Religion, Nationalism and the State

Gandhi, Ambedkar and India's engagement with political modernity

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Late in the year 1909, Mahatma Gandhi set sail from England to South Africa after concluding an unrewarding political mission in the "mother country". He had as company on the long voyage, a laconic Muslim businessman who had been part of the mission of representing the cause of the Indian community in South Africa. With little to divert him, Gandhi turned his attention to India, a country he had visited only in brief and sporadic intervals over the past two decades.

Writing at a furious pace, Gandhi completed *Hind Swaraj* in the course of the voyage, setting out the terms of his political engagement with Indian nationalism. Organised as a dialogue with an unidentified interlocutor, *Hind Swaraj* was a book that he insisted till his last days, represented the clearest distillate of his political philosophy.[1] An early biography of Gandhi holds that the interlocutor Gandhi engaged with, was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the political agitationist then living in London, shortly afterwards to be brought to trial by the British *raj* for crimes of sedition and convicted to a life in the desolation of the Andamans penal colony.

Gandhi and Savarkar had just weeks before, shared a platform at a Dassehra gathering of the Indian community in London. As guest of honour, Gandhi had in his remarks, gloried in the generosity and loving kindness of Ram, a figure from the Hindu pantheon who he saw as an intimate companion and retained as a source of inspiration to his last days. But with a little subtlety, in disregard of the rule he had himself laid down that the Dassehra observance would not be converted into a political platform, he went on to suggest that the conquest of evil was a mission that still lay ahead in India's life as a nation. If all creeds and races in India were to unite behind the banner of Ram, evil would soon be banished from the land, he declared.

Speaking shortly afterwards, Savarkar held forth on the cultural richness of India, which was only enhanced by its many-coloured diversity. "Hindus are the heart of Hindustan", he said:

> Nevertheless, just as the beauty of the rainbow is not impaired but enhanced by its varied hues, so also Hindustan will appear all the more beautiful across the sky of the future by assimilating all that is best in the Muslim, Parsi, Jewish and other civilisations.[2]

He went on to echo all that Gandhi had said about Ram before pointedly referring to the celebration over the nine days preceding Dassehra, of the cult of Durga, who embodied the attributes of anger and retribution.

That was a fateful first encounter, where the seeds of a momentous political divergence in later years were sown. An Indian "nation" then seemed a prospect greatly to be desired, though one subject to extreme differences in interpretation. Closure in some respects was applied four decades later, when Savarkar went on trial for Gandhi's assassination and secured an acquittal because of infirmities in the legal process and his own clever and evasive testimony.[3] But closure from the viewpoint of securing India's national identity to a secular ideal is yet to be attained. That much is evident from the recent hysteria over an imagined slight, inflicted posthumously, on Savarkar.[4]

Over the years following his authorship of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi revisited the themes of the pamphlet on numerous occasions, without ever giving a hint of the identity of his interlocutor. In his preface to a 1921 edition, he revealed that it was written in "answer to the Indian school of violence" after contacts with "every known Indian anarchist in London". He also chose the occasion to reaffirm his undimmed faith in the principles laid out:

> My conviction is deeper today than ever. I feel that if India would discard `modern civilisation', she can only gain by doing so.

In three years since returning to a tumultuous welcome in India, Gandhi had been propelled to the forefront of the Indian nationalist movement. And what he had by way of prognosis for the movement was very simple. *Hind Swaraj* had fallen into neglect, he wrote, since the "only part of the programme which is now being carried out in its entirety is that of non-violence". With great regret though, he had to "confess", that "even that is not being carried out in the

spirit of the book". Indeed, if it were, then "India would establish *swaraj* in a day".[5]

An Indian nation in the making

An Indian nation struggling to come into being was a very distinct component of Gandhi's vision, as he wrote *Hind Swaraj*. Unlike Rabindranath Tagore, who he was yet to personally encounter, he had little reserve about embracing nationalism as an organising principle of political action. And again unlike Tagore, he was willing to give the Congress ample credit, as the principal vehicle of the Indian nationalist project then. For all its failings, the Congress, said Gandhi, had imbued all of India with the spirit of nationalism. "The spirit generated in Bengal" in response to the imperialist stratagem of dividing up the province, had "spread in the north to the Punjab, and in the south to Cape Comorin".[6]

If Gandhi was quick to recognise the power of nationalism -- as a slogan and a concept -- for mobilising the people against British colonialism, he remained sceptical about the moral and ethical legitimacy of an organised polity. Though the term did not enter his political lexicon till much later, Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*, had little use for what would be called "the State" in the vocabulary of modern political science. Indeed, the modern State for Gandhi, seemed to embody man's impertinence in seeking to supplant a benevolent God.

This seeming conceit of the human race was best expressed by his ideological adversary in *Hind Swaraj*. "We must have our own navy, our army, and we must have our own splendour, and then will India's voice ring through the world", says the "reader", intent on challenging the most deeply held beliefs of Gandhi, who speaks through the medium of the "editor". Gandhi is equal to the challenge, though not quite able to descend to the same level of banality. In his guise as the "editor", he gently chides the "reader":

> You have drawn the picture well. In effect, it means that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English…. This is not the Swaraj that I want.

The challenge that Gandhi posed before his "reader" then was daunting: it was "to learn, and to teach others, that we do not want the tyranny of either English rule or Indian rule".[7]

These are powerful formulations, yet strange and paradoxical. Gandhi titles a pamphlet after "Indian Home Rule", but then proceeds to denounce "Indian rule", as a form of tyranny very much akin to "English Rule". There are echoes here of Tagore, who was then in the process of recoil from the Swadeshi movement, and preparing an explicit critique of nationalism. P.C. Mahalanobis, the principal architect of India's economic plans -- and a scholar on Tagore whose knowledge of the poet's early years has been characterised as "unrivalled" -- puts the facts on record for a forgetful generation. After his early, enthusiastic propaganda work for the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, Tagore in 1907, "resigned his membership of every committee, severed the connection with every organisation -- all in the course of a single day -- and fled to (Shantiniketan) from where he could not be dragged out for several years".[8]

Tagore emerged from this reflective cocoon many years later with *Ghare Baire*, a novel that in its time failed to spark off the kind of interest that later years would invest in it. In the contention between the novel's main characters -- Sandip and Nikhil -- Tagore articulated all the unresolved ethical tensions of the nationalist project, known then by its most visible manifestation in the Swadeshi movement. Nikhil is obviously Tagore's alter-ego, the man who responds to his wife's complaints about his lack of sympathy for the spirit of Swadeshi, with a gentle admonition:

> **I am willing to serve my country, but my worship I reserve for Right, which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a God is to bring a curse upon it.**

Sandip, the politician, has fewer scruples. He is convinced that "in the immense cauldron where vast political developments are simmering, untruths are the main ingredient", and "man's goal is not truth but success".[9] Nikhil similarly sees no way that the "nation" – so alien to the popular sensibility – could be internalised within the Indian mind as a focus and objective of mass mobilisation. The cause of forging social solidarities between people separated by vast discrepancies could not be served by creating "illusions", he chides his friend. But Sandip is unapologetic. As he responds: "Illusions are necessary for lesser minds".[10]

Tagore also serves up a subtle characterisation of the sectarian attitude that was growing and becoming entrenched within the two major communities of British India, as the nationalist project was being transformed from an elite pursuit into a mass phenomenon. Communal antagonism was not in Tagore's portrayal, an accidental intrusion into the Swadeshi movement, but integral to its ideology. He has Nikhil asking Sandip why "Mussalmans" should not be an integral part of the nation. Sandip responds with ill-concealed disdain:

> Quite so. But we must know their place and keep them there. Otherwise they will constantly be giving trouble.[11]

Free of the subtleties of fiction, Tagore was himself to articulate his political sensibilities in a series of reflections on all that was wrong with the nationalist project, as it then was. Confidently swimming against the dominant current, which viewed the "nation" as a platform of collective salvation, Tagore critiqued it as the antithesis of all that the human spirit stood for. "A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people", he declared in a series of addresses in Japan and the U.S. in 1916, "is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose":

> When this organisation of politics and commerce … becomes all powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity.[12]

Tagore of course does not make a distinction between the "Nation" and the "State", since it was a fundamental premise of nationalism that the political unit (the State) should be in confluence with the national unit. But he does speak in places of "government by the Nation" as one of the most oppressive features of nationalism. This form of government, he suggests, is "like an applied science and therefore more or less similar in its principles wherever it is used". India could be governed by the British or by the Dutch, or French or Portuguese, but the "essential features" would remain "much the same as they are".[13]

The nation and the people

Viewed in this perspective, the divergence between Tagore and Gandhi sharply narrows. For Gandhi the power of the nation was vested with the people, rather than the State. And the reason why Gandhi saw the State as a dispensable organism in the Indian civilisational context offers

interesting counterpoints to early European political thought.

Writing during the English civil war for instance, Hobbes saw the strong controlling centre of the State as necessary to avoid a precipitous descent into a "war of all against all". In his natural state, man was impelled by little else than infinite acquisitiveness and the competitive spirit. Without the restraints of living in a political society, and a social compact by which all men submit to the laws that the State decrees and enforces, every man would be in a state of perennial conflict with fellow beings.

In the more placid and settled time of the Stuart restoration, Locke could take a more serene view. Mankind was naturally in a state of perfect harmony, he wrote. The only disturbances that could arise in this settled course would be from the willful encroachment by the unlawful on the rights, privileges and properties of others. The function of the State was little else than to guard against this variety of illegality. Where conflict was inherent in human nature for Hobbes, Locke saw this undesirable tendency in only a few who had fallen from a naturally given state of grace, by virtue of some original sin.

For Gandhi, the State was entirely dispensable, since he saw India as a country intrinsically at harmony with itself. The kind of social and economic competition that western liberalism set much store by, which it had indeed raised to the status of the principle of progress, was completely absent in India. "We have no system of life-corroding competition", wrote Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*: "Each followed his own occupation or trade and charged a regulation wage".[14] Man's inherent goodness was preserved in the traditional organisation of society. The challenge for the nationalist movement was merely to rediscover these values and make them the fundamental principles of politics.

This notion of an inherent harmony in a traditional social order, which had been disrupted by modernity, remained a part of Gandhi's thought for long. But there was no hint of religious revivalism in him. Indeed, in the context in which it was authored, *Hind Swaraj* stands in striking opposition to the dominant trends in Indian nationalist thinking. Gandhi in this respect, was just as adrift of the mood of the nationalist camp as Tagore.

The Swadeshi movement and the agitation against the partition of Bengal, had seen a nationalist strain emerging which tethered itself strongly to Hindu religious revivalism. All their differences apart, the leaders who came to prominence then, as also the older nationalist lions -- Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal -- shared certain common perceptions. They all held the style of politics of the Congress in a fair amount of disdain, seeing it as a particularly debasing form of mendicancy. And they were all firmly wedded to the belief that nationalist salvation lay in Hindu revival. Tagore indeed, earned the displeasure of this influential group of leaders very early on, for his lack of enthusiasm for the revivalist agenda. His quite futile, seemingly quixotic pursuit of a universal ideal, they felt, was a needless dilution of the fervour of the nationalist program.[15]

Gandhi addressed each of these issues in its place in *Hind Swaraj*. The forging of a political strategy other than Congress mendicancy was a welcome development in his judgment. "Hitherto we have considered that for redress of grievances we must approach the throne, and if we get no redress we must sit still, except that we may still petition", he wrote. But after the partition of Bengal, "people saw that petitions must be backed up by force, and that they must be capable of suffering".[16] The "force" referred to here, of course, is the moral variety rather than the physical.

There were no concessions though to revivalist religion as a focus of nationalist mobilisation. Responding to a question from his imagined interlocutor on whether the "introduction of Mahomedanism" (sic) had "unmade the nation", Gandhi answers quite definitively. "India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it". A nation indeed, to deserve the status, needed to cultivate the capacity for assimilation.[17]

In the following years, the social philosophy of *Hind Swaraj* fell into relative neglect. In contrast, the economic philosophy, redolent as it is with the spirit of rebellion against all manifestations of bourgeois industrial society, has been grist for those who have made Gandhi out to be a committed enemy of modernism. But *Hind*

Swaraj is nothing if not a reflection, steeped in the spirit of political modernity, on the individual, his place in society, and the relationship of the State to civil society. Gandhi offered little concession to the idea that India's liberation lay in welding its past civilisational glories -- mostly reimagined and reinvented in the heat of nationalist agitation -- to the modern, militarised State that Britain exemplified. That was Savarkar's project, which came, in the later years of India's freedom struggle, to be embodied in a more primitive form in M.S. Golwalkar and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS). The parting of ways that was to culminate with three bullets on January 30, 1948, was already foretold in *Hind Swaraj*.

Though faith was his most stable anchor, Gandhi had little patience for institutionalised religion. Hindutva was then an incipient notion, and its full articulation in the works of Savarkar and Golwalkar, was yet to come. But Gandhi's critique was already laid out in *Hind Swaraj*, where he elaborated his perception of religion as a set of personal, ethical rules of conduct, rather than a criterion of identity fixation or political mobilisation. "In reality", he wrote,

> there are as many religions as there are individuals, but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion… In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous term; nor has it ever been so in India.[18]

There is a radical notion of individual liberty inherent in these locutions, born in the disavowal of the authority of both the State and the institutions of religion. It was that sense of individual liberty that was to be affirmed through the withdrawal of consent to an oppressive State. "It is not necessary to debate whether you hold India by the sword or by consent", he said. He could well tolerate a continuing presence of the British in India. But though they were then the rulers, they would "have to remain as servants of the people".[19]

Gandhi's mobilisation in India began with the nationwide strike against the Rowlatt bills. And then followed the epic mobilisation of the non-cooperation movement. It was a period of deepening crisis for British imperialism. Though victorious against Germany in the war of 1914-18, the imperial nation was besieged from within by labour strife. And its victory against Germany had come at a severe price. Its role as the clearing house for all global commerce had

been seriously eroded. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia had rudely sundered the concord among even the victorious imperial powers of Europe. China was restive, as too was most of Central Europe and West Asia, recently liberated from the yoke of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. British imperialism, worn thin, was less inclined to exercise its hegemony through impersonal mechanisms of bureaucracy and the law, and tilting towards baring its fangs.

Consent and coercion

Non-cooperation implied the active withdrawal of consent to the colonial State. The maintenance of order would then call forth the overt exercise of coercion by the State. Violence even in self-defence -- and especially in retaliation -- was explicitly proscribed for participants in the nationwide mobilisation. The underlying aim, the operational philosophy of non-cooperation, was that the moral power of society would step into the breach, maintaining harmony where the coercive power of the State fails. The moral advantage would shift from the colonial State to civil society, laying the foundations of *Swaraj*.

Non-cooperation was withdrawn following the Moplah uprising in Malabar and the disturbances in Chauri Chaura. Writing in *Navajivan* shortly afterwards, Gandhi offered a sober stocktaking:

> for the time being progress has been arrested in Malabar and the government has had its way…. Malabar has demonstrated that we non-cooperators have not yet gained full control. A Government to be worthy of the name has to get the people under control. There is only one way in which we can gain such control, and that is through non-violence.[20]

The purpose of non-cooperation was to transfer the locus of control from the Government to the movement. The movement would supplant the Government without itself becoming one. And the movement would maintain order in society because non-violence would then be a deeply internalised virtue.

Non-cooperation provided the context for a celebrated debate between Tagore and Gandhi. The differences between the two on nationalism were less substantial than imagined. But Tagore was both exhilarated and alarmed at the massive national upheaval of non-cooperation, unprecedented in his memory. "It is in the fitness of things", he wrote, that

> Mahatma Gandhi, frail in body and devoid of all material resources, should call up the immense power of the meek,

> that has been lying waiting in the heart of the destitute and insulted humanity of India.

To Tagore, the moment seemed to prove that "the frail man of spirit" with none of the apparatuses of coercion, would prove that "the meek would inherit the earth".[21]

This glowing preamble aside, Tagore proceeded to ask the hard questions. "What is *Swaraj*?", he asked, before deflating the concept itself with his answer:

> It is *maya*, it is like a mist, that will vanish leaving no stain on the radiance of the Eternal. However we may delude ourselves with the phrases learnt from the West, *Swaraj* is not our objective.

Gandhi's struggle for *Swaraj* seemed rather too mundane for Tagore, since he perceived the fight as little less than "a spiritual fight", to release "Man" from the "National Egoism" that he had "enmeshed" himself in. The task before the "famished, ragged ragamuffins" who Gandhi had roused from their slumber was to "win freedom for all Humanity". The "Nation" was an alien concept for all Indians -- and here Tagore returned to the theme of universal humanism that he remained faithful to all his life:

> We have no word for Nation in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us.[22]

Tagore plainly felt that Gandhi had isolated himself from the world to an unacceptable degree by casting his political project within the framework of the "Nation". This insularity was exacting a price that the politicians were not willing to recognise. Non-cooperation meant "political asceticism", said Tagore, but the country's students, motivated by nationalism, were seeking not a "fuller education", but a "non-education". This variety of nihilism elicited none of Tagore's sympathy. It represented for him, no more than "a fierce joy in annihilation", or a descent by humanity into "a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation".[23]

In Tagore's political memory, the turbulence that had been excited by Gandhi's non-cooperation call was uncomfortably reminiscent of the anarchy, as he remembered it, of the *Swadeshi* movement. And by seeming to repudiate all things Western, Gandhi had unwittingly fallen into a trap of cultural hatred, and set himself on the path towards the kind of havoc that the world had seen in the World War. Cultural rejection pained him, since he was prepared, with "unalloyed gladness" to accept all the "great glories of

man" as his own. The "clamour that the Western education can only injure us" was for him completely unfounded:

> It cannot be true. What has caused the mischief is the fact that for a long time we have been out of touch with our own culture and therefore the Western culture has not found its prospective in our life … giving our mental eye a squint.

There was no doubt in Tagore's mind that the "West had misunderstood the East", leading to much disharmony. But he was unconvinced that matters would be rendered any better by the East in its turn, misunderstanding the West.[24]

Gandhi responded soon, repudiating the accusation of cultural insularity in justly famous words:

> I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.[25]

The purpose of the movement he assured Tagore, was not to "erect a Chinese wall between India and the West". Rather, it was to "pave the way to real, honourable and voluntary cooperation based on mutual respect and trust". The coercive power of the colonial State was the target of the mobilisation and the object was to "end the armed imposition of modern methods of exploitation, masquerading under the name of civilisation". A Government builds its prestige on "the apparently voluntary association of the governed" and the eagerness that Indians had shown for western education had made of them what they were intended to become: "clerks and interpreters". It was wrong to cooperate with the colonial project of keeping India enslaved, and this principle needed to be asserted forcefully in the domain of education, where Indians seemed to be associating themselves most voluntarily. Non-cooperation was not, as Tagore feared, all about "saying no". It had an affirmative component too in the revival of vernacular traditions, so that every Indian could "think (and) express the best of thoughts in his or her own vernacular".[26]

The exchanges continued through another cycle. In later years, Tagore and Gandhi were to engage each other in public debates on what the former called "the cult of the *charkha*" and the very meaning of *Swaraj*. The poet publicly rebuked Gandhi for his observation that the 1934 earthquake in Bihar was "divine chastisement" for the social evil of untouchability. Gandhi defended himself spiritedly, invoking his "living faith" in a connection between cosmic phenomena and human behaviour. The living recognition of

the union between matter and spirit, said Gandhi, had "enabled many to use every physical catastrophe for their own moral uplifting". Yet such a belief would be a "degrading superstition" conceded Gandhi, if out of the depth of ignorance, he were to use it for "castigating opponents".[27]

Two epochal figures

Years later, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in *The Discovery of India*, that "Tagore and Gandhi have undoubtedly been the two outstanding and dominating figures of India in this first half of the twentieth century". The contrasts they offered were instructive. Tagore, as Nehru saw him, was "the aristocratic artist", "a democrat with proletarian sympathies", who "represented essentially the cultural tradition of India". Gandhi, was "more a man of the people, almost the embodiment of the Indian peasant". He too had his roots in an ancient tradition of "renunciation and asceticism". Yet he was quintessentially the man of action. Their differences apart, both, in Nehru's judgment "had a world outlook" while at the same time, being "wholly Indian". "They seemed to present different but harmonious aspects of India and to complement one another".[28]

Despite their disagreements and rather different temperaments, Tagore and Gandhi shared an underlying modern sensibility. The British historian E.P. Thompson observes in his introduction to a recent edition of *Nationalism*, that Tagore was "a founder of 'anti-politics'". His steadfast refusal to enter the turbulence of political agitation and his reluctance to endorse key tactical moments in the nationalist struggle, engendered problems with Gandhi and Nehru. But mutual respect was always maintained. Tagore's aloofness from politics, Thompson notes, arose from the clarity of his conception, which he had ahead of any other thinker of his time, of "civil society, as something distinct from and of stronger and more personal texture than political or economic structures".[29]

Clearly, the observation applies with almost equal force to Gandhi. The political strategies that Gandhi crafted since his return to India, revolved around a notion of the relationship of the individual to civil society, and in turn to the State. The objectives of his agitational work included the dismantling of the coercive powers of the State and the recovery of individual autonomy and freedom

within a framework of civil society. The animating force of the struggle was in his terminology, *satyagraha*, or the pursuit of truth. Though inspired by deeply held religious faith, Gandhi claimed no monopoly of virtue or the truth. Every individual had to determine what he understood as the truth, drawing from his own sources of religious inspiration.

In testimony before the Disorders Inquiry Commission in 1920, Gandhi affirmed that the principle of *satyagraha* could often invite suffering upon the participant, though it could not under any circumstances involve violence inflicted upon others. Chimanlal Setalvad, who interrogated him, was insistent on chasing what he thought was a chimera and exposing its basic fallacy. Could not this atomised process of defining the truth, engender quite different perceptions on the political course to be followed by individuals? Gandhi was certain that it could. But then, would not "considerable confusion" be the outcome? This proposition Gandhi firmly set his face against:

> I won't accept that. It need not lead to any confusion if you accept the proposition that a man is honestly in search after truth and that he will never inflict violence upon him who holds to truth.[30]

Different ideas of truth can coexist, as they should. But none should cross the threshold of civilised discourse and end in violence. That was the final test that Gandhi set for the truth-value of any belief. If it impelled the adherent into an act of violence against a fellow being, then it could not aspire to the status of truth.

Gandhi never hesitated to proclaim that his politics was completely in thrall to his religious beliefs. The distinction to him was entirely artificial, since politics and religion were just two different terms for the same process, of mediating an individual's relationship with society. In a 1925 speech to a group of women missionaries, he confessed himself rather amused by the distinction. "Can life be divided into such watertight compartments?" he asked. And he had the answer:

> The seemingly different activities are complementary and produce the sweet harmony of life. Politics separated from religion stinks, religion detached from politics is meaningless.[31]

Religious faith, though could not be imposed. Each individual had to be true to his own faith. Gandhi was

undergoing a longish incarceration in 1924 when a wave of violence gutted the delicate fabric of communal unity in India. The leaders from the two sides, who had enjoyed a long spell of camaraderie during the Khilafat agitation, were rapidly slipping into a more adversarial mode. Emerging from prison he issued a statement on Hindu-Muslim unity, naming the principal leaders on both sides and extolling their commitment to communal harmony. He then deprecated the aggressive proselytisation efforts by both sides, and their effort to mobilise political crowds on the basis of religion. "The modern method does not appeal to me", he said: "It has done more harm than good". But those were his personal views and if any faction or movement -- and he named the Arya Samaj in this context -- felt it had a "call from the conscience" to engage in proselytisation, then they had a "perfect right" to do so. If Hindu-Muslim unity could be "endangered" by religious preachers responding to the inner urgings of their faith, that unity could only be "skin-deep".[32]

Religion was entirely a matter within the personal domain. It expressed itself in actions in the social and political realm, but could not be a basis for identity fixation or for political mobilisation. Unfortunately, in the competitive political model that was being introduced in India, religion was becoming syndicated. It was the primary form of political identity the rising middle classes chose to assert as they prepared incrementally to occupy spaces in governance being vacated by the colonial power.

Gandhi's remedy for the ills and tensions of competitive politics tilted towards rediscovering the lost harmonies of tradition. His extremely controversial views on the *varnashrama* and the institution of caste, were derived from this perception. As he put it after a contentious tour of the south of the country, where he had been constantly under pressure to explain his views, "*varnashrama* is, in my opinion, inherent in human nature, and Hinduism has simply reduced it to a science".[33] There was however, no sanction for the evil of untouchability in the *varnashrama*, and neither was there any principle in it that privileged one occupational grouping with a higher social status.

As an adherent of the *sanatana dharma*, Gandhi believed in the holy writ of the Vedas and all other texts that were part of the Hindu scripture. But he did not insist on their exclusive claims to divinity.[34] In fact, he could claim,

with little seeming contradiction, that being an adherent of the *sanatana dharma*, he could be a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian at the same time.

With communal violence raging through the mid-1920s, Gandhi's withdrawal became complete and his sense of despair, overwhelming. "What more may I say about the Hindu-Muslim fighting?" he asked in a 1926 letter to G.D. Birla: "I fully understand what is best for us, but I also know that anything I say at present will be a cry in the wilderness".[35] And referring to a resolution on the issue that was passed at the All India Congress Committee session in Bombay in 1927, he wrote in *Young India*:

> If the reader does not see me now often refer to the question (of Hindu-Muslim relations) in these pages, it is because the sense of humiliation has gone too deep for words. It matters little to me whether the perpetrators of evil deeds are Hindus or Mussalmans. It is enough to know that some of us are blaspheming a patient God and doing inhuman deeds in the sacred name of religion.[36]

Bureaucratic governance and social harmony

All through these years of relative isolation and despair, Gandhi remained anchored in his conception of politics as a process of intensive self-purification, of achieving a harmony between the individual and society. He showed little inclination to engage with the realities of the bureaucracy and the law, or to attend to the mundane tasks of framing agreements and compacts that would govern a transfer of power to Indian hands. Motilal Nehru and Chitta Ranjan Das had, with due respect, taken issue with him in 1924 on the question of contesting the elections to the legislative councils permitted under the post-World War reforms. If the principle of "non-cooperation" as endorsed by the Congress was "more a matter of mental attitude" than the "application of a living principle to the existing facts", then they felt compelled to sacrifice the principle. The nationalist agenda, they insisted, required an engagement with the "bureaucratic Government" that ruled Indian lives.[37]

In later years, Gandhi remained aloof from the nationwide agitation over the Simon Commission. He conceded that he had done so since his "interference" could quite conceivably have brought the "masses more prominently into the movement", and been a potential "embarrassment" for the promoters of the agitation. Writing in February 1928, he disavowed any desire to "interfere with the … evolution of

the national movement, except through occasional writings". But he called for the formation of a cadre of "earnest, able and honest men and women" to build on the momentum of the successful agitation against the Simon Commission and carry it forward.[38] Despite his deep personal regard for Motilal Nehru, Gandhi could not, later that year, summon up very great enthusiasm over the report of the committee of the All Parties Conference he had chaired. The Nehru report is recognised today as the first effort to give independent India a constitution. But Gandhi still remained focused on human essences, rather than the forms and outward trappings of political structures. As he put it in a communication to Motilal: "I feel that we shall make nothing of a constitution, be it ever so good, if the men to work it are not good enough".[39] A few days before, writing in *Young India*, Gandhi lauded the unanimity that had been displayed by all parties in the Nehru report, which he said, took the country one step closer to "constitutional *Swaraj*". But he still sought to make a distinction between this political state and what he called "organic *Swaraj*".[40] He left no one in any doubt about where his priorities lay.

Once the Nehru report was endorsed at a formal session of the All Parties Conference in Lucknow, Gandhi called for forging a "sanction" to enforce it as a national demand. Much "diplomatic work" remained to be done, he conceded, but the popular mobilisation effort was the more important. By now enthused by the Bardoli satyagraha, he saw in it the prototype for national action to forge the popular will. "Bardoli", as he wrote in *Navajivan*, "had proved that the power of the people is greater than that of the State". And this success was entirely premised upon the "peoples' capacity to remain peaceful and their capacity to offer peaceful resistance".[41]

Gandhi's years of relative quiescence in political forums, were suffused with intense social observation and travel through all of India. Till the late-1920s though, he is still using, in part, the vocabulary of pacifist anarchism, consistently demoting the State to a subsidiary position in his attentions, giving little priority to the process of drafting and enacting a constitution, and raising "peoples' power" to a higher pedestal. Indeed, the "State" as an organised political entity, enters his vocabulary and acquires a positive connotation only in the following years, and under multiple stimuli.

Radicalised by his first-hand observations of the global capitalist crisis of the 1920s and the experiences of the Soviet Union, Jawaharlal Nehru was pressing the case for a declaration of independence by the Congress and a future for the Indian nation in the "socialistic" mould. The Nehru report of 1928 had fallen short of his ambitions for the country, by opting for the more moderate course of seeking "dominion status" rather than "independence". Gandhi urged a shift of focus from the terminology to the essence. "Dominion status can easily become more than independence, if we have the sanction to back it", he argued, and "independence can easily become a farce, if it lacks sanction".[42] If "the sanction" -- a term that in Gandhi's terminology, clearly meant the popular will -- was clear, then it did not matter whether *swaraj*, his preferred term, was spelt "dominion status" or "independence".

Nehru reflected some of the impatience of the popular mood in his aloofness from the constitutional scheme devised by his father. But he pressed, with Subhas Chandra Bose and other radical elements, for a one-year deadline between the Congress' adoption of the Nehru report and a formal commitment to "independence" as a goal. Gandhi introduced the resolution setting out the one-year period for the colonial Government at the Calcutta Congress of 1928. As the year ran its course and the Lahore Congress of 1929 approached, he rebuffed the unanimous opinion within the nationalist stream that he should take over as Congress president, and nominated Jawaharlal Nehru to the post. The independence resolution was adopted at Lahore, but the Congress remained unclear about the tactical means it should adopt. It looked once again to Gandhi, to energise the movement and to invest the ultimate goal with its concrete meanings.

The State and religious neutrality

The Dandi march followed and a series of meetings with Viceroy Lord Irwin. Nehru was disappointed at the outcome and saw little in the Gandhi-Irwin pact that served the cause of India's independence. He remained in deference to Gandhi, not explicitly speaking his mind or distancing himself from the leader. And Gandhi for his part, began the process of shifting his model of pacifist anarchism towards the socialistic paradigm favoured by Nehru. The outcome was the resolution on "fundamental rights", adopted at the 1931 Congress. It is still unclear whether Gandhi drafted the resolution or Nehru. But the fact that they worked in close

concord is clear. Aside from the welfare component, which committed the State in independent India to ensure economic equality and protect the working class and the poor from the predatory tendencies of unbridled capitalism, the resolution also set down the clear rule that the "State" would maintain "neutrality between all religions".

Speaking to the Karachi Congress on the fundamental rights resolution, Gandhi described "religious neutrality" as an "important provision". But as usual, he remained focused on essences:

> **Swaraj will favour Hinduism no more than Islam, nor Islam more than Hinduism. But in order that we may have a State based on religious neutrality, let us from now adopt the principle in our daily affairs.[43]**

The anarchist had finally accepted the State as an indispensable component of political life. And just as the individual inspired by authentic religious faith would treat all alike, irrespective of religion, the State too would retain its essential commitment to secularism as a principle. The term "secularism" would enter Gandhi's discourse only many years later. But the foundations had been laid by 1931.

Gandhi had of course, though not without some reluctance, expressed his belief that the State would be an unavoidable part of India's political future. Responding to the challenge that his support for the Khilafat movement was inconsistent with his commitment to non-violence, Gandhi had in 1920, explained that the *satyagrahi*, though proscribed from the use of force in "defence of anything", is not "precluded from helping men or institutions that are themselves not based on non-violence". If the stronger kind of proscription applied, he pointed out, he would be prevented entirely from agitating for *swaraj*, since he knew "for certain" that a "future Parliament of India under *swaraj*", would be maintaining "a military and police force".[44]

Gandhi contributed little to the debates that became increasingly specific -- from the Nehru report in 1928 -- on the mode of organisation of the State or on the framework of law it should function within. He seemed to defer, in most such matters, to the judgment of the Nehrus -- first Motilal and then Jawaharlal. Yet Jawaharlal Nehru was ever impatient with him, failing to find in him the positive endorsement that would lend strength to his case

for an explicitly socialist political program. It is clear now that Gandhi's main purpose in seeking to restrain the more radical propositions that were advanced by Nehru and Bose, was his insistence on maintaining unity within the nationalist movement at all costs. This was a priority for him, since he evidently did not yet see the flowering of the organic social cohesion that would make *swaraj* a reality.

The 1920s and '30s were a period of sprouting and multiplying social identities. Gandhi's epic nationwide mobilisations of 1919-22 and 1930-32 had much to do with the entry into the nationalist stream of several sections that till then had remained isolated. But Gandhi could not dictate the terms on which these new entrants would engage with the nationalist project, or the range of political interests and aspirations they would bring to the table, when negotiating the contours of the future Indian State. It was a process of bargaining that went from local politics, with all its mundane concerns over the control of municipal revenues and urban spaces, to larger questions of law and constitutional governance. And the debate was taking place in an environment skewed by the degree to which British colonialism felt compelled to accommodate nationalist demands. Britain's imperial calculations were integrally, part of the process, since it could inject these perspectives into the process with the reforms it was forced to grudgingly accepted -- first in 1909, and then in 1919 and 1935.

Rising social conflict was inherent in the situation, with different groups staking a claim to the political powers that British colonialism was reluctantly ceding. It was a political agenda that, when not represented at the high table of constitutional negotiations, erupted at the level of the street in violence. It took the Congress more than two decades since Gandhi's entry into the nationalist domain, to achieve a manifestly imperfect job of composing these proliferating movements and identities into a semblance of political consensus. Without the frequent political interventions of Mahatma Gandhi, in forms that oscillated between moral seduction and coercion, this reconciliation may perhaps have been impossible. Independence was accompanied by partition along the most pronounced fault-line of the Indian polity in the colonial period. But several other schisms were repaired by Gandhi's constructive work through the 1920s and '30s, perhaps not

fully, but sufficiently well for an effective salvage operation under the rules of the Nehruvian democratic polity.

By any credible conception, the motivations that drove Gandhi were anything but secular. Religious piety was for him among the most prized of attributes, one that put the individual in touch with his basic humanity. This attitude suffuses all his work, but his interventions in the aftermath of the Kohat riots of 1924, when conversions of faith were reportedly forced upon the minorities by a belligerent majority community, represent a particularly acute expression of it. Addressing a meeting of the minority community – in this instance, the Hindus -- that had fled to Rawalpindi, Gandhi gave vent to his anguish:

> What I mean to say is that we should be prepared to lose our lives but not to change our faith. Our true wealth is not money, land or gold. They can be pillaged. But our true wealth is religion. When we abandon that we can be said to have pillaged our own homes.

He went on to advise them that the worldly bonds of home and livelihood were a minor sacrifice compared to what they would potentially suffer through a loss of religion. This required that they remain refugees in Rawalpindi rather than risk going back to Kohat:

> I feel there is nothing to be gained in your going and staying there. You are losing much through love of wealth and life.[45]

With all this, his aversion to a politicised religion was also clearly stated. Not long after his exhortation to the sufferers of Kohat, he observed acerbically, that an "invasion" had begun in the name of religion:

> on the one hand, unification is going on for the protection of Hinduism; on the other, the weaknesses which have entered Hinduism are corroding it from within.

The corruption began with the neglect of caste, which for Gandhi was a basic feature of the Hindu religious universe:

> In the name of the preservation of the castes, the castes are being and have been intermingled. The restraints of caste have disappeared, only its excesses have endured.[46]

And for the movement of the depressed classes and the untouchables that was then rapidly gaining ground, he offered what can only be regarded as rather vapid and politically futile advice.[47] Caste is an ineffaceable aspect of one's identity, ascribed at birth, he argued, and to not live by one's caste "is to disregard the law of heredity".

Swaraj and the State

For a person who believed deeply in religious differences and caste ascriptions, Gandhi saw India's freedom, or *swaraj,* not as a mission of capturing State power, but of establishing a harmony within a bewildering social complexity. Speaking to two petitioners from the untouchable castes who visited him in the early-1920s for an exchange of views and advice, he said:

> There is not a shred of doubt in my mind that so long as we have not cleansed our hearts of this evil (of untouchability) and have not accepted the path of non-violence, so long as Hindus and Muslims have not become sincerely united, we shall not be free.[48]

Yet there was a fundamental asymmetry between the Mahatma's approach towards the Muslim and the Untouchable populations.[49] In an exchange with two members of the depressed classes in the early-1920s for instance, he posed the question whether the untouchables would "ascend to heaven" once the caste Hindus "washed off their sins". Clearly not, since in his estimation, it required corresponding effort from the side of the untouchables:

> They should give up drinking, refuse to eat leftovers, stop eating meat and, though for the sake of service, engaged in the most uncleanly work, remain clean and worship God. All this is for them to attend to. Others cannot do it for them.[50]

Does this attitude amount to the easy option available to those fortunate enough not to have experienced the worst of life's vicissitudes: blaming the victim? Certainly, B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Indian untouchables' movement thought so, denouncing Gandhi and the Congress for its attitude, which was in his characterisation, one of "killing with kindness".[51]

Ambedkar refers specifically to the formation in September 1932 of the Harijan Sewak Samaj under Gandhian auspices, and the prolonged correspondence he carried out with the principal organisers of the body, over the best strategy that could serve the purported objective of combating untouchability. With an abundance of enthusiasm, Ambedkar wrote to the principal trustee of the Samaj in November 1932, identifying two possible approaches to the issue, based on two quite different social philosophies. One would focus on the individual and would seek to foster the virtues of "temperance, gymnasium, cooperation, libraries, schools, etc", in the belief that personal effort and

motivation are the decisive factors in the removal of the social debilities that an entire social strata may confront. The other would look at the social environment and make allowance for the fact that "if an individual is suffering from want and misery, it is because the environment is not propitious". It would emphasise not merely personal motivation and the impulse for self-improvement, but the determining influence of the social and physical environment too.

The first of these approaches could work, but only in the case of a "few stray individuals" who may be raised "above the level of the class to which they belong". But Ambedkar was in little doubt that the second approach was "the more correct", since the emphasis of the Samaj should be on "raising the whole class (of Untouchables) to a higher level".[52] The project of eradicating untouchability in turn, required the active agency of communities that had the most to gain. And though Ambedkar was not inclined to overlook the fact that there may be "scoundrels among the Depressed Classes", he determined that he would still place faith in Tolstoy's dictum that "only those who love can serve". This meant essentially, that the workers of the Samaj should be drawn from the ranks of the Depressed Classes, for whom the mission would be a "labour of love".[53]

Ambedkar's letter addressed to the principal trustees of the Samaj, who included Ghanshyam Das Birla and Amritlal V. Thakkar, remained unacknowledged. Retrospectively evaluating the situation in 1944, Ambedkar thought the whole cycle of events entirely characteristic of Gandhi's approach. He recalled that when a deputation of notables from untouchable communities "waited on Gandhiji at Sevagram" in 1932, with the request that members from communities notified as "scheduled castes" should be given adequate representation in the Harijan Sewak Samaj, they were politely rebuffed. Gandhi allegedly told the delegation that the Samaj was "meant to help Harijans" but it was "not a Harijan organisation".[54] The aim in Ambedkar's reading, was to make untouchable uplift a social object while denying those who bore the brunt of the evil an active agency, of casting them in the role of inert matter, to be moulded into an appropriate shape by the caste Hindu elite.

Little wonder then, that after cataloguing a few more instances of Gandhi's patronising attitude towards those at

the bottom of the ascriptive social hierarchy, Ambedkar concludes with an agonised and rather agitated question:

> Is there any wonder if the Untouchables look upon the Harijan Sewak Samaj as an abomination, the object of which is to kill them by kindness?[55]

Ambedkar's challenge

Relations between Ambedkar and Gandhi became progressively embittered after the Poona Pact was concluded in 1932. Despite driving a hard bargain and securing a fairly high level of assured representation for the Untouchables, Ambedkar was soon assailed by the realisation that the system put in place did little to safeguard the political autonomy of the lower castes. Methods of coopting them into the Congress-dominated system were rife and this represented a potentially fatal obstacle to their aspirations for social liberation. In a 1936 address, printed for mass circulation at his own cost after the organisers of an anti-caste event in Lahore thought it too extreme to be delivered from their platform, Ambedkar frontally challenged what he regarded as Gandhi's unseemly superstitions about caste.

The rationalisation of caste on the grounds that it was another name for the division of labour -- a necessary feature of every civilised society -- was in Ambedkar's perception, flagrantly off the mark, since caste enshrined the "division of labourers" into "unnatural" and "water-tight compartments". The "stratification of occupations" was "positively pernicious" because industry which is "never static .. undergoes rapid and abrupt changes" and "an individual must be free to change his occupation" according to the opportunities available.[56] A "biological trench" had also been dug around caste in the form of the the argument that it helped preserve purity of culture and race, but this Ambedkar condemned as a creation of artifice rather than reality. And the claims that the caste system enhanced economic efficiency, were another fiction. Ultimately, the caste system, Ambedkar pronounced, "by preventing common activity .. has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and a consciousness of its own being".[57]

Arguments on the hoary antiquity of Hinduism and its institutions were met with a withering riposte. The mere fact of survival over many millennia was not to be confused, said Ambedkar, with "fitness to survive". What

was germane rather, was the state in which the community has subsisted, or the "plane on which" it has lived:

> It is useless for a Hindu to take comfort in the fact that he and his people have survived. What he must consider is the quality of that survival. If he does that, I am sure he will cease to take pride in the mere fact of survival.[58]

The challenge to the caste system needed to go beyond people who observed it as an institution governing their lives, to the very texts that laid out the doctrine and enjoined an entire community to follow it. "Not to question the authority of the *Shastras*", said Ambedkar, and

> to permit the people to believe in their sanctity and their sanctions and to blame them and criticise them for their acts as being irrational and inhuman is an incongruous way of carrying on social reform.[59]

After an exegesis of the Hindu scriptures, Ambedkar arrives at the conclusion that despite their inherent illogic, they have the common unifying theme of opposition to individual liberty and social progress. A true social reform process needed to "apply the dynamite" of critical thinking to "the *Vedas* and the *Shastras*, which deny any part to reason (and) which deny any part to morality". With this said, Ambedkar proceeded to exhort his audience "to destroy the religion of the *Shrutis* and the *Smritis*", since it was his "considered view" that "nothing else (would) avail". This radical act of nihilism, in his view, did not represent a loss to society, since religion truly constructed, could only embody a set of principles, not a set of rules. Yet, what was called the Hindu religion, as embodied in its scriptures, was really speaking "legalised class-ethics". This "code of ordinances" did not merit the title of "religion".

Even as Ambedkar rejected this construction of religion, he was anxious to uphold an alternative conception of a "religion of principles", which would embody the values of freedom and social advancement. This required that the multiplicity of texts venerated by the faithful, be reduced to a single acceptable text, consistent with modern values of liberty and progress. Since the religious priesthood was a social institution that could be counted on to be an obstacle, Ambedkar had little doubt that it needed to be abolished. But since this could prove somewhat tricky on a practical plane, he had an alternative prescription – which bore direct reference to the European experiences in secularisation through the separation of State and Church –

that priests should qualify for their status through an examination process prescribed by the State. They would function as servants of the State, subject to its disciplinary jurisdiction.[60]

It is little wonder that the Jat Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore which had invited Ambedkar to deliver its annual keynote speech, should have recoiled from the utter radicalism of these pronouncements, and withdrawn its hospitality when it became aware of the range and scope of Ambedkar's critique of religion. Gandhi for his part, was deeply offended by the discourtesy done to Ambedkar and chided the Mandal for depriving "the public of an opportunity of listening to the original views of a man who has carved out for himself a unique position in society". Ambedkar's views on caste and Hinduism were sufficiently well known, said Gandhi, and this meant that "nothing less than the address that (he) had prepared was to be expected".

Gandhi found it highly commendable nonetheless that Ambedkar had, despite the indignity he had suffered, published the address at his own expense. He urged Ambedkar to reduce the price of his publication by half, if not more, since his wisdom needed that much wider dissemination. "No reformer can ignore the address", wrote Gandhi, which was not to say that it was "not open to objection". Indeed, it needed close perusal simply because it was open to "serious objection".[61]

But with this said, Gandhi's effort to address the points made by Ambedkar seemed an effort at evasion rather than engagement. Hindu scriptures, he said, had attracted vast accretions over the years, some authentic some not quite so. To merit the reverence of society, the scriptures needed to be concerned solely "with eternal verities and appeal to any conscience". Nothing could be accepted "as the word of God" unless it could "be tested by reason". For every example of society drawing the worst from scripture, with authoritative commentaries upholding these iniquities in social practice, a number of contrary cases could be found, of religion living in its highest glory through the experiences of its seers. "When all the most learned commentators of the scriptures are utterly forgotten, the accumulated experience of the sages and saints will abide and be an inspiration for ages to come".[62]

Ambedkar took these exchanges through another cycle, robustly criticising Gandhi while maintaining appropriate reverence. As the years wore on, he tended increasingly to shed the aura of respect and engage in open polemic. In a 1939 address titled ***Federation versus Freedom***, delivered at the Gokhale Institute in Poona, he castigated Gandhi for dragging India back into an imagined past:

> To my mind there is no doubt that this Gandhi age is the dark age of India. It is an age in which people instead of looking for their ideals in the future are returning to antiquity. It is an age in which people have ceased to think for themselves and .. they have ceased to read and examine the facts of their lives. The fate of an ignorant democracy which refuses to follow the way shown by learning and experience and chooses to grope in the dark paths of the mystics and the megalomaniacs is a sad thing to contemplate.[63]

Relating the present to the past

In wrapping up his address at Lahore, Ambedkar had vigorously challenged "the Hindus", as he put it, to seriously reckon with the question whether they wanted to "worship the past" as a source of contemporary ideals. Quoting the American philosopher John Dewey, to whom he owed much by his own admission, Ambedkar said that the present is neither, merely the temporal successor to the past, nor the result of the past. The present rather, was what mankind created for itself "in leaving the past behind it".[64]

Gandhi though, recognised neither past nor present, preferring to focus his attention on the eternal virtues invested in mankind through its intimate contact with divinity. To take one consequence of this rather unconventional attitude, Gandhi in his riposte to Ambedkar firmly discounted the notion that caste has anything to do with religion. Neither did it have anything to do with the institutions of *varna* and *ashrama*. The origins of caste were irrelevant. He neither knew anything about this, nor did he need to, for the "satisfaction" of his "spiritual hunger". It would be wrong to judge *varna* and *ashrama* "by its caricature in the lives of men who profess to belong to a *varna*, when they openly commit a breach of its only operative rule".[65]

In a different context, when dealing with the demand for Pakistan, Ambedkar argued that the intractable political antagonisms that were paving the way to the cataclysm of

partition, arose at least in some part, from the inability of the two main religious communities to leave their pasts behind and fashion a future that they could share as equal claimants. It is not quite clear how Ambedkar viewed the growing alienation between the communities: as an unavoidable consequence of deep and intrinsic differences in identity, or as the avoidable outcome of identities constructed from tendentious readings of history. The "Hindu" case that Muslims are not a separate entity deserving of a distinct national status is dealt with, for example, through the mere device of quoting some of the most eminent and vigorous spokesmen from the Hindu nationalist camp. The notion that Hinduism was the defining basis of Indian nationhood, Ambedkar acutely pointed out, predated the Muslim claim to a distinct nationhood. And as the two communities sought to embellish their claims to the status of nationhood, they only underlined the absence of "common historical antecedents". This in turn, meant that "the Hindu view that Hindus and Musalmans (sic) form one nation" collapses under the weight of its contradictions:

> The pity of it is that the two communities can never forget or obliterate their past. Their past is imbedded in their religion, and for each to give up its past is to give up its religion. To hope for this is to hope in vain.[66]

In an earlier work, Ambedkar had deployed very similar arguments to make a case that the Untouchables were an element distinct of Hindu society. Even if they had similar customs and venerated a common pantheon, they had a "cycle of observances" and a pattern of social reproduction that was entirely different.[67] There was no "concomitance" between religion and nationality, said Ambedkar. Cases were abundant where "there is no separation though religions are separate", as also of "cases where separation exists in spite of a common religion", and worse still where "separation exists because religion prescribes it".

Could these distinct trajectories of history be fused into a common sense of belonging? Could the burdens of the past be shed in an endeavour to forge a shared sense of nationhood? Ambedkar believes in these possibilities, though under specific circumstances. He is aware that "Government" could be a "unifying force", since "there are many instances where diverse people have become unified into one homogeneous people by reason of their being subjected to a single Government". But in practice, the obstacles to this process of unification in India were immense:

> The limits to Government working as a unifying force are set by the possibilities of fusion among the people. …. In a country where race, language and religion put an effective bar against fusion, Government can have no effect as a unifying force.[68]

Ambedkar contrasts the record of inter-community relations, which he had witnessed from close quarters, with the pious hopes of the social and political leadership of the time, that unity could be established. He graphically reproduces some of the worst incidents of communal violence over the twenty year period following 1920, and concludes with a grim summation:

> Placed side by side with the frantic efforts made by Mr Gandhi to bring about Hindu-Muslim unity, the record makes most painful and heart-rending reading. It would not be much exaggeration to say that it is a record of twenty years of civil war between the Hindus and the Muslims in India, interrupted by brief intervals of armed peace.[69]

There was a tacit recognition of this reality, he observed, in Gandhi himself having abandoned communal unity. What had been "at least in sight (though) like a mirage" was, as he wrote, "out of sight and also out of mind".[70]

After an outbreak of communal riots in Allahabad in 1938, Gandhi provided a sober and chastening assessment. That the Congress needed, in its headquarters town, to "summon the assistance of the police and even the military" to restore order, showed that it had "not yet become fit to substitute the British authority". It was "best to face this naked truth, however unpleasant". It was a vain hope, he warned, to say that "once we have our independence, riots and the like will not occur". Without non-violence being internalised as a virtue "in every conceivable circumstance", there was little likelihood of this being achieved.[71]

The locus of control and the onus of preserving social order, had to be firmly implanted within the processes of civil society. Without this being achieved, it was futile calling upon the apparatus of the State to establish harmony.

Here again is the characteristic Gandhian theme, which needs to be counterposed and viewed in the full richness of its contrasts, with Ambedkar's avowal of loyalty to the State, rather than society, as the location where the controlling centre should be firmly established. With his

relentless focus on issues of practical politics, Ambedkar found that there was "no distinction of a fundamental character between a State and a society". It was true that "the plenary powers of the State operate through the sanction of law", while "society depends upon religious and social sanctions for the enforcement of its plenary powers". But this did not constitute a fundamental difference, since the people who constituted society also constituted the State, and both held the power of coercion.[72]

Later, in a 1943 homage written for the 101-year birth anniversary of Mahadev Govind Ranade, Ambedkar sought to contrast the political approach favoured by Ranade with those pursued by his prominent contemporaries, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Vishnu Shastri Chiplunkar. Though modern in his beliefs, he said, Tilak had been "primarily political" in his approach. Chiplunkar in contrast was "orthodox" in his beliefs and "unpolitical" in outlook. The two had nevertheless combined "against Ranade and created as many difficulties for him as they could". In the bargain, they had "done the greatest harm to the cause of political reform in India". The orthodox school had adopted a policy of "realising the ideal and idealising the real" in Hindu tradition. This approach was fundamentally flawed, since the ideals of Hindu tradition were themselves fatally flawed. Tilak's brand of activity in contrast, put political autonomy ahead of social reform, but showed little understanding of the "social" and the "political". Indeed, Tilak and his followers had in their obduracy over social reform, contributed significantly to the prevalent deadlock in constitutional matters. Escapist minds, he alleged, were making out the alibi that the British were responsible. But it was evident to the plainest intelligence that the failure to obtain independence was a consequence of the "defects of (the) social system" which in turn had engendered "the communal problem and .. stood in the way of India getting political power".[73]

Though seemingly directed at the Gandhian brand of politics, these locutions display a fair degree of convergence with Gandhi's own insistence till virtually the bitter end, that India would not be ready for *swaraj* until peace prevailed between Hindu and Muslim and justice was secured for the untouchables. The difference however, was of a strategic character. If Ambedkar believed that these objectives could be achieved through institutional

politics, Gandhi did not. If Gandhi tended to view the coercive power of the State as an unhappy recourse under all circumstances, Ambedkar thought it an essential instrument of enforcing overarching social purposes. As he put it during his address on Ranade:

> Many people do not realise that society can practise tyranny and oppression against an individual in a far greater degree than a Government can. The means and scope that are open to society for oppression are far more extensive than those that are open to Government, also they are far more effective.[74]

Gandhi and the problem of theodicy

Ambedkar's indictment of Gandhism resonates powerfully to this day through Dalit political movements. But Gandhian politics was always evolving and even if he chose not to explain himself in terms of intellectual sources and inspirations, Gandhi broke significant new ground even in the years after these exchanges with Ambedkar. In the first place, he had no use for the rationalisation of the iniquities that he saw around him and busied himself with ways of banishing them. His attitude towards tradition was nostalgic and uncritical, but forged in a conscious act of rebellion against the competitive model of politics and economics, which he saw as corrosive of both individual autonomy and social harmony.

For people of deep religious faith, the doctrine of theodicy, which seeks to justify the existence of a just and benevolent god even in the face of all the evils and iniquities that exist in the world, has been a major source of sustenance. Various cultures have devised answers that invariably boil down to a dogma of the original sin. Mankind lost its opportunities for perfection by succumbing to temptation in the earthly paradise that god placed it in. In Hinduism, the concept of *karma* as Max Weber has identified it, is the equivalent of the doctrine of theodicy:

> the metaphysical explanation and legitimisation of each individual's social situation and the sufferings and successes of his daily existence.[75]

It is another matter that the liberation movements of the lower castes, transformed this dogma of theodicy and the fall into a narrative of primordial belonging. In the hands of the great liberator of the lower castes, Jyotiba Phule, the Hindu scripture became so many morally obtuse accounts, which inverted the categories of good and evil for the

politically tendentious purpose, of justifying the invasion and colonisation of the earthly paradise that was India, by alien forces. When not claiming the mantle of being the original settlers, the lower castes also fell back upon various myths of origin. These sprang invariably from a pivotal figure of history or myth, and a hypothetical golden age of equality and perfect harmony. As a recent, invaluable compilation of dalit voyages[76] documents, the story in this narration of history, is vitiated by some act of treachery that establishes a hierarchical social order and supplants a culture of harmony with one of inequality.

Accounts of the origin of untouchability in Hindu society are in various ways, dependent upon this theodicy of *karma.* Gandhi's attitude though was more akin to that of the medieval poet and preacher, Kabir, who forcefully denounced the superficiality of spiritual knowledge that led to differences in social status: "The great are absorbed in their greatness, in every hair is pride. Without knowledge of the Satguru, all the four *varnas* are Chamars".[77]

Addressing a Rajput conference of Kathiawar in 1924, Gandhi described the injustices and iniquities that India was rife with, as a consequence of the collective fall of the *varnas*. "When the Brahmin gave up pursuit of higher knowledge, the Rajput became commerce-minded … and the *Vania* took to paid service", who he asked, could "blame the Sudra if he ceased to be a servant":

> When the four castes fell, they gave rise, against the spirit of religion, to a fifth one and this came to be looked upon as a class of untouchables.[78]

European modernity, as represented in its beginnings in Hobbes' political theory, represented man as inherently acquisitive and violent. He was a being who would not be kept in check except through the controlling centre of the State. To allow him the freedom to accumulate property was to open the door to a "war of all against all", since there would be little limit to his acquisitive urge. For this reason, the preservation of social order required that absolute sovereignty, including the undiluted right to own and dispose of property, remained a monopoly of the State.

Later variants of the doctrine, in a context of settled bourgeois society, saw the human being as a naturally peaceable character, who only needed the protection of the State to beat back the depredations of the wilfully evil. There were two logical lacunae in this doctrine. First, it

failed convincingly to explain how the perfect harmony that man enjoyed in his natural state, come to be vitiated by villainy and caprice, and the impulse to encroach on another's freedom and property. Secondly, it also does not have an internally consistent way of accounting for inequality in material possessions and in the power to command the necessities, conveniences and luxuries of life. If all men were created equal in the eyes of a wise and benevolent god, society as it actually existed bore witness rather to a whimsical and spiteful creator.

European modernity had no clear answer to these questions, except to unthinkingly fall back upon a notion of inherent good and evil. In John Locke's narration for instance, the evil having once forfeited their right to life could have earned a reprieve by putting themselves at the service of the virtuous. And they would be obliged to maintain this status of social subordination indefinitely.

Gandhian modernity worked on a principle of man as necessarily peaceful, since the alternative would be a war of all against all. The inspiration for this worldview was distinctly religious, since no religious teaching in the Gandhian reading, could condone violence while being true to its basic precepts. Where civil society failed to institutionalise these principles, the State needed to step in, though in not more than a temporary, contingent capacity. Harmony finally required not the indefinite sustenance of the coercive power of the State, but the fostering of consent within society.

Gandhi remained a sceptic about the State, while Tagore to his last days could not accept the Nation. Both believed in a notion of individual liberation through action in civil society. For Tagore, "society as such (had) no ulterior purpose". It was "an end in itself", "a spontaneous self expression of man as a social being".[79] But for Gandhi, society was an expression of a deeper divine purpose, and individuals on earth, in fulfilling their ordained purposes, were seeking the divine through the pursuit of the mundane. Harmony on earth was merely the outward appearance of a transcendental communion of individuals. It was an ideal of organic human solidarity that Gandhi sought to realise all through his political life. When he found the ideal slipping from his grasp, he accepted the inevitability of a secular State to ensure social harmony.

To yield up the internal dynamic of social governance to an alien body, called the State, seemed to Gandhi the characteristic of a society that was not yet ready to accept its own credentials for self-rule. In stark contrast, Ambedkar viewed the inherent and subtle coercion of civil society to be a considerably greater evil, which required that social life should submit itself to the coercive power of the State.

Ambedkar posed a powerful critique of the sanctions imposed by religion and civil society. It is conceivable that this, among other elements of his relentless criticism, as also the difficulties of achieving a concord between the main religious communities, could have been instrumental in convincing Gandhi that the supposed harmonies of religion could not be relied on to establish a regime of consent. Coercion could not be eliminated within society, except through the overarching authority of the State.

By the early-1940s, Gandhi was already dealing with issues of administration as a common civic sphere where differences of religion and denomination were immaterial.[80] And "secularism" and the "secular State" began to feature in his speeches and writings closer to Independence, as an indispensable constitutional commitment of the emerging Indian nation. Addressing a crowd in Bengal province in August 1947, he insisted that the "State was bound to be wholly secular" and "no denominational educational institution in it should enjoy State patronage".[81] In the course of the same cycle of public meetings, he chastised members of the audience who sought to argue that an India that had ostensibly established itself as an independent Hindu realm could enact legislation enshrining the most significant tenets of its faith, such as the protection of the cow. "It is obviously wrong", he said, "to enforce one's religious practice on those who do not share that religion".[82]

In later weeks, Gandhi critiqued the provincial government of Bengal for refusing to deal with a Muslim chamber of commerce on the ground that the body had no legitimate right to exist as a locus of narrow denominational affiliations. He wondered why the same scruples did not apply to bodies organised in accordance with other criteria of community solidarity. He was also decisive in rejecting the possibility that the reconstruction of the Somnath temple, then engaging the attention of several of his

associates in the Congress, could be financed out of the public exchequer. The Indian government, he insisted is a "secular government" not a "theocratic" one. As such, it "does not belong to any particular religion" and could not "spend money on the basis of communities".[83]

As an adherent to *sanatana dharma*, Gandhi believed in the holy writ of the Vedas and all other texts that were part of the Hindu scripture. But he did not insist on their exclusive claims to divinity.[84] In fact, he could claim, with little seeming contradiction, that being an adherent of the *sanatana dharma*, he could be a Hindu, a Muslim and a Christian at the same time. It was the same spirit of ecumenism that saw him in later years claim that by being a good Gujarati, he also simultaneously was a Bengali.[85] And in the traumatic aftermath of Partition, he could proclaim his fealty to both the states of India and Pakistan.

Speaking at a prayer meeting in a Muslim dominated neighbourhood of Calcutta the week following independence, Gandhi said in essence, that the partition meant nothing to him. He drew attention to the

> **"two flags of Pakistan and the India Union that were being prominently flown among the audience and hoped that that pleasing sight would be universal in India".**

The following day, he addressed another meeting in Calcutta and made the point still more sharply: "The fact is that the Indian Union and Pakistan belong equally to all who call themselves and are, sons of the soil, irrespective of their creed and colour".[86] With all the depth of his religious piety, there could not have been greater freedom from the taint of sectarian loyalty. That he did not find the harmonies he sought in the reinvention of religion and tradition, did not undermine in anyway the significance of his quest. That this quest ended, rather, in the explicit avowal of the principle of secular statecraft, testifies to its basic sense of modernity.

(This paper originated as a considerably briefer one titled "Nationalism, Civil Society and the State: Gandhi and the modernism of politics", which was published in Irfan Habib et al, *Towards a Secular and Modern India, Gandhi Reconsidered*, (The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), V.P. House, Delhi, 2004). In the months that followed, the author has had occasion to revisit some of the themes the paper dealt with and frame new perspectives. The current paper, which incorporates much new material, is the outcome.)

[1] In a 1938 preface he was quite categorical that his views remained unchanged: ".. after the stormy thirty years through which I have since passed, I have seen nothing to make me alter the views expounded". Gandhi was generous enough to concede that the reader needed to balance this opinion of his against that of a "dear friend", recently deceased, who thought *Hind Swaraj* "the production of a fool". See *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1982, pp 16, 18. Gandhi also reportedly presented a copy of Hind Swaraj to Jawaharlal Nehru on the eve of India's independence, with the clear implication that he would find a reading of it rewarding in charting course as Prime Minister. (See Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, The Bodley Head, London, 1969, pp 220-1.

[2] Details of Gandhi's visit to London in 1909 and this encounter with Savarkar, are found in Payne, *op. Cit.*, pp 199-225. The quotations are from pp 205-6.

[3] Perhaps the most authoritative and accessible account of this final encounter between Savarkar and Gandhi is in A.G. Noorani, *Savarkar and Hindutva: The Godse Connection*, LeftWord Books, Delhi, 2002.

[4] For fuller details on the modernity of the Savarkar controversy, a useful reference is the recent publication from SAHMAT, *The Savarkar Controversy*, The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, Delhi, 2004.

[5] "*Hind Swaraj* or the Indian Home Rule", in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Publications Division, Delhi (hereafter *CWMG*), Vol XIX, page 277-8.

[6] "Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule", in *CWMG*, Vol X, p 13.

[7] *CWMG*, Vol X, p 15.

[8] This 1920 letter by Mahalanobis is quoted in E.P. Thompson's introduction to a 1991 edition of Tagore's *Nationalism*, MacMillan, London, p 3.

[9] Both quotations are from the translation of *Ghare Baire* by Surendranath Tagore, which was later revised by Rabindranath. See *The Home and the World*, published in the *Rabindranath Tagore Omnibus III*, Rupa and Co, Delhi, 2005; quotations at page 230. Greater elaboration on the place occupied by the novel in Tagore's political thinking has been attempted by this writer in an earlier essay. See "Patriotism Without People: Milestones in the Evolution of the Hindu Nationalist Ideology", *Social Scientist*, Vol 22, Nos 5-6, May-June 1994.

[10] *The Home and the World*, p 312-3.

[11] Ibid, p 330.

[12] *Nationalism*, p 51, 53.

[13] Ibid, pp 56-7.

[14] *CWMG*, X, p 37.

[15] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-08*, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1973, p 60.

[16] *CWMG*, X, p 12

[17] Ibid, p 29.

[18] Ibid, p 29.

[19] Ibid, p 62.

[20] *CWMG*, XXI, p 47.

[21] Tagore's reflections on non-cooperation, in the form of a series of letters to C.F. Andrews, were carried in the Calcutta journal *Modern Review*, in May 1921. The citations are from the volume compiled and edited by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet, Letters and Debates Between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-41*, National Book Trust, Delhi, p 55.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid, p 57.

[24] Ibid, p 62.

[25] Ibid, p 64. Also, *CWMG*, XX, p 159.

[26] *The Mahatma and the Poet*, pp 66, 64. Also, *CWMG*, XX, pp 163, 159.

[27] Ibid, pp 158-60.

[28] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982, pp 340-1.

[29] Introduction to *Nationalism*, p 14.

[30] *CWMG*, XVI, p 408

[31] *CWMG*, XXVII, p 203.

[32] *CWMG*, XXIV, p 149-9.

[33] *CWMG*, XXI, p 246.

[34] Ibid.

[35] CWMG, XXX, p 372.

[36] CWMG, XXXIV, p 3.

[37] CWMG, XXIV, p 585.

[38] CWMG, XXXVI, p 14-5.

[39] CWMG, XXXVII, p 194.

[40] Ibid, p 181.

[41] Ibid, p 190.

[42] Ibid, p 234.

[43] CWMG, XLV, p 373.

[44] "Khilafat and Non-violence", *CWMG*, XX, p 165.

[45] "Speech at Rawalpindi", CWMG, XXVI, p 81.

[46] CWMG, XXVII, p 206.

[47] In the following sections, the word "Untouchables" will be used to refer to sections of the Indian population who today are known as the *dalits*. None of the alternative terms has quite the same flavour of the debate as engaged in by Gandhi and his contemporaries. Dalit is very much a modern creation of post-independence India; "Scheduled Caste" became official usage only in the context of the effort to implement the constitutional reforms of the 1930s and may not have been inclusive of all the sections that believed in their status outside of the Hindu fold; and "Harijan", which Gandhi popularised, was regarded by many of the intended beneficiaries of his reform efforts, as fatally paternalistic.

[48] CWMG, XXI, p 552. His views on social intermingling were fairly relaxed, but he drew the line on inter-marriage. "Many Hindus and Muslims eat together of their own free will and Hindu society tolerates this. But nowhere do we find marriages as between Hindus and Muslims; if such a thing were to be encouraged, the Hindu religion would die out. I think it is impossible for a Hindu and a Muslim to marry and yet follow his or her religion properly. Men devoid of the religious feeling live to no good purpose". (CWMG, XVII, p 60-1.

[49] This issue has been dealt with in the context of the disputes over the franchise reform, in particular, the proposal to have a separate electorate for the Untouchables in an earlier article by this author. See "Patriotism Without People", *Social Scientist*, volume 22, numbers 5-6, May-June 1994.

[50] CWMG, XXI, p 554.

[51] The phrase is from the heading to chapter V of B.R. Ambedkar's, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*. Written in 1944, the tract deals in very large part with Ambedkar's 1932 encounters with Gandhi, including the dispute over the issue of separate electorates for the untouchables. See Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Volume 9, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990.

[52] Ibid, p 134-5.

[53] Ibid, p 139.

[54] Ibid, p 131.

[55] Ibid, p 145.

[56] *The Annihilation of Caste*, in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Volume 1, 1989, p 48-9.

[57] Ibid, pp 50-1.

[58] Ibid, p 66. The authority that Ambedkar is challenging here is S. Radhakrishnan, whose *Hindu View of Life* is cited.

[59] Ibid, p 68.

[60] Ibid, p 75-7.

[61] CWMG, LXIII, pp 134-5. Also in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Volume 1, 1989, p 81.

[62] CWMG, LXIII, pp 152-3.

[63] *Federation versus Freedom*, in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Volume 1, 1989, p 352.

[64] *The Annihilation of Caste*, p 83.

[65] CWMG, LXIII, pp 153-4. Also in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writings and Speeches*, Volume 1, p 83.

[66] B.R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan, or the partition of India,* in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Volume 8,* 1990, p 37.

[67] *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, p 184.

[68] *Pakistan, or the Partition of India*, p 187.

[69] Ibid, p 184.

[70] Ibid, p 187. Ambedkar's work on Partition seems to offer ample grist to the religious chauvinist today. He holds both communities responsible for the unending cycle of violence, but on balance, seems to suggest that the Muslims have been the more aggressive. He condemns religion and tradition on both sides for holding entire communities in thrall to the worst social practices, but concludes that the Muslims have perhaps the worse record. These aspects of his thinking have lately been underlined by those with the scarcely concealed motive of appropriating the progressive social agenda that he upheld for a narrow, sectarian and reactionary purpose. The supposition that Ambedkar harboured a deep-seated animosity towards the Muslim faith has also lately been greatly publicised. But these arguments overlook some very important qualifications. Ambedkar framed his perceptions in as wide a context as possible, and saw contemporary realities in terms of their historical and sociological determinants. He had little use for the argument that saw Islam in its basic characteristics as the antithesis of science and progress. If that were the case, he argued, it would be impossible to "account for the stir and ferment that is going on in all Muslim countries outside India". He then concludes that

the reasons "for the absence of the spirit of change" in the Indian Muslim was to be sought "in the peculiar position he occupies in India": "He is placed in a social environment which is predominantly Hindu. That Hindu environment is always silently but surely encroaching upon him. … As a protection against this gradual weaning away he is led to insist on preserving everything that is Islamic without caring to examine whether it is helpful or harmful to his society". (Ibid, p 235.)

[71] CWMG, LXVI, p 405-6.

[72] *Federation versus Freedom*, p 310.

[73] B.R. Ambedkar, *Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah*, in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Volume 1*, pp 218-25.

[74] Ibid, p 217.

[75] David Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism? Essays on Religion in History*, Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2006, p 89.

[76] Fernando Franco, Jyotsna Macwan and Suguna Ramanathan, *Journeys to Freedom, Dalit Narratives*, Samya, Kolkata, 2004.

[77] Lorenzen, *op. cit.*, p 88.

[78] CWMG, XXIV, p 123.

[79] *Nationalism*, p 51.

[80] Kumkum Sangari, "A Narrative of Restoration, Gandhi's Last Years and Nehruvian Secularism", in Irfan Habib et al, *Gandhi Reconsidered, Towards a Secular and Modern India*, The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), Delhi, 2004.

[81] CWMG, LXXXIX, p 56.

[82] Ibid, p 73.

[83] CWMG, XC, p 126.

[84] CWMG, LXXXVIII, p 184: "I am a true Sanatani Hindu. My Hinduism tells me that along with the Hindu prayer I should also offer the Muslim prayer and the Parsi and Christian prayers…… because only he is a good Hindu who is also a good Muslim and a good Parsi".

[85] CWMG, LXXXIX, p 71.

[86] CWMG, LXXXIX, p 73-4.