
GANDHI'S GITA AND POLITICS AS SUCH*

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M. K. Gandhi's "Discourses on the Gita," a series of talks delivered to ashramites at Sabarmati during 1926 and 1927, provides a singular instance in Indian intellectual thought in which the Bhagavad Gita's message of action is transformed into a theory of non-violent resistance. This essay argues that Gandhi's reading of the Gita has to be placed within an identifiable general understanding of the political that emerged among the so-called "extremists" in the Congress towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Gandhi, we argue, wrested from the "Extremists" their vocabulary and their pre-eminent political text, the Gita, and put them to use in the cause of non-violent politics. But, more importantly, his discourses on the Gita after 1920 suggest an acceptance, on his part, of politics as it actually was. This is where he departed from the projects of Tilak or Aurobindo. The Gita, in Gandhi's hand, became a talismanic device that allowed the satyagrahi his or her involvement in political action while providing protection from the necessary and unavoidable venality of politics and its propensity to violence.

I

Immediately after the Amritsar Congress of December 1919, Gandhi joined issue with the Indian nationalist leader Balagangadhar Tilak, or Tilak Maharaj, or the Lokamanya (as he was popularly called), on the question of the nature of modern politics. He cited Tilak as someone whose understanding of politics was opposed to his:

Lokamanya Tilak represents a definite school of thought of which he makes no secret. He considers that everything is fair in politics. We have joined issue with him in that conception of political life. We consider that political life of the country will become thoroughly corrupt if we import Western tactics and methods.

Opposing the idea that it could be "proper" for leaders of political parties "to use others as tools so long as there are any to be used," Gandhi recommended that the 'right course' would lie in taking care to "purify our politics."

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Tilak disagreed with Gandhi's understanding of his—Tilak's—conception of political action. “[Y]ou have represented me as holding that . . . everything [was] fair in politics. I write . . . to say that my view is not correctly represented herein. Politics is a game of worldly people and not of Sadhus [renouncers; holy men].” A “sadhu,” Tilak suggested, using a supposedly Buddhist maxim, was someone who sought to conquer anger. “I prefer,” he said, “to rely on the maxim of [the god] Shri Krishna,” who tailored his responses to particular devotees by keeping them “in perfect harmony with the manner of their own approach.” “Any further explanation of the difference,” said Tilak in conclusion, “will be found in my *Gita-Rahasya*.” In riposte, Gandhi explained his differences even further.

With deference to the Lokamanya I venture to state that it betrays mental laziness to think that the world is not for Sadhus . . . when I wrote the sentence about everything being fair in politics according to Lokamanya's creed I had in mind his oft-repeated quotation “tit for tat.”

Gandhi proceeded to explain why in his view sadhus should not keep out of politics. “The epitome of all religions,” he wrote, “is to promote Purushartha [Hindu ideas regarding the ends of life], and [to become] Sadhu, i.e. to become a gentleman in every sense of the term.”¹ One did not have to cease to be a truly gentle person simply because one had embraced politics.

Dhananjay Keer, who reports this exchange in his 1959 biography of Tilak, points to the apparent fallacy in Gandhi's logic: “Tilak said: ‘Politics is a game of the worldly people and not sadhus.’ Gandhiji put a wrong interpretation . . . when he said [i.e. quoted Tilak as saying]: ‘Sadhus have no place in the world!’”² And Keer then goes on to provide this gloss on the difference between Tilak's and Gandhi's positions. According to Tilak, he says, “sadhus ought not to pollute themselves by contact with the worldly game of politics”;

However high on a moral plane a man might be it would be impossible for him to achieve the desired goal in this matter-of-fact world without sacrificing some of his saintliness, but in so doing the object of the saintly man ought to be selfless. This is what Tilak meant.³

We can distill from this account two positions as to how the question of being a moral person—the sadhu—in the domain of politics may have been seen in this argument between Gandhi and Tilak. Tilak was not arguing against morality per se. His position, in Keer's interpretation, was that even the most moral of people had to compromise their principles at times—get “polluted,” as Keer put

¹ Dhananjay Keer, *Lokamanya Tilak: Father of Our Freedom Struggle* (Bombay: S. B. Kangutkar, 1959), 413–14.

² Ibid., 414.

³ Ibid., 414.

it—in pursuing political objectives. Tilak's one important requirement from the ethical politician, however, was that even such compromise would have to be strictly "selfless," that is to say, they must not bring any personal benefits to the person who knowingly compromised his morality in the interest of achieving a political gain. The compromise was merely an act of recognition on his part of the intrinsically worldly nature of politics. One could be ethical in the political domain but one could not escape being worldly. A sadhu, on the other hand, would be absolutely uncompromising about his other-worldly values and would thus be unfit to play the political game. He saw Gandhi in the image of this figure of the sadhu. Gandhi would not approve of violating his own values if even such violation were required in some higher, public, and unselfish interest. He would rather change the very nature of politics itself. The task, as he wrote in responding to Tilak, was to "purify politics."

This exchange took place in 1920. We begin our discussion of how Gandhi read the *Gita* with this story because many commentators on Gandhi's reading of this text have worked with a stated or unstated assumption that "purifying" or reforming the very nature "politics" was Gandhi's lifelong mission. Many aver that Gandhi was a saint in political garb or vice versa. Note, for instance, an observation by Bradley S. Clough who writes on the authority of the historian Judith Brown that Gandhi's prolific discussions of the *Gita* in the years from 1920 to 1936 show "that at this point in his life, religion was more important to Gandhi than politics, though she [Judith Brown] is quick to acknowledge that the two would become inseparable for him."⁴ Clough puts Gandhi's reading of the *Gita* squarely within this interpretive framework: "Further evidence that Gandhi was using the *Gita* to create the marriage of politics and religion, for which he is so well known, is that he and his fellow *satyagrahis* carried copies of the *Gita* with them on his famous 'salt-*satyagraha*' in 1930."⁵ We offer a different argument about the Mahatma's use of the Bhagavad Gita.⁶

In parenthesis, we should clarify that whether or not Tilak and Gandhi challenged liberal conceptions of citizenship or politics, whereby politics becomes an area where rules enable groups or individuals to pursue their legitimate

⁴ Bradley S. Clough, "Gandhi, Nonviolence, and the *Bhagavat-Gita*," in Stephen J. Rosen, ed., *Holy War: Violence and the Bhagavat Gita* (Hampton, VA: A. Deepak Publishing, 2002), 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61

⁶ Our approach also connotes some friendly disagreements with certain strands of the arguments presented in Ajay Skaria's thoughtful essay "Gandhi's Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram," in Saurabh Dube, ed., *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization* (Delhi: Routledge, 2009), 199–233; and in Partha Chatterjee's influential book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed, 1986), 109.

interests, is not the principal question animating this essay. It is an important question but it does not interest us here except tangentially. The so-called Extremists such as Tilak and Aurobindo espoused a romantic and moral conception of political action as action in strictly public interest and surely looked down upon action based on self-interest as less moral. In that sense, they would have been opposed to any interest-based idea of politics. Gandhi's personal values also would not have chimed with the liberal talk of pursuit of self-interests. But our point is different. It is to make a distinction in the history of Gandhi's relation to politics *before* and *after*, roughly, 1920. Gandhi before the 1920s may have fundamentally agreed with Tilak et al. in finding self-interest-based action morally unappealing. He would have spoken of "reforming politics." But we argue that Gandhi's discussions of the Gita in the 1920s actually show that he made a twofold move in the later period: he accepted politics for what it actually was—an arena for pursuit of self-interest by groups and individuals, and hence sought in the Gita the means that would protect a *satyagrahi* like him from the venality of this domain while allowing him to be fully involved in it. Gandhi's use of the Gita thus marks a departure from the age of Tilak and Aurobindo and he may have been the first national politician to accept Indian politics as it actually was (including strands of liberalism), and the Gita was the text that enabled him to do that.

Our approach takes into account the importance of the political context in understanding why Gandhi interpreted the Gita the way he did in the 1920s. We suggest that Gandhi's relation to politics was an evolving one and that his commentaries on the Gita in the 1920s are instructive in this regard. It is a well-known fact that Gandhi's first encounter with the Gita occurred in 1889 when two theosophist brothers invited him to read the text in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation. But, as J. T. F. Jordens has emphasized, Gandhi's "own interpretation of the *Gita* started only after his return to India in 1919, and was fully and definitively articulated by 1925."⁷ Between 1926 and 1932, writes Clough, Gandhi "devoted three works totaling roughly 360 pages to translating and commenting on the *Gita*," mainly "in response to questions from *ashramites* at his *Satyagraha Ashram* . . . in Sabarmati"⁸ These were the years when Gandhi's involvement in Indian politics was at its most intense. Not only is this political context crucial to any non-theological discussion of Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita—on this many would agree with us; but, in addition, we actually find it intellectually unhelpful to freeze Gandhi into the picture of a man who—as in his moment of

⁷ See J. T. F. Jordens, "Gandhi and the *Bhagavadgita*," in Robert N. Minor, ed., *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1986), 88, 90.

⁸ Clough, "Gandhi," 61.

conversation with Tilak—could not or would not distinguish between religion and politics by wanting to purify and spiritualize the latter. In what follows, we put forward a different hypothesis. We argue that Gandhi's comments on the Gita, in particular the ones he made in the 1920s, actually suggest that his idea of "purifying politics" underwent a remarkable transformation after the Non-Cooperation movement.⁹ Not only did he move away from the idea of purifying politics, he actually found in the Gita a means of protecting himself (and those like him) from the corrupt practices of politics while being immersed in political action. In other words, unlike Tilak and Aurobindo, the Gandhi of the 1920s did not look on political action as such as something capable of being inherently ethical—he did not demand of a Jinnah, Subhas Bose or an Ambedkar, for instance, that they be ethical on his terms; his question rather was: how would someone like him struggle to pursue the highest end of life, *moksha*, while engaged full-time in political action? The object of his moral exercise was not the political domain as such—which remained an area where worldly interests clashed—but the very self of the "political missionary" (more on this expression later). The aim of reading and discussing the Gita daily was to transform the text into the *satyagrahi*'s talisman. There was no longer a project of "purifying" politics. Rather, the project was constantly to purify, and thus shield, the self of the *satyagrahi* who entered the political fray as part of necessary action in life. This, we may say, was Gandhi's way of accepting politics as it actually was.

II

Many a Hindu nationalist in the early decades of the twentieth century had used the Gita as a source text for political philosophy. The text itself was rediscovered, so to speak, in the colonial period, thanks to the interest it had generated among different sections of European and American readership—colonial officials, missionaries, romantics, transcendentalists, and others.¹⁰ The text had been interpreted before by "ancient" and "classical" Indian interpreters but, as Eric Sharpe reminds us, before the 1880s it was "the Krishna of the *Puranas* [who] had the upper hand on the charioteer-god of the *Gita* in the wider

⁹ Reading Faisal Devji's essay in this volume, one could date the change in Gandhi's relationship with politics to his great disappointment over the violence of Chauri Chaura and the consequent withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation movement. The disappointment, in our terms, led to the realization that while *satyagraha* necessarily involved deep engagement with politics, politics could not be transformed wholesale into the business of *satyagraha*.

¹⁰ On this see Eric J. Sharpe, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavatgita—a Bicentenary Survey* (London: Duckworth, 1985). See also Christopher Bayly's contribution to this volume.

community of *Vaisnavism*; while in *Shaiva* and *Shakta* circles the emphasis lay elsewhere.”¹¹

Reading the *Gita* for ideas about what might constitute proper action in this world was something Gandhi shared with other nationalists of the turn of the century: Tilak, Aurobindo, and the so-called Extremists in India and Europe. As early as 15 June 1897, on the occasion of the Shri Shivaji Coronation Festival, Tilak’s journal *Kesari* discussed the murder of the Mughal general Afzal Khan by the seventeenth-century Maratha king, Shivaji. Justifying the ethics of Shivaji’s actions the *Kesari* raised the question: “Did Shivaji commit a sin in killing Afzal Khan?” “The answer,” it said, “can be found in the *Mahabharata* itself. Shrimat Krishna’s teaching in the *Bhagavat Gita* is to kill even our teachers and our kinsmen.” And, as if to anticipate what Tilak said to Gandhi in 1920, it added,

No blame attaches to any person who . . . is doing deeds without being motivated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds. Shri Shivaji Maharaja did nothing with a view to fill[ing] the small void of his stomach [from interested motives]. With benevolent intentions he murdered Afzal Khan for the good of others . . .

It ended with a call: “Get out of the Penal Code, enter into the extremely high atmosphere of the *Bhagavat Gita*, and then consider the actions of great men.”¹² Tilak would, of course, go on to write his magnum opus *Gita Rahasya* in the Mandalay Jail “in the Winter of 1910–1911,” wherein he would argue, against the venerable Shankaracharya and other ancient and modern commentators, that the *Gita* is “essentially a treatise on Right or Proper Action (*Karma-Yoga*).”¹³

Sharpe is correct to observe that the “overtly political period in the history of *Gita* interpretation was not of long duration and its extremist phase was even shorter, lasting no more than half a dozen or so years.”¹⁴ The tendency was at its most intense around the period of the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal (1905–8) when the Congress split into its so-called Moderate and Extremist wings. For example, Savarkar’s introduction to his Marathi biography of Mazzini that was published from Poona in April 2007 “emphasised the importance of elevating

¹¹ Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 67, 85. For a handy treatment of the “classical” Indian interpretations of the *Gita* see Arvind Sharma’s *The Hindu Gita: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavatgita* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986); and his translation of and introduction to *Abhinavagupta Gītārthasāgraha* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983).

¹² Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 71.

¹³ Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *Srimad Bhagavatgita-Rahasya or Karma-Yoga Sastra*, 2nd edn, trans. Bhalchandra Sitaram Sukhtankar (Poona: Tilak Bros., 1915), “Author’s Preface,” xix, xxv. See also Shruti Kapila’s essay in this volume and Sanjay Seth, “The Critique of Renunciation: Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s Hindu Nationalism,” *Postcolonial Studies* 9/2 (June 2006), 137–50.

¹⁴ Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 82.

politics to the rank of religion.”¹⁵ Sharpe is helpful with some of the dates here. Between 1905 and 1910, Aurobindo “wrote and spoke repeatedly about the *Gita*,” as in the journal *Bande Mataram* of 26 December 1906: “*Gita* is the best answer to those who shrink from battle as a sin, and aggression as a lowering of morality.”¹⁶ Aurobindo’s references to the *Gita* became more intense in tone after May 1909, when he was acquitted in the Alipore conspiracy case. In his famous Uttarpara speech of 30 May 1909, he spoke of the conversion-like experience he had had on reading the *Gita* in jail (Sharpe thinks his familiarity with the text was shallow before). Aurobindo spoke of Lord Krishna demanding “of those aspiring to do His work . . . to renounce self-will and become a passive and faithful instrument in His hands . . . I realised what the Hindu religion meant.” Krishna had granted him this vision and said, “I am the nation and its uprising and I am Vasudeva.”¹⁷ In this phase of his life, he equated *sanatan dharma* with nationalism and described the latter as “not a mere political programme [but] . . . a religion that has come from God.”¹⁸ Aurobindo would go on later to propound a more philosophical interpretation of the *Gita*, influenced, it seems, by his reading of Nietzsche, whereby the *Gita* would be seen as the call to enjoin the strife of life in a determined and practiced “state of inner poise.”¹⁹ But that is a different story and a very different chapter in the history of modern Indian interpretations of the *Gita*.

This much, however, is clear: that in the first decade of the twentieth century, Tilak, Aurobindo, and many other so-called Extremists tended to equate their ideal definition of political action with the *karma-yoga* which they claimed constituted the core of the spiritual message encoded in the *Gita*. To act for all, which is what the nationalist aspired to do, was to act in accordance with the *Gita*. Even violence, when it was strictly unselfish and was in the interest of “all,” could constitute proper action. The ideal political activist had the *Gita* as his political-philosophic guide. During his “last couple of years of activity in Bengal,” says Sharpe, Aurobindo emphasized the *karmoyogin* aspect of the *Gita*.

¹⁵ Indulal Yajnik, *Shaymji Krishnavarma: Life and Times of a Revolutionary* (Bombay: Lakshmi Publications, 1950), 261.

¹⁶ Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 78. Sharpe makes the point that Aurobindo did not know much Bengali or Sanskrit around 1903 and his interpretation of the text may have been influenced by Annie Besant’s expositions. See *ibid.*, 80.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79. The whole speech is reproduced in *The Penguin Aurobindo Reader*, ed. Makarand Paranjape (Delhi: Penguin, 1999), pp. 18–27.

¹⁸ Cited in P. M. Thomas, *20th Century Indian Interpretations of Bhagavatgita: Tilak, Gandhi & Aurobindo* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1987), 81.

¹⁹ See, for example, the essays “The Core of the Teaching,” “Kurukshetra,” and “Man and the Battle for Life” in Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1966), 28–34, 35–41, 41–8, and Andrew Sartori’s essay in this volume.

To his brother, Barindrakumar Ghosh, a radical political activist of the Swadeshi years, the *Gita* was as important as the manufacture of bombs.²⁰ This philosophy that equated ideal political action with the conception of action upheld in the *Gita* finds a sharp expression in what Aurobindo wrote in an article published in the journal *Karmayogin* shortly before he abandoned his political career:

Mr. Risley repeats a charge we have grown familiar with, that the *Gita* has been misused as a gospel of Terrorism . . . The only doctrine of the *Gita* the Terrorist can pervert to his use, is the dictum that the *kshatriya* must slay as a part of his duty and he can do it without sin if he puts egoism away and acts selflessly, without attachment, in and for God, as a sacrifice, as an offering of action to the Lord of action. If this teaching is in itself false, there is no moral basis for the hero, the soldier, the judge, the king, the legislature which recognises capital punishment. They must all be condemned as criminals and offenders against humanity.²¹

A similar reading of the *Gita* inspired those members of the India House in London, Krishnavarma and Savarkar the most noted among them, who, contemporaneously with Tilak, Aurobindo and Bipin Pal in India, sought to liberate the country through violent means. Like Tilak, or perhaps inspired by him, they also used the episode of Shivaji's killing of Afzal Khan as an example of the kind of action they claimed was supported in the *Gita*. "Every student of Indian history," noted Krishnavarma, "knows that Shivaji, the founder of the Mahratta Empire, assassinated Afzal Khan and thus winning the practical supremacy in Southern India earned for himself the respect and esteem of all Hindus." Citing India's "ancient history and literature," they argued that "political assassinations are not foreign to the religious principles of Indians . . . Rama and Krishna, who are popularly regarded by Hindus throughout India as incarnations of the Deity, are chiefly remembered for killing the tyrants Ravana and Kansa respectively." The British viceroy had described revolutionary violence as "hideous crimes" which were "contrary" to Indian "precepts and instincts of humanity and . . . loyalty." This group of activists argued instead that there was a long tradition of rightful violence in India, from the days of the Mahabharata to the 1857 "War of Independence . . . miscalled by the English the Indian Mutiny." "We know," wrote Krishnavarma, mixing the *Gita* with an implicit theory of natural rights,

the English themselves beheaded their own king Charles I, the French guillotined Louis XVI, the Hindus acted similarly in more ancient times as stated above . . . We need therefore hardly emphasize the point that it is natural for every people to use violence in order to counteract violence.²²

²⁰ Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 81

²¹ Cited in *ibid.*, 82

²² *Indian Sociologist*, Jan. 1913, 2.

In conceiving the man of action as envisaged in the Gita, the London group of revolutionaries created the figure of “the political missionary” on which Gandhi may have partially modeled his idea of the *satyagrahi* (without the Extremists’ emphasis on violence, of course). The May 1907 issue of the *Indian Sociologist* (a magazine whose debt to Herbert Spencer was announced in its title) published a letter by an anonymous writer who described himself as “one who is prepared to be a political missionary.”²³ The editor’s note described the author as “a highly distinguished Master of Arts of an Indian University” who was now “fitting himself for the duties of a Political Missionary by studying history and politics and by acquiring collateral culture in Europe, and as a true son of India he is prepared to devote all his time and energies to his country’s cause.” A society of “political missionaries,” observed the anonymous writer (we now know that this was Har Dayal), was crucial to the cause of “national unity and independence in India.” Such an individual “must believe in the profound truth that life is a mission.” Recalling the words of Sri Krishna from the Gita, “*Karmanyevadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana*” (“do your duty regardless of consequences”), the writer of the letter exhorts “zealous nationalists” to fulfill the aspirations of the teeming millions of India by adhering to “the ideal of renunciation” familiar to “every Hindu child.” The political missionary would be ever-ready to “spurn all prospects of worldly advancement,” and dedicate their lives “to the service of the Fatherland with a solemn sense of their responsibility.” They should not be deterred by the “timid prudence” of their “nearest and dearest relatives,” and nothing would be dearer to them than the “cause” which would replace their “father, mother, brother, and friend.” They must go about their task with a “religious earnestness and with a spirit of self-denial.” “They should grieve, like Commander Hirose of Japan, that they have only one life to give to their country.” A political missionary must “renounce all personal property, follow no profession, and devote all his time and energy to the movement.” Second, a political missionary must “study the history of his own country” as well as the history of national movements in Europe, so that his enthusiasm was backed up with a spirit of rational inquiry. He should also “possess adequate knowledge of the economic and political problems that New India is called upon to solve.” Third, the political missionary must embrace celibacy. Like Mazzini he should be “wedded” to the country. His sense of duty to the nation should “cancel all social obligations . . . domestic cares, and anxieties” that might divert the mind from

²³ *Indian Sociologist*, May 1907, 19. Earlier, in Nov. 1905, an article in the *Indian Sociologist* had made a categorical distinction between Tilak, whom it described as an “unbending patriot,” and Gokhale, whom it called a “professional politician.” See “The President-Elect of the Indian National Congress: Contrast between Mr. Gokhale and Mr. Tilak,” *Indian Sociologist*, 4 Nov. 1905, 42–4.

the pursuit of the struggle for national liberation. Finally, such “young men” should not be “too calculating in temperament.” At this hour of national crisis, when the nation’s existence as a “social organism” stood threatened, the political missionary should “act in the spirit of heroes, not shopkeepers.”²⁴

III

Gandhi would borrow much from Tilak and the India House group in London while remaining implacably opposed to their passion for violence. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, he shared their basic premise that political action, in its highest form, ought to be shaped by an ascetic and spiritual impulse. David Hardiman makes the perceptive suggestion that in writing *Hind Swaraj* (1909) in the form of a dialogue (between the editor and reader) Gandhi probably mirrored—at the same time as he enunciated a critique of them—the political and intellectual concerns of the London group of militants associated with the *Indian Sociologist*. This group, as Hardiman reminds us, “as a whole advocated the use of terrorism and violence against the British in India. Clearly, Gandhi saw it as his task to refute their belief in this strategy.”²⁵ When we analyze Gandhi’s ideas about yoga, karma, the ideal individual, and the ends of human life as explained in his comments on the Gita, it becomes clear that the Extremists constituted his *purvapaksha*. Yet his imagination of the *satyagrahi* was a foil to the Extremists’ ideal of the “political missionary” and his ashram in many ways was like the “Society” discussed in the pages of the *Indian Sociologist*.

It is, of course, true that Gandhi retained—at some abstract level—the principles he adumbrated in *Hind Swaraj* in 1909. As he himself wrote to Nehru in October 1945, “I still stand by the system of government envisaged in *Hind Swaraj*.”²⁶ But a careful reading of his 1920s discourses on the Gita shows a very significant shift in how he situated himself with regard to politics. His practical mission, as we have said, was no longer to “purify” or spiritualize politics as such. He was more concerned with the question of how he and others—such as the individuals in his ashram, for instance—who had vowed to be *satyagrahis* would protect their own selves from the corruption and venality that were inevitable

²⁴ *Indian Sociologist*, April 1907, p. 20. Indulal Yajnik, in *Shaymji Krishnavarma*, 200, names Har Dayal as the writer of these lines. The article in the *Indian Sociologist* even put forward an institutional structure for the training of political missionaries. For details see *Indian Sociologist*, June 1907, 23–4.

²⁵ David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Times and Ours: The Global Legacy of His Ideas*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 67–8.

²⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, 5 Oct. 1945, 149.

in the political sphere while being immersed in it. Reading and contemplating the Gita every day was that indispensable inoculation that he thought would immunize the *satyagrahi* against the virus of moral corruption. Gandhi was thus one of the first nationalists who, while seeking both involvement in and protection from the murky world of politics, accepted that world as it actually was.

There was a big difference, for instance, between 1909 when he wrote *Hind Swaraj*, a text that articulated his principled opposition to parliamentary democracy, and the 1920s. In the latter period, Gandhi, for all his lack of faith in the parliament as an institution, took leadership of a nationalist movement where he had to negotiate how the Congress would parley for a central place in a quasi-parliamentary politics determined by elections, representation, and the politics of numbers that the British-Indian constitutional reforms had introduced in the years between 1919 and 1937. The stinging criticism that Gandhi penned in *Hind Swaraj* of the parliamentary form of government is worthy of recall:

That which you consider to be the Mother of Parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute. Both of these are harsh terms but exactly fit the case. That parliament has not yet of its own accord done a single good thing, hence I have compared it to a sterile woman. The natural condition of the Parliament is such that, without outside pressure, it can do nothing. It is like a prostitute because it is under the control of ministers who change from time to time. Today it is under Mr Asquith, tomorrow it may be under Mr Balfour.²⁷

Anthony Parel, a recent editor of *Hind Swaraj*, seeks to save Gandhi from himself, saying that this passage “should not be interpreted to mean that Gandhi was against the institution of parliament.” He mentions Gandhi’s 1920 statement that what he wanted for India was “a parliament chosen by the people with the fullest power over the finance, the police, the military, the navy, the courts and the educational institutions,” and that in 1921 he actually advised readers of *Hind Swaraj* that his corporate activity was devoted to “the attainment of parliamentary *swaraj* in accordance with the wishes of the people.”²⁸ Parel overlooks the letter from 1945 (which he reproduces in his selection) wherein Gandhi affirmed his faith in the “system of governance” envisaged in *Hind Swaraj*, and that system was not parliamentary democracy. Besides, the phrase “in accordance with the wishes of the people” could very well be read as a statement of his deep acceptance of the reality of colonial constitutional reforms—for it was these reforms rather than Gandhi’s own vision that were setting the ground rules of politics in India. This is what we describe here as Gandhi’s acceptance of Indian politics as it actually was, and his parting of ways with the imagination that had deeply influenced the

²⁷ Ibid., 30

²⁸ Ibid., 30; editor’s note, 39.

Extremists and his own thinking in the period before—politics itself as an ethical or spiritual or religious project.

But this acceptance of politics did not mean that Gandhi, as an individual *satyagrahi*, would compromise his own values in any way, not even if such compromise could be shown or perceived to be in the interest of “all” and thus scrupulously unselfish. If anything, politics would be the field in which he would practice *satyagraha* and encourage other *satyagrahis* to do the same. But he did not, unlike the Extremists of yesteryear, expect to reform the political sphere in its entirety by defining political action as essentially ethical. He would accept that there would always be other legitimate players in politics who would play by rules very different from his. A *satyagrahi*’s duty to himself was therefore to ensure that he remained himself while fully immersed in political work. This protective work of “self on self”—in the same way as a fireman needs to know and wear his protective gear while dealing with fire—was the ever-incomplete exercise for which the Gita was a daily resource.

It is therefore not surprising that the primary and intended audience for Gandhi’s daily discourses on the Gita should be his ashramites, potential and actual *satyagrahis*, and others who wrote to him seeking guidance in conducting their own selves. But the majority of people involved in the political process at any one point in time would not be *satyagrahis* and would not have constituted his intended audience. It was the *satyagrahi* who needed, and indeed was committed, to do this work of “self on the self” as an everyday preparatory exercise for surviving in the world of politics.

The distinction we are highlighting here between political action and the techniques of the self that a *satyagrahi* needed to adopt in order to engage in political action can be tracked in Gandhi’s discourses on the Gita. Gandhi sometimes expressed his sense of being an outsider to politics by describing politics as a “botheration.”²⁹ As he observed during one of his major political campaigns, “the work of social reform or self purification . . . is a hundred times dearer to me than what is called purely political work.”³⁰ Rather, his aim as he discussed it in his reflections on the Gita in hundreds of letters, as well as in the *Discourses*, was to lay out the methods by which an individual could prepare himself for participation in politics. The ideal *satyagrahi* would remain unsullied, calm, and controlled—the *sthitaprajna* described in the Gita—even as he engaged in the strife of politics. Politics could not contaminate his being. To this end, the Gita served Gandhi as his “spiritual dictionary,” “our guru,” “our mother” who

²⁹ Tom Weber, “Gandhi Moves,” in Debjani Ganguly and John Docker, eds., *Rethinking Gandhi and Nonviolent Relationality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 85.

³⁰ Ibid.

would keep her children “safe if we seek shelter in her lap,” and his “*kamadhenu*” (the cow that grants all wishes).³¹

The first strategy in Gandhi's reading of the Gita was to treat the text as an allegory. The move was not new, having been pioneered in the nineteenth century by Indian theosophists.³² Following in their footsteps, Gandhi also regarded the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas as an allegory for the battle “between the innumerable forces of good and evil which become personified in us as virtues and vices.”³³ This strategy enabled him to read the Gita as a text with which to examine one's “inner self.” As he noted in the early chapters of the *Discourses*, “We shall leave aside the question of violence and non-violence and say that this *dharma-grantha* was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife.”³⁴ Or, as he put it on 9 March 1926,

The chief aim of the epic, however, is to represent the most invisible of all invisible wars. It tells of the Arjuna and other Pandavas in our minds who are battling with the Kauravas in it. The moral problems which confront one in this inner war are far more difficult than those of a physical war . . . The *Gita* shows how we may emerge safe from it . . . Krishna is the *atman* in us, who is our charioteer.³⁵

The move to read the Gita as an allegory was inherently an anti-history move as well. The battle of Kurukshetra was not, in Gandhi's reckoning, “a battle which took place so many thousand years ago; it is one which is raging all the time, even today.”³⁶ The vivid details of cities, communities, and individual characters might mislead the lay reader into imagining that Vyasa was describing a historical battle. But a closer engagement with the text, argued Gandhi, brought about the realization that “the description of the battle serves only as a pretext.” In reading the Gita in this manner Gandhi marks a sharp distinction between his approach to the text and that of his political predecessors, particularly the Extremists. The latter had read in the Gita a spiritual justification for violent political actions of the past (such as Shivaji's against Afzal Khan) or of the future (their own against

³¹ Cited in J. T. F. Jordens, “Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita,” in Robert Minor, ed. *Modern Indian Interpretations of the Bhagavadgita* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 88; *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter CWMG), 55: 10 Feb. 1932–15 June 1932, 33.

³² Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 90–94, 103–5, 116–17. Sharma, *Abhinavagupta Gitarthasangraha*, claims that this strategy had precedents in the precolonial Indian interpretive tradition.

³³ That the theosophists were one of the first groups in the late nineteenth century to describe the Gita as principally an allegorical text is well established in the researches of Sharpe. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, pp. 90–94, 103–5, 116–17.

³⁴ CWMG), 37: 11 Nov. 1926–1 Jan. 1927, 75–6.

³⁵ Ibid., 88–9.

³⁶ Ibid., 76.

British rule). “When I was in London, I had talks with many revolutionaries,” recalled Gandhi.

Shyamji Krishnavarma, Savarkar, and others used to tell me that the *Gita* and the *Ramayana* taught quite the opposite of what I said they did. I felt then how much better it would have been if the sage Vyasa had not taken this illustration of fighting for inculcating spiritual knowledge. For even when highly learned and thoughtful men read this meaning in the *Gita*, what can we expect of ordinary people?³⁷

But if the *Gita* was not a historical text but an allegory of battles eternal in the soul of man, what use was it? The *Gita* “is very much concerned with practical life,” Gandhi would insist. “A *dharma* which does not serve practical needs is no *dharma*, it is *adharma*.”³⁸ But in what way could this poetic and philosophical text be practical? Again, Gandhi’s discourses clearly show that the *Gita* served not only as a tool for examining our “inner strife” but also as a manual for “inner striving” as well. Thus:

The *Mahabharata* is a unique work and in it the *Gita* has a unique place. Describing a physical battle, it gives an account of an invisible fight and shows through it that in the physical battle not only those who lose but even those who win are defeated . . . This does not mean that we should stop striving.³⁹

One thus always owes a responsibility to oneself that must be the ethical basis of the work of self on self:

In the *Gita*, the author has cleverly made use of the event [of the war] to teach great truths. If the reader is not on his guard, he may be misled. The very nature of *dharma* is such that one may easily fall into error if one is not vigilant.⁴⁰

Gandhi extracted from the *Gita* some very particular techniques that the true *satyagrahi* would have to adopt in order to be protected from politics while being

³⁷ CWMG, 37: 11 Nov. 1926–1 Jan. 1927, 82. A biography of Savarkar gives this interesting account of a meeting between Gandhi and Savarkar in London. Gandhi dropped in at the India House one Sunday evening when Savarkar was cooking prawns. On Gandhi’s declining to eat prawns, Savarkar is reported to have taunted him by saying, “this is just boiled fish . . . while [we] want people who are ready to eat the Britishers alive (*zo angrezo ko zinda aur kachcha chaba sake* . . .).” Harindranath Srivastava, *Five Stormy Years: Savarkar in London, June 1906–June 1911* (Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1983), 28–9.

³⁸ CWMG, 37: 11 Nov. 1926–1 Jan. 1927, 131–2.

³⁹ Ibid., 338

⁴⁰ Ibid., 82.

thoroughly political. "In present-day politics," he wrote,

there is no good at all and plenty of evil, for it is full of flattery and one is not protected from dangers, but, on the contrary, surrounded by them. It does not help us to realize the *atman*; in fact we have lost our soul.⁴¹

A most important task was to follow the principle of sticking to one's true *dharma* or *swadharma* as the Gita recommended: If we "lose our *dharma*, we lose our capacity for good works, lose both this world and the other."⁴²

The *satyagrahi*'s ideal *dharma* was to work ceaselessly towards *swaraj*. But Gandhi defined *swaraj* (literally self-rule)—a word he takes from the lexicon of his adversaries, the Extremists—as something that was larger than politics but of which politics remained an integral part.⁴³ He includes within the ambit of his understanding of *swaraj* the mystical ideal of *moksha*, the liberation of the *atman* (misleadingly translated as "soul") from the body and the cycle of births. The path lies through an incessant effort at conquering one's senses. *Swaraj* was thus, at one level, literally about power and mastery, for it was, as Gandhi put it in the 1920s, to "live without fear of those who hold us down." But this power could be simultaneously mystical and political. The

evil system which the Government represents, and which has endured only because of the support it receives from good people, cannot survive if that support is withdrawn. Just as the Government needs the support of good men in order to exist, so Duryodhona required men like Bhishma and Drona in order to show that there was justice on his side.⁴⁴

Yet the striving for *swaraj* must not be violent as that would contravene the other principle of the Gita: action with non-attachment. To be overly attached to even the idea of attaining *swaraj* would prevent it from being rightful action.

We should do no work with attachment. Attachment to good work, is that too wrong? Yes, it is. If we are attached to our goal of winning *swaraj*, we shall not hesitate to adopt bad means . . . Hence, we should not be attached even to a good cause. Only then will [our] means remain pure and our actions too . . . Anyone who works for reward . . . is a person deserving of our pity.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid., 100.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The history of this word would repay examination. In Maratha historical memory, the word would have had some resonances with Shivaji's use in 1645 of the expression *Hindavi Swaraj* ("the self-government of the Hindus" is how A. R. Kulkarni translates it). A. R. Kulkarni, *Explorations in Deccan History* (Delhi: Pragati, 2006), 60. *Indian Sociologist*, March 1907, 11, mentions an Anglo-Gujarati journal called *Hind Svarajya* in existence at least two years before Gandhi writes his *Hind Swaraj*.

⁴⁴ CWMG, 37: 11 Nov. 1926–1 Jan. 1927, 77.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 105.

The idea of non-attachment was central to his principle of non-violence or *ahimsa*.

Gandhi exploits to the full the ambiguity of the word *swaraj*—self-mastery or self-rule?—to ensure that the striving for *swaraj* is just that, a constant and unending striving. For “it is impossible in this body to follow *ahimsa* fully.”⁴⁶ The *Gita*, according to Gandhi, makes it clear that “evil is inherent in action . . . Arjuna did not . . . raise the question of violence and non-violence. He simply raised the question of distinction between kinsmen and others, much in the same way that a fond mother would advance arguments favouring her child.”⁴⁷ It was imperative for the political missionary or the *satyagrahi* to struggle ceaselessly to shed his attachment to the ego. “No matter how well one cultivates *vairagya* [non-attachment] or how diligent one is in performing good actions or what measure of *bhakti* one practises, one will not shed the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ till one has attained knowledge.”⁴⁸

This end of “attaining knowledge” actually never came in one’s lifetime. One could only strive to create the conditions that could make one into a receptacle for this ultimate knowledge. “Call no man good till he is dead,” noted Gandhi, for “[w]e may know that a man has attained *moksha* only if he died in a *brahmi* state.”⁴⁹ Elsewhere he would put it even more strongly:

It is doing violence to the meaning of words to say that a man has attained deliverance even while he lives in the body, for the necessity for deliverance remains so long as connection with the body remains. A little reflection will show us that, if our egoistic attachment to ourselves has completely disappeared, the body cannot survive.⁵⁰

Or, “the cravings of the senses die away only when we cease to exist in the body. This is a terrible statement to make, but the *Gita* does not shrink from stating terrible truths.”⁵¹

If the striving was eternal, it called for some techniques, some routines of personhood by which one would make a beginning towards being a *satyagrahi*. Where would one begin? Here it is interesting to observe that while, like Krishnavarma, Gandhi also valued the practice of *brahmacharya* or celibacy and non-attachment to material possessions as important routines for the political missionary or the *satyagrahi*, they were not a sufficient guarantee that the *satyagrahi* would overcome attachment. Even the sacrifice of life was not enough.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 86–7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 116.

⁵¹ Ibid., 117.

"Quite a few persons mount the gallows with perhaps a smile on their face. But they depart from this world and have no future in the other."⁵² For "it is the desires which need to be conquered. Anyone who eats to keep alive his body may certainly eat, but he should stop eating if he finds that eating food rouses his appetite."⁵³ So fasting or celibacy by themselves did not ensure the attainment of the status of the *sthitaprajna*. "Something more is needed," said Gandhi. A diseased body, too, turned away from thoughts of food or a good life. The difference between an ailing body and that of a *sthitaprajna* turned around the question of the destruction of the everyday ego:

If a man's pleasure in the objects of sense has disappeared, if he has become established in *samadhi*, or if he is suffering from a disease like jaundice nothing placed on his tongue will dissolve. Thus, the man who has turned away from pleasures and the man who is stricken with disease will ultimately reach the same state, one voluntarily, the other against his will.⁵⁴

But how would the *satyagrahi* strive to dissolve his ego? The first and perhaps the most difficult step was to learn the art of submission, the submission of man to a higher being. Once again, Gandhi uses the Krishna–Arjuna relationship to note that only from the slough of despondency can there arise a true will to know. "When Arjuna becomes utterly weak, his intellect is awakened. Shri Krishna then tells him, 'Your intellect by itself will not serve you. You will need to do *yoga*, *karmayoga*.'"⁵⁵ It is only as a confused and traumatized Arjuna turned to Krishna for guidance in the battlefield of Kurukshetra that he could become the recipient of divine wisdom.

This "confusion" or the "trauma" of Gandhi's reference amounted to a capacity to let go of the sensibility that marked a *satyagrahi's* everyday phenomenal life. The spinning wheel became Gandhi's symbol of a routine of action that, if undertaken in the right spirit, would enable the *satyagrahi* to become oblivious of his own everyday self. Gandhi suggested, using no doubt the vocabulary of the *bhakti* tradition, that the *satyagrahi's* devotion to the spinning wheel should be like that of a slave. "Your right is to work, and not to expect the fruit," the slave-owner says to the slave. "Mind your work, but beware lest you pluck a fruit from the garden. Yours is to take what I give."⁵⁶ God, writes Gandhi, "has put us under restriction in the same manner. He tells us that we may work if we wish, but that the reward of the work is entirely for Him to give."⁵⁷ But lest we

⁵² Ibid., 118.

⁵³ Ibid., 111.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 341.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

be misled by the analogy, we should remember the qualification Gandhi adds. “The relationship between the slave-owner and his slave is an unhealthy one. It is based on [the owner’s] self-interest.”⁵⁸ The *satyagrahi* was someone who waged an incessant battle against self-interest. Here is Gandhi again, using the image of Arjuna’s *visvarupdarshan* in the Gita: “man is ever rushing into the mouth of God. A wise man does so consciously and deliberately, and tells God that he wishes to be His slave, and not the world’s.”⁵⁹ *Swaraj* could be achieved when *satyagrahis* performed their respective labors without any consciousness of laboring.⁶⁰ In that state of unselfconsciousness, who would be the colonized and who the colonizer? “If . . . we can have faith in this spinning wheel movement, we can serve the world, be happy ourselves, can live safe from a great danger, that is, we can live without fear of those who would hold us down.”⁶¹ The *satyagrahi* also secured, simultaneously, a means of ensuring human welfare in the other world.⁶² But the critical thing was to lose the consciousness supported by the everyday ego. Just as the eyelids protect the eyes by reflex action—that is, without conscious intention—so too the relationship between the *satyagrahi* and his goal should be spontaneous, without the expectation of any reward.

Spinning also had the advantage of being a technique available to everybody irrespective of his or her social status. *Satyagraha* was not an activity meant for men or the higher *varnas* alone. Drawing inspiration from the Gita, Gandhi argued that “women, *Vaisyas*, and *Sudras*, all classes of people, can win freedom. In the same way, all of us can do this.” The critical point was not to “let the senses distract the mind.” If such a state could be assured, “we can become fit for *satyagraha*.”⁶³ Gandhi makes it extremely clear that spinning belongs to a set of activities that protected the *satyagrahis* from “politics” while living within the embrace of the political:

At present whether in politics or social reform we leap from one branch to another . . . The mind of a person who is not satisfied with a lakh which he has earned and hopes to earn ten lakhs the next day, who is addressed as a *Mahatma* this day, hopes to be so addressed ever afterwards—the mind of such a person is distracted by all manner of thoughts and attractive visions. His mind will not be plain white, like khadi; he is ever wanting to dress his mind, as fashionable women do their bodies in many-coloured saris with borders of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Devji in this issue describes this process pithily as “action without a subject.”

⁶¹ CWMG, 37: 11 Nov. 1926–1 Jan. 1927, 100.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 121.

various designs. Such a person can never be devoted to God. Only he who has a spirit of extreme humility, who has the faith of the Faithful, can be said to have a resolute intellect.⁶⁴

Satyagraha during and after the 1920s meant, above all, a task of vigilance. It was a task that taught *satyagrahi* political workers to be of the world but not be molded by its compulsions. This is what Gandhi took away from Sri Krishna's message to Arjuna in the Gita:

in conclusion, Shri Krishna gives the mark of a *sthitaprajna* in one verse. He is awake when it is night for other human beings, and when other human beings and all the creatures seem to be awake, it is night for the ascetic who sees. This should be the ideal for the *Satyagraha Ashram*. . . The world's night is our day and the world's day our night. There is, thus, non-cooperation between the two. This should be our attitude if we understand the *Gita* rightly. This does not mean that we are superior to others; we are humble men and women, we are a mere drop while the world is the ocean. But we should have the faith that, if we succeed in crossing to the other shore, the world, too, will. Without such faith we cannot claim that the world's night is our day. If we can achieve self-realization though fasting and spinning, then self-realization necessarily implies *swaraj*.⁶⁵

It can thus be seen how, in the Gita, Gandhi sought a series of routines by which the figure of the *satyagrahi*, as distinct from the modern political animal, could be both imagined and practiced. This was called for, we have proposed, not by Gandhi's desire to "spiritualize" politics, but more by his acceptance of the fact that in politics the *satyagrahi* would often have to work alongside the political human being, one who relentlessly and passionately pursued interests, whether of a group or of the individual. That the Gita became something of a fetish in the process—almost a talismanic object, an amulet that would protect the *satyagrahi* from the venality of politics—is suggested by the little factoid we have mentioned earlier: that Gandhi's followers often carried copies of the Gita with them when involved in nationalist mobilization.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 122.