GANDHI MARG

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THE PASSAGE OF THE VB-G RAM G Act in late 2025, which replaced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), marks more than a policy shift; it signals a profound reorientation of the Indian state's relationship with its rural poor. From a Gandhian perspective, this transition from a rights-based, demand-driven framework to a discretionary, budget-controlled programme raises profound ethical, political, and moral questions about development, democracy, and dignity.

At its core, MGNREGA was not merely a welfare scheme. It embodied a moral claim: that the state has a duty to guarantee work as a means of livelihood, especially to those pushed to the margins of the economy. For Gandhi, *work* was not charity but a form of *swaraj*, self-rule rooted in self-respect and economic autonomy. Any policy that transforms a legal right into a conditional benefit risks reducing citizens to supplicants. The VB-G RAM G Act, by shifting from a demand-driven entitlement to a supply-based programme, appears to undermine this foundational principle.

Critics are right to worry about the dilution of benefits for women, Dalits, and Adivasis, groups for whom MGNREGA functioned as a rare instrument of economic security and social inclusion. Gandhi consistently warned that development divorced from the needs of the weakest would hollow out democracy from within. The increased financial burden on states under the new funding ratios and the provision for a "monsoon pause" may further constrain employment precisely when rural distress is most acute. From a Gandhian lens, such constraints reflect an urban–bureaucratic rationality that is insufficiently attentive to the rhythms of village life.

Equally troubling is the erosion of local self-governance. MGNREGA's emphasis on Gram Panchayat–led planning resonated strongly with Gandhi's vision of *Gram Swaraj*, where villages are not administrative units but living communities capable of shaping their own development. A more centralized, top-down framework risks

weakening participatory democracy and local accountability—values Gandhi saw as essential to ethical governance.

Proponents of the VB-G RAM G Act invoke efficiency, fiscal discipline, and the need to curb corruption. Gandhi was not indifferent to waste or misuse of public funds; indeed, he insisted on moral restraint and transparency in public life. However, he would have cautioned against equating efficiency solely with budgetary control or technological surveillance. Mandatory digital platforms and e-KYC processes may curb "ghost workers," but they can also exclude the illiterate, the old, and those on the wrong side of the digital divide. For Gandhi, means were as important as ends; a system that achieves efficiency by excluding the most vulnerable cannot be ethically justified.

The promise of increased workdays and more durable assets may sound progressive, but without a guaranteed right and adequate fiscal commitment, these assurances remain fragile. The nationwide protests under the banner of "MGNREGA Bachao Sangram" suggest that many rural citizens perceive the new law not as modernization, but as a rollback.

Ultimately, a Gandhian perspective urges us to ask: Does this reform deepen *swaraj* or diminish it? Development, Gandhi insisted, must begin with the last person in the queue. Any reimagining of rural employment policy must therefore restore the primacy of rights, decentralization, and human dignity, without which efficiency becomes hollow and reform risks becoming regression.

This issue of the journal has six articles, an interview, and an extended book review. I am happy to present them to the readers.

JOHN S. MOOLAKKATTU
Chief Editor

Reclaiming Gandhi for Gender Equality: A Case for Reflective Autonomy

Bijayalaxmi Nanda
Nupur Ray
Shambhavi Mani

ABSTRACT

The struggle for Gender equality in India is a continuous and dynamic one, with trajectories that can be traced back to pre-colonial times. Irrespective of many progressive ideas and campaigns by women's movements in India which raised debates around representation, domestic violence, reproductive autonomy, sexual harassment at the workplace and property rights, there is still a long road ahead for women to be completely emancipated. To address these challenges, which have magnified with the reconfiguration of the global economy and the intrusion of modern technologies, this paper seeks to explore and reclaim Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of Satyagraha and Swaraj, especially in the context of gender equality. Drawing on his ideas about non-violence, the moral force of feminine consciousness, and the resolute pursuit of truth, the paper argues that Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha and swaraj has inherent tools to address these challenges through emancipatory conceptions of labour, the body, agency, consciousness, and oppression. The article delves deep into these ideas and attempts to unravel the dilemmas and contradictions highlighted in critical feminist readings of Gandhi.

Key words: *Gandhi, Satyagraha, Swaraj, Reflective Autonomy, Women*

1. Introduction

"WHEN WOMAN, WHOM we call abla, becomes sabla, all those who are helpless will become powerful." (CWMG 64:165)

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These words of Gandhi at the All-India Women's Conference in 1936 reflected his emphatic invocation of women's agency and the need to awaken their collective consciousness as prerequisites for the country's freedom and their own liberation from the shackles of oppression. From perceiving women as passive recipients of social reform movements in the early nineteenth century, waiting to be 'uplifted', Gandhi invoked the moral autonomy of women as independent subjectivities and projected them as a potential force in the Indian freedom struggle, alongside leading the movement towards building a humane and egalitarian society. Despite some 'cautious distancing' that the women's movement in India takes from Gandhi, his reframing of traditional roles and qualities associated with women as the centre of emancipatory politics challenged the patriarchal norms of Indian society and made women equal contributors to the Indian National Movement.

In recent times, in spite of many progressive ideas and campaigns pushed by women's movements in India that have raised awareness and public discussion around issues of representation, domestic violence, reproductive autonomy, sexual harassment at the workplace, and property rights, two serious challenges need immediate attention and responses. First are the rising instances of more insidious forms of violence against women. Second is the decline in workforce participation, with more women either opting out of work or being unable to join the workforce due to patriarchal constraints in India, as recent studies show.(Singh, 2024).

The struggle for Gender equality in India is a continuous and dynamic one, with trajectories that can be traced back to pre-colonial times. The paper argues that this process has been a disruptive one, in which the framing of the idea of women, their rights, and the claim for justice has been marked by contradictions and contestations. The paper is exploratory and raises more questions than it answers.

The distinctive idea of gender equality mobilized by Gandhi has been a break from the social reformist understanding of the subject and remains one of the more significant political moments in the Indian freedom struggle. The colonial hegemonic order used the 'position' of women in Indian society to define the regressive cultural history of India. Imperialism was justified by this definition of the colonial subject in the way in which the women were treated here. Gandhi's contribution was to redefine the colonial subject, to invoke women as partners, and to reconfigure distinctions between masculinity and femininity. However, feminist texts have also critiqued Gandhi for his essentialist positions on gender and sexuality and have contested his moralising project.

While the paper remains conscious of these contradictions, it strives to reclaim Gandhi by using the theoretical position of Reflective Autonomy as envisaged. In order to do so, the paper will examine Gandhi's core political ideas, Satyagraha and Swaraj, with special reference to their relevance to feminist politics. Secondly, it would apply the theoretical framework of reflective autonomy to recognize the significance of Gandhi's addressing the women's question within the nationalist discourse. His offering of alternative conceptions such as Satyagraha and Swaraj, and the articulation of his various strategies, will provide us with the traction to emphasize the relevance of the Gandhian engagement with contemporary debates on gender equality.

The paper is divided into 4 sections. The first section provides a broad overview of significant critical feminist readings of Gandhian political ideas around satyagraha and swaraj from different perspectives. The second section introduces the concept of reflective autonomy in the context of gender equality, as the authors theorise it. (Nanda and Ray,2019) The third section seeks to explore and argue that the various dimensions of Gandhi's feminization of the Indian national movement encapsulate the three components of reflective autonomy – engagement, empathy, and emancipation - which, in our view, is our foundational tool for reclaiming gender equality.

2. Feminist Reading of Gandhi: Critical Reflections

Feminist interventions in Gandhi's political philosophy, as a system of thought and as personal dispositions, have ranged from attributing to him a 'saviour' status for women in British India to more severe critiques of his unconventional methods in his 'experiments with truth'. In this section, we discuss feminist contentions on certain issues to help us unravel significant debates in Gandhian methods and philosophy.

From the margins to mainstream: Women's role in India's freedom struggle

One of the most widely accepted contributions of Gandhi to the women's question is his assertion that the ideas of Satyagraha and Swaraj cannot be pursued without the active participation of women in the Indian freedom struggle, which brought women from the fringes into mainstream discourse and movements. Scholars like Tanika Sarkar, Bhikhu Parekh and Lyn Norvell assert that it was Gandhi who transformed women from being passive recipients to active agents during various phases of the freedom struggle. As Tanika Sarkar argued, "Gandhian movements changed this. Peasant women, upper-caste, middle-class women, upper class Muslim women, tribal women

came together in nationalist demonstrations, picketed foreign-goods shops, organized social boycotts of loyalists and public burning of foreign cloth, filled up prisons, became local level 'dictators' during civil disobedience when their men were arrested. No aspect of Gandhian politics was sexually segregated."

But with some scepticism, she adds further, "this owed much to the self-representation of Gandhian movements. Led by a man who was seen more as a saint than as a politician…", to suggest that women were drawn towards the 'benevolent patriarch' or a 'savior' image of Gandhi! (Sarkar,2011, p.185)

On the other hand, some feminists have seen this attribution with criticism and have presented contrary views. Sujata Patel writes: 'given that the phase [1917-22] is characterized by the spontaneous and later organized expression of protest against the British and participation of both men and women in this struggle, it is difficult to separate analytically which proceeded first: women's participation or Gandhi's advocacy of this.' (Patel,2011, p.328)

Essentialist constructions of masculinity-femininity

The appropriation and therefore inevitability of distinct virtues/ qualities like tolerance, passive resistance, kindness as essentially feminine and violence, ego, impatience, and authoritarianism as essentially masculine has been a problematic proposition as it reinforced the gendered division of labour, virtues, and attributes, thereby strengthening the patriarchal system of social order.

Sanjam Ahluwalia (2003) argues that Gandhi essentialized gendered divisions as one unravels his patriarchal assumptions. In the same vein, N. Woods (2016, p.2) averred, 'Gandhi essentialized the Indian women as pure, moral, resolute and self-sacrificing.'

On the other hand, some scholars argue that '… one should be aware of the fact that he [Gandhi] did not consistently essentialize gender roles. Although he wanted women to assume more domestic or home-centred jobs like spinning, reinforcing the gendered public-private division, his recognition of the role that women could play in satyagraha suggested that there was no rigidity about the private-public roles" (Khoshoo and Moolakkattu, 2009, p.36)

The imagery of women, essentially as mothers and nurturers and therefore naturally inclined towards care and non-violence has had adverse implications. First, the fact that women's primary responsibility as caregivers in the family, especially children, often overrides that of the father, has often constrained her professional aspirations and opportunities in the public domain. Women have been considered naturally 'unsuited' for many kinds of work, seen as

naturally suited for men, which has considerably contributed to their economic, social, and political impoverishment all over.

Secondly, the glorification of the idea of passive tolerance has led to the internalising and normalising of domestic violence by women. (Lal,2008) Is there a moral limit to this passive resistance or tolerance in his theory?

Instrumental role of women in Gandhi's experiments with truth

Commentators have argued that Gandhi's difficult relationship with his wife and the moral coercion he exerted on her in the early years contradicted his claim that he allowed himself to be governed only by the principles of Satya and ahimsa. Erik Erikson, in his study of 'Gandhi's Truth', points to the disjunction between the non-violent struggle that Gandhi waged against the British and the psychological violence to which Kasturba and the inmates of Sabarmati Ashram were subjected. Following Erikson's cue that Gandhi may have sacrificed people to truth, Carol Gilligan (2016), in her acclaimed work *In a Different Voice*, links Gandhi to the 'biblical Abraham'.

The scholars deliberate on his contentious experiment and have inferred it differently. Arundhati Roy (2019, p.76), while referring to this experiment writes: "He [Gandhi] viewed woman not as an individual, but a category."

Rita Banerji (2018) argues, "I saw Gandhi as a classic example of a sexual predator — a man who uses his position of power to manipulate and sexually exploit the people he directly controls." Veena R. Howard, Vinay Lal, and Bhikhu Parekh are among the other Gandhian scholars who have conducted more in-depth research on this facet of Gandhi's life and have come to very different conclusions. Parekh lists the five justifications Gandhi offered for carrying out his "experiment." Among the explanations, Parekh(1989, p.196) elucidates: "he [Gandhi] decided to plunge into the 'sacred fire… and be burnt or saved." His adherence to celibacy was a way of mobilizing the capital of his spiritual *Shakti* and making it yield vitally necessary political dividends. Veena R. Howard (2013, pp.153-54) goes one step forward and writes: "By including Manu in brachmacharya yajna, Gandhi sought to offer her an equal partnership." She argues, "Gandhi was seeking to make Manu 'an ideal brahmachari as well' and to grant women the privilege of equal choice by defining celibacy not solely in terms of semen control, but also as comprehensive control of the sense"

Sexual Division of Labour

Feminists have expressed concerns about Gandhi's firm belief that men and women should occupy distinct yet 'complementary' roles in

society. He doubted that a woman would aspire to be the primary provider for her family and was quite resolute in his response to a question posed to him in 1935 about a woman's responsibilities within the family, asserting that 'the duty of a woman is to look after what in English is called the hearth and home.'

Though he reimaged a significant 'new place' for women in the domestic sphere, he could not create a similar place for them in public. In his vision, only those women who are desexualised and dedicated to the idea of the nation can work outside. On the other hand, Madhu Kishwar's (1985) approach appears sympathetic to this view. She contends that by reimagining women in the public sphere as dedicated to the nation, Gandhi established a social-political climate in which, even now, very few people openly oppose women's fundamental rights or forbid them from engaging in politics.

Drawing attention to the dignity of labor, Gandhi believed that, if the contributions of lower castes were as valuable to a society as those of physicians, attorneys, or pandits, then the domestic labor of women was equally valuable to society as that of men. Additionally, Gandhi also rejected the idea that distinct rights were somehow related to different obligations. Gandhi asserts that their rights are the same even though their responsibilities might vary. "*If a woman sets out in shirt and trousers with a gun in her hand, a man has no right to stop her. In such matters men and women enjoy equal rights.*" (CWMG 61: 124) A woman was not obligated to enter politics, but she was perfectly entitled to do so. Many women, such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Sucheta Kripalani, Usha Mehta, and Aruna Asaf Ali, asserted themselves at the forefront of political movements. However, Gandhi had no trouble balancing the portrayal of women as guardians of the home and hearth with the political reality.

Unfinished agenda of Swaraj: Women's economic Independence

Feminist scholars have criticized Gandhi for his insufficient focus on improving women's economic status. Madhu Kishwar (1985, p.1699) articulates this viewpoint. "one of the limitations of Gandhi's thinking, then, was that he sought to change not so much the material condition of women as their 'moral' condition." She continues: "Gandhi failed to realize that, among other things, oppression is not an abstract moral condition, but a social and historical experience related to production relations. He tried changing women's position with either transforming their relation to the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality, and reproduction."

However, scholars such as Simmi Jain believe that helping women become economically independent was one of Gandhi's great

contributions to their emancipation. Furthermore, Neera Desai points out that, unlike many other Congress leaders of their time, Gandhi and Nehru were in favour of giving social and economic equality to women. (Norvell,2017)

The claims of Simmi Jain and Neera Desai regarding Gandhi's contribution to helping women become economically independent seem to be a slight exaggeration, because Gandhi never encouraged men or women to pursue higher education, economic stability, or political power.

He aimed for more radical changes in the social, economic, and political institutions that create inequality and exploitation. As Ronald J. Terchek, (1998, p.123) writes about Gandhi's economy: "… He [Gandhi] finds that the character of the new economy introduces standards that reduce the realm of freedom available to ordinary men and women. Accordingly, his alternative is a place where people are said to regain control of their lives and livelihoods because employment is widespread, power dispersed and social relationship non-hierarchical." Gandhi's Khadi programme, along with other constructive programmes, was directed towards building structures, systems, processes, or resources that offered positive alternatives to the oppression and hierarchy created by the present economic system. It means that Gandhi wanted to create a de-cartelized, de-industrialized, village-centred, non-hierarchical economy where every man and woman can contribute according to their ability.

Purity-Impurity Discourse around women's body

Feminist scholars argue that Gandhi could not overcome his urbanized middle class upper-caste Hindu male's perception of what a 'woman' should be. Different scholars reached this conclusion in different ways. For instance, Madhu Kishwar (2011, p.271) believes that Gandhi's obsession with the idea of bodily purity of women reflects the age-old patriarchal bias in his thinking. She writes: According to Gandhi in any case, women should prefer to give up her life rather than her virtue. She adds: "The equation of rape with loss of virtue reflects the age-old patriarchal bias." Another scholar, Debali Mookerjee-Leonard (2010, pp. 43-44), has done extensive work on this aspect of Gandhi's thought. She takes an objective stance and highlights the contradictions in his perspective on the issue. First, Gandhi, as a patriarch, believes that a raped woman loses her virtue, and second, a modern liberal ethical Gandhi who believes "that the victim remains unsullied by the acts of violence performed on her." To substantiate her second point, she presents two quotes from Gandhi. In the first quote, Gandhi says: "*If a women's mind is pure, her virtue is not violated and she is not stained by*

sin, even though she may have been raped." And in the second quote, Gandhi says: '*that girls forcibly abducted have committed no crime, nor incurred any odium.*' However, she writes that "Gandhi is never fully consistent as a liberal thinker." She reconciles the contradiction between the patriarchal aspects of Gandhi's Hindu beliefs and his liberal ethical stance by asserting that Gandhi's liberalism is evident only within the specific context of the partition of India.

She believed that Gandhi's progressive views were solely for advocating the social rehabilitation of Hindu and Sikh women who were repatriated from Pakistan after abduction or violation. '*Gandhi acknowledges a certain nationalist logic for the Indian State's efforts to restore women to their families, so that they would not become wards of the State, as many women eventually did.*'

However, Debali's opinion might not be presenting the entire picture. There were many other incidents in which one witnessed Gandhi's liberal self. For instance, when he writes: '*and why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? ... Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?*' (CWMG 31:329-330) In this context, one should also not forget Vinay Lal's argument on Gandhi's 'purity'. Lal (2008, p.60) argues: "Gandhi did not at least endorse varying standards of sexual conduct for men and women. Nothing in Gandhi's writings or actions even remotely lends itself to the view that he insisted on sexual probity among women but turned his face the other way when it comes to the sexual conduct of men."

For Sujata Patel (2011, p.330) Gandhi exhibits upper caste and middle-class biases because "though Gandhi did introduce a dynamic concept, that politics, in his model of social role for women, he did not revolutionize the assumptions on which these middle-class reformers perceived women." She comes to this conclusion by analysing Gandhi's writings and speeches, in which he defines women's role in the national movement. However, she forgets that Gandhi's construction of women's role in the national movement was not based solely on his own perception of women, but was also determined by the exigencies of their social, political, and economic situation in Indian society. According to S. Shridevi (1969, p. 67), "Gandhi had to go slowly in the beginning," since he realised that women would face challenges in breaking free from isolation, primarily due to their own insecurities about their involvement in the national movement. She further states that 'they were further hindered by their menfolk, who in general were too conservative to permit them to participate in public activities.'

And as Madhu Kishwar (2011, p.318) writes: 'despite insisting on

the stereotype of women as running the household while men dominate the affairs of the outside world, in practice Gandhi encouraged a breaking away from these stereotypes.' She further adds, "Gandhi's action, in bringing women dignity in social life, in breaking down some of the prejudices against their participation in social and political life, in promoting an atmosphere of sympathetic awareness of their issues, goes far beyond his own views and pronouncements of women's role and place in society."

3. The idea of Reflective Autonomy

We introduced the concept of 'reflective autonomy' to offer a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of rights, especially in relation to marginalized groups in India. This concept challenges the liberal, individualistic notion of autonomy and instead situates autonomy within social, political, and cultural contexts. Reflective autonomy is defined as a self-aware, contextually grounded, and socially embedded form of agency. It is the capacity to make informed, critical, and self-reflective choices within the constraints of structural inequalities, such as caste, gender, class, and religion. (Nanda and Ray,2019) It is a critical framework for reimaging, reflecting on, and reframing the discourse on rights, especially in the Indian context of deep social hierarchies and exclusions.

There are three components of this framework:

-Engagement- Engagement refers to the active and critical participation of individuals in their social, political, and cultural contexts. This involves dialogue with tradition, community, and institutions rather than passive acceptance or wholesale rejection. For example, marginalized women engage critically with state welfare schemes or legal rights, choosing how to participate or resist based on their lived experiences.

-Empathy- Empathy is central to reflective autonomy. It implies the recognition of interdependence and the ability to understand and relate to others' experiences as equals. It shifts autonomy from a self-centred, individualistic notion to one embedded in human relationships. This allows for a collective and solidaristic politics, especially among marginalized communities.

Emancipation- Emancipation is the goal and potential of reflective autonomy: to transform oppressive structures and assert the right to live with dignity. It includes the capacity to resist internalized oppression, imagine alternatives, and redefine agency beyond dominant narratives. This dimension aligns with social justice, as it aims not just for survival within the system but for meaningful change—example: Feminist and Dalit movements that redefine both

personal identity and collective political strategies.

The concept offers a robust framework for promoting gender equality by recognizing that women's agency is shaped by their social, cultural, and structural contexts. Rather than seeing autonomy as individualistic freedom, it emphasizes engagement with societal norms, empathy toward shared struggles, and the pursuit of emancipation through negotiation and transformation. This approach allows women—especially those from marginalized communities—to make informed, context-sensitive choices, resist oppression from within traditional structures, and build collective, solidaristic forms of empowerment. Reflective autonomy thus supports an intersectional and ethical vision of gender justice rooted in lived realities.

4. Gandhi and 'feminizing of the Indian National Movement'

Gandhian and feminist scholars agree with discomfort and for different reasons, the notion that Gandhi 'feminized' the Indian national movement. This argument invokes a plethora of multiple contexts, contestations, and connotations. Some scholars have claimed that Gandhi's emphasis on the principles of Satyagraha, Swadeshi, and Sarvodaya was closely aligned with feminine virtues of compassion, forgiveness and endurance, thereby shifting the contours of the emerging freedom struggle from a masculinist to a feminized discourse. The other set of arguments emanates from a critical perspective where Gandhi is perceived as an 'essentialist feminist' who almost fossilized the gender-based binaries that constricted Indian women into these facades of social norms and expectations carried forward post-Independence. (Fiore, 1995)

The paper attempts to offer a more nuanced perspective of this debate by mapping the terrains of political, social, and personal dimensions of 'feminization' of the Indian National Movement supposedly influenced by Gandhian ideas.

Feminization of the 'political':

The political feminization of the Indian national movement by Gandhi was a radical process that challenged the traditional notions of leadership, resistance, and power, seeped in hegemonic masculinity. He transformed the dominant language of political struggle in the twentieth century, laced with violence, military power, and hypermasculine aggression, through three core principles: Satyagraha (non-violent resistance), Swaraj (freedom), and Swadeshi (self-reliance).

Gandhi's principle of Satyagraha (non-violent resistance) was central to the Indian freedom struggle, based on the pursuit of truth

force. The principle strongly relied on the moral and spiritual strength of human beings, their ability to endure, persevere, and embrace non-violence without being tempted to resort to violence. He also emphasized that he was inspired by his own mother and wife, who he observed exhibited these qualities more 'naturally'. He declared that the future of the non-violence movement lay with women, as they were inherently equipped with these qualities. (Fiore, 1995, p.23) Gandhi's political language destabilised the contradictions between supposedly public values and domestic values. This steady conciliation enabled women to bridge the public-private divide and encouraged them to join the national movement.

He encouraged women to join the three main mass movements - the non-cooperation movement, the Civil Disobedience movement, and the Quit India movement. Women were equal partners in the mass non-cooperation movement by participating in the boycott of foreign goods, accepting Swadeshi, and becoming part of Gandhi's Constructive Programme. During the historic salt march in 1930, women played an active role in making salt as a form of defiance against the British salt tax. Women like Aruna Asaf Ali took the lead during the Quit India Movement. He also invigorated women's political mobilization, leading to the formation of independent women's organizations with a regional focus and making a significant contribution to social and political programmes for the upliftment of women. Women like Kamala Devi Chattopadhaya, and Sarojini Naidu became strong leaders under his guidance with no obligation to agree with him on all issues.

His idea of Swaraj expanded the ideal of independence from a notional political independence from colonial rule of the British but to freedom from all forms of oppression, injustice, and violence, including freedom of women from gender-based discrimination. This entailed an emancipatory ideal that challenged all forms of systemic oppression prevalent in the form of patriarchy and casteism during these times. Gandhi reiterated that swaraj is not limited to political liberation but is envisioned as the premise for the social reconstruction of society led by women, which includes the politicisation of the domestic space. He also asserted that the core idea and final goal of Swaraj is moral independence, i.e., freedom from one's vices and inner demons, and that the end of oppression liberates both the oppressed and the oppressor. Therefore, the inclusion of women as equal partners with an independent agency was imperative to his vision of Swaraj for the country. As argued by Devaki Jain (1989), because the freedom struggle was a struggle to build self-reliance from the individual level up to the nation, it also became an instrument for the empowerment

of women.

One of the most significant arguments persistent in Gandhi's writings was a deeper analysis of the adverse impact of colonialism on the economic status of women in India. He argued that an important component of Swaraj was the idea of economic emancipation, and this is not possible without including women. (Mazumdar and Kasturi, 1994) Gandhi propagated a range of economic strategies like the use of local products, the Khadi movement, spinning 'charkha' and boycotting foreign-made goods. The symbolism attached to these political methods was conventionally associated with women, and therefore he made women not just instruments to fulfil these goals, but also intrinsic and indispensable to the success of these strategies. The 'spinning of khadi on charkha' encapsulated the essence of conventional domestic space and feminine activities. Gandhi was successful in feminizing the political/public domain by turning the 'spinning of khadi' into a political act with a political message of self-reliance and the dignity of human labour, where women became the 'end' rather than the means to achieve a goal. The woman, as a 'mother' embedded with natural qualities of patience, strength, courage, and intuition, became a new symbol of the political message, and his strategy of non-violence and freedom from colonial power would not have been possible without her involvement (Patel, 1988, p. 379). The picture of Gandhi with the spinning charkha, surrounded by Kasturba and other women, is one of the most feminine and empowering political messages etched into the national consciousness of people in India, defying all dichotomies between the public and private domains. By making spinning and wearing Khadi intrinsic to the freedom struggle, he feminized the national movement and made it inclusive of women's participation. (Forbes, 2008, p.22)

Feminization of the Social

Gandhi feminized the social space by offering a stern critique of orthodox social customs and traditions that were oppressive to women during several public meetings, openly and vehemently. He especially spoke against female infanticide, dowry, Sati, and the purdah system, prevalent during these times, as constraints to the political liberation of women (Norvell,1997). He also wrote a series of articles and reflections against the social evils, including child marriage and the deplorable condition of widows in India. He campaigned for the remarriage of widows and asserted that the prevalence of oppressive social customs is against Swaraj- the social, educational, moral, and political awakening of the people of India.

On the practice of Sati, he retorted that the practice has its origin

in superstitions and 'blind egotism of man'. *'The wife'*, he averred, "*is not a slave of her husband, but a comrade, his better half, colleague and friend. She is a co-sharer with him of equal rights and duties. Their obligations towards each other and towards the world must therefore be the same and reciprocal*" (CWMG 39:419).

These were significant interventions in creating an internal critique of certain deeply problematic and patriarchal elements of Hindu social life by a person who personified and celebrated certain religious/ spiritual practices as a way of life for Indians.

Gandhi also strategized his mission of social upliftment of women by alluding to texts, scriptures, and folklores embedded in the social consciousness of people in India. He asserted that women are not *"play things or dolls to be adored as goddesses and decorated with ornaments. They have a voice, autonomy and agency and therefore men can attain salvation only when 'our women become to us what Uma was to Shankar, Sita to Ram and Damayanti to Nala, joining in deliberations and nourishing our aspirations*" (CWMG 14: 33)

An intrinsic element of the feminization of the 'social', as conceived by Gandhi, is the acknowledgment of women as autonomous and independent beings, stronger than men in many ways, and with natural human 'dignity'. For so long, the immanent presence of guilt to be just born as a woman, carrying the burden of womanhood, seeking the validation of society and men of their own human existence had made women internalise the subjugation where they had lost the agency to question, reflect or resist to their deplorable human condition. She was the ever-sacrificing, vulnerable, and helpless Sita who succumbed to the brute masculinity of Ravan and was later 'saved' by another benevolent masculinity in Ram. Gandhi empowered women by elevating the figure of Sita, thereby providing her with a voice and agency. He transformed the prevailing narrative, celebrating Sita's moral fortitude and resilience, which exemplified the concept of Satyagraha that triumphed over Ravan's oppressive masculinity. This served as an inspiration for Indian women to stand against social injustice and colonial domination.

Though Gandhi has often been critiqued for feminist essentialism, Gail Minault(1989) argued that this form of essentialism is 'affirmative essentialism' which is emancipatory in nature as opposed to pejorative essentialism by the imperial powers to justify colonial rule. Gandhi's essentialism was affirmative, emancipatory, and always within the purview of his critical engagements.

Gandhi's approach to feminizing the social space was also through the opening up/democratizing of public spaces like streets, temples, schools, organizations, and protest marches, which had been denied

to women for a long time. With Gandhi, women were able to claim
public spaces, join and speak at public meetings, walk through streets
for protest marches, and share common spaces with men for various
programmes of the national movement. This was the beginning of
the reconfiguration of access and the gender-based division of spaces
for men and women. Women were also able to claim the nights in
public spaces, so far, an exclusive privilege of men. Gandhi was able
to break the barriers of caste, gender and class boundaries, including
untouchability, through his Constructive programme where he
envisaged the role of women as equal partners in the freedom struggle
as well as nation building (Parr, 2023)

Gandhi's constructive programme was a comprehensive effort to
achieve social and economic transformation through non-violence and
Satyagraha. He believed that, along with the Civil Disobedience
movement and non-cooperation, there was a need to bring about
transformative change in the social, economic, and political lives of
people, with active engagement and mass participation from across
all castes, communities, and genders. The Constructive programme
was introduced by Gandhi in 1941 as a way to empower people, foster
self-reliance and build a stronger foundation of Independent India. It
entailed promoting khadi and village industries to create self-reliant
rural village economies. His most significant intervention was the
introduction of the spinning wheel (charkha), primarily for women,
as a symbol of self-reliance and dignity of labor. He gave a new
message to the women of India: spin for the country's upliftment.
(Patel,1988) His fundamental premise for the practice and success of
spinning wheels and Swadeshi as a social and political tool was that
these ideas could not be implemented without the involvement of
women.

It also emphasized the importance of education for all deprived
communities, including women. He envisioned an education system
that would nurture self-reliance, a dignified life, critical thinking and
vocational skills. The education of women was a prerequisite for their
empowerment in all spheres of life and for nation-building in post-
independence India.

The manual labour women did at home became a new political
message, urging both men and women to spin in public spaces. This
completely radicalised and feminized the exclusionary social spaces
dominated by men and made women an indispensable part of it. In
the words of Devki Jain (1989), Gandhi was methodologically a feminist
because, for him, the means were as important as the end. In Gandhi's
vision, as argued by Kishwar (1985, p.1691), "*women are not objects of
reform and humanitarianism, but as self-conscious arbiters of their own*

destiny." Gandhi's constant pursuit of substantive equality, gender justice, and a constructive programme feminized social spaces in radical ways.

Feminization of the Personal

One of the most direct attacks on Gandhian philosophy by feminists has been his essentialist feminism. They argued that the association of women with a certain set of attributes like sacrifice, non-violence, endurance, empathy and manual labour and then appropriation of these attributes to fulfil the goals of movements (non-cooperation/civil-disobedience) and political programmes (swadeshi/charkha/swaraj) launched by him during the freedom struggle only paved way for a further subjugation of women in future. As Partha Chatterjee (2010) argued, political liberation led to a new form of subordination of women. As aptly put by Sujata Patel(1988), Gandhi's reconstruction of women did not challenge or analyse the structural foundations of women's subordination; rather, his essentialist arguments further legitimized the role of women as a mother and wife in the household by glorifying certain qualities that suited his political strategies, thereby consolidating the 'separate spheres doctrine' owing to biological differences.

Gandhi's feminist politics challenged/deconstructed the binaries between hyper-masculinist nationalism discourse and the subjugated feminine domestic space. This was not just in terms of a sharp public-private divide leading to unequal access to public domain and opportunities between men and women, but also in terms of mental/intellectual attributes like decision-making, political responsibilities, use of violence and intellectual labour as natural to public domain vs care and dependency, forgiveness, physical labour, tolerance and forgiveness in private domains. This had not only limited the reach of the national movement before Gandhi but also rendered women irrelevant to the discourse and struggle. This divide had also justified/reinforced social evils that kept women in an oppressive social system. By making women indispensable to the national movement, Gandhi transformed the entire discourse of the Indian national movement, including women's role and status in India.(Mazumdar and Katuri,1994).

In a critical examination of Gandhi's strategies, members of the women's movement have also noted that many of Gandhi's methods were those of the women's movement. Or the methods women employed in their personal sphere for protest, rebellion, or change. Gandhi admitted being influenced by the life of his mother, as a sense of the supreme sacrifice of his mother and his wife. His embrace of

fasting as a form of protest reflects a feminine strategy employed by women in their day-to-day negotiations in the domestic sphere. His embrace of the principles of non-violence and his engagement with the idea of spinning the charkha symbolized feminine ethics and practices.

At a more intimate level, his personal style lacked any visible signs of masculinity. A frail body, with minimal clothing, a soft but firm voice, mostly surrounded by women, cherished, laughing and arguing with them, internalised at the subconscious level, the caring and nurturing androgynous personality that made him accessible.

The idea of a masculinist, hegemonic leader embodying power through physical prowess is not part of Gandhi's discourse. His choice of clothing, mannerisms, personality, and language revealed an 'assumed' vulnerability associated with maternal attributes. A study of Gandhi and his 'dinacharya' highlights that he spent a large amount of time nurturing animals, taking care of cleanliness, especially in the kitchen and toilets, and enquiring into children's health, which overlapped with stereotypical traits of motherhood, dismantling the binaries of masculinity and femininity.

5. Gandhian Politics and gender quality: A Reflective Autonomy approach

The paper tried to engage with Gandhi's attempt at politicising the personal, political and the social, which resonated with the three E's-empathy, engagement, and emancipation in the theoretical framework of reflective autonomy. His attempt at politicising begins with the conventional territory of women, 'the domestic sphere', his 'dincharya', which reflected his commitment to performing household chores and nurturing and caregiving roles, thereby diverging from the masculine idea of a man in the household. His adherence to men following and respecting domestic roles and responsibilities brought a sense of empathy for the invisible labour of women. Secondly, moving from the domestic to the public sphere, Gandhi did not dismiss the role of women in the nation-building process; hence, he favoured their political and social emancipation despite his own patriarchal limitations. By involving women in the political arena, Gandhi politicised their concerns. Indian women's involvement in the freedom struggle was not only visionary but also unexpected. It was the women whose engagement sustained the movement after the arrest of political leaders and even the hegemonic and patriarchal colonial setup did not have any mechanism to oppose so many of them participating in the struggle non-violently. Gandhi, with his ideals and praxis, does provide an alternative to the hegemonic masculinity that prevails in

Indian society. The involvement of women in the anticolonial struggle gave a new dimension to his satyagraha and swaraj, making it transformational and inclusive. He tried to create a new image of women as more empowered, informed, and active agents of their own destiny, beyond the four walls of confinement. This kind of autonomy he acquaints women with was visionary and attempts to offer a solution to the ongoing crisis vis-à-vis women's rights. Lastly, Gandhi's attempt to emancipate women from the socially gendered and hierarchical norms practiced by the Indian society needs to be recognised. His staunch criticism against the practices of sati, dowry, child marriage and his emphasis on women being educated reflected on his quest for empowering and emancipating women from their invisible chattels of patriarchal bondage. However, one does acknowledge his failure in emancipating women from their patriarchal destinies completely, lies with the expectation of them to be the ultimate self-sacrificial figure. And given his educational and cultural exposure, one could argue that he might have been more considerate and radical in his support for women's emancipation. His tendency to essentialise inevitably creates the same dichotomy and absolves men of responsible civic engagement. His thoughts, however, have significant potential to contribute to contemporary feminist discourse and concerns. To contribute to an ongoing, dynamic quest for gender equality, one can integrate his ideals with those of modern feminist concerns.

Conclusions

Gandhi's engagement with gender remains deeply complex and contested within feminist discourse. While he undeniably created space for women's participation in the nationalist movement and challenged certain patriarchal norms, his idealization of femininity and reinforcement of traditional roles remain contested. However, as the paper argues, when assessed through the lens of *reflective autonomy*, it becomes possible to appreciate how women navigated, negotiated, and sometimes subverted these constraints to assert their agency. This approach shifts the focus from Gandhi's intentions to the lived experiences and choices of women, highlighting their role as active political subjects rather than passive followers. Ultimately, a feminist reading of Gandhi must hold both his contributions and limitations in tension, recognizing the need for a critical reflection on politics that is rooted in empathy, engagement, and emancipation.

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BIJAYALAXMI NANDA is Principal and Professor in Department of Political Science, Miranda House, University of Delhi, email id-*principal@mirandahouse.ac.in* . Her research interest is in gender studies, political theory and philosophy, human rights and public policy.

NUPUR RAY is an Associate Professor in Department of Political Science, Kamla Nehru College, University of Delhi. Email id-*hope.nupur@gmail.com*. Her research interest is in Political Philosophy, Gender Studies, Human Rights, Human Development and Body Politics.

SHAMBHAVI MANI is an Assistant Professor in Department of Political Science, Vivekananda College, University of Delhi, Email id- *shambhavi@vivekanand.du.ac.in*. Her research interest includes gender studies, public policy and administration and political theory.

Decentralised Planning through MGNREGA: The Role of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

Parameswar Mallik

ABSTRACT

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) play a pivotal role in decentralised planning under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). This act aims to enhance rural employment and infrastructure development through a bottom-up approach. This decentralised approach increases local participation, ensures projects are relevant to community needs, and improves transparency and accountability. The broad objective of the paper is to explore the impact of decentralised planning in rural development through the MGNREGA, with a focus on the role of PRIs. The subsequent section addresses different challenges faced by PRIs in MGNREGA implementations. The study's findings highlight that MGNREGA has provided PRIs with a platform to engage more actively in the planning and implementation of rural development projects, thereby improving accountability and transparency. The last section includes recommendations and concludes.

Key words: *PRIs, Decentralised Planning, MGNREGA, Rural households, India*

Introduction

THE MGNREGA HAS played an important role in improving the livelihoods of rural communities across India. It was introduced by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India (GoI), specifically under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Indian National Congress. The scheme was enacted on August

23, 2005, and notified on September 7, 2005, during the tenure of Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh (Das, 2016). It was a landmark legislation aimed at providing rural households with guaranteed wage employment to enhance their livelihood security and promote sustainable rural development. This Act provides at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work. The program has contributed to empowering marginalised groups, including women, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), and transgender people by providing them with opportunities for economic participation and decision-making (Kumar et al. 2020). This Act aims to mitigate the seasonal and chronic unemployment prevalent in rural areas, especially during the agricultural off-seasons. MGNREGA reduces distress migration to urban areas, thereby relieving pressure on urban infrastructure and promoting balanced regional development (Kumar and Deogharia, 2017). This scheme emphasises the creation of durable assets that benefit rural people, such as water conservation structures, rural roads, irrigation canals, and land development. These assets not only improve rural infrastructure but also enhance agricultural productivity and livelihood opportunities. MGNREGA intersects with environmental sustainability through its emphasis on natural resource management, ecosystem restoration, and sustainable development practices in rural areas of India (Ghuman and Singh, 2018).

Phase-Wise Implementation of MGNREGA

The implementation of MGNREGA involves multiple layers of governance, from the central government to the state and local bodies. It operates under the supervision of the MoRD, with funds allocated in the Union Budget and administered through various state agencies. The journey of MGNREGA began with a pilot phase launched on February 2, 2006, in 200 districts across India. This phase was crucial for testing implementation mechanisms, assessing feasibility, and gathering stakeholder feedback (Turangi, 2022). Further, MGNREGA was expanded nationwide by April 1, 2008. It marked a significant milestone as the scheme was extended to cover all rural districts of India. Phase 2 focused on building robust institutional mechanisms, expanding the scope of asset creation, and improving the quality of rural infrastructure (Singh, 2017). The period from 2009 to 2014 witnessed efforts to consolidate and strengthen MGNREGA. Phase 3 aimed at improving efficiency, transparency, and accountability through technological advancements and systemic reforms (Patwardhan and Tasciotti, 2022). In the current phase, this scheme has focused on

integrating Aadhaar-based payment systems, mobile applications for real-time monitoring, and asset geo-tagging to enhance transparency and accountability. Throughout its implementation, MGNREGA has had a profound impact on rural India (Bhatti, 2012).

Constitutional Framework

MGNREGA is rooted in the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) outlined in Part IV of the Indian Constitution. Specifically, Article 41 directs the state to secure to all citizens the right to work, ensuring a livelihood and just and humane working conditions. The Act aligns with this principle by guaranteeing rural households the right to employment. While MGNREGA primarily draws from DPSP, it also indirectly supports Fundamental Rights under the Constitution, such as the right to life (Article 21) and the right to equality (Article 14) (Nayak, 2015). By ensuring employment opportunities and improving living conditions in rural areas, MGNREGA contributes to the realisation of these rights. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) provided constitutional status to PRIs, which play a crucial role in the implementation and monitoring of MGNREGA at the grassroots level (Sinha, 2021). India follows a federal structure where legislative powers are distributed between the Union (central government) and the states. MGNREGA is a centrally sponsored scheme in which the central government provides the framework and funding, while states are responsible for its implementation within their jurisdictions. This distribution of powers is set out in the federal provisions of the Constitution (Chakraborty, 2014).

Methodology

The data used in this study came from secondary sources. The relevant data was obtained from the MGNREGA website and the official portal of the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Government of India. Additional data sources include the Management Information System (MIS), Press Information Bureau (PIB) reports of MGNREGA, and the Ministry of Labour & Employment (MoLE). Further pertinent data have been acquired from internet resources, Census records, journal articles, books, book chapters, and both published and unpublished works that address the subjects at issue.

Conceptual Framework of Decentralisation

Decentralisation is the process of distributing or delegating power, authority, or functions away from a central authority or governing body (de Xavier et al., 2021). This approach seeks to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of public administration by tailoring policies

and plans to the specific needs and conditions of local communities (Julfikar and Rahaman, 2018). The implementation of the MGNREGA scheme is closely aligned with the principles of decentralisation, particularly in planning, execution, and governance. This Act focused on decentralised planning through the participation of central and state governments at the regional level, such as *Gram Panchayats*. It permits a more localised and responsive technique for implementing the scheme, potentially leading to better outcomes (Maiorano et al., 2018). This section is divided into two sub-sections: (i) Gandhi's views on Decentralisation and (ii) Kumarappa 's views on Decentralisation.

Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Decentralisation

According to Mahatma Gandhi, his views on decentralisation were integral to his broader vision of rural development. His perspective on decentralisation was not just a political or administrative concept but was deeply intertwined with his philosophy of self-reliance, grassroots democracy, and social justice. He believed that true democracy and sustainable development could be achieved only through a bottom-up approach, in which village and local communities would be self-reliant and self-governed (Prasad, 1955). Gandhi was critical of the centralised system of governance, which he believed led to the concentration of power and corruption. His thought is to minimise bureaucratic complexity and focus on practical, community-based solutions. He argued that political power should be devolved to the lowest levels, enabling people to participate directly in decision-making. He envisioned a system in which the panchayat would play a central role in governing local affairs, including justice, administration, and resource management (Gandhi, 1962). He opposed large-scale industrialisation and instead promoted self-reliant village economies based on local production. Gandhiji supported the use of traditional tools and cottage industries, such as hand spinning, as symbols of economic independence. Gandhi's philosophy of Swadeshi, which called for the use of locally produced goods, was a direct challenge to the centralised economic system (Palanithurai, 2019). His principles of local autonomy, community participation, and self-reliance are reflected in modern decentralised planning initiatives such as the PRIs and MGNREGA.

JC Kumarappa 's views on Decentralisation

Kumarappa was an eminent Indian economist and a prominent Gandhian thinker. He critiqued both capitalist models for their reliance on centralised structures of production and governance. His views

on decentralisation were deeply intertwined with his commitment to rural self-sufficiency, local empowerment, and economic democracy. Kumarappa envisioned a decentralised economy wherein local communities were empowered to manage their resources and economic activities. He believed that decentralisation would lead to greater self-reliance and reduce dependency on external sources. This approach aimed at creating a network of self-sustaining villages, each contributing to and benefiting from a more balanced national economy (Gurusamy, 2018). He argued that by promoting local industries and agricultural practices, villages could become economically independent, thus ensuring their sustainability and resilience. He contended that local decision-making would be more inclusive and representative, addressing the community's needs more effectively than centralised governance (Chathukulam et al., 2018). Kumarappa also emphasised political decentralisation; he believed in strengthening Panchayat Raj institutions and encouraging participatory democracy at the grassroots level. According to him, true democracy could only thrive in a decentralised system in which individuals and communities had real power over their lives, resources, and development priorities (Pillai, 2018). Mahatma Gandhi and Kumarappa provided a visionary perspective on decentralisation, rooted in their commitment to social justice, economic self-reliance, and sustainable development. Gandhi's focus was on political and social empowerment through village republics, while Kumarappa integrated economic and environmental considerations into the decentralisation framework. Their ideas continue to influence the implementation of MGNREGA, decentralised governance, and sustainable rural development.

PRIs' Contribution to MGNREGA Implementation

The MGNREGA and the PRIs have a strong legal relationship, as they work in a cycle to ensure the right to work and promote local governance. PRIs, functioning at the village, block, and district levels, are instrumental in identifying local needs, planning and implementing projects, and monitoring progress. Their involvement ensures that projects are tailored to community needs, fostering greater transparency, accountability, and efficiency in resource utilisation. PRIs help bridge the gap between government policies and rural realities, thereby strengthening participatory development and improving rural livelihoods (Vijayanand, 2021). The MoRD at the central government level plays a vital role in implementing MGNREGA, as it is responsible for allocating funds, setting wage rates, and providing technical support to the states. At the state level, the State governments are responsible for the execution of the program, ensuring that the works
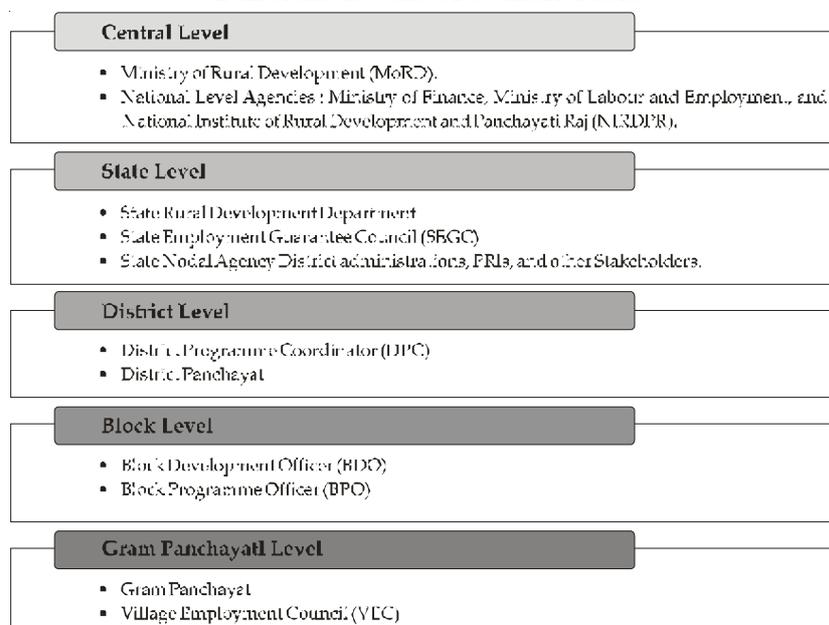
are completed on time and in accordance with the guidelines, and maintaining proper accounts and records. At the district level, the main authority responsible for implementing MGNREGA is the District Programme Coordinator (DPC), who is usually the District Collector or District Magistrate. These are accountable for the day-to-day administration and coordination of MGNREGA activities at the district level. They ensure the proper implementation of the program, including beneficiary registration, execution of works, timely payment of wages, and monitoring of outcomes. The block level is an intermediate tier between the district and the Gram Panchayats. The Programme Officer (PO) at the block level, often the Block Development Officer (BDO), plays a vital role in coordinating and supervising implementation. The *Gram Panchayat* (GP) is the grassroots-level institution directly responsible for field-level implementation. It works closely with the Gram Sabha, which serves as the community forum for participatory planning and accountability (MoRD, 2013). PRIs play a dynamic role in implementing the program at the grassroots level. They are responsible for identifying works, selecting beneficiaries, and supervising projects (Rajasekhar, 2025). Each level of administration collaborates to ensure that MGNREGA projects are implemented effectively, funds are utilised efficiently, and the program benefits reach the intended beneficiaries.

This section has been arranged under five major sub-sections: (i) local planning and implementation, (ii) social inclusion and empowerment, (iii) monitoring and transparency, (iv) capacity building and training, and (v) advocacy and policy support.

Local Planning and Implementation

PRIs play a vital role in the local planning and implementation of MGNREGA in India. In particular, GPs are responsible for identifying and prioritising projects under MGNREGA based on local needs and priorities (PIB, 2021). They conduct participatory planning processes involving *Gram Sabhas* and other local bodies to ensure that projects address genuine local developmental challenges. PRIs oversee the execution of MGNREGA works, ensuring that projects are implemented in accordance with the guidelines and within allocated budgets. It plays a crucial role in mobilising local labour and resources to ensure effective project implementation (Sathyapalan et al., 2025). The program mandates that the GP make relevant documents available for social audit by the Gram Sabha, including muster rolls, bills, vouchers, and other records (Sakthivel, 2025).

**Figure 1: Implementation of MGNREGA at
Different Levels of Stakeholders**

Central Level
- Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD).
- National Level Agencies : Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Labour and Employment, and National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR).

State Level
- State Rural Development Department
- State Employment Guarantee Council (SEGC)
- State Nodal Agency District administrations, PRIs, and other Stakeholders.

District Level
- District Programme Coordinator (DPC)
- District Panchayat

Block Level
- Block Development Officer (BDO)
- Block Programme Officer (BPO)

Gram Panchayati Level
- Gram Panchayat
- Village Employment Council (VEC)

Source- Drawn from MoRD, GOI

Social Inclusion and Empowerment

Social inclusion and empowerment are core principles of MGNREGA, aimed at ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable groups in rural India benefit equitably from the program. This Act guarantees 100 days of wage employment per household annually, with a focus on providing equal opportunities for men and women, as well as marginalised groups such as SCs, STs, and other backward classes (Goyal et al., 2023). A study by Vij (2013) has found that this scheme ensures that traditionally excluded groups have access to employment opportunities. It includes provisions to ensure that at least one-third of the workforce is women. The program not only promotes gender equality but also empowers women by providing them with independent income, decision-making roles in project implementation, and opportunities to develop skills and leadership qualities (Vij, 2013; Peter, 2023). PRIs ensure that job cards and employment opportunities are distributed equitably among all eligible individuals, without discrimination based on caste, gender, or socio-economic status. They monitor the implementation to prevent any exclusionary practices (Rout, 2013).

Monitoring and Transparency

Monitoring and transparency are critical to MGNREGA implementation, ensuring accountability, preventing corruption, and enhancing the program's effectiveness. This scheme mandates regular social audits at the local level, where beneficiaries and community representatives review project implementation and verify expenditures. Social audits promote transparency by allowing local communities to scrutinise the utilisation of funds and ensure that projects benefit the intended beneficiaries (Yamini and Mehta, 2015). The program uses a strong MIS to track various aspects of implementation, including fund allocation, work progress, job card issuance, and wage payments. The MIS reports provide real-time data, enabling officials at various levels to monitor project status and take timely corrective actions (PIB, 2014). Information and Communication Technology (ICT) interventions, such as biometric attendance systems and mobile applications, are used to monitor worker attendance and ensure timely wage payments. These technologies enhance transparency and reduce delays in disbursing wages to beneficiaries (Pole, 2015). PRIs manage the effective implementation of MGNREGA at the grassroots level. They monitor the quality of work under the scheme, ensure timely wage payments, and address beneficiaries' grievances. This accountability mechanism ensures that the program benefits reach the intended beneficiaries, thereby enhancing their empowerment (Ehmke, 2016).

Capacity Building and Training

Capacity building and training are integral components of MGNREGA implementation, aimed at empowering rural communities, enhancing their participation, and ensuring the program's sustainable impact (Gupta et al., 2021). This scheme invests in training programs to build beneficiaries' capacity, especially women and marginalised groups, across various aspects of project implementation. These training programs cover skills such as construction techniques, project management, financial literacy, and rights awareness (Pankaj, 2022). This Act enhances their ability to actively participate in program activities and contribute effectively to local development. PRIs are responsible for disseminating information about MGNREGA rights and entitlements among rural communities. They educate beneficiaries about their rights, the processes involved, and the benefits they can derive from the program. It empowers marginalised groups by enabling them to make informed decisions and actively engage with the program (PIB, 2018). PRIs also often conduct training and capacity-

building programs for elected representatives and local officials involved in MGNREGA implementation. This enhances their ability to manage the program efficiently and inclusively, thereby improving outcomes for marginalised communities (Reddy, 2013).

Advocacy and Policy Support

Advocacy and policy support are essential for the effective implementation and sustainability of MGNREGA, ensuring that the program achieves its objectives of providing employment and enhancing livelihood security in rural India. Civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and advocacy groups play a crucial role in advocating for policies that strengthen MGNREGA (Fischer, 2019). They engage in research, policy analysis, and lobbying efforts to influence decision-makers and policymakers at various levels to allocate adequate resources, improve program design, and ensure compliance with legal provisions. This Act advocates policy reforms and improvements in MGNREGA implementation, grounded in on-the-ground experiences and challenges. It includes support for increased funding, streamlined procedures, and better targeting of beneficiaries (Chopra, 2018). PRIs promote convergence between MGNREGA and other rural development schemes to maximise resources and enhance developmental outcomes. This collaborative approach ensures holistic development and addresses multiple facets of rural poverty (Chopra, 2015).

Challenges Faced by PRIs in MGNREGA Implementations

The MGNREGA has been a landmark initiative in India, providing livelihood security through rural employment. However, its implementation faces several challenges and constraints:

Capacity Constraints

MGNREGA relies heavily on the participation and engagement of local communities. Capacity constraints at this level may include a lack of awareness of entitlements, limited social mobilisation efforts, and challenges in ensuring transparency and accountability in the use of funds and resources (Lali, 2021). This encompasses the ability to translate policy intentions into effective on-ground implementation. Issues such as delays in issuing job cards to workers, insufficient availability of work within the stipulated household radius, and discrepancies in muster rolls (attendance records) can undermine the program's impact (Kumar, 2019). Adequate infrastructure and technology are essential for the proper functioning of MGNREGA. This includes facilities for data management, monitoring of work

progress, and communication between different stakeholders. In rural areas, where MGNREGA is primarily implemented, challenges such as poor connectivity and inadequate technological resources can hinder program effectiveness (Druwe et al., 2014).

Financial Constraints

The central government allocates funds for MGNREGA annually. Financial constraints can arise if the allocated budget is insufficient to meet the demand for employment generated by the scheme. One of the major challenges is the timely allocation and release of funds by the central government to the states (Agrawal, 2019).   According to FY 2019-20, the allocation for MGNREGA was 71,001 crore, and in FY 2020-21, it increased to 1,11,500 crore. This increase was partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic disruptions it caused, leading to additional demand for employment under the scheme. However, in **FY 2022-23**, the allocation was **73,000 crore**. This was a reduction compared to the previous year **(MoRD, 2023-24). In this context,** most states, including Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Jammu & Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Lakshadweep, and Puducherry, have not paid wages as required under MGNREGA within 15 days. Furthermore, employees receive no remuneration for any delays in receiving their wages (PIB, 2019). Delays in fund release can hinder the smooth execution of projects and the timely payment of wages to the workers. There have been instances where workers have faced delays in receiving their wages. This can discourage participation and affect the livelihoods of rural households who depend on these wages (Salian and Leelavathi, 2014). Furthermore, the availability of work under MGNREGA is often seasonal and depends on factors such as rainfall and agricultural cycles. This can lead to fluctuating employment demand, making it difficult for workers to rely on it as a stable source of income throughout the year (Fernandes, 2015).

Political and Bureaucratic Constraints

Political pressures and interference in project selection, resource allocation, and employment generation may undermine MGNREGA's objectives and affect program integrity. Complex administrative procedures, lengthy approval processes, and bureaucratic red tape can delay project implementation and frustrate beneficiaries and implementing agencies (Masiero and Maiorano, 2017)   The program has also been plagued by corruption at various levels, leading to leaks of funds intended for development projects and wages. This reduces the program's effectiveness and impacts its outcomes (Fischer and

Ali, 2019). A study by Sanyal (2022) has found that the contractors or intermediaries involved in the implementation process may engage in corrupt practices to inflate costs or provide substandard materials, thereby profiting from the program at the expense of its objectives (Malla, 2020; Sanyal, 2022). According to reports by the Indian Express, a government audit revealed that about 935 crores in MGNREGA funds were misappropriated over the last four years across the country. The data were collected from the MoRD MIS for FY 2017-2021. The majority of financial fraud occurs through the acquisition of costly goods, payments to fictitious individuals, and bribery. According to the report, the states with the greatest rates of misappropriations were Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Karnataka, Bihar, West Bengal, and Jharkhand. About 245 crore was misappropriated in Andhra Pradesh; however, only Rs 2.07 crore was recovered. Approximately 239.31 crore was misused in Tamil Nadu, but only 4.48 crore was recovered. According to social audits conducted in Gujarat, 6,749 was misused; however, no amount was recovered (The Wire Staff, 2021).

Lack of Community Participation and Awareness

Lack of community participation and awareness is a significant challenge that impedes the effective implementation of MGNREGA in India. A study by Breitkreuz et al. (2019) has found that many potential beneficiaries in rural areas may not be fully aware of their rights under MGNREGA or the processes involved in accessing employment opportunities through the scheme. Lack of awareness leads to underutilization of the program and reduces its impact on poverty alleviation (Breitkreuz et al., 2017). Information about project proposals, fund allocations, and grievance redressal mechanisms may not reach the intended beneficiaries due to communication gaps or language barriers. This hampers their ability to participate in decision-making processes actively. The bureaucratic procedures and documentation required to apply for MGNREGA work can be discouraging for rural communities with low literacy levels or limited access to information and technology. This complexity discourages participation (Narayanan et al., 2017).

Social Barriers to Participation

Social barriers to participation under MGNREGA in India stem from various socio-cultural factors that hinder certain groups from accessing and benefiting from the scheme. Social and cultural factors, such as gender inequalities or caste dynamics, can act as barriers to meaningful participation in MGNREGA activities (Kumar, 2021).

Women often face discrimination and limited mobility, which restricts their ability to participate in MGNREGA activities. Traditional gender roles and social norms can limit women's participation in wage labour outside the home (Mallik and Paltasingh, 2023). Cultural practices may also discourage certain groups from seeking employment through MGNREGA due to stigma or perceived social status implications. They may also have less decision-making power within households, affecting their ability to access employment opportunities under the scheme (Saha, 2019). A study by Dhaktode (2021) has found that caste-based discrimination excludes certain marginalised caste groups from equitable participation in MGNREGA. Dominant caste groups may control local resources and decision-making processes, thereby marginalising lower-caste communities (Dhaktode, 2021).

Recommendations

To overcome the issues and challenges of MGNREGA implementation, the following recommendations may be considered: Governance reforms are imperative to strengthen PRIs, and it is crucial to empower PRIs with greater decision-making autonomy and financial authority. This could be achieved by decentralising administrative powers and resources, enabling PRIs to plan and execute MGNREGA projects aligned with local development priorities. Clear guidelines and training programs should be instituted to enhance PRI members' understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as well as the legal framework governing MGNREGA. Capacity building is essential to equip PRIs with the requisite skills and knowledge for effective MGNREGA implementation. Training programs should focus on project management, financial administration, and the use of information technology for monitoring and evaluation. Specialised training modules tailored to the needs of PRI members, including women and marginalised groups, should be prioritised to ensure inclusive and equitable participation in decision-making processes. Community participation and social accountability mechanisms are crucial. PRIs should actively engage with local communities through participatory planning processes, ensuring that MGNREGA projects address genuine local needs and priorities.

Social audits should be conducted regularly to enhance transparency, verify project outcomes, and address grievances promptly. Information dissemination campaigns should be intensified to raise awareness among rural households about their entitlements under MGNREGA, thereby empowering them to demand their rights and hold PRI members accountable. Ensure the timely and adequate release of funds for MGNREGA activities to prevent delays in wage

payments and project execution. Improve financial planning and management to optimise resource utilisation. Simplify bureaucratic procedures and reduce administrative bottlenecks to expedite project approvals, material procurement, and implementation timelines. Community awareness campaigns may be conducted, and engagement with local leaders to address socio-cultural barriers that may affect participation in MGNREGA. Promote gender equality and the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the implementation of the scheme. Sustainable development practices within MGNREGA projects are essential for long-term socio-economic impact. PRIs should prioritise environmentally sustainable works such as water conservation, afforestation, and renewable energy initiatives. Integrating climate resilience into project planning and implementation will enhance rural communities' resilience to climate change impacts and promote the sustainable use of natural resources.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that MGNREGA stands as a pioneering initiative in India's efforts towards inclusive growth and rural development. By providing employment, creating assets, promoting social inclusion, and empowering rural households. This Act has significantly improved incomes and reduced poverty in rural areas. PRIs cover numerous key areas, including planning, project execution, financial management, monitoring, and community engagement. They are also involved in building awareness among marginalised people about their rights and entitlements under MGNREGA. Further, PRIs help in processing wage payments to workers. They are responsible for maintaining muster rolls, verifying work done, and ensuring timely and accurate payment of wages. However, findings from the existing literature indicate that this role is significantly challenged by various obstacles, including infrastructure deficiencies, capacity constraints, funding issues, bureaucratic hurdles, and socio-cultural dynamics that hinder effective implementation and outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society organisations, and local communities. Overall, PRIs are integral to the successful implementation of MGNREGA. Their roles in planning, execution, and oversight are central to achieving the scheme's objectives and improving rural livelihoods.

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PARAMESWAR MALLIK is a PhD. Research Scholar (UGC NET-NFSC Fellow) P.G. Department of Sociology, Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar-768019, Odisha. Email ID: *parameswarmail0@gmail.com* **ORCID ID-** *https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4673-2015.*

Shifting Paradigms: Unveiling Kashmir's Militancy through History and Post-Article 370 dynamics

AIJAZ Ahmad Dar

ABSTRACT

This research paper delves into the multifaceted history and evolution of militancy in Kashmir, providing a comprehensive overview of the insurgency's genesis and its various phases. The study explores the historical roots of militancy, tracing its development from the early 20th century to the present, with a particular focus on key milestones that have shaped the region's volatile security landscape. It critically examines the impact of the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 on militancy trends, analyzing shifts in insurgent activities, including stone-pelting incidents, before and after this pivotal constitutional change. Furthermore, the paper reviews the Indian government's post-2019 security and counterterrorism strategies, assessing their effectiveness and the challenges faced in combating militancy in a post-Article 370 context

Key words: *Kashmir insurgency; article 370 abrogation; security dynamics;*

The Historical Roots of Militancy in Kashmir: Examining the Genesis and Complexities

THE ARMED INSURGENCY in Kashmir, which began in 1989, cannot be understood as an isolated political event; rather, it emerged from a long historical process rooted in the unresolved conflict that originated during the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 (Bose, 2003). Over time, the conflict became increasingly complex due to competing claims by India and Pakistan and the aspirations of the

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Kashmiri people themselves. This complexity involved both external and internal dimensions. The external dimension was shaped by the persistent hostility and rivalry between India and Pakistan, while the internal dimension reflected the growing alienation and political dissatisfaction felt by many Kashmiris toward the Indian state (Behera, 2007).

Although both dimensions influenced the post-1989 insurgency, the immediate triggers were largely internal. Political developments within Jammu and Kashmir prior to the outbreak of violence created conditions that enabled popular unrest. The armed militancy and uprising in the Kashmir Valley were initially local reactions to prevailing political and social circumstances. Once these local reactions emerged, external actors and regional dynamics became increasingly influential, gradually merging with internal factors. The period between 1989 and 1990 marked the onset of organised violence, characterised by targeted attacks on security personnel, government officials, mainstream political activists, and those seen as aligned with the Indian state. This phase represented a turning point that laid the foundations for a prolonged and continuing conflict (Choudhary, 2014).

The insurgency is frequently associated with allegations of rigging in the 1987 elections. However, this explanation alone is inadequate, as electoral manipulation has reportedly occurred repeatedly in Kashmir since 1953 (Bose, 2003). Therefore, the emergence of insurgency must be understood as the result of an interaction between multiple internal and external dynamics rather than a single event. Political suppression was one such internal factor. The detention of leaders of the Muslim United Front, who attempted to engage with the political process through elections, contributed to disillusionment and heightened grievances. Yet this alone cannot fully explain the rise of armed resistance, which evolved through a combination of factors (Ganguly, 1996).

Among these catalysts, Jamaat-e-Islami played an important ideological and organisational role. Through its network of madrassahs and political engagement, the organisation mobilised and recruited young militants while promoting a conservative Islamist worldview. Its influence contributed to a significant ideological transformation, shifting the insurgency from a largely secular nationalist struggle to one increasingly marked by Islamist aspirations. This change significantly reshaped the nature and direction of the conflict during the period (Schofield, 2021).

External support further transformed the insurgency. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a crucial role by establishing training camps, facilitating arms procurement, and creating logistical

support networks for militants. These camps trained Kashmiri fighters and foreign combatants under the guidance of Afghan war veterans and Pakistani operatives. Equipped with weapons, strategic assistance, and ideological motivation, militant groups were prepared for sustained conflict. The ISI also worked to coordinate and unify various factions, redirecting their objectives toward Islamist goals, which significantly influenced the trajectory of the insurgency and the wider geopolitical dynamics of the region (Bakaya & Bhatti, 2005).

Education and media expansion also contributed to political mobilisation. Rising literacy rates, from 11.03 per cent in 1961 to 26.67 per cent in 1981, increased political awareness among youth. Non-formal educational institutions, especially those linked to Jamaat-e-Islami, encouraged separatist thinking, while exposure to Palestinian students at Kashmir University introduced ideas drawn from the Palestinian Intifada (Ganguly, 1996). The expansion of print and electronic media broadened awareness of global political developments, including the Intifada, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the Indian Army's withdrawal from Sri Lanka, which inspired aspirations for change and resistance (Bose, 2003).

The Afghan War of the 1980s further intensified and transformed the insurgency. The success of Afghan mujahideen inspired Kashmiri youth, while returning Afghan veterans brought combat experience, weapons, and tactical knowledge. The war also facilitated the spread of radical Islamist ideologies and strengthened cross-border networks supported by Pakistan, thereby intensifying the conflict during the late 1980s and 1990s (Bakaya & Bhatti, 2005).

In conclusion, the Kashmir insurgency cannot be explained solely by the alleged rigging of the 1987 elections. Instead, it was the outcome of multiple long-term political, ideological, educational, and geopolitical factors that evolved over decades. The elections acted primarily as a catalyst, igniting already accumulated tensions and grievances.

Phases of Insurgency

The insurgency in Kashmir can be divided into several distinct phases. The first phase, commonly referred to as the uprising (1990–1995), was led primarily by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and aimed at achieving an independent Kashmir. During this phase, the majority of participants were of Kashmiri origin. The Kashmir Valley, with its long-standing aspirations for political autonomy, served as the epicentre of the insurgency. In contrast, insurgent activities remained limited in Jammu and were almost absent in Ladakh.

However, the Doda district of Jammu witnessed a rise in insurgent activity, largely due to its predominantly Muslim population. This development highlights the importance of ethno-linguistic factors rather than purely religious motivations in shaping the conflict dynamics.

The Indian government's forceful counterinsurgency response resulted in substantial casualties, which in turn contributed to the decline of the JKLF and the rise of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) as the dominant militant organisation by 1994. Unlike the J.K.L.F, H.M advocated the unification of Kashmir with Pakistan, signalling a significant ideological shift in the insurgency (Shah, 2021).

The second phase of the insurgency (1996–1998) was characterised by demoralisation and fragmentation. Popular support for the insurgency declined due to prolonged violence, civilian suffering, and widespread disruption of daily life. High casualty rates, including deaths and arrests among insurgents, weakened organisational structures and reduced recruitment. Improved control by Indian security forces over infiltration routes from Pakistan further constrained militant operations. Internal rivalries and factionalism diverted attention and resources, while defections to Indian security agencies increased. The combined impact of these factors—reduced external support, internal disintegration, and enhanced intelligence capabilities—marked a significant setback for the insurgent movement (Bose, 2003).

The third phase (1999–2002) was marked by the emergence of fidayeen (suicide) attacks, which introduced a new and audacious dimension to the conflict. Approximately fifty-five such attacks occurred during this period, primarily attributed to militant organisations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM). This phase differed significantly from earlier stages, as the majority of militants involved were Pakistani nationals rather than local Kashmiris. The fidayeen attacks were characterised by their deliberate targeting of high-security installations and their psychological impact on the Indian security apparatus. However, the frequency of these attacks declined after 2003 due to evolving counterinsurgency strategies, changes in the operational environment, and shifting regional dynamics, including the Composite Peace Process and the impact of the American–Afghan war. Despite their decline, these attacks left a lasting imprint on the trajectory of the conflict by demonstrating the adaptability of militant groups (Adewunmi, 2016).

The failure of successive peace initiatives between India and Pakistan, despite several confidence-building measures, generated widespread disillusionment among Kashmiris. This frustration

intensified during the mass protests of 2008 and 2010, which revealed a growing disconnect between evolving political expressions and the security forces' continued reliance on coercive counterinsurgency methods. Although political dissent increasingly adopted non-violent forms, security responses remained disproportionately harsh, particularly during episodes of mass protest and stone pelting. The 2010 unrest popularised stone throwing as a form of resistance and exposed the inadequate preparedness of security forces to manage civilian demonstrations. Ironically, these measures contributed to the radicalisation and recruitment of disaffected youth into militant ranks, underscoring the need for adaptive counterinsurgency strategies (Shah, 2020).

Between 2014 and 2019, Kashmir witnessed the emergence of a new phase of militancy marked by intensified radicalisation and the widespread use of social media. Internet penetration increased dramatically, with social media usage rising from approximately 25 per cent in 2010 to nearly 70 per cent by 2015. Digital platforms facilitated the dissemination of radical ideologies and anti-India propaganda, playing a crucial role in mobilising young recruits. Security forces faced unprecedented challenges in managing online radicalisation and controlling digitally coordinated protests. This period thus represented a critical transformation in the nature and dynamics of militancy in Kashmir (Shivamurthy, 2021).

Government's Post-2019 Security and Counterterrorism Strategies in Kashmir

Following the constitutional changes of 2019, the Government of India initiated a comprehensive set of measures to curb militancy and restore stability in Jammu and Kashmir. These strategies addressed multiple dimensions of the conflict, ranging from counterterrorism operations to outreach initiatives designed to engage local communities. The overarching objective was to create a secure environment conducive to political normalisation and socio-economic development.

India adopted a multi-layered counterinsurgency framework that involved the deployment of the Indian Army, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), and the Jammu and Kashmir Police. Operations such as *Operation Rakshak* and *Operation All Out* focused on intelligence-driven cordon-and-search missions, targeted encounters, and dismantling militant networks (Singh, 2017). Border fencing along sensitive stretches of the Line of Control (LoC) was strengthened to prevent infiltration, while surveillance mechanisms—including communication monitoring and financial tracking—enhanced intelligence collection (PTI, 2023).

Legislative instruments such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and the Public Safety Act (PSA) continued to provide extraordinary powers to security forces to counter militancy (Ganai, 2021). Simultaneously, diplomatic efforts sought to address cross-border terrorism through sustained international engagement.

A major institutional intervention involved the banning of separatist organisations such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which were accused of promoting secessionism and facilitating militant recruitment (Ahmad, 2019). Following the Pulwama attack, the Ministry of Home Affairs declared JeI an unlawful organisation under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, citing its alleged links with militant networks and extremist propaganda (Masood, 2019).

Externally, India adopted a more assertive posture, exemplified by the Balakot airstrike of February 2019. This operation signalled India's willingness to conduct cross-border counterterrorism actions and served as a strategic deterrent. The strike reshaped regional security calculations and conveyed a strong message to militant sponsors and international observers alike (Chellaney, 2020).

Domestically, stringent measures were introduced to curb stone pelting and mass mobilisation. The application of the PSA enabled preventive detention of individuals involved in violent protests. The policy of withholding the bodies of slain militants aimed to prevent their glorification and disrupt recruitment networks, although it raised humanitarian and ethical concerns (Wani, 2023).

Social media regulation formed another crucial pillar of counter-radicalisation. Government agencies implemented content monitoring, temporary platform suspensions during security crises, cybersecurity operations, and counter-narrative campaigns to counter extremist propaganda (Shivamurthy, 2021).

In November 2021, the Jammu and Kashmir government established the State Investigation Agency (SIA) to strengthen counterterrorism investigations. Modeled on the National Investigation Agency, the SIA was mandated to investigate terrorism-related offences, including financing, propaganda, and arms trafficking, thereby enhancing institutional capacity for long-term security management (Iqbal, 2022).

Parallel to coercive strategies, the government emphasised developmental and outreach initiatives to reduce alienation. Programmes such as Udaan, Nai Manzil, and USTTAD sought to improve education, skills, and employment opportunities. The Indian Army's *Operation Sadhbhavana* and the "Winning Hearts and Minds" (WHAM) strategy expanded significantly, focusing on youth

engagement, scholarships, healthcare, and national integration tours (Shivamurthy, 2021).

In 2021, the Army launched *Mission Pehal* to facilitate direct dialogue between officers and Kashmiri youth, providing a platform for expressing grievances and rebuilding trust. These initiatives reportedly contributed to a decline in stone-pelting incidents, indicating the potential effectiveness of combined security and outreach approaches (Trali, 2021).

In conclusion, the post-2019 period reflects a comprehensive and multidimensional strategy adopted by the Government of India to counter militancy in Kashmir. By integrating hard security measures with institutional reforms, diplomatic signalling, developmental policies, and community outreach, the state has attempted to stabilise the region and mitigate long-standing patterns of violence. While these efforts have contributed to a decline in militant activity, their long-term success will depend on sustained political engagement, protection of civil liberties, and inclusive governance capable of addressing the deeper roots of alienation and conflict.

Impact of Article 370 Abrogation on Militancy: Trends and Analysis Since 2019

The abrogation of Article 370 has profoundly impacted Kashmir's security landscape, leading to significant improvements in law and order and a substantial reduction in militancy-related incidents. This constitutional change has notably enhanced public safety in the region. Prior to the revocation of Article 370, between 2016 and 2019, a total of 4,894 law and order incidents were recorded. Following the abrogation, this figure declined sharply to 804, representing a reduction of more than 80 per cent (Gupta, 2022). This decline contributed to the emergence of a more peaceful public atmosphere and improved maintenance of public order.

Similarly, the frequency of hartals and bandh calls decreased significantly after the abrogation. The number of such incidents fell from 302 before August 2019 to only 31 thereafter, indicating a reduction of nearly 90 per cent (Yousuf, 2023). In 2018 alone, fifty-two organised bandh and hartal incidents were reported, whereas by 2023 this number had declined to zero. This improvement can largely be attributed to enhanced security arrangements and intensified counterterrorism efforts following the abrogation, which enabled more effective deployment of central security forces and granted them expanded operational authority to combat insurgency and maintain law and order (Mahapatra, 2023).

Since 2018, at least 1,050 militants and 319 security personnel have

been killed in 791 militancy-related incidents in Jammu and Kashmir, according to data released by the Ministry of Home Affairs. These incidents included 626 armed encounters (Radhakrishnan, Sharma and Ganapathy, 2023). Annual militancy-related incidents were recorded as 228 in 2018, 153 in 2019, 126 in 2020, 129 in 2021, 125 in 2022, and only 30 up to 31 July 2023. The highest number of militant deaths occurred in 2018, with 257 militants killed, followed by 221 in 2020, 187 in 2022, 180 in 2021, 157 in 2019, and 50 up to July 2023. Security force fatalities also declined steadily over this period. Ninety personnel were killed in 2018, eighty in 2019, sixty-three in 2020, forty-two in 2021, thirty-two in 2022, and only eleven by mid-2023, indicating a sharp reduction in casualties among security forces. Additionally, 184 civilians were killed in militant-initiated incidents during this period, with annual civilian deaths recorded as forty in 2018, thirty-nine in 2019, thirty-two in 2020, thirty-seven in 2021, twenty-six in 2022, and ten in 2023 (Wani, 2023).

Between 5 August 2016 and 5 August 2019, there were reports of 124 civilian fatalities caused by police and security forces during protests and stone-pelting incidents. Notably, no comparable fatalities have been reported in Kashmir after the revocation of Article 370, reflecting a significant decline in protest-related violence in the post-abrogation period. Furthermore, militant recruitment has declined substantially, with annual figures now in the double digits (Masjid, 2023).

Trends in Stone-Pelting: Pre- and Post-Abrogation of Article 370

Stone pelting in Kashmir may be interpreted as a form of popular resistance in which sections of the local population engage in the act of hurling stones at Indian security forces and the Jammu and Kashmir Police. These forces are frequently deployed to maintain public order and crowd control, particularly during periods of heightened tension associated with militant and separatist activity. The indigenous term for this practice is *"Kanni Jung"*, which may be translated as "stone warfare". Individuals involved in stone pelting are commonly referred to as *"Sangbaaz"* or *"Pathraw Players"* (Pathak, 2017).

The origins of stone pelting in Kashmir can be traced back to 1931, which marked the beginning of organised political mobilisation in the region. During this period, young Kashmiri Muslims reportedly hurled stones at police personnel stationed in Srinagar as an expression of political protest. However, stone pelting emerged as a widespread and sustained form of resistance only with the expansion of insurgency and separatist mobilisation, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008

Kashmir protests (Parthasarathy, 2016). This phase represented a significant tactical shift within the separatist movement, as confrontations moved away from direct armed engagements towards the adoption of mass stone throwing as a method of resistance.

After 2008, incidents of stone pelting occurred with increasing regularity across the Kashmir Valley. Prominent episodes were recorded during the 2010 Kashmir unrest and the 2016–2017 cycle of protests, with intermittent outbreaks continuing in the intervening years (Pathak, 2017). During this period, stone pelting became a central symbol of street-level resistance and posed a persistent challenge to law enforcement agencies.

Following the abrogation of Article 370, however, a drastic decline in stone-pelting incidents has been observed. According to data from the Ministry of Home Affairs, the number of stone-pelting incidents fell from 1,767 in 2018 to zero by 2023. This sharp decline can be attributed to multiple factors, including the banning of Jamaat-e-Islami, the increased deployment of security forces, and the implementation of stringent law enforcement measures. The deterrent effect of heightened surveillance and targeted disruption of networks supporting stone pelters further contributed to this outcome. Central investigative agencies, particularly the National Investigation Agency (NIA), played a crucial role in dismantling organisational and financial networks associated with street mobilisation, leading to the near-elimination of organised stone-pelting activity in the post-abrogation period (Tiwari, 2023).

Navigating the Landscape: Challenges in Countering Militancy Post-2019

Kashmir is currently experiencing a phase of relative stability and what may be described as "negative peace", attributable to several key factors. The banning of Jamaat-e-Islami, proactive actions by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), strengthened counterterrorism measures, enhanced border surveillance, and a reduction in cross-border infiltration along the Line of Control (LoC) have all contributed to this period of relative calm. However, despite these developments, a series of targeted killings in recent months indicates that underlying tensions and security challenges persist.

Prior to the revocation of Article 370, several militant organisations actively disseminated anti-India propaganda with the objective of radicalising individuals and recruiting new members. These groups encouraged their supporters to organise protests and obstruct counterterrorism operations. With the rapid expansion of digital connectivity, recruitment efforts increasingly shifted to online

platforms, where images and information about new recruits were publicly circulated. The growing use of social media in Kashmir enabled militant propaganda to reach a broader audience, including educated youth, by normalising violence and portraying militants in a sympathetic light. However, this strategy eventually proved counterproductive. In response to the rising influence of online propaganda, Indian security agencies intensified surveillance and crackdown operations against extremist networks.

Following the abrogation of Article 370, militant organisations significantly altered their online strategies. Whereas earlier they openly claimed responsibility for attacks and circulated photographs, thereby exposing themselves to identification risks, they now rely on anonymity to protect their cadres and operational networks (Kapur, 2022). Militancy in Kashmir has evolved into what is commonly described as "hybrid militancy". Hybrid militants maintain affiliations with militant organisations and receive training in small arms, but continue to live normal civilian lives after carrying out targeted assassinations. This model allows them to evade detection and poses serious operational challenges for security agencies. These developments have also revived memories of the violence of the 1990s and contributed to renewed migration among sections of the Kashmiri Pandit community (Vohra, 2022).

The post-abrogation period has also witnessed a significant structural transformation in militant recruitment patterns. The proportion of foreign militants declined sharply from 77 per cent in 2016 to only 15 per cent in 2020, while the recruitment of local youth increased substantially. This shift reflects the emergence of new domestic militant formations and a greater reliance on indigenous networks. Recruitment among local youth has been driven largely by feelings of political exclusion, marginalisation, and resentment. Several new groups have emerged in this evolving landscape, including the United Liberation Front of Kashmir (ULFK), The Resistance Force (TRF), Kashmir Tigers, and the People's Anti-Fascist Force (PAFF). Indian security agencies maintain that established terrorist organisations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have rebranded themselves under new names in order to appear more secular and locally rooted. These groups increasingly project themselves as representatives of Kashmiri political aspirations, emphasising rights and identity rather than religious jihadist narratives (Stambumkadi, 2021).

Another emerging challenge has been the growing use of drones for illicit activities, including the smuggling of weapons, narcotics, and cash across the border. The threat posed by unmanned aerial

vehicles has increased considerably, raising serious concerns within the intelligence community about the possibility of future terrorist attacks involving drones. Reflecting this trend, arms recovery incidents rose from 90 in 2019 to 209 in 2022 (Pandya, 2023).

Although civilian killings have declined significantly since 2019, falling from forty-four in 2019 to twenty-nine by the end of 2022, a disturbing new pattern has emerged in the form of targeted assassinations of minority community members and migrant labourers. Groups that were rarely targeted in earlier phases of the conflict have now become vulnerable to militant violence. Between 2019 and 2022, more than nineteen non-local civilians were killed in targeted attacks in Kashmir (Zargar, 2023).

While insurgent activity had declined markedly in the Jammu region over the past decade and a half, a noticeable shift has occurred since mid-2021. According to security officials, sustained efforts are underway to revive militancy in Jammu. The region's mountainous terrain and dense forest cover provide favourable conditions for militant movement and concealment. Moreover, infiltration routes along the LoC in the Jammu sector continue to facilitate cross-border militant incursions (Ramachandran, 2023).

Since the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of the former state into two Union Territories, the conflict geography of Jammu and Kashmir has undergone a significant transformation. The Pir Panjal region, encompassing the districts of Rajouri, Poonch and parts of Reasi, has emerged as a new hotspot of militant activity. While the Kashmir Valley has witnessed a decline in violence and local recruitment, Jammu—previously considered relatively peaceful—has experienced a steady escalation in attacks. Rajouri district, in particular, has suffered several high-profile and deadly assaults since 2019. In the Pir Panjal region alone, more than ten soldiers have lost their lives in the past two years. These developments underscore the evolving nature of the security challenge and highlight the need for a carefully calibrated, region-specific counterinsurgency strategy (Ali, 2023).

Conclusion

Kashmir's security landscape has undergone a profound transformation since the abrogation of Article 370. Incidents of stone pelting have virtually disappeared, and militant recruitment has declined to double-digit figures. The sharp rise in tourism and the restoration of everyday economic activity suggest the emergence of relative calm. Yet beneath this surface stability, deep-seated tensions continue to persist. The revival of militancy in the Pir Panjal region

and the targeted killings of minorities and migrant workers serve as stark reminders that peace in Kashmir remains fragile.Historical experience demonstrates that militancy in the region follows cyclical patterns. The period between 2010 and 2014 witnessed a similar decline in violence, only to be followed by the unprecedented upheaval of 2016. The current lull must therefore not be interpreted as the end of the conflict but rather as a critical opportunity to convert negative peace into sustainable positive peace.

Durable peace cannot be achieved through coercion alone. It requires reconciliation, inclusive dialogue, and meaningful political reform. A proactive strategy is essential—one that expands democratic space, strengthens deradicalisation programmes, and institutionalises conflict-resolution mechanisms such as a permanent peace commission. The early restoration of statehood is crucial for rebuilding political trust and restoring democratic legitimacy. Equally important is the sensitisation of security forces to human rights concerns, so that trust replaces fear in state–society relations.

Kashmir today stands at a historic crossroads. The present calm, though fragile, holds immense transformative potential. If nurtured through empathy, institutional reform, and courageous political engagement, it can pave the way towards a future in which peace is not merely imposed but genuinely embraced—a future where stability rests not only on the absence of violence but on the presence of justice, dignity, and hope.

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AIJAZ AHMED DAR obtained his PhD. in International Relations from the Central University of Kerala.
Email: aijazrehman11@gmail.com

The Scramble for Lithium Triangle: China's Hegemony in Latin America?

Dileep P Chandran

ABSTRACT

China's new hegemonic role in the Lithium Triangle – Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile – exposes its elusive strategies that create 'new dependency' in Latin America. China's resource politics in the lithium triangle offers a case study to understand the changing economic strategies of global power aspirants for securing political gains at the cost of the autonomy of dependent countries. China succeeded in shrinking the region into a mere exporter of minerals and importer of finished goods such as electric vehicles. This, in turn, made China dominant in the lithium and battery industries in a global race to secure renewable energy. The narrative tools of postcolonialism and Kumarappa's notion of predatory economy can be complemented by the old-fashioned theoretical frameworks of dependency and neocolonialism to expose China's hegemony, which deviates from Xi's proclamation of a win-win approach to the region.

Key words: *Latin America, New dependency, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, China, India*

New Dependency of Latin America

THE DEPENDENCY THEORY, as a reaction to the ethnocentric claims of the modernization thesis, emerged from studies of economic underdevelopment in Latin American societies. The proponents of the dependency approach to the study of underdevelopment in postcolonial societies questioned the popularised Western binary of tradition and modernity. The proponents of dependency theory

replaced individual societies with the historical, uneven relationship of exploitation as the basic unit of analysis in examining underdevelopment in Latin America (Friedmann & Wayne, 1977). Traditionally, this underdevelopment was caused by the peripheral position of Latin American countries. It was created through an uneven trade relationship in which raw materials were exported from the periphery to the core, and finished goods were imported from the core to the periphery. The new capitalist economic order and its new instruments like foreign aid, private investment, trade negotiations, and the emergence of an elite social class within underdeveloped societies, sustain this dependency (Perez Jr., 1990). The new dependency in Latin America involves both traditional imperialist modes of exploitation and new instruments of the neoliberal order within the international capitalist economic system. However, dependency theory alone cannot explain the new dependency created in Latin America, which is caught in new modes of extractive strategies. The changing nature of Latin American dependency and the means of hegemonic powers need to be comprehended to advance a new theoretical framework for explaining new dependency.

China's relations with Latin America since 1949 have been motivated by the former's political goal of 'anti-imperialism' and support for Third World Countries (Ratliff, 1972). 'Anti-imperialism' and 'revolution' were two broad themes that helped Chinese foreign envoys relate to their counterparts in Latin American countries (Ratliff, 1972). The end of the Cold War between the two 'superpowers' changed the nature of foreign interventions in Latin America. The vacuum created after the Cold War and the US's loss of hegemony in the region was a political opportunity for China and other aspirants to global power. With the disintegration of the USSR and the end of the perceived threat from left-wing regimes in Latin America, the US also changed its nature of relations with the region from 'geopolitics' to 'geoeconomics' (León-Manríquez, 2016). In this changing scenario, new global power aspirants such as Japan, the European Union, and China approached Latin American governments cautiously. Other Asian countries, such as India and South Korea, also began maintaining closer relations with the region (Wintgens, 2023). Moreover, the US's hegemonic decline paved the way for China's economic incursion into Latin America (León-Manríquez, 2016). The US perceived a threat from China's presence in the region amidhe changing scenario (Hakim, 2006). Anti-US propaganda in most Latin American countries also worsened relations between the US and Latin America (Hakim, 2006). At the same time, the economic relation between China and Latin America began to deepen. In sum, the changing geopolitics in the

post-cold war era witnessed the hegemonic attrition of the US in Latin American countries, which in turn helped China emerge as a new global power by filling the strategic lacuna in the region.

The end of the twentieth century witnessed an apparent rise in economic relations between China and Latin America. The rapid growth in China's economic engagement with Latin America and Caribbean began in 1990s (Jenkins, Peters, & Moreira, 2008). There was a twenty-six-fold growth in China-Latin America trade between 2000 and 2020 (Stevenson-Yang & Tugendhat, 2022). It was an outcome of China's prioritisation of bilateral and multilateral relations with developing countries in its external relations since 2009 (Yu, 2015). However, this was never free of political aspirations. China also considered these states as important allies in its self-projection as a global power (Yu, 2015). The search for natural resources is one of the major factors motivating China's strategic interests in Latin America (Yu, 2015). China began expanding its economic presence in developing countries with the launch of the 'going out' policy (Eichenauer, Fuchs, & Brückner, 2021).

The second decade of this century further witnessed more apparent political signals from China in its external relations with the region. Xi Jinping, after two months in office, made his first formal visit to Latin America in 2013. This marked the beginning of an era of intense political and strategic relations between China and the region. Xi promulgated a 'China-Latin America Community of common destiny' (Yu, 2015). Since then, China has stepped into the strategic space of Latin America, hitherto considered the 'US backyard.' He has visited the region thirteen times since 2013 (Ezrati, 2022). Former Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang, during his 2015 visit to Latin America, concluded an agreement on a twin-ocean rail with Brazil and assured assistance for Chile's Two Ocean Tunnel (Yu, 2015). Latin America is also a potential destination for China's Belt and Road Initiative (Myers, 2018). Beijing explicitly expressed that "Latin America is their natural extension of 21st century maritime silk road" (Farah & Babineau, 2019). Although China's official foreign policy towards Latin America is portrayed as apolitical and economic, public perception of Latin America among people in China is not primarily characterised by these claims (Shen, 2012). These economic relations helped China to receive political gains like switching recognition from Taiwan to China by Latin American countries (Nugent & Campell, 2023). China, in a policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean published on 24th November 2016, applauded the majority of countries in the region for subscribing to the one-China principle. In addition, these economic relations of China and Latin America also spilled over to military cooperation

later (Ezrati, 2022). These political and military relations between the global power aspirant, China, and developing countries in Latin America further intensified debate over the former's camouflaged intentions in its economic outreach to the region. The rapid growth of China's economic engagement in the region gave rise to political and scholarly debates over its implications for the international political order.

There are winners and losers in the trade relationship between China and Latin America, across countries and sectors (Jenkins, Peters, & Moreira, 2008). Nevertheless, China's rapidly increasing visibility in Latin America and the Caribbean received more suspicion than applause (LIN, 2015). Similarly, Latin America's reporting on China's engagements has not grown apace. Latin American media often lack the capacity and resources to cover foreign affairs and geopolitical repercussions of China's external relations (Stevenson-Yang & Tugendhat, 2022). These factors strengthened scepticism among China's adversaries regarding her strategic intentions in the region. They began closely observing China's gestures towards the region and speculated about its threats to the region and to the existing global political order.

Some scholars view the relationship between China and Latin America as complementary, whereas others view this complementarity as short-term (Cypher & Wilson, 2015). For those who perceive China's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean as complementary, it is biased western academia and media that spreads misinformation about China's benevolent outreach towards the region (Harris, 2015). For them, it was Communist China's mission to build a multilateral, postcapitalist world order by aligning with left-leaning developing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (Harris, 2015). On the other hand, some scholars argued that the Sino-Latin American relationship poses no threat to either Latin America or third party (Shixue, 2006). For them, it is merely part of the economic outreach of an economic power to developing countries. They applaud China's assistance in regional infrastructure development and envisage a mutually beneficial economic order.

Public opinion and scholarly views on China's relations with Latin America are contested. There are 'hard-liners' as well as 'soft-liners' in United States having contradictory views on China's role in Latin America (León-Manríquez, 2016). Some scholars argue that China's incursion and active role in Latin America helped the latter to free itself from US dependency (Legler, Turzi, & Tzili-Apango, 2018). However, unlike US hegemony in the Cold War era, China's dominance is not determined by ideological considerations, despite the emergence

of left-leaning leadership in some countries of the region. China's policy towards Latin America is also not discriminatory in favour of authoritarian regimes in the region (Brand, McEwen-Fial, & Muno, 2015). This departure from ideological blocs is a notable difference in China's dominance compared to that of the US and USSR. This does not mean that China's relations with Latin America are free of political or strategic consequences. Unlike USSR, China's political approach towards the region is characterised by 'opaqueness' (Farah & Babineau, 2019). This ambiguity regarding China's intentions also confused policymakers in the USA (Choo, 2009). However, China is yet to replace other dominant players in the region (Farah & Babineau, 2019). Today, Latin America witnesses a tripolar competition among the US, Russia, and China as a 'new normal' in the region (Farah & Yates, 2020). In short, the end of the Cold War was not the end of Latin America's dependency. China and other aspirants filled the vacuum left by the attrition of US dominance as a global power. However, the US did not completely withdraw from its strategically significant 'backyard.' The remarkable difference in the post-Cold war dependence of Latin America is its overtly economic nature, hidden political and strategic interest, and a complete departure from ideological binaries. The scramble for primary resources remains the primary objective of dominant players in the region. Although the nature of China's economic relations with the region is significantly different from those of the US and the erstwhile USSR, the question of whether China would create a new dependency in the region leads to debate over elusive means of power building in international politics in an era of contested neoliberalism.

There is a possibility that China's economic and strategic interests in Latin American countries could create a new form of dependency in the long run, despite the ambiguity surrounding China's covert political aspirations in the region. It is evident in the changing economic relation between two in the economic sphere itself. Most of the countries in Latin America registered a trade deficit with China (León-Manríquez, 2016). It created a 'fundamental imbalance' among them. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), trade, official lending, and infrastructure development assistance are important pillars of China-Latin American relations in recent years. Hence, the panorama of the rise and fall of China's economy would be reflected in Latin America. It was evident when official lending from China sharply declined since 2016 (Larrain & Zhang, 2023). It is also important to note that China's lending strategy is significantly different from the international financial institutions and other dominant external players. It acts as the 'lender of last resort' for countries with high default

rates. Moreover, it gives the highest priority to confidentiality clauses, which ensure repayment (Wintgens, 2023). Most loans have an inbuilt collateral mechanism in which the debtor's profits are credited to Beijing-corolled accounts (Wintgens, 2023). Some loans to Argentina by China Development Bank contain the clause of 'No Paris Club' (Wintgens, 2023). And some loans are backed even by natural resources in the region. These kinds of lending strategies and conditionalities are often accused of being 'debt trap diplomacy.' These issues in economic relations between China and Latin America raise questions about the political intentions behind the 'benevolent' outreach.

Latin American scholars pose critical questions about the impacts of deepening ties with China on the region, despite the concrete opportunities it provides. They raise the question of whether the growing dependence would compromise region's autonomy in decision-making. They ask how Latin America can ensure lasting ties with China without replacing one dependency with another (Magnotta, 2025). The Latin American political system, marked by a lack of institutional resilience, is yet to be prepared to negotiate with China on an equal footing. Apart from institutional incapacities and economic challenges, the region is also facing other critical issues arising from the extractive strategies of external players. For instance, in Colombia, mining of rare earth minerals results in a shift in river courses, spills toxic substances into rivers and the sea, leaches heavy metals and chemicals into drinking water, and threatens the existence of sensitive, biodiverse areas (McNeish, 2018). The extraction-induced violence on indigenous communities rarely drew the attention of international media and human rights organizations. However, there were instances in which the killing of environmentalists in Latin America was reported and condemned by some major international newspapers. For instance, Berta Carceres, an anti-mining human rights activist from Honduras, was killed in 2010 and sparked off discussions on events of murder and threat to community leaders opposing resource exploitation (Krain, Murdie, & Beard, 2023). There is lethal violence directed against social activists who fight for human rights and environmental rights in Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico (Albarracín & Wolff, 2024). The extractive industries in the region intensified conflicts over indigenous rights and disrupted the everyday lives of local communities (Bebbington & Bury, 2013). In essence, this new dependency resorted to new strategies of extraction grounded in elusive political interests. The post-hegemonic era also witnessed the emergence of new dependency in Latin America by new global power aspirants (Chandran, 2023). The scramble for the lithium triangle is a case study of the intricacies of structural changes in resource

politics in Latin America and their implications for new dependency.

The Scramble for Lithium Triangle

The 'lithium triangle' – spanning Latin American countries of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile – has around sixty per cent of the lithium reserves across the globe. The demand for the 'white gold' i.e., lithium, which is a vital mineral for manufacturing batteries increases manyfold in this decade. The huge lithium reserves in these three Andean states are critical to the global transition from fossil fuels to electrification. Let us look at the impacts of China's extractive strategy in these countries on their domestic economies and politics.

Chile produces around twenty-six per cent of world's lithium and holds largest reserve in its Atacama region. It is a leading producer of high-quality lithium from brines. Investments from foreign countries are flooding into the region and is expected to boom in the future as well. For instance, in Chile, US-based Albemarle is the dominant foreign investor (Vásquez, 2023). Chile's regulatory environment for the lithium industry remains uncertain despite the scramble for it intensifying. The country is also moving towards a state-owned lithium company. However, the issues of environmental impacts and the future of local community extraction remain unresolved. Government officials plan to approve only projects that use new technologies, such as Direct Lithium Extraction (DLE), in the future (Vásquez, 2023). However, DLE technology, which is water-intensive, remains untested at large scale. These regulatory, environmental, and technological uncertainties do not hinder the global scramble for lithium by countries like US, China, and Europe. Instead, they are involved in industry experimentation, unmindful of its consequences for local communities and the environment in the region. The 'lithium boom' in Chile's Atacama Desert affects the lives of the indigenous Lickanatay community, which is suffering from severe drought, ecological loss, and cultural disruption (EHN Curators, 2025). Dominant external players in the region, like China, have the least concerns about local labour, environmental regulations, local communities, domestic governments, and vulnerable sections of the population (Eliis, 2022). Water-reliant industries and mining companies in Chile entered into agreements with indigenous peoples and their institutions and provided jobs, scholarships, and infrastructure to build trust with local communities, despite protests from some residents (Horvath & Medina, 2019). This benevolent hegemony silenced the protest of indigenous people against the illegal and extra-legal extractions of a lithium from these regions. Some civil society movements in Chile and Argentina organized campaigns against the violations of rights

of indigenous people (Horvath & Medina, 2019). American policy maker Ellis (2022) argued that China had been using its economic and other levers to intimidate and silence its critics. Amnesty International challenged electric companies to develop ethical batteries and to strengthen their human rights practices (Horvath & Medina, 2019). Argentina, which has the largest reserves of lithium, is also facing similar issues.

Farmers, large salinas communities, and people involved in llama husbandry in Argentina fear that lithium extraction-induced water scarcity will affect their livelihoods (Horvath & Medina, 2019). Similarly, Bolivia, home to world's largest salt flat, continues to be a poor nation. The competition of nation-states to secure the vital minerals made Bolivia's declared goal of complete control over its own resources in vain.

In Argentina, currently the most productive country for lithium extraction in the region, the Chinese firm Ganfeng has majority ownership of the Cauchari-Olaroz lithium project. In addition, PRC-based Zijin mining spent $960 million to acquire Neo lithium, with its Tres Quebradas project in Cajamarca province. In Chile, the Chinese firm Tianqi owns a $4.1 billion, 25% share of the SQM lithium project in the Atacama desert (Eliis, 2022, p. 3).

China is a significant trade factor to countries like Argentina and Chile among other countries in the region (Armony & Strauss , 2012). Those who are optimistic about China's growing influence in Latin America overlook issues such as China's competition in manufacturing industries and the increasing specialisation of the latter in primary products (Jenkins, 2010). Gandhian economist Kumarappa's notion of a predatory economy helps explain the nature of the exploitative relationship between China and its new dependents in Latin America. Predatory economy is an economic system in which "a unit in nature benefits without conferring corresponding advantage to another unit" (Kumarappa, 1948). China's extractive strategy is a replica of such an exploitative model in the region. The role of China in the Lithium triangle and its economic engagements in these countries are a good example of the specific nature of the new hegemony over Latin America.

China's Hegemony in Lithium Triangle

There is high concentration of Chinese investments in extractive industries in Latin America (LIN, 2015). Chinese firms manage around two-thirds of global lithium processing and refining (Joseph, 2023). As a global power, China needs to secure lithium from all possible sources to monopolise the lithium battery industry. That is why some

observers assert that Chinese presence in Latin America is part of their external strategy to secure critical resources (LIN, 2015). Chinese investments in the region are also characterised by the decisive role of state-owned enterprises and strategic interests vis-à-vis resource-earning activities (LIN, 2015). This led them to prefer countries with political instability and a weaker rule of law. American policymaker Ellis (2022) accused China of being an 'incubator of authoritarian populism' in the region. China has geopolitical considerations, especially to secure natural resources, in its initiatives like technology transfer to Latin America (Kirrcherr & Matthews, 2018). This means that China's search for lithium is not independent of other covert political and strategical considerations.

Scholars and policymakers are divided over perceptions of China's soft power in Latin America. Latin American media also have mixed views on China's economic engagement (Eichenauer, Fuchs, & Brückner, 2021). However, there are some visible trends in China's economic relations with the region, compounded by political aspirations. China's urge for securing a monopoly over lithium reserves is not conforming to its declared goal of 'win-win situation' as envisaged in 2016 policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean vis-à-vis energy and resource cooperation. The apparent discrepancies between the declared policy goals and economic strategies suggest suspicions about the emergence of China's new hegemony in the region.

China's resource-securitization strategy reveals the emergence of new colonialism in the region. It is visible in the growing export of lithium from the region, on the one hand, and the dominance in importing electric batteries from China, on the other. There is significant growth in the trade of Chinese electric vehicles to countries in Latin America (Ugarteche, Le´on, & García, 2023). China also dominates, in some cases monopolises, financial assistance to Latin American countries in the renewable energy sector (Ugarteche, Le´on, & García, 2023). Latin America is also witnessing a shift towards primary or raw commodities vis-à-vis exports to China. This 're-primarization' leaves behind environmental footprints (Ray, 2017). There is a causal relationship between China's demand for exports and economic growth of countries in Latin America (Vianna, 2016). China's economic stability invariably determines the region's growth trajectory. China uses new strategies, such as investments in critical industries, alongside traditional means of hegemony, like shrinking dependent economies into exporters of primary resources and recipients of finished goods. The economic trajectory of the region is now invariably controlled by the new dominant power, which shows the tinges of a new dependency

of the region.

Two of world's largest lithium mining companies are from China – Ganfeng and Tiangi. Ganfeng operates in Argentina and supplies batteries to Tesla. Tiangi owns a significant stake in SQM, a Chilean company. The Luis Arce government in Bolivia signed a $1 billion agreement with the Chinese firms CATL, BRUNP, and CMOC (CBC) and the Bolivian state company Yacimientos de Litio Bolivianos (YLB) to explore lithium deposits in the country (Joseph, 2023). It also secures a significant share of the minerals from Argentina and Chile. Oppositions to the legality and consequences of the contract have been raised by civic communities in Bolivia. People are also raising concerns about whether the internationalization of lithium extraction would benefit the country. Opposition called it 'denationalization.' Opposition leaders and civil society movements demanded that the terms of the agreement be made public. For states in the lithium triangle, the project of internationalizing the lithium market and agreements with foreign extraction firms are also questions of sovereignty. The political perspectives from the countries in the Lithium Triangle towards China's dominance in the lithium industry began to reveal their hidden political and strategic means.

China is not the only global power aspirant with this new strategy of resource politics in the region. Countries like India are also in a race to secure lithium resources in the region to reduce their dependence on China for them. It eyes lithium reserves in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. India has accelerated its efforts to reach agreements with Argentina since 2019. India signed trade agreements and MoUs with Argentina for bilateral cooperation in the field of mineral resources. India's Khanij Bidesh India Limited (KABIL) signed an agreement with CAMYEN SE, a state-owned enterprise of Catamarca province, Argentina, in 2024 to secure a resilient, diversified supply chain for critical and strategic minerals for Indian industries. India also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Mineral Exploration and Consultancy Limited (MECL), a public sector undertaking of Catamarca province, for deeper collaboration in the extraction of critical minerals. The country is also making similar engagements with Bolivia and Chile in this race to secure lithium reserves. However, China is far ahead of other countries in this race. China also emerged as an important lender for development projects in these countries. India aspires to challenge China's hegemony in the region and to create a conducive environment for multilateralism in the region. India's Union Defence Minister indirectly cited China for its attempts in aggressive mineral diplomacy: "While [the] scramble for resources for economic reasons has had a long history, their

weaponisation by some nations for strategic reasons is a comparatively new phenomenon" (Sharma, 2024). Moreover, India needs to strengthen its strategic partnership with the region to secure rare earth materials and diversify its supply chain.

Predatory Economies and Destructive Relations

'Global China' is an important determinant in understanding the changing nature of globalization and its economic and political implications for new dependents. China's resource politics in the lithium triangle is an apparent case study for understanding the changing economic strategies of global power aspirants. China succeeded in shrinking the region into mere exporters of minerals and importers of finished goods, such as electric vehicles, from Latin America. This, in turn, made China dominant in the lithium and battery industries in a global race to secure renewable energy. This resource politics has implications for the region's economic stability and affects political and strategic autonomy. The new scramble for lithium is also leaving severe environmental footprints. The new dependency of the Latin American region is not a complete departure from the traditional means of exploitation by the region's hegemonic power. China successfully combined the traditional instruments of hegemony with neo-liberal strategies. Although China ideologically aligned with Latin American countries in rebuilding their economies in a post-hegemonic era, its global power aspirations motivated it to resort to new covert strategies of exploitation in the region. It tried to monopolise lithium extractive industries, lend money to high defaulting states with confidential clauses and on security of natural resources, ignored ecological and human rights concerns, and suppressed the opposition from indigenous communities. There is an apparent deviation from Xi's declared policy of 'win-win situation' and exploitative strategies of Chinese companies in lithium mining sector in the region. Debt trap diplomacy and unfulfilled commitments opened new avenues of dependency in the post-hegemonic era. Hence, the concerns regarding the formation of new dependencies following the US's attrition in Latin America are valid.

The scramble for the lithium triangle proved that the lightest metal can cause the heaviest damage in politics – a new era of dependency. However, the decade-old theoretical tools, such as dependency theories and other neocolonial approaches, are not sufficient to explain the new strategies that combine old resource politics with the elusive political strategies induced by the neoliberal agenda in Latin America. Issues like loss of human lives, ecological damage, discourses on indigenous rights, and sufferings in everyday lives demand new

narrative frameworks to understand and explain the condition of new dependency in Latin America. The theoretical ambiguity of the dependency perspective in addressing these socio-political issues can be resolved through the narrative tools of postcolonialism (Chandran & Lekshmanan, 2023). Although there is a need for a combination of theoretical tools to explain China's hegemony and Latin America's new dependency, Kumarappa's notion of a predatory economy can expose the nature of the relationship between the new hegemonic power and the region's dependents. The destructive nature of economic relations between unequal states in international politics can be explained by applying this conceptual framework to the relationship between state economies. Violence is inherent in the structure and relations of predatory economies. Moreover, the era of contested neo-liberalism demands new theoretical and conceptual frameworks to understand and explain hegemony and new dependency in Latin America. India can emulate a model economy of gregation for its future relations with Latin America, in which India can secure rare earth minerals without compromising the autonomy of countries in the region.

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DILEEP P. CHANDRAN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Panampilly Memorial Government College, Chalakudy, Thrissur District, affiliated to the University of Calicut, Kerala. Email: dileeppchandran9654@gmail.com

Turban or *Topi*: A Study of Gandhi's Casteless Khadi in Kathiyawad

Nidhi J. Makwana

ABSTRACT

The paper proposes studying the relationship between clothing and identity, particularly between headgear and caste identity in Kathiyawad, Gujarat. Gandhi's khadi left a remarkable impact on fashion and visual communication in India and abroad, becoming a symbol of the nationalist agenda. This paper explores and discusses the historical role of Gandhi topi in the social movement where caste-based headdresses were replaced with casteless topi. Fashion in social movements stands against clothing that marginalises groups based on hierarchical distinctions; Gandhi's khadi became a political symbol against colonialism, as did the feminist movement, which challenged stereotypes about gender-based dress. The paper concludes that the Khadi and Gandhi topi replaced Kathiyawad's caste-based headdress with the casteless Gandhi topi.

Key words: *Gandhi, khadi, topi, headdress, social movement*

Introduction

INDIA HAS LONG been a multicultural and multilingual nation celebrated for its unity in diversity. It has preserved a rich heritage of unique artefacts, art, handlooms, embroideries, and spices for centuries, influenced by numerous external forces that have contributed to a diverse and prosperous society. Despite this unity in diversity, societal vices such as caste pride, discrimination, and untouchability persist. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi recognised the need to confront both the British Empire and the vices within his society. He undertook significant initiatives for the abolition of caste, from the Kochrab Ashram and the Poona Pact to the Vaikom Satyagraha, fighting personally and publicly for this cause. He edited

four newspapers, wrote several books, and replied to nearly every letter he received during his lifetime; he was an exceptional communicator. However, his communication transcended verbal or linguistic forms, encompassing symbols and signs. Each of these symbols carries a deeper connotation. This paper examines one such symbol, the Gandhi topi, which ultimately became a visual representation of nationalist politics and, in some cases, a casteless headdress.

Gandhi's fashion evolved significantly over the years. While studying in London, he wore a European cap, tie, and coat; however, in South Africa, he started with a tie, coat, and turban before gradually transitioning to a shirt and trousers. Upon his return to India in January 1915, Gandhi intentionally exchanged his pants and shirts for a Kathiyawadi peasant dress (Tarlo 1996, pp. 83-92). In 1920, Gandhi exchanged his Kathiyawadi turban for the Gandhi topi, which he wore for a year or two. Gandhi's khadi and fashion redefined Indian attire, embodying nationalism through visual communication. Therefore, the relationship between dress and people is significant as a symbol of self- and collective identity, conveying essential information about culture, class, and caste (Flugel 1950).

Roland Barthes and Lisa Trivedi explore the relationship between dress and individuals, analysing clothing as a socio-political symbol. In his work, Barthes suggests that activist groups employ fashion as a symbolic tool (Barthes 2006). Historically, fashion within social movements has opposed clothing that marginalises groups based on hierarchical distinctions. Revolutionaries adopted red, black, and white costumes and ankle-length trousers during the French Revolution, reflecting their working-class status. Aristocrats were easily identifiable by their attire during the revolution (Harris 1981). Furthermore, the feminist movement of the 1960s rejected the restrictions and objectification associated with gender-based fashion in favour of styles that promote empowerment, performativity, and self-expression (Crane 1999). Similarly, Gandhi's khadi served as a political and social symbol of resistance against an oppressive state and administration.

A substantial body of literature exists on Gandhi's khadi, commencing with its emergence as a political symbol and a tool for the Indian independence movement. For instance, Rahul Ramagundam's work on Gandhi's khadi explores its socio-political and socio-economic dimensions, as well as its impact on rural development and self-reliance (Ramagundam 2008). Similarly, Lisa Trivedi's work explores khadi as an ideological pivot for an illiterate South Asian society, providing a visual means of communication

(Trivedi 2007). Emma Tarlo's book explores Gandhi's fashion, from his childhood in Kathiyawad to his time as a European gentleman, culminating in the half-dressed Gandhi known to all (Tarlo 1996). Gandhi observes in Satyagraha in South Africa that he was asked to remove his turban in the Durban courtroom; he subsequently left the courtroom and wrote a note about fashion-based discrimination for the city's newspaper, the *Natal Mercury* (Gandhi and Desai 1995). Gandhi's personal and political experiences with clothing and discrimination led him to embrace the Khadi movement as a crucial element of the Independence movement.

This paper explores the role of Gandhi's khadi topi as a casteless element in Kathiyawad, a region in western India comprising 193 princely states, each distinguished by its unique dialect, attire, and cultural identity. Consequently, considerable importance was placed on a visual communication medium that enabled straightforward interpretation of an individual's area and caste identities. Notably, this region boasted a rich textile heritage, showcasing rural handicrafts, dyeing, and distinctive designs informed by caste, class, and locality. The community adopted the Gandhi topi during the Dandi March of 1930, symbolising castelessness and classlessness; it enabled people to transcend the authority of the princely states, unequal cultural norms, and British administration.

The paper examines Gandhi and the significance of his topi in the social movement in Kathiyawad, viewing the topi as a symbol of banal nationalism, as Michael Billing suggests. This concept pertains to unnoticed practices that sustain national identity. Within Billing's framework, the Gandhi topi emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance and national belonging (Billig 2017). Similarly, Alexander Maxwell contends that nationalised clothing enforces imagined boundaries of citizenship; however, Maxwell's model FOP emphasises forbidden, obliged, and permitted clothing, which was not the case with the Gandhi topi (Maxwell 2010). Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his work, observes khadi as a political language embodying moral purity (Chakrabarty 2001). Clothing in Indian society is associated with caste (social position), class (economic position), and area (geographical position). The Gandhi topi emerged as a breaker of caste and geographical identities, establishing a single identity for one nation, and served as a political and social symbol of banal nationalism in united India through visual communication.

Clothing as an Identity

Humans are the only rational animals, and we do not know whether that is why they are the only ones who wear clothes. It could also be

because of the subjective consciousness of being different from the rest of the world's species. After all, rationality is a realisation of self-identity. One way people assert their identities is through the attire they wear. All societies have specific laws, and some are very strict about how men, women and children should dress. Notably, collective identities such as caste, age, race, class, religion, and political opinion affect an individual's clothing (Kuper 1973). These norms about clothing define people's identity, how they see themselves, and how they want others to see them.

If you ask someone to tell you about what they are wearing, wish they were wearing, or are glad they are not wearing, you will receive surprising insights into identity, body, and culture. The connection between dress and people is significant both individually and collectively. Recent studies in psychology even indicate that clothing can have psychological and behavioural consequences for wearers (Johnson et al. 2014). This medium creates cultural meaning beyond linguistic signs and their associated connotations. As a symbol of personal and collective identity, a dress is a visual means of communication. It conveys valuable information such as culture, class, and caste.

Hindu society assigns strict connotations to dresses according to caste. These dress codes have persisted since the Vedic period, propagated by Brahmin teachers (Gopal 1961). Several Vedic texts advocate clothing norms based on one's varna or caste; among these, Apastamba's Dharmasutra states that Brahmins wear cotton for upper shoulder garments, Kshatriyas wear hemp, and Vaishyas wear wool (Apastamba 2000). Even in the *Manusmriti*, it is noted that untouchables should wear the clothes of the dead (Arie 2021). As a result, Hindu society has remained strict about its clothing norms based on caste for millennia, leading to the visual representation of one's caste. Throughout history, their attire has been influenced by the continent's rulers, as Mughal fashion intersected with Hindu clothing, giving rise to new fashion trends (Agarwal 2025). However, caste-based clothing persisted in practice; B.R. Ambedkar writes that untouchables in the Maratha state wore black threads around their necks and wrists to visually mark their identity (Ambedkar 2014).

One's identity is shaped by culture; thus, the cultural connotation assigned to clothing is hierarchical. Clothing represents a social hierarchy and conveys information about an individual's position. As mentioned previously, the role of fashion in social movements such as the French Revolution demonstrated how clothing created symbolic distinctions between classes, social groups, and the public and private spheres, playing a crucial role in signaling significant political and

cultural changes (Gupta 2012). Additionally, in feminist movements, unisex clothing was introduced to counter the notion of fashion that reinforces affective gender stereotypes (Salah et al. 2023). Fashion in social activities emphasises clothing, marginalising groups based on hierarchical distinctions. Similarly, Gandhi's khadi played a vital role in dismantling India's hierarchical caste-based clothing system.

Gandhi's khadi

Gandhi's khadi is regarded as a symbol of nationalist fashion that opposed Imperialist Britain and addressed social issues in India, such as illiteracy, the caste system, and poverty. During the British Empire, clothing associated with caste evolved alongside English education, as the British fostered the concept of being civilised. A metropolitan urban middle class began to adopt coats and hats typical of English attire during British rule, which did not reflect their traditional caste dress code. English education, combined with the middle class's ties to British administration, gave rise to a new Indian class in appearance, yet in a British manner (Joshi 1994). Clothing became an essential part of this new India; Gandhi offered an alternative to the educated middle class's desire to embrace progressive fashion by introducing casteless khadi.

Gandhi employed various forms of nonverbal communication, including silence (maun), fasting (upavas), and clothing (Merriam 1975). Gandhi's khadi symbolises cultural self-identity, the historiography of the nationalist movement, and the significance of a constructive agenda; khadi played a vital role in building the social and political movement. Gandhi believed that one should wear minimal clothing, as the general climate of India necessitated very little clothing, rather than English attire or heavy coats. The economic rationale behind khadi was to oppose the British textile industry, which severely threatened India's once-flourishing cloth industry (Choudhury and Ghosh 2016). The introduction of machines systematically degraded India's craft-based cloth industry, resulting in economic hardship. Weavers operating from a pit crafted Gandhi's khadi from handspun cotton yarn, creating an ideological focal point that allowed individuals to affirm their political and personal beliefs, with clothing as a marker of their affiliations. Trivedi wrote that khadi was a visual medium of expression to disseminate. Nationalism in South Asia arose without the benefits of a common written language and rising literacy, as visual communication was the sole preserve of oral tradition and illiterate societies (Trivedi 2007).

Khadi became a symbol of resistance against the British Raj; there were three freedom struggles: the Swadeshi Movement, the Khilafat

Movement, and the Non-Cooperation Movement, which involved and influenced khadi (Gupta 2012). In the early stages of khadi during the 1920s, Gandhi promoted khadi among the metropolitan middle class and educated Indians, who adopted it as a visual medium to express their protest against British authority. Later, the non-cooperation movement was divided into five phases, with two phases playing an essential role in establishing khadi as a political symbol. The first phase occurred in the 1920s, when the Congress, the educated middle class, and urban areas embraced khadi. The second phase unfolded during the 1930s, when the masses connected with Gandhi and the freedom movement through khadi.

Additionally, the Dandi March played a pivotal role in spreading khadi, as news reporters worldwide captured photographs of the March and disseminated images of people wearing khadi to symbolise their nationalism (Sriram 2023). Billing also argues that banal national signifiers are frequently solidified through exposure to media and the repetition of images circulated through mass media (Billig 2017). In later phases, Gandhi established mobile khadi shops in rural areas, making khadi more accessible to the broader public. In 1921, Gandhi burnt a pile of foreign clothes in support of the Swadeshi movement; in response, in parts of India, people started burning their topis or caps made of foreign fabric (Ramagundam 2008). Gandhi refers to these responses as telepathic communication (Gonsalves 2010). In contrast, C.F. Andrews refers to this movement as violent, distorted, and unnatural, which evoked a racial feeling of selfish nationalism (Bakshi 1990).

The purpose of khadi was to boycott imported fabric and embrace Swadeshi materials and products. Gandhi believed this would alleviate poverty in India and provide employment for local communities. Another aspect of khadi was to unite people through visual communication. Nevertheless, many elements of the promising Gandhian fabric, khadi, could be improved. However, it fails to serve all, as thousands of people in India lack clothing or cannot afford it. In such situations, how can Khadi represent their freedom? Another limitation of khadi concerned the participation of women in the khadi movement. Kasturba Gandhi noted in her diary that khadi sarees were too heavy for household tasks (Adhar 2016). Secondly, white khadi became problematic for Indian women as it symbolised widowhood in Indian culture, and there was a scarcity of coloured khadi. In response, Gandhi redefined the colourless khadi as a symbol of purity and simplicity. Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggested that khadi is a political language of moral purity and signifies simplicity and voluntary poverty (Chakrabarty 2001). Gandhi sought to connect

women by establishing the Khadi Bhawan, where they worked to collect cotton, deliver self-spun yarn, and receive remuneration.

Thereafter, Gandhi, in his self-edited newspaper *Navjivan*, wrote on 'the use of khadi and khaddar' about the role of women in khadi, stating that as long as women in India do not participate equally with men in the affairs of the world and religious and political matters, India shall not be a rising star (CWMG 17, p.16). Furthermore, he argues that, as it is a peaceful struggle, women can surpass men by many miles. Gandhi also stated that our fight is not solely against the British Empire, but also against our divided India and the caste system (Torchia 1997). In this article, he discussed the uses and benefits of wearing khadi, as well as the newly developed khaddar saree for women by Sarladevi Choudhrani (Kumar 2011). Thus, Gandhi's khadi was seen as a fabric that anyone could wear, regardless of gender or caste. As Gandhi wrote in Young India in 1928, Khadi is not a threat. It is the breath of national life, like swaraj (CWMG 35, p. 478). Furthermore, Gandhi, in the Congress resolution on khadi, asserted that it would promote Hindu-Muslim unity and eliminate untouchability (CWMG 26, p.9).

Upon arriving on Indian shores in 1914, Gandhi advised Maganlal that specific attire should be worn in India, suggesting that men don a lungi, a shirt, and a topi (Gandhi 1996). Gandhi launched his Swadeshi khadi project in opposition to British polyester upon his return to India. However, the production of hand-spun khadi is insufficient to meet India's population's needs. Gradually, khadi gained popularity throughout India, and people incorporated the nationalist fabric with or alongside their traditional attire. Gandhi's birthplace, Kathiyawad, embraced the nationalist spirit through its traditional garments. In this context, examining the origin and emergence of the Gandhi topi is essential.

Gandhi Topi

Much literature explores Gandhi's semiotics, the study of signs and signifiers (Anish 2020). Gandhi, in the words of Bikhu Parekh, certainly created a dictionary of political philosophy in indigenous languages, literature, and culture (Parekh 1989). Among these visual representations, the Gandhi topi remained a profound symbol of Gandhian ideology in colonial and postcolonial India. It is a banal signifier of nationalism, transforming an abstract equaliser into a tangible and observable identity beyond linguistic references. There are ongoing debates about the origin of the Gandhi topi, and each discussion yields different narratives. For instance, Paul John states in his article that the topi was invented in 1908 in South Africa, where

Gandhi organised passive resistance against the Asiatic Registration Act and was imprisoned (John 2014). The prison cap resembled the present-day Gandhi topi. Meanwhile, renowned Gandhian and Gujarati writer Kaka Kalekar states that the topi is closer to the Kashmiri cap (Tarlo 1996).

Interestingly, some references note that Abadi Bano Begum first sewed and invented the Gandhi topi, popularly known as Bi Amma (Fredrick 2024). Rohit Ghosh narrates the origin of the Gandhi topi in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh, during the 1920s. Furthermore, Ghosh notes that the cap was made from gara, not khadi; gara is thicker and rougher than khadi. Gandhi attended a wedding near Rampur and subsequently decided to meet Nawab Sayyid Hamid Ali Khan Bahadur of the Rampur princely state (Ghosh 2021). However, wearing headgear before the Nawab's court was a custom; nonetheless, Gandhi discarded his Kathiyawadi headgear upon returning to India. Consequently, some of his companions visited the market to find suitable headwear for the meeting but could not find any suitable options. Thus, Ali Brothers Jauhar and Shauqat's mother, Abadi Bano, sewed the first Gandhi topi.

Eventually, the Gandhi topi became a significant part of fashion in Western India, particularly in Maharashtra and Gujarat. The anthropological report on Maharashtra explains and discusses the clothing of each caste; it notes that the Kirad, Kohli, and other castes incorporated the Gandhi topi into their attire (Singh and Bhanu 2004). Similarly, the western region of Gujarat also embraced the Gandhi topi as part of its fashion. Notably, the Gandhi topi is distinguished by its shape and fabric, which serve as an understood, shared, and unspoken element.

Kathiyawad and clothing

From an archaeological perspective, Gujarat is recognised as a Harappan settlement with intricate connections to the Indus Valley civilisation. Historically, Gujarat is renowned for its flourishing trade, commerce, architectural development, art, and textiles (Wilberforce-Bell 1980). Commerce and trade thrived and proved profitable due to excellent access to the Arabian Sea, which linked it to Southeast Asia, Persia, and European nations, primarily for the exchange of Indian spices and textiles (Chakravarti 2021). Kathiyawad is part of the modern state of Gujarat, located on the state's larger coastal belt. Notably, this region is agriculturally rich and yields a substantial cotton crop.

Kathiyawad is named after the Kathi community of the 7th and 8th centuries, suggesting a territory marked by communal unity. It is

a place where the caste system is firmly entrenched and rigid in shaping society. The community has specific connotations for dresses associated with castes and regions. The area was divided into 193 princely states; each had its dialect, language, and attire. These states of Kathiyawad were geographically separated into four parts: Zalawad, Halar, Sorath, and Gohilwad (Wilberforce-Bell 1980). Numerous castes populated Kathiyawad in these four regions, including Jethwas, Walas, Ahirs, Rabari, Mer, Bhil, Koli, and Memon.

It is important to note that clothing in Kathiyawad depended on an individual's caste class. The upper class in these princely states was well-dressed, and their garments were made from various materials such as wool, cotton, and silk. The painting, printing, and colouring techniques showcased these rich and artistic materials. Other classes of society used to wear dhotis, dupattas, and turbans; all of these were unstitched in the past. Women generally wore sarees, chadars, and dresses, which were equally relaxed and comfortable as a dhoti, to counter the hot climate of India (Ranavaade 2024). The women's clothing featured intricate patterns with various styles and materials. Each region was renowned for its artistic craftsmanship in apparel, including tie-dyed garments known as *bandhani* and striped designs called *leheriya*. An individual donning a *bandhani* as their attire indicates their regional identity, such as Halari or Jamnagari (Acharya and Samani 2017). The design and colours of clothing often indicate one's caste. For instance, the Ahir community can be recognised by the Peran and Rabari communities by their Kediyu attire.

Turban or Topi

In the Vedas, a turban is described as an unstitched garment used to cover the head. In Indian culture, the turban is significant for identity, modesty, and honour. For centuries in South Asia, the higher classes and elites wore the turban exclusively (Cohen 2007). Traditionally, men have worn turbans, while women have covered their heads with a long scarf known as a *chunni*, *dupatta*, or *ghoonghat*. A turban or pagri is a headdress worn by men. It signifies the wearer's social status, religion, ethnicity, and, in some instances, a profession, as suggested by the material's type of fabric, colour or design, length, and shape (Legrand 2012). Headdresses held particular significance in Kathiyawadi culture, much as turbans do. Numerous literary references to pagri exist in paintings, folk songs, and proverbs (ibid). Several works of folklore literature elucidate significant details about the headdress for men in Kathiyawad, where the turban was more closely tied to a person's caste, region, and class. Women wore the chadar as their headdress, which also varied in colour, style, and

pattern by caste region.

This region possesses numerous anthropological and archaeological documents, as well as Barot's traditional genealogical records. It is also referenced in Persian trade and shipment documents. Known for its unique folklore, much oral literature recounts Kathiyawad's diverse dresses. Within this oral tradition, Charani sahitya poet and songwriter Pingalsingh Gadhavi (1914-1998) wrote a poem that describes the types, patterns, and colours of Kathiyawadi turbans and how they convey an important message about each wearer's identity (*Sangeet Natak Akademi* 2011). Since the poem is written in Gujarati, this paper describes it in English. The poet makes two distinctions based on caste and regional identity to narrate the turbans of Kathiyawad; Gadhavi elaborates on how each of these turbans differs through linguistic narration. A person from Halari (Jamnagar), a part of Sorath (Junagadh), can be identified by his long pagri.

The area-based pagri discussed in Gadhavi's poem are Morbi, Gondal, Jamnagar, Baradi, Bardo, Sorath, Gir, Gohilwad, Junagadh, and Zalawad; for the convenience of the readers, the names of these areas are presented according to the current district division. Morbi's pagri is a circular, twisted cloth worn overhead, and its surface can hold a pitcher. The Gondal turban partially covers the forehead, resembling a bird's beak or nabla symbol. The Jamnagar turban is a tapered cylindrical headdress made of five-colour cloth, while the nearby area's Jodiya turban is meticulously folded from multiple pleats. The larger area of Zalawad features a knotted pagri made of polka-dot fabric. The area near Junagadh, Sorath's headdress is a traditionally shaped turban, a loose turban requiring no specific artistic talent. Gir's headwear consists of a thick white wool cap designed to combat the weather in the land of Asiatic lions. The state governed by the Gohil community near Bhavnagar, known as Gohilwad, has an oval-shaped turban worn at a slant over the head. The Kathiyawadi pagri is cylindrically knotted in colourful fabrics adorned with artefacts.

The poet narrates that the headdresses of the Rajput, Kathi, Mer, Ahir, Bharwad, Charan, Rabari, Brahman, Sadhu, Vaniya-Vepari, and even Meman communities are significant to one's identity. Bharwad wear a wine-coloured turban within the shepherd communities, while Rabari don a deep-coloured turban with a knot. The Soni community, known for selling gold and jewellery, wears a thick turban covering one ear to the other. The Muslim ruler of the Junagadh community, Batti, is adorned with a green turban made from serpentine-twisted cloth. The warrior community, the Sipahi, wears a turban with a long tail called a Safo. The Sufi Muslim saints, Fakir and Mujawar, wear

green turbans with short tails.

Gadhavi provides a detailed account of Kathiyawadi pagris, highlighting their association with caste and regional identities. Additionally, it illustrates the significance of headdresses within the caste system. These visual representations undeniably evoke a sense of belonging to both caste and the princely state, yet they also marginalise individuals based on their visual vocation (Tomar 2019). A hierarchical structure based on clothing can create divisions within society. An individual's treatment is not only a reflection of their subjective self but also of the objective group to which they belong.

Kathiayawad faced numerous economic hardships during the British Raj. It was part of the Gaikwar of Baroda and later became a part of the Bombay Presidency in 1882. Several factors contributed to these hardships. Firstly, the growing prominence of British-manufactured goods led to a decline in the Indian craft industries, as this region relied heavily on its cotton and textile sectors. The princely states had no trading agreements with the East India Company, resulting in an open and oppressive market; the conflict between the princely states and the British negatively impacted the region's development (Jhala 2019). It is important to note that starvation and poverty were also caused by unmanageable taxes imposed by the British Raj and Princely states. Despite the high taxes and oppressive rule, the Kathiyawad region during the colonial period often faced drought and farming-related issues, contributing to the high poverty rate.

Literacy in the region became accessible to all after Independence; previously, much of Kathiyawad's population remained illiterate. Consequently, the literature of this region will remain in oral form until Zaverchand Meghani compiles it in written form (Kapadia 2022). The rise of literacy in this region began with the establishment of Raj Kumar College in Rajkot in 1870, which became an educational institution for the upper class and the Princely states. Additionally, the progressive Princely state of Gondal established a school, library, and public sector during 1930-33; this development in Gondal indicates governance in a true sense. The subsequent literacy phase in Kathiyawad was based on Ashramshalas and Buniyadi education, an educational concept proposed by Gandhi. Therefore, according to Trivedi's argument, visual communication plays a pivotal role in the rise of nationalism in an illiterate society. Similarly, Billing argues that a banal signifier such as the Gandhi topi served as a subtle yet powerful shift in public semiotics through daily repetition; this slight shift in nationalised clothing not only operates during the exceptional moment of revolution but also accompanies the changing hearts and minds of

the people.

The oppression of the British Raj was similar across colonies, whether in Bengal, Gujarat, Kerala, Kashmir, or South Africa. Similarly, Kathiyawad faced hardships akin to those of the Raj and the princely states; the population was divided along caste and regional lines. Therefore, the adoption of Indian nationalism and Gandhian idealism served as a means to escape from the multiple identities of this diverse region. Their identities, rooted in caste and state, were expressed through attire and turbans; to achieve a sense of visual equality, individuals would break the visual associations of their identities as Ahirs of Junagadh or Patels of Morbi. The villages and states of Kathiyawad had limited access to education during the early phase of nationalism; hence, they were only partially aware of democratic ideas and nationalist movements, as reading was challenging for them. However, Gandhi's khadi served as a visual medium for them. This region's young, educated class adopted English clothing or hats to distinguish themselves from their Indigenous identities, effectively erasing the visual markers of belonging. Upon returning to India, Gandhi aimed to combat the British and promote Swaraj, civilisational progress, and societal change, as discussed in his *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi 1909).

Gandhi provided an alternative to traditional caste attire and heavy Western clothing through khadi for people in this region and across India. Gandhi emphasised that this alternative should be casteless and classless. Gandhi's khadi and his topi were a third space for people to escape the authority of the Princely states, unequal cultural norms, and the coloniser's identity. Gandhi topi, a reframed instrument of banal nationalism, allows us to recognise its power, not limited to political protests, but shaping a new identity. The elite class adopted khadi earlier, including those who were politically progressive and part of the Congress. As mentioned earlier, khadi was inaccessible; people could neither buy it nor wear it; therefore, this class was the first to adopt it. Those who could afford to wear khadi attire adapted the entire khadi attire with a shirt, trousers, and topi, and some adapted only the khadi topi along with their traditional attire. In the early 1920s, khadi production was insufficient to meet the needs of the entire Indian population, as it was handspun and required greater attention and time. Consequently, in the early stages of khadi, people in Kathiyawad adopted Gandhi's khadi topi, which requires less material. Gradually, this topi became an important political symbol of the Indian Independence movement and a sign of a casteless element in many societies, such as Kathiyawad.

In a later phase, during the 1930s, Gandhi played an active role in

the freedom struggle, marking ten years since the introduction of khadi in India for the Indian freedom movement. In rural areas, the masses connected with Gandhi through the Gandhi topi, and the Dandi March was essential in its spread. Interestingly, the Dandi March received worldwide coverage from national and international press; in those images, people wore khadi as a symbol of nationalism, which recognised the Gandhi topi beyond its cultural and political borders. It is also essential to note that mobile khadi shops in rural areas have made khadi accessible to a larger number of people (Hempson 2018). The people of Kathiyawad suffered under the heavy taxation imposed by the Princely states and the British Raj. However, the feeling of nationalism in Kathiyawad was not on the roads or in mass rallies. Nevertheless, they communicated their support for Indian nationalism, democracy, and Gandhi's ideology by adopting Gandhi's topi with their caste attire.

The significance of Gandhi topi can be understood by the number of diverse castes that adopted this headdress as a political and fashion symbol. Among these castes, Patels, Ahirs, and Dalits were the first to adopt Gandhi topi as their headdress. Also, the dress of Ahir and Patel changed from their caste attire to simple white clothes, such as trousers, shirts, and a topi. These communities move away from caste attire, communicating their identities as Ahir or Patel. Eventually, it creates a new identity as equal and Indian, in the words of Billig, a powerful visual banality of national belonging (Billig 2017). Even the Dalits of the region primarily adopted it, as this was the first time they could access a similar fashion and attain equal status with upper-caste or class people. Altogether, a Gandhi topi breaks the identities of the area and caste attached to Kathiyawad's turbans. It also communicates essential messages on equality, unity, and nationalism.

The present-day Kathiyawadis do not express their caste identities through their attire, as most of the population has adopted modern clothing influenced by traditional or Western fashion; They do not include headwear as part of their garments. However, the older generation still wears caste-based dress and headwear, primarily in rural areas. Unfortunately, they have found various ways to communicate their societal standing by displaying symbols or slogans on their vehicles, thereby conveying their identity. Additionally, they have begun naming their houses and businesses after their caste or surname to represent their caste identity.

Conclusion

Gandhi topi became a political symbol of India through visual communication, despite India's multicultural and multilingual nature.

Khadi provided the two main elements of honesty and self-identity. Gandhi did not focus solely on khadi as a product but also engaged with the production process, where weaving khadi could be seen as a casteless vocation. The spinning of the gharkha was also a political symbol, and collective spinning became one of the most visible features of a community. Khadi's language and symbolism had politically charged significance and moral meanings. Khadi tried to mould the latent 'moral' beliefs of Indian society, and its purpose was very much secular, as Dipesh Chakraborty suggests.

Gradually, Gandhi topi became merely a political symbol representing morality and nationalism in contemporary Indian politics. It also means that banal nationalism's disappearance has slowly lost its silent authority and stands simply as a political uniform of morality, purity, and nationalism. Even during the Nehruvian era, people who wore a topi as their headdress continued to do so, and eventually it became part of their traditional attire. Gandhi topi reemerged in Indian politics with Anna Hazare's satyagraha against corruption in 2011, representing Gandhian ideals. Sequentially, many political parties adopted it for their politics and sign of righteousness; the Aam Adami Party of Delhi adopted the white topi, the Samajwadi Party of Uttar Pradesh adopted the red topi, whereas Bihar's Rashtriya Janta Dal adopted the green colour, and the Bharatiya Janta Party in saffron colour and many more adopted topi in different way to suggest their honesty, virtue and honour. Once a casteless element, a symbol of nationalism and self-reliance, it becomes merely a political costume.

This case study is a modest attempt to narrate the political, social, and cultural importance of Gandhi topi becoming a banal nationalist object that reproduces nationalist consciousness and daily life, particularly in Kathiyawad. As a political symbol, Gandhi topi connected people to the experience of oppression and provided an identity that could serve as a medium for their shared experience. Gandhi topi symbolised a democratic idea: everyone is equal before the law and cannot be marginalised based on caste or class; citizens have equal rights and duties.

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NIDHI J. MAKWANA is a doctoral candidate at the School of Liberal Studies, Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat. Her PhD research is titled 'Translations within Satyagraha: A Critical Study of M.K. Gandhi as a Translator', Email: nidhijanak@gmail.com

Forging Unity: Mahatma Gandhi, *Indian Opinion* and the Shaping of Indian Identity in South Africa

Sushmita Rajwar

ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi's tenure in South Africa marked a pivotal moment for both South African history and the Indian independence movement. During this time, he earned the title "Mahatma" as he committed himself to fighting for Indian rights. His opposition to racial discrimination, especially in Natal, set the groundwork for his future activism and the larger struggle against racial injustice in the country. Gandhi's impactful writings helped unify the diverse Indian community in South Africa, motivating collective resistance against oppression. He leveraged media, particularly through Indian Opinion, to mobilize the Indian populace against colonial injustices, emphasizing their determination to resist discrimination. His skillful use of media not only instilled a strong sense of resistance among South African Indians but also equipped them to continue challenging injustices following his departure.

Key words: *Racial Discrimination, Indian Diaspora, South African Indians, Indentureship, Indian Opinion, British colonial rule.*

Introduction

MAHATMA GANDHI'S CONTRIBUTIONS to the history of South African Indians are widely recognized. His 21-year stay in South Africa transformed both his own life and the Indian community there. When he arrived in 1893, he was a young lawyer focused on his career. However, the racial discrimination he experienced—most famously being thrown out of a first-class railway compartment—along with the daily humiliations faced by Indians under colonial rule, awakened

in him a deeper sense of purpose.

Gradually, Gandhi evolved into a community leader and developed the concept of satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance. He organised campaigns against oppressive laws such as the pass system and the Asiatic Registration Act, uniting a diverse Indian population divided by region, religion, and language. Through his activism and his newspaper, Indian Opinion, he fostered a shared political identity among South African Indians and encouraged collective resistance to injustice.

For the Indian community, Gandhi's leadership became a catalyst for political awakening. He instilled confidence and agency, urging them to reject the degrading label of "coolies" and assert their rights as British subjects. His efforts strengthened organisations like the Natal Indian Congress, which provided a platform for political negotiation. By the time he left in 1914, Gandhi had become a seasoned activist, and the foundations he laid shaped the community's later role in South Africa's broader struggle against racial oppression.

Central to this transformation was Gandhi's strategic use of writing. Recognising the power of the press, he published Indian Opinion to promote social and political awareness. Among his early writings, "The Green Pamphlet: The Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa: An Appeal to the Indian Public" (1896) stands out as a powerful indictment of colonial injustice. Written in Rajkot during a visit to India, the pamphlet exposed the degrading treatment of Indians and responded to racist portrayals in sections of the white South African press.

As Gandhi writes:

The man in the street hates him, curses him, spits upon him and often pushes him off the foot path. The Press cannot find a sufficiently strong word in the English dictionary to damn him with"…... "These parasites"….."wily, wretched semi-barbarous Asiatics", he is Ramysamy, he is Mr. Samy, he is Mr. Coolie, the black man.

The pamphlet appealed directly to British authorities, documenting specific injustices suffered by Indians in Durban and elsewhere. Gandhi criticised a Natal Government bill that barred non-Europeans from voting, supported by Mr. Chamberlain on the claim that the Indian vote would "overwhelm" Europeans. Gandhi insisted that Indians, as British subjects, were entitled to equal political rights, including the franchise.

He also condemned the £3 tax imposed on Indians who remained in South Africa after indenture, describing it as inhumane. Gandhi

recounted the case of Balasundaram, an indentured labourer brutally assaulted by his employer in 1894, leaving him bleeding with broken teeth. Gandhi filed a complaint, but Balasundaram ultimately had to settle with his employer, illustrating the limited justice available to indentured workers (Gandhi, 1896).

Through such examples, Gandhi depicted the harsh realities of indentured labour, which he likened to modern slavery. The Green Pamphlet systematically refuted racist stereotypes of Indians as unhygienic or inferior and substantiated its claims with evidence. The British authorities viewed it as anti-government propaganda. When Gandhi returned to Durban after its publication, his ship was prevented from docking for three days due to the controversy it generated.

Gandhi's Impact through the print media

Long before Gandhi emerged as a prominent freedom fighter and political leader, he established himself as a skilled and compelling writer in South Africa. His time there taught him to harness the power of the written word, with newspapers as the most effective medium to reach a broad audience. Gandhi's writings reflected the various phases of his political struggle, mobilizing public sentiment and rallying people toward shared goals. His words not only informed and united the public but also fuelled his own resolve. With an exceptional gift for communication, Gandhi strategically published in multiple languages, understanding the linguistic diversity within the Indian diaspora.

Isabel Hofmeyr (2013) provides a comprehensive analysis of Gandhi's time in South Africa, with particular focus on his role as the proprietor of a printing press and the founder of the periodical *Indian Opinion*. Through her detailed examination, Hofmeyr illustrates how Gandhi's engagement with print media was not merely a secondary aspect of his activism but a central pillar in his political and ideological development. His experience as a newspaperman allowed him to refine his ability to communicate effectively, mobilize communities, and challenge colonial authority through the written word. Over time, he became one of the most influential figures in this field during his tenure in South Africa, using journalism as a tool to shape public discourse and organize resistance.

Hofmeyr underscores how Gandhi's background as a subject of a colonized nation provided him with a unique perspective on the power dynamics of the British Empire. He recognized that colonial rule relied heavily on the efficient, rapid transmission of information across vast distances, a system that enabled authorities to maintain control,

enforce laws, and suppress dissent. By understanding this mechanism, Gandhi was able to subvert it to his advantage—using print media as a counterforce to imperial narratives. Through *Indian Opinion*, he ensured that the struggles of Indians in South Africa reached a global audience, thereby drawing attention to issues of racial discrimination and injustice that might have otherwise remained localized.

Furthermore, Hofmeyr's analysis sheds light on how Gandhi's immersion in print culture shaped his later political strategies. His ability to craft persuasive arguments, disseminate critical ideas, and engage with both the oppressed and the oppressors through print media played a crucial role in the evolution of his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. The *Indian Opinion* was not just a publication; it was a vehicle for consciousness-raising, community organizing, and transnational solidarity. Through this platform, Gandhi was able to connect struggles across different geographies, reinforcing the idea that resistance against colonialism required an informed and united populace.

Gandhi first encountered newspapers while studying law in England in 1888. However, it was in South Africa that he launched his most influential newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, through which he wrote extensively. Upon arriving in South Africa, he quickly recognized the oppressive conditions faced by South African Indians under British colonial rule. Realizing the media's potential to expose these injustices, Gandhi began writing for prominent outlets such as *The Hindu*, *The Statesman*, *Pioneer*, and *The Madras Standard*, establishing connections with media in both India and South Africa. He also sought the support of Indian editors, asserting that publicity was their "best and only defense" (Chatterjee, Mrinal & Sambit Pal, 2018).

Yet, Gandhi found that contributing articles and giving interviews to established media outlets was not enough to amplify his message. He needed a direct platform to broadcast the mistreatment of Indians under colonial rule and to mobilize South African Indians, many of whom were unsure of how to negotiate or advocate for their rights. This realization led him to start *Indian Opinion* in 1903. It quickly became an essential publication, shaping political awareness and unity among the Indian community in South Africa.

Gandhi soon realised that those who controlled the press could create public opinion. As quoted by S. Bhattacharyya (1965) in his book, Gandhi said later:

> I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without a newspaper- it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, nor

kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through the *Indian Opinion*, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle.

Newspaper as a Unifying Force

The first issue of *Indian Opinion* was published on June 4, 1903, with support from the Natal Indian Congress. Mansukhlal Nazar, the Congress's secretary, served as its first editor, and later, Gandhi's son, Manilal, would become the newspaper's longest-serving editor. From the outset, Gandhi made *Indian Opinion*'s mission clear, stating, "Our countrymen in South Africa are without the guiding influence of the institutions that exist in India, and that impart the necessary moral tone when it is wanting" (Gandhi, 1903a). Gandhi envisioned *Indian Opinion* as more than a publication—it was meant to serve as an institution in its own right. Through its pages, he aimed to inform, unify, and empower the Indian diaspora, providing a moral and social anchor in an unfamiliar land. By promoting a sense of collective identity and shared purpose, *Indian Opinion* sought to mobilize the community, foster resilience, and inspire the Indian diaspora to assert their rights with dignity and solidarity.

Before *Indian Opinion*, two Indian newspapers were published in South Africa. The first, *Indian World*, was launched in 1898 by P.S. Aiyar. Three years later, in 1901, the *Colonial Indian News* began publication from Pietermaritzburg. Initially printed in English, the newspaper later introduced a Tamil edition. However, due to a lack of readership, the publication ceased operations in 1903 (Mesthrie, 1997).

In this inaugural issue, Gandhi underscored the transformative potential of a united Indian community in influencing South Africa's political landscape. He firmly believed that if Indians recognized their collective strength and acted in solidarity, they could not only shape public opinion but also effectively advocate for their rights and challenge discriminatory policies (Pandey, 2018). His vision extended beyond mere awareness; he sought to instill a sense of agency among Indians in South Africa, encouraging them to see themselves as active participants in their own struggle rather than passive victims of colonial rule.

The newspaper quickly gained traction within the Indian community, becoming an essential source of news, commentary, and mobilization. Readers eagerly awaited each issue, finding in Gandhi's words a reflection of their own grievances, aspirations, and struggles.

His writings addressed pressing concerns, from restrictive immigration laws and labor exploitation to the broader fight against racial injustice, giving a voice to those who had long been marginalized. The paper not only informed but also inspired, fostering a collective consciousness that transcended class and regional divides within the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

Gandhi's advocacy through the publication was deeply personal and emotional, as he viewed journalism not just as a means of communication but as an instrument of resistance. By highlighting the everyday struggles of Indians and articulating a vision for their empowerment, he transformed the newspaper into more than just a publication—it became a rallying point for the community. His ability to connect with his readers on such a profound level helped cement his role as a leader, reinforcing his belief that a well-informed and united Indian populace had the power to effect meaningful change.

One of the key issues that Gandhi addressed was the harsh reality faced by indentured Indian labourers, whose numbers had reached 81,390 by the end of 1903. He highlighted the deplorable living conditions, with many labourers dying from diseases like plague and pneumonia, and exposed the British government's false narrative that indentured labourers could return to India with substantial savings. In reality, the 2,029 labourers who returned in 1903 brought back only £34,690, revealing that indentured labour offered little financial security (Gandhi, 1904a). Gandhi argued passionately against the indenture system, calling it a form of slavery, and expressed hope for the day when Indian immigration for indentured labour would cease. He also emphasized that Indians, both as labourers and free citizens, had greatly contributed to the colony's economy (Gandhi, 1904b).

Beyond labour issues, Gandhi used *Indian Opinion* to address the lack of quality education for Indian children. He raised the issue of education for Indian children in South Africa, underscoring the importance of quality education in empowering the Indian community. He was concerned that Indian children were not receiving adequate educational opportunities, which he believed would hinder their intellectual growth and, in turn, limit the progress of the entire community.

One of Gandhi's primary concerns was that Indian children were restricted to elementary education and often segregated into poorly funded "Indian schools". After the age of thirteen, they were generally barred from attending general schools, cutting them off from broader educational advancement. In his articles, Gandhi expressed frustration over this lack of access to quality education and argued that these limitations would stifle the community's future potential. (Gandhi,

1909).

Through *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi provided a powerful counter-narrative to British policies and created a platform for the Indian community to challenge injustices, laying the groundwork for a unified movement in South Africa.

Indians as a Unified Community

Gandhi avoided referring to Indians by regional or linguistic identities, instead focusing on unifying the Indian diaspora around common concerns. *Indian Opinion*, the newspaper he launched, was dedicated to addressing issues relevant to all Indians in South Africa. To reach the diverse Indian community in Natal, he published it in Hindi, English, Gujarati, and Tamil, ensuring accessibility for Hindus, Muslims, Tamilians, and Gujaratis alike, while also connecting with the English-speaking population. Gandhi's aim was not to erase individual identities but to unite everyone under the banner of "British Indians" and foster a collective purpose.

Acknowledging the community's diversity, Gandhi warned against letting divisions hinder their progress. In his article "The Uses of Adversity" (1903 d), he wrote, "If we have brought from India these divisions and differences as a very valuable cargo…there is no doubt that it would clog us at every step and hinder our progress."

Gandhi also fought for the rights of specific communities when needed, recognizing that individual cases could impact all Indians. A notable example involved a Muslim man who had married in India and later moved to the Transvaal with his wife. When he attempted to enter with her, the colonial authorities refused to recognize their marriage, claiming it did not meet European legal standards. This effectively barred his wife from entry. Gandhi warned that this policy could have far-reaching consequences, leading authorities to question the legality of all Indian marriages conducted without a Western-style marriage certificate. This denial of recognition threatened the stability of families and cast doubt on the legitimacy of marital relationships within the Indian community.

Through *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi took a firm stand, arguing that such policies were discriminatory and violated Indians' fundamental rights. He asserted that all Indians—Hindus, Muslims, and others—deserved equal respect for their personal laws and customs, especially in matters as sacred as marriage. By publicizing these issues, Gandhi aimed to unify the Indian community in opposition to these injustices and pressure the colonial administration to respect the sanctity of Indian marriage traditions (Gandhi, 1913).

The Fight Against the Oppressive Indenture Labor System

Gandhi was outspoken about how deeply the British economy depended on the indenture labour system, and he argued that they would not willingly abolish it. In his well-known editorial, "The Lion and the Lamb" (1903c), Gandhi used the allegory of a lion blaming a lamb for muddying a stream to illustrate the British tendency to unfairly blame Indians for social and economic issues. He highlighted the growing resentment of Europeans toward the prosperity of Indians, who had begun to build successful lives and businesses. This resentment manifested in opposition to the Asiatic Bazaar proposal and changes to the Immigration Act. Gandhi suggested that if British authorities found it difficult to manage the Indian population, they should simply end Indian immigration altogether, stating, "We say with all earnestness we can command: stop the immigration…" (Gandhi, 1903c).

Through *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi detailed the harsh conditions faced by indentured labourers and called for the abolition of the system. He consistently advocated for this cause, describing how the terms of indenture were exploitative and led to derogatory treatment of Indians. His articles like "The British Indians in South Africa", "The Lion and the Lamb", "Immigration Bill", and "The Labour Question in Transvaal", among others—addressed these injustices, proposing solutions to improve the lives of indentured Indians. In his article on 'The Immigration Act' (1903f), he has severely criticised the British stand on derecognising the five-year residence period of indentured labour as constituting their domicile. This clearly states that the norms of the Act were much stricter for the Indians who couldn't get domicile even after serving for five years as indentured labour.

Initially, Gandhi's opposition to indentureship was rooted more in a fight against discrimination than in nationalist ambitions, as he focused on the injustices faced by Indians in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In particular, he condemned laws restricting Indian employment to menial tasks and the £3 poll tax imposed on Indians entering Transvaal. While criticising this Gandhi writes, "The European lion bids fair to swallow up the Indian lamb in British South Africa while the arbiter at Downing Street is looking on." (Gandhi 1903e).

Gandhi actively sought to cultivate a close and personal connection between himself, as the editor of his publications, and his readers, both in South Africa and India. Through his writings, he provided continuous updates on the socio-political conditions faced by Indians in South Africa, ensuring that the struggles and injustices they

encountered were not only documented but also disseminated to a broader audience in India. This steady flow of information was facilitated through newspapers, letters, and other written communications, which served as a bridge between the two regions.

By keeping the Indian public informed about the challenges faced by their compatriots in South Africa, Gandhi was able to garner sympathy and support for their cause, fostering a sense of transnational solidarity. His reports detailed discriminatory laws, acts of resistance, and the broader implications of racial oppression, positioning the plight of Indians in South Africa as a critical issue that demanded attention from both political and social leaders in India. This exchange of news and perspectives also allowed Indians in South Africa to remain connected to the nationalist movements and socio-political developments unfolding in their homeland, reinforcing a shared sense of identity and purpose.

Markovits (2014) has described this dynamic flow of information as "inhabiting both spaces," emphasizing the way in which Gandhi's activism transcended geographical boundaries. He was not merely a passive observer or correspondent but an active participant in shaping public discourse in both contexts. His editorial work functioned as a conduit for mobilization, ensuring that the struggles of Indians in South Africa resonated within the larger framework of Indian political consciousness. This dual engagement played a crucial role in shaping Gandhi's evolving ideology and strategies, as he navigated the intersection of imperial power, racial discrimination, and nationalist aspirations in both regions.

Gandhi frequently travelled between India and London to establish and strengthen connections with prominent leaders and thinkers. His regular interactions with influential Congress leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak significantly advanced his vision and future endeavors. Additionally, he met with government officials, including Lord Elgin and John Morley, to gain insights into the political dynamics spanning three continents (Power, 1969).

Gandhi sought the support of the Indian National Congress to bring the indentured labour issue to the attention of the British government and worked with leaders like Gokhale and Naoroji to amplify awareness. His advocacy brought the plight of indentured Indians into the Indian nationalist discourse, which increasingly opposed indentureship between 1900 and 1910.

In 1912, Gopal Krishna Gokhale introduced a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council to prohibit the recruitment of Indian labourers under indenture. Though defeated (22 votes for, 33 against),

Gokhale argued that indentureship was degrading, reducing Indians to the status of "coolies" and stripping them of dignity:

> '… this Council recommends to the Governor-General-in-Council that the Government of India should now take the necessary steps to prohibit the recruitment of Indian labourers under contract of indenture, whether for employment at home or in any British Colony (Gokhale, 1912).

Similarly, Gandhi criticized the British portrayal of Indians as "filthy beings without any virtue" (Gandhi, 1903b). In 1916, Madan Mohan Malaviya moved another resolution against indentureship. Malaviya's resolution stated that the indenture system was degrading and reduced Indian workers to a status akin to slavery, with people often referred to dismissively as "coolies". He argued that continuing this practice not only harmed individuals but also damaged India's dignity and reputation. The resolution was a rallying cry for reform and attempted to put an end to this practice, which trapped Indian labourers in severe working conditions far from home. Despite Malaviya's compelling arguments and widespread opposition to the system, the resolution was defeated in the council.

Undeterred, Gandhi vowed to initiate a Satyagraha if the system wasn't abolished by March 1917. His persistent efforts, alongside those of other leaders, eventually led to the end of indentured labour migration on March 20, 1917. This marked a significant victory in the fight for Indian dignity and against the oppressive labour system.

Political Mobilization of Indians

Gandhi worked tirelessly to instill a sense of "Indianness" in the South African Indian community, aiming to bridge the divisions among them based on region, language, and religion. *Indian Opinion* served as a powerful tool in this mission, publishing columns that urged Indians to unite against British discrimination and demand fair treatment. Through the newspaper, Gandhi brought his negotiations with colonial authorities to public attention, including discussions with the British Indian Association and Lord Milner on oppressive taxes and the requirement for Indians to carry passes (Gandhi, 1903). He emphasized that Indians should demand humane working conditions and refuse to accept the label of "coolies" imposed on them by the British.

Surendra Bhana and Goolam Vahed (2005) explore how Gandhi redefined the cultural and religious identity of his South African followers, strategically molding it into a unifying political identity that could be leveraged in the struggle against local white domination. They argue that Gandhi's approach was not solely about resistance

but also about positioning the Indian community in a way that would elicit British protection by reinforcing their status as British subjects.

A crucial aspect of this strategy was Gandhi's emphasis on "Indianness," which deliberately highlighted a sense of otherness and distinction from the indigenous African population, despite their shared experiences of oppression under colonial rule. This tactic, while fostering solidarity among Indians in South Africa, also reinforced socio-political divisions between different racial groups. By maintaining a clear connection to India and simultaneously affirming their allegiance to the British Empire, Gandhi's followers were able to advocate for their rights within the imperial framework rather than align with broader anti-colonial struggles in the region.

Such scholarship sheds light on the complexities of Gandhi's politics in South Africa, illustrating how his efforts to uplift the Indian community were deeply intertwined with imperial loyalties and the strategic formation of identity. This nuanced perspective challenges the conventional portrayal of Gandhi as an unequivocal anti-colonial leader, revealing the calculated pragmatism behind his early activism.

The resistance to the Asiatic Registration Act saw numerous Indians, including Gandhi's own son, being arrested for hawking without licenses. Defiance of this law became a symbol of honour, as the community celebrated the release of imprisoned Satyagrahis, including Imam Abdool Kadir and others, fostering unity across diverse backgrounds (Gandhi, 1908). In one notable example, Indians who were arrested were offered a choice by the magistrate: pay a fine or face rigorous imprisonment. Nearly all chose jail, demonstrating their commitment to the cause (Gandhi, 1908). Gandhi's writings inspired them to see prison as a preferable alternative to compromising their dignity.

In his letters to Gokhale, Gandhi explained his efforts to mobilize the Indian community in South Africa and urged the Indian National Congress to address their plight. He highlighted that Indians in South Africa faced some of the harshest conditions of any British colony, and he tirelessly advocated for an end to the indentured labour system. Gandhi's correspondence played a crucial role in building support within India, ultimately leading to Congress's efforts to end indentureship. This talent for political mobilisation also proved quite useful in his later years, when he returned to India.

Markovits (2003) underscores the significant influence of Gandhi's formative and transformative years in South Africa on the development of his later public image. He argues that Gandhi's experiences during this period were instrumental in shaping his political ideology, leadership style, and approach to nonviolent resistance. Furthermore,

Markovits asserts that the differences between Gandhi's early and later phases should not be disregarded but instead carefully examined and critically assessed. By doing so, a more nuanced understanding of Gandhi's evolution as a leader and thinker can be achieved, shedding light on the complexities and contradictions that defined his journey.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's effectiveness as a writer was central to his leadership in South Africa. Through speeches, pamphlets, letters, and *Indian Opinion*, published in several languages, he promoted unity, resistance, and political awareness among oppressed communities. His legal training strengthened his advocacy for both Indians and Africans living under colonial rule, while *Indian Opinion* emerged as a crucial medium for educating, inspiring, and mobilising the Indian population. The editorials offered hope, fostered solidarity, and encouraged confidence in the methods of nonviolent resistance that Gandhi advocated. Even after Gandhi returned to India in 1914, the principles he had disseminated continued to shape protests and campaigns, contributing to the abolition of indentureship and reinforcing the Indian community's lasting significance in South African history.

At the time, many Indians were largely engaged in trade and lacked formal education or political awareness, a condition Gandhi helped transform through sustained journalistic interventions and by drafting petitions to the governments of Natal, India, and Britain. His commitment deepened during conflicts such as the Transvaal bill, which restricted Indian movement and produced a highly politicised climate marked by the burning of registration certificates and open defiance of colonial authority (du Toit, 1996). Gandhi's mobilisation efforts helped establish the Natal Indian Congress and promoted critical scrutiny of British legislation through *Indian Opinion*. Continued later by his son Manilal, the newspaper remained a beacon for political action, ensuring that Gandhi's early leadership left a durable legacy of unity, resilience, and organised advocacy.

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SUSHMITA RAJWAR is Associate Professor, Centre for African Studies, School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi- 110067 Email: sushmitarajwar2@gmail.com

Notes & Comments

Interview with Radha Behn Bhatt

Siby K. Joseph
Vivek Kumar Shaw

IN KAUSANI, A TRANQUIL mountain setting, Radha Behn Bhatt, recipient of the Padma Shri in 2025, embodies a life dedicated to social work, aligned with Gandhi's principles of truth, non-violence, and creativity. At 18, she left home to serve society shortly after India's independence, embodying Gandhi's vision of a renewed nation. Throughout her life, Radha Behn has contributed significantly to organizations like Lakshmi Ashram and the Gandhi Peace Foundation, championing women's rights, rural development, and environmental conservation. Her activism includes pivotal movements to protect the Himalayas and foster inter-community peace, nurturing a connection between humanity and nature amidst the challenges of modernity. Even at 92, her spirit inspires youth, as highlighted by a June 2025 interview with Vivek Kumar Shaw and Siby K. Joseph that revealed her impactful life journey. Radha Behn Bhatt serves as a beacon of truth and service, illustrating the profound beauty of a life committed to positive change and linking the past and present through her enduring message of hope and resilience.

1. How did you get connected with Sarala Behn and Lakshmi Ashram?

What was the initial journey like from your home to the ashram?

In my speech (Youth for Truth Camp), I mentioned what young people should do. Someone asked what young people should do, and I replied that when I was young, I did and thought about certain things. From a young age, I had a strong desire to do social service, and I realized that if I wanted to pursue this path, managing family life would be challenging. Therefore, I decided not to get married for the sake of social service. Social service was more important to me, so I decided not to marry.

In those days, girls were often married off at the age of 13-14, and I had four to five younger sisters. Being the eldest, people thought that if I didn't get married early, it would delay my younger sisters' marriages, and there was a lot of pressure on me to get married. I excelled in my studies and had a strong desire to progress. I was always first in my class, so I thought I could achieve great things.

I had two attractions - one was studies, and the other was social service. The idea of social service came to me when I saw the women in my community. I would see them working continuously from morning till night, and I would wonder why they didn't take rest. If they had books, they could read and gain knowledge while resting. Since they were uneducated, I thought it was essential to educate them. My vision for social service was to open a school for girls and women where they could learn.

However, this decision wasn't easy, and I faced opposition from my family, relatives, and society. I remained firm in my decision and didn't budge despite repeated attempts to persuade me. I also told young people in a Chintan Shivir that if they want to do social service, they need to be prepared to struggle. Some might say, " I have studied engineering, become an engineer, and earn a lot of money," but if your heart is in social service, you'll have to struggle for it. I had to go through this struggle too.

My father was in the army, and he didn't understand the meaning of social service. He would ask, "What is this social service?" One day, he was going to Nainital on foot, and on the way, he stopped at Bhawali. There was a small, clean tea shop, and my father sat there. The shopkeeper's name was Purva Da. My father asked him to make tea, and while he was making it, Purva Da asked about my father's family. My father replied, "Everyone is fine, but my daughter has been troubling me." Purva Da asked what happened, and my father said, "She wants to do social service. What is this social service?" Purva Da explained, "What the Congress people do is social service." At that time, the Congress party wasn't just involved in politics but also in social service. During the freedom movement, villagers would

help Congress workers by hiding them from the police. My father asked, "How will my daughter join the Congress?" Purva Da then told him about a Congress woman who had started Lakshmi Ashram in Kausani, where they worked in villages and provided education. He suggested that my father send me there.

That Congresswoman was Sarala Behn, a strong freedom fighter who had been jailed several times. Purva Da gave my father Sarala Behn's address, and when my father returned home, he told my mother, "Today, Radha's arrangements have been made." My mother asked what arrangements, and my father replied, "There's an ashram where we'll send her. If she doesn't want to get married, she can stay there."

After that, a letter was written to Sarala Behn, and she immediately accepted me, saying, "Come whenever you want." When the winter break started, I was in 11th grade, and my father took me to Lakshmi Ashram. That's how I got connected with Sarala Behn.

2. When Gandhiji came to the lush green hills of Kausani, he stayed in a bungalow for almost two weeks. Forty years later, that bungalow was transformed into Anasakti Ashram. You witnessed this transformation. What was the purpose behind building the ashram? Share your memories of when the foundation was being laid and the visions that were conceived during that time.

In the early days, there was a bungalow. When Gandhiji said he wanted to stay in Kausani, his companions arranged for his stay in that bungalow. You know, the bungalow has a porch. Gandhiji didn't sleep inside; he slept outside. One night, a leopard came there. It just walked around and left, but in the morning, Gandhiji told his companions that a leopard had come during the night. People said, "No, Bapu, you won't sleep outside anymore, absolutely not!" But Gandhiji said, "No, I will sleep outside. This is its place. It came to its own place, and we are the ones who have come to its place." Then Ba said, "You won't listen, so I will also sleep outside with you." During the Gandhi Centenary Year, it was thought that there were two or three places in Kumaon where Gandhiji had stayed, including one near Nainital. So, the idea came to develop this place as a memorial to Gandhiji. Since Gandhiji had written the introduction to Anasakti Yoga here, it was named Anasakti Ashram.

3. When Anasakti Ashram was being constructed, was a committee formed? Or was there a preconceived plan?

At that time, no committee was formed. The bungalow was handed over to the Uttar Pradesh Gandhi Smarak Nidhi because we

were still part of Uttar Pradesh at the time. So, no local committee was formed. It was decided that the Uttar Pradesh Gandhi Smarak Nidhi would manage it. We, that is, I and some other people from the Gandhi Nidhi, like Karan Bhai, et al., would sit together and discuss it. We thought that there should be arrangements for people who want to study Gandhiji's thoughts. Just one bungalow was not enough for that. So, it was decided to build a dormitory, which is now there. The Gandhi Nidhi obtained funds from the government and had it constructed. The construction was completed at that time. It was decided to convert the outhouse downstairs into a kitchen. All this was decided at the local level. Along with this, with the people of the Gandhi Nidhi, the idea was formed to make it a Centre for research and study of Gandhiji's thoughts, so that people who want to study Gandhiji can come, stay, and work here.

4. Didi, at that time, Kaka Saheb Kalelkar was also there. I am asking this because in the first volume of his collected works (published by Gandhi Hindustani Sahitya Sabha), I read that when Kaka Saheb came to Kausani in 1950, he wrote about the visit and envisioned that a memorial to Gandhiji be built here, to be named Anasakti Ashram. Was this his vision?

I don't know, Kaka Kalelkarji didn't come in front of me. I came here in 1951, meaning to this Lakshmi Ashram, but Kaka Saheb came here, I don't know... When Sucheta Behn (Sucheta Kriplani was then the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh) came in front of us and handed over the place to the Gandhi Nidhi, at that time she also said in her speech, and the people of Gandhi Nidhi also said in their speech, that we will make this a study Centre for Gandhi's thoughts. There was a Gujarati brother here who had some knowledge about Gandhiji. Whenever he met anyone, he would tell them what Gandhiji had said. His study was not very deep, but he was interested in the subject. Later, the Gandhi Nidhi told him, "We have made Anasakti Ashram. You go and stay there." When someone comes, you can tell them about Gandhiji's thoughts. He said okay and came here.

Gradually, Kausani became a tourist place. When I first came here, there was only one shop at the crossroads downstairs. So much has changed in front of me. The same thing happened with Anasakti Ashram. Initially, it was a quiet place where only two or three people lived - a cook, another person, and Jeeva Bhai. Then one day, some people came to the ashram and asked, "Will we get a place to stay in Kausani?" They said yes. The next morning, they asked the people at the ashram, "Will you take some money for it?" The people at the ashram said, "We don't take money, if you want to give something, you can give it to the ashram." That's how it started. Today, Anasakti

Ashram earns lakhs of rupees. Kausani has also become a popular tourist place. There are hotels everywhere, tourists come and stay. Anasakti Ashram has also changed gradually. I'm sorry to say, but when money starts coming, everyone gets greedy. When money is available, it keeps coming.

The Gandhi Nidhi also got a little greedy.

5. Didi, what was the environment like when the ashram's foundation was being laid? The scenery, the lush green trees, the freshness that Gandhiji described in such beautiful words in his letters to Mahadev Desai and others in 1929 - do they still retain the same beauty? You have been living here since 1951, tell us, how much has Kausani changed from then to now? Has the natural beauty been preserved, or has time eroded it?

When I came in 1951, the scenery was very beautiful, but it's not the same now. I'm seeing it myself: roads have been built, and many trees have been cut. The villagers have cut trees, though they have also planted many. We planted these trees; there was no original forest here. Especially, you can see below that there's a forest all around; it's a Banj oak forest. Pine trees are not here, why? Because pine brings dryness. We deliberately planted this (Banj oak) tree, because it releases water and increases the water source around it. It reduces the heat. We got this land on lease from the forest department. When we were given this land, there was a Chir pine forest, which was cut and traded. We got bare, dry land, which used to get very hot in the summers. We thought something should be done, but at that time, there was no nursery of Banjoak, Tut, Peepal, or any other tree. There were only insects around. Then we went to the hill in front, which is called Pinak or Pinakeshwar. There's a temple of Shivji there, and in the forest, there were Banj oak trees. We thought that there must be small plants near the roots of these trees, because their seeds fall down. My classmates and I took our baskets and went there. We picked up small plants with soil and brought them here. We watered them because the soil here was dry. That's how the first Banj oak tree grew in our campus. Next year and the year after, we did the same thing. Later, we didn't need to bring plants from outside, because plants started growing from the seeds here. Gradually, this forest became so dense that now leopards, wild boars, monkeys, and langurs come here easily. Sometimes, the girls eat downstairs and see a line of wild boars or their babies coming from upstairs. Langurs have like a kingdom here.

6. Gandhiji came to Almora, then went to Kausani. Tell us something about that journey. You must have heard something from people at the time;

please tell us something.

Gandhiji came here. The people here, meaning the people of the valley behind this valley and other valleys, were suffering from the Kuli Begar system. (A system of forced labor that required people to provide unpaid service to British government officials.) The Kuli Begar system was such that when an Englishman, DM, or SDM came, it seemed as if he had come from a very far-off place. He would bring everything with him, even his commode. The villagers were told that they had to carry all his luggage to the next village the next day, and they wouldn't get paid for it. This was Begar. The people here were a bit strong-willed. They would say, "We are Pants, we are Pandeys, we are Kshatriyas." But for the British, being a Kshatriya, Brahmin, or anything else didn't matter. They would say, "Pantji, pick up the commode and carry it," because there was no option to say no. For this, a list was prepared in advance, listing how many people would go, their names, and the luggage they would bring. This list was given to the people. When the people of this area got the hint of freedom, and Gandhiji came to India, they thought, why should we tolerate this slavery of the British? They started propagating from village to village that we won't tolerate Kuli Begar. This became a big movement. In Bageshwar, where a famous fair is held every year on January 14th on the occasion of Makar Sankranti, people threw all the Kuli Begar lists into the Saryu River and said, "We won't tolerate it anymore." This was a revolutionary step. There was no big organization or leader involved; the local people themselves did it.

I'm telling you that you can also do it. We had started a campaign to save the river. We didn't call any big leader; we were there ourselves. We just had to start, and we started one day. In this valley, our Koshi valley, we first worked with the women and did what was needed to save the river. Then one day, we started a padyatra. Nobody else comes; you have to do it yourself. That's what those people did. When the movement was successful and the Kuli Begar system was abolished, those people were in close contact with Gandhiji, and they kept writing to him, saying, 'We did this, we did that.' Gandhiji might have been writing back to them, but I don't know; there must have been some correspondence. Those people kept calling Gandhiji, but Gandhiji didn't go. But when the people were successful, then Gandhiji came. His journey to Kausani was not to Kausani, but to Bageshwar, on the occasion of the abolition of the Kuli Begar system. You might also know that at that time, the motor road only went up to Garur, and there was no motor road beyond, so people had to walk. Gandhiji was ready to walk. When he arrived, an accident also occurred in Garur. A person got hit by a car. The person might not have seen cars

before, and they came too close to the car. Whatever happened, something went wrong. Gandhiji expressed his sorrow and regretted that he had to come in this car, and an accident also happened. Then when they reached Garur, people said that they would have to walk from there. Gandhiji said, "Yes, yes, I will walk." People said, "No, no, Gandhiji, you don't have to walk. You have to sit in a palanquin, and we will carry you." Then people carried Gandhiji on their shoulders for 30 kilometers, and they didn't let him put his feet on the ground, and they didn't even let the palanquin be set down. We heard this from Shantilalji. Shantilalji was with him, and he was from Gujarat himself. He had also started the Gandhi Ashram. He told us that people didn't let the palanquin be put on the ground. What enthusiasm, tell me! What people thought about Gandhiji! The people here didn't have Gandhiji's darshan before that. At that time, Gandhiji had such a reputation. Whatever work he did, people were influenced by it. He gave a new direction. He didn't say that we have to bring guns to chase the British away. He said, no, we will sit down. If they kill us, we will be ready to die. This was Gandhiji's advice: you do your work being ready to die. I think so. That's why I think that people heard this thing there, that's why they were so enthusiastic. People used to gather in such large numbers. At that time, there weren't that many people. Now the population has also increased, but at that time so many people gathered; so many people ran after Gandhiji, carrying him on a palanquin so he wouldn't have to put his feet on the ground.

Then, on his way back, he stayed in Kausani.

SIBY K. JOSEPH, Director, Sri Jamnalal Bajaj Memorial Library and Research Centre for Gandhian Studies, Sevagram Ashram Pratishthan, Wardha, Maharashtra

VIVEK KUMAR SHAW, Assistant Professor, H.K.B.K. Degree College, Bengaluru, Karnataka

Book Reviews

Lal, V. (Ed.). (2025). *Gandhi, Truth, and Nonviolence: The Politics of Engagement in Post-Truth Times*. Oxford University Press. pp.xiii+360. £99.00(11,253.59 Indian Rupees)

IT CAN BE metaphorically said, as the tittle of this review indicates , that Gandhi balanced his philosophy of life by holding Truth (Satya) in one hand and Nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) in the other, maintaining a harmonious equilibrium between the two without ever letting go of either. Both principles form the twin pillars of his thought and can be explored at length from diverse theoretical as well as practical perspectives. Nearly every other concept central to Gandhian thought—such as *Swaraj* (self-rule), *Satyagraha* (truth-force),Trusteeship(*Nyâsitâ*), and his educational thoughts (Nai Talim)— can be traced back to this foundational ethical core of Truth and Nonviolence. This is especially evident when we consider Gandhi's metaphysical, axiological, and religious standpoints, which permeate his writings and actions. In other words , Gandhi was not only a philosopher but also a socio-political reformer who underwent several paradigms shifts in his worldview. One of the most notable was his transition from the belief that "God is Truth" to the realization that "Truth is God"—a shift that encapsulates his evolving spiritual and moral insights. Armed with this philosophical clarity, Gandhi confronted numerous injustices throughout his life, whether it was the racial discrimination he and other faced in South Africa or the broader structures of colonialism in South Asia, particularly in India.

The above narrative may sound ideal—and perhaps even overly idealistic—to revisit concepts like Truth and Nonviolence in today's world. Yet, there is a growing and urgent need to do exactly that. One key reason lies in the evolving nature of cultures and civilizations, which are simultaneously becoming more interconnected through media and technology, and yet increasingly fragmented due to geopolitical tensions, identity politics, and cultural polarization. To

put it simply, if there is any ideology that haunts our times, it is the ideology of the post-truth era. Post-truth does not just signify a casual indifference to facts—it represents the extreme culmination of various intellectual trends, including radical postmodernism, anti-foundationalism, and deep skepticism. This normative erosion is not just philosophical; it is existential. When Truth becomes relative or irrelevant, the entire structure of human civilization—indeed, the very environment we depend on—is put at risk. Without a shared commitment to some version of truth and a nonviolent mode of coexistence, dialogue becomes impossible, communities fall apart, and ethical responsibility fades. This is precisely why returning to Gandhian ideals is not merely a nostalgic exercise but a vital philosophical and ethical task. Gandhi's emphasis on Truth and Nonviolence offers a counter-narrative to the cynicism of the post-truth age—a call to rebuild our world on the basis of sincerity, compassion, and moral courage.

If the post-truth crisis truly represents a pressing global challenge—which it undoubtedly does for the well-being of humanity—then the volume *Gandhi, Truth, and Nonviolence: The Politics of Engagement in Post-Truth Times*, edited by Vinay Lal and currently under review, merits serious attention and reflection. Featuring essays by renowned scholars, the book offers a rich and multifaceted examination of Gandhi's complex legacy, positioning him not as a distant icon but as a radical moral thinker whose vision remains urgently relevant today when wars and attacks on civilians has become an everyday practice. It challenges conventional understandings of Gandhi, highlighting his ethical courage, political fearlessness, and yogic discipline, while also exploring his influence on global movements, including the American civil rights struggle. Among its standout contributions is a rare and insightful interview with civil rights leader Rev. James Lawson. The compilation distinguishes itself from other Gandhi collections by prioritizing the depth of his ethical vision over surface-level debates about his relevance. It examines Gandhi's critiques of political logic, his notions of community and political solidarity, his legal work in South Africa, his conversations with Tagore, his enduring relevance in movements like the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests in India among many other intriguing normative topics. The volume is structured as a curated collection of thirteen essays and an introduction, each exploring distinct yet interrelated dimensions of Gandhi's ethical, political, and philosophical thought—from his critique of political rationality and aesthetic sensibility to his global influence, spiritual discipline, and historical dialogues—offering both thematic depth and geographical

breadth.

In the introduction *The Measure of a Man: The Many Enigmas and Strange Journeys of Mohandas Gandhi*, Vinay Lal offers a bold, iconoclastic meditation on the many enigmas surrounding Gandhi, resisting the tired question of his "relevance" and instead positioning Gandhi as a necessary provocation—someone who unsettles, disturbs, and refuses easy assimilation(p.1). Lal is concerned by the fact that despite thousands of biographies and scholarly works, Gandhi remains elusive, often forgotten even as his statues dot the Indian landscape, their visibility paradoxically marking cultural amnesia. He critiques the state's performative reverence of Gandhi, noting how those in power both appropriate and erase his legacy, and draws sharp attention to contemporary India's disavowal of Gandhi in favor of more militant, masculine nationalist figures. Situating Gandhi not as a saint or mere icon of peace, but as a radical ethical force who stands in quiet but firm opposition to violence, authoritarianism, and conformity, Lal's introduction challenges readers and set the tone for the whole volume to take the measure of Gandhi not through homage but through honest reckoning with his unsettling moral and political vision(p.11). Furthermore, in Lal's view, Gandhi's resistance to religious conversion should not be conflated with Hindu chauvinism; rather, it reflects his deep ethical commitment to the sovereignty of individual conscience. Lal emphasizes that Gandhi's position evolved over time and was grounded in the belief that all religions offer the resources for ethical living. For Gandhi, as Lal argues, true conversion had to pass the "litmus test of conscience" and emerge from a sincere, informed spiritual quest, requiring the sacrifice of one's ego and selfishness in any form, whether individual, cultural, or otherwise(pp.21-22).

Following the introduction, the volume opens with its first chapter, In the *Topography of Nonviolence*, where Faisal Devji reexamines Gandhi's anti-colonial vision, challenging his reduction to a territorial icon of India by emphasizing his global engagement with the British Empire's maritime power(p.23). Devji argues that Gandhi recognized colonialism's reliance on the interplay between land (as a realm of legal particularity) and sea (symbolizing imperial universality through trade, law, and humanitarianism). By analyzing Gandhi's three transformative sea voyages and strategies like the famous Salt March, Devji illustrates how Gandhi sought to dismantle this duality, critiquing state-centric nationalism and "modern civilization" while reimagining freedom through nonviolent resistance. Contrasting Gandhi with figures like Nehru and drawing on Carl Schmitt's geopolitical theories, Devji highlights Gandhi's unique synthesis of moral practice—dietary and sexual discipline(p.30), decentralized governance—and his

metaphor of an "oceanic circle" of egalitarian communities, transcending imperial hierarchies to unite land and sea in a vision of ethical universality beyond state violence(pp.42-43).

Chapter 2, *A Different Vision: Gandhi's Critique of Political Rationality*, features Uday Singh Mehta challenging conventional interpretations of Gandhi as a primarily political thinker, arguing that his life and work were fundamentally oriented toward spiritual goals—self-realization, seeing God, and attaining moksha(p.44). Mehta contends that Gandhi's politics were inseparable from his ethical and metaphysical vision, which rejected modern political rationality's fixation on state power, security, and sovereignty. Unlike Hobbesian frameworks that prioritize self-preservation and fear of anarchy, Gandhi centered social practices (family, religion, community) and virtues like courage, patience, and nonviolent integrity, explored at length by Mehta , as pathways to ethical selfhood(p.44-55). For Gandhi, toleration emerged organically from India's civilizational pluralism rather than state-enforced secularism; courage meant individual readiness to suffer for truth; and patience reflected a rejection of modernity's rush toward abstraction and vicarious living. Mehta emphasizes Gandhi's critique of imperialism and modernity as distortions of relational ethics, advocating instead for a "religious soil" rooted in scriptural introspection and coexistence. By subordinating politics to spirituality, like a typical Neo-Vedantin of his time, Gandhi reimagined freedom as a slow, inward transformation, resisting state-centric solutions and embracing anarchy as preferable to coercive order.[1] Mehta's analysis reveals Gandhi's radical idealism: a vision where social harmony and self-realization transcend the logics of power, progress, and nation-state imperatives(p.58).

Now shifting the discourse toward a more practical register, the challenge of truly loving one's neighbor—especially beyond the bounds of kinship, community, or even species—has long been regarded as an impossible demand in political and ethical thought. Christianity took this ideal seriously, making it a prerequisite of religious life, and Gandhi was notably influenced by this aspect. Yet many thinkers, including Freud and Dostoevsky, dismissed it as unrealistic or psychologically untenable(p.60). In fact, dominant Western political ideologies—whether liberalism or Marxism—have fragmented this vision of unity(Rajan,2024).[2] Yet Gandhi, as Ajay Skaria shows in Chapter 3, *Along the Way to Gandhi's Neighbour*, radically reimagines this biblical injunction as central to his philosophy of nonviolence and equality(p.59). Skaria argues that Gandhi transforms the neighbor into a quasi-universal figure of boundless care(p.65), drawing from the Bhagavad Gita and *bhakti* traditions to reject

sovereignty-centered models of equality in favor of an "equality of the minor"—an inclusive embrace of all beings through self-surrender (tyaag). This vision challenges modern frameworks of rights and power, offering instead a radical democracy rooted in ethical practices rather than state institutions. By blending Pauline neighborliness with Hindu pluralism, Gandhi proposes a fragile but transformative ideal of justice that transcends caste, imperialism, and anthropocentrism.

In her chapter *Historical Memory and American Nonviolence: Recovering the Radical Roots and Vision of the 'American Gandhi' A. J. Muste*, Leilah Danielson recovers the legacy of A.J. Muste, the "American Gandhi," a radical minister who fused Gandhian principles with U.S. activism. Muste, a Calvinist-turned-socialist pacifist, pioneered nonviolent resistance to war, imperialism, and racism, working with figures like J.P. Narayan through the World Peace Brigade(WPB)(p.89). Danielson argues that Muste's erasure from history reflects discomfort with his anti-statism, religious roots, and revolutionary socialism. Although the WPB failed, Muste believed it affirmed the need for U.S. activists to challenge foreign policy and the nuclear arms race. His vision shaped the Spring Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, uniting diverse groups despite liberal hesitation. Though Muste died before the major 1967 protests, his influence endured. Danielson shows, however, that his legacy faded as the left shifted toward revolutionary models and identity politics. Recovering Muste's story reveals the movement's radical critique of militarism, materialism, and empire, and its efforts toward interracial and transnational solidarity. For Muste, the creative tensions of nonviolence were not failures but necessary struggles, sustained by the belief that "without a vision, the people perish"(p.113)—a vigilance Gandhi also exemplified, setting an enduring example for others, including for our modern civilization, which often becomes trapped in closed systems and rigid ideologies, whether consumerism, Marxist binaries like bourgeoisie and proletariat, or, as is central to the whole volume, the post-truth plagues of our time.

Moving forward, the dialogue between two of modern India's towering figures—Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore—has gained renewed attention in recent times, offering profound insights into the ethical and political challenges of modernity. Chapter 5, *On the Exchanges between Gandhi and Tagore* by Sudipta Kaviraj, is another important contribution to this trend, exploring their rich intellectual engagement and challenging Western political theory's assumption that modernity inevitably leads to a uniform, homogenized world(p.114). Kaviraj argues that the West's own increasing diversity mirrors postcolonial realities, demanding a shift from unidirectional

intellectual influence to a serious engagement with non-Western thinkers like Gandhi and Tagore, who both critiqued the European nation-state model. He positions them as critical theorists grappling with the possibilities of deep diversity and democratic governance, despite significant philosophical differences: Gandhi's ethical ideal centered on truth (satyagraha) and ascetic discipline, while Tagore envisioned an aesthetic life rooted in beauty and non-possessive engagement with the world. Their debates—on the risks of mass movements (seen in Tagore's fictional critiques of Swadeshi) and on events like the Bihar earthquake (where Gandhi's moral reading clashed with Tagore's rationalist dissent)—illustrate their distinct approaches to divine presence, human freedom, and social justice(pp.121-122). Yet their disagreements never descended into hostility; instead, they modeled a rare form of respectful, mutually enriching dialogue. Kaviraj concludes that their exchange broadens political theory's understanding of diversity, offering ways to navigate the contradictions of modernity without collapsing truth into a single, homogenizing narrative, and enriching ideals of both ethical and aesthetic life(p.134).

Succeeding , Sumathi Ramaswamy in the 6th chapter, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being Mahatma*, examines the paradox of Mahatma Gandhi's lifelong aspiration to reduce himself to "zero" (*sunyata*) through non-possession (*aparigraha*) against the material legacy that persists posthumously(p.135). Despite Gandhi's minimalist ethos and efforts to shed worldly attachments—evident in his writings, ashram life, and rejection of bourgeois comforts—his existence remained entangled with material objects, from spectacles and sandals to spinning wheels and dentures. Ramaswamy highlights the irony that these items, integral to his identity and political work, became relics enshrined in museums and art, contradicting his desire to "pass on without a trace." Ramaswamy further using number of artworks delves into how artists have reimagined Gandhi's possessions as symbols of his legacy, transforming mundane objects into aesthetic and memorial icons. This materialization, Ramaswamy argues, underscores a tension between Gandhi's spiritual ideal of immateriality and the inevitable materiality of his public life, revealing how his legacy is both preserved and commodified(pp142-150). The analysis critiques the dissonance between Gandhi's quest for self-effacement and the monumentalization of his image through statues and memorabilia, reflecting broader themes of memory, power, and the challenges of honoring a figure who sought to transcend materiality.

And then we proceed to one of the most attractive chapters of this volume, focusing on a very rare aspect of Gandhian philosophy—

his aesthetic dimension. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt in the 7th chapter *A Rasâtmaka Journey: Aesthetics and Moral Fervour in Gandhi «°l«°s Quest* examines Mahatma Gandhi's lifelong quest for selflessness through the lens of Indian aesthetic theory, particularly the concept of rasa (aesthetic relishing)(p.174). Bhatt argues that Gandhi's moral and spiritual journey was intrinsically tied to an aesthetic sensibility, framing it as a *rasâtmaka* (essence-of-rasa) journey. This axiological fusion of ethics and aesthetics, she suggests, sustained Gandhi through personal and political turmoil, offering him profound joy even in adversity. The chapter further highlights Gandhi's autobiographical reflections on deriving rasa from his "experiments with truth," linking this to classical Indian theories where aesthetic experience transcends egoistic emotions(p.177). Bhatt connects Gandhi's pursuit of detachment and humility to Abhinavagupta's notion of *úântarasa* (the mood of tranquility). Gandhi's reliance on poetry, such as Urdu poet Nazir's verses recited before his assassination, and devotional music like Mirabai's hymns, further underscores how aesthetic forms provided solace and moral fortitude, becoming integral to his ethical framework. The chapter also explores the tension between Gandhi's minimalist, ascetic aesthetics and his attempt to democratize *úântarasa* for mass mobilization; while symbols like the *charkha* resonated with the marginalized, Tagore's critique—warning against blind obedience and the erosion of individual freedom—reveals the challenges of translating deeply personal spiritual experiences into collective political action. Juxtaposing Gandhi's journey with Abhinavagupta's *úântarasa* and bhakti traditions(p.192), Bhatt innovatively bridges Gandhian ethics with Indian aesthetic philosophy, distinguishing Gandhi's detached rasa from devotional bhakti-rasa centered on divine love, and acknowledging his tragic inability to fully impart this inner transformation to the masses. Ultimately, Bhatt paints Gandhi's life as a *rasâtmaka* epic, blending spiritual austerity, ethical rigor, and aesthetic richness. Bhatt is also of the view that While Gandhi's experiments with truth achieved fleeting moments of unity between beauty and morality, the essay poignantly captures the paradox of his legacy: a deeply personal quest for serenity amid public chaos, whose spiritual-aesthetic core remains elusive for collective replication(p.200).

Chapter 8, *On Sorcery of Peace and Nonviolence: A Note on Gandhi's Yogic Fearlessness and Omnipotent Yoga* by Yohanan Grinshpon, offers a compelling exploration of Gandhi's fearlessness and moral strength through the lens of classical yogic traditions, especially Patañjali's Yoga Sûtra(p.201. Grinshpon argues that Gandhi's unparalleled self-confidence and nonviolent resilience were not solely moral achievements but also the results of deep yogic discipline, particularly

mastery over fear of death (*abhiniveœa*) and cultivation of transformative energy akin to yogic siddhis(pp.214-25). Although Gandhi publicly dismissed miraculous powers, Grinshpon suggests that his profound impact—such as calming riots or inspiring massive nonviolent movements—echoed the yogic ideal that perfected *ahimsâ* can disarm hostility. Gandhi's celibacy (brahmacarya), breath control, and disciplined detachment shaped not just his inner life but his political methods, functioning as societal austerities (tapas) aimed at collective moral purification. Ultimately, Grinshpon portrays Gandhi as a unique synthesis of ethical activism and yogic adeptness, embodying a "sorcery of peace" that remains elusive in today's fractured world but very much needed(p.219).

In Chapter 9, *Gandhi, the Indian National Congress, and the Jewish*, Vinay Lal explore how Gandhi and the Indian National Congress responded to the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and the Zionist movement in Palestine during the 1930s and 1940s(p.220). Lal highlights Gandhi's distinction between "spiritual" and "material" Zionism, showing Gandhi's early support for a Jewish spiritual homeland but skepticism toward establishing a Jewish state under British imperial backing. The chapter discusses Gandhi's 1938 Harijan article, where he condemned Nazi atrocities but controversially advised Jews to pursue nonviolent resistance rather than political nationalism. Lal also addresses criticisms from Jewish thinkers like Martin Buber and Judah Magnes and situates Gandhi's views within his deep commitment to nonviolence, limited familiarity with European politics, and personal ties with Jewish individuals such as Hermann Kallenbach(p.226). Ultimately, Lal portrays Gandhi's engagement with the Jewish Question as morally consistent yet politically complex and controversial that create further scope of research.

Chapter 10, *Satyagraha in America—Gandhi, King, and the Politics of Fasting*, is dialogical in nature, as it features James Lawson in conversation with Vinay Lal (edited with an introduction and notes by Lal), discussing the adaptation of Gandhian satyagraha within the American Civil Rights Movement, particularly focusing on the absence of fasting as a public tactic used by Martin Luther King Jr(p.244). Lal introduces Lawson as a crucial figure in the movement, emphasizing his role in training activists like Diane Nash and John Lewis, and notes that Lawson's three years in India—where he engaged deeply with Gandhian thought and leaders like Vinoba Bhave—uniquely positioned him to merge Christian nonviolence with satyagraha(p.246). In the dialogue, Lal raises W. E. B. Du Bois's suggestion that fasting's deep cultural significance in India might not translate easily to America, and Lawson agrees, explaining that while King fasted privately for

spiritual discipline, public fasting was never adopted as a mass strategy, unlike Gandhi's dramatic fasts in Delhi and Calcutta. Lawson reflects that the American movement was still discovering the full possibilities of nonviolence and already had traditions of boycotts and strikes, independent of Gandhian influence. Their conversation also touches on Cesar Chavez's use of fasting, with Lawson noting that Chavez's practice was more Gandhian in spirit, while Catholic figures like the Berrigan brothers and Dorothy Day also integrated fasting into protest(pp.249-250). They also discuss Andrew Young's observation that King felt fasting would not resonate with the American public and explore cultural differences in the symbolism of food and hunger. Overall, the chapter offers a nuanced understanding of how Gandhian nonviolence was selectively and thoughtfully adapted in the American context, with the strategic omission of public fasting standing out as a significant cultural and tactical shift.

Tridip Suhrud in the 11th chapter *On Being Impervious to the Discreet Charms of M. K. Gandhi* explores the complex and often contradictory relationship between Gandhi and Gujarat, particularly Ahmedabad, where he established his ashram after returning from South Africa(p.264). Gandhi initially chose Gujarat with hopes of reviving handloom weaving, promoting the Gujarati language, and securing financial support from local merchants, but early challenges, including the withdrawal of community support after admitting an "untouchable" family to the ashram, complicated his efforts. The ashram's relocation to a less hospitable site near a crematorium and a jail symbolized Gandhi's uneasy fit within Gujarat's social fabric, even as he became central to the city's political economy by mediating labor disputes. Suhrud highlights the ambivalence of Gujarati intellectuals toward Gandhi, illustrated by his 1919 defeat in the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad election, suggesting that educated Gujaratis were hesitant about Gandhi's literary and political interventions. In 1928, Gandhi transformed the ashram into the Udyog Mandir (Temple of Industry), reflecting his internal struggles with maintaining strict ashram observances, especially around gender equality. Gandhi's ideals, particularly *asteya* (non-stealing) and *aparigraha* (non-acquisitiveness), sharply contrasted with Gujarat's mercantile culture, and his approach to wealth, charity, caste, and labor redefined traditional norms. His interpretation of ahimsa as a political ethic linked love, compassion (*daya*), and self-realization with swaraj (self-rule) and duty, offering a radical vision of social transformation. Eventually, Suhrud argues that while Gandhi profoundly influenced India, his unique interpretation of traditions often met with resistance in his own homeland, making his relationship with Gujarat one of both acceptance and

alienation(p.287).

The 12th chapter *Exemplary Citizens and the Symbolic Politics of Nonviolent Protest* by Karuna Mantena analyzes the wave of mass protests that swept India in December 2019 following the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)(p.288). Mantena argues that these protests, triggered by a law perceived as an existential threat to Indian Muslims and the secular foundations of Indian citizenship, were remarkable for their spontaneity, spread, and especially their rhetorical strategies. Protesters, particularly students and Muslims who were directly targeted and stigmatized by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindutva ideology, skillfully appropriated symbols of the Indian state—the Constitution and the national flag—to represent an inclusive, alternative nationalism(p.288). The recitation of the Preamble became a powerful act, asserting that Indian identity is founded on secular and egalitarian principles, not religion or ethnicity, while slogans like "Indian by choice, not blood" boldly affirmed belonging against exclusionary narratives. Mantena draws parallels between these protests and historical instances of nonviolent resistance led by M. K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., highlighting how both movements used nonviolent action not just to resist oppression but to enact a more desirable political identity(p.292). Led by Muslim women, the protests displayed dignity and fearlessness to challenge state repression and criminalization of dissent. Drawing on Niebuhr, Mantena shows how nonviolent action, like Gandhi's and King's, counters state narratives by emphasizing discipline and patriotism. She contrasts the government's violent response with the protesters' strategic use of silence and national symbols, arguing that nonviolence's power lies in reshaping political identity and asserting an inclusive vision of Indian nationhood(p.310).

And lastly, Charles R. DiSalvo, in the 13th chapter, *Advocate Gandhi: Race, Role, and Transformation?* explores the complex and controversial issue of Mahatma Gandhi's racism, particularly during his time as a lawyer in South Africa(p.311). While acknowledging the validity of charges of racism against Gandhi, citing his discriminatory statements toward Africans, DiSalvo also seeks to provide a broader context for understanding Gandhi's actions. The chapter highlights Gandhi's 18-year legal career in South Africa, where he mainly represented wealthy Indian merchants and prioritized his clients' interests, sometimes making morally questionable arguments. The Balasundaram case, taken pro bono, is contrasted with the Scheurmann eviction case, where Gandhi acted ruthlessly on behalf of his client. DiSalvo introduces the concept of "role-differentiated behavior," a legal ethic allowing lawyers to separate personal morality from client advocacy, suggesting

Gandhi's racist remarks should be viewed through this lens(pp.320-321). Specific instances of Gandhi's derogatory distinctions between Indians and Africans are detailed, with DiSalvo acknowledging the pain these statements cause while urging a contextual reading. The chapter expands the critique to include Gandhi's arguments based on class distinctions and procedural tactics that prioritized legal technicalities over moral merit. Central to the chapter is the question of how to reconcile Gandhi's early racism with his later emergence as a global icon of peace and justice. DiSalvo does not excuse Gandhi's racism but instead frames it within his professional role as an advocate and the prevailing social conditions of South Africa at the time, challenging readers to confront the complexities and contradictions of Gandhi's character and legacy(p.332).

Overall, while the volume is excellently edited, meeting all professional standards such as indexing and typesetting—for which we first commend the editor Vinay Lal and all the contributing authors—it could have benefited from the inclusion of an additional bibliography, particularly for sources used in comparative studies. Referencing has been done in a footnote format, which I leave to the reader's preference; however, as current trends suggest, endnotes are now generally more preferred. Now coming to some discussion points with which we aim to provoke the authors and readers for further research : while the book has compellingly explored the axiological, socio-political, and cultural standpoints of Gandhi, with an exception of chapter 2 , it has largely missed addressing the metaphysical foundations that, in fact, greatly influenced his views on Truth and Non-violence. The authors of the volume, with the exception of Mehta, Kaviraj, Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, and Vinay Lal, have somehow overlooked the fact that metaphysical foundations permeate all worldviews—whether materialist or spiritualist, idealist or realist—which weakens the volume's ability to effectively confront the extreme nihilism of the post-truth era, a phenomenon that can, in part, be traced to the rise of anti-foundationalism.

Philosophically speaking, if there are two Indian philosophical traditions that have profoundly shaped Gandhi's thought, they are none other than Advaita Vedanta's absolutism—reflected in his famous dictum "Truth is God," much like the Advaitic notion that "All is Brahman and Brahman is All," i.e., All that exists is ultimately one and not two—and Jainism's *Anekantavada*, the doctrine of manifoldness of truth(Rajan,2024).[3] However, it is to be noted, as studies suggest, that Gandhi did not follow any religion or philosophy in a dogmatic sense; rather, he accepted them only insofar as they succeeded on the parameters of Truth and Non-violence, which could, in fact, be

considered the litmus test for any idea or thought to be embraced within his worldview. This approach allowed him to refute any alleged contradictions that one might try to highlight in his view of life or way of life. As the following Gandhian expressions suggests:

> I am an advaitist and yet I can support Dvaitism (dualism). The world is changing every moment, and is therefore unreal, it has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, there is something about it which persists, and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an Anekantavadi or a Syadvadi. But my Syadvada is not the syadvada of the learned, it is peculiarly my own […]. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the man who knew the elephant. I very much like this doctrine of the manyness of reality (Gandhi 1986: 22).[4]

A number of chapters, such as the 6th, 11th, and 13th, have attempted to highlight certain ironies, contradictions, and imperfections in Gandhian thought; however, they have not thoroughly examined his discussions on the two parameters that also form the title of the volume—Truth and Non-violence. One might be interested in knowing the literal meanings of Truth and Non-violence, but in Gandhi's worldview, these concepts are neither generic nor can they be adequately understood through typical Western ideological or philosophical theories. Yet, despite their profound depth, Gandhi presented them with a simplicity comparable to the alphabets of any language—elementary in form but infinite in meaning and compilations. For instance , as glimpsed in the following remarks of him :

> Socialism and Communism of the West are based on certain conceptions which are fundamentally different from ours. One such conception is their belief in the essential selfishness of human nature. I do not subscribe to it for I know that the essential difference between man and the brute is that the former can respond to the call of the spirit in him, can rise superior to the passions that he owns in common with the brute, and, therefore, superior to selfishness and violence, which belong to the brute nature and not to the immortal spirit of man (Gandhi 1957:270)[5]

And lastly, our discussion point includes responses to the questioning of Gandhian "Mahatmahood," as glimpsed in Chapter 6. How should we understand Gandhi's status as a Mahatma—through strict ascetic rules that reject social engagement and material

possession, or through his philosophy of life, which categorically affirms Truth and Non-violence as the essential parameters of being human? This can be further explored by noting that when Gandhi claims himself to be an Advaitin, a Sanatani or Jain, he is not advocating withdrawal from life, but rather affirming everyday existence, valuing the suffering of others, and aiming to overcome it through principled means, much like the Lord Buddha. He lived the fact the no one is free until everyone is free as seen in his educational , socio-political and cultural ideas. Gandhi lived and preached the ethics of Puru c ârtha, where Dharma, Artha, and Kâma are all given their due place, especially by guiding Artha and Kâma through Dharma ˇh-«˚ where Dharma is nothing other than the ideological expression of Ahimsa paramo dharma (nonviolence as the highest duty). As Gandhi is being cited from his autobiography in the chapter 7 by Neelima Shukla- Bhatt :

> …Conquering my passions seems to me even more difficult than defeating the whole world in an armed conflict. Even after coming to India, I have been realizing my hidden passions. I have felt embarrassed; but have not accepted defeat. I have enjoyed rasa in conducting my experiments with Truth, and I am enjoying it even today. But I know that I still have to tread a difficult path. For it, I have to become absolutely egoless [œunyavat lit. 383 ˇh-«˚ like zero   ˇh-«˚]. Until a person willingly puts himself last, there is no liberation for him. Ahimsa is the furthermost limit of humility. And it is proven by experience that liberation can never be attained without that humility. Praying for such humility, and urging for the world's support in it, for now, I bring these chapters to a close (p.177).

If one is well-acquainted with the above cited expressions and ideas , one would not so readily question Gandhian Mahatmahood. However, if one is exposed to biased ideologies, whether Marxist or conservative, then even God cannot be spared from critique. Yet this stance becomes self-contradictory, for when we situate Gandhi within the so-called "post-truth" era, we should be careful not to fall prey to its distortions. Gandhi was indeed a Mahatma—but a different kind of Mahatma—one deeply engaged in liberating humanity from its inner and outer confinements and striving to provide the conditions for true Swaraj (self-rule).[6] We shall conclude this review discussion with Vinay Lal's citation of Gandhian expressions in the introduction of this volume, which also resonate with the objectives of our discussion points.

In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many

new things. . . . What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my god, from moment to moment, and therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he still has faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject(p.20).

Notes and References

1. See-Rajan. "Making of Contemporary Indian Philosophy and Dilemmas of Demanded Change: A Critical Study of Swaraj in Light of Neo-Vedanta". *Journal of Human Values*(2024).31(2), 150-170. *https://doi.org/10.1177/09716858241268972*

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4. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi: Truth and Non-Violence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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RAJAN works as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Allahabad, Prayagraj, India. 211002. Email: jattrajan12@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0655-0850

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Examples

Books: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.23.

Articles: Ramashray Roy, "Parameters of Participation", *Gandhi Marg*, 12, 3(October-December 1990), p.276.

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