodern and exotic nature of India. *Ashram* carried quite a different valence.

An influential ‘romantic view of the ashram’, articulated by figures like Max Mueller and P. Deussen, insisted that the ashram system ‘merits recognition and admiration even from those who have reached the highest degree of civilization…. The entire history of mankind does not produce much that approaches in grandeur to this thought [of the four asramas].’

The nationalist category ashram arose from within the interstices of this Orientalist concept. Here too, the ashram came to represent the spirituality of ancient Hindu India, though the institution was presumed to have since degenerated. This was what called for the nationalist project: that of rejuvenating the ashrams, and through them, India. Gandhi said of the Satyagraha ashram that it was ‘engaged in the great effort to resuscitate [*punurudvar*] the four asramas.’

In thinking about resuscitation, Gandhi chose two interlocutors — Mahatma Munshiram, who had founded the Gurukul Kangri at Haradwar, and Rabindranath Tagore, who had founded Santiniketan in Bengal. Gandhi had intimate ties with both ashrams. When his associates moved from South Africa to India in 1915, they stayed initially at the Gurukul, and later moved to Santiniketan. These ties were maintained in later years.

These ashrams represented the two dominant responses — very different and yet intertwined — to the nationalist question: how was India to be constituted as a nation? In the narrative emphasized at institutions like the Gurukul Kangri, ancient India was characterized by a civilizational Hinduism, one sustained by an ashram system. This Hinduism was already national, and yet needed to be transformed into the national. (In this sense Hindu nationalism, like all modern fundamentalisms, is profoundly secular. For rather than denying or questioning secular regimes of truth, it produces a Hinduism that is compatible with these regimes.) The
problems of contemporary India were caused by the decay and decline of this Hinduism — sometimes ascribed to Muslim invasions.

To rejuvenate this Hinduism (and thus produce a modern Indian culture and nation), a rejuvenated ashram was necessary. The Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist organization, set up several gurukuls — as ashrams focused on teaching students were often known — in various parts of the country. The Gurukul Kangri led by Mahatma Munshiram was amongst the best-known of these. Here, the focus was on teaching Vedic texts, with Sanskrit and Hindi as the two major languages of instruction. Students were expected to remain brahmachari or celibate during their stay at the gurukul. The gurukul was in the forefront of efforts to create a nationalist religion, to produce a national identity as Hindus.

Tagore’s ashram initiative, Shantiniketan, operated both within and on the fringes of another response, which instead emphasized Indian popular culture both as having always constituted India and yet needing to be brought into self-awareness as a nation. Here, education was centered, on the one hand, around a cosmopolitan but Indian civilizational universalism — the latter was understood as larger than Hinduism, and as open to borrowings from other civilizations. This understanding, while it was fiercely hostile to the historicism that enshrined Europe as the only truly civilized society, sought nevertheless to expand the range of societies that were civilized. It continued to depend, thus, on the distinction between civilization and popular culture, and to measure the distance between the two in historicist terms. On the other hand, it often celebrated popular culture so forcefully as to undermine the very dominance of Indian civilization that it otherwise affirmed. Not only was the very location of Santiniketan in rural Bengal itself meant as such an affirmation; Tagore himself was fascinated with the figure of the primitive, and one of the tasks that Santiniketan set itself was a program of rural reconstruction.11
Gandhi’s own ashrams, while criticizing the areas of convergence of these two ashram initiatives with the liberal problematic, also developed more rigorously the possibilities opened up by their departures from it.

Crucial to his practices was the category of discipline. It figured prominently in the critique he developed of the liberal ensemble of institutions and practices, which he often called ‘modern civilization’ [in Gujarati, ‘paschimna sudhara’ — western civilization, though he also insisted that ‘there is no such thing as Western or European civilization, but there is a modern civilization’, and that it was not the British but modern civilization which was ruling India]. His early book *Hind Swaraj* is in part an exploration and indictment of the ‘so-called discipline’ of modern civilization. The ‘truly defining characteristic’ of this civilization was that care and comfort of the body became the ‘object of life’ [his translation of *purusharth*]; its discipline was directed towards this end. As such, the discipline of modern civilization made people ‘completely forget the really important matters’: ‘they stay neither with the way of religion nor with the way of the world’.

Gandhi’s civilization — what he called ‘true civilization’ [*sudharo*] — involved a discipline which was articulated in opposition to the discipline of modern civilization. *Sudharo*, which was what swaraj was meant to attain,

is that mode of conduct which by which man does his duty. Performance of duty is the observance of morality. To observe morality is to discipline [*vash rakhavi*] our mind [as Gandhi translates *man*; it is perhaps better rendered as ‘organ of desire’ in acknowledgement of its profound difference from *chit*, which would more properly be ‘mind’] and our senses.

For Gandhi, such discipline — and not simply the lack or rejection of the discipline of ‘modern civilization’ — led to true civilization, and ashram vows were designed to practice this discipline.
His fear about the gurukul was that its discipline was that of modern civilization. When criticizing Swami Shraddhanand for the latter’s role in increasing Hindu-Muslim tensions, he remarked of Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj:

He has tried to make narrow one of the most tolerant… of… faiths …. he has idolized the letter of the Vedas and tried to prove the existence in the Vedas of everything known to science [in Gujarati ‘this generation’s science’].

The Arya Samaj, put differently, sought to convert Hinduism into a modern religion by making it congruent with science, by constituting Hinduism — and therefore, by its logic, India — through a process of transcendence, and by making the gurukuls both the embodiment of and agent for such transcendence. Through such transcendence, Hindu civilization was rendered into an object that should command reverence and admiration.

But these criticisms were accompanied by a deep admiration for the degree to which the gurukuls did also have the discipline of true civilization. This discipline was most evident in the seva (a concept usually glossed as service) of the Arya Samaj and its gurukuls. Gurukul students took many of the same vows as inmates of Gandhi’s ashrams — those of celibacy, non-stealing and non-possession, of simple living, and even that of spinning khadi. From within a Gandhian problematic, vows that disciplined the self and thus created a physical and conceptual space for neighbourly practices, were a pre-requisite for seva or service, and were themselves a form of seva. Furthermore, such discipline was inimical to the spirit of modern civilization and nationalism, which required ever-increasing consumption as part of its vision of growth and development. From his perspective, the problem with the gurukuls was that this seva or service was directed, paradoxically enough, at a transcendent object — the Hindu nation — that, because it was produced by the logic of ‘modern civilization’, had no space for such seva.

Of Santiniketan, Gandhi once admiringly insisted that it provided a truly ‘Indian education’. Now, by this, he could not have referred to an education that provided knowledge of
Indian culture or history — he had criticized the Arya Samaji gurukuls, after all, for providing such knowledge and thus making India into an object to be known through education. That, in Gandhi’s terms, was the education of modern civilization, not Indian education.

Why then was Santiniketan’s education ‘Indian’? Perhaps because its practices too involved, from a Gandhian perspective, a critique of modern discipline. This critique sought to create a space outside modern discipline through two strategies — one for affirming popular culture as the local, and the other for affirming civilization — which were both different from Gandhi’s. While the spontaneity of popular culture was celebrated at Santiniketan, here spontaneity was understood primarily as the absence of modern discipline — as that which was undisciplined or before discipline. It was in this manner that the Santhals or the bauls were celebrated. Similarly, Tagore did not question ‘modern civilization’ in the manner that Gandhi did. Rather, he attempted to displace the transcendental logic of this civilization by focusing on its redemptive moment. For him, this redemption came about through the work of the poetic or of imagination, which produced that which was truly universal in civilization. For instance, in the famous exchange between him and Gandhi in 1921, when he sharply criticized the non-co-operation movement and called instead for co-operation between ‘East’ and ‘West’, he did so by celebrating the universality of the power of creativity.19

‘The poetic, argued Tagore, took us outside of historical time’.20 As such, it created a different relationship with the primitive or popular culture from that involved in the discourse of development. In the latter, the nationalist as a more advanced figure from a more developed time, had a responsibility to develop the primitive or popular culture; it was a fundamentally hierarchical or transcendental relationship. In contrast, the redemptive work of the poetic created the space of the nation by allowing the nationalist to have with popular culture a relationship of coevalness and even togetherness outside of historicist time. Through the redemptive work of poetry, the nationalist left the time of historicism and came together with the primitive.
Here, India was not an object of education, nor was the ashram the subject. Rather, the very affirmation of the experience of the subject was undone; and a devotional way of apprehending the nation was instituted. Here, the nation was experienced through 

\textit{darshan}, or divine sight — a practice ‘that bypasses — and not just dissolves — the subject-object distinction’.\textsuperscript{21} As a process, \textit{darshan} always involved simultaneous subordination to and, in this manner, identification with, that of which \textit{darshan} was sought. \textit{Darshan}, then, marks the moment of a performative nationalism that cannot be understood as empiricist experience.

But Gandhi also used the category ‘discipline’ to reject any assumption that \textit{darshan} was already adequately political. ‘Shantiniketan lacks discipline [in Gujarati, shisth]’. ‘You say at Santiniketan there is more individual liberty, but I do not call that liberty I call it licence.’\textsuperscript{22} Such remarks suggest two gentle but no less insistent Gandhian questions to Tagore. First, what were the precise mechanisms by which \textit{darshan} — the religious mode of apprehending the nation — was sustained as a practice? Second, what was the \textit{darshan of}, if not of the nation constituted by history and culture?

With regard to the first, from Tagore’s perspective, the primitive (whether popular culture, woman, peasant, or tribal) was celebrated precisely because it already had, inherent to it — before any discipline, and precisely because of the lack of any discipline — the ability to have \textit{darshan}. It was only the middle class nationalists who had to learn the practice of \textit{darshan}, and they did so through the redemptive (not, note though, constructivist) power of the imagination available to the civilized. As for the second question, the practices of Santiniketan did not even allow it to be posed in Gandhi’s stark manner. For Tagore, after all, history and culture — categories produced by the discipline of modern civilization — could never quite be rejected: they had to be in place for redemption to occur through them, for the primitive to be affirmed. Having initiated a rigorous interrogation of liberal nationalism, Tagore nevertheless could not
abandon its concept of civilization. As such, *darshan* here was of the liberal nation — a contradiction (since *darshan* transforms the liberal nation) which Tagore did not address.

In contrast, Gandhi, quite unlike Tagore, felt that what was universal in modern civilization could be found not by identifying its moment of redemption, but only in what it rendered recessive; he acknowledged the force of the moment of redemption only to the extent that it often converged with that which was recessive. He was also skeptical of any strategies that sought the affirmation of liberty through only the absence or defiance of discipline. This, for him, was nothing but ‘license’; as this word implies, it was literally authorized by discipline, and accepted by default the ‘so-called discipline’ involved in modern civilization. So while he too, like Tagore, celebrated societies unaffected by the discipline of modern civilization (such as the villages central to his vision), he did so not because they were before discipline but because they had the potential to be marked by self-discipline. For Gandhi, the *darshan* of the nation could only be sustained by *tapasya*, a word he often translated as self-discipline, and which constituted the discipline of ‘true civilization’.

But this brings us to the second question: *darshan* of which nation? In Gandhi’s practices, *darshan* was not itself already adequately political; rather, it was a terrain for the play of the political. As such, it was not enough to simply affirm *darshan*. ‘The *darshan* of god is fraught with difficulties. He dwells in the hearts of thirty crores of people. If you wish to catch a glimpse of him there, you should merge yourself [*othproth*] with their hearts. These thirty crores include all the skeletons of Orissa, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, men and women. We shall continue to be atheists and not believers so long as we do not establish this unity with every section of this community.’

Note here that *darshan* lies not in the nation constituted by history, but in a merging with those rendered marginal by such history. It was this focus on the *darshan* of the marginal that led to his argument that the identity of India was to be sought not in its history or culture, as mainstream nationalists felt, but in *khadi* or homespun and home-woven
cloth. Indeed, he insisted that without khadi there could be no swaraj or independence — which is to say that India could not exist as a nation without khadi. Khadi was important because it provided, for Gandhi, a means of economically and politically empowering marginal groups; by weaving khadi, the upper caste Gandhian nationalist sought to create kinship with the marginal. As part of ashram vows, for instance, ‘it is compulsory for all to spin for at least one hour in the name of God incarnated as the Poor (daridranarayan)’. Similarly, he insisted that all members of the Congress party should also weave a certain amount of khadi annually as a condition of membership. Through the weaving of khadi, a darshan of the daridranarayan was instituted as constitutive of the Gandhian nation.

Gandhi’s emphasis on khadi, tapascharya, and the darshan of the daridranarayan, present his political arguments to us in condensed form. It is time now, however, to attempt a more rigorous elaboration of these arguments. ‘Politics, divorced of religion, has absolutely no meaning’. But what is religion? We may feel that by now we know the answer to that question. Daridranarayan, tapasya, darshan: are these not part of Hindu religious traditions? Hence Gandhi’s religious politics. The analytical vacuity of such a definitional protocol (where we take the presence of certain objects, already designated as religious, to be symptomatic of the presence of religion) usually goes unnoticed only because this secular criterion of the religious has by now been so naturalized as to seem commonsensical.

Gandhi’s focus, in contrast, was not on religion as an empirical object, but on a criterion that could mark religion. Thus, for him, religion was constituted by devotion to Truth. The first vow discussed in both Mangalprabhat and Itihas was Truth (the title of their first chapters), and the second chapter of itihas dealt with prayer as a form of devotion. Gandhi’s truth was not about an external reality that had to be confirmed or arrived at, or about an external world experienced
by the interiorized subject. Rather, ‘the word Satya is derived from Sat, which means Being. That is why Sat or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God’. 26 ‘I used to say that “God is Truth”. But that did not satisfy me. So I said, “Truth is God”’.

The concept of devotion (bhakti) was also crucial. Two senses of devotion are relevant here. First, there is the sense of being subject to — subordinate to that which is the godly. The godly may be constituted in various manners; nevertheless, it is crucial for Gandhi that such subjection has to be absolute for it to form a religious sensibility. Second, there is the sense of being subject through — that is to say, the form of action acquired by being suffused by (what Gandhi sometimes described as identification with) the godly. ‘The ultimate goal [parakashta] of devotion is that the devotee become one with the object of his devotion. The bhakta [devotee] extinguishes himself and merges into, becomes, Bhagvan [God or, in another of Gandhi’s preferred translations, Being]. 27 Again, the criterion of the religious involves an insistence on the absoluteness of such identification: a religious sensibility strove to allow for no other form of identification. Darshan was a religious practice because it involved a vision of Being through such devotion. 28

As such, religion in Gandhi’s sense was incompatible with ‘modern civilization’. The continuity of religion as a name after its modern reworking should not be allowed to obscure the point that a new category had been created — religion within the limits of reason alone. Religion in this new sense was distinctive not only because it was now confined to the private sphere (as though all that had changed was its domain, as though this transformation could be described in terms of a constriction), but because of the new terms that described it. When it remained within this (private) sphere, it could, bereft of its absolute subjection, be defined only in terms of its domain of objects — the various scriptures, rituals, and institutions such as church, mosque or temple. Even when it threatened to wander outside this sphere (as in the case of what is miscalled religious fundamentalism), it could only claim absolutism without subjection: it
could only seek to make absolute its new domain of objects. Hence that commonsensical association, under the regime of secularism, of religion and fanaticism.

Gandhi’s Truth was marked by a paradox. On the one hand, as Truth, it was universal and absolute in its claims. Through this reformulation of devotion and Truth, he sought to make his claims universal. This emerged quite forcefully in his insistence that even atheists were often religious: ‘You may call yourself an atheist, but so long as you feel akin with mankind you accept God in practice’. On the other hand, this universalism refused to define Truth as a positivity. ‘The seers have described God as “Neti, Neti” (Not this, not this). Truth will elude you. The sum total of all that is true is Truth. But you can’t sum up all that is true’. In his formulation, then, the not-this, and the unknowability it implied, was constitutive of Truth as a universal. In spite of single minded devotion, thus, ‘one person’s truth may appear as another’s untruth’. This multiplicity of absolutes was unavoidable given the impossibility of mortal knowledge of the divine. ‘Hence not only is there nothing wrong in every person following their own Truth; it is their duty to do so.’ But if every person was to follow his or her Truth, then the inevitable question arose: what was to be the relationship between these various Truths when they encountered each other — as they necessarily did?

The answer, *ahimsa* (another ashram vow deserving of a separate chapter, with the heading, in English translation, ‘ahimsa or love’) was for Gandhi a logical consequence of the simultaneous insistence on the absoluteness and unknowability (neti neti) of Truth.

it is impossible for us to realize perfect truth so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame... ...

This impossibility led the seeker after truth to appreciate *ahimsa*. The question which confronted him was: “Shall I bear with those who create difficulties for me, or shall I destroy them?”...The first act of destruction taught him that the truth he sought was not
outside himself but within. Hence the more he took to violence, the more he receded from truth.\(^{31}\)

The commitment to ahimsa, then, emerged from his commitment to religious Truth.

Indeed, without *ahimsa* it is not possible to seek and find Truth. Ahimsa and Truth are as inseparable [*othproth*] as two sides of a coin …. *ahimsa* is the means [*sadhan*] and Truth is the end [*sadhya*]. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so ahimsa becomes our supreme duty and Truth becomes God for us.\(^{32}\)

This relationship of ahimsa and truth — means and end — instituted *ahimsa* as the practice required for Truth. The focus of the ashram, and of Gandhian practices, was therefore not directly on Truth but on *ahimsa* as the means to Truth.

Again: ‘Politics, divorced of religion, has absolutely no meaning’. But what is a religious politics? Liberal thought, we saw, dismissed faith and privileged knowledge by one kind of answer to just this question: that faith’s very insistence on absolute Truth (which liberal thought necessarily misunderstood) prevented it from producing a tolerant universalism, that faith could only seek to exterminate that which was different from it. In contrast, Gandhi’s writings suggest that liberalism produced a false and intolerant universalism, that a secular politics could provide no systematic reasons — only tactical or contingent ones — for tolerating the heterogenous, for not destroying ‘those who create difficulties for me’. Through *ahimsa*, Gandhi tried to constitute the nation not by suppressing or transcending antagonisms or heterogeneity, but by developing distinctive protocols for relationships amongst them. As Gandhi insisted, as the means, *ahimsa* was the crucial ashram vow; all other vows could be derived from it.

But *ahimsa*, and the related discipline of *satyagraha*, should not be conflated, as in many radical liberal accounts, with the concepts of civil society and civil disobedience. The genealogy
of these latter concepts has more to do with the curious position of violence and indeed of the political itself in liberal thought. In his powerful critique of liberal thought, Schmitt has deployed the friend-foe distinction as the criterion of the political: ‘the political is the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, that of the friend-enemy grouping’. When the political is understood in this manner (which, despite other problems, is resolutely anti-historicist and anti-statist), then the argument can be made that the liberal age has been one of depoliticizations and neutralizations, that the practice of liberalism involves the negation of the political, and the muting of concrete antagonisms. Hence the liberal premise that ‘politics is necessary but should not become serious’. By means of this negation, as Leo Strauss remarks, it seeks to found the state, ‘or, more accurately, …rational social relations’. Such relations — of which secularism, history and anthropology are various forms — mute antagonisms and produce the workable truths that constitute civil society.

As the most dramatic expression of antagonism, violence has a particularly charged position in liberal thought. Thus the truism that produces the civility of civil society — that it should be characterized by the absence of violence. Within liberal discourse, violence can only mark a disruption of civil society; it is always aberrant and requires explanation. Premissed on rational social relations, civil society seeks to leave no serious antagonism standing, certainly none strong enough to beget violence. It is for this very reason that civil society has an uncomfortable relationship with its corollary concept of the state: while it needs the state to sustain the regimes of punishment (of violence) that render its civility possible, it must simultaneously insist that this regime of punishment has no consequence for itself.

Now, civil disobedience has a curious relationship with civil society. To the extent that it challenges the unity of the state which makes civil society possible, it can be a serious threat to the concept of civil society. Nevertheless, even as it challenges the unity of the state, it extends
the reach of those rational social relations that constitute civil society. Thus, here, antagonism is banished from confrontations even with that last redoubt of violence in liberal thought — the state. Civil disobedience is in this sense the bringing to bear of the rationality of civil society even to dissension. This is why progressive liberal defenders of civil disobedience uphold it as a way of strengthening civil society, insisting, as does Habermas, that ‘every constitutional democracy that is sure of itself considers civil disobedience as a normalized — because necessary — component of its political culture’.

In contrast, since civil society is inseparable from Gandhian ‘modern civilization’, in a Gandhian problematic civil society would be understood not as excluding violence, nor even as resting on it (as when the violence of the state sustains a non-violent civil society), but as itself a form of violence. Thus, he argued that resort to violence would lead to the victory of modern civilization, and that the latter was constituted by ‘violence of the blackest sort’ and ‘brute force’. Similarly, discussing the League of Nations invocation of moral pressure, he argued that here, if moral pressure failed, then ‘brute force’ was left open as a ‘last remedy’, and this, he argued, revealed the true nature of modern civilization. As such, Gandhian ahimsa was directed against civil society instead of, like civil disobedience, seeking its extension.

Thus, rather than deny or reject antagonism, rather than create a non-antagonistic third term or terrain (such as the public sphere or civil society) that would modulate, transform and transcend antagonisms and thus allow them to engage with each other, Gandhi’s politics of ahimsa sought to institute the protocols for antagonisms to encounter each other without a middle term. Unlike liberal thinkers, Gandhi was insistent about the existence of such absolute antagonism or difference. For instance, his opposition to British rule was organized by an insistence on absolute antagonism that made his even liberal allies — votaries of workable or positive truths all — flinch. He repeatedly described the British empire, its government in India, as well as ‘modern civilization’, as ‘Satanic’ or ‘devilish’ (rakshashi, a word more
conventionally rendered as demonic). Needless to say, this led to some urbane ire, both amused and bemused, directed at Gandhi by the Viceroy, as well as by secular nationalists. But Gandhi defended and repeated his description on the grounds that these words ‘relate the exact truth … We are bound to hate evil, if we would shun it.’

‘Evil’: this brings us to the stakes of Gandhi’s religious politics. The English words ‘politics’ and ‘political’ carry two connotations: that of state centered politics, and of an absolute difference, even antagonism. In contrast, the Gujarati words ‘rajkaran’ and ‘rajkiya’ — which Gandhi translates as politics and political — refer only to a state centered politics. To this politics he was opposed. It was to denote a different politics, one centered on absolute difference, that Gandhi referred to a ‘religious battle’, evil, or the Satanic. This politics necessarily requires religion in Gandhi’s sense: only a moral or ethical politics can identify an absolute fissure. (To the extent that Schmitt denies this point — he insists, for instance, that the criterion of politics is independent of ethics — his argument remains, ironically, within a liberal problematic. Thus, while his criterion allows him to practice absolute war against the enemy, it does not allow him to identify friend or enemy in any consistent manner: friendship and enmity continue to be constituted, as in liberal traditions, by the contingent circumstances of realpolitik.)

To deal with such antagonism, or absolute difference, *ahimsa* was required. Gandhi sometimes referred to its practice as *padoshi dharma*, or neighbourliness. Babu Suthar has pointed out that this common Gujarati phrase expressed the duty owed to a *padoshi* or neighbour; hence also the phrase ‘*padoshi pahelo*’ or neighbours first. Indeed, neighbourliness, as a rendering of *ahimsa*, perhaps brings out its political dimension better than Gandhi’s preferred translation, ‘love’.

The Gandhian compulsion to neighbourliness arose from a divinely instituted kinship (*sagpan*). As such, Gandhi’s *sagpan* or kinship was radically inclusive, covering within it not only humans but all life — ‘if we really have imbibed the spirit of brotherhood, it extends to the
lower animals’.⁴⁰ This created the obligation for the ashram vow of *ahimsa*, which was about the ‘sacredness and kinship of all life’. ‘Ahimsa means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word, or deed, even for the supposed benefit of that creature. To observe this principle fully is impossible for men, who kill a number of living beings large and small as they breathe or blink or till the land’. Such violence or *himsa*, while unavoidable, had to be reduced because of the commitments produced by kinship. ‘If I save the food I eat or the clothes I wear or the space I occupy, it is obvious that these can be utilized by someone whose need is greater than mine. As my selfishness prevents him from using these things, my physical enjoyment involves violence to my poorer neighbour’.⁴¹

Produced by *ahimsa*, *sagpan* was marked by a radical inclusiveness which made it quite different from the liberal principle of kinship, which involves an insistence on an antagonistic exclusion of non-kin, and on a coercive commonality — whether passively through race or actively through the imagined community — amongst kin.⁴² True, civil society and nation are often assumed to be opposed to this logic. When Renan in his classic nineteenth century essay sought to define nationalism, for instance, he insisted that race was of real importance only in the tribes and cities of antiquity which ‘were then merely extensions of the family’. But race played ‘no part in the constitution of modern nations’; a nation was ‘a soul, a spiritual principle’.⁴³ Or as Anderson, who has written the most complete autobiography of nationalist thought, puts it: ‘nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations’.⁴⁴ Here, as in much nationalist self-representation, kinship and fraternity were that which preceded the nation, that which had to be overcome for the nation to emerge. Nevertheless, kinship remains surreptitiously constitutive of both civil society and the nation: without it, liberalism cannot think their concrete borders. For even where the explicit logic of kinship is rejected, its surrogates — such as history or culture, which categories, despite being more open, share the same logic of exclusion — remain inescapable.
Gandhian kinship, in contrast, was not exclusionary but neighbourly. Consider its logic in the context of the ashram vow of *swadeshi* [lit. of one’s own country, an insistence on using products made in one’s own country]. Gandhi’s *swadeshi* had, unlike the *swadeshi* movements which preceded it, nothing to do with a shared culture, history, or experience. Rather, *swadeshi* (also one of the vows of ashram life) was about neighbourliness: ‘Man is not omnipotent. He therefore serves the world best by first serving his neighbour. This is Swadeshi, a principle which is broken when one professes to serve those who are more remote in preference to those who are near.’45

Some key dimensions of this neighbourliness are particularly important in our context. First, neighbourliness did not allow for the exclusion of the foreign. ‘[T]here is in Swadeshi no room for distinction between one’s own and other people’. Because the foreigner too was a neighbour, even if a more distant one, Gandhi insisted on the difference between *swadeshi* and boycott. A boycott of British goods and cloth would have been ‘a purely … statist [rajya-prakarni] weapon … rooted in ill-will and the desire for punishment’. In contrast, he sought ‘swadeshi in a religious and true spirit without even a suspicion of boycott’. Put differently, the logic of boycott was that of mainstream nationalism. While it contested that imperialist argument that the interests of the colony had to be subsumed to those of the empire, while it was antagonistic to the foreign, this was because of its claim that the Indian nation was the culmination of transcendence. Because Gandhi’s ‘native’ was constituted by neighbourliness, it did not have this relationship of antagonism with that which lay outside it.

Second, neighbourliness involved serving universal brotherhood through the immediate neighbour. A man’s first duty is to his neighbour…. If everyone of us duly performed his duty to his neighbour, no one in the world who needed assistance would be left unattended. Therefore one who serves his neighbour serves all the world. …. Indeed it is the only way open to us of serving the world.46
Involved in this casting of *swadeshi* as that which was insistently local is a radical reworking of the concerns that characterized the logic of transcendence. Like the latter, *swadeshi* too provides a ‘universal law’. But this universal law, unlike the latter, cannot be arrived at by subsuming the particular under ever higher levels of generality. The concept of the neighbour is constituted by singularity rather than particularity, and it is only through service of this singular that the universal can be reached.

There were different practices of neighbourliness depending on the conceptual nature of the absolute fissure being addressed — with equals, friendship (*mitrata*); with subordinates, service (*seva*); and with antagonists *satyagraha*.

Gandhi’s friendship — part of the ashram vow of the equality of religions — was based not on the principle of intimacy but on that of equality. Now, when Michael Oakeshott opposed friendship to liberalism’s relations of utility and reason, he did so in terms of intimacy. ‘To discard friends because they do not behave as we expected and refuse to be educated to our requirements is the conduct of a man who has altogether mistaken the character of friendship. Friends are not concerned with what might be made of one another, but only with the enjoyment of one another; and the condition of this enjoyment is the ready acceptance of what ails and the absence of any desire to change on to improve… The relationship of a friend to friend is dramatic, not utilitarian; the tie is of familiarity, not usefulness.’

While Gandhi too thought of *mitrata* as dramatic rather than utilitarian, for him the friendship of intimacy was too preliminary a formulation because friendship was political, and therefore involved an effort to change the friend:

A reformer cannot have friendship [his English rendering of *mitrata* here is, suggestively, ‘close intimacy’] with him whom he seeks to reform. Friendship is an identity of souls [*advaitbhav*] … A friendship between those of equal qualities is
beautiful and will last. Friends necessarily influence one another. Hence in friendship there is very little scope for reform…. My opinion is that intimate friendship is undesirable.  

Within the friendship of intimacy, produced as it was by a unity or ‘identity of souls’, give and take simply meant that friends blended into each other; that the boundaries between them became fuzzy, unstable, or blurred. Reform, in contrast, required separation and difference: that which was to be reformed had to be distinct from that which reformed. (And all conversation, need it be said, must, to be political, allow for the possibility of reform.)

What then could be a political friendship — one that allowed for the conceptual possibility of reform? Across serious political difference, friendship on the basis of intimacy — indefinable attraction — is not possible in any systematic way, for there are no ‘like natures’ here. In this context, Gandhi emphasized friendship based on equality. ‘It is the law of this world — not a divine law — that there can be love or friendship only among equals.’ Gandhi sought such friendship with Muslims — a friendship based simultaneously on absolute difference and full equality.

This insistence on difference explains his insistence on an absolute distinction between Hindu and Muslim, and his rejection of syncretism. As a category, syncretism (like the friendship of familiarity) represents our attempt to envision the mixing of distinct religions or cultures without that third term or neutral meeting ground usually represented by secularism and civil society. Border crossings, blurred genres, fuzzy boundaries: these are fundamentally syncretic categories, now often invoked to reject civil society, and to think of alternative forms of sociality without the third term. But as a concept, such syncretism remains entirely within the problematic of secularism, it remains a secular attempt to think of those moments of pre-secular or non-secular co-existence that are not conflictual, and are therefore not repugnant to secularism. It works on the same principle as secularism: by focusing on miscibility. Only, in the absence of a third term
secularism — the miscibility is directly between religions or cultures, between Hinduism and Islam.

Gandhi in contrast recast tolerance not as miscibility — as in the case of secularism or syncretism — but as respecting an absolute difference:

I hope that nobody will bring up here the history of the attempts by Guru Nanak and Kabir to unite Hindus and Muslims; for the effort today is not for uniting the religions, but for uniting hearts while maintaining the separateness of religions. The efforts of Guru Nanak and others were towards fusing the two by showing the basic unity of all religions. The effort today is at tolerance [titiksha]. The effort is to see how the orthodox Hindu, while remaining staunchly Hindu (chusth), can respect and sincerely wish prosperity to an orthodox Muslim. True, this attempt is altogether new, but its spirit is there at the roots of Hindu dharma.50

But how were two absolutes that shared nothing except divine kinship to be friends? In considering this crucial question, the centrality of seva or service becomes paramount. Gandhi worked out what was involved in seva by focusing on the suffering (tapascharya, or tapasya, both words that he also translated as self-discipline) that it was inseparable from. During the Khilafat movement, Gandhi insisted that the only way to create friendship was by creating bonds through unconditional suffering on behalf of the Muslim demands.

I consider myself to be among the staunchest of Hindus. I am as eager to save the cow from the Mussulman’s knife as any Hindu. But on that very account I refuse to make my support of the Mussulman claim on the khilafat conditional upon his saving the cow. The Mussulman is my neighbour. He is in distress. His grievance is legitimate and it is my bounden duty to help him to secure redress by every legitimate means in my power even to the extent of losing my life and property. That is the way I can win permanent friendship with Mussulmans.... The nobility of the
help will be rendered nugatory if it was rendered conditionally. That the result will be the saving of the cow is a certainty. But should it turn out to be otherwise, my view will not be affected in any manner whatsoever. The test of friendship is a spirit of love and sacrifice independent of expectation of any return.\textsuperscript{51}

Through unconditional friendship — rather than conditionality as in the bargain — Gandhi also seeks the reform of the friend: the Muslim, reformed by his love for the Hindu as a friend, will desist from cow-slaughter.\textsuperscript{52}

In the context of friendship, the work of \textit{tapasya} or suffering was to create a bond between two absolutes which, precisely because they were absolutes, could not be united by forms of experience or transcendence such as a shared history or culture.\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Seva} of a friend necessarily involved \textit{tapasya}. Thus, what Gandhi stressed was not a shared suffering (such as history and culture) which made for unity by melding absolutes together, but a sharing in the suffering of the neighbour. Only by such willed sharing could Gandhian friendship be sustained.

Now, \textit{mitrata} or friendship was not possible with everybody — certainly not with either the subaltern or the dominant. In both these contexts, \textit{tapasya} was crucial.\textsuperscript{54} When faced, as a dominant figure, with the subaltern, Gandhi responded by working through the implications of the constitutive impossibility of equality (and thus speech) for the subaltern. If the subaltern was not equal, then, by any rigorous logic, the subaltern could not autonomously have a cause that was the equivalent of Khilafat. Service or \textit{seva} to the subaltern as neighbour thus could not take the form that it did with the Muslim — that of suffering for the cause the neighbour had decided on. How then was subalternity to be addressed? Radical liberalism has responded to this question by emphasizing either abstract or substantive equality. The first response searches for subaltern agency; it insists that the subaltern always speaks, that civil society only has to learn to listen and thus include the subaltern. The second response leads to the discourse of development, which in
its most conscientious manifestation tries to provide the subaltern with substantive equality, and thus remake the subaltern in the liberal’s own image.\textsuperscript{55}

Through criticisms of the incoherence and injustice of these two liberal responses to subalternity, Gandhi arrived at the categories of \textit{daridranarayan} and Harijan. Now, such terms (and especially ‘Harijan’ — a term Gandhi translated often as ‘children of God’, and used to refer to the ‘untouchable’) have been much misunderstood. We have sometimes opposed ‘Harijan’ to ‘Dalit’ (a term which Gandhi translated as ‘suppressed’), the name that is now more widely accepted amongst ‘untouchables’. Harijan, we have suggested, glosses over subordination and imposes a bland spiritualism — as though only untouchables are the children of God, and nobody else! When we respond in this manner, however, we allow our secularist prejudices to entirely shape our vision. ‘Harijan’ as a category did not displace ‘Dalit’ but answered a very precise question (which Gandhi himself never asked): how was the figure of the dominant (not, note, the subaltern) to address subalternity, if the options of granting the subaltern an abstract or substantive equality were recognized — as they should be in any rigorous settling of accounts with liberalism — as not available? To recognize the untouchable as Harijan was to respond to the impossibility of friendship with the subaltern by transforming the subaltern through \textit{darshan}. In this manner, imbued with divinity, the subaltern could be offered the service or \textit{seva}, and the concomitant suffering or \textit{tapasya}, that was offered to the friend. Many ashram vows — amongst them the vow to spin and weave \textit{khadi} — were designed to produce such service and, concomitantly, \textit{darshan} of the Harijan and \textit{daridranarayan}.

Conversely, when faced, now as a subaltern, with colonial dominance, Gandhi responded again not by insisting on equality or agency, but by a form of \textit{satyagraha} involving peaceful non-cooperation.\textsuperscript{56} By revealing to the dominant that it was the co-operation of the subaltern that made their authority possible, \textit{satyagraha} foregrounded the fundamental kinship and equality, within a Gandhian problematic, of the subaltern and dominant. Such non-co-operation involved
*tapasya* in two senses. First, non-co-operators suffered since they were expected to willingly accept even the violent sanctions imposed by the dominant; second, if the non-co-operators were wrong in their perception of injustice, they would already have through their self-suffering punished themselves for unfairly acting against the British.

The *tapasya* involved in *satyagraha* and *seva* were thus fundamentally different — one involved confrontation and the other devotion. As such, from within a Gandhian problematic, the subaltern untouchable could not be Harijan, but only Dalit; and in categorial terms, the Dalit was required to practice *satyagraha*, not *seva*. When the dominant wished to undo relations of domination, however, the Dalits had to be Harijans, not Dalits. Now, within a liberal problematic, based as it is on the politics of identity, this is incomprehensible. The radical liberal (and liberalism, we must remember, can only know the subaltern as an Other who awaits admission into its inclusive neutrality) would argue: if the Dalits think of themselves as Dalits, and since Dalit is a political term in that it refers also to the relations of subordination that constitute untouchability, then surely our politics requires us also to call them Dalit as a way of including them? To call the Dalit a Harijan: surely this is an act of extreme disrespect?

Within a Gandhian problematic, however, such affirmation of ‘dalit’ by the dominant, despite its acknowledgement of their complicity in domination, is inadequate. Quite apart from its failure to systematically institute practices that try to undo domination, such use of the category Dalit glosses over the profound, even absolute, gulf that separates the dominant from the subaltern. Because there is for the Gandhian such a gap, because the dominant cannot simply disclaim their history of domination, the category Dalit is not available for affirmation to the Gandhian as a dominant figure. It is in the context of this unavailability of the category Dalit that ‘Harijan’ emerges. The latter category acknowledges the absolute gulf between the dominant and the subaltern, and to make a political commitment to initiate practices — such as those involved in *darshan* through *seva* — that can sustain kinship, and even maybe produce
friendship, across this gulf. The Harijan as a figure called for devotion and suffering by the dominant; this was why Gandhi repeatedly remarked that he wished to die for the Harijan cause.

It was in opposition to rajkaran or statist politics, we will recall, that Gandhi defined his religious politics. Perhaps, then, one useful question for pulling together the implications of Gandhi’s politics of neighbourliness would be: where did this politics leave the state?

The liberal-democratic state is constituted by a particular kind of claim to representation: the claim that it represents the people through a process of transcendence. The question of rights emerges in liberal theory as a vexed issue precisely because it is the terrain on which the limits of such transcendence, and therefore of representation, are debated: how are minorities to be represented? are there rights that cannot be taken away by transcendence? And the salience of our recent critiques of liberal political thought has been in part because they have argued that the state is an inadequate metaphor for thinking through the capillary forms of modern power; that both rights and the citizen — the subject separate from and represented in the modern state — are produced by the same logic that produces the state. Modern discipline — the practices of modern power — is thus pervasive rather than localized in the state.

Now, the absence of the state in Gandhi’s religious politics is not part of anti-statist communitarianism. True, Gandhi repeatedly argued that the Congress should, after independence, make no claim to state power. He suggested that it disband itself or devote itself to seva of India’s villages, of the daridranarayan and the Harijan. But here, as we might expect, seva was envisioned as part of a deeply political project, one with twofold implications: that of marginalizing the state, and of battling the capillary reach of modern power. One set of the metaphors that Gandhi often used for thinking of the state adequate to ‘true civilization’ was that of dharmaraja and dharmarajya [which could be glossed as the king and kingdom of duty/religion], is particularly suggestive. The classical figure of the dharmaraja, one whom
Gandhi was particularly fond of referring to, is the truth-telling figure of Yudhishtar in the *Mahabharata*. Yet Yudhistar, having won the throne after a long battle, finds himself dissatisfied with ruling, and soon gives up the throne. The *dharmaraja*, then, cannot maintain *dharmarajya* through rule.

Probably in this vein, Gandhi insisted on one occasion that there were two forms of representation, elections and *satyagraha*, and he was committed to the latter. *Satyagraha* as a form of representation: this intriguing formulation which makes *satyagraha* and *seva* interchangeable terms has profound ramifications. For *satyagraha* was about the inescapability of dissonance and disobedience: it opposed state, friend, and antagonist in the name of a politics of neighbourliness. As such, it may be too preliminary to think of this politics as characterized only by a supplementary logic in relation to the modern power and the modern state. For this politics involved a disciplinary logic that made modern discipline — the practice of modern power — its object, that displaced and undid modern discipline with its own discipline, that disciplined modern discipline. Given the capillary nature of modern discipline, given the multiple registers and institutions through which the economizing logic of modern governmentality constitutes itself, a Gandhian disciplining of this power too had to work at those levels, rather than confine itself to representation in the state through elections. To its pastoral discipline which was centered around fostering and producing life in the modern sense, Gandhi opposed the stark discipline of *tapasya*, with its radical commitment to self-suffering and death.

The immense scope of such an anti-disciplinary discipline imparts to Gandhi’s politics of neighbourliness its extraordinary everyday-ness. For what strikes the reader of Gandhi (and what caused much frustration amongst mainstream nationalists, who complained about his lack of a sense of priorities) is that the politics of neighbourliness is worked out in myriad singular situations, some of extremely local concern. The politics of neighbourliness was nothing if not about everyday life — that phrase being understood here not in its catch-all empiricist sense but,
with De Certeau, in a political sense, as that which evades modern disciplinary regimes. Much of Gandhi’s work lay precisely in seizing upon the fugitive (and supplementary) forms of everyday life, and in infusing them with a rigorous anti-disciplinary discipline which allowed them to no longer be fugitive. It is the universal scope of this extraordinary everyday-ness, should we say, which inserts Gandhi into our political and conceptual horizons today.

Notes

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2 Mark Thomson, Gandhi and his Ashrams (Bombay, 1993).


4 Gandhi’s works are available in English — Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (henceforth CWMG); and in Gujarati — Gandhijino Akshardeha (henceforth Akshardeha). They have been both published from Ahmedabad. I usually cite texts first in the language in which it was originally written. I have modified translations most usually to foreground the conceptual distance between Gandhi’s arguments and liberal thought.

5 William Connolly, Why I am not a Secularist (Minneapolis, 1999), 19f.

6 Gandhiji, Mangalprabhat (Ahmedabad, 1930): 1; M. K. Gandhi, From Yeravda Mandir (henceforth Yeravda; Ahmedabad, 1932), 1, translation modified.


8 For a discussion of these two regimes, see Alasdair Macintyre, After Virtue (Indiana, 1981), 80; I explore their relationship to liberalism at greater length in Ajay Skaria, Gandhi’s Neighbours.

Satyagrahashramno Itihas, in Akshardeha, vol. 50, 221; CWMG, vol. 56, 180; translation modified. Gandhi completed the manuscript of this book around July 1932 (after Mangalprabhat), but remained dissatisfied with it. It was published posthumously in 1948. Akshardeha, vol. 50, 186.


Hind Swaraj, in CWMG, vol. 10, 257. The Gujarati original to this English translation — by Gandhi — has no equivalent to this phrase. In Gandhi’s Neighbours. I discuss at greater length how the category, ‘discipline’, so prominent in his English writings, is quite elusive in his Gujarati writings, and yet, how its distinctiveness only emerges from the latter. This is symptomatic of how his critique of liberalism is available to us through an interplay of Gujarati and English writings and translations.


Hind Swaraj, in Akshardeha, vol. 10, 41; CWMG, vol. 10, 279; translation modified. This point about the difference between chit and man was made clear to me in a discussion with Babu Suthar.

This understanding of “civilization” makes it impossible to rely on history, politics, the tutelage of one community by another, and more generally the work of power as engines and instruments of civilization’. Uday Singh Mehta, Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought (Chicago, 1999).


Cf Rabindranath Tagore “Reflections on non-cooperation and cooperation”, May 1921, in The Mahatma and the Poet, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (Delhi, 1997), 62.

Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 153.

Ibid., 175.


Mangalprabhat, 1; Yeravada, 1.

Anasaktiyoga, in Akshardeha, vol. 41, 125; CWMG, vol. 46, 201. In this book, Gandhi audaciously reads the Bhagvad Gita as a text on neighbourliness.

As this suggests, our current anti-secularist affirmations of Gandhi’s religiosity — which paint his Hinduism as an extension of folk traditions, and oppose it to the BJP’s communalist and monolithic Hinduism — are somewhat misplaced. Gandhi affirmed the folk traditions of Hinduism not because of populist faith in rural traditions, but because they conformed to his criterion of religiosity — disciplined devotion. ‘The people of India have drunk of the nectar of devotion [bhakti-ras]. This great people overflows with faith [shraddha]. It is no difficult matter to lead such a people on to the pure path of satyagraha.’ Akshardeha, vol. 13, 490; CWMG, vol. 16, 13.

CWMG, vol. 84, 266f.

Mangalprabhat 4, Yeravada, 3, translation modified.
Mangalprabhat, 8; Yeravda, 6; translation modified.

Mangalprabhat, 12; Yeravda, 9; translation modified.


I thank Sitanshu Mehta for pointing out the centrality of *sagpan*.

August 4, 1925, in *CWMG*, vol. 32, 244.

*Satyagraha-ashramno itihas*, in *Akshardeha*, vol. 50, 202; *CWMG*, vol. 56, 160.

As I point out in *Gandhi’s Neighbours*, *sagpan* included animals too, and thus produced a ‘man’ who was quite different from the liberal category ‘man’.


June 14, 1928, in *CWMG*, vol. 42, 109. I thank Alon Confino for discussions of these points. See also Alon Confino and Ajay Skaria, “The Local Life of Nationhood”, in *National Identities* (Spring, 2002); and Ajay Skaria, “National, Popular, Historical: The Curious Loves of Indulal Yagnik”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. XXXVIII, No. 3 (June-September, 2001).


52 I draw heavily here on Faisal Fatehali Devji’s brilliant essay, Faisal Fatehali Devji, “A Practice of Prejudice”, in Subaltern Studies XII, ed. Shail Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian, and Ajay Skaria (Delhi, forthcoming).

53 I thank David Hardiman for pointing out the centrality of tapasya.

54 I provide a detailed account of these two sets of relations in my Gandhi’s neighbours.


56 Another form, involving fasting, was practiced only against friends.