

## GANDHI, CITIZENSHIP, AND THE IDEA OF A GOOD CIVIL SOCIETY

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[Author's Preface: This approximates the text of the Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta Memorial Lecture, delivered at Vidya Bhawan, Udaipur, on 19 April 2008. I am grateful to Shri Vijay Mehta, President of the Mohan Singh Mehta Memorial Trust, and Shri Ajay Mehta, President of Seva Mandir, for honoring me with their kind invitation, and to Shri Jagat Mehta, former Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, for his warm hospitality during my brief stay in Udaipur. This lecture is a small tribute to Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta, whose vast array of activities extended from the arenas of administration, governance, and diplomacy to education and a wide range of social services. Bhaisaheb, as Dr. Mehta came to be known to the citizens of Udaipur and in particular to the people who worked under his leadership, appears to have been one of the more successful institution builders in India, and both Vidya Bhawan and Seva Mandir occupy a hugely significant place in the socio-economic and cultural history of Udaipur. I would also like to place on record my appreciation of Ms. Neelima Khetan, Chief Executive Officer of Seva Mandir, whose superb command of at least two languages was amply on display as she rendered my lecture into chaste, mellifluous and accurate Hindi. And, finally, my thanks to the citizens of Udaipur for turning out in such numbers and staying with me through thick and thin.]

Sixty years after his assassination, it can scarcely be doubted that Mohandas Gandhi was the most singular figure anywhere in the world during the twentieth century. One measure of his unique place in modern history is the fact that he has repeatedly had to be assassinated, and that even as a rapidly burgeoning middle class appears to have abandoned every particle of his thought, Gandhi's spectre continues to loom large. Tridip Suhrud, one

of our more thoughtful commentators, has gone so far as to say that "Gujarat is not the land of Gandhi anymore. . . . His existence in the Gujarati mind, society and economy has been minimal."<sup>i</sup> Gujarat may have gone further than most of the rest of India in repudiating everything Gandhi stands for, but we sometimes disown with a vengeance that which perpetually haunts us. As India rushes to embrace the modern, industrial civilization which was the subject of Gandhi's withering critique in *Hind Swaraj*, it is also instructive both how Gandhi has trickled back into the popular imagination,<sup>ii</sup> as the resurgence of Gandhi in mainstream Hindi cinema so amply demonstrates, and how he continues to be the principal icon of protest around the world. When Indian Malaysians took to the streets a few months ago to demand an end to discrimination and injustice, they held aloft pictures of Gandhi<sup>iii</sup>; and Tibetan protestors have done the same the world over. Whatever else one may be tempted to believe about Gandhi, it is clear that it is always too easy, and too early, to bury him.

Gandhi's achievements spanned an extraordinarily wide array of fields, even though to the outside world he is known principally as the chief architect of Indian independence and history's most creative theorist and practitioner of mass nonviolent resistance. In India, he is remembered for much else, from his ardent advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity and what would today be called interfaith dialogue to his hard-fought campaigns for the abolition of untouchability and his stress on economic self-reliance. The history of Indian journalism, for example, would be woefully incomplete without an elaborate mention of the several newspapers that Gandhi founded and edited in his lifetime, and similarly his advocacy of vegetarianism, nature cure, and so-called alternative systems of medicine, for which he has been mocked by many of his contemporaries and other believers in modern science, now seems to have put him far ahead of his own time. One could continue in this vein for a long

time: fortunately, however, it is neither my brief nor my ambition to catalog Gandhi's achievements. Even the word 'achievement', howsoever amplified it may be by sumptuous descriptions, seems to be too small a word to convey the epic contours of his life.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to call forth, to develop the arguments that I propose to explore in this lecture, one aspect of his life which has not been commented on at much length in the copious literature that has developed around Gandhi. For more than fifty years of his life, Gandhi was engaged in a tussle with the regime of the colonizer. Yet, uncommonly for a revolutionary, Gandhi had a profound and almost unequalled respect for the spirit of the law: some have attributed this to the fact that he was trained as a lawyer, but it is unequivocally clear that he had little respect for the legal profession. His strictures against lawyers in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) are well known,<sup>iv</sup> and he has written that he quit India for South Africa in April 1893 because the "intrigue" in the courts and political circles in Saurashtra was intolerable.<sup>v</sup> That Gandhi had not altered his views about the law is apparent from his later writings, such as this piece he wrote for the *Harijan* on 17 February 1940: "The atmosphere around law courts is debasing as any visitor passing through them can see. I hold radical views about the administration of justice. But mine, I know, is a voice in the wilderness."<sup>vi</sup> When he was prosecuted for sedition in 1922, he pleaded guilty: not only did his commitment to satya or truth make any other course of action impossible, but Gandhi agreed with the prosecution that he had been responsible for preaching disaffection against the British government in India.<sup>vii</sup> That violation of a particular law which is held to be unjust is not inconsistent with the highest regard for the idea and spirit of law is nowhere more clear than in Gandhi's famous letter of early 1930 to Irwin, where he announced his intention to break the 'Salt Law' – not laws in general, but a specific law that was iniquitous in the extreme.<sup>viii</sup>

Thus, in considering Gandhi's views on the law, it is necessary to understand that his recognition that only a nation under laws can offer redress to its citizens did not prevent him from having an antagonistic relationship to the law. He found that Indians in South Africa lived under the burden of oppressive laws; and though the British government in India described itself as a government duly established by law, to distinguish itself from the despotisms that had allegedly always prevailed in India, Gandhi knew only too well that the law did not apply equally to the British and to Indians. A despotism under laws can be vastly more effective than the despotism which is bound by no laws at all. Many people might suppose that Hitler's Germany, the supreme example of a totalitarian state, offers an outright example to the contrary, but in fact Germany under Hitler was governed by a plethora of laws. Nazi Germany is distinguished not by its lawlessness, not even by the arbitrary or uneven application of laws, but rather by the fact that it singled out entire groups – not only Jews, but gypsies, homosexuals, and the mentally ill -- that were subject to the jurisdiction of certain discriminatory laws while others were exempt from such laws. Indeed, Nazi Germany is also distinguished by its many progressive laws, such as one enacted in 1933 which, referring to the intrinsic worth of animals, places them on the same footing as humans.<sup>ix</sup>

In his awareness of how a law operates in a colonial state that at the same time purports to offer equality to its subjects under the law, Gandhi was, in this matter as in most others, unusually prescient. A state may well view the law merely as one of its arms, as a cloak under which it can pursue its nefarious activities designed to advance the interests of a particular racial, ethnic, or monied group, but no state can hope to win the eternal approbation of its subjects if it does nothing else. If the law serves only to oppress or consolidate inequality, the state loses much of its legitimacy. In his characteristic manner,

while mindful of the fact that oppression under the law is even more insidious as it not always recognized as such, Gandhi sought to build on this ambiguity by urging Indians to respect the spirit of the law even if specific unjust laws were to be violated. To this extent at least, Gandhi also saved himself from the intractable difficulties into which revolutionaries have always fallen. Accustomed as they are to being in the camp of resistance, revolutionaries have seldom found it easy to construct or preside over a nation of laws. It is no coincidence that, at the helm of the opposition that he was leading to British rule in India, Gandhi also set into place a 'constructive' programme. The idea was not only, as he explained on countless occasions, that India had to win, alongside political freedom from colonial rule, economic, social, and legal freedoms. Rather, anticipating the fact that resistance and opposition were also fraught with their own hazards, namely the inability of a people to live under the law, Gandhi sought to create a socio-cultural framework that would lead, when opposition to British rule had been rendered unnecessary, to a constructive appreciation of the place of law in a just civil society.

I have spoken of Gandhi's relationship to the law because it furnishes the first clues we require in order to unravel Gandhi's conception of citizenship and his idea of a good civil society. Several years ago, when I sought to understand the myriad ways in which Gandhi lived a life of remarkable ecological awareness,<sup>x</sup> I also discovered that the word 'ecology' is not at all encountered in his writings. There were no national parks in India as such in Gandhi's time, and the modern environmental movements were nowhere on the horizon, but nonetheless it is true that Gandhi has been the inspiration behind many of the principal ecological movements of our times, from Chipko to the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Similarly, Gandhi did not often speak of citizenship, but that is not surprising considering that the discourse of citizenship is comparatively recent to our times. The idea of the 'rights

of the citizen' received full expression in the French Revolution of 1789, but in a colonial state there are few, if any, citizens. Following the Indian Rebellion of 1857-58, the British and Indians alike became subjects of Victoria, though as subjects they had vastly differing rights. As subjects of Victoria, and of her successors, the British in India could claim certain rights as citizens within the Empire; Indians, on the other hand, had only the right to petition the Queen, though the vast majority of them would not have known how to exercise this right to seek more rights.

One of the peculiarities of the discourse of citizenship is that the conception of the citizen has gone hand-in-hand with the conception of rights. A citizen of Delhi may be described as an inhabitant of that city, but the word 'citizen' carries with it a charge that can only be conveyed by some other sentiment. Thus, if one were asked to furnish a definition of the word citizen, it is likely that one might think of the citizen as the bearer of certain entitlements, in particular the right to franchise. The Oxford English Dictionary, the most authoritative source for the English language, is explicit in providing this link: a citizen, it says, is "An inhabitant of a city or (often) of a town; esp. one possessing civic rights and privileges." Correspondingly, it defines a "citizen of the world" as someone who "is at home, and claims his rights, everywhere; a cosmopolitan." But this definition, on close examination, is neither very satisfying nor enlightening; ironically, it bespeaks a certain parochialism. Take, for example, the American writer Henry David Thoreau, whose essay 'Civil Disobedience' is thought to have exerted a considerable influence on Gandhi. Thoreau never left the United States, indeed he seldom traveled outside his native New England and for nearly his entire life he was confined to the area around Concord, Massachusetts where he grew up. Yet Thoreau was deeply steeped in world literature, and had a greater acquaintance with the spiritual and sacred literature of India, China, and Japan

than almost any other American of his generation or the following.<sup>xi</sup> He would not have hesitated to claim his rights everywhere, but one doubts that he felt at home everywhere; and though neither by the standards of the 19<sup>th</sup> century nor by those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would he be considered cosmopolitan, he had a much greater awareness of the world than those who style themselves cosmopolitan.

If we take an example closer to home, there is little question to my mind that both Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi thought of themselves as citizens of the world. But they were 'citizens of the world' in such extraordinarily different ways: Tagore traveled widely nearly to the end of his life, until his early 70s, whereas Gandhi, having returned to India from South Africa in early 1915, took only one overseas trip thereafter, to represent India at the Round Table Conference in London, until the end of his life on 30 January 1948. Tagore founded Viswabharati, a 'world university' that he imagined would create the space for intercultural conversations in a climate of freedom; on the other hand, one of the many reasons why Harilal became estranged from his own father is Gandhi's insistence that his oldest son had nothing to gain from a formal overseas education. Yet, shortly before his death, Tagore entrusted the welfare of Santiniketan to none other than Gandhi himself.<sup>xii</sup>

To be sure, Gandhi commenced his own political life with the conception of the citizen as a bearer of rights and privileges. When he was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg for daring, as a coolie, to enter a first-class cabin, it dawned on him that as an Indian he had no rights in South Africa. It is a self-evident proposition that, for the rest of his life, Gandhi would remain deeply committed to a political struggle designed to secure equal rights for all Indians, first within the Empire and then as free subjects of an independent India. But as I shall now argue, and this shall be the principal burden of my remarks this evening, Gandhi is distinct among the political and moral thinkers of our time

in also decisively rejecting the exclusive association of citizenship with the demand for rights. In the first instance, he resuscitated the hidden third term, namely 'duty', to flesh out the meaning of both rights and citizenship; and, secondly, he sought to restore the idea of the 'commons' within which the true citizen finds the true fulfillment of his or her life. I shall now endeavor to elaborate upon these remarks in various ways, and in so doing draw attention to Gandhi's thinking on a number of subjects which will be of interest to you, such as his ideas about development, education, and the role of the state in the creation of a good and just civil society.

Let me turn first to Gandhi's conception of duty and how he brought it into play with the idea of rights. Though the notion of rights and duties might seem to bear a symbiotic relationship to each other, it is, in my view, an indubitable fact that the two have seldom been brought into conversation with each other, and seldom have they been the subjects of conjoined political inquiry. If you look, for example, at the question of rights and duties in relation to the sexes, it is transparently clear that women were almost never seen as the bearers of rights and privileges but rather were saddled with duties. Before the revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which began to stress (in the words of Thomas Paine's political tract) the 'rights of man', the conception of duties would have weighed most heavily with social commentators. I am mindful of the fact that political philosophers since the 17<sup>th</sup> century had begun to weigh the rights of individuals against the state, but it required the revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to eventually make the discourse of rights into a widely shared discourse of civil society. Thereafter, over a long period of time, as anti-colonial struggles developed around the world, and there was the political awakening of the masses and the working classes in the industrialized nations, the notion of rights began to hold sway over the imagination of common people. At this present juncture, I would urge you to reflect



upon the fact that the language of 'duty' has almost entirely disappeared from our political vocabulary. Indeed, in a world where identity politics thrives on its insistence of rights for distinct political, ethnic, racial, linguistic, or religious groups, the very notion of duties has been rendered obsolete.

At the commencement of his political career, then, as Gandhi strove to secure rights to Indians, he also undertook to inquire into the duties that might correspond with the rights that were being claimed by those who were the victims of injustice. "During the first year," wrote Gandhi in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, "I was merely the witness and the victim of these wrongs. I then awoke to a sense of my duty" (p. 38). Many of his actions are inexplicable, even inexcusable according to his critics, if one fails to comprehend that Gandhi found it unethical to hold to a conception of rights without demanding adherence to a conception of duties. His critics have found it maddeningly perplexing that, at the outbreak of the Boer War, Gandhi decided to come to aid of the British in South Africa by raising an ambulance corps. Gandhi has described the lively discussion that took place among the Indians about the course of action they should follow when war broke out between the British and the minority Boers. That the Indians were required to adopt some position was not in doubt: one of the charges laid against them, Gandhi says in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, is that they "were merely a dead-weight upon the British", and that they were unable to protect themselves and their own homes, much less come to the aid of the British in the event of an attack (p. 65). Some in the community, who held to the view that the Indians were oppressed by the British as much as by the Boers, insisted that Indians should maintain neutrality. Gandhi and some friends, on the other hand, embraced the view that the Indians should come to the assistance of the British; as Gandhi has reported, he argued that "Our existence in South Africa is only in our capacity as British subjects. In every memorial we

have presented, we have presented our rights as such." While conceding that justice most likely lay on the side of the Boers, Gandhi nevertheless advocated support of the British cause. "The authorities may not always be right," Gandhi told his audience, "but so long as the subjects own allegiance to a state, it is their clear duty generally to accommodate themselves, and to accord their support, to acts of the state." (pp. 66-67)

Though the world has largely insisted on seeing rights and duties as standing in opposition to each other, Gandhi saw them as appositional terms. If he held to the position that rights flow from duties, he was not blind to the obvious circumstance that historically deprived groups have been compelled to perform duties without having any rights conferred on them. The burden of exercising duties falls most heavily on those who occupy the most privileged positions in society, and accordingly Gandhi could admit the possibility that those who have been deprived of rights should have fewer duties devolve upon them. If Indians were to advance claims against the British, Gandhi recognized that lower castes were similarly entitled to claim entitlements against the upper castes. He wrote in 1934 that Harijans "should be taught to assert their rights of elementary citizenship" (Harijan, 23 February 1934; CWMG 64:204). Nevertheless, it is perhaps not much of a stretch to suggest that he eventually came to view duties as holding nearly the same relationship to rights as means do to ends. Gandhi had always been attentive to the means: if the means were compromised, the end attained would be questionable. That Gandhi was not indifferent to the ends is obvious from the fact that in 1942, when World War II had derailed Indian independence, Gandhi issued something of an ultimatum to the British and advised his countrymen and women, 'Do or Die'. Indians were entitled to their freedom and, Gandhi appeared to be saying, were to be prepared to secure this right at any price. But Gandhi's more characteristic position is gleaned from the appeal he addressed to the people of Rajkot,

who were immersed in a struggle with the local ruler, on 13 March 1939: "In swaraj based on ahimsa, people need not know their rights, but it is necessary for them to know their duties. There is no duty but creates a corresponding right, and those are true rights which flow from a due performance of one's duties" (CWMG 75:178).

True swaraj, Gandhi continued, "comes only from performance by individuals of their duty as citizens. In it no one thinks of his rights." Lest this extraordinary position be viewed as something inconsistent with the general tenor of Gandhi's thinking, it is instructive to consider his letter to the scientist Julian Huxley, penned only a little more than three months before his assassination. "I learned from my illiterate, but wise, mother", wrote Gandhi, "that all rights to be deserved and preserved come from a duty well done." We might suppose that there is an unquestionable right to life, but here, too, Gandhi suggests a new reading: do we have a right to our life if we do not stand by our duty of preserving the lives of others? If this seems to turn Gandhi into an advocate of capital punishment, this position cannot be sustained: I may not have a right to my own life, but the other person's duty to preserve my life ought to guarantee my life. Every right, Gandhi was certain, correlates "to some corresponding duty to be first performed" (Hindustan Times, 17 October 1947; CWMG 97:99). We arrive, thus, at this anomaly: though Gandhi became the chief spokesperson for the rights of Indians and the rights of oppressed all over the world, he also embraced the view that attentiveness by individuals to the performance of their duties is the true condition of their liberation – liberation not only from colonial rule or oppression from outside, but also from one's ego, desires, and habits of thoughts.

If, as is now evident, Gandhi sought to alter the terms of political discourse by calling attention to duties as much as rights, this logically calls to mind the next question: just how do we determine what constitute one's duties, and what is the realm of the action

that one must undertake? Many scholars of Gandhi have argued that this answer is rather easily determined, and that Gandhi himself has furnished all the necessary cues. We know that the Bhagavad Gita exercised an incalculable influence over Gandhi's life and he studied the text closely.<sup>xiii</sup> The Gita, one could say, is a set of teachings, delivered by Krishna to Arjuna on the eve of the great battle around which the Mahabharata has been woven together, about the performance of one's duties, without attachment and without any heed to the rewards that might follow. The ideal of the Gita is expressed in the figure of the stithaprajna (Ch. 2, verses 54-61), the person who lives in utter equanimity. Though there is scarcely any need to dispute Gandhi's affection even reverence for the Gita, and his frequent recourse to its teachings, in my judgment Gandhi ultimately did not stand by texts. Time after time, Gandhi stressed that where the text, however sacrosanct, and one's conscience come into conflict with each other, the pursuer of truth must always follow one's conscience. Gandhi was also a political saint, if I may use this phrase, of an unusual kind: he not only forged his own political vocabulary and created a unique grammar of political action, but he also worked across such a huge array of human endeavors – among them, journalism, education, women's reform, social reform, the language question and the promotion of Hindi/Hindustani, cow protection, Hindu-Muslim unity, eradication of Untouchability, nutrition, sanitation, village reform, not to mention the political independence of India and the reform of political institutions -- that he had to move beyond texts and tradition in his quest for truth.

It is my submission to you that, in seeking to yoke the conception of citizenship to the notion of duties, Gandhi also desired to place action within the realm of what might be called the 'commons'. Before I attempt to explain how Gandhi deployed the idea of the commons, and what bearing his ideas about development, education, and the role of the

state have to the idea of the commons, it will be useful to place before you a brief sketch of the moral, political, and intellectual contours of the idea of the 'commons'. Hitherto the notion of the 'commons' has been most commonly understood in its ecological sense, pointing to an enhanced awareness that biodiversity and humanity's inheritance of natural resources are at grave peril and that land used to be held in common in most societies. From the Club of Rome report down to the ecological movements in opposition to big dams, strip mining, unregulated disposal of hazardous wastes, the wanton destruction of animal and plant species, the uprooting of forests, and the like, there have been numerous attempts to restore the notion of 'commons'. In recent years, moreover, the much-acclaimed World Social Forum can be viewed as an attempt to expand considerably the reach of this idea. Opposition to intellectual property rights, drug patenting, corporate mergers, the appropriation of land in the name of development, the privatization of water and many other such phenomena is also inspired by the desire to reclaim the 'commons'.

I want to suggest that Gandhi not only prefigured the language of the 'commons' but also anticipated that it can become the bedrock of social and political movements aimed at securing distributive justice, genuine pluralism, and commitment to democratic norms far exceeding our presently impoverished conception of electoral democracy. Before turning to Gandhi, however, let me turn to one concrete instance of the struggles that take place over the commons, in this case the space of the 'street'. Proponents of mass public transportation argue their case not only on economic and ecological grounds, but also because public spaces have shrunk. Cars have pushed pedestrians off the roads, the phenomenon of road rage has become part of the public consciousness, and one is witness to various other transformations that have ensued as a consequence. Streets in many urban areas, in particular, have acquired a reputation as crime-ridden or dangerous places, but

much of life – children's games, daily shopping, conversations among housewives -- in many parts of the world and not just India, revolved around streets. In India's largest metropolitan cities, the elites have almost entirely abandoned the streets and know them only through the windows of their cars. They seldom walk down the streets, and certainly do not live on them; nor can they envision that such streets were, until recently, places of public conversation and conviviality.

One of the most fundamental problems of our times is that the elites have opted out of the state, abandoned the commons, and are committed only to a rights-based conception of citizenship. In suggesting that they have opted out of the state, I mean a great many things, from their rejection of the public sector, state-run schools, and the idea of social services to their feverish embrace of privatization, their unabashed celebration of greed and the so-called principles of the free market, and their open enthusiasm for Special Economic Zones (SEZs). As it not possible for me to enter into a lengthy discussion of these matters, I shall confine my remarks to the areas of education and development and suggest why our present thinking on these matters is not conducive to producing a just civil society.<sup>xiv</sup> What comes to mind, in the first instance, is an anecdote from the life of Gandhi. In the mid-1930s, after Gandhi had relocated to Sevagram, an American clergyman by the name of Rev. Dr. John Mott paid him a visit. Towards the end of his stay, Rev. Mott sought to crystallize the weeklong discussions in a set of two or three brief remarks. "Tell me, Mahatmaji", Rev. Mott asked Gandhi, "what is it that, after nearly two decades of the freedom struggle, still gives you the greatest hope"? Gandhi unhesitatingly replied, "What gives me the greatest hope is that even today most Indians, despite the gravest provocations, still stand by their faith in ahimsa." Rev. Mott then moved on to the next question: "And what is it that fills you with the greatest fear and makes you exceedingly unhappy"? Gandhi, we are told,

paused for a long moment – and then said: "What fills me with the greatest sorrow is the hardheartedness of the educated."

I think it is rather remarkable that already by the mid-1930s, when the educated comprised a relatively tiny community, Gandhi was beginning to have grave suspicions about the value and utility of formal education, particularly university-level education. Some people have thought it hypocritical that, having availed of higher education in London, Gandhi was not inclined to let his two older sons pursue the same course of action. A rigorous defense of Gandhi's thinking is not necessary at this juncture, though it will suffice to say that it is precisely Gandhi's own experience with higher education that, in his view, conferred on him the moral authority to repudiate its alleged benefits.<sup>xv</sup> The reasons why he held formal and higher education in considerable disregard are numerous, but one can begin with his frequently voiced view that adherence to the creed of ahimsa came more naturally and effortlessly to India's masses than to its educated elites. To the extent that the educated had followed him, Gandhi did not doubt that they did so not because they had an intrinsic faith in the moral soundness and efficacy of ahimsa but rather because they recognized it as the expedient way to win India its freedom. The educated had a calculated interest in following Gandhi and giving their assent to ahimsa; the illiterate masses, on the other hand, embraced ahimsa as a creed rather than as a policy, from the purest motives. Formal education, particularly at the higher level where education cannot be disassociated from the idea of specialization, also introduces, and thrives on, a number of disjunctions which in Gandhi's view are absolutely fatal to the development of a person's moral faculty and thus to the conception of the person as a whole entity. Such formal education aggravates the divide between the head and the heart, between mind and body, between intellectual work and the work of labor, between reason and emotion, indeed between thought and feeling.

Thus, when Gandhi adverted to the hardheartedness of the educated, he had in mind the view that modern educational systems are not designed to teach compassion or empathy for the poor and the wronged. Education may inspire a well-meaning economist to draw up a model for the alleviation of poverty, but it is very unlikely to give that economist a feel for the poor or for their lives. If anything, the economist's model is much more likely to worsen the condition of the poor: entranced by his own artful games, the economist overlooks the fact that most models have little or no relationship to the reality that they purport to describe. Their referential world is other models, and the work of other economists; and before the well-meaning economist knows it, the lives of the poor themselves get reduced to a series of numbers and abstractions. In all this, the meaning of 'poverty' itself never gets interrogated.<sup>xvi</sup> I am convinced, in this regard, of two things: first, for all the supposedly complex academic and policy work that has gone into defining poverty, talking about it, and attempting to remove it, modern thought has resolved upon a tacit consensus: if you are not a consumer, you are among the poor. Secondly, had Gandhi been alive and had he leisure for intellectual work, he would, in his ordinarily creative way, have hit upon the idea that the most imaginative and insightful way to write on poverty is to write about the lives of the super-rich.

For all its failings, Gandhi did not at all abandon the idea of education. He regretted the 'hardheartedness' of the educated, not their 'heartlessness'. There is a significant difference between the two: I very much doubt that Gandhi thought of anyone as 'heartless', and he would have agreed with the novelist E. M. Forster that the British had an 'underdeveloped heart'. Education had hardened the British, too, and in his visit to Britain in 1931 he found that the warmest receptions he received were from the working class, particularly the mill workers of Lancashire who had suffered the most from the boycott of



British textile manufactures that Gandhi had initiated in India. But the most potent sign of his enduring faith in the possibilities of education is that he entrusted much of his time and energy into the formulation of what he described as 'Basic Education'. Such education was designed to instill in students a knowledge of the mother tongue, the enduring values of Indian civilization and its wide history of literature, culture, and the arts, and the country's rich heritage of religious ideas; it also sought to give students an appreciation of the values of sacrifice and the necessity of resistance to oppression, and insights into the nature of village life and the reforms needed to sustain the village in the face of modernity's onslaught. Over the years, Gandhi wrote at length about education and he experimented unceasingly in this domain as in all others, but he also unswervingly held to certain ideas: that education was best which was conducted in the mother tongue, Indians were never to give 'credence to the idea that everything European is good', and the labor of the mind and of the body were not to be divorced from each other.<sup>xvii</sup>

On all these counts, it is all too self-evident that Gandhi's aspirations have wholly failed, and that in every respect, if one substitutes 'America' for 'Europe', his critique is at least just as true today as it was then. If we consider this critique within the framework which I have placed before you today, it is transparent both that the elites in India have abandoned the educational commons and that education in India has not been designed with a view to promoting the idea that citizenship comes with responsibilities. Though the IIMs and the IITs are held forth as examples of 'shining India', and educated Indians speak with them in a tone of undisguised admiration, India has by far the worst record in the world when it comes to the arena of primary education. In less than three years after the revolution in Cuba, the literacy rate shot up to 97%; the country today has 100% adult literacy.<sup>xviii</sup> The less celebrated example of Nicaragua, where the Sandinistas ushered in a 6-

month literacy campaign in 1980, should also be borne in mind if one is tempted to think of Cuba as an exception. Nicaragua today has adult literacy of 77% and a primary school enrollment rate of 87%, and one can speculate if these figures would not have been substantially higher but for repeated Americans attempts to undo the revolution and restore the traditional oligarchy to power.

When I advert, however, to the abandonment of the educational commons, I am calling attention to far more than the fact that India gave up on the quest for universal primary education and sought to channel its resources into the creation of an elite class. There is no significant body of research work in the social sciences that is being produced in any of the Indian languages; nor is there even what we might describe as an Indian social science. In most of the social science disciplines charged with understanding and transforming the history, politics, and society of India, we have borrowed our ideas and concepts lock, stock and barrel from the American social sciences. There is very little in this body of knowledge which has some bearing on the lifestyles and modes of thought that have evolved in India over the course of three to four millennia.

The very idea of 'development' is possibly, even though it may not be commonly realized as such, American social science's most successful export to the rest of the world. A number of scholars have traced the idea of development to the immediate aftermath of the post-World War II period when the Americans introduced a new regime of social engineering.<sup>xix</sup> We need not bother with the precise genealogy of this idea at the present moment, and arguably development had its antecedents in such phenomena, in the Soviet Union, as the collectivization of agriculture. It is sufficient to say that as an universal and sacrosanct idea, development was ushered in with the end of the Second World War and the grim realization that a greater part of the world had been devastated by six years of total war.

Development was promised as the mantra that would free people from the shackles of the past, rid them of their superstitions, emancipate them from their culture – all, of course, in the name of introducing rapid economic growth and thus an unprecedented change in lifestyles. Once development had become part of the arsenal of modernity, other things naturally came in its wake, from development experts and the development industry to the human development index. All cultures and civilizations could then be placed on a scale, from superior to inferior; if countries ranked at the bottom aspired to climb to the top, they had only to develop in the prescribed ways.

There was a time when we spoke of 'social change'; now the only permissible language is that of development. Some might wonder if there is any difference, other than that of nomenclature. Unless one assumes that societies are or have been stagnant, there has always been social change; the pace and mode of this change has varied according to time and place, but societies have, with rare exceptions, always had to confront social change. The ideology underlying development, on the other hand, is strikingly different – even if the ideology comes masked in several disguises, for instance as development with a human face, alternative development, sustainable development, and so on. By the mid-1950, the idea of development had achieved the status of unimpeachable certainty, global in its reach and totalizing in its capacity to order human relations. Development was insistently modern in that it promised not only the rewards of modernity but also made incapable any dissent from its ideology: those who dared to critique development were certain to be condemned as primitives and pariahs.

What, then, might be the specifically Gandhian elements of a critique of development? Development has always been uneven, but this is not a fundamental criticism: to concede that it is uneven is to allow the possibility, as development's advocates have

always claimed, that it may, if it displays more sensitivity, become less lopsided. Proponents of sustainable and alternative development argue for precisely this, advancing the claim that development should and can be more sensitive to the culture, history, and aspirations of the people whom development targets. Gandhi would have agreed with some of this, perhaps, and certainly he was opposed to any development that did violence to a people's history, culture, or sense of dignity. His opposition to colonialism stemmed in part from revulsion at the violence of what the British described as their civilizing mission in India. But Gandhi also had a more far-reaching critique of development than what is suggested by those who, mindful of some of the excesses and indignities that have been committed in the name of development, have been advocates of sustainable or alternative development.

First, the advocates of development, in howsoever mild or benign a form, have found it difficult to resist the temptation to think that some sacrifices have to be made in order for a country or a people to develop. Who makes these sacrifices, at what price, to what end, and for whose development? The generation of Nehru, enthused by the song of development to the extent that dams were transformed into the future temples of humanity, thought little of the millions of people who were displaced from their traditional homelands. Worldwide, according to the World Commission of Dams' own figures, some 45-100 million people, at a conservative estimate, have been displaced by dams.<sup>xx</sup> The violence perpetrated by development has, in other words, seldom been recognized as violence – and almost never as ethnic cleansing, though there is no other phrase which as effectively captures the open targeting of the poor, ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities, and the 'underdeveloped'. And since development permits no critique, one of its most insidious aspects is, as Ivan Illich has written, that it "enlist[s] people in their own extinction."

Colonial development was a form of underdeveloping the colony; postcolonial development hijacks the futures of those it targets. Throughout his life, Gandhi was centrally concerned with the enslavement of the colonized subject to the philosophical and moral worldview of the colonizer. Perhaps the most famous passage in *Hind Swaraj* (1909) is one where he warns against a conception of India where the mere substitution of Indians for the English, without any substantive alterations in the structures of British rule, is mistaken for independence. He expressed a fear that Indians wanted the tiger's nature without the tiger's skin. The difficulty with development, as Gandhi intuited, is precisely this: it condemns the subjects of development to lead not their own, but someone else's, conception of the good life. The developed person's past is the developing person's present; indeed, in the developing person's present, the developed can find traces of their own past of which they may be only dimly aware. The developing person's future is the developed person's present: in other words, those on the road to development have no future, or only an imitative future, since their future has already been lived somewhere else. The best hope that the developing world may hold on to is that the inevitable time lag between itself and the developed world continues to narrow.

As I turn to my conclusion, I would like to leave you with three thoughts. One of the many reasons why Gandhi remains immensely interesting is that he uniquely and persistently brought theory and practice into dialogue with each other. The frequent simplicity of his expressions belies the expectation that ordinary commonsense should suffice in being able to comprehend the enormity of this achievement. I have, to take one example, argued that Gandhi was opposed to the divide or disjunction between labor of the mind and labor of the body. In the ordinary sense of these terms, one would be well within one's rights to interpret this statement to mean that Gandhi believed that intellectual work

should be conjoined with manual labor, whether that be farming, scavenging, spinning, or weaving. It is important, indeed remarkable, that Gandhi joined sweepers in cleaning toilets: this act can be read in numerous ways, as a sign of his resolute determination to break the barrier between mind and body, to do away with rigid caste distinctions and to ennoble acts ordinarily considered cheap and degrading, but it is also a mark of his faith in the commons. The matter is still more complex, because in my view Gandhi also thought with and through his body. One senses that he lived with a full awareness of how the body can become a site of spectacle, but when we contemplate the vast range of public activities of which his body became a bearer – fasts, enemas, massages, oil rubs, walks, baths, sun baths, among others – it raises the possibility that Gandhi thought of the body as far more than an ancillary to the mind. Gandhi can be credited with having invented the thinking body.

Secondly, as we think about Gandhi's conception of citizenship and his physical, moral, and political investment in the idea of the commons, we should also bear in mind that fundamentally Gandhi was an anarchist. By this I mean that he believed in the devolution of power as well as in a limited role for the state. Many of you will be familiar with the so-called last will and testament of Gandhi, written virtually on the eve of his assassination, where he urged that the Congress disband itself and that its members each adopt a village for social, economic and political reform. If this may be put within the framework that I have placed before you, Gandhi viewed the commons – here, the village commons -- as the domain within which the rights and duties of citizenship are properly exercised. Gandhi's idea, needless to say, was destined to fall by the wayside: having waged a struggle over some decades, Congressmen were not about to relinquish the fruits of the power that they had acquired for the first time. It may be that his experience with the colonial state had rendered

Gandhi suspicious of all states, but I suspect that he also thought that the exercise of power is inimical to the performance of duties.

Finally, to gauge just how radical Gandhi was in his thinking and practice of ideas, let me suggest to you that he had in mind a vastly different relationship of the local to the global than has so far been envisioned by anyone. You may recall that during the 1960s, an idea supposedly appropriated from Gandhi began to circulate very widely in activist and dissenting circles. The slogan that became current then was, 'Think globally, act locally.' The idea of cosmopolitanism attributed to Gandhi was that one should think about the whole world but should confine one's political activism to the local area where one can be most effective. It is my submission to you that Gandhi had in mind the inverse of what has been imagined: he would have said 'think locally, act globally'. This thought appears to be both counter-intuitive and contradictory of Gandhi's practices: after all, he counseled people to engage in those struggles that were in their proximity or held the most meaning for them.

I would urge for your consideration the thought that nearly our entire conceptual frameworks of knowledge have been borrowed from the West, and though Gandhi was neither parochial nor a nativist, he did not think it possible that the emancipation of a people is possible if they are living someone else's history. At the same time, he was catholic enough in his tastes to recognize that good thoughts emanate from everywhere, and that freedom is indivisible: one cannot be free if others are enslaved. Therefore, the 'citizen of the world', if we are to at all use that phrase, takes the entire world as the canvas of his or her action. This is how we are to understand his implicit injunction to 'think locally, act globally'. The 'citizen of the world' accepts that every struggle around the world is his or her own struggle; similarly, though one should open oneself up to thoughts from around the

world, Gandhi was also quite certain that those relying on the conceptual and intellectual frameworks of others are living on borrowed time. There is, as Gandhi was fully aware, no more profound colonialism than the colonialism of the mind. Gandhi commenced this struggle against colonialism over a century ago, and as the present history of India suggests, the greater part of this struggle remains today. It is this struggle that we must all join.

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<sup>i</sup> Tridip Suhrud, "Modi and Gujarati 'Asmita'", *Economic and Political Weekly* XLIII, no. 1 (5 January 2008), p. 11.

<sup>ii</sup> Ashis Nandy, "The 'Lure' of Normal Politics: Gandhi and the Battle for Popular Culture of Politics in India", *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 2 (October 2007), pp. 167-78.

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, Dean Johns, "Gandhi would be proud" (28 November 2007), online at: <http://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/75374> (accessed 15 April 2008)

<sup>iv</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (1909), online at: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/swarajya/coverpage.htm> (see ch. 11).

<sup>v</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950 [1928]), p. 37.

<sup>vi</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Law and the Lawyers*, compiler and ed. S. B. Kher (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1962), p. 218.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-22.

<sup>viii</sup> See letter of 2 March 1930, anthologized in hundreds of books and collections of Gandhi's writings. The most authentic source is *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, hereafter abbreviated as CWMG. I have used the original, rather than the revised, set of CWMG; the original set, for which Professor Swaminathan acted as the Chief Editor, commenced publication in the 1950s and is comprised of 100 volumes, including supplementary and index volumes. The revised set, issued by the BJP-led Indian government, had to be recalled after vigorous protests from the scholarly community. The original set is available online, in PDF format: see <http://www.gandhiserve.org>; this site also has information on the controversy surrounding the new (and subsequently withdrawn) CWMG.

<sup>ix</sup> Philip F. Cramer, *Deep Environmental Politics: The Role of Radical Environmentalism in Crafting American Environmental Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1998), p. 21.

<sup>x</sup> Vinay Lal, "Gandhi and the Ecological Vision of Life: Thinking Beyond Deep Ecology", *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 149-68; a longer version appears in my *Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), pp. 154-184.

<sup>xi</sup> See Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Arthur E. Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), is useful but dated.

<sup>xii</sup> Tagore wrote to Gandhi on 2 February 1940, as the latter prepared to depart from Santiniketan: "I make my fervent appeal to you, accept this institution under your protection giving it an assurance of permanence if you consider it to be a national asset." See *The Mahatma and the Poet*, compiler and ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), pp. 177-78.

<sup>xiii</sup> See M. K. Gandhi, *Gita, My Mother*, ed. Anand T. Hingorani (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965). But the seminal text to consult here is the *Gita According to Gandhi or the Gospel of Selfless Action*, ed. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1946).

<sup>xiv</sup> The phrase 'civil society' operates on a very wide register. NGOs think of themselves as synonymous with civil society, but this is the narrow end of the spectrum. By civil society I wish to



designate predominantly non-state actors and institutions and the social and political agendas advanced by such actors.

<sup>xv</sup> It is certain that had Gandhi not received his legal education in Britain, his critics would have countered with the argument that he had no right to prevent his children from partaking of an experience of which he had not been a beneficiary.

<sup>xvi</sup> For a radical perspective on poverty, see Majid Rahnema, "Poverty", in *The Future of Knowledge and Culture: A Dictionary for the Twenty-first Century*, eds. Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2005), pp. 240-47.

<sup>xvii</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *The Problem of Education* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1962), pp. 149-50

<sup>xviii</sup> These figures are drawn from UNICEF:

[http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cuba\\_statistics.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/cuba_statistics.html) (accessed 15 April 2008) and the Human Development Report:

[hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_CUB.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_CUB.html) (accessed 15 April 2008).

<sup>xix</sup> The most succinct and critical account of development is to be found in Gustavo Esteva, "Development", in *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 1992), pp. 6-25, though the entire volume is nothing less than a revelation.

<sup>xx</sup> See the report entitled 'Dams and Development' at <http://www.dams.org/report/overviews.htm> (accessed 10 April 2008). The report gives a figure of 40-80 million displaced people, but the report is dated to 2000.