CHAPTER 7

GANDHI’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELVES: A QUEST FOR INTEGRATION

My purpose is to describe experiments in the science of satyagraha, not to say how good I am.

What I want to achieve ... is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain ‘Moksha’ (M.K. Gandhi, ‘Introduction,’ My Experiments with Truth).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s life is today a part of global public memory and inheritance. Both his life and his writings hold lessons – political and moral, intellectual and spiritual – which inspire the imagination as often as they provoke it towards critical thought. Gandhi compels engagement from thinkers and practitioners in a very wide range of fields. Given the historical contingencies that weighed so heavily in his life and that of India at the time, the categories of East and West, Europe and Asia, England and India, form a significant series of binaries dealt with in his corpus of writing; they reflect his own journeys, physical, mental and spiritual, through these spaces. From the perspective of the task undertaken in this thesis, his unique negotiation of these binaries makes for revealing analysis. What emerges is a non-dualist mode of thought that ultimately seeks to dismantle the binaries in a search for freedom understood as at once political and spiritual. I argue that Gandhi’s negotiations with questions of selfhood, nation and vocation are carried out via an evolving though integrated vision that calls for a broadening of existing analytical frames for understanding these categories. Given his compelling afterlife in the national and international imaginary, his location must be understood as spanning time and place. Much like Gandhi the multivalent figure who challenges facile categories, his autobiography poses a series of questions that challenge given frames, eluding definitional confinement. The challenge begins with the consideration bestowed on the enterprise of writing the autobiography itself.

The literature on Gandhi is too vast to be reviewed exhaustively here, since it spans diverse disciplinary formations, languages and discourses. Political scientists, historians, philosophers, environmentalists, educationists, people from the handicrafts
sector, bureaucrats, and literary critics have all added their bit to the ocean that is ‘Gandhiana,’ to the effect that he often appears as the proverbial elephant in the Jain folk tale—each blind man who touched its various extremities formed a distinct picture of the true nature of the beast. And each man held fast to his belief, resulting in a multiplicity of mutually conflicting readings of the ‘true’ nature of the elephant. That metaphor, however, has its limitations. While the elephant in the story has an objectively discernible shape to one who is not visually impaired, Gandhi’s complex persona is far more elusive.

This elusiveness is a product partly of his own fluidity of thought, a continuously growing and evolving way of being, a practice conducted with a balance of firmness and flexibility in a context no less elusive - and as demanding. The contradictions in his thought complement the contradictions in the world around him. M.K. Gandhi, no trained philosopher or careful historian of his own life, declared that he “[made] no hobgoblin of consistency”, his goal being “to be true to myself from moment to moment” (Harijan, November 1934, CWMG 59, 308). Since this truth was for him not merely a “cognitive” category but an “experiential” one (Bilgrami, “Gandhi the Philosopher”, 4164), it had to be lived and then communicated in the hope that it would inspire others. His urge to communicate could take multiple forms, involving his entire being, from sartorial choices to epistolary, journalistic, polemical forms of writing, as well as symbolic acts. While his subjects were as varied as health and hygiene, imperialism, culture, art and morality, he coined an entire vocabulary effecting new syntheses in his pursuit of the interrelated goals of achieving swaraj, satya and ahimsa.

Satya or truth is the defining frame of his autobiography, a text that is produced in the crucible of a historical moment where swaraj had been declared to be a national goal by Gandhi as the leader of the nationalist movement, while a parallel discourse of defining and refining the notion of self-rule was carried out in the experimental spaces, such as ashrams, he had created. Swaraj combines the notion of the self (‘swa’) with the notion of rule (‘raj’). Gandhi’s thought exploits the full potentiality of this word, turning it inwards to suggest rule or control over self, as in brahmacharya, as well as outwards to the fight for the freedom of individuals and
collectivities from external control, imperial or statist. This freedom was to be fought for at a level that had inner/cognitive as well as outer/political dimensions. However, it is a fight that must be fought on the basis of *ahimsa*, interpreted as a radical refusal to fall into the violence of binary thinking.

**Framing the Self: Family, Faith, Failure**

In his autobiography, Gandhi begins by delineating his family history in the traditional terms of caste, religion and profession. While his father, a member of the Rajasthanik Court “had no education save that of experience,” his mother is remembered as an equal if not greater influence for her tendency towards “saintliness”. It is only at the end of the chapter that he gives the details of his birth: “Of these parents I was born…” (*Experiments 5*). He dwells on the incorruptibility of his father and the piety of his mother, setting the moral tone for the text. The first few years of his life are thus rendered in terms of his experiments with living up to these high standards of truth-telling, and in his fight with his carnal self. Vocation in the narrow sense does not concern him in the early part of the narrative, except obliquely, since his entire political strategy rested upon *satya* and *ahimsa*, lessons imbibed early in life.

This early period of achieving self-realisation is described largely in terms of universalized individual choices, such as speaking the truth to one’s parents, and refusing to tell a lie in school, even at the insistence of the teacher. The teacher’s definition of Gandhi’s recalcitrance as a species of “stupidity” clashes with his internalized inability to cheat, something taken as a moral value to be practiced. This unconscious resistance to the teacher’s definition of truth-telling as “stupidity” is an early lesson in literal truth. Gandhi’s earliest teachers were thus not institutional ones, but the devotional literature he read and the example of his parents, and later his wife, to whom he would give credit for teaching him ahimsa. He records being “deeply moved” and “haunted” by his reading of *Shravan Pitrabhakti Nataka* and *Harishchandra*, who became “living realities” for him (6). These early indications of the birth of *satyagraha* as a concept are located outside formal education, with the family as the locus. Even his internalized respect for elders (among whom he counts his teacher intent upon making him cheat) cannot make him depart from the *sanskara* of *satya*. Success achieved at the cost of integrity is not true
success. This sets the template for the narration and for his life, representing such values as a basis for civic and even national virtue. From this point on in the autobiography, self-critique predominates as he moves from recording one failing to the next - in the field of marriage (where he is a jealous, lustful and possessive husband), academics (where he is an indifferent student, down to his neglect of handwriting skills) and truth-telling (where he is not averse to lying, though under bad influence) even as devotion and duty to parents frames his moral judgments. An “experiment” in meat-eating, couched in the language of “reform” indicates the first hint of a colonial psychology at work as he recalls the Gujarati verse by Narmad that extols the salutary effects of non-vegetarianism on “the mighty Englishman,” and, conversely, the emasculation resulting from the vegetarian diet of the “Indian small” (18). Organised religion and the Manusmriti leave him cold, not least because of the “glitter and pomp” and “immorality” at the old haveli, or the family’s house of worship, while the Ramanama imbibed from Rambah, the nurse, is acknowledged as a lasting influence. Also remarked on is “a Gujarati didactic stanza” which Bhabani Bhattacharya identifies as the work of a 17th century Gujarati poet Shamal Bhatt, extolling the virtues of “good for evil done” (B. Bhattacharya 10). Interestingly, this message, which was later reinforced by his reading of the Sermon on the Mount, occurs alongside a stated “dislike for Christianity” due to its missionary excesses (Experiments 29). Gandhi seems keen on establishing a set of dharmic precepts, genealogically traceable to family and a ‘vernacular’ idiom, which he represents later as having been reinforced by his contact with religion and ethical modes of living and thinking acquired from the West.

The next stage in his vocational journey followed a pre-decided pattern, though Gandhi’s speech to his fellow students at Alfred High School, Rajkot on July 4, 1888, as he set sail for England, indicates a young man of purpose. Published in Kathiawar Times on 12-7-1888, it is a short injunction to his fellow students: “I hope that some of you will follow in my footsteps, and after you return from England you will work wholeheartedly for big reforms in India” (CWMG 1, 1) This text is missing from the autobiography, in which Gandhi recalls the incident but merely registers the fact that he “could scarcely stammer out” the few words he had written and that his “whole frame shook” due to nervousness (Experiments 33).
The speech itself indicates a clearer sense of purpose than would be indicated by the circumstances that prompted his departure. An old friend and advisor to the family had recommended his going to England for purely material and practical reasons, citing as incentive the fact that a barrister’s degree was acquired in less time and the position of a Diwan would be his for the asking upon return to India. Gandhi, for his own part, reports that “he was fighting shy of his difficult studies” and therefore “jumped at the proposal,” though he suggested medicine as an alternative. His vaishnava father’s reported objections to dissection of dead bodies, as well as the family friend’s recommendation of law as a quicker road to Diwan-ship, ruled in the favor of the latter, and Gandhi self-mockingly reports “building castles in the air” at the prospect of a bright future (Experiments 31). Gandhi’s silence on the substance of his farewell speech suggests modesty and a desire to reveal his weaknesses as a young man, the more to show the possibilities of overcoming them. As he set off “exultantly for Bombay, leaving [his] wife with a baby of a few months,” he was taking a leap that threatened an aspect of his Hindu identity, namely the prohibition on caste Hindus crossing the seas. Though he had promised his mother that he would observe traditional vaishnava pieties of abstaining from “wine, woman and meat,” he contended with community elders who objected to his voyaging abroad on caste grounds, declaring him an outcaste. Apart from this impediment, with his “desire to go to England…uppermost” in his mind, he overcame even his initial abhorrence for the necktie and the “immodest” short jacket, and set sail from Bombay on September 4, 1887 (Experiments 35).

**Intellectual Locations: ‘The Magic Spell of a Book’**

Towards the end of my second year in England I came across two Theosophists…. They talked to me about the Gita. They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold’s translation -The Song Celestial - and they invited me to read the original with them. I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Samskrit nor in Gujarati (Experiments 57).

My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, the Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount (Experiments 58).

The Magic Spell of a Book… (Gandhi on Ruskin’s Unto This Last, Experiments 248).
Discussions on Gandhi over the last half-century show him as an embattled site for debates on culture and location. This is evident in the manifold intellectual genealogies ascribed to him. On the one hand Bhikhu Parekh insists on his unique indigenization of Western discourses while retaining a ‘native’ cultural location, especially in contrast to Nehru, and has a distinctive emphasis on recovering the Gujarati Gandhi (Parekh 266). On the other, historians like Irfan Habib, departing from Marxist dogma, have come to see in him a variety of modernity in the tradition of 19th century reformers like Keshavchandra Sen and Justice Ranade, who were forging the nation based on an ideology of reform.

Before he came to re-read Indian tradition (as understood by scholars like Habib), Gandhi took a Western detour. In Bhabhani Bhattacharya’s tracing of Gandhi’s career as a writer, the list of his readings reveals the considerable presence of Western literature. His encounter in England with Henry Salt’s *Plea for Vegetarianism*, Howard William’s *The Ethics of Diet*, Anna Kingsford’s *The Perfect way in Diet*, as well as contact with the Vegetarian movement and, through it, with the thought of Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman, stand out as turning points. A new sense of individuation came upon him while reading Salt’s book which, in his own words, made him “a vegetarian by choice”, making the spread of vegetarianism his new “mission” (*Experiments* 41). However, “playing the English gentleman” was still a goal as he recalls his colonial fixation with Western attire, dance and modes of speech, to the extent of buying Bell’s *The Standard Elocutionist*, which, however, suddenly brought home to him a self-awareness of his location: “..Mr. Bell rang the bell of alarm in my ear and I awoke….I had not to spend a lifetime in England….What then was the use of learning elocution…I was a student and ought to go on with my studies.” Being “called” to the bar becomes his next vocational goal, as he contemplates a legal career back in India, rehearsing a familiar trajectory for educated Indians in colonial India (*Experiments* 44).

It is during his English sojourn that he absorbed a range of diverse influences which confirmed to him the manifold ills of modern European industrialism, though they comprised a critique of that civilization from within. The atmosphere that bred Theosophy, via which he first read the Gita, was one of Orientalist appreciation of
Eastern metaphysics, making it difficult to delineate into a clear binary the formative forces in Gandhi’s life. In a striking image used by his secretary, “the well from which he imbibed was thus the one in which the buckets of both the East and the West had often dipped and grated together” (Pyarelal 240).

One of the many ways in which Gandhi seems to have thought of his vocation in England is as cultural ambassador. In journals such as *The Vegetarian Messenger*, for instance, he wrote regularly and painstakingly of the need to bridge the chasm caused by ignorance between the English and the Indians. In article after article, he described Indian habits, customs, festivals, foods as a way of educating the English about India, a fact rendered impossible by the colonial arrogance which prevented social intercourse between the two communities, and bringing the two countries together. The notion of the nation, and of his belonging to one rather than the other, is implicit in these statements, though his analysis of colonialism had not advanced enough to make him question the Empire:

I …hope the time will come when the great difference now existing between the food habits of meat-eating in England and grain-eating in India will disappear, and with it some other differences which, in some quarters, mar the unity of sympathy that ought to exist between the two countries. In the future, I hope we shall tend towards unity of custom, and also unity of hearts (*The Vegetarian Messenger*, Jun 1 1891, *CWMG* 1, 40).

Nine days after writing this, he was called to the bar, and three days later, sailed for India after joining the High Court. After a short stint as “a briefless barrister” in Bombay, Gandhi moved to Rajkot, where an encounter with an arrogant British officer is construed in his autobiographical narrative not so much as a lesson in colonial power as a personal one “never to exploit friendship” as he had tried to do on his brother’s behalf (*Experiments* 83). The petty politics of the princely states of Kathiawad leaves him “depressed” with its “poisonous” atmosphere. The timely offer to work as a *vakil* for a Meman firm in South Africa was to prove not only a welcome change but an occasion for his most important political lessons (*Experiments* 84).
It was in South Africa, as “coolie barrister” that Gandhi would evolve a political consciousness and devise his response to racism (*Experiments* 90). The iconic Maritzburg incident of being thrown out of the train was when he records thinking of his “duty” in terms of location: “Should I fight for my rights or go back to India?” (94). He chooses to stay back. It was also into his South African sojourn that he encountered Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* via Henry Polak whom he had met at a vegetarian restaurant in Johannesburg. Reading the book on a train to Durban in September 1904 changed him utterly. It is described as a conversion experience which brought about “an instantaneous and practical transformation” of his life (250). Ironically, for all his criticism of the railways, Gandhi encountered Ruskin’s text on a train. In one reading of the event that captures the creativity of Gandhi’s response to the given, “Gandhi’s reading of Ruskin on the train can be interpreted as the eruption of a recalcitrant subjectivity which refuses to be tamed or erased by the technology of transport, even as he is using that technology” (Majeed 85).

There is also a sense of “a calling”, as Ruskin provided an impetus for Gandhi’s questioning of the links between lifestyles, politics, and systems of economic organization. Of particular interest were the teachings that reflect on vocation: “that a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barber’s” and “that a life of labour, *ie*, the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living” (250).

The Phoenix Settlement followed, as Gandhi attempted to combine these newfound values with his already set vocation of activist journalism, via the weekly *Indian Opinion* which had been started in 1904. “*Satyagraha* would probably have been impossible without *Indian Opinion,*” he writes (*Experiments* 239). But the birth of *satyagraha* needed greater shocks to his consciousness and, in the psychoanalytically inflected reading of Erik Erikson, nursing the injured Zulus during the Zulu “Rebellion”, which reminded him of India in 1857, was a further transformative experience: “witnessing the outrages perpetrated on black bodies by white he-men” resulted in “both a deeper identification with the maltreated and a stronger aversion against all forms of male sadism” (Erikson 94). Gandhi’s brief return to India and first encounter with the Congress in 1901 was merely an interlude in the development of the idea of *satyagraha* in South Africa, where too he would have his first experience of jail life in 1908, two years after he formally took the vow of *brahmacharya*. Though Gandhi’s stated reason for choosing the term ‘*satyagraha*’ over ‘passive resistance’ is that it was free of the
latter’s connotations of weakness and propensity towards “hatred” and “violence” (Experiments 266), this need not be construed as a sign of rejecting the ‘West’, as Gandhi refers to his family in Johannesburg at this time as an “essentially heterogeneous family” of which Westerners like the Polaks and Albert West were members. Rajmohan Gandhi comments that “the East and West merger we find around Gandhi is remarkable for its time”, noting especially the “almost simultaneous impact on Gandhi of the Gita and Unto this Last” (R. Gandhi 114-5). As Gandhi goes on to clarify: “the distinctions between heterogeneous and homogeneous is discovered to be merely imaginary. We are all one family” (Experiments 258).

However, he insisted on his children learning Gujarati, firm in the belief that “Indian parents who train their children to talk in English from their infancy betray their children and their country. They deprive them of the spiritual and social heritage of the nation, and render them to that extent unfit for the service of the country” (Experiments 261). Balancing this awareness of ‘rootedness,’ is the simultaneous iconoclasm latent in his statement that “a devotee of Truth may not do anything in deference to convention. He must always hold himself open to correction, and whenever he discovers himself to be wrong he must confess it all costs” (293). Though the context is his wrestling with himself on the real meaning of ahimsa, as he had come to support the British in the war, this dialectic between convention and Truth, between concern for tradition and a very ‘modern’ openness to public confession, undergirds his autobiographical enterprise.

**Relating the Self: the autobiographical enterprise**

*If we realised the presence of God as witness to all we say and do, we would not have anything to conceal from anybody on earth* (Gandhi Archives, 22 Dec 1920, MS, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, S. no. 20, Envelope 17).

*After all, does one express, can one express, all one’s thoughts to others?* (Gandhi in a discussion with Sardar Patel, Harijan Bandhu, 7 May 1933, CWMG 55, 76)

*There are some things which are known only to oneself and one’s Maker* (Experiments x).
The autobiography described events in Gandhi’s life up to 1920. In 1921, Gandhi had declared, in a clarification concerning *Hind Swaraj*, “I am individually working for the self-rule pictures therein. But today my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj, in accordance with the wishes of the people of India” (*Young India*, 26 January 1921, *CWMG* 19, 277-78). Suhrud points out that the autobiography was written largely during “intense periods of in-dwelling” at the Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmati, when Gandhi had resolved to take a “sabbatical” in December 1925 (Suhrud *Table of Concordance* 1). The first installment was published in Gujarati as *Satya na Prayogo Athava Atmakatha* in *Navajivan* in November 25, 1925 while the last came out in February 3, 1929. “I want to see *Navajivan* reach the farmers and weavers in their huts and dwellings. I want it to be in their language,” Gandhi had said about the medium, so that his autobiography’s primary readership was also that of *Navajivan* (*CWMG* 16, 94). The task of translating it into English simultaneously was entrusted to Mahadev Desai, with Gandhi himself revising it for the subject-matter and Madeleine Slade for the language (Suhrud 2). While the English translations also appeared in *Young India* serially from 1925 to 1929, the full text of the English version was published in two installments, in 1927 and 1929, with a second edition in 1940.

Writing from his Ashram in Sabarmati in 1925, Gandhi, in the Introduction to the narrative he called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, poses a question as to the propriety of undertaking the enterprise. The task, in itself, had a low priority for Gandhi. In his decision to serialize the narrative for *Navajivan*, there was also a clear sense that autobiography was being reconfigured generically. It became part of his larger commitment to communicate journalistically, to share with and give direction to an emergent public space that blends, in a way that we now recognize as quintessentially Gandhian, matters minute and monumental, deeply personal and profoundly public. The fact that the narrative would come out in pieces, not as whole, was irrelevant. In any case, in the early 1920s, much of Gandhi’s life was yet to be lived. The autobiography then is far removed from those frames of it that see the genre itself as invested in a ‘mature’ and ‘complete’ attempt to write the self. However, in significant ways, some of the key elements in his vocational formation
had already found articulation by the time he left South Africa to return to India, his ultimate karma bhoomi for the application of the concepts of ahimsa and swaraj. Having said this, it also becomes necessary to delineate the ways in which the autobiography does constitute an act of deliberate self-fashioning, being a post-dated, re-collective recounting of a life – partial and in process though it was – since Gandhi was in his 50s but by no means a man who had ‘retired’ from the world. Neither the public nor the private journeys of the self that his life constituted had yet been completed, though the moral and political foundations for each had been laid.

In his recent biography of his grandfather, Rajmohan Gandhi considers the partial nature of the autobiography to be a ‘fault’, a deliberate act of editing and shaping that robs the reader of the human complexity of the figure that Gandhi actually was, even at the earliest stages of his life. “… in the autobiography, he mixes frank recollections of his boyhood and youth with the contrition of a later period….The contrition of an older Gandhi and descriptions of lessons learned long after the events described surround the candid recollections and can conceal them, just as accounts of his early fears envelop the revelations of his strengths as a lad” (17). Thomas Weber also cites an interview with Margaret Sanger in which Gandhi had acknowledged that there was one episode in his life that was “so personal that I did not put it my autobiography” (138). Now identified with Saraladevi Chaudhurani, and discussed by Rajmohan Gandhi, this is one of the few silences in a text that continues to be seen as an example of searing honesty, unexpected in a public figure, let alone one who was already a ‘Mahatma’ in the public’s eye.

Notions of public and private were an abiding concern with Gandhi and the autobiography can be seen as both a meditation on the issue, and perhaps more usefully as a radical embodiment of the principles of transparency that Gandhi came to espouse as central to his vision of a truly moral life. In 1920, around the time that the Autobiography starts getting written, he wrote on ‘The Sin of Secrecy’. Though the context was the overtly political one of a colonial state and its deployment of espionage, effectively turning all natives into spies, Gandhi, in a typical move, expands the scope of the debate and extrapolates a larger moral from the situation:
One of the curses of India is often the sin of secrecy – for fear of an unknown consequence we talk in whispers. Nowhere has this secrecy oppressed me more than in Bengal. Everybody wishes to speak to you ‘in private’. …I feel thankful to God that for years past I have come to regard secrecy as a sin...It is uncleanness that seeks secrecy and darkness...we do not want to see or touch dirty things…This desire for secrecy has bred cowardice amongst us and has made us dissemble our speech.... [the solution is] to think everything aloud, have no privileged conversation with any soul on earth and to cease to fear the spy… (22/12/1920, Gandhi Archives, MSS, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, S. no. 20, Envelope 17).

This vignette illuminates the intimate connection between all realms of existence that Gandhi sought to make. He especially sought to dissolve the boundary between the private and the public. It is not surprising, then, that the autobiography should contain so much self-exposure and challenge the normative paradigms governing the exposure of the conduct of ‘public figures.’ However, it is true that Gandhi himself draws a curtain over certain events as they would involve others and he could not write about them without verifying all the facts and a self-confessed “sense of propriety” prevents him from writing about some of the leaders of the independence movement. This meditation on the private self versus the public comes at the very end of the autobiography, in the chapter titled ‘Farewell’ where he gives the reason for bringing the narrative to a close: “My life from this point onward has been so public that there is hardly anything about it that people do not know” (Experiments 419).

However, his reasons for closure are still aligned to his personal search for truth. “…my conclusions from my current experiments can hardly as yet be regarded as decisive. It therefore seems to me to be my plain duty to close this narrative here. In fact my pen instinctively refuses to proceed further”, he admits, despite the fact that the enterprise, so reluctantly begun, has grown on him. “It is not without a wrench that I take leave of the reader. I set a high value on my experiments….the exercise has given me ineffable mental peace, because, it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in Truth and Ahimsa in waveringers” (Experiments 419).
Gandhi’s autobiography is a text that pushes the genre and is ill at ease with definitional norms. As “a biography of Gandhi written by the Mahatma” (Parekh 262), it indicates a split self at work, and a text that is uneasy with the genre of autobiography. Rajmohan Gandhi states that the term “‘Autobiography’ is a misleading description … [for] a chronological account, ending in 1920, of his ethical and spiritual experiments” (17), without engaging with what the genre of autobiography entails. In this he is echoing Gandhi’s own disavowal, but without the concomitant reasoning that Gandhi provides. For, Gandhi’s own account elaborates a related but differently articulated set of anxieties surrounding the enterprise of writing Experiments. These concerns, as already discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, are posited as arising out of a sense of location whose cultural signifiers and philosophical assumptions are explicitly coded as ‘Eastern’. Interestingly, Gandhi ascribes the objections to the act of writing Experiments to those around him, just as the initial impetus to produce one came from the self-same sources. Thus, it is now “a God-fearing friend” who voices his “doubts” about Gandhi’s decision to write Experiments and warns against this culturally alien “adventure,” an objection Gandhi dissolves by recasting the attempt as an experiment with truth (Experiments ix).

A double move is visible in Gandhi’s negotiation with the issue. Not only is there a disarmingly smooth redefinition and reconfiguring of the genre itself – for all his disavowals, his book is called Experiments – there is also a simultaneous displacement or overwriting of the ‘political’/public self in favour of a need to articulate the struggles of larger/deeper sense of the self. His autobiography traces the fashioning of a vocational self. But it will address this via recourse to the spiritual and a consequent neglect of the overtly political since his “experiments in the political field are now known, not only in India, but to a certain extent to the ‘civilized’ world. For me they have not much value…” He prioritises the value of his spiritual experiments “‘known only to myself, and from which I derived such power as I possess for working in the political field’”. These are “experiments with non-violence, celibacy and other principles of conduct believed to be distinct from truth” (x). He might have added that these principles, seen to be distinct from the space of the political, are central to his understanding of the political. Thus he creates a model of
depth; his autobiography will provide a glimpse of what lies behind the public persona, undergirding and sustaining it. The private and the public are posed as different, and hierarchically so, but they are also part of an integrated continuum. The apparent duality of the “spiritual” and the “political” experiments, which he himself set up when he created the hierarchy, is thus resolved.

The debate on the cultural location of the autobiography as a genre invokes notions of individuation which are seen to be Western in origin. Socially, institutions like family, caste, and community shape and define the identity of the subject to an extent that makes the idea of striking out on a personal journey of self-making to be socially irresponsible, if not downright disruptive. Philosophically, this can be buttressed by reference to notions of the dual nature of reality as formulated by the philosophy of Shankara, whereby the phenomenal world is a mere illusion and all its manifestation of diversity (the different selves that humans inhabit being part of this diversity) misleading, and obstacles to the achievement of true understanding, freedom or moksha, which comes about with the dissolution of these multiplicities. Given this framework, assuming that this model of the self versus the Self (atman versus Atman/Brahman) truly does represent ‘Indian’ culture, autobiography, in its unnecessary focus on the ‘self’, which in any case is not ‘real’ and something to be transcended, becomes a dubious, unworthy, and downright obstructive enterprise for a good Hindu. Gandhi attempts to resolve this conflict, by disclaiming the name autobiography, and creating an alternative nomenclature of it: satyana prayogoni atmakatha. This shifts attention away from the limited self since not only is the subject undergoing the prayog (experiments) the atman (soul), and not the mere ‘self’ (Parekh 258), Truth itself is its protagonist (Gopalkrishna Gandhi xi). Gandhi is confident that “if the experiments are really spiritual, there can be no room for self-praise. They can only add to my humility ….” (Experiments x).

This issue is central to understanding Gandhi since the moral imperative to integrate the deepest personal recesses of the conscious mind with the most visible public acts is at the heart of his politics and philosophy. Acknowledging its “inspirational and therapeutic value” as well as its status as “a profoundly political act” (Parekh 260) we can read the autobiography as a master text for understanding
these defining characteristics of Gandhi’s life and his message, the unity of which he insists on repeatedly. In telling his story in his own words, on his terms, and in debating the enterprise itself, he reveals some of the central tensions and drives that mark his remarkably recalcitrant persona.

**Linguistic Locations: The Translated Self**

Gandhi’s autobiography was not written in English. Originally written in Gujarati, it uses the words ‘satya’ and ‘prayog’ in the title, which keywords were then rendered as ‘Truth’ and ‘Experiments’, respectively. We know that his trusted friend, associate and follower Mahadev Desai carried out the translation under Gandhi’s guidance, and with his approval, and therefore, whatever the differences between the original and the English versions, they carry the stamp of his approval.

However, it is useful to ponder over the implications of deploying English for concepts that are often alien to that language. This becomes especially significant since this was the Gandhi who had in his early years wrestled passionately with issues of his own cultural location. Gandhi, after the early phases of a deep disquiet with the culture he was born into, resulting in his attempt to ape the West, had by now written *Hind Swaraj*, a searing condemnation not only of Western ‘civilisation’ but, more significantly, of the epistemic power it wielded.

However, while he rejected many aspects of the European way of life, Gandhi’s position on the English language, remained nuanced and enrichingly complex. Like his views on technology and science, he did not reject the English language wholesale, merely rejecting its historical and socio-economic embeddedness in inequity. Because it is the language of the imperial masters, and is used to create a distance between the ruling classes and the masses, Gandhi felt compelled to question it. Thus, though he acknowledged that “English is the language of international commerce” and of diplomacy, he offered a scathing critique of anglophile nationalism:

> My suggestion about Hindustani has been the advice that students should *during the transition period* from inferiority to equality, from foreign domination to Swaraj, from helplessness to self-help, suspend
their study of English. If we wish to attain Swaraj before the next Congress…. We must do nothing that would not advance it or that would actually retard it. Now adding to our English knowledge cannot accelerate our progress towards our goal and it can conceivably retard it. The latter calamity is a reality in many cases for many there are who believe that we cannot acquire the spirit of freedom without the music of the English words ringing in our ears and sounding through our lips – This is an infatuation (22/2/21, Gandhi Archives, MSS, NMML / 190 (LXXII) S no. 7-8, envelope 5, 24-28, emphasis added).

Significantly, this suspension of English is suggested as an interim measure, both to counter the psychological damage that the “infatuation” with English results in as well as an entirely practical move, aimed at mass mobilization. It is thus that though masterful in his deployment of English where needed, he chooses to speak and write in Indian languages that are easily understood by those he is addressing, the poorest and weakest sections of rural society. He urges his followers to do the same.

For instance, in Delhi for a meeting between Hindus and Muslims regarding the Khilafat movement, he ponders the question of language, in this case of the quality of his Hindi/Urdu. Communication being the chief aim, he abandons any ambition of speaking a refined language and speaks in his broken Urdu. He concludes his reminiscence of this event by touching on a key issue that will exercise him later: that of a lingua franca for the emergent Indian nation: “This meeting afforded me a direct proof of the fact that Hindi-Urdu alone could become the lingua franca of India. Had I spoken in English, I could not have produced the impression that I did on the audience…” However, his linguistic flexibility is soon apparent: “I could not hit upon a suitable Hindi or Urdu word for the new idea, and that put me out somewhat. At last I described it by the word ‘non-cooperation’, an expression that I used for the first time at this meeting….” (Experiments 401)

It was in such a crucible of lived experience that Gandhi’s ideas crystallised, his convictions took shape, and his epoch-making vocabulary evolved. In sharing the process of that language coming into being, rather than giving us the vocabulary readymade, he renders transparent the making of a movement, and of a nation in the making.
A striking instance of this openness to English, and a mental freedom from the reification of it as the absolute ‘other’, is to be found in Gandhi’s fulsome praise for Nehru’s description of *khadi*: “Your calling khadi the ‘livery of freedom’ will live as long as we continue to speak the English language in India. It needs a first class poet to translate into Hindi the whole of the thought behind that enchanting phase. For me it not merely poetry but it enunciates a great truth whose full significance we have yet to grasp” (Letter July 30, 1937, *CWMG 65*, 446). Yet it is possible to read the letter as an ambiguous and partial embrace of English; the use of “as long as” suggests the possibility, and a hope, that English will not forever be the language of India. Gandhi also reveals a sensitivity to the aesthetics of language that clarifies that his qualified appreciation of art (a fact that becomes apparent in his conversations with Tagore) was due not to lack of aesthetic sense but to the greater value he placed on a “greater truth” that transcends “mere poetry”. Language, any language, whether English or Gujarati, has to serve the cause of ‘Swaraj,’ his chosen mode of conducting the nationalist enterprise.

One of the reasons for choosing to set up his ashram in Gujarat had been that being a Gujarati, “I thought I should be able to render greatest service to the country through the Gujarati language” (*Experiments* 330). Significantly, the regional and the national did not collide in his understanding of the *swadeshi* enterprise. The potential divisiveness of regional chauvinism, which could take linguistic turns, could pose a threat to the needs of pan-Indian mobilization. However, Gandhi’s answer was to support the idea of a *rashtrabhasha*. Presiding over the convocation of the Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha on 26 March 1937, he articulated the relationship between the regional and the national in symbiotic terms:

….A strong and virile national language requires healthy development of the provincial languages. If the latter be weak or anemic, how can the former at all grow?....When I was thus reasoning this out, let me tell you that I did not know the actual number of people speaking Hindi, and yet I instinctively felt that only Hindi could take that place and no other… (*CWMG 65*, 19-21).
In a response to the communal overtones of the language debate, Gandhi would argue for a mixed Hindi/Urdu propagated by Hindustani Prachar Sabha at Wardha, in order to promote a simplified Hindustani that would use the Nagari script, but with a slightly modified alphabet. For the Sabha, Amritlal Nanavati published literature like *Nashte se Pehle*, a booklet for children compiled by Rehana Tayebji that told simple stories in this ‘new’ language, which, however, did not succeed as a language either of school curricula or widespread usage. Gandhi’s attempts to work towards the acceptance of this north Indian lingua franca by the two main opposing sections of India – Bengal and the South – continued.

Gandhi’s objection was not to English as a language per se (he continued to use it with great effect in his communication with the English whether the Imperial masters or the English press and citizenry whose consciousness he wishes to raise vis-à-vis British Imperialism) but to the contingencies of it use. This was a move that reflected Gandhi’s dynamic and dialogic approach to national mobilization, grounded in pragmatism. Gandhi’s vocabulary of mass mobilisation was therefore cast in ‘native’ terms – *satyagraha*, *khadi*, and *ahimsa* – indicating both the limits of translatability, and the political possibilities of altering the terms in which the English language could be allowed to access the full spirit of his understanding of nation-making. His approach to language may have been fluid and adaptive, but the flow of that fluidity worked to transform the master tongue in what was, in the final analysis, a political act of re-inscribing power, a subtle semiotic strategy of resisting epistemological colonization cast not so much in the language of resistance as one of displacement.

Along the same line of argument, but one which veers towards an interiorized approach to self and identity, is Suresh Sharma and Tridip Suhrud’s discussion of *Hind Swaraj* with reference to the language Gandhi chose to use. Pointing out that “the first public statement of the *Hind Swaraj* problematic was in his address… ‘East and West’ to the Peace and Arbitration Society in Hampstead,” they conjecture that Gandhi could easily have written the book in English, but chose not to do so. They seek to make a subtle distinction between “the anxiety to make a strong political gesture” and “gestures…as intimations…of a deeper reality.” Though recognising that
“Macaulay’s shadow troubled Gandhi deep within,” they argue that his reasons went beyond a reaction to Macaulay. Gandhi sought to “affirm two cardinals upon which the fact and possibility of human equality is ineradicably predicated: Inherence in language…of a capacity to make sense and take measure of things utterly unfamiliar and unknown…..and Gujarati as mediation to folk discourse as pristine resource of the Indic universe and civilization” (Sharma and Suhrud, “Editors’ Introduction” Hind Swaraj xiv). Though downplaying the overtly political, they make a deeper political point, in suggesting that Gandhi was reconfiguring the very terms of the political by refusing to reduce it to the binary of inside/outside. Gandhi’s approach to political change as requiring a complete shift in our very conceptions of political struggle, replacing reactively violent and retributive solutions with the discourse of ahimsa, brought attention back to the self as the object of enquiry and effort.

Bhikhu Parekh points out that Gandhi chose the name ‘atmakatha’ over ‘jivan vritanta’ because he wished to focus on the deeper spiritual connotations of ‘atman’ or soul (259). It is worth noting that the word ‘atmakatha’ is also the generic word for autobiography in Hindi and its sister languages, without any of the resonances of a distinction between ‘self’ and ‘soul’ that Parekh draws out. However, in Gandhi’s case, Parekh reads a careful choice of nomenclature that locates the autobiography within an alternative tradition to the Western one, a difference that might be of consequence to Gandhi as well, if his shrinking from calling his book a “real autobiography” is any indication. The autobiography is then not about the ‘self’ (personal and individual) but the ‘soul’ – a deeper, shared essence that unites rather than separates individualized human units, since, in his understanding, all creatures have souls that are fundamentally identical at their core. In his vision, the goal of the soul is union with something larger towards the attainment of moksha. The autobiography is not to be a mere historical documentation of events, but an account of this soul in the process of learning and growth. Unlike Nehru, who also claims that his autobiography is not be read as history, Gandhi actually eschews the kind of ‘impersonal’ narrative that Nehru attempts, keeping his focus largely on himself and his experiments in the hope that they may guide and inspire other experimenters.
Sunil Khilnani quotes Gandhi’s “surprising insouciance for one given to keeping fastidious accounts and records [when] he insisted that ‘I just write as the spirit moves me at the time of writing’,” going on to point to the autobiography’s contiguities with “parables” or as “a modern recension of the Buddhist jataka tradition” (Khilnani “Gandhi and Nehru” 144, emphasis added). Gandhi often refers to his work simply as a katha, thus aligning it with an Indian tradition of telling oral narratives that recounted incidents from the lives of saints and great men with the intention of providing morally uplifting teachings. At the same time, there is throughout an insistence on the story’s – and subject’s – ordinariness. The trope of Everyman is never far to find, though Gandhi inflects it via the Indian mythological tradition, namely the Mahabharata story of the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas as an allegorical representation of the perpetual war of light and darkness for possession of the human heart. The text thus blends diverse genres and linguistic registers and captures Gandhi’s dynamic and holistic sensibility.

**Swaraj: The Personal as the Political**

Gandhi’s struggle with making himself a fit instrument for the life of service that was his vocational ideal saw him engaging in manifold acts of self-fashioning. Life itself took the form of art, a careful crafting of the mind and the body, and occasional re-crafting of received social practices, including caste and gender roles. His ashrams were spaces where these experiments with an alternate life could be conducted.

The ashrams that Gandhi set up at crucial junctures in his growth track his vocational development as spaces that allow for his many evolving selves to flourish and for his experiment to be carried out. As he grew from a somewhat tentative experimenter to a mature political leader at the national level (Phoenix Farm, Satyagraha Ashram, Sevagram) the ashrams bridged the personal and the public, the spiritual and the political:

For Gandhiji ashram is a community of co-religionists, bound together not only by a common quest but by a set of obligatory observances that make them the ashramites. Ashram therefore is where there are ashramites. Thus, Yeravda prison – mandir or temple as he called it –
the Aga Khan Palace Prison were as much an ashram as the Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmati and Sevagram at Wardha. Thus, the ashram went with him on his lonely pilgrimage to Noakhali and to Bihar, that was his Karbala (Suhrud “Between” 3).

The naming was carefully done, reflecting his current beliefs and inspirations. While Phoenix owed its origin to the influence of Tolstoy, the later ones in India grew from a ‘native’ sense of location. He describes the process of choosing a name in considerable detail. Sevashram and Tapovan were rejected, the first due to its lack of focus on the mode of service, the latter for being pretentious (“we could not presume to be *tapasvins*”) and finally the name ‘Satyagraha Ashram’ was selected as “conveying both their goal and their method of service” (*Experiments* 330).

Food and dietetics were an early concern as he explored the world of English vegetarians and made control over the palate a central plank of his belief in ‘brahmacharya’, which ranged in meaning from sexual control to embrace wider meanings. In Suhrud’s evocative words:

Charya or conduct adopted in search of Brahma, that is Truth, is brahmacharya. In this sense brahmacharya is not denial of control over one sense, but it is an attempt to bring all senses in harmony with each other. Brahmacharya so conceived and practised becomes that mode of conduct that leads to Truth, knowledge and hence Moksha. Thus, one could argue that an experiment in Truth is an experiment in brahmacharya (Suhrud, “Between” 7).

Dietetics was also thus connected with an economy of care for the self and for the other:

My life is based on disciplinary resolutions. I thought of the unnecessary trouble I had caused to my hosts at Calcutta and Rangoon….I therefore decided to limit the articles of my daily diet…I was convinced that if I did not impose these restrictions on myself, I should put my future hosts to considerable inconvenience and should engage them in serving me rather than engage myself in service. So I pledged myself never whilst in India to take more than five articles in
twenty-five hours, and never to eat after dark….I have been under these vows for thirteen years now. They have subjected me to a severe test, but I am able to testify that they have also served as my shield (Experiments 325-6).

Gandhi is acknowledged as a master of the publicly symbolic act, and of the slogan/mantra that could galvanise the masses. In doing so he often reinvented tradition. One such word was ‘Swaraj’. Coined by Bal Gangadhar Tilak as a symbol of India’s political aspirations, and accepted by the India National Congress in 1906 as the objective of the national movement, the word acquired a deeper meaning in Gandhi’s vocabulary. Swaraj was to be internal as well as external, a radical freedom experienced at the personal level that yet needed objective conditions to flower into being. His politics was thus often subordinate to his spiritual aspirations. His spiritual aspirations, in turn, were predicated upon a set of experiments with living that would embody the spirit of ahimsa.

Like the terminology he created or imbued with fresh life – Quit India, Civil-disobedience, Do or Die, Sarvodaya, Swaraj, Ahimsa and Swadeshi – Gandhi’s attire altered in line with his convictions and spoke volumes for his commitments. While he declares his initial dislike for Western clothing such as a necktie/vest, quickly followed by as great a fascination and awe for all things British/Western, we see a searing self-critique of his erstwhile vanities from the Gandhi who had by now firmly established a sartorial style that reflected his deepest political and spiritual commitments. In fact the reversal of the colonial power equation would be visually effected via the figure of Gandhi bare of all but the basics. Commenting on Gandhi’s careful crafting of a sartorial self and its visual power, Leela Gandhi refers to “the iconic anti-colonial frieze”: the image of C. F. Andrews touching Gandhi’s feet. Gandhi was now in his new avatar, bare feet, shorn headed in a coarse dhoti: “The London-trained Indian barrister defying imperial polarities of class and station in an elaborate costume drama; the Anglican priest recovering the fundamental civilizational hierarchy of Empire in a single defiant gesture of self-abnegation” (14).

His own earlier vanity of preferring Western dress, on which one of his inspirations, Thoreau, had made the insightful comment, was something that the
khadi-clad Mahatma could now recall as an object lesson for those amongst his countrymen who were laboring under that form of cultural enslavement:

During the Satyagraha day in South Africa I had altered my style of dress so as to make it more in keeping with that of the indentured labourers, and in England also I had adhered to the same style for indoor use. For landing in Bombay I had a Kathiawadi suit of clothes consisting of a shirt, a dhoti, a cloak and a white scarf, all made of Indian mill cloth. But as I was to travel third from Bombay, I regarded the scarf and the cloak as too much of an encumbrance, so I shed them, and invested in an eight-to-ten annas Kashmiri cap. One dressed in that fashion was sure to pass muster as a poor man (Experiments 314).

He describes the birth of Khadi with equal candour, capturing the ironies and difficulties of a group of male professionals attempting to adopt a way of life and a manual skill alien to them:

I do not remember to have seen handloom or a spinning-wheel when in 1908 I described it in Hind Swaraj as a panacea for the growing pauperism of India. …..Even in 1915, when I returned to India from South Africa, I had not actually seen a spinning wheel. When the Satyagraha Ashram was founded at Sabarmati, we introduced a few handlooms there…All of us belonged either to the liberal professions or to business; not one of us was an artisan. We needed a weaving expert to teach us to weave before we could work the looms (407).

“Adam wove and Eve span,” Gandhi had declared in the Harijan 1930, underlining an essentialist division of labour (T. Weber 20). However, in taking up spinning as a plank of satyagraha, Gandhi was undoing the sexual binary, in keeping with his other cherished belief that “a man should remain man and yet should become woman…” (quoted in Weber 18).

Attire for Gandhi was also linked to his negotiations with his religious identity, which he was flexibly redefining in his own light. Describing his visit to Haridwar for the Kumbh Mela, he writes, “I had not gone to Hardwar with the sentiments of a pilgrim. I have never thought of frequenting places of pilgrimage in
search of piety. But the seventeen lakhs of men that were reported to be there could not all be hypocrites or mere sight-seers….It is difficult, if not impossible, to say to what extent this kind of faith uplifts the soul” (Experiments 325).

On being questioned by an unnamed ‘swamiji’ on not sporting a shikha and sacred thread, he chooses to explain the history of his choice. “The practice of wearing the sacred thread was not then common among the vaishya families in Kathiawad. But a movement had just started for making it obligatory for the first three varnas.” However, when the first one gave way, he did not go in for a fresh one though “several well-meaning attempts” in India and South Africa to re-invest him with the sacred thread met with “little success”. His reasoning reveals his reworking of Hinduism with reference to caste: “If the shudras may not wear it, I argued, what right have the other varnas to do so? And I saw no adequate reason for adopting what was to me an unnecessary custom.” The story of the shikha was different. Here the traditional ‘sartorial’ choice was reinstated since abandoning it had been a sign of a colonized mind:

…. On the eve of my going to England …I got rid of the shikha, lest when I was bare-headed it should expose me to ridicule and make me look, as I then thought, a barbarian in the eyes of the Englishmen….The sacred thread does not appear to me today to be a means of uplifting Hinduism. I am therefore indifferent to it….As for the shikha, cowardice having been the reason for discarding it, after consultation with friends I decided to regrow it (327-8).

This ‘fluid’ Hindu self, critically aware of religion and culture as sites where power was wielded, cast a critical glance at his own traditions. Unimpressed by Hardwar, and though “charmed by the natural scenery about Hrishikesh and the Lakshman Jhula,” he reported being “filled with agony” at the lack of hygiene. “But the Hardwar experiences proved to me to be of inestimable value. They helped me in no small way to decide where I was to live and what I was to do” (329). Moving away from ritualized religion, he would yet harness a vocabulary and modes of self-fashioning that harked back to his roots in Hinduism.

In 1920, during the Non-cooperation movement, he had established a University, which then was called Gujarat Mahavidyalaya. Gandhi was appointed its
Chancellor for life. In his Inaugural Address as Chancellor he raised the question of vocation in terms that refer to the traditional caste structures even as he undid them: “I fulfilled a function of a *rishi*, if a Vanik’s son can do it” (*CWMG* 21, 482). His ashrams, in any case, freed the inmates of caste and gender roles, as men could cook, women and girls exuded “an air of freedom and self-confidence….rarely visible in Indian society elsewhere” (Kaur iv-v), and the cleaning of toilets by all in turn broke one of the deepest taboos that the caste system had created.

Gandhi’s interpretation that the Gita was a poem that enjoined the duty of non-violence had led to criticism that he not only distorted the meaning of the divine song but that he was a Christian in disguise. His reply to the charge was telling: “My religion is a matter solely between my Maker and myself. If I am a Hindu, I cannot cease to be one even though I may be disowned by the whole of Hindu population. I do, however, suggest that non-violence is the end of all religions” (*CWMG* 28, 47). Gandhi’s insistence on reinterpreting Hinduism and his perceived partiality to Muslims would result in a very violent death at the hands of those representatives of Hinduism who felt threatened by his radical act of interpretation, which allowed him to embrace Christianity (and indeed all religions) while retaining a Hindu identity.

The Gandhian notion of *Swaraj* implies self-rule in all its dimensions, to indicate independence at the macro and the micro level. For Gandhi, his vow of *brahmacharya* was also an experiment in *Swaraj* as, in his view, it granted freedom, especially to the woman, from the demands of the male. This then made it possible for women to be free agents in history, a discourse of freedom that is also inflected with a curious mix of tradition. Writing to his son Manilal and his wife on the naming of their daughter, Sita, he says:

> In our society as also among the English a person may have two or three names. Let Sita have two or three. In this way I wish to justify the name Sita. Sita is the last word in wifelhood as it is in maidenhood. Moreover it is my ideal to make a person lead a life of *independence* and purity in spite of being married. Sita, Parvati and others have fully attained these ideals. According to the accounts in the Ramayana and other works they were free from passion...
In an interesting move, Gandhi first cites the authority of the Ramayana to assert his reading of the women but then proceeds to side-step the same textual authority by positing a trans-historical reading of the figures of Rama and Sita:

Sita should not be regarded as a historical person but as our ideal woman. We do not worship the historical Ram and Sita. The Rama of history is no more now. But the Rama to whom we attribute perfect divinity, who is God directly perceived, lives to this day. Reciting the name of this Rama would save us (S. Gandhi 48).

Interesting negotiations with tradition/modernity and East/West can be seen in Gandhi’s treatment of ‘history’, his role as parent/grandparent, and as shaper of a discourse on womanhood. While his dismissal of the historical Rama and Sita is central to his negotiation with the ‘modern’ discourse of history, putting him in a tradition that is different to Nehru’s incessant history-writing, the stress on a shared tradition of multiple names with the West insists on an openness to multiple identities and it is instructive that he speaks of an ungendered ‘person’ as the subject of the desired ‘independence’. However, soon enough a set of traditional beliefs becomes evident as his feminine ideal is figured in orthodox and essentialist beliefs regarding the innate purity of women. Feminist critics’ qualified support for Gandhi’s role as a leader who could extend the idea of a vocation to women other than being wives and mothers (not only were traditionally married women mobilised in large numbers for the nationalist cause, his ashrams nurtured women workers from India and abroad who lived active political lives outside marriage) is well-grounded: “Gandhi made women into a subject, making her realize that she had freedom, qualities and attributes which are crucial to contemporary society…In a path-breaking intervention, he made possible not only the involvement of women in politics, but made her realize that the national movement could not succeed without her involvement in the struggle. Gandhi ultimately empowered woman in the family and in marriage” (S. Patel 349).

However, the terms of this empowerment were stern: “Gandhi’s new woman can now break the ‘Lakshman Rekha’ of the home only by denying her biology” (350). Even Sarala Behn, who opted to remain single, reiterated what Patel calls Gandhi’s “essentialist arguments to reaffirm [woman’s] place as mother and wife in the
household” (349). However, the fact that Gandhi applied the idea of brahmacharya to himself before all others, and saw men too as bound by similar codes, made for greater gender parity in his approach to the body.

**Gandhi’s Reception and Relocations: Text, Affect, Effect**

Gandhi’s posthumous life is as eventful, if not more, as was the one he lived and wrote of. Though much of it is owed to official nationalist historiography and iconography, whereby the ‘Father of the Nation’ ironically presides over a centralized and partitioned nation-state that he was already beginning to show his alienation from, he also acquired an international appeal thanks to the inspiration he provided for civil rights movement in the US and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Louis Fischer’s somewhat hagiographical *Gandhi and Stalin* (1947) would describe him as “saint, statesman, seer, idealistic socialist, pacifist” (Fischer 6) while an academic reviewer saw in it Gandhi’s successful mediation of East and West:

A Westerner reading this book will see more vividly than before how much of a Hindu Gandhi was….Yet the reader will also be aware that in the pages of this book he is encountering one of the greatest of world citizens (Purinton 156).

While this academic reading follows Gandhi’s own pronouncements regarding his Hindu identity, Romain Rolland’s influential book, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man who Became One with the Universal Being*, had cast Gandhi in the mould of a spiritual savior in language heavily redolent of Christianity. As he would record in his Diary in 1924, “The Mahatma himself almost seems Christ reborn” (*Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence* 28). This was to have enormous influence on Westerners like Madeleine Slade who were drawn to India and the independence movement via this charismatic portrait, making a vocation out of devotion to Gandhi, a “calling” in the purest Weberian sense.

Verrier Elwin, in his 1932 piece on India, writes of Gandhi as a patriot who spoke a language of nationalism that was free of hate. In his 1945 essay “Notes on Nationalism,” George Orwell points out that “nationalism is not to be confused with
“patriotism,” arguing that while the latter is a “defensive” form of “devotion to one particular place or way of life”, the former is “inseparable from a drive for power” (Orwell, n.p.) Elwin’s use of the word patriot for Gandhi however, does not make these distinctions for a man who was in the midst of a nationalist political struggle to oust the British:

Mahatma Gandhi’s patriotism is not antagonistic to his universalism….What to the metaphysician is a triumph of intellectual subtlety is to Mahatma Gandhi a supreme adventure of the heart and mind. His love is a reasoned love; it is no sentiment or emotion; it is the fruit of hard thinking; it is in fact a part of Truth. Hence there are no perils to this universalism; it is as strong as Truth itself. Mahatma Gandhi is universal because he has put his selfhood to death; from the funeral-pyre of individualism there rises the triumph of universal love (Elwin Truth about India 28-29).

Elwin’s praise of Gandhi’s amphibious ability to inhabit the space of patriotism and universalism, of politics and “love” is cast in terms that recall Elwin’s own Christian past. Whether Gandhi had put his individualism to death is open to question, even as a desirable goal. His autobiography has been read as betraying evidence of self-regard (Parekh 263). Further, despite his “universal love”, his leadership of the national movement, preceded by the work in South Africa on behalf of the Indian community, was so powerful in its effect that it was read as evidence of a firm and even “militant nationalism” which would not agree to “anything involving national dishonor,” in Nehru’s words (Discovery 446).

But it developed, like his other commitments, in a holistic context, and as Elwin and Nehru saw, here the nation and the world were not mutually exclusive categories. In his successful harnessing of the spiritual realm for political purposes, he was exemplifying the pure type of Weber’s “charismatic” style of leadership, which relies on the prophetic mode to command a following. Nehru repeatedly uses words like “charisma” and “prophet” to explain Gandhi’s extraordinary rise on the national stage, after having come as a veritable stranger after over 20 years of absence from
India (*Discovery* 448). The journey was not easy though, and Gandhi’s tactics were attacked.

Gandhi’s mixing of religion of politics had its critics. The April, 1920 issue of *East and West* had carried an article attacking Gandhi on precisely these grounds. Gandhi quotes his critic: “Mr. Gandhi has the reputation of a saint but it seems that the politician in him often dominates his decisions. He has been making great use of hartals….” in his own reply in *Young India* articulated in terms that blend the discourse of inner work and outer action:

…the word “saint’ should be ruled out of present life. It is too sacred a word to be lightly applied to anybody, much less to one like myself who claims only to be a humble searcher after truth, knows his limitations, makes mistakes, never hesitates to admit them when he makes them, and frankly confesses that he, like a scientist, is making experiments about some of ‘the eternal verities’ of life, but cannot even claim to be a scientist because he can show no tangible proof of scientific accuracy in his methods or such tangible results of his experiments as modern science demands. But though by disclaiming sainthood I am disappointing the critic’s expectations, I would have him give up his regrets by answering him that the politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries.

Gandhi continues to provide his own testament on his vocation:

I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake, as I have been doing, with little or less success, consciously since 1894, unconsciously, as I have now discovered, ever since reaching the years of discretion. Quite selfishly, as I wish to live in peace in the midst of a bellowing storm howling round me, I have been experimenting with myself and my friends by introducing religion into politics. Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the
truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.

It was in that religious spirit that I came upon hartal. I wanted to show that it is not a knowledge of letters that would give India consciousness of herself, or that would bind the educated together. The hartal illuminated the whole of India as if by magic on the 6th of April, 1919. (12 May 1920, *CWMG* 20, 303-304).

The struggles that Gandhi was waging had always received support from Westerners. Frederick Fisher, a Bishop of the Methodist Church, who first met Gandhi in 1917, who would write in a book that would be promptly banned in India: “What a strange contradiction Gandhi is! In India a god: in England and America a cartoon. Newspaper pictures reveal him ugly, emaciated, toothless. We see in him a thin little brown man, walking on foot to the…palace of the Viceroy of India.” Fisher records being asked “He was your friend when he was plain Mr. Gandhi. Is he a saint or a fool? Is he a fanatic or a statesman? Does he for one moment dream that he can buck a machine-made civilization? That he can upset the world?” His confident response to that in 1932 – “That is exactly what he is doing…upsetting a world, a materialistic world….For he understands both the brown man and the white” – frames Gandhi as a world leader even as he acknowledges the transformation that the “the patient, easy-going tropical country” that he had seen in 1904, one that valued “accepting suffering as its right…even enjoying it” into “a newly vibrant people” that Gandhi had created (Fisher 2, 76, 78).

Gandhi’s concern with national rejuvenation and the Constructive Programme, along lines that suggest an ethic of work (Stephen Hay would see in it a Victorian influence), was combined with an understanding of the international imbalance of power. Fisher quotes a 1931 letter from him: “An individual or a nation must have faith in one’s self and in the protective power of God to find peace in the midst of strife…and I hold such peace to be impossible so long as strong nations do not consider it to be sinful to exploit the weak nations” (222). Even in 1931, Gandhi’s
vision was nationalist and internationalist in orientation, though couched in terms that are deeply interiorized and spiritual. Elwin would reassert this in 1932:

In the Mahatma the Congress has a leader of unique political insight...Mahatma Gandhi, just because he is the most spiritual, is also the most practical of Indian statesmen..... He is not, perhaps, an expert constitution-maker, but he is a supreme nation-builder. He is not the less practical because he bases his politics largely on the Sermon on the Mount (Elwin *Truth about India* 25).

Recent re-inventions of him as a messiah for the ecological movement and even as a postmodern self that suggest an open-ended approach to the nation need to be inflected via an understanding of Gandhi’s effectiveness within the discourse of political nationalism minus statist reification.

It is instructive, however, to return to the frame of the nation where he continues to live on in unofficial public memory as a powerful and compelling presence. Significantly, this latter aspect of Gandhi had also resulted in his resurrection within discourses that might have been antithetical, even hostile, to him. I take two examples, each from India, that suggest the kind of locations that he has come to occupy. Neither represents an official statist voice, and neither is concerned with *Hind Swaraj*, the text that has been often been speaking to various nationalist, and sometimes ultra-nationalist, formations as a nativist panacea for the ills of modernity. Instead, these voices suggest a nuanced reclaiming of Gandhi, that simultaneously pays tribute to him and problematises a simplistic idolatrous approach that has been the bane of the ‘Saint-hood’ granted him. Each recognizes his extraordinariness while seeing his fallibility. In this, each is a post-dated extension of the project of his autobiography, one rather more literally than the other.

One example of this is the more recent writing on Gandhi by the Marxist historian Irfan Habib. In two pieces written in the wake of the Babri Masjid issue, and the communalization of religion, Habib under the aegis of SAHMAT, a Left-wing cultural front, reassessed the legacy of Gandhi. While his article in the SAHMAT publication is tellingly titled “Gandhiji”, the honorific suggesting a traditional
reverence that the Left has withheld from Gandhi, his other piece in *Social Scientist* has a movingly personal beginning and goes on to reconsider his earlier assessment of Gandhi. In its self-reflectivity, and its combining of an almost visceral ‘feeling’ with scholarly detached analysis, Habib’s piece reveals a very Gandhian turn: a “vulnerability” that Majeed sees as the keynote of Gandhi’s autobiography, undergirded by a commitment to clarity of thought (Majeed 214).

In “Gandhi and the National Movement”, even as Habib moves from the neutral appellation ‘Gandhi’ to the respectful ‘Gandhiji’ within the first paragraph, he registers “the embarrassment” of his first encounter with the “problem of assessment of Gandhiji in slightly personal terms.” The essay takes on an autobiographical turn as he recalls how his “difficulties are not exceptional” and are likely to be faced by “those who came to the communist movement during the last phase of the National Movement. With my parents it was not usual to refer to him as Gandhiji, but only as Mahatmaji; even to refer to him as Gandhiji was thought of as taking a liberty. It did not mean that my father was not critical of positions taken by Gandhiji: but it meant that whatever the criticism it was within the framework in which Gandhiji’s total dominance in the National Movement was accepted as fact, and although one might differ, one must also defer to Gandhi’s views” (Habib 2).

In recent years, critical attention has shifted to the domain of what may be called affect, especially of friendship as a phenomenon, a force that undoes the binaries of the colonial encounter, and especially the monolithic demonization of the ‘West’ within postcolonial theory. Susan Viswanathan’s *Friendship, Interiority and Mysticism* and Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought and the Politics of Colonialism* have altered the lens through which postcolonial theory views the East-West, and colonizer-colonized divide. Interestingly, within India, the dissolution of the divide between Gandhi and his Marxist critics, an act of ‘othering’ that has a trajectory that also comes via a Western/rationalist/modern route, can also take these forms. In Habib’s essay, we can see Gandhi operating in the domain of ‘affect’, as Habib recalls the personal Gandhi. Gandhi also exerts a force that elicits respect that exemplifies what Max Weber called “charismatic” authority (245-251). As he proceeds to examine Gandhi’s legacy in terms of both emotional affect and
political effect, the personal element resurfaces in his recollection of Gandhi’s writing letters in good Urdu to his aunt, and to his advocacy of Hindustani. Critiquing the subalterns for their wholesale critique of the national movement as well as of the communists as being “elite”, Habib seeks to extricate Gandhi from the Cambridge school of historians represented by Seal or Judith Brown who imply that the Gandhi-led movement was “a business enterprise, no real movement,” by the use of such words as ‘sub-contractors’ and ‘intermediaries’ for the Non-cooperationists.

What compels Habib’s attention is the sway over the masses and the reformist progressive zeal of a Gandhi the “essential strands” of whose “intellectual make-up are certainly modern” (Habib 6). Interestingly, in asserting this, he challenges Gandhi’s “own belief that these [Western] writings merely strengthened….what was present in his mind, perhaps dormant, from his own tradition.” Habib’s historicist consciousness chafes against Gandhi’s attempt “to read into the Bhagavad Gita that which it seems to one is not there, a message of dignity ….. of labour …of peace. He was similarly to assert equally unhistorically that the message of peace can be read as strongly in the Quran. Gandhi’s words often seem much more a testament of the New Testament than either of the Bhagvad Gita or the Quran” (7). For Habib, Gandhi’s precursors are the 19th century reformers – Ram Mohun Roy, Keshavchandra Sen and Justice Ranade – of whom he is the “greatest,” since he was able to effect such profound “modern” change in the popular perceptions of the theological tenets of “the most ancient of all surviving religions….Those who in the 1880s thought that the caste system was basic to Hinduism, by the year of Gandhi’s death would have been ashamed if anyone were to refer to it as an essential part of Hinduism” (8).

Tridip Suhrud offers, in his recent act of careful textual restoration of Gandhi’s autobiography a different relocation of Gandhi in the national imaginary (Suhrud 2010). He uncovers an interesting editorial intervention in the 1940 edition of the English translation of the text attributed to Mahadev Desai: the identity of the unnamed “revered friend” who had helped him with the editing and who had wished to remain anonymous. The person is identified as V.S. Srinivas Sastri and his meticulous attention to grammatical detail as well a few suggested deletions in the text are tracked equally meticulously in Suhrud’s “table of concordance,” including
commas and full stops. Thus, Suhrud’s text gives us the original translation, Sastri’s suggestions and the final version in a tabular form. What this exercise achieves, especially since the changes are usually very minor, is to reconfirm the canonicity of the original. Behind it lies the dream of faithfulness to an original.

However, in the fact that it acknowledges the layers of editorial intervention, Suhrud’s text reminds the reader of the English version that Gandhi is accessible only via multiple mediations. While paying tribute to the difficulties of the translator’s enterprise, it also thus evokes nostalgia for the ‘original’ Gandhi, available only in Gujarati. In doing this, it asserts the Ur-Gujarati text’s irreducibility. However, in another sense it invests the text with meaning in a way that harks to New Critical modes of close reading, since it is worshipful in its attention to the smallest detail, down to punctuation marks that more often than not do not have any consequence for the meaning. This exercise asserts the textual canonicity of the book, fetishising ‘the word on the page’ to the extent that it calls for a momentary act of forgetting the original context of the text’s production and dissemination in serial form. Perhaps in the process, Gandhi’s own attitude towards his words/works which focused on action and effect, rather than reified text, gets deflected. The layering of its many pasts that are carefully delineated in the edition exposes the textual, constructed quality of the autobiography in English. In a double move, it reifies the ‘original’ while undoing the naïve notion of unmediated access, especially to the non-Gujarati reader. Gandhi is thus ‘nativised’ anew and reclaimed for a regional Gujarati readership in an act that otherwise ostensibly adds to the English reader’s understanding of the Gandhian text. Through the exercise, Gandhi is located within protocols of modern scholarship; but this ultimately serves to underline the distance of the original text from the non-Gujarati reader, whether national or international.

Gopalkrishan Gandhi’s ‘Foreword’ to Suhrud’s edition, in a move that perhaps reflects a Gandhian balancing of contraries, subtly shifts the focus from Bhikhu Parekh’s criticism of “‘the defects of Mahadev Desai’s translation’.” Gandhi continues: “Variations in translation are not ‘defects’ and when, as in this particular work, the stamp of the author’s approval is implicit, the variations have to be taken as ‘revisions’ that re-phrase the original….” (x). He goes on to suggest that more
translation should proliferate as an “exercise in the art of literary explication and expression, [which] will enrich comparative studies in literature” (xiv). Behind this observation is an understanding of the supplementarity of texts, a multiplicity that acknowledges diversity of context, and an openness that reflects aspects of Gandhi’s approach to difference.

In using the word “experiments” for what he insists is the spiritual domain, Gandhi raises important issues regarding the interrelationship between the ‘scientific’ and the ‘moral’ domains, and, by extension, between the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional.’ Many commentators have seen in this choice of nomenclature (“experiments”) a commitment on Gandhi’s part to a ‘modern’ openness to self-fashioning, a scientific approach to the self that seems at odds with the language of ‘eternal truth’ and other ‘metaphysical’ and mystical notions that also appear as central to Gandhi’s vision.

We may now consider the implications of the word ‘prayog,’ which has been translated as ‘experiments’ by Mahadev Desai. Again, in Suhrud’s edition, Gopalkrishna Gandhi makes a useful observation on the consequences of translation that is relevant here:

The Gujarati part-title, *Satya na Prayogo* translates itself literally to ‘Truth’s Experiments’ or ‘Experiments of Truth’ rather than ‘Experiments with Truth’. The preposition ‘of’ expresses the relationship or an association between ‘truth’ as a general category and ‘experimentation’ as something which that category, in self-activation, becomes engaged in. The original title therefore suggests a field of narration in which the protagonist is ‘Truth’, the author being an instrument used by it (‘Foreword’ *Table of Concordance* x).

When we read ‘prayog’ as experiment, ‘science’ appears to be the dominant paradigm and much has been said – mostly celebratory – about Gandhi’s very modern vision of the ‘self’ as something to be subjected to experiments much as a lab rat or a chemical compound. It becomes apparent that given Gandhi’s version of Truth as eternal and unchanging and his repeated assertion that it, along with non-violence, is “as old as the hills”, there is a fundamental philosophical conflict that can arise. Of
course, a student in a lab experiment, one could argue, tests a scientific law, again and again, despite its being an ‘accepted’ fact. In fact repeatability is often cited as the essential definitional component of scientificity. This repeatability and an almost detached sense of the ‘objectivity’ of the experimental situation separates the realm of scientific ‘fact’ from those other forms of knowledge that fail to meet this rigorous criterion. Mystical experiences, for instance, though reported regularly, have been denied this status of fact due to their inability to be repeatable in the sterile conditions of a ‘controlled’ simulation.

Yet, the truths that Gandhi wishes to ‘test’ – satya, ahimsa – cannot be reduced to that objective status, just as the experimental subject (‘atman’) cannot be reduced to a non-sentient material object that can be measured. How does one, in other words, square the assertion that Gandhi has a deeply sacralized notion of the self – and indeed of Nature – with the assertion that he seems to be using the vocabulary of sceptical science and de-sacralisation to describe his spiritual forays? Are we to then question the use of the word ‘experiment’ as an inadequate translation of ‘prayog’? Or does this throw up yet again a question on the failure of a translated word to capture the semiotic range of the original word in the Source Language text? What of the fact that Gandhi approves the translation and does not raise any doubts about the adequacy of this word? Exploring the many meanings of ‘prayog,’ one comes across the non-scientific one of ‘to put to use’ or ‘to try’. ‘To use’ a tool, a technique, is also a kind of ‘prayog.’ Here the meaning would tend less towards a sceptical questioning of that which is being tested, inclining towards a spirit of faith in the Truth being ‘experimented’ with. For, the humility that Gandhi explicitly declares is essential to the spiritual enterprise implies a spirit of surrender. The experiment then is not about testing the truth, which is understood to be eternal, but with the less-than-perfect self’s attempt to understand itself in its light, and to live by it.

**Gandhi’s Continuous Self: Recent Theoretical Interventions**

A recent insight into the apparent contradictions in Gandhi’s writings, and in his self, has been offered by two philosophers. While Richard Sorabji has sought to understand the contradictions in Gandhi between universal love and emotional
detachment (especially vis-à-vis his own family) in terms of Stoicism, Akeel Bilgrami’s is a sustained effort to examine the paradoxical co-existence in Gandhi of politics and spirituality and the dichotomy between his use of science and his declared anti-modernity. Bilgrami, in a series of closely argued essays over the last few years, has attempted to trace in Gandhi a remarkable integrity of ideas that reinstates him as being more coherent philosophically than his own recalcitrance would indicate.

Amongst his colleagues, it was his self-anointed political heir Nehru who had registered deep reservations with respect to Gandhi’s sometimes “religious and sentimental approach” to political questions, finding his politics “metaphysical” and “difficult to understand” (Nehru *An Autobiography* 386, 302), though acknowledging his power as a “magician” who “knew how to pull the strings that moved people’s hearts” (387) and was also “a man of action and very sensitive to changing conditions” (268). Nehru’s reading of Gandhi ranges from exasperation at his abstruse methods, affection for him as a father figure, awe at his charisma, and respect for his pragmatism. Nehru’s ‘educated’ response to a Gandhi who seemed to defy any recognizably consistent methodology is mirrored in the way a Habib might point to Gandhi’s contradictions.

Bilgrami’s effort to read into Gandhi’s thought an inner consistency is therefore an act of posthumous relocation that rewards close attention. While he notes Gandhi’s “insouciance about fundamental objections, which he himself raises, to his own intuitive ideas,” Bilgrami also claims that “his thought itself was highly integrated….his political strategies [flowing] from…the most abstract epistemological and methodological commitments” (Bilgrami, “Gandhi the Philosopher” 4159). Distancing himself from the oscillation in perceptions of Gandhi – “a sentimental perception of him as a Mahatma to a cooler assessment of him as a shrewd politician” – Bilgrami claims that this mode of opposition hides the very quality of Gandhi’s thought. Making a distinction between “moral judgment and moral criticism,” Bilgrami unpacks the meaning of resistance with *ahimsa* which implies the ability to hold a core set of beliefs that are yet not imposed on others. This kind of resistance, of which Gandhi made an “art”, he sees as key to his ethics, in which “exemplary action takes the place of morals” (4161, 4163). Seen in this light, then, Gandhi’s
autobiographical writings are of a piece with his ethical practice since they demonstrate through personal example the challenges of the search for truth which “for Gandhi is not a cognitive notion at all. It is an experiential notion” (4164). The experiments with truth that exemplify such virtues as truth-telling, are laid bare to scrutiny, in an open assertion of his fallible humanity. As Majeed points out, Gandhi’s many hesitations shared in his autobiography, his literal stammerings, and his stage fright, flow from a “larger discourse of vulnerability”, which opens up the possibility of true dialogue (Majeed 214). Teaching by example, Gandhi deploys his autobiography for the furtherance of his vocation as a humane and humanizing teacher.

Elsewhere, Bilgrami develops his thesis that the key question that unites Gandhi with some strains of enlightenment thought is: “When and how did we transform our concept of the world as not merely a place to live in, but a place to master and control?” and finds that “a sympathetically careful reading” of Gandhi’s writings reveals that “his is not really a critique of science as some careless words he writes suggest, or even of modern science, but really a critique of a metaphysical outlook generated by certain developments around the rise of modern science, and its implications for society, politics, political economy and culture” (Bilgrami, “Gandhi’s Modernity” 274, emphasis original). In an earlier version of this thesis, taking Young India and Hind Swaraj, and not exploring his politics, Bilgrami had located Gandhi in a long line of traditions of European Dissent, which has important implications for the cultural/national locations of Gandhi. Tracing the connections between “perfectly scientific” (Bilgrami, “Gandhi, Newton” 25) strains in European thought that were critical of certain tendencies in Enlightenment science on the understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, and Gandhi’s critique of modernity, he sees both as constitutive positions from which it becomes possible to critique exploitative regimes. His nuanced conclusion deserves full quotation:

….the dismissals of Gandhi’s critique of the Enlightenment ideals as a kind of irrationalism and nostalgia have blinded us to making explicit the interpretative possibilities for some of his thinking that are opened up by noting his affinities with a longstanding, dissenting tradition in
perhaps the most radical period of English history. I am not suggesting for a moment that what was radical then could be retained without remainder as being radical today or even at the time when Gandhi was articulating his critique. But I am saying that it opens up liberating interpretative options for how to read Gandhi as being continuous with a tradition that was clear-eyed about what was implied by the 'disenchantment' of the world, to stay with the Weberian term.

Given the placing of his own essay in a book defined along a Marxist thematic, it is not surprising that Bilgrami goes on to establish links that locate Gandhi within that frame of reference:

It is a tradition consisting not just of Gandhi and the early seventeenth century freethinkers, but any number of remarkable literary and philosophical voices in between such as Blake, Shelley, not all of Marx, but one prominent strand in Marx, William Morris, Whitman and Dewey in America, and countless voices of the non-traditional Left, from the freemasons in the early eighteenth century down to the heterodox Left in our own time, voices such as those of Edward Thompson and Noam Chomsky, and the vast army of heroic but anonymous organizers of popular grass roots movements, in a word, the West as conceived by the 'radical' Enlightenment which has refused to be complacent about the orthodox Enlightenment's legacy of scientific rationality that the early dissenters in England had warned against well over three centuries ago (Bilgrami, “Gandhi, Newton” 26).

This move, reclaiming Gandhi for a ‘Radical Enlightenment,’ even as it acknowledges that “Gandhi’s understanding of nature derived heavily from his Bhakti ideals in which nature is sacral, suffused with the divine, continuous with the atman that suffuses each of its inhabitants” (Bilgrami “Gandhi’s Modernity” 275) undoes the superficial binaries of the debate on locating Gandhi in the ‘East’ and/or ‘West’, by positing the problem in terms of a more universalist idiom of approaches to nature and matter that have a history within Western scientific discourse. The West acquires a layered and complex temporal location rather than being a monolithic geographical space. It explains yet again the reason why Gandhi could forge deep and lasting bonds.
of friendship and camaraderie with people and literature of the West, and reach out to workers at the mills of Lancaster, while rejecting the very idea of ‘Western’ civilization, by which he meant the dominant strains of industrial modernity that defined the contemporaneous West. It was the discourse of modernity, understood as a desacralization of nature that had historically been used to justify colonial rapacity and ruthless exploitation, that he rejected, rather than West itself, in ‘essence’. Bilgrami’s reading allows for a layered engagement with Gandhi’s location as it also sidetracks the binary frame which reads him as making instrumental use of ideas for achieving pragmatic political goals or as a hopelessly reactionary prophet who was out of touch with the requirements of the present. It resolves the apparent dichotomy between the ‘modern’ Gandhi, and Gandhi the rabid critic of all things modern and ‘Western,’ a dichotomy that rests upon a simplistic equation between the ‘West’ and exploitative scientific modernity.

This kind of reading is also continuous with Gandhi’s notion of the nation which diverged so sharply from a ‘modern’ V.D. Savarkar, whose ideal of the nation rested upon majoritarian nationalism whose genealogies Bilgrami traces to the Westphalian ideal by which “people came to feel for the nation most easily and most intensely by finding some ‘minority’ or minorities, and stigmatizing them as implicit outsiders”. Bilgrami refers to Ashis Nandy’s “shrewd and convincing reading of Hindutva” according to which Savarkar is a modernist and a Westerner in this sense (Bilgrami, “Gandhi’s Modernity” 283). Nehru and Gandhi did not subscribe to this idea of the nation, though their lives took different trajectories. Nehru experienced phases of discomfort with the non-modernity of Gandhi’s idiom and methods, but shared with him a deep commitment to a non-communitarian ideal of the nation. In Nehru’s case, it came from a historiographical reconstruction of ancient India as a seat of such ideals, which it was the duty of modern India to recover. This was unlike Gandhi’s indifference to history as a legitimizing discourse, a point argued in some depth by Vinay Lal (“Gandhi and the Social Scientists” 281-6).

Bilgrami’s reading allows us another lens through which to access Gandhi’s genius in making apparent contraries meet and to see Gandhi’s creative engagement with the West, as with all his ‘others’ within the nation – women and harijans for
instance – as being deeply humanistic, though not anthropocentric, since even animals were drawn into its fold, as the human for him was not alienated from the natural. “I myself have become a harijan by choice,” Gandhi had declared at a Prayer Meeting in May, 1946 (CWMG 84, 247). Gandhi’s identification with women and peasants, his advocacy of physical labor, of which his espousal of the charkha and his concept of ‘bread labour’ were a part, and his caution with a technology that was the tool of exploitation, can be seen to be rooted in a vision of equity and freedom which is based on a sound understanding of economic and social disparities. This also connects the emergent political entity of India with humanity and with nature at large.

This vision makes it impossible to see Gandhi as a narrow nationalist even though in his full commitment to the cause of national liberation he would come to differ from Tagore’s version of internationalism. His nationalism would also differ from those based on religious identities, espoused by Savarkar and Jinnah, as it would be from the anti-religious varieties of it which the communist movement was beginning to articulate. Finally, in its emphasis on the rights of the poorest and the advocacy of the small village republic, it also served as warning to the danger of the nation-state as a potentially oppressive regime that merely replicated the structures of power it had politically replaced. ‘Swaraj’, ‘swadeshi’ and ‘ahimsa’, the planks of his self-fashioning, were crafted in the laboratory of a mind that saw no gap between science and moksha, where intuition and religiosity was not the antithesis to science, but aspects of good science. In doing this, he helps recover meanings and holistic visions that modernity in its narrower, more instrumentalist, aspects has buried.