Gandhi – the Success of his Failure

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[The rebel] is not simply a slave opposing his master but a man opposing the world of slave and masters.

Albert Camus, The Rebel

For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?

Saint Augustine, City of God

Introduction

There is an important difference between most of the assessments of Mohandas K Gandhi’s political career and his political thought. While the former is often a narrative of triumph, of leading one of the biggest popular movements in history, the latter is tinged with a sense of tragedy. Though Gandhi’s principles (non-violence being the most well known of them) have inspired several political movements world wide, his political vision was never realized in the country whose struggle for nationhood he so successfully lead. As opposed to the village centric, non-industrial, pacifist, moral community that he wanted India to be, in the last year of his life he saw the birth of a sovereign Indian state with the same modern institutions like army, police, bureaucracy and parliament against which he had so forcefully argued in his writings. The person who liked to describe his
political vision as “enlightened anarchy” became the official “father” of a state that has one of the biggest bureaucracy and standing army in the world.

The story of this failure of Gandhian political project is not at all one of betrayal or corruption. It would be inaccurate to understand it in terms of the Congress party’s approval of the instruments of state power once they were in control of it. The leaders of the independent Indian state were completely open about their great respect for Gandhi (who was the political mentor for most of them), as well as their disagreement with him over their vision of what is the best path to follow for an independent Indian nation – and those disagreements were not merely borne out of compromising principles for the sake of power.

Instead, I would like to argue in this paper, that to appreciate the fate of the Gandhian project, one must look at two significant aspects of Gandhi’s thought. First, is the scope of his critique. Post-colonial national movements are often understood within the logic of legitimacy. That is, the colonial state is illegitimate since the people ruled are not represented in it. Gandhi espoused this narrow particularizing critique of the colonial state for a more fundamental critique of modern sovereign state structure itself. It was universal in the sense that it could be applied not just by subjects of colonial states, but of any sovereign state even if it is “legitimate” in the sense of representation. That is why his critique is not exhausted by the creation of the sovereign state of India, ruled by the “legitimate” representatives of the people, as long as it failed to do away with the logic and institutions of the modern state. In the first part of this paper, I would try to sketch an outline of this critique, focusing on two of the most significant tenets (or as I would argue, rationales) of the modern state that is problematic for
Gandhi: fear and violence. In opposition to this, I would like to provide a brief understanding of the main elements of Gandhian politics – life of the soul, non-violence, suffering and love.

The second aspect that is crucial for this story is the central place of praxis in Gandhi’s thought. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to present Gandhi as a coherent theoretician of politics. The only comprehensive book that he wrote outlining his political philosophy – *Hind Swaraj* – was before he played any significant role in the national movement. Since then, most of his writings were in the form of articles in the organization journals, letters to colleagues, speeches etc. Instead of a coherent philosophical structure, these writings present a much more fractured, and often contradictory picture of his political ideas. This is because Gandhi was not a philosopher trying to make sense of the world around him in abstraction. He was essentially a political actor. His thoughts were borne out of, and constantly evolved, in reaction to, and as a reaction of, his everyday experiences in the political movement that he was a part of, and largely inspired. As he himself says, “I must admit my many inconsistencies. But [...] there is, I fancy, a method in my inconsistencies.” The possible “method” that he alludes to is the deep link of his thinking with actual political practice. The inconsistencies though were not merely a product of the chaotic political reality that he was engaging with. There was a fundamental contradiction that was imminent to his project borne out of the realities of leading an organized mass movement and a political philosophy that was opposed to any centralized or absolute order. It is this central and (I would argue) inherent contradiction that I would try to explore.

Mohandas K Gandhi, “My Inconsistencies”, *Young India*, February, 1930.
in the second part of the paper to understand the so-called tragic demise, but at the same time the radical and still relevant potential of Gandhian politics.

The Discursive Context

To understand the political philosophy of Gandhi, one has to place him in the discursive context in which he was trying to formulate his political and philosophical response – the context of late colonialism. The European discourse concerning the “Orient” was marked by a clear sense of superiority. The political conquering of the east was accompanied by a reproduction of the orient as essentially weak. India was no exception. The weakness, or the lack was both spiritual and moral, and it is this weakness which made the colonial people unfit for ruling themselves.

However, for India, the colonial discourse, it has been argued, was not entirely homogenous. In her upcoming book, Karuna Mantena argues that there were two phases to the British imperial discourse. The first of these phases one could call the “civilizing mission phase”. This phase takes note of the “backwards” nature of the Indian society which makes it unfit for self-rule. The society is seen as morally degenerate, full of barbaric practices (like sati), and generally lacking the modern sensibilities that is present in early nineteenth century Europe. The idea is to intervene and civilize the natives. To bring them up to the level of civilization that the Europeans enjoy, and that has enabled them to, rightly, be the rulers. For

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what its worth, this conceptualization had a distinctly political edge, more specifically liberal political edge. It was the lack of certain politically desirable values in the Indian society that made the Indians unfit to be the master of their own political destiny. The job of the Europeans was to impart those values. However, there is an interesting shift of this discourse in the second half of the nineteenth century, specifically after the rebellion of 1857. The rebellion was not seen as a political opposition to the colonial rule, rather the idea amongst the colonial administrators was that it happened because the British meddled with the long cherished cultural practices of the Indians (Use of pork and beef fat in the cartridges to be used by Hindu and Muslim soldiers in the British Army and other similar issues). Following this periods, scholars like Henry Maine, advanced the idea of the “traditional society” with certain deep-rooted unchanging cultural values. The idea was to create a sort of autonomous and rigid sphere from the sphere of the political and statecraft. The right thing to do—and more importantly – the smart thing to do for the empire was not to try and change the society through interventions and enlightened projects, but to manage it. The idea of this socio-cultural sphere itself was the result of an anthropological understanding of “Indianness” What it led to is a social scientific model of studying, understanding, and managing the society through what were essentially technocratic interventions. It was no longer about reshaping the social to fit the political rule. It was about governing the social.

See, Henry Maine, *Ancient Law,* Murray, London, 1905. For a reading of that work that is followed in this paper, see, Mantena, ibid.

It is not my contention that there is a distinct transition between the two discursive phases. However, what is important to note is a shift from a political idea of “ruling” to a more technical idea of “governing” that was seen in the administration of the empire. One did not replace the other, but the latter took a more prominent role.

Implicit in this shift is a certain retreat of the political. What started as a justification of the political superiority of the West, due to certain cultural advantages, becomes a separation of the sphere of the social and the political, and thereby emptying the colonized society of any potential for a political opposition.

There were two main facets of this discourse that we would focus on, to frame Gandhi’s thought. One was the idea of the disjuncture between the social life of India and self-determining political life. The other was the creation of the colonized self, as one that is passive, weak and generally lacking the character and cultural mores that are necessary to rule.

What Gandhi did was not so much question but invert these understandings. For the former, he agreed that there was a disjuncture between the social and the political in the present context of India. The blame though, he lay at the doorstep of the political. It was not the social sphere that was in some ways deficient and lacking, rather there was a need for a new kind of politics.

What would it then mean to act politically? Here is where Gandhi turned the idea of the colonized self on its head. He turned precisely those aspects of the “Indian

character” that were seen as weak, into its strengths, and built his vision of political action on the idea of passivity, non violence (or more widely, non aggression), and suffering.

This is where we can see the seed of dualism in Gandhi’s political vision. It was framed as a response to, and informed by the immediacy of a particular political struggle. But its scope and breadth transcended the particularity of the British colonial rule in India. Instead, it questioned certain fundamental strains of western political philosophy, and at its extreme, the idea of a sovereign state itself. While being a participant and shaping the nationalist discourse in India, his vision aspired to be universal. It was not just a duality in terms of ideals, as we would see in the later parts of this paper, it lead to certain contradictions in terms of the objectives of the political movement that he lead. For the following parts though, we would take his ideas in their broadest sense— a sweeping critique of modern western theory of the state— and try to analyze what that entailed.

Overcoming Fear: The Life of the Soul

For Gandhi, at the heart of the modern state lied fear. It was not just the simple fear of the repercussions of opposing the colonial state (which was particular to the context of the Indian freedom struggle) but the fundamental fear for one’s bodily security, on which the modern state builds its edifice. Therefore Gandhi believed that to successfully challenge the state, the political actor had to overcome that fear.

This central function of fear as the rationale for the modern state as Gandhi saw it is best exemplified in the theory of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes starts with the
state of nature. It is a state of absolute equality, and absolute rights. The most fundamental of these rights is the right to life, to stay alive. However, it is this most fundamental of the natural rights is what is most threatened in the state of nature. Because it is a state of “war of every man against every man” and the result is a life that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” So there is a need for something artificial to get out of this predicament. And that is where politics, and the state come in. The reason we have politics for Hobbes – the core of politics so to speak— is the right to life, the right to simply stay alive. And thus, life is at the heart of the city— the civil state. State here, in a break with the Ancient understanding, is not an ethical machine. Its job is not to educate, but to provide security. It is not after one’s soul, it’s concern is fundamentally the physical life. This leads to the second separation, that of the public and the private. To protect life, to have order in the city one needs laws. And like the state, the law has no relationship to morals, its focus is not the soul. It is authority (auctoritas), not truth that makes the law, and that is the key to judging the validity of the law. What we see created here is an intimate relationship between politics, law and life.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ed. Richard Tuck, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991. 7 This is what could be called the “machinistic” element in Hobbes. That the state is an artificial creation, a great machine – the Leviathan. An interesting point to note here is Gandhi’s view on machines, especially the connection he draws between machines and violence. He wrote in 1945, in the aftermath of the war, “Another danger in making more and more machinery is that we have to make great efforts for the protection of it, that is to say, we have to keep an army as is being done today elsewhere in the world. The fact is that even if there is no danger of aggression from outside we shall be slaves to those who will be in control of big machinery” (Collected Works, Vol. 82, at 132-33). This big machinery Gandhi speaks about, could easily be read as the biggest machinery of them all, the Leviathan.
The state of nature does not get dissolved once the city is in place. It surrounds the city, *in potentia*. Whenever there is disobedience of the authority, and its laws, there is a possibility of moving back into the state of nature. 

However, what happens when the bodily security is deemed immaterial? What happens, when the mere fact of being alive is not what is at the center of one’s politics? This is exactly what was central to Gandhi’s politics. Gandhi would feel that the Hobbesian political authority is fundamentally based on fear: the fear of all that one would lose in the state of nature – peace, property and crucially, life itself. The reason one obeys the state, and its laws, is because of this fear. Gandhi equates this with cowardice. Therefore, getting over this fear was crucial to Gandhi’s political practice. In *Hind Swaraj*, he writes,

“Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness. Those alone can follow the path of passive resistance those who are free from fear, whether as to their possession, false honors, their relatives, the government, bodily injury, death.”

Fear of losing anything material, or anything physical, including one’s life, impedes the possibility of pursuing the truly important form of life, the moral life. The pursuit of the moral life therefore takes Gandhi to the border of politics— as Aristotle calls it— death. Death is not martyrdom, it is not essential in any way, but neither does avoiding it at any cost preoccupy the politics of Gandhi. “That

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nation is great”, Gandhi writes, “which rests his head upon death as a pillow. Those who defy death are free from all fears.”

When one can overcome fear, then one can only follow the law voluntarily, if she finds it consistent with her ethical propositions. If they violate those principles, one should decline to obey the law, no matter what the consequences are – including death. Thus the life of the satyagrahi (the exemplary Gandhian political actor) is thought of as a life beyond mere physical survival. Life, when thought of as moral life, the life of the soul, no longer occupies the center of the sovereign state’s logic. The Hobessian state cannot appropriate it, neither encompass it through law. To quote Gandhi,

“It is a fundamental principle of satyagraha that the tyrant, whom the satyagrahi seeks to resist, has power over his body and material possessions, but he can have no power over the soul. The soul can remain unconquered and unconquerable even when the body is imprisoned.”

Moving beyond fear allows the politics of Gandhi to challenge the colonial state on not just the ground of its legitimacy (as many contemporary nationalists were doing) but the on its basic rationale itself. Gandhi himself had described his ideal polity as an “enlightened anarchy”. Sovereignty was clearly an extremely problematic concept for him. The problem was not just with who ruled, but the whole trope of the sovereign ruler. This is what he meant when said that a sovereign Indian state was akin to English rule without Englishmen. The life of the soul that he envisaged would be free from a sovereign law creating authority.

10 Ibid. at 94-95.

In, Young India, March, 1930. As quoted in Raghavan N. Iyer, The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1973, at 278.
The political life that Gandhi envisaged would be detached in a radical way from positive law, and the state that makes and enforces them. Instead of being determinately organized by a set of rules that governs it, for Gandhi the political life was defined by a process of seeking the Truth. Not a doctrinal truth that one can assuredly follow, but a truth that one has to continually search and move towards through pursuing the moral path. The trope of the search brings us to perhaps the most important element in Gandhi’s politics – non-violence.

Non-Violence: The Search for Truth

Gandhi saw the modern state as an institution enmeshed in violence. Partly it was an empirical acknowledgement of the status of the state as holding a monopoly on violence. He did take note of those aspects of the modern state— the police, the wars etc. However, the idea of non-violence, like the idea of overcoming fear, attempted to strike at something more fundamental to the logic of modern sovereign state – the violence that lies at the core of its foundation. In other words, what the Gandhian principle of non-violence was challenging was not just the mere violent manifestations of state power, but the violence that is always necessarily implicated with the foundation of a sovereign order.

In its broadest sense, violence for Gandhi is not just about causing bodily harm. It has a deeper ontological significance. It is about a non-dialogical process that forms an order. The creation of any sovereign order calls for a moment of pure ascription of meaning that creates and founds that order. Whether that ascription
comes in a moment of anomie through a singular act or through a process of deliberation is a debate I don’t want to enter in this paper. Rather, what is important is that either way the new order must claim for itself an absolute juridical and political authority to properly call itself “sovereign”. This claim is what would be questioned by Gandhi.

Perhaps the best way to understand this critique would be through a comparison with Carl Schmitt’s well-known theorization of the sovereign decision. Schmitt defines the sovereign as one who decides the exception. It is this decision which makes the “norm” possible. “Decision” is the bridge through which the exception and the norm is linked. The “outside” (exception) of the sovereign action does not threaten the “inside”(norm) of the juridical order, but rather makes it possible.

As opposed to this, the Gandhian theses of non-violence would posit a theory of indecision, or rather the impossibility of a decision. However, calling it merely a “theory” of indecision would be incorrect. Gandhi was exploring these ideas while deeply involved in a political struggle. What comes out of it, one feels, is an interesting praxis of indecision, if one may say so. This comes from Gandhi’s discussion on expression and restraint, and like many other things in his philosophy, it relates back to the European idea of the “Indian”. As we have discussed, Gandhi challenges the widely held European notion that courage is manifested through self-expression, for example, through heroic deeds in a battle. Gandhi argues that the supreme courage is shown through self-restraint.

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This would be the debate between Carl Schmitt’s decisionistic model of founding and Hannah Arendt’s deliberative model of founding.


He clearly prioritizes the idea of self-restraint, which underpinned his logic for satyagraha, to the idea of self-expression. The idea of the decision, is the act of expression in its most extreme sense. It inscribes meaning through one miraculous act, to use Schmitt’s immensely significant analogy. However, meaning for Gandhi is a matter of search, maybe even an unending one. Any singular moment of ascription, without any attempt to either search one’s own soul, or to convince the other, is completely antithetical to the Gandhian creed. A decision is therefore a definitive determination, an absolute moment of “being”. Its efficacy lies in the absoluteness of this determination. And therefore, by its act it also unmasks an absolute sovereign. A sovereign who provides the law as well as the absolute meaning to the being of the polity. Gandhi’s philosophy rejects the absolute being, and rather emphasizes the importance of becoming. As he says explicitly in the introduction to his Autobiography, “I have not yet found Him (Truth as God), but I am seeking Him”. It is a continual search, for the truth. There is no place in this search for an absolute decision, and therefore no sovereign is ever unmasked. There is no sovereign to unmask. The divine—the absolute God—is not replaced by the absolute sovereign. Instead, the “divine resides within all of us”. Each one has to perfect themselves, through suffering and a moral life, to fulfill the divine potential they each have. And when that is achieved, the only sovereign that will be unmasked would be the sovereign in


For an interesting discussion on the idea of becoming, as opposed to being (albeit from a different perspective than that of this paper), see, David Hardiman, *Gandhi in his Time and Ours*, Hurst, London, 2003.

See, Schmitt, Supra note 13.

In *Indian Review*, December, 1909, quoted in Iyer, supra note 11.
each individual. Sovereignty is thus radically dispersed, to the point where there is no mediation, no institutions, and therefore, no state as we know it.

“The power to control national life through national representatives is called political power. Representatives will become unnecessary if the national life becomes so perfect as to be self-controlled. \textit{It will then be a state of enlightened anarchy in which each person will become his own ruler.} He will conduct himself in such a way that his behavior will not hamper the well-being of his neighbors. In an ideal state, there will be no political institution and therefore no political power.”\textsuperscript{19} (Emphasis Added)

There is no one moment of absolute disruption, of expiation. There is instead a painstaking process of searching for the truth, through one’s everyday live, through the small things we do in our individual lives, and the big protests we register through them. It is one of experimentation, of convincing one’s opponents, of slowly building one’s self, and the collective self of the polity through it.

All of this links to the philosophical core of Gandhi’s non-violence. Violence for Gandhi, as have been mentioned, was not just the use of physical force. It is a form of aggressiveness that does not try to convince and change the mind of opponent, but instead affirms one’s own view absolutely, through whatever means.

“No man can claim to be absolutely in the right, or the particular thing is wrong because he thinks so; but it is wrong for him so long as that is his deliberate judgment. It is, therefore, important that he should not do that which he knows to be wrong, and suffer the consequences whatever it may be. This is the key to the use of soul force.”

In a way then violence and absoluteness converge in Gandhi’s philosophy.20 There is no scope for search in violence, there is no scope for changing the soul of the other. It is an either/or solution. This is why there is no absolute friend-enemy distinction for Gandhi. This is another absolute decision that Gandhi would refuse to make. Because there is no absolute enemy. While for Schmitt, the enemy is:

“The other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way existentially something different and alien.” 21

For Gandhi, the enemy is always a potential friend; it is by no means an existential divide. The enemy for a particular cause can always be won over by the moral force of one’s cause. There is always the potential for the self to open up to this other.

How one changes the mind of the enemy, or more broadly, how the self opens up to the other brings us to the third trope of Gandhian politics, that of suffering and love.

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Gandhi’s politics, though necessarily dialogical in nature, is not a theory of deliberation. The enemy’s mind has to be changed, not merely by reason, but through one’s own suffering.

Gandhi collapses the distinction— well accepted by most modern western political theorists since Hobbes— between the personal and the public. Gandhi’s autobiography, as Susan and Lloyd Rudolph observed, read more like a confession (those written by Saints) than one of a public figure. In it he writes agonizingly about his dietary habits or his sexual practices. This is because the personal was fundamental to what was the political for him. If politics was about searching for the truth, that truth was not doctrinal to be discovered in an authoritative text, it was lived. The kind of clothes he wore (Khadi), the kind of food he ate (Vegetarian, and minimalist), his sexual practice (celibacy) all were a part of his larger political vision. It was the creation of a new self who would be able to practice the new politics that he had in mind. Many of these practices drew heavily on the Indian tradition, thereby aiding in creating a charisma, which was rooted in the idea of the ascetic in Indian tradition. But it was by no means a political strategy. As he wrote to Ambedkar,

— As Gandhi wrote, “The reasoning faculty would raise a thousand issues; only one thing would save us from these, that is faith.”

Loyd I. Rudolph Supra note 15, at 159.
“Who is the best interpreter? Not learned men surely. [...] it lives in the experience of its saints and seers, in their lives and sayings.”

Suffering was the way to approach this lived truth. Suffering not only denies the state power over one’s body, as we have discussed, it is crucially the form in which Gandhi envisages political action— it is the truly non-violent way. Also, suffering brings back passion into politics. It is not the cold logic of reason, which could not move anyone beyond their interests, but which moves you with the justness of its cause. Truth, as Gandhi would go on to say, is something that you “feel”, not just rationally grasp, and suffering is the way you convert your enemies. He writes,

“Suffering is infinitely more powerful than war for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason. [...] You must not merely satisfy reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. Suffering is the badge of human race, not the sword.”

It is a politics of feelings, as well as a politics of means over ends. Suffering in one’s physical body, making one’s mere biological existence irrelevant for the cause of the ethical purpose. However, this suffering is not the suffering of a monk – alienated from the society in his search for the transcendental truth.

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24 “Truth is what everyone feels it to be”. Letter to Mirabein, April 20, 1933, As quoted in Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1986, at 89.

It is not a pursuance of the spiritual to the disregard of the temporal. It is political because the ethical is to be lived, in one’s own life, and also collectively. It is the continual search to create not just an ethical self, but also an ethical community. Empathy for the other, the acknowledgement of the feeling in the other, the potential of the other to become as well is fundamental. It is political, and therefore not isolationist of individual. The ethical life Gandhi talks about is as much the life of the community as the life of the individual self.

That is why suffering has to be understood in conjunction with another idea that Gandhi uses often in his work – that of love. The satyagrahi, Gandhi reminds us, must necessarily have love in his heart to truly partake in this kind of politics. This is the love that a lover feels for her loved one. It is a feeling, and a state of mind, that transcends calculations of interests, materiality of modern capitalist society, and the bare necessity of survival – all crucial aspects of Gandhian politics. One can further understand this as a discourse not from the point of view of the goal, the end (that is, the lover’s success in being with her object of love) but the journey, the means (that is, her attempt to be the lover).

The end(s) of this suffering is not what makes the lover, but the pure means of suffering. The end is always promised, but never fully completed. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “But for itself, in its living essence, love is reputed to be rebellious, fugitive, errant, unassignable, and inassimilable. Thus love is at once the promise
of completion— but a promise always disappearing— and the threat of
decomposition, always imminent.” 27

This suffering the lover carries as a batch of the true lover, because who has loved
who has not suffered in love? And it is through this suffering, that the lover
transcends her rational self-interests. Through that suffering she finds an idea of
life that goes far beyond one’s mere biological existence.

This love remains a few things yet to be appropriated by modern techniques.
The true lover (much like the true satyagrahi), remains the perennial
outsider to any attempt at ordering by the very fact of being an insider to the
experience of love. It is a feeling, an experience that one must find on one’s
own, and crucially, suffer on one’s own. At the same time, by transcending it’s
self, the lover “truly” finds himself. “The subject finds itself in love, beyond
itself.” 28 And this is what allows it, the Ego, to open up to the Other.

The search for the ethical in life therefore is not in any way structured or
subsumed by law, or the technologies of the state. Law is followed only when it is
in keeping with the ethical purpose of life, voluntarily and for no other reason.

Law is denied (not just broken) when it conflicts with ones ethical values, when it
is unconscionable to follow it. The bare fact of living, of surviving, of security is of
no concern, if the higher ethical purpose is compromised. The government’s
technologies of “making live” is of no value to a Gandhian, if that life is not an
ethical life. Politics, for Gandhi, is the search of that ethical, and law plays no part

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27 Jean-Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community, Trans. Peter Connor et al, University of

in its practice. Its grammar is never juridical or technological, it at best can be called poetic, as Gandhi himself said.

Failure in Success

The final piece to the story of Gandhi, is its ultimate tragic disavowal by his followers – the eventual defeat of his politics in the success of his political struggle. There is a Weberian narrative to the story of that demise, and that offers us certain valuable theoretical insights. But I feel that one should take the paradoxical nature of that statement, the idea of failure in success more seriously. Charisma, noted Weber with a sense of fatality that often permeate through his writings, must give way to a legal rational form of domination. The transcendental possibility of the charismatic moment, that ruptures the established structures of domination has to finally arrest that possibility, and “routinize” it. Routinization always follows the charismatic phase, it is the inevitable end to the story of charisma. Weber writes,

"Charisma is a phenomenon typical of prophetic movements or of expansive political movements in their early stages. But as soon as domination is well established, and above all as control of over large masses of people exists, it gives away to the forces of everyday routine.”

The marker for this shift is control, and the motivation security. When the old order has been successfully overcome, the movement has to secure its own

existence, and thereby, create its own order. Dynamic disruptiveness has to give way to static dominance. Consistent with the idea of a charismatic moment in Weber, Gandhi did disrupt the legitimization of the colonial rule like very few others have done before him or since. However, for Weber, the charismatic moment of rupture was attached specifically to the idea of the single heroic figure, rather than a collective democratic founding. Gandhi may fulfill the Weberian expectations of a heroic leader, but his political project escapes it. Gandhi was in the most extreme way invested in the collective realization of his project, rather than merely creating a mass following for his struggle. The basic anarchic nature of his politics, as we have discussed, meant that his project was to create a mass community of people who were like him in their ethical search, not a mass community of people that would follow him in his search for political power. What got routinized, was the Weberian dimension of Gandhian charisma, that of the exemplary leader who would became the “father of the nation”. What could not be appropriated, let alone routinized in a Weberian paradigm, was this truly “popular” dimension of what Gandhi meant. To understand the fate of that dimension, we need to look at the contradictions imminent to Gandhi’s own project.

There was no one Gandhi. Shahid Amin notes the different images of Gandhi that were prevalent amongst the subaltern classes, including that of a princely figure

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“Indeed in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in statu nascendi. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.” Ibid, at 246.

atop a horse, or celestial signs that were witnessed accompanying his arrivals or meetings. There was very little in common with this to the meaning of Gandhi to an elite urban Indian. In a way, it was this profusion of meanings that enabled Gandhi to create a truly mass movement. He was the first true mass leader the Indian national movement has seen. Jawaharlal Nehru, somewhat mystified, but with no little respect, points out his “amazing knack of reaching the heart of the people” Indian National Congress, till then limited to petitions by the English educated urban elite took the shape of a pan-national movement that could in no way be ignored or dismissed by the colonial authorities as it has been till then. Gandhi did not invent the idea of the Indian nation, but he did populate it. But when we say Gandhi mobilized the masses, the term mobilization has to be understood in its widest possible sense. It was not merely enrollment to a particular cause. Rather, he gave the “People” a voice. And by giving a voice, he made it possible for what Sieyes would have called the “Nation”, to “speak”. However, it was not at all the way Sieyes would have conceived that speech act. The multiplicity of meanings lead to a multiplicity of voices. Examples are abound when people looted the exploitative local landlord, or violently clashed with the law enforcement authorities in the name of Gandhi. But Gandhi was intervening in a discourse of nationalism, the voice that he was searching for was the voice of a nation speaking out against colonization. He was the leader of an

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As quoted in Chatterjee, Supra note 25.
organization which lead the struggle, and claimed to represent politically the nation to be. Congress, and Gandhi, did not only need to bring the people into the national struggle, but bring them in “as a whole”\textsuperscript{37}. This is where, in a very real sense, the success of Gandhi engendered, even necessitated his own failure. As Partha Chatterjee writes,

“it was the unique achievement of Gandhian thought to have attempted to reconcile these two contradictory aspects which were, at one and the same time, its integral parts: nationalism which stood upon a critique of the very idea of civil society, a movement supported by the bourgeoisie which rejected the idea of progress, the ideology of a political organization fighting for the creation of the modern national state which accepted at the same time the ideal of the ‘enlightened anarchy’.”\textsuperscript{38}

Therefore, in reaction to the throngs of masses who came to see him, and pay homage to him on his journeys, Gandhi wrote in a telling passage,

“Before we can make real headway, we must train these masses of men who have a heart of gold, who feel for their country, who want to be taught and led. But a few intelligent, sincere, local workers are needed, and the whole nation can be organized to act intelligently, and democracy can be evolved out of mobocracy.”\textsuperscript{39}

There is a need to discipline this mob that has been energized by his politics and create an organized national movement that can make “headway”. The need was

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, at 110.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, at 101.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, at 110.
therefore for certain instruments and organizational apparatus by which to
discipline. The most significant of them was the “volunteer”, the trained Congress
worker, well versed in the objectives and techniques of the movement, who must
lead the local struggles. He writes,

“I wondered how I could have failed to perceive what was so obvious. I
realized that before a people could be fit for offering civil disobedience,
they should thoroughly understand its deeper implications. That being so,
before restarting civil disobedience on the mass scale, it would be
necessary to create a band of well-tried, pure-hearted volunteers who
thoroughly understood the strict conditions of satyagraha.”

Moreover, one needed rules as to how the movement was to be conducted. The
idea of *ahimsa*, or restraining from committing any acts of violence, was
introduced as a negative imperative. *Ahimsa*, had a functional political goal, as a
tool for the movement Gandhi was leading. He placed “ahimsa as a political
weapon in front of the congress to solve practical problems”.

To call this a compromise on the part of Gandhi would be terribly simplistic. His
politics was always one of praxis, of experimentations, which always had within
them their own contradictions. There was never a doctrinal worldview, there was
a possible state of mind, which can never be reached completely. It was, as I have
stressed, a search, a transformation.

For the movement though, the search ended. After the Second World War, independence became just a matter of time. From a theoretical point of view, this had two implications. First, now that the “People” have been successful in asserting themselves as an entity, they were taking the form familiar to modern republicanism everywhere – as a unified sovereign entity. Clearly, this would be a far cry from Gandhi’s idea of a radically dispersed sovereignty. Second, now that the colonization was over, and the Indians were so called masters of their own destiny, should the political discourse still be one that was framed essentially in opposition to the colonial discourse, or should one find a new language to express the nationalist aspirations. As Gandhi grew increasingly upset at the prospect of Congress inheriting the mantle of the centralized, bureaucratic, new Indian state, Jawaharlal Nehru responded to him in a letter that illustrates both these issues.

Nehru wrote:

“Then again we have to put down certain objectives like a sufficiency of food, clothing, housing, education, sanitation etc. which should be the minimum requirements for the country and for everyone. It is with these objectives in view that we must find out specifically how to attain them speedily.” [Emphasis added]

India had certain problems – mostly economic problems – that had to be solved. For Nehru, they could not be solved through an “inconsistent” search and experimentation, but solved “speedily” by a modern state with all the techniques of governance at their disposal. There was a need for efficient allocations, of

plans, technology, industrialization. In that context, Gandhi’s politics seemed “completely unreal”\textsuperscript{42} to Nehru. Indian people no longer were bound by the need to oppose the colonial ideology. Their need was not one of moral self, but the necessities of life one needs to survive, physically.

“I should imagine that a body like the Congress should not lose itself in arguments over such matters which can only produce great confusion in people’s minds resulting in \textit{inability to act} in the present.”\textsuperscript{43} [Emphasis added]

The time for passivity, of restraint was over. In a way, time for reflection was over as well. It was the time to act, to speak, to assert. The time to engage with the reality that confronted the nation. And how could the People act or speak? Obviously, through a “body like Congress”, through a body of representatives who would legitimately give voice to the people’s aspirations. They would act in the present in the name of the People. That is their role. They cannot be distracted from that duty by a search for a different kind of politics, and life. The sovereign people of India have arrived, and they will take the decision (through Congress) about what kind of state they want.

“Ultimately of course, this and other questions will have to be decided by the representatives of free India.”\textsuperscript{44}

– Nehru concluded his letter with. And of course, when the sovereign people take a decision, who could stand against it.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
Conclusion

So what happens to the enormous political potential, that the Gandhian movement unleashed? Do they get subsumed and exhausted by the creation of the new national state? The state that not illegitimately claimed to be the realization of those potentials? One could say yes. The political movement that Gandhi lead, whose immediate and organizational goal was the removal of the illegitimate British Empire, culminated in a transfer of power and the Congress party inheriting the centralized state structure of the British times. The constituent assembly, which spoke in the name of “We the People” created a constitutional structure, which institutionalized a sovereign state whose logic and forms of action was in no way different from the western sovereign states. That could be a coherent conclusion to the ultimately tragic story of Gandhian politics. But some questions remain.

Though it is essential to see Gandhi’s politics as one responding to the colonial discourse, it would be extremely limiting to view his contribution only as providing an ideological basis for that specific purpose, namely, decolonization. It can be argued, that Gandhi’s ideas, which were very much a part of the nationalist discourse being shaped in India, lost their relevance once the moment of colonization came. That at the moment of arrival, that discourse necessarily took a different and decisive shape. The concern then was how best to build the newly independent country, not how best to counter the colonial hegemony. However, Gandhi was not just questioning the legitimacy of the rulers, but the legitimacy of the state structure itself. The scope and
vision of his politics, if we take it seriously, was much larger, much more ambitious. What does he mean, for example, when he says that “civil disobedience is the purest form of constitutional agitation”\textsuperscript{45}?

One could then argue that the relevance of the Gandhian project was not linked to the colonial state, but existence of modern state itself. While we still find ourselves within the form of sovereign state structures very much like the one’s Gandhi questioned, it is possible to see scope for Gandhian political action. True the contours of that politics has to be shaped by the specific experiences of the movement, as Gandhi himself would have been the first to acknowledge. But the essential trope of moving politics beyond the concern for life and security, towards a dialogical search for meaning and critique of the sovereign order retains its relevancy and its radical potential.

\textsuperscript{45} In \textit{Young India}, December, 1921, as quoted in Iyer, Supra note 11.