

## Mass Satyagraha and the Problem of Collective Power

Karuna Mantena

[forthcoming in *Political Imaginaries: Rethinking India's Twentieth Century*, edited by Manu Goswami and Mrinalini Sinha]

### I. The Perils and Possibilities of Mass Satyagraha

Gandhi's first attempts at nationwide political mobilization against British rule were understood to be experiments in *mass satyagraha*. In his words, "*satyagraha* was being brought into play on a large scale on the political field for the first time."<sup>1</sup> Gandhi had been developing and practicing *satyagraha* as a new style of political action on behalf of Indian migrants in South Africa, and more recently in local campaigns in Champaran, Kheda, and Ahmedabad. By 1919, Gandhi was poised to amplify and deploy *satyagraha* on an unprecedented scale, eventually culminating in the Non-Cooperation/Khilafat Movement (1920-1922).

Scaling up was driven by Gandhi's understanding of the nature and scope of the political project of *swaraj* or Indian self-rule. In respect to the goal of *swaraj*, numerical size mattered tactically, strategically, and morally. Political action, especially disruptive protest, will always prove most potent when large numbers are involved. This has been confirmed especially strongly in the most recent empirical studies of nonviolence. Chenoweth and Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works*, for example, argues that what lends nonviolence its political potency is precisely its "participation advantage;" simply put, nonviolence mobilizes significantly more people than armed rebellion.<sup>2</sup> Tactics like non-cooperation work by staging mass disaffection, large-scale withdrawal and non-participation make visible the illegitimacy of a regime. For Gandhi, mass dissent became the practical demonstration that political power resides in the people's consent.

That nonviolence works via "people power" or a consent theory of power also gives it a democratic valence.<sup>3</sup> When masses assemble to contest authority, in that very moment

---

<sup>1</sup> M.K. Gandhi, "The Duty of Satyagrahis (6-7-1919)," *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 18, 183. References to *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), 98 vols. (New Delhi, 1999) and are cited hereafter as *CWMG*, followed by volume and page number.

<sup>2</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, 2011), 3-61.

<sup>3</sup> On nonviolence and a consent theory of power, see Dustin Ells Howes, "The Failure of Pacifism and the Success of Nonviolence," *Perspectives on Politics* 11:2 (June 2013) and Gene Sharp, *The*

they also constitute an alternative *demos*; they seemingly actualize popular sovereignty. Moreover, there was a distinct populism to Gandhi's call for mass satyagraha. In *Hind Swaraj*, he had contended that Indian swaraj was only truly achieved as an analogue to individual swaraj. Swaraj was something that had "to be experienced, by each one for himself."<sup>4</sup> Indian freedom therefore depended on the freedom of the vast majority and the realization of their political agency, which in practice meant the direct action of the rural masses. The ends of such a movement would be a fundamentally village-centered swaraj. This is perhaps the deepest sense of why mass satyagraha was the necessary means to swaraj, it was poised to realize true swaraj, or what Gandhi called, "swaraj *in terms of the masses*."<sup>5</sup>

Gandhi thus appeared on the Indian political scene as the champion of direct, popular mass action in a manner than was meant to challenge imperial authority as well as disrupt the existing patterns of elite politics. But almost immediately these experiments in mass satyagraha became imbricated with violence. This ranged from the riots and property-destruction of the short-lived Rowlatt Satyagraha to the infamous killing of police constables at Chauri Chaura, which effectively ended the Non-Cooperation movement (hereafter, referred to as NCO). In Chauri Chaura, constables, after firing upon NCO protesters, had been chased into the police thana which was then set alight, leaving 23 dead. In response, Gandhi announced the immediate cessation of mass civil disobedience and began a five-day fast of atonement and purification.

Gandhi's dramatic decision remains one of the most confounding of a long and contentious political career. For militant activists, it occasioned a real disillusionment with Gandhian politics. But even those closest to Gandhi – like Jawaharlal Nehru – never fully reconciled themselves to Gandhi's reasoning. What neither could fathom was why Gandhi seemed so quick to give up the momentum of what looked to be a cascading revolution toward swaraj. After all Gandhi himself had been campaigning on the promise that sustained nationwide mobilization would bring about – as the slogan went – 'swaraj in one year.'<sup>6</sup>

---

*Politics of Nonviolent Action, Volume I* (Boston: Sargent, 1973), 10-16. It is also referred to as a social theory of power or the 'pluralistic' view of power. On the association of nonviolence with democracy, see Jonathan Schell, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (New York, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, CWMG, 10, 282.

<sup>5</sup> M.K. Gandhi, "In Fulfilment of Promise (24-7-1924)," *Young India*, CWMG, 28, 345. Italics in original. Also M.K. Gandhi, "Speech at Meeting of Deccan Princes (28-7-1946)," CWMG, 91, 372.

<sup>6</sup> M.K. Gandhi, "Swaraj in One Year (22-9-1920)," *Young India*, CWMG, 21, 278-281.

In this moment, two connected lines of criticism emerged that are still at play in contemporary assessments of Gandhi, and of nonviolent politics. One critique perceives an arbitrary moralism at work in the heart of Gandhian politics. This involves concerns that the spiritual demands of Gandhian *satyagraha* might work to undermine its political usefulness. The second line of criticism – and the one I focus on in this essay – viewed Gandhi’s decision as a denigration of popular agency, the betrayal of mass politics as such. This is a core element of left critique of Gandhian politics, a critique that coalesced in the aftermath of Chauri Chaura. The suspension was seen as a concerted attempt by Gandhi (and the Congress coalition) to reign in a radicalizing mass movement; the plea for nonviolence merely a cover for a conservative and/or reactionary ideology.

In this essay, I focus on how Chauri Chaura shaped Gandhi’s evolving understanding of the perils and possibilities of mass *satyagraha*. I will attend to competing interpretations of NCO and its end to foreground a collision between Gandhian and Marxist models of collective action. Gandhi referred to Chauri Chaura, and more broadly the incidents of violence that were concomitant with these first experiments in mass *satyagraha*, as his ‘Himalayan miscalculations.’<sup>7</sup> The need to halt and rethink *satyagraha* in their wake was so urgent that it would be nearly a decade before Gandhi led another all-India campaign of mass civil disobedience. In this respect, the end of NCO was a crucial moment of reckoning and conceptual clarification, out of which Gandhi retooled *satyagraha* itself. I argue that what Gandhi rejected at Chauri Chaura was not mass action as such but forms of action that were premised on the generation and display of collective power. From this angle we see more clearly how unusual *satyagraha* would be as a model of collective action, one that was disturbed by and suspicious of its collective or corporate nature.

After revisiting the debate on Chauri Chaura, I will explore more fully Gandhi’s critique of collective or corporate power, especially in its connection to his skepticism of mass democracy. Chauri Chaura revealed to Gandhi that even ostensibly nonviolent mass action could function as a pure demonstration of power. That is, when mass *satyagraha*

---

<sup>7</sup> See M.K. Gandhi, “Speech at Mass Meeting, Ahmedabad (14-04-1919),” *CWMG*, 17, 420-424; “The Duty of Satyagrahis,” 182-185; “Gandhi Old and New (4-05-1920),” *CWMG*, 23, 112-113; “A Confession of Error (18-08-1921),” *CWMG*, 24, 109-112; “The Crime of Chauri Chaura (16-02-1922),” *CWMG*, 26, 177-182; “A Revolutionary’s Defence (12-02-1925),” *CWMG*, 30, 243-249; “Notes (10-09-1925),” *CWMG*, 32, 390; “The Truth is One (24-04-1927),” *CWMG*, 38, 295-296; “A Himalayan Miscalculation,” *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, *CWMG*, 44, 441-442.

relies on the superiority in numbers to pressure, intimidate, and coerce, it was akin to violence in purpose and effect. Gandhi became deeply concerned that these forms of political action – political action as the demonstration of collective power – would not only be tactically fraught, they portended a false or dangerous swaraj, a kind of freedom that was more akin to domination and mastery. From our contemporary vantage point, there is in Gandhi’s diagnosis of NCO a prescient attunement to the imbrication of power and freedom in democratic politics, a problem we face perhaps most urgently today in the guise of majoritarianism.

## II. Satyagraha as a Theory of Action

There is a strong tendency to read satyagraha as a political morality, specifically a plea for anti-Machiavellian political ethics.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, nonviolence is often defined in terms of its disavowal of violence and coercion as tools of politics, a disavowal secured on primarily ethical grounds. This is the underlying assumption which, for example, animates the characterization of Gandhian nonviolence as a form of *principled* as opposed to *strategic* nonviolence.<sup>9</sup> For Gandhi, however, violence was not only an ethical problem, but a political one, that required a response and an alternative. Satyagraha was devised as a creative mode of combating injustice and effecting political change in new way.<sup>10</sup> This is why I would contend that, for Gandhi, satyagraha was first and foremost a theory of action and its guiding conceptual concern was the “how” of social change.

As a theory of action, nonviolence does not imply passivity or a negative turning away from politics. Nor would it be a purely aspirational or exemplary form of politics, in which one is acting ‘as-if’ the ideal world you want to shape already exists. For Gandhi, satyagraha was oriented towards political efficacy; it sought to persuade, disrupt, and overcome opposition and positively shape political outcomes. A theory of action implies a theory of politics, a set of background assumptions about the nature of political conflict, where the main practical impediments to political change lay, and how they manifest themselves. It then posits a range of action that would be most successful at

---

<sup>8</sup> Raghavan Iyer’s *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford, 1973) is a strong statement of this kind.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Nepstad, *Nonviolent Struggle: Theories, Strategies, and Dynamics* (Oxford, 2015), 4-21.

<sup>10</sup> As Gene Sharp put it, in trying to find a mode of fighting oppression, Gandhi reasoned not from the ethical to the political, but “directly from the political to the political.” Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (Boston, 1979), 26.

transforming them to effect progressive change. *Violence* was very often the name that Gandhi gave for a whole series of impediments to constructive politics.

Gandhi's theory of politics hinges on a distinct understanding of the sources of violence and domination in politics. What I have termed Gandhi's *realism* stems from a view of politics as a realm of recurring violence and of political action as a peculiarly hazard-bound activity.<sup>11</sup> I want to suggest that Gandhi understood political action to be a precarious activity wrought with difficulty, always subject to failure, and one that carried within it the potential for violence. The burdens of political action are heightened or made more dangerous – action is further subject to escalation, and harder to manage – because political contestation enables and is enabled by negative passions and egoistic dispositions. When left unchecked, the logic of political contestation leads to polarization and entrenchment and enflames feelings of indignation and resentment, which, in turn, feed the temptation towards violence. Provocative or violent tactics would only further exacerbate these given political dynamics and dispositions.

Nonviolence, by contrast, would be the correlative force and orientation that seeks to limit and mitigate the negative, affective dynamics of political action. To be sure, there are moral and ethical elements at play here – ideas of moral integrity, self-discipline, and self-mastery. But importantly integrity is tied to a political – that is, a strategic and tactical – account of the efficacy of nonviolent action. Here, the self-disciplining of action, the inward work of satyagraha, is linked to its outward effects, effects that aim to blunt and abate the recurring obstacles to political change.

These concerns about the negative entailments of political action place Gandhi in interesting proximity to a critical and skeptical strand amongst theorists of action. The problem of action was a central topic of political debate throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, it came to the fore in a new and pressing way in Gandhi's era as a whole range of Marxist, existentialist, progressive, anarchist, and anticolonial thinkers and activists wrestled with the legitimacy and efficacy of new forms of mass political action – such as the boycott, the general strike, etc. – as well as the specific question of the use of violence in politics and revolution. From Tolstoy, Lenin, Sorel, Weber, Gramsci, Trotsky, Dewey, Niebuhr up through Camus to Fanon, important strands of twentieth century political thinking were centrally concerned with techniques of mass

---

<sup>11</sup> K. Mantena, "Another Realism: Gandhi and the Politics of Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106:2 (2012).

mobilization, questions of popular agency, and their relation to political and social change. Indian nationalist debate was also profoundly shaped by, and often riven apart by, these questions, such as the relationship between political action and social reform and the utility and necessity of exemplary violence. Political action was also the terrain for some of the most generative modern philosophical interpretations of the *The Gita*, and the revisionary reading of karma yoga as detached, worldly action.<sup>12</sup>

Within this broad and extensive debate on political action, we can distinguish three guiding concerns about the moral, strategic, and tactical purposes of popular action. A first set of questions revolved around how to bring people – especially people who were unaccustomed to acting politically – into the political sphere. From Gandhi to Lenin, Sorel and Fanon, radical activists and thinkers were concerned with how to inspire and sustain popular action and argued about which forms of action could work best to recover a person's dignity, autonomy, and agency. A second set of concerns revolved around how popular movements and collective action ought to be organized so as to shape, prefigure, and embody the collective ends of popular mobilization, i.e. the future shape of anarchist, socialist, or democratic self-government.

But there also existed a third and often overlooked strand, what I term a skeptical or critical strand. This line of thinking foregrounds the excesses of political action, tendencies towards enthusiasm, hubris, and overextension that could undermine or overwhelm sought-after political ends. This skepticism was most apparent in the voices of critics of violent revolution as the strategy and goal of popular mobilization – such as Tolstoy, Camus, Weber, and Arendt. All of these thinkers, in different ways, like Gandhi, were concerned with the moral-psychology of action, of how to reckon with the psychological burdens of unintended consequences, of escalation and polarization.

Marxism and Gandhian satyagraha were comprehensive theories of action; they engaged with, and were implicated in, all three kinds of questions. But the inclusion of a strong skeptical element in Gandhian satyagraha has seemed, especially to his Marxist critics, to be confusing and evasive. As noted above, one prominent criticism in the aftermath Chauri Chaura was that though Gandhi seemed to venerate mass popular agency in his call to direct action, in practice, Gandhism involved disciplining it in the negative sense of trying to dampen its revolutionary potential. What I hope to show is

---

<sup>12</sup> Nagappa Gowda, *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse* (OUP, 2011); Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji (eds), *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*; Sanjay Palshikar, *Evil and the Philosophy of Retribution: Modern Commentaries on the Gita* (Routledge, 2014).

that Gandhi's position was less contradictory and duplicitous than it may at first appear, and attending to its seeming duality reveals something distinctive about mass satyagraha as a form of political action.

### III. Interpreting Chauri Chaura

There are many understandable and enduring differences between Gandhism and Marxism, most importantly at the level of ideology. Marxists often presented Gandhian ideas as a loose mix of medievalism and mysticism, which were implicated in conservative and reactionary ideals.<sup>13</sup> Above all, they rejected Gandhism's anti-modern elements – the critique of industrialism and the modern state – and its overtly moral and religious orientation. Alongside this wariness, however, was also consistent praise of Gandhi's populism and emphasis on the necessity of mass action. In R. P. Dutt's words, Gandhi's great feat in NCO was to have to "brought before the masses a policy of action, of action of the masses."<sup>14</sup> That is, most Marxists saw Gandhi as capable of being a genuine mass leader and considered his ability to 'awaken' the masses to be his unique historical achievement and role.

But the suspension of NCO after the events of Chauri Chaura provoked serious doubts about Gandhi's commitment to mass action. Gandhi's professed aim was to recover the power of action of ordinary people through mass satyagraha. And yet, he seemed to call off the movement just as ordinary people – in this case, the peasants of UP – were realizing their power and beginning to undertake independent action. Marxists, already wary of the moral-religious language of nonviolence, came to suspect that nonviolence was being used as a pretext to constrain popular agency. But to what end? It was in answer to this puzzle that Marxist criticism of Gandhian politics would take on its most characteristic form.<sup>15</sup>

The most prominent line of interpretation, one that coalesced in the immediate aftermath of Chauri Chaura, was inaugurated by M.N. Roy and R.P. Dutt.<sup>16</sup> For both, Gandhi's vacillation stemmed from the class character of his leadership and, more

---

<sup>13</sup> S.G. Sardesai, "Gandhi and the CPI," in *The Mahatma: A Marxist Symposium*, edited by M.B. Rao (People's Publishing House, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> R. Palme Dutt, *Modern India* (Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927), 72.

<sup>15</sup> Subrata Mukherjee, *Marxist Interpretations of Gandhi* (PhD Thesis, Indiana University, 1976); M.B. Rao (ed), *The Mahatma: A Marxist Symposium*.

<sup>16</sup> M.N. Roy, *India in Transition* and "Mahatmaji and Bolshevism;" Dutt, *Modern India*.

generally, of the Congress coalition. Roy and Dutt differ in their characterization of this class as primarily bourgeois or feudal but what mattered was that, for both, Gandhi and the Congress party were beholden to landed and propertied elites and their interests. In tactical terms, it meant that the national movement had to reign in and contain any popular initiatives that threatened those interests; in effect, they had to disavow mass action that was building towards popular revolution.<sup>17</sup> Marxists critics also differed as to whether this class leadership was intentional – i.e. that Gandhi was insincere and intentionally duplicitous when he mobilized the masses – or objective, that is was borne of the broad-based nationalist coalition that necessarily included elite classes, which, for strategic reasons, could not be directly attacked. In either case, it implied that Gandhi was willing to encourage mass discontent but only so long as he could direct and control it from above. This exposed the ideological limitations of the movement, but also made the movement susceptible to political compromise and imperial cooptation since it could not risk a truly revolutionary awakening of the masses.

This general line of criticism has been surprisingly tenacious, and has been recapitulated in comparable terms throughout the twentieth century, as part of both polemical and scholarly evaluation.<sup>18</sup> An important restatement of this criticism can be found Ranajit Guha's seminal essay, "Discipline and Mobilize."<sup>19</sup> In line with the subaltern studies project of revising the historiography of Indian nationalism, Guha foregrounds what he sees as the elite and authoritarian elements in Gandhi's varied attempts to impose discipline and order on mass action. In the essay Guha pulls together wide-ranging evidence of Gandhi's frustration with and even disgust for unruly crowds and mob-like behavior to give substance to this claim. For Guha, Gandhi's repeated call for discipline and displays of aesthetic revulsion of the crowd were signs of elite anxiety and contempt for the spontaneity, immediacy, and autonomy of subaltern agency. What aligns this to the earlier Marxist line of interpretation is that, like Dutt, Guha registers the moral and spiritual language of nonviolence as a form of "soul control,"<sup>20</sup> a way to

---

<sup>17</sup> In this case, the main evidence for the claim was the substance of the Bardoli resolution that ended NCO which emphasized the necessity of revenue payment to landlords. Dutt analyzes these Bardoli clauses in detail. Dutt, *Modern India*, 75-80.

<sup>18</sup> For a recent endorsement of the thesis, see Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology* (Delhi, 2015). For a longer history, see especially Mukherjee, *Marxist Interpretations of Gandhi*. Marxist analyses could also be more nuanced than suggested above. Consider, for example, Philip Spratt's 1939 work, *Gandhism: An Analysis* (Madras), which explicitly challenges and revises the standard account of NCO.

<sup>19</sup> Ranajit Guha, "Discipline and Mobilize: Hegemony and Elite Control in Nationalist Campaigns," in *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Princeton, 1998), 100-151.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-150.

harness the power of the masses and at the same time to slow down, and eventually demobilize an awakening mass consciousness. The philosophy of nonviolence serves to keep the masses in a condition of paternalistic subjection, a deeply authoritarian paternalism that is meant I think to also throw suspicion on the idea that Gandhi held any serious commitment to popular agency, equality, or democracy.

In this line of criticism Gandhi's decision to suspend NCO is taken to be such an outright contradiction that analytic focus turns toward unearthing implicit ideological commitments to make sense of it. But in trying to pinpoint these underlying causes, these accounts tend to ignore or downplay Gandhi's own reasoning for the suspension of NCO. It seems to me that this becomes something of a closed hermeneutic: the assumption and conclusion is that Gandhi's logic had no internal coherence and so must be explained by recourse to something else. But attending to Gandhi's understanding of the violence at Chauri Chaura reveals a more immediate, straightforward, and important divergence at play between Marxist and Gandhian models of mass action. Marxist critique of Gandhian politics is premised on a model of mass action as the accretion of collective agency, and popular revolution as the cascading effervescence of that power and energy. Gandhi's formulation of mass satyagraha was always at odds with that model and, in the aftermath of Chauri Chaura, became more explicitly an immanent critique of it.

As we saw, a common and prominent feature of Marxist critique – and one especially emphasized in more recent accounts like Guha's – is a view of Gandhi's insistence on discipline in action as the counterpart to a disapproving view of popular initiative and spontaneous agency, and the suggestion that such disavowals were the motivating cause of the suspension of NCO. Though Guha is surely right to note the often paternalistic logic of Gandhi's understanding of, and relationship with, the masses, it is not at all clear that Gandhi diagnosed the violence at Chauri Chaura as a problem of mass psychology or mass indiscipline. For one, Gandhi did not see the violence as either spontaneous or as driven by something like mob frenzy. This becomes more evident when we look at the debate and criticism that ensued directly in the wake of the suspension of NCO.

The most common critical refrain was a concern that Gandhi was imposing impossibly high standards for mass resistance. Critics contended that outbreaks of popular violence were the acceptable and expected risks of popular awakening, especially under conditions of colonial repression. In response, Gandhi argued that the issue was not violence per se; in his words, "Violence there always will be, and I should not be

perturbed by stray cases of violence.”<sup>21</sup> The problem of Chauri Chaura was the specific kind of violence enacted, a violence he characterized as “political violence.”<sup>22</sup> Neither unruly crowds nor spontaneous outrage in response of state violence were sufficient grounds for halting the movement. Gandhi noted several instances of violence, including the much more serious Moplah Rebellion, that did not interrupt the movement or require atonement. The reason that Chauri Chaura elicited such a severe reaction was that it was *political* in three overlapping senses. Firstly, in the contrast to Moplah, the event was sparked by public-political activity that was intimately connected with Gandhi and the Congress movement; in terms of ideology, organization, and personnel, the demonstration was fully and openly allied to their political aims. Secondly, the demonstration was organized and the violence foreseeable, neither the cause nor the intended effect were spontaneous. And, finally, the tactics were political in a third sense, the demonstration that ended in violence was purposively organized to cause a political effect through the display of power.

In reflections on his so-called Himalayan “miscalculations” and “blunders” of the period, including the culminating blunder of Chauri Chaura, Gandhi conspicuously emphasized the non-mob-like character of this violence. From the most determined mea culpa and to his varied admonishments after violent outbreaks, Gandhi punctuated these meditations with reminders of, and praise for, the capacity of workers and peasants to show restraint in the face of provocation. Moreover, he used this to direct attention to the responsibility of Congress workers, that is, the elite and middle classes for failing to understand the necessity of discipline for *satyagraha*. That is, in Gandhi’s view, Congress demonstrations, instead of displaying a strength and courage borne of self-constraint and self-mastery, became occasions for the testing and display of a newly found and threatening power. In correspondence with Nehru, Gandhi noted that with the success of NCO as a movement, “our people were becoming aggressive, defiant and threatening.”<sup>23</sup> At Chauri Chaura, this was evident in the structure and purpose of the demonstration. It was intended to stage a particular kind of confrontation and, in that sense, the violence that erupted was a foreseeable, perhaps even the desired outcome. The political procession – led and organized by Congress volunteers – was purposely taken in the direction of the police station, knowing full well that it would instigate a

---

<sup>21</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Interview to “The Bombay Chronicle” (15-2-1922),” *CWMG*, 26, 169.

<sup>22</sup> “It is political violence which *must* stop civil disobedience.” M.K. Gandhi, “Notes (9-3-1922),” *CWMG*, 26, 299. See also Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (OUP, 1995), 49-50.

<sup>23</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Letter to Jawaharlal Nehru (19-2-1922),” *CWMG*, 26, 197.

collision between the police and the people. That is, the violence followed from a structure of protest that was meant to demonstrate power and provoke a response.

In this sense, Gandhi's reckoning of Chauri Chaura was neither simply a display of moral outrage with a violence with which he felt himself complicit, nor an aesthetic and political revulsion of unruly, mob behavior but rather the "discovery that very few understand the nature of non-violence." What he saw at Chauri Chaura was the intimation of a seductive sense of power and an idea that displays of power can be politically effective. In a long and particularly revealing letter to Konda Venkatappayya – the leader of the provincial Andhra Congress and the only officially sanctioned no-tax campaign of NCO, Gandhi argued that in Chauri Chauri – as with previous events in Bombay and Madras – Congress workers showed that they "liked and loved excitement, and underneath these vast demonstrations was an idea unconsciously lurking in the breast that it was a kind of demonstration of force, the very negation of non-violence."<sup>24</sup> In correspondence with Nehru, Gandhi reiterated this concern when he spoke of how NCO demonstrations had everywhere become ever more "politically minded."<sup>25</sup> They capitalized on "a vague sense of political wrong" to show strength through acts of provocation and intimidation.<sup>26</sup>

To be sure, in these outbursts of violence there were issues of popular discipline at play. And, of course, the emphasis on discipline was a recurrent chorus of all of Gandhi's speeches and writing. But here the source of indiscipline was tied to a conceptual confusion of strength with displays of force and power, especially in terms of the power of large numbers. To Gandhi, this underscored not a lack of spiritual resolve but a mistaken understanding of the political logic of nonviolence. The aim of nonviolence as a form of politics was to persuade and disrupt the opposition rather than to coerce or force it into compliance. The confusion of nonviolent strength with force, intimidation, and provocation, demonstrated that "the workers did not understand the full purpose of non-violence nor its implications."<sup>27</sup> They seemed "to believe that violence can run parallel to non-violence and the two together accelerate the progress of the country

---

<sup>24</sup> M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to Konda Venkatappayya (4-3-1922)," *CWMG*, 26, 271.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, "Letter to Nehru," 26, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Gandhi, "Interview to 'The Bombay Chronicle'," 26, 169

<sup>27</sup> Gandhi, "Letter to Venkatappayya," 26, 270.

towards its goal.”<sup>28</sup> With this mistaken understanding, what workers seem to want was “to deliver ‘non-violent’ blows” and through a “show of force” win swaraj.<sup>29</sup>

What was at issue then was the very purpose and logic of nonviolent action, of how nonviolence is supposed to do its political work. R.P. Dutt was closer to the mark when he noted that throughout the NCO movement rival understandings of the purpose and form of effective mass action were at play. Gandhi envisioned mass satyagraha to be a form of non-coercive persuasion – a “spiritual” weapon and argument – whereas Marxists understood that NCO was primarily “a question of *power*” and its “whole political importance” was “the attempt to *force* the Government to submit, by the use of the power of the united action of the masses.”<sup>30</sup> Dutt did not feel the need to elaborate this distinction, for he viewed Gandhi’s alternative reasoning to be glaringly disingenuous and confused. But as I have tried to show, these differences did not simply turn on the morality of violence nor were they confused symptoms of ideological divergence. What looked like moralism or confusion was in fact a dispute about how mass action worked as a lever of political change. For Dutt, for Marxist theories of collective action more generally, and – more surprisingly – for most contemporary advocates of nonviolence, the logic of mass political action is understood to work as the assertion of a nonviolent but nevertheless coercive collective power. For Gandhi, by contrast, nonviolent persuasion – especially in its mass form – works through the disruptive display and dramatization of discipline and self-mastery. The performative dynamics of discipline distinguish the logic of nonviolence from *both* the pure violence of armed rebellion as well as the ‘nonviolent coercion’ at work in collective power.

Chauri Chaura forced a clarification of the logic of mass satyagraha, of how to retool satyagraha in such a way as to avoid the generation and implications of collective power. Before outlining some aspects of this retooling, I want to explore the nature of Gandhi’s critique and worry about collective power. Collective power was associated with a particular moral psychology; the excitement of action was linked to the experience of collective power and the strength of acting in numbers. Mass action in this sense was bred by a collective egoism, a moral hubris grounded in a sense of corporate power – we might even say a democratic conception of power. Gandhi’s worries about collective power tracks well to his better known critique of mass democracy. In addition to strategic and tactical concerns about the efficacy of coercive

---

<sup>28</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Violence in the Camp (9-2-1922),” *Young India*, CWMG, 26, 134.

<sup>29</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “The All-India Congress Committee (2-3-1922),” *Young India*, CWMG, 26, 261-262.

<sup>30</sup> Dutt, *Modern India*, 73.

collective power, as crucial were moral and political conundrums about freedom's potential affiliation with mastery and domination.

#### IV. Gandhi's critique of collective power

One of the earliest and consistent sources of Gandhi's critical account of collective or corporate power can be discerned in his well-known aversion to mass democracy. My contention is that there are instructive analogies between the critique of mass democracy and the critique of mass action. In his critique of mass democracy, Gandhi was participating in a radically individualist strand of nineteenth-century thought, which included thinkers and interlocutors he most admired such as Thoreau, Emerson, Tolstoy, and Tagore.<sup>31</sup> All of them worried about the deforming effects of modern politics – and the principle of majority rule therein – on individuality. One concern, and perhaps the overarching one, was the threat posed by conformity to moral integrity. This threat could take the form, as Gandhi expressed in *Hind Swaraj*, of unreflective deference to public opinion or the spirit of party at the expense of genuine public spiritedness and right judgement.<sup>32</sup> Majority rule held no special moral standing and might even work to confuse questions of moral right. This was majority opinion as “brute force,”<sup>33</sup> where the power of numbers imposes a kind of false or unquestioning truth. Gandhi therefore would insist that “in matters of conscience, the Law of Majority had no place.”<sup>34</sup>

Animating the concern with modern political institutions as engendering conformity and moral coercion was the problem of external imposition, the ways in which these institutions impinged on moral integrity and conscience, on the possibility of self-realizing truth. Gandhi's model of self-mastery praised internally generated action, as an answer to and protection from externally imposed forms – from practices of social boycott to the very structures of legitimation of the modern state and law. Here, we

---

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps best characterized as a Romantic liberal strand. Marxists like Dange and Spratt were quick to pick up on this individualist aspect of Gandhi. Dange linked it to Tolstoy, while Spratt implied an affiliation to bourgeois individualism. Dange, *Gandhi vs Lenin* (1921); Spratt, *Gandhism*.

<sup>32</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (1909 in Gujarati/1910 in English), *CWMG*, 10, 255-258.

<sup>33</sup> “Europe, which we are so impatient to imitate, also worships brute force or, which is the same thing, majority opinion, and the majority, surely, does not always look after the interests of the minority.” M.K. Gandhi, “Insanity (30-5-1920),” *Navajivan*, *CWMG*, 20, 375.

<sup>34</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “The Congress and Non-Co-Operation (4-8-1920),” *Young India*, *CWMG*, 21, 114.

may also add, that Gandhi would also view egoistic attachment as functioning as an externalizing or extrinsic force that compromised the integrity of the self.

Most alarmingly, the coercive implications of majority rule were becoming exacerbated and heightened in the age of mass democracy, which bestowed a new moral-political authority to the power of numbers. The democratic celebration of majority-rule legitimates and puts into play a new kind of power politics, a new and dangerous logic of ‘might over right.’<sup>35</sup> As we know, in the colonial world, the numbers game became a central and particularly fraught political logic. The moral claim to popular rule became seductively entwined with the demographic superiority of numbers, pitting groups against one and other in an open and brutal competition for power. In our own time, we are beginning to recognize that this is a general and recurring feature of modern democracy. Democratic claims necessarily braid moral-ethical claims to legitimacy with claims to power, and it is that mingling that makes them especially hard to temper and restrain. In plural societies especially, this dual logic becomes a recipe for majoritarian assertion and minority vulnerability.

Gandhi was prescient in his attunement to the dangers of majoritarianism in India. This was especially prominent in the ways in which he conceptualized Hindu-Muslim conflict and mechanisms for mitigating it. He laid emphasis on legitimate Muslim fear of Hindu political dominance in a future swaraj government and therefore insisted that it was incumbent upon Hindus as the numerically advantaged community to actively work to mitigate these fears. But Gandhi also discerned the majoritarian turn at Chauri Chaura, as a claim to power within the context of protest. The democratic logic of numbers imbues collective protest with a similar double logic of enacting democratic sovereignty – the greater the crowds the closer you concretize popular will – as well as asserting sheer power.

The conjoined critique of collective power and of mass democracy never implied the abandonment of democracy, nor was it inherently elitist in orientation. Gandhi consistently accepted the principle of majority rule, even parliamentary government, as the basic frame of a swaraj government. Moreover, in his ideal version of a

---

<sup>35</sup> The idea of “might over right” is probably most directly traced to Thoreau’s essay, “Resistance to Civil Government” where he argues that in popular government “the practical reason the majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because physically they are the strongest.”

decentralized village democracy, universal suffrage was the rule.<sup>36</sup> As a decision rule, Gandhi considered “the principle of majority rule” to be just and necessary in “ordinary matters;” it was “justice as the world understands justice.”<sup>37</sup> To be sure, Gandhi was attuned to the ever-present potential for ignoring the interests of the politically weak, and so suggested that a government that was “perfectly democratic” would look beyond “the rule of the majority” and protect “the interests of the even the smallest limb of the realm.”<sup>38</sup> There was always a “subtle violence implicit in the very fact of a majority.”<sup>39</sup> Even so, the real danger was when this latent coercion becomes overt assertion, when empowered majorities become intolerant of minority interests or, indeed, or any opposition. “Swaraj necessarily means the rule of the majority. If, however, a large mass of people get more power and misuse their increased power, that will not be swaraj, that will be oppression or tyranny.”<sup>40</sup>

Majoritarianism as a problem of moral-psychology is less concerned with conformity or contagion than the temptations and seduction of power. Gandhi feared that “in the consciousness of strength we are daily acquiring,” lay a risk of repeating “the mistakes of the rulers in an exaggerated form in our relations with those who happen to be weaker.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it would lead to “a worse state” than British rule. For when the rule of the majority becomes coercive, it is undergirded by the self-certainty of freedom, but an idea of freedom that confused with mastery and domination. The danger was of awakening a kind of political freedom that in overcoming slavery instantaneously reveled in mastery, hence becoming a form of sovereign domination.

British rule was a minority rule, the rule of a ‘bureaucratic’ minority, and as such required coercion of various kinds to secure the obedience of the many. But Indian tyranny would be a “terrorism imposed by a majority,”<sup>42</sup> its coercion would be of a wholly excessive kind. For Gandhi, NCO was marred by innumerable instances in which

---

<sup>36</sup> Strikingly, his two conditions to qualify for suffrage was a specific age qualification (between 18-50) and the bread labor principle. Neither of these, especially the latter, can easily be cast as elitist.

<sup>37</sup> Gandhi, “Insanity,” 20, 375. See also Ajay Skaria’s discussion of the two versions of justice at work in Gandhi’s discussion of majorities and minorities here in “Relinquishing Republican Democracy: Gandhi’s *Ramrajya*,” *Postcolonial Studies* (2011) 14:2, 203-229.

<sup>38</sup> Gandhi, “Insanity,” 20, 375.

<sup>39</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “My Notes (29-1-1922),” *Navajivan*, CWMG, 26, 37.

<sup>40</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “(2-2-1922),” *Navajivan*, CWMG, 26, 45

<sup>41</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Fraught with Danger (26-1-1922),” *Young India*, CWMG, 26, 15.

<sup>42</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “The Secret of It (27-10-1921),” *Young India*, CWMG, 25, 12

non-cooperators sought to impose their views on ‘cooperators’ – by forcing people to wear khadi caps (or attacking those that did not), forcibly shuttering foreign cloth and liquor shops, or imposing social boycott. Chauri Chaura was a stark illustration of this kind of intolerance, borne of an eagerness to demonstrate power. In the aftermath of NCO, Gandhi began to insist that this was by far the greatest obstacle to attaining swaraj. No longer a problem of British power but, rather, the internal aspiration to a kind of unconstrained power. He noted this problem in relation to communal tensions but also in relationship to the caste question. Gandhi’s refrain was that a Hindu collective is dangerously empowered because they feel themselves to be morally justified by the logic of democracy to impose their will on others.

Again, Gandhi’s worry is different from an anxiety about unthinking, mob frenzy. It was aimed at the self-certainty brought on by feelings of power, and in this respect, is closer to what Reinhold Niebuhr called collective or group egoism. Collective egoism was most dangerous when its claim to power is tethered to, and supported by, a sense of moral altruism, superiority, or rectitude. This overlap in the analysis of group egoism in collective conflict is what made Niebuhr one of Gandhi’s earliest and most provocative interpreters.<sup>43</sup> One of Niebuhr’s great insights was how group egoism was itself premised on a paradoxical melding of altruism and selfishness. Collectives allow a distinct opportunity for self-denial, i.e. in the willingness to sacrifice for the group, but this self-denial is tied to an egoism on a larger scale. Patriotism is the most vivid example of the transmutation of individual unselfishness into collective egoism, an egoism whose fervor yields a loss of perspective and self-criticism, dangerous forms of self-delusion and hypocrisy, all of which lead to a kind of limitless or unconstrained politics. While Niebuhr had in mind racism, nationalism, and imperialism as his primary examples of collective egoism, we might now want to add to that list the problem of democratic majoritarianism, which also uneasily mixes and veils its claims of power with moral aspirations and ideals.<sup>44</sup>

My reading of Chauri Chaura as a problem of collective power, and majority rule, aligns well with the emerging consensus amongst scholars of Gandhi who present him as the champion of the minority. The idea of the minority is also connected in interesting ways to alternative visions of freedom, especially non-sovereign models of agency and freedom that try to undo the association of freedom with mastery and domination. Uday Mehta, for example, has powerfully argued that Gandhi fundamentally rejected

---

<sup>43</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York, 1932).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, especially Chapter IV.

the category of “the people” as a collective moral and political agent, as the site for the aggregation of political power. Faisal Devji has articulated this worry about sovereignty in Gandhi’s interest in the minority as the pure/insurgent agent of nonviolence, where the majority represents tendencies towards domination and closure. With similar resonance, Ramin Jahanbegloo associates nonviolence with a plural or shared sovereignty in contrast to the dangers of unitary sovereignty. Dustin Howes also formulates the grounds of a nonviolent conception of freedom, for the uncoupling of freedom from violence, through an ambitious re-reading of narratives of liberation in the western political tradition. Finally, Ajay Skaria’s work disrupts the traditional figure of freedom as the sovereign warrior by contrasting the warrior’s sacrifice and self-mastery with that of the satyagrahi’s. The satyagrahi, like the warrior, overcomes fear through the display of strength and self-discipline but also enacts *abhaydan*, the gift of fearlessness.<sup>45</sup>

## V. Satyagraha as disciplined action

If I have a quibble with these subtle and persuasive philosophical accounts of Gandhian nonviolence is that they tend to stop short of describing what these intimations of non-sovereign freedom looked like in the context of political action. Gandhi was primarily driven by the question of means, of how to translate ideas into practical action. Indeed, it might be more accurate to say he strove to innovate and experiment in the sphere of action. Given Gandhi’s growing suspicion of collective power – the worry that an orientation towards dominance seemed conjoined with its expression – the challenge was to recalibrate and retool mass satyagraha so as to mitigate these troubling aspects. The period between Chauri Chaura and the Salt Satyagraha can be seen a moment of satyagraha’s reckoning and reformulation. Gandhi would continue to defend the controversial Bardoli decision to call off aggressive civil disobedience in the near term. It was in part the very success of NCO that had shifted the tasks of the national movement. NCO was meant to bring people into consciousness of their individual power and to break the hypnotic hold of British authority. Even if the program of total withdrawal was never fully realized, for Gandhi, NCO was nevertheless successful in

---

<sup>45</sup> See Uday Mehta, “Gandhi on Democracy, Politics, and the Ethics of Everyday Life,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7:2(2010); Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptations of Violence* (Cambridge, 2012); Ramin Jahanbegloo, *The Gandhian Moment* (Cambridge, 2013); Dustin Howes, *Freedom without Violence: Resisting the Western Political Tradition* (Oxford, 2016); Ajay Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi’s Religion of Resistance* (Minneapolis, 2016). See also Skaria, “Relinquishing Republican Democracy” and Leela Gandhi, *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy* (2014).

both these tasks, in teaching people to overcome fear and realize agency and to call into question the government's legitimacy. But the problem was – as suggested in the previous section – the consciousness of power as agency had become aligned to the assertion of power as mastery, and it was this braiding that Gandhi wanted to disrupt and interrogate. Power once recovered had to be properly channeled, organized, and, most importantly, disciplined. Only through disciplined shows of strength would the power of the nonviolent action be demonstrated and realized.

To repeat, Gandhi's challenge was to develop forms of collective action that could temper collective egoism and, at the same time, be effective without relying upon sheer force. The key mechanism of self-limitation was *tapasya* or disciplined suffering.<sup>46</sup> In *Satyagraha in South Africa*, which was written in this period as an object lesson in the kind of patience and discipline needed for successful satyagraha, Gandhi described satyagraha as “a force containing within itself seeds of progressive self-restraint.”<sup>47</sup> The idea of self-suffering in satyagraha is often associated with the paradigm of sacrifice, and conjures up images of extreme acts of self-abnegation like the fast unto death. But suffering in Gandhi's conception of it was less concerned with physical distress per se but something more along the lines of self-discipline in action. Moreover, in conceptual terms, *discipline* more readily conveys important aspects of self-constraint and limitation.

Sacrifice was for Gandhi a much more fraught political practice. It was by nature double-edged, it could easily take more negative, egoistic, vain forms. This was the case with the violent revolutionary as much as the ill-advised hunger striker.<sup>48</sup> The problem of the patriotic sacrifice is though it is selfless in form it is often tied to a unconscious desire to display one's commitment and, at worst, to garner fame. In the context of political conflict, its consequences are also double-edged; while they may show commitment, they also provoke and escalate conflict. Moreover, sacrifice and self-denial when tied to and subsumed by larger ideals of patriotism and sovereignty, become vehicles for the accretion of power – a point made eloquently and differently by Uday Mehta and Ajay Skaria. For Mehta this is the basic paradigm of modern politics, part of its “inherent idealism,” in which all action is subsumed by and only given

---

<sup>46</sup> The term *tapas* or *tapasya* was variously translated by Gandhi as “self-discipline,” “self-suffering,” “voluntary suffering,” or “sacrifice.” It was also translated as “power.” See M.K. Gandhi, “Speech on Non-Co-Operation, Calcutta (22-12-1920),” *Young India*, CWMG, 20, 89.

<sup>47</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1925), CWMG, 34, 174.

<sup>48</sup> On the “false exultation” of the revolutionary's sacrifice, see M.K. Gandhi, “A Revolutionary's Defence (12-2-1925),” *Young India*, CWMG, 30, 249.

meaning in terms of greater purposes.<sup>49</sup> For Skaria this is part of the paradox of the self-mastery, especially in the form of the sovereign warrior.<sup>50</sup> Sacrifice can convey a kind of power and mastery that is deeply tied to moral self-certainty which is what makes the politics its drives hard to resist and contain. By contrast, Gandhian politics more consistently aims for a form and a discipline that can moderate, limit, and slow down the compulsions of collective political mobilization.

This is why I argue that discipline is the defining feature of satyagraha and the orientation towards 'progressive self-restraint' becomes especially central in mass satyagraha. Moreover, discipline is something that needs to be built into the very structure of nonviolent protest; practices of self-discipline and ascetic self-mastery are *staged* in mass nonviolent protest and action. The dramatization and display of *tapasya* was vital to its success as nonviolent protest. Comportment and discipline also appeared to serve a second function, one that was especially crucial in mass satyagraha, namely, the re-insertion of individuation into the dynamics of mass action. Mass satyagraha would then function not through the power of numbers per se but by the coordinated activity of disciplined individuals whose individuality would be maintained and expressed in their comportment, constraint, and detachment. If mass action could be given such an individuating structure, it would neither depend on nor incite collective egoism.

Arguably, the best exemplification of the centrality of discipline – in the organization of action and the bearing of satyagrahis – would be the Salt Satyagraha, Gandhi's next major campaign of mass disobedience and the campaign that garnered global acclaim for satyagraha. The tight (successful) scripting of the campaign from the ritualized discipline of the salt march to the escalation following Gandhi's arrest, the Salt Satyagraha became the exemplary model in the global diffusion of nonviolent action. In the early or classical phase of global adoption, in the anti-nuclear campaigns in UK to the US civil rights movement, nonviolent comportment and discipline were likewise dramatized and staged in specific and directed actions like sit-ins, marches, and freedom rides.

Before the famous renewal of mass civil disobedience, in the interregnum between NCO and the Salt Satyagraha, Gandhi also pushed for another kind of disciplined satyagraha

---

<sup>49</sup> Mehta, especially 363-369.

<sup>50</sup> Skaria, *Unconditional Equality*. Self-denial as a political problem is addressed in Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, as the danger of "selflessness" in Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

in the form of the constructive program. In its own way, constructive satyagraha was also a response to the dilemmas of mass action and the problem of collective power as they appeared in the aftermath of NCO. The constructive program would eventually become a permanent campaign of rural reform and rejuvenation. Its central pillars would be Hindu-Muslim unity, the eradication of untouchability, as well as various campaigns for promoting literacy, hygiene, and temperance. For Gandhi, the *ends* of nonviolent action – the moral, tactical, and strategic ends – had to be built into and expressed via the *means* of nonviolent action. If the goal is true swaraj – a swaraj that did not end in majoritarian tyranny – the intertwining of means of ends meant that satyagraha had to model the norms and practices of a different horizon of democracy, one in which toleration, equality, and the defense of the weakest would be central.<sup>51</sup> The constructive program's focus on identification with and service to the poor and excluded was precisely a way of cultivating and dramatizing these moral values, most radically entailed in Gandhi's call for educated, urban, elite Congress workers to go to the villages and take up the work of service.

Constructive satyagraha was the mode by which Gandhi sought to privilege internal reform rather than resistance to British power as the main fulcrum of national political activity. For Gandhi, what looked like a social program was necessarily political. It simultaneously built and displayed the collective capacity for self-rule by its power of self-organizing and in its determination to solve the most pressing social and economic issues of the day. Gandhi argued that if the movement could neither model democratic values in its political organization and action, nor begin to make self-rule a reality through the enactment of genuine social change, then it was not deserving of swaraj. Finally, the 'silent work of construction' was contrasted to the exuberant speeches, assemblies, and protests as better training in and for politics. Service cultivated patience, the day to day focus of practical work was to "steady and calm us" and counteract cycles of enthusiasm and despair, hope and disappointment that are necessary features of political action.<sup>52</sup>

Above all else, khadi and the practice of spinning were the symbolic and material heart of the constructive programme. It was right after his release from jail in 1924, that Gandhi begins his most expansive and relentless push for khadi. Famously, Gandhi partially implemented and then withdrew a strict khadi franchise in Congress, which in

---

<sup>51</sup> Gandhi, "Insanity," 20, 375; M.K. Gandhi, "Definitions of Swaraj (14-8-1921)," *Navajivan*, CWMG, 24, 88-89; "The Moral Issue (24-11-1921)," *Young India*, CWMG, 25, 147-9. [Add citations]

<sup>52</sup> Gandhi, "Notes," 26, 254; also Gandhi, "Letter to Venkatapayya," 26, 272.

its most expansive form made spinning the basis of membership and, most controversially, a prerequisite for office-holding in Congress. The failure led to the eventual creation of the All-India Spinning Association (AISA). Khadi was important for its “universal” quality, for promoting the identification of rich and poor, undoing privilege, and for keeping front and center the problem of rural poverty. Spinning was also the practice that best modeled the discipline of a calming, inward-directed practice. But khadi was also a striking example of individuation within the context of mass-collective action, maybe even Gandhi’s ideal model of dispersed, individuated-collected action. Recall, the khadi system was a large-scale, decentralized system of cooperative cloth production. It was a mode of cooperation that was collective in nature but also premised on the patient work of radically *isolated* individuals, where each individual – in the act of spinning – would separately cultivate inward discipline, let go of egoism, calm their passion, and experience a kind of individual self-rule.<sup>53</sup>

Disciplined conduct and individuated comportment would become core, structural features of Gandhian nonviolence in its classic mold, displayed in the ritualized form of the directed campaign, or the slow march, or strike. Here silence, calmness, slowness, and repetition over time might be usefully contrasted to (sometimes unruly) crowds gathering in public spaces more readily associated with collective nonviolence today. Over the course of his long career and evident in his voluminous writings, Gandhi devised a set of rules of nonviolent action, for how specific actions like pickets, boycotts, and hartals could be organized and practiced so as to avoid the appearance of coercion and intimidation. These rules of action register how discipline is to be performed. Rules reconcile what often appear to be nonviolence’s exacting ethical demands with Gandhi’s insistence that satyagraha did not require, in his own words, “saints for its working.”<sup>54</sup> That is, rather than thinking of discipline as a prior condition of action – or as a set of virtues cultivated outside and before political action – we can conceive of discipline as dramatized and cultivated in and through the specific forms that nonviolent action is meant to take. Gandhi’s expectation and demand was not that everyone had to be pure in motive in order to act or had to adopt nonviolence as a creed and way of life as he had, but that people consistently “carry out the rules of non-violent action.”<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “Interview to Nirmal Kumar Bose (9/10-11-34)”, *CWMG*, 65, 317.

<sup>54</sup> “To follow out non-violence as a policy surely does not require saints for its working, but it does require honest workers who understand what is expected of them.” Gandhi, “Letter to Venkatappayya,” *CWMG*, 26, 270.

<sup>55</sup> “...for my movement I do not at all need believers in the theory of non-violence, full or imperfect. It is enough if people carry out the rules of non-violent action.” Gandhi (1943), quoted in Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, 279.

Discipline and individuation were therefore not simply moral ideals and ethical practices associated with nonviolence, nor simply tools to contain political agency. Rather they were the mechanisms by which nonviolent action transforms the tenor and dynamics of political contestation and ultimately sways opponents and potential allies more effectively than outright coercion, confrontation, and intimidation. Recall that for Gandhi politics was driven by affective attachments and dynamics – and in its most conflictual modes would generate (and be exacerbated) by resentments and egoistic sentiments. Disciplined nonviolence disrupts these dynamics by mitigating our psychological responses to the dilemmas of action, to the burdens and frustrations of action. Inwardly, it would discipline protestors which, in turn, would initiate outward effects for those who receive or witness nonviolence. Ideally, it would temper their passionate resistance and weaken their entrenched commitments. More often, its most potent effects would be on the neutral observer or the public at large.<sup>56</sup>

## **VI. The politics of nonviolence today**

In a 1936 meeting with the African-American theologian Howard Thurman, Gandhi famously suggested that “it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world.”<sup>57</sup> He implied that only minority movements could offer a pure demonstration of nonviolence since majoritarian movements – like the anticolonial movement in India – would always be “adulterated” in the sense that their seeming success may be attributable more to collective power than disciplined satyagraha. The basic conceptual confusion Gandhi identified between mass satyagraha as the assertion of power versus mass satyagraha as the public display of self-mastery was neither resolved nor fully clarified within the nationalist movement. On the one hand, in memorializing the independence struggle, it became common to pay lip service to Gandhian nonviolence and, in same breadth, celebrate the revolutionary violence of Bhagat Singh or Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army. (More recently and most alarmingly, the pantheon has been extended to include Gandhi’s assassins). The veneration of martyrs as well as the more violent episodes are indicative of the fact that there existed no clear disavowal of violence let alone a reckoning with the coercion of nonviolent forms of political action.

---

<sup>56</sup> To my mind, the most interesting account of this dynamic is given in Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Chapter IX.

<sup>57</sup> M.K. Gandhi, “Interview to American Negro Delegation (1936),” *CWMG*, 68, 237-8.

On the other hand, in a kind of inverse mirror, there were various concerns expressed about the place of satyagraha in independent India, warnings that disruptive mass protest would undermine the moral and political habits needed to sustain India's precarious experiment with democracy. This was Ambedkar's famous admonition that the "method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and satyagraha" was the "Grammar of Anarchy" and must be abandoned in favor of constitutional methods.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, some of Gandhi's closest comrades, from Vallabhai Patel, Vinoba Bhave, and later Nehru, similarly worried that the constant resort to mass disobedience in everyday politics was a dangerous legacy of the independence movement.<sup>59</sup> This uneasiness was echoed more recently in the debate about Anna Hazare's hunger strikes during the India Against Corruption campaign. Many public intellectuals highlighted the coercive character of ostensibly nonviolent protest tactics – like the fast unto death – and argued that their use threatened democratic norms and institutions.<sup>60</sup>

I want to suggest that all of these views are symptomatic of the conceptual confusion between, or rather the assimilation of, of the two ways to view and practice mass satyagraha I have been exploring. It is a slippage that makes visible a central puzzle about contemporary Indian politics. Gandhian forms of action – the political fast, the hartal (a work-stoppage), etc.– have been persistent features of Indian politics, practiced by politicians and activists from across the ideological spectrum. But the continual recourse to forms of political action whose semiotic reference is Gandhi is coupled with a lack of clarity (and maybe even lack of interest) in what would define these practices as nonviolent or Gandhian in a conceptual sense (and not just by symbolic or historic reference to Gandhi's political career). I tried to show that in his own time Gandhi took great pains to distinguish between nonviolent forms of protest and coercive forms, and insisted that any action – even ostensibly nonviolent action – could become coercive depending on the context within which it was enacted. But

---

<sup>58</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, "Speech at the Closing of the Constituent Assembly (25-11-1949)," *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, edited by Vasant Moon (Govt of Maharashtra, 1994), Volume 13, 1215.

<sup>59</sup> On Nehru's worry about disruptive protest, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "'In the Name of Politics': Democracy and the Power of the Multitude in India," *Public Culture* 19:1 (2007).

<sup>60</sup> See especially, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Of the few, by the few," *Indian Express* (April 7, 2011) and "Time to Step Back," *Indian Express* (August 16, 2011); and Aradhana Sharma, "Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles: The 'India Against Corruption' Movement, its Critics, and the Re-Making of 'Gandhi,'" *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37:3 (2014); Mitu Sengupta, "Anna Hazare and the Idea of Gandhi," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71:3 (2012) and "Anna Hazare's Anti-Corruption Movement and the Limits of Mass Mobilization in India," *Social Movement Studies* 13:3 (2014).

these kinds of distinctions often appeared to critics as little more than sophistries. And they have not sparked serious political or intellectual engagement and debate on the what nonviolent political action consists in.

Instead, the wider contestation over who or what Gandhi represents tends to overdetermine questions about the nature and specificity of nonviolent action. Most often *satyagraha* and nonviolence are taken as symptoms of Gandhian ideology, his underlying philosophy, or deeper political commitments. For critics from the left, as we have seen, nonviolence cannot be disentangled from these ideological commitments and is seen to be naturally aligned to a conservative and/or reactionary agenda. For the right, nonviolence is equally compromised but more often as part and parcel of a deeply enervated and/or emasculated nationalism. But even defenders of Gandhi tend to tie nonviolence very tightly to Gandhian philosophy, for instance, insisting that nonviolence is best understood and practiced as a way of life, an integral philosophy which can only be disfigured when treated as a theory of politics or a political tactic.

If in India today nonviolence is overdetermined by controversies around what Gandhi represents, global discussions of nonviolence tend towards the opposite trajectory. They focus more directly on nonviolence as political technique, and they do so by distancing themselves from such close identification with Gandhi. In the early twentieth century, this was done to demonstrate nonviolence's universality and portability. The first attempts to translate Gandhian politics for the West – such as, Richard Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence* (1934) and Krishnalal Shridharani's *War without Violence* (1939) – purposefully tried to dis-embed *satyagraha* from its Indian political, religious, and philosophical context. These influential texts were widely read and disseminated in the US civil rights movement precisely because they pared down *satyagraha* into a replicable set of political techniques.<sup>61</sup> They mingled elements of discipline and collective power in their accounts of how nonviolence did its political work. Gregg's was arguably the most utopian in its vision of the psychology of "conversion" at work on nonviolent action, a process he famously dubbed *moral jui-jitsu*. Shridharani more openly advocated for a view of nonviolence as collective power, as an insurgent, countervailing form of directed mass power that engaged in a kind of social combat and sought to undermine state power.

---

<sup>61</sup> Richard B. Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence* (New York, 1934); Krishnalal Shridharani, *War without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Method and Its Accomplishments* (New York, 1939). For the influence of these works in nonviolent movements, see especially Sean Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge, 2011).

Since the nineteen-seventies onwards, the distancing from Gandhi became more pointed. In the aftermath of King's assassination and the denouement of the civil rights movement, radicals rejected the centrality of discipline and suffering to the logic of nonviolent protest. New cultures of protest came to celebrate what they considered to be more confrontational, transgressive, and authentic expressions of dissent and opposition.<sup>62</sup> It was in this moment of intense reassessment that nonviolent theorists and activists began to draw a sharp distinction between principled and strategic nonviolence.<sup>63</sup> That distinction, most influentially developed in the work of Gene Sharp, has now become paradigmatic; it is the core assumption of scholarly treatment as well as activist endorsement of nonviolence.<sup>64</sup> Gandhi and King are associated with a principled commitment to nonviolence, defined as a religious or absolute commitment to nonviolence/non-killing. In contrast, activists now recommend nonviolence, ostensibly, on purely pragmatic or strategic grounds, as a set of useful tactics rather than a defining creed.

In the now dominant strategic or pragmatic theory of nonviolence, nonviolence is understood and celebrated as collective power. And, arguably, this collective power model – tethered to a theory of democratic power and legitimacy – approximates well the forms of mass nonviolence we see today, for instance in the image of massive crowds occupying public spaces. These mass gatherings are thought to not only display strength through the force of numbers but also symbolize the mobilization and expression of popular will. New social science research has also reinforced claims about the strategic efficacy of collective nonviolence. Chenoweth and Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works*<sup>65</sup> charts 300 campaigns from 1900-2006 and notes both the growing frequency of nonviolent movements and their increasing success as compared to armed struggles. Indeed, Chenoweth and Stephan argue that nonviolent campaigns are now twice as likely to succeed; they seem especially effective at toppling authoritarian regimes, overturning a longstanding assumption that nonviolence may only be viable in and against liberal regimes. And though Chenoweth and Stephan do not frame their analysis in these terms, it also seems to be the case that the most common determinant of successful nonviolent movements is that they are broadly majoritarian in nature.

---

<sup>62</sup> See Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West*, Chapter Seven.

<sup>63</sup> Judith Steim, "Nonviolence is Two," *Sociological Inquiry* (1968) and Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, 1973).

<sup>64</sup> Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Recent endorsements of this distinction from a more activist perspective, include Mark Kugler and Paul Kugler, *This is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Stephan and Chenoweth, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

In this line of thinking, the paradigmatic example of successful mass nonviolence has become anti-authoritarian, anti-regime resistance. But so it remains unclear how this model of collective power can translate or work in democratic political contexts. While collective power can undermine state legitimacy and topple governments, it is less clear how it can sustain democracy. The superiority of numbers that so potently expressed mass dissent risks turning into majoritarian displays of power. Moreover, nonviolent politics may actually face acute and different hurdles in democracies. Authoritarian legitimacy may be a brittle façade, easily exposed as such by nonviolent tactics of mass disruption and provocation. But cascading models of revolution may not be well suited to the democratic demands of living together through crises and conflict. Our challenge today is to think more concretely about how different forms of mass protest and action might be more compatible with and effective in and for democratic politics. In democracy, political antagonists are also recalcitrant fellow citizens, with whom one has to find a means of co-existing in peace, equality, and dignity. Gandhi's emphasis on discipline and individuation, and more generally the attempt to formulate rules and models of action, was meant to navigate the demanding path of political persuasion, a project that has only become more vital today.