In one of his early works, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Partha Chatterjee (1999) attempts to understand the peculiar nature of anti-colonial nationalism in India. Objecting to Benedict Anderson’s thesis that the “historical experience of nationalism in Western Europe, in the Americas, and in Russia had supplied for all subsequent nationalisms a set of modular forms from which nationalist elites in Asia and Africa had chosen the ones they liked,” Chatterjee argues that such a thesis would imply that the postcolonial world would remain “perpetual consumers of modernity”: “Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of anti-colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anti-colonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imagination must remain forever colonized.” Clarifying that he does not object to Anderson’s thesis because of “sentimental reasons” but because he cannot reconcile such a thesis with the evidence of anti-colonial nationalism, Chatterjee presses forward the view that the most influential and creative results of nationalist imagination in Asia and Africa were “posited not on an identity but rather on a difference with the forms of the national society propagated by the modern West” (5). Where, according to Chatterjee, did this difference that anti-colonial nationalism asserted lie?

Chatterjee’s claim is that anti-colonial nationalism marks this difference by shaping its own domain of sovereignty within the colonial society much before it began its political battle with colonial power. Nationalist discourse does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains - the “material”, “public sphere” and the “spiritual”, “private” sphere. While conceding the need to accept the superiority of the colonizers in the material, public sphere, where the latter had exercised their dominion over
the colonized with their knowledge of science, technology and modern methods of statecraft, in the“private” spiritual and moral domain, East would always remain superior to the West. It was in this “private” sphere that the distinctive spiritual and moral core of national identity would be preserved—un-colonized and authentic. The greater the success in imitating Western skills, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. “This formula,” Chatterjee declares, is a “fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa” (6). Therefore, in the narrative of Indian anti-colonial nationalism that Chatterjee etches, nationalism sought to bring print-capitalism, family and education, three institutions that it identified as belonging to the inner domain of national culture under its jurisdiction. New institutions of secondary and higher education were started, vernacular literature and language legitimized, institutions of colonial education were turned into distinctly national institutions in its curriculum, indigenous funding and composition of faculty were sought and alternative institutions established. It is in this inner, spiritual domain that the existing traditions of the land would be protected from colonial interference.

However, though nationalism keeps the colonial state out of this inner, spiritual domain, the domain itself is not left unchanged. It is here, according to Chatterjee, that nationalism is most creative: it fashions a “modern” national, Indian culture which is nevertheless not Western. Thus, standard histories of nationalism which see nationalism primarily as a political phenomenon, merely mapping the changes that it sees in the “material” sphere, can only see anti-colonial Indian nationalism as an imitation of one of the many models offered by Europe or America. However, Chatterjee’s claim is if we can outline the history of nationalism not merely as a political movement or phenomenon but as a cultural movement which precedes the political, then we begin to see that it is indeed different and sets itself

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167 Chatterjee states that this is the central argument also of his earlier book Nationalist Thought and Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (1986). The thematic and problematic framework which we see as more central to Chatterjee’s argument is part of how the “spiritual realm” gets transformed by the nationalist discourse, a process which is given an analytical unity through Chatterjee’s analysis of Bankim, Gandhi and Nehru.
apart from Western forms of nationalism. However, let us persist. What exactly constitutes this difference, given the fact that in this process the traditions and ways of the people get re-described in terms of the “religion of Hinduism”?

The attempt to re-describe the traditions and practices of the land as derived from “Hindu religion” is a necessary prior step before the “Hindu nation” can emerge, in imitation of a modular form of the Christian nation. However, on the issue of what constitutes the difference, Chatterjee is remarkably protean. In his account, any form of deviation gets marked as difference – from the way drama as a genre is received in India and how Indian drama fails to adhere to the criterion of Western standard, to the way Indian languages are seen as belonging to the inner domain by the intelligentsia, becomes for Chatterjee a sign of how anti-colonial nationalism deviated from and was therefore different from the modular forms of the West (6-9). It was all a part of what he would later call “our modernity.” Somewhere along the way, from describing the nationalist discourse, Chatterjee seems to buy into the self-descriptions of the nationalist discourse as well. For Chatterjee, the difference is indicative of the native’s creative appropriation and assertion of nationalism. He does not entertain the idea that at least some of these uses are more an evidence for distortion that has occurred due to incomprehension or miscomprehension or deployment made by various interest groups. What allows for recognition and assertion of difference? Implicit in the idea of difference are the traditions of India which for Chatterjee necessitate a version of “our modernity” and because of which we can never be like the West. However, Chatterjee tells us little about the traditions that constitute and shape our experience other than suggest that it has been invented by the

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168 This transformation has been brought out in my previous chapter, Chapter IV, on the effects of modern education where we see the production and strengthening of religious identities. By 1900, numerous societies had sprung up to defend the “domain of culture” in terms of a religious nationalism, a strong Hindu identity on which Indian nationalism must be based (Mallampalli 2003). Of course, then the Hindu nation will have to secularize itself. Once such a modular form becomes available, it is there for any set of people to come together and use the form to its benefit.
nationalists. He thereby refuses to give any reality and concreteness to the existence of traditions and practices within which people live and make sense of their worlds.

It is within this larger story of nationalism and power that education finds a place in the “inner” domain. Chatterjee places education in the realm of civil society where the nationalists produce consent for political domination or produce hegemony through interventions in the cultural realm before their struggle to take over state power. However, the explanatory framework of Gramscian passive revolution which Chatterjee uses raises more questions than explain the nationalist moment and its relation to education. Firstly, Chatterjee’s analysis presupposes the Gramscian link between state, education and civil society rather than prove it in the Indian case. For if education, (here more particularly “national education” which was articulated in distinct opposition to Western colonial education, and which carried the “essential marks” of identity to emphasize the difference) was a site through which hegemony was sought to be produced and national subjects created, it fails to explain why most institutions that rose under the rubric of national education failed and indeed in the long run, only those which managed to model themselves largely along the lines of the Western colonial model succeeded. Secondly, if the function of education as serving a state agenda (colonial or national) exhausts the domain of education, then we will be unable to account for the rich and complex response to the idea of national education by thinkers like Tagore and Gandhi. It leaves unexplained why education erupts as such a central problematic for the nationalists. Sanjay Seth’s explanation for why education emerged as important to the nationalists was because “it straddled the distinction” of “inner” and “outer” (Seth 2007, 177) rather than be neatly boxed into one or the other. His claim is that on the one hand one could not reject modern education because it was the site where the knowledge,

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169 The distinction between “the material” and “the spiritual” realm which Chatterjee sees as a fundamental to anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa, is a feature of the nationalist discourse itself. This becomes clear when we see that in the case of Bildung, education is clearly placed in the realm of the “spiritual” as opposed to the “material.” This distinction owes its origin to Augustine’s doctrine of two kingdoms reintroduced by Luther.
skills and techniques to be “modern” were disseminated and to give up on this was to give up on the aspiration to be “modern.” On the other hand, while nationalism used indigenous education to assert difference and to consolidate national identity, it never sought to seriously revive the study of indigenous knowledges as an alternative because they were not seen as conducive or “amenable to global-European constructions of modernity.” While it is unclear what it means for a knowledge form to be “amenable to modernity,” Seth indicates that the living traditions of Sanskrit disappear precisely when Indology and Orientalism were established. Critical, historical and philological knowledge about Sanskrit which were central to Indology was not what the traditional pundits possessed and it clearly served a different role as part of a living tradition that it was (170-76).

However, I contend that education emerged as a problematic for the nationalists not because it straddled the distinction but because it is in this domain that the idea of cultural difference could be most strongly articulated. Many thinkers of the time draw attention to the presence of distinct “mental traditions” and forms of learning. Tagore, for example, is strongly wedded to the idea of the “Indian mind” and an Indian ideal of education. Gandhi does not hypostasize anything called the “Indian mind,” but it is he who through his active ways of involving people in the act of spinning and satyagraha, teaches the people to understand the relation between the agent, action and subjective ends and not to confuse swaraj with throwing the British out. It must also be remembered that despite the fact that Tagore and Gandhi referred to India (Tagore often extended it to the idea of Asia) as possessing some kind of structural, geographical unity, they did not associate this unity with the idea of a nation in the sense of expression of collective will; on the contrary, both Tagore and Gandhi were powerful critics of the idea of nation and nationalism. Tagore’s Santiniketan

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170 Hence, the civilizational discourse becomes important during this period. For an illuminating account of the idea of national education and the importance of the civilizational discourse to the times, see Bhattacharya, Bara, and Yagati (2003), Bhattacharya (2014, 1998).
was in fact envisaged as an antidote to what he saw as the “demon” of nationalism (Nandy 1994, 5) which he saw as primarily responsible for the imperialism of the British and the violence of colonial rule in India. How then do we reconcile this apparent paradox where thinkers such as Gandhi and Tagore assert the distinctness of the “Indian” ways of going about the world and yet are critical of the idea of the nation and nationalism, seeing them specifically as European imports which were distorting and causing violence to the social fabric of the land?\footnote{For Tagore’s criticism of the idea of nation and nationalism, see Tagore’s famous text, *Nationalism* (1917). The theme also runs through many of Tagore novels such as *Ghare Baire, Gora, Char Adhyay* among others. Also see Nandy (1994) for the important elements of Gandhi and Tagore’s critique of nationalism.}

In his perceptive section of “the paradox that attends reflection on experience,” Uday Mehta distinguishes between two views with regard to understanding the relation between experience and language: one that sees experience as referring to that “which exceeds or remains below, the threshold of what concepts and language can capture” and the other more dominant view which holds that everything is subject to linguistic mediation and therefore “experience cannot be prior, nor can it exceed, the expressive capacities of that system” (U. S. Mehta 1999, 201–02). Mehta makes a case for the former view as an important heuristic for “the inexpressible may be a limit beyond the immediate reach of a language, but it is precisely in the face of such a limit that language strains to extend itself (202)” such that it can understand and clarify experience. It is precisely such an orientation towards experience and language that allows us to be attentive to the ways in which the language of thinkers such as Gandhi and Tagore constantly exceeds the limit placed upon it by the colonial \textit{and} nationalist framework.\footnote{In the story that Chatterjee (1986) wishes to tell, Gandhi and Tagore would be nationalist in the same sense as Nehru and Bankim were, with minor differences. They would make possible different movements in the various moments of nationalism in its process of emerging as unified and hegemonic. Hence, the criticism that Gandhi and Tagore had of nation and nationalism would either be ignored in Chatterjee’s analysis or merely be seen as minor. However, understanding the integrity of the thought of Tagore and Gandhi requires us to be attentive to the ways in which even while they speak in the derived language of nation and nationalism, another layer to their thought keeps leaping out in their writing. As a result, we see several conceptual confusions on the...}
cognitively understood through education rather than for education to be submerged by nationalism and the nationalist discourse.

The aim of this chapter is to examine Gandhi and Tagore’s writings on education and the alternatives they forwarded as part of their problematization of education. What is the diagnosis they have of modern education? What are the categorial structures through which they make sense of the activity of education? In the first section, I deal with the debate around the idea of national education that rose in late nineteenth century India and situate Tagore and Gandhi’s response in relation to it. In the second and third sections, I specifically discuss Tagore and Gandhi’s diagnosis of colonial education and show how their criticism of colonial education and the alternatives they forward are part of the same problematic.

5.1 The Problem of National Education

Almost a century after modern education was institutionalized in India, the nationalist moment once again reopened the question of education and formation. Education emerged as the single most important problem during this period. The energies of several leaders and thinkers of the time – Rabindranath Tagore, M. K. Gandhi, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Syed Ahmed Khan, Zakir Hussain, Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghose, Vivekananda and J Krishnamurti among many others – coalesced around the issue, with many of them involved in the common pursuit of finding a solution to the problem of national education. Two questions came to be foregrounded: Was the education imparted in British, colonial institutions and the newly emerging “national education” institutions worthy of being called

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surface of their writings. Even while the two speak about national education as something that is distinct and is in tune with the traditions of the land, they strive to prevent it from being “nationalist” in the parochial sense of the term. One has to be attentive to both these layers present in their writings.

173 For an account of national education see Bhattacharya (1998), Bhattacharya, Bara, and Yagati (2003), K. Kumar (2005), Seth (2007). Also see Lajpat Rai (1920), A. Ghose (1924), Coomaraswamy (1909, 2011), Gandhi (1962) for their thoughts on national education. Several nationalists came up with alternative educational institutions. J. Krishnamurti remained critical of nationalism as an idea and kept out of the movement. Yet his thoughts on education had already taken shape by then.
education at all? If not, what was true education? A search for answers to these questions took different shapes.

The debate acquired a sense of urgency due to the dissatisfaction with colonial education and prior experiments with “national education” in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The intellectual ferment due to the emerging sense of nationalism had led to the establishment of various “Hindu” and Muslim educational institutions in the late nineteenth century - the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic schools and colleges, the Gurukul at Kangri, Central Hindu College by Annie Besant and the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh - as some sort of an answer to the moral and cognitive crisis created due to colonial, educational institutions. As we saw in Chapter IV, a larger concern that modern education was not only producing mere crammers as opposed to independent thinkers, but was also turning them away from their own traditions without any new source of morality in its place had gained ground. This pervasive sense of moral crisis led to the formation of native alternatives to British-run religious institutions. These institutions were formed along the lines of Christian religious institutions imparting “religious education” (along with the necessary official subjects) with a thrust on denominations. Thus, while following the official university syllabus with its emphasis on acquiring modern knowledge (the sciences and literature) in order to make it possible for students to enter government services, they simultaneously declared their commitment to Sanskrit, Arabic, Urdu or the vernaculars as the case may be, with subscriptions and endowments towards the promotion and dissemination of their respective religions. The Hindu institutions sought to inculcate in students the “doctrines of Hinduism” through emphasis on its Vedic origins, an attempt to put in place an incipient notion of “Hindu theology” which remained unsuccessful because the traditions of the land did not rely on doctrines as much on practice.
By the last decade of the nineteenth century, there arose an increasing sense of disillusionment that these native institutions were becoming like the rest of the state-run universities, with a focus on clearing examinations, thereby being no different in their content and form when compared to the British-run educational institutions. The question of what specifically constitutes national education came to haunt the debate. Observing the failure of the educational experiments in Bengal, Lala Lajpat Rai despaired at the multiple ways in which “national” was interpreted in the experiments: “What do we mean by national education? Do we want to distinguish it from local or provincial education or from denominational or sectarian education? How does education become national? Is it the language which is the medium of instruction that makes it national, or is it the agency through which it is imparted, or the agency which controls and regulates it, or the books which are taught or the standards and ideals which underlie it?” (Lajpat Rai 1920, 76)

Rai’s frustration in identifying something as “national” can be considered as an indicator of incomprehension of the concept in the colonial context. As early as 1909, Chesterton had applied the thesis that the political life of a people should be the expression of their distinctive cultural ethos and drawn attention to the peculiar feature of Indian nationalism in his characteristically witty prose: “The principal weakness of Indian Nationalism seems to be that it is not very Indian and not very national. It is all about Herbert Spencer and Heaven knows what….When all is said, there is a national distinction about a people asking for its own ancient life and a people asking for things that have been wholly invented by someone else. There is a difference between a conquered people demanding its own institutions and the same people demanding the institutions of its conqueror” (Chesterton 1909). A few years

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174 The National Council of Education, Bengal was started during the swadeshi movement in 1905-1906 and rose in response to the call given to students that they must withdraw from government schools and colleges. It aimed at establishing educational institutions “on national lines and under national control.” Its objective was to provide an education that drew upon the richness of Indian traditions, in the vernacular languages, with English taught as second language. See Seth (2007). For a detailed account, see Mukhopādhyāya, Mukherjee, and Bengal (2000).
later Tagore, in a letter to C. F Andrews in 1921, would indicate the lack of fit between the concept and the nature of Indian sociality: “We have no word for Nation in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us” (Bhattacharya 1997, 55). This scepticism of nationalism also ran strong in Gandhi who held that the Indian civilization had the ability and resources to overcome nationalism and offer alternative, harmonious ways of living.175

Yet, the two most robust answers to the problem of national education came from Tagore and Gandhi. While we find them articulating their thoughts through the inherited vocabulary of the “nation” and “religion,” there is yet a sense in which their articulations on the subject constantly exceeds the conceptual limits set by the colonial, liberal framework, with both of them questioning colonial concepts and our hasty borrowal of them. I would like to suggest that their response to the problem of national education is best understood not as a “nationalist” answer but as an attempt to grasp something significant about the distinct patterns of learning and forms of mental cultivation specific to the traditions of the land even if they do not have an adequate formulation of it.

From the very beginning of the early twentieth century, Gandhi and Tagore were engaged in the common enterprise of building alternative educational institutions outside of the colonial, state-run, institutions. Tagore had founded the Brahmacharya Ashram at Santiniketan in 1901, (twenty years later he would call it the “Visva-Bharati,” or the ‘World University’) and Sriniketan, his school for “rural reconstruction” in 1922 while Gandhi had established the Sabarmati ashram in 1915 and the Sevagram ashram in 1936, all with the aim of “liberating

175 Thus, it is not surprising that Gandhi, on the eve of his assassination, wrote that the Indian National Congress should be disbanded since it had outlived its uses and political independence had been achieved. Instead, his suggestion was it should convert itself into a Lok Sevak Sangh, an association for the service of the people (Johnson 2006, 158).
the Indian mind.”¹⁷⁶ The alternative educational institutions established by the two had several similarities – they were envisaged as ashrams with an emphasis on simplicity and austerity of everyday life, were residential, and stressed the close, filial relationship between the student and teacher. They emphasized the primacy of the vernacular, the centrality of practical arts/craft and distinctly attempted to shape the new schools in the mould of what they perceived as an Indian way of life, in tune with the “Swabhava” of Indians, as opposed to a Western way of life (Bhattacharya and Mukhopadhyay 1995).¹⁷⁷

No doubt, differences emerged during the course of time. By 1920s, Tagore had developed some scepticism about national education and like Lala Lajpat Rai openly expressed concern about what constituted “national.” His dissatisfaction with British-run institutions which turned students into passive recipients of bookish knowledge on the one hand and his increasing scepticism with national education on the other, (expressed in his note of caution about the excessive emphasis on the “national” leading one to parochialism) made him move more towards an idea of an institution where ‘knowledge could be exchanged and compared, where India’s knowledge can be analyzed in the perspective of the knowledge acquired by the entire mankind’ (Bhattacharya and Mukhopadhyay 1995, xviii). Thus, when Gandhi announced the reconstruction programme in 1920s with its thrust on the swadeshi in which the charkha occupied the pride of place as a central educational instrument, a role that it would go on to play even in his educational programme Nayee Talim, Tagore sounded his note of caution and openly disagreed with Gandhi’s emphasis on spinning and manual labour. Again, when Gandhi’s educational programme plunged students into productive activity and all the everyday transactions it involved, Tagore, in a speech at a conference on education


¹⁷⁷ For an excellent introduction to Tagore’s educational thought which I draw from, see the introduction by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya in Bhattacharya and Mukhopadhyay (1995, xiii-xxxviii).
given in 1936 noted: “As the scheme stands on paper, it seems to assume that material utility, rather than development of personality is the end of education” (Tagore 1996, 1111).

Despite the fading away of Tagore’s significant experiment in education from the national imagination and the criticism that Nayee Talim invited as a congress-implemented programme, I would like to argue that it is Tagore and Gandhi who provide us with a diagnosis of the crisis in education, a diagnosis that is as valid today as it was then. It is a diagnosis that the contemporary scholarship on crisis in higher education entirely misses. In their diagnosis, the crisis in education is not about institutional failure, a problem with the Indian student or the social fabric, a crisis in politics or even one of bureaucratic apathy. It is a more serious issue: it is a crisis in education and learning, an interruption in the transmission of structures and concepts that help us clarify experience and render our experience intelligible, factors essential to understanding and the full-fledged flourishing of ourselves. If Tagore points at what is involved in developing the “whole man” whose patterns of learning and the social fabric are shaped very differently from that of the West, it is Gandhi who embodies and enacts this difference in the political arena, outside formal institutions.

We noted earlier that Tagore and Gandhi have a similar diagnosis of the educational problem – that what went under the name of “education” in colonial institutions could not be called education at all. One can reformulate their primary concern in the following way: modern

\[178\] The significance of the public debate between Gandhi and Tagore has prompted philosophers like Amartya Sen to argue that in the field of education, India should have followed Tagore’s vision rather than Gandhi’s. In a recent interview, Sen attributes India’s initial commitment to Gandhi’s thought in its first-year plan on education rather than to Tagore’s vision as the reason for the lack of enthusiasm with regard to education in Indian culture, especially for the poor (A. Sen 2013). Interestingly, Gandhi and Tagore themselves converged on the issue. Education through craft and arts, where the student would acquire the necessary skills with the ethical comportment that was intrinsically tied to practices of the self was as much a focus in Tagore’s Santiniketan as it was for Gandhi. Gandhi, far from being opposed to reading, writing, arithmetic and science, desired that the learning of these be linked to the different aspects of a chosen craft. Why, despite so many convergences, Tagore disagreed with Gandhi on spinning has remained a puzzle. See Vivek Dhareshwar’s forthcoming article on “Truth or Fact? Reframing the Gandhi-Tagore Debate” (Dhareshwar, Forthcoming).
education had become an unreflective activity and had insulated us from reflection on experience. Instead of enabling inquiry and understanding, it actively prevented them, thereby arresting the development of the student. On the contrary, it gave us an *illusion of cognition and understanding.* As a result, education had become merely a way to earn more money, get into government careers and become clerks and interpreters. Utilitarianism, they seem to suggest, is not the cause of the problem but more a result of an unreflective activity. What then was preventing reflection on experience which was so central to the idea of education and the development of the person? Tagore develops his argument in “The Centre for Indian Culture or Visva-Bharati” (hereafter CIC), first published in 1919 (2007, IV: 515–48). The essay remains one of the most systematic of Tagore’s writing with regard to his diagnosis of modern education and the institution of the University. Towards the end, he “arrives” at the institution of Visva-Bharati, meant for the comparative study of world cultures. It is worth examining in detail the paper in which Tagore problematizes the various nationalist solutions of his times and forwards his own formulation of the crisis in education, addressing the question of what it means to think of the mind as a “living thing.”

5.2 Tagore’s Diagnosis: Spectacles at the Expense of Our Eyesight

In the very beginning of the paper, Tagore states his question “what should be the ideal of education in India,” and follows it up immediately with his answer: “India has proved that it has its own mind, which has deeply thought and felt and tried to solve according to its light the problems of existence.” The education of India, then is, in Tagore’s words, “to enable this mind of India to find out truth, to make this truth its own wherever found and to give expression to it in such a manner as only it can do (515).

I draw from Tagore’s other essays on education and the university as well when necessary.
The declaration of the distinctness of the Indian mind is bound to raise some problems in modern readers like us and perhaps this accounts for the silence on Tagore’s educational vision in current times. That there is an “Indian mind” or that there should be a distinct conception or ideal of education that is more suited to India is not bound to sit well with most readers today. Are these not universal concepts, similar across cultures? What indeed could be Indian about the “Indian mind”? - are questions that immediately spring to our mind. However, if we take the “mind” as not a neutral apparatus for thinking that is outside history and as always already given but produced as the result of insertion into pre-existing social-institutional arrangements, traditions of learning and the mode of reflection they initiate you into, then we can take Tagore to be drawing attention to the nature of sociality and knowledge practices which have been transmitted by long-standing social structures and traditions in India. It is this that we can see Tagore referring to as “The Indian Mind.”

Taking note of the different experiments that were spontaneously erupting in various parts of India under the rubric of national education as a response to the crisis in education, Tagore reflected: “But it often happens that because man's wish is so immediate to him, and so strong, it becomes difficult accurately to locate the exciting cause, to make sure of the object towards which it aspires” (516). In the rest of the paper, Tagore goes about making the “exciting cause” and the “object towards which it aspires” visible. Tagore first notes the difficulty the educated, intellectual community faces. Since we have been brought up within the crucible of the modern Indian educational system, our own intellectual life has been

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180 This could also account for the silence on Tagore’s vision and diagnosis in the recent proposal for “Tagore’s Liberal Arts University.” See Guha, Khilnani, and Chaudhuri (2013). While the proposal with a university in his name acknowledges Tagore as a leading intellectual of India, there is no reference to the diagnosis that produced Santiniketan. There are however some references to the international character of Tagore’s institution which is seen as essential to global times. The silence can only mean one thing: that Tagore’s vision and his diagnosis of the problem are no longer relevant to contemporary times and our predicament is no longer the same.

181 In fact, Tagore in his writings, often substitutes India with Asia, frequently asserting that common ways of living and learning were common to the whole of Asia: “But before Asia is in a position to co-operate with the culture of Europe, she must base her own structure on a synthesis of all the different cultures which she has.” Tagore (2007, IV: 639–58). Also see Visvanathan (1987) for an interesting account of Tagore’s vision of the university.
shaped by these institutions and we naturally are unable to judge from outside. We have “a natural partiality and admiration” for it and are convinced it cannot be changed. And yet, “there lurks, in some depth of our self-satisfaction, a thorn, which does not let us sleep in comfort.” Tagore observes that in our fretfulness, we ascribe the cause for this “secret pricking,” to some “outside intrusion.” We assume that if we took over the control of our educational institutions from the British, this irritation would disappear. It was precisely such an understanding of the cause of the irritation that had resulted in the emergence of various national schools and universities which rose under the assumption that “national education” was equal to the freedom to have absolute control over educational institutions. However, mere external independence where we have taken over the control of our institutions from the British government (and here we can note that Tagore is strikingly similar to Gandhi on swaraj) would invariably draw us to the “slippery slope of imitation” and “our freedom will become the freedom to imitate the foreign institutions” (516-17). We would be blindly imitative and Tagore asserted, what is worse, we would be badly imitative. Tagore insisted that we should not imitate Western universities and even if we wished to, we could not. Here, Tagore calls attention to the long history of the institution of the university and the cultural and intellectual milieu of which the institution of higher learning is a living, organic extension:

All organic beings live like a flame, a long way beyond themselves. They have thus a smaller and a larger body. The former is visible to the eye; it can be touched, captured and bound. The latter is indefinite; it has no fixed boundaries, but is widespread both in space and time. When we see a foreign University, we see only its smaller body - its buildings, its furniture, its regulations, its syllabus; its larger body is not present to us. But as the kernel of the coconut is in the whole coconut, so the University, in the case of Europeans, is in their society, in their parliament, in their literature, in the numerous activities of their corporate life. They have their thoughts published in their books, as well as the living men who think those thoughts and criticize, compare and disseminate them. One common
medium of mind connects their teachers and students in an educational relationship which is living and luminous. In short their education has its permanent vessel which is their own mind; its permanent supply which is their own living spring of culture; its permanent field for irrigation which is their own social life. This organic unity of their mind and life and culture has enabled them to seek truth from all lands and all times, and to make it vitally one with their own culture which is the basis of their civilization. (522-23)

Far from being an institution that grew overnight, the institution of the university in the West, Tagore suggests, is a product of certain ways of thinking and learning, crystallized over centuries. Education then is that means through which certain cultural ways of learning and specific forms of cultivation are institutionalized and transmitted. The Western university, Tagore implies, is a product of specific histories of engagement in particular kinds of cultural practices. As a result, there is an organic unity between “mind,” life and culture, with “one common medium of mind” connecting teachers and students. Here, Tagore is capturing, in everyday language, something as abstract as the flow of ways of learning and subject-formation. These are lodged not so much as individual traits or even embodied in the institution of the university itself but are a result of a certain kind of sociality or cultural arrangements that far extends individual learners and the institution, of which the university is only an expression.

However, Tagore contended, when we think of building universities in India, we mistake the smaller flame to be the beginning and the end. We end up thinking of the physical institution of the university as a finished product: “The European University comes before our vision, full-grown. That is why we cannot think of the University except as a fully developed institution. An impatient craving for result and an unfortunate weakness for imitation have led us to cherish just such an unnatural desire for a National University, full-fledged from its very birth. So that most of our endeavours become fruitless.…These solidly complete
Universities, over which our country is brooding, are like hard-boiled eggs from which you cannot expect chickens to come out” (518). In another essay on “An Eastern University” [1922], Tagore captures the primacy of a milieu of learning and the community of the learned in the formation of the student as opposed to mere physical externalities with the help of an analogy: “Had the deep-water fishes happened to produce a scientist who chose the jumping of a monkey for his research work, I am sure he would give most of the credit to the branches of the trees and very little to the monkey itself. In a foreign University we see the branching wilderneses of its buildings, furniture, regulations, and syllabus, but the monkey, which is a difficult creature to catch and more difficult to manufacture, we are likely to treat as a mere accident of minor importance” (648). Tagore repeatedly brings attention back to the subject of education, the *longue durée* flow of specific learning processes involved and the cultural milieu in which ideas are born. The students “never see the process and the environment of those thoughts which they are compelled to learn - and thus they lose the historical sense of all ideas, never knowing the perspective of their growth” (523). They remain reliant on books not for mental sustenance but merely for the sake of external advantage. As a result, the modern European culture, “whose truth and strength lie in its fluid mobility, comes to us rigidly fixed.” It is this deadness of borrowed thoughts and concepts which merely gives us an illusion of thinking that Tagore insisted, has made us “miss the dynamic character of living truth” (523-24).

Tagore’s point was simple yet profound. His claim was that our education was no education at all for there was no cognition or understanding of ourselves taking place. Since we fail to acknowledge that the university is the outcome of a specific pattern of learning traditions distinct to the Western culture, we also fail to understand the relation of Western thought and its institutions to its culture. As a result, Western thought comes to us with certain immobility, merely as tools to deploy and reify or for reasons of external advantages rather
than as frameworks of ideas with which we can have an active engagement. In short, Tagore’s charge is that our failure to understand the depth of the debates in the West from our own vantage point, results in us not understanding India and ourselves.

Tagore insists that the form of labour to form a human being whose traditions of learning and forms of experience are structured differently from that of the West require a certain creativity, initiative and courage. Thus, Tagore asserted the need to experiment. These experiments would necessarily be like a work-in-progress, much as he envisaged Santiniketan itself to be, experiments which could be tested, improved and worked upon by posterity.

Tagore therefore predicted as early as 1919 that the “imitation tree” would whittle down, would shrink and become shrivelled after years, even while it, in a shrill manner asserted its fruitfulness. Thus, Tagore concluded that “it does not follow that by merely founding a University oneself, and keeping it under one’s own control, it can be made one’s own” (520).

**Making the University One’s Own: To Keep the Mind on the Move**

How then does one make the university one’s own? What is the cause of the discomfort that is troubling our minds? Tagore forwards his idea of true education: Just as life is always more than the sum of its parts, and here Tagore formulates a certain standard through which we can judge our education: “our mind, also, in the fullness of its life, is infinitely greater than the information it appropriates, the training it acquires. That education is true, which acknowledges the mind to be a living thing, and therefore stimulates it to give out more in quality and quantity than is imparted to it from outside. And we are to judge our education by this standard” (521). Now by this standard, Tagore concludes “far from having given our University more than we received, we have not even rendered back full measure. We have been repeating great words, learning great truths, looking on great examples, but in return we have simply become clerks, deputy magistrates, pleaders, or physicians” (521-22). In short,
our education, and Tagore comes back to this point repeatedly, has not resulted in understanding and therefore we fail to produce independent thinkers.

Of course, Tagore admits that it is no mean thing to be a physician. However, while our physicians practiced in every remote village, acquiring considerable repute and substantial money, their “extensive experience” had not resulted in “any new theory or great fact being added to the science of medicine.” “Like good school-boys”, Tagore observed, “they have only applied with over-cautious precision just what they have learnt. And who shall make good the vital thing that is lost when students never become masters?” (521-22)

Why was this so? Is it because Indians were inherently defective and do not possess the necessary powers that can make us intellectually independent? Is it because we are born to be “serfs, permanently bending under the burden of another's intellectual acquisitions?” Tagore here looks back to the teaching traditions of India, specifically the healing tradition from India’s past when “the science of healing with us was a living growth, spreading its different offshoots and branches all over our country” and “our mind was in living connection with its acquirements.” That was when “we did not merely learn by rote, but made our own observations and experiments; that we tried to discover principles and build hypotheses and apply them to life.” Now, this living link has been broken and present education “starved of all life elements” (522). In “An Eastern University,” Tagore highlights the paradox of learning, thinking and inquiry being very much a part of our culture for centuries and yet our present education, paradoxically, far from nourishing this ability seems to divest one of it:

Once upon a time we were in possession of such a thing as our own mind in India. It was living. It thought, it felt, it expressed itself. It was receptive as well as productive. That this mind could be of any use in the process, or in the end, of our education was overlooked by our modern educational dispensation. We are provided with buildings and books and other magnificent burdens calculated to suppress our mind. The latter was treated like a library-shelf solidly made of wood, to be loaded with
leather-bound volumes of second-hand information. In consequence, it has lost its own colour and character, and has borrowed polish from the carpenter's shop. All this has cost us money, and also our finer ideas, while our intellectual vacancy has been crammed with what is described in official reports as Education. In fact, we have bought our spectacles at the expense of our eyesight. (643)

Tagore’s explanation for why this is so is that modes of learning, knowing and teaching specific to the West have been grafted onto Indian cultural processes without acknowledging and understanding the presence of already existing traditions of learning, thought and inquiry. It is the displacement from living traditions of thought and practice as well as the unthinking insertion to another model that had removed the necessary conditions of growth. Rote learning, far from being the trait of individual learners, was a result of this superimposition.

How then do we envisage the educational ideal for our context? Tagore sketches out three steps in “The Centre for Indian Culture”: Firstly, “the mind of India has to be concentrated and made conscious of itself” (515). The acknowledgment of the distinctness of the Indian mind is crucial for Tagore, for the consciousness of the living traditions of India which shape our experiences and the way we go about the world, was for Tagore, not an ideological, nationalist position but a recognizable, social fact for all to see and acknowledge. In short, it was given to us experientially. We had to acknowledge this distinctness, not merely to know our past but because these intellectual traditions of the land continued to exercise their influence, though running underground. To bring them to the surface was to make possible a certain fullness of life for all. It was to provide conditions where education would help us reflect on our experience and make our actions intelligible. Though Tagore does not have the resources to formulate the predicament in terms of enabling one’s “life with concepts,” it is clear that it remains his implicit concern.\(^{182}\) Thus, he would claim, “the unfortunate people

\(^{182}\) Tagore’s criticism of nationalism and his statement that there is no word for nation in our language is just one instance of his struggle with Western concepts and their lack of fit in our context. Similarly, that we have lost our connection with our living traditions can be taken to mean that we are unable to name and refine our
who have lost the harvest of their past have lost their *present age*” (541). Far from any impetus to revive the past either as nationalist assertion or romantic nostalgia, Tagore’s thrust is an invitation to us to acknowledge the significant features of this form of life, the larger body of the flame that continues to shape our present and is therefore essential to our understanding of ourselves, and our relations to others.

The awareness of the distinctness is what would allow us to assimilate and comprehend modern knowledge on our terms, instead of letting it “flood our banks,” only to overwhelm us without resulting in any understanding. All the elements in our own culture have to be strengthened, Tagore argued, “not to resist the Western culture, but truly to accept and assimilate it; to use it for our sustenance, not as our burden; to get mastery over this culture, and not to live on its outskirts as the hewers of texts and drawers of book-learning” (540). The acknowledgement of India’s distinctness was for Tagore was as much a theoretical necessity as much as being attuned to a social fact. It would create a commonality of purpose by “bring[ing] the scattered minds of India into co-ordinated activity” (515), making our minds more receptive and creative.

Such a university whose “primary function” was “the constructive work of knowledge,” would bring people together and provide them with the full scope for “intellectual exploration and creation.” Characterizing education as a dynamic activity, Tagore stressed the role of the human teacher *whose mind would also be on the move, as inquirers*. Culture, which Tagore succinctly and briefly defined as “the life of mind,” (which we can translate as traditions of learning) which “grows and moves and multiplies in life” can only be imparted “through a living agency.” It is by “moving with the moving mind of the teacher” that one learns (524) and it is precisely “this concentration of intellectual forces of the country” which is the most

experiences in the present. Hence, Tagore’s emphasizes on the “harvest of the past” as being important for the present. While Tagore did not self-consciously reflect on one’s life with concept, it is clear that his concern is with concepts and their relation to experience.
important mission of a University. Hence, Tagore would repeatedly stress the need for the institution to establish the lost, organic connection with the living traditions of India and move it to the centre of the society.

Tagore no doubt held to the categories of the East and the West and thought them as valid formulations. He both asserted and inquired into the cultural difference between them but he was anything but parochial in his vision. Tagore envisaged the Centre for Indian Culture as an Indian and international centre of learning with a comparative thrust. The goals of the institution included the patient study and scientific research of the different cultures, specially the West and the East on the basis on their respective underlying unity. It was a unity that Tagore recognized and researched into, in his own ways though he is unable to theoretically formulate the nature of this difference. His vision was one of a genuine complimentarity of the East and the West where we would understand both in the most robust ways possible, making possible genuine understanding and cooperation.\(^\text{183}\)

We are now in a position to reformulate the “national” in Tagore’s sense of the term as a way to acknowledge the active forces of traditions that structure the experience of the people of the land. The first step to make “the university our own,” was through understanding the link between learning, “mental traditions” and the distinct forms of sociality. In another essay “Society and State” published in 1904, Tagore would bring out the nature of this sociality more explicitly. He distinguished between the European civilization which assigned an

\(^{183}\) The aim of Santiniketan is as follows: “To study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view. To bring into more intimate relation with one another, through patient study and research, the different cultures of the East on the basis of their underlying unity. To approach the West from the standpoint of such a unity of the life and thought of Asia. To seek to realize in a common fellowship of study the meeting of the East and the West, and thus ultimately to strengthen the fundamental conditions of world peace through the establishment of free communication of ideas between the two hemispheres. And, with such ideals in view, to provide at Santiniketan, a centre of culture where research into and study of the religion, literature, history, science and art of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, Christian and other civilizations may be pursued along with the culture of the West, with that simplicity in externals which is necessary for true spiritual realisation, in amity, good fellowship and co-operation between the thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries.” See http://www.visva-bharati.ac.in/Heritage/Contents/SantiniketanAims.htm.
important position to the State which took over all the welfare services and the Indian civilization, which he held, accorded that central space not to the state but to the society guided by dharma. The goal of social welfare was not so much the task of the king as of the samaj, the domain of actions and practical life which were ceaselessly in operation. The sociality of India, Tagore held, was such that it was built on these elaborate networks of practices and actions which were interlinked, with people tied to each other with innumerable social obligations. These saw uninterrupted transmission even while kings were at war or were negligent. These complex networks of actions, traditions and social obligations were so intricate, well-developed and dynamic that Tagore noted that “our educated classes keep no track of the thousand breakdowns and building up of customs and religious observances among the common people. Had they done so, they would have noticed that even today this secret but active process of adjustment and accommodation has not ceased to work” (Tagore 1961, 62).

Before concluding his essay on “The Eastern University,” Tagore poses the question of what should be the “religious” ideal (we can take this to mean an ethical ideal) that would govern the Indian Centre. Here, Tagore gives us an answer that is startlingly different from that of the European thinkers on Bildung who emphasized education or Bildung as the actualization of one’s will, or as freedom of action through self-determination and autonomy: “The one abiding ideal in the religious life of India has been Mukti, the deliverance of man’s soul from the grip of self” (Tagore 2007, IV: 656). Here, the influence of Indian traditions, especially the Upanishads on Tagore is unmistakable and he makes no attempt to hide this influence. In some of his writings Tagore would talk about India as a personality, the unique character or individuality of which has to be brought out, similar to the cultural idea of nation expressed by the thinkers on Bildung like Herder, Humboldt and other German Romantics. Yet, in certain other writings, Tagore would draw attention to “the Problem of the Self” where he
emphasized that “it is our ignorance which makes us think that our self, is real.” The self we think of as a real, positive entity and that makes us live as if it were the ultimate object of our life was in fact, Tagore observed, not a real entity at all: “In the typical thought of India it is held that the true deliverance of man is the deliverance from avidya, from ignorance. It is not in destroying anything that is positive and real, for that cannot be possible, but that which is negative, which obstructs our vision of truth. When this obstruction, which is ignorance, is removed, then only is the eye lid drawn up which is no loss to the eye” (Tagore 2011, 159).

The knowledge emphasized here is knowledge of the nature of “the self” and not about objects in the world. Such a mode of knowing is negative in its operation, removing the cognitive obstacles that come in the way of us being attuned to the world around us. It is only avidya or ignorance, Tagore holds, “which makes the self our fetter by making us think that it is an end in itself, and by preventing our seeing that it contains the idea that transcends its limits. That is why the wise man comes and says, 'Set yourselves free from the avidya', know your true soul and be saved from the grasp of the self which imprisons you” (159-60).

We can see that Tagore is constrained by the fact that there is only one word in English “self” when he needs three. In fact, equating the atman to the self itself appears to cause some distortion since the atman dwells in all – humans, birds, animals, grass, rocks, moon, sky, mind – and is not anything like the agential self which causes an action through the exercise of a deliberate will. Yet, constrained by the available vocabulary, Tagore has to resort to the idea of the self and soul, in order to refer to the atma, paramatma/Brahman and the ego-self.184 This results in a series of conceptual confusions in Tagore’s writings as a result of his use of self for that which he rejects and that which he upholds as uniting all humankind. For

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184 Often Tagore uses the original terms – atma and Brahman. At other times, he uses self and soul. However, the use of self, spirit or soul for atma seems to deter rather than aid understanding. Ramana Maharshi, for example, uses self (I-hood, I-ness or ego-self) and Self (with a capital S for that sense of unity once I-hood is removed), a structure common to many Indian thinkers, to capture the difference but the confusion persists.
Tagore (as it is for Gandhi), Atmavidya or to know the nature of the atman is the highest form of knowledge, a form of freedom in action made possible by the realization that self and subjective ends, beliefs and desires of the person (“compulsions of want or fear” as Tagore describes it) are mutually generative. When one realizes this, one attains freedom in action, the ability to perform the right action which is not merely dictated by one’s subjective want, desires or fear. This, Tagore holds, is “the teaching of disinterested work in the Gita.” This is when action is truly free.\textsuperscript{185} Maya, Tagore seems to suggest, is not the property of the world as is usually thought of, but is in the realm of the particular kind of cognitive mistake we tend to make with regard to the nature of entities such as the self which are not real but we mistake them to be positive and real. I would like to argue that it is precisely the access to these traditions that make it possible for Tagore (and Gandhi) to counter nationalism.\textsuperscript{186} For even while acknowledging the role of the self and individuality in one’s life, Tagore sees in them the potential for violence, of creating the basic conditions for actualizing one’s identities aggressively, whether at the individual level or at the level of community and nation. True education then has to be freedom from “the grip of the self,” freedom from identities, at the root of which is the self. Thus, it is not surprising that Tagore, as Nandy astutely notes, rejected the concept of a single Hindu rashtra as both anti-Indian and as essentially “anti-Hindu” (Nandy 1994, 87).

We can now fruitfully cast the conceptual confusion that we see in Tagore’s writing as a conflict between two ideals of education: One is the Western ideal which is to actualize one’s self and unique individuality, with actions being expressive of one’s identity and the other is

\textsuperscript{185} Such a notion of action is expressed by the term Nishkama Karma or desireless action, an ideal upheld by Tagore, Gandhi and many other Indian thinkers.

\textsuperscript{186} Ashis Nandy therefore asks: “how were Tagore or, for that matter, Gandhi able to defy the universal sociology of nationalism?” For most people at this point could not separate nationalism, patriotism and anti-imperialism. Was there something in Indian culture that enabled this criticism of nationalism, as Tagore believed? Nandy (1994, 84–85). To the question where they got the resources to oppose nationalism from, one might find the answer in their common affinity towards the Upanishads.
to arrive at the recognition that this self is a false entity and what constitutes one are larger domains of practices. It appears that the latter is what the Indian traditions prepare you for.\textsuperscript{187}

Why are Tagore’s views on education important today? While we acknowledge Tagore as an important thinker and evoke his name while setting up new universities, we do not see his diagnosis as relevant to our contemporary intellectual inquires. Perhaps, herein lies our mistake. Tagore asserted the distinctness of what he called, for want of a better term, the “Indian mind.” We can reformulate his statement as forwarding some kind of hypothesis about the existence of certain patterns of learning and practices which produced in one a disposition to act in certain ways. Central to these specific forms of cultivation of mind were learning traditions that aid in knowing the nature of the self which structured knowledge-practices in the non-West. These traditions, for Tagore, continued to shape our experiences and thus India for Tagore, as he would write in a letter to C. F Andrews in 1921, was a structure, “an idea” and “not a mere geographical fact” (Bhattacharya 1997, 61).

Tagore attempts to grasp the patterns of learning and teaching that run deep in the form of a state description – the “Indian mind.” However, it is Gandhi who would embody and enact this difference at the nation-wide level. In the next section, I examine Gandhi’s criticism of liberal education and his alternative more closely.

5.3 Gandhi on Liberal Education and Ethical Learning

Among many other things, Gandhi is known for his strong, almost radical critique of British education in India and his nation-wide experiment in the form of Nayee Talim (New

\textsuperscript{187} Tagore would draw from Buddhism, \textit{Upanishads} and the songs of the Bauls in order to show how they were united in delivering one from the “thralldom of the self.” See the essay “An Indian Folk Religion” (Tagore 2007, IV: 588–601).
Krisna Kumar points out that among several thinkers, reformers, political leaders and writers who rejected colonial education as part of the larger intellectual ferment generated by the freedom struggle, no one rejected modern education as completely as Gandhi did. In his critique of modern education, Gandhi was sharp, relentless and almost uncompromising (Kumar 1993). His criticism against colonial education went to such an extent that during the peak of the nationalist, non-cooperation movement, Gandhi asked the youth of the nation to boycott educational institutions, causing much apprehension in nationalists like Rabindranath Tagore, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Srinivasa Sastri, Lala Lajpat Rai, and Annie Besant, all of whom disapproved of what they considered as Gandhi’s extreme views on the subject. According to them, such an extreme response would be not guiding the youth but misleading them.

In his lecture “The Call for the Struggle for Freedom,” delivered to students in Ahmadabad (September 28, 1920), Gandhi responded to the criticism against him by giving a characteristically metaphorical answer: “Do we not throw away the best milk if it gets contaminated with poison?...I regret to say that these great leaders of ours have failed to detect the poison in the education that the Government is giving us” (Gandhi 1962, 10) and asserted he was in no doubt about his assessment. To the students who asked where the alternative institutions for them to attend were, Gandhi observed that they had not yet learnt the lesson of liberty, of thinking independently and acting on their own. He himself was without doubt and was certain that he was on the right path: “How can I have any doubt about the propriety of getting out of a room in which there is a deadly snake”? You read the

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188 Nayee Talim was initially called Basic education or Buniyaadi Talim, and sometimes referred to as the Wardha scheme. The Sabarmati community had disbanded in 1930 and Gandhi vowed not to return there till India had attained Poorna Swaraj. His search led him to Wardha which became Gandhi’s new base for his experiments. See Bakshi (1998).

189 Tagore’s disagreement with Gandhi is well-known. That the others mentioned also objected to Gandhi’s call for non-cooperation to be enacted in the domain of education, can be gleaned through Gandhi’s speeches where he responds specifically to some of the objections made by others. See the essay “The Call for the Struggle for Freedom” in Gandhi (1962, 7-12).
resolution passed by the congress on this matter; it does not contain any promise to find new schools for you. Your decision should be to give up your present schools regardless of whether you have new schools or not. The question is simple: Are you prepared to boycott present schools which have become poison to us? My answer is that you *must* (Gandhi 1962, 11; italics in the original).  

“A deadly snake,” “false education,” “a poison,” “an evil,” “an engagement with slavery,” a system that created “worshippers of Mammon” and aimed at producing clerks and interpreters for the government - these were only some of the disparaging epithets Gandhi used to describe modern, colonial education.

Yet Gandhi repeatedly asserted that he must not be mistaken to be against education per se, as some were tending to accuse him of. In a speech delivered to teachers at Ahmadabad (September 29, 1920), he said: “Nobody will accuse me of hostility towards education. I cannot sit even a moment without either thinking or reading” (1962, 14). In his response to Srinivasa Sastri’s criticisms of Gandhi’s views on higher education (*Harijan*, July 9, 1938), he would emphasize that he was not opposed to the highest type of education in the world. He was just opposed to all higher education being paid for from the general revenue and that “the vast amount of the so called education in Arts, given in our colleges is a sheer waste and has resulted in unemployment among the educated classes” (Gandhi 1999, 73: 279). Even a cursory glance at his speeches on the subject makes evident the immense importance he attached to it in the formation of the individual. He frequently asserted that education was more important than politics, assiduously maintained that educational spaces should remain

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190 Tagore and Malaviya had posed the question of where the alternative institutions for students to attend were. Gandhi’s *vidyapeeths* which were at the centre of the rural reconstruction programme were an answer to this demand. This was the beginning of the establishment of *vidyapeeths*, national schools and colleges all over the country. In the November of 1920 Gandhi founded the National University of Gujarat, Gujarat *Vidyapeeth*. Similar national institutions also came up in Calcutta, Patna, Aligarh, Bombay, Banaras and Delhi. The Jamia Millia Islamia, the National Muslim University, was founded through the joint efforts of Gandhi and Muhammad Ali. See Devi Prasad (1998) for details.
outside state control and constantly reiterated it as a central site where the character of the student was formed and his/her ethical being shaped. In his own reconstruction programme, students were asked to keep out of the political activities of the congress. That Gandhi himself thought that his system of education was so far his biggest and best gift to India is made evident when at an educational conference in Wardha in 1937 on Nayee Talim, Gandhi remarked: “I have given many things to India. But this system of education together with its technique is, I feel the best of them. I do not think I have anything better to offer to the country” (Gandhi 1962, v).

Gandhi’s diagnosis about modern education is striking when juxtaposed against the claims made by the British administrators in the nineteenth century. If in the nineteenth-century, British officials and missionaries had claimed that modern liberal education would make the natives moral, Gandhi turns their expectations on its head and states his diagnosis emphatically in reverse: modern education, he claimed, not only did not enable ethical learning but was destructive of it. His solution, puzzlingly, was education through craft as expressed in his idea of Nayee Talim. At the apparent level, they appear like two completely unrelated ideas. How then do we understand Gandhi’s response?

**Understanding Gandhi on Education**

Gandhi’s antagonism to modern education and his solution in the form of Nayee Talim has long been familiar to scholars of education and to postcolonial thinkers. Yet, there have been few attempts to uncover the conceptual logic behind his views on education. Gandhi’s thoughts on education remain less explored partly because of his sharp rejection of modern education in his writings, making one uncomfortable and partly because the very idea of an Indian conception of education and the cluster of concepts associated with it, which Gandhi evidently seems to be drawing upon, has become largely inaccessible to us. Yet, it appears
that Gandhi’s idea of education permeates much of his thinking in other spheres too, particularly politics.

Gandhi’s articulations on education have to be gleaned from his responses to different circumstances. As a result, many of his thoughts on education are suffused with rhetoric to meet the needs of particular circumstances. To make matters more difficult, he often uses Protestant terms and an inherited English vocabulary which freely mingle with traditional Hindu terms, often tending to mislead if taken at face value.

Thus, prima facie we find several contradictions. For instance, at various points Gandhi gives us the impression that colonial education must be rejected completely for his anxiety is that the Indian mind would be cognitively enslaved by British education and we would continue to work with Western institutions and ideas long after the British left. This would frustrate the ideal of swaraj, which as Hind Swaraj (1909) makes evident, was clearly more than about throwing the British out and getting the Indians to rule themselves politically. On other occasions, Gandhi cautions us that he is not against modern education at all times: “All I have now shown is that we must not make a fetish of it. It is not our Kamadhuk. In its place it can be of use and it has its place when we have brought our sense under subjection and put our ethics on a firm foundation....As an ornament it is likely to sit well on us” (Gandhi 1997, 102). Gandhi here draws attention to another form of knowledge that involves ethical learning which he thinks of as more essential and necessary to contain the effects of modern education and operates with a clear hierarchy of knowledge forms. However, at another point, it appears he even desires modern education, particularly the sciences, for the nation. In a letter responding to Srinivasa Sastri’s criticisms mentioned earlier (Harijan, July 9, 1938), he claims: “Under my scheme there would be more and better libraries, laboratories, and research institutes. Under it we should have an army of chemists, engineers and other experts
who will be real servants of the nation...These experts would speak not a foreign language but the language of the people. The knowledge gained by them will be the common property of the people. Only then would there be truly original work instead of mere imitation and the cost evenly and justly distributed” (Gandhi 1999, 73: 283). Interestingly, the language of science and research permeates the characterization of his own life when he calls his own inquiry into living as his “experiments with truth.” Thus, he writes in the introduction to his autobiography: “I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth,...as my life consists of nothing but those experiments” and later adds “I claim for them [experiments] nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them” (Gandhi [1927]2001, x). Gandhi referred to himself more often as a scientist than as a philosopher. In a letter to his friend W. Tudor Owen (March 2, 1933), he wrote in a matter of fact manner: “I believe that I have got the mind of a scientist” (Gandhi 1999, 59: 412). Lastly, Gandhi’s criticism of liberal education was that it served no other purpose other than make clerks of us, implying that it largely addressed the problem of making government jobs accessible and prevented reflection on experience. However, paradoxically, his own programme on education was intensely practice-based and “vocational” in its thrust. The vocational focus of the programme came in for much criticism during the 1930s with many, including Tagore, comparing it to a factory-based type of education and objecting to it on the grounds that it ignored the creation of cultural subjects due to its excessive emphasis on crafts and undue stress on a vocation (Varkey 1939). If his own alternative programme of education was vocational, how do we understand his criticism of liberal education as creating nothing more than careers for the youth in India? What was he critiquing and how was his own programme that he offered as his “best gift” to the nation different?
We could dismiss these as contradictory statements made by Gandhi on different occasions to satisfy the demands of specific times and circumstances. However, such a conclusion would imply that Gandhi was merely being strategic and pragmatic in his thoughts and actions. Contemporary thinkers like Akeel Bilgrami and Vivek Dhareshwar have shown us otherwise. Highlighting the deeper integrity of Gandhi’s ideas, Bilgrami has argued how far from being arbitrary and contingent, Gandhi’s thoughts on various issues are of a piece, and highly integrated, with his ideas, flowing from “the most abstract epistemological and methodological commitment, from ideas very remote from politics” (Bilgrami 2003). Vivek Dhareshwar traces the source of Gandhi’s epistemological and methodological commitment to Gandhi’s conception of the integrity of experience, the ground from which emerged his understanding of political activity. Such a conception enabled Gandhi to work towards removing or resisting “experience-occluding structures” and create alternative sites of ethical learning that were more hospitable to preserving the integrity of experience. One of the implications of this formulation seems to be that Gandhi derived his understanding of political activity from his conception of education, central to which is the idea of reflection on experience such that structures that impede our relation to the world are removed (Dhareshwar 2010).

**The Link between Action and Norms/Principles in Gandhi**

Contemporary scholars have noted the primacy of action in Gandhi and argued how Gandhian action ruptures the traditional understanding of the relation between action and principles as embodied in the Western tradition, particularly as represented by Kant. In one of his pioneering articles on understanding the idea of exemplary action in Gandhi, Akeel Bilgrami (2003) argues that central to the Gandhian ideal of non-violence is the delinking of

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191 Much of the writing on Gandhi focuses on Gandhi’s political ideas and attempts to illuminate his political activity and thought. I would like to suggest that Gandhi was engaged, even in the realm of politics, in activities that are better defined as educational.
the relation between moral judgement and moral criticism, a link that is strong in the Kantian idea of the categorical imperative where one must “act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.” The Kantian system of ethics (a paradigmatic example of normative ethics), with its focus primarily on ends, requires the law to be both universal and universalisable. While “universal” implies a value that is held by all, in ‘universalisability’ Bilgrami finds the seeds of potential violence, coercion and hostility to others. It involves an act of conscience where an action is based on a principle which applies as an “ought” or an imperative to everybody else in similar circumstances. Since the principle generated or applied exemplifies a moral truth, any deviation from it would necessarily be wrong and invite moral criticism, something Gandhi repudiated.

Bilgrami instead understands Gandhian non-violence as a practice of exemplarity, where the concept of exemplar replaces the concept of principles. This is the role for the satyagrahi: “when one chooses for oneself, one sets an example to everyone” (4162). A moral exemplar embodies universality without resorting to any idea of universalisability. Since no principle is generated with which we can criticize others for falling short of it or for violating it, violence or coercion is eschewed for there is no generality to their truth. At most, Bilgrami points out, one can be disappointed that one’s example has not set. Thus, Bilgrami asserts that truth for Gandhi was not a cognitive notion where truth is the property of propositions that describe the world rendering the world as an object of detached study. Such a notion of truth intellectualizes our relation to the world by seeking principles that explain the varied phenomena and removes the world we inhabit from the sphere of our moral experience. Truth, for Gandhi, instead is an exclusively experiential and moral notion that undergirds our practical and moral relationships.
Uday Mehta, similarly, recasts Gandhian exemplary action as an action severed from any teleology thereby divesting it of any “deferred larger purpose” that modern institutions necessarily rely on, requiring the instantiation of larger notions of justice or equality (U. S. Mehta 2010). On the contrary, Gandhi, Uday Mehta points out, often accepts social life as it is, without taking recourse to an idealism (fundamental commitment to normative principles) that evaluates, finds experience incomplete or deficient and is transformative of the given social particularities. Drawing attention to Gandhi’s reading of the Gita where he emphasized the importance of the renunciation of fruits of action, Mehta sees Gandhi as recognizing the essential link between violence and the desire for achieving a cherished end or purpose. This essential, underlying link between violence and modern politics where everyday action was seen from an instrumental view divested everyday life of its gravity and materiality. Thus, for Mehta, Gandhi undermined the priority of modern politics which does not make sense without the notion of ends or principles and a reference to some deferred point in the future when they will be realized. Instead, Gandhi, through his emphasis on

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192 In his Liberalism and Empire, Uday Mehta elaborates on the impoverished view of experience within liberal thought: “And is not the “crisis of experience” for which Agamben appears to be writing the epitaph —“The question of experience can be approached nowadays only with an acknowledgement that it is no longer accessible to us”—to be seen as the culmination of a process in which experience becomes provisional on the telos attached to a particular experiment, and in which any “present” can be understood only from the futural orientation and anticipations that that teleology and those experiments make possible?” (U. S. Mehta 1999, 209)

193 It is in this “separation of the act from its purposeful effects” that Mehta sees some resonance between Gandhi and Kant. Though Mehta recognizes that there is no doctrinal, law-like principle component to Gandhi’s action which requires that one act in obedience to the moral /duty, he still sees some similarity between the two in their emphasis on when an action can be considered autonomous. However, Gandhi was not concerned with the question of when is my action ‘my own’ with an emphasis on willing the right maxim at all. Neither does he set up a moral dilemma involving the overcoming of inclinations (through a process of theoretical reasoning) in order to be able to act in accordance to the moral law or Duty. Nor can it be equated with some ascetic withdrawal of the self in order to cultivate detachment. The rest of this chapter focuses on illuminating what Gandhi’s notion of action was about.

194 Also see Mantena (2012) for an account of Gandhi’s emphasis on means as opposed to ends, best expressed in his statement “means and ends are convertible,” and “means are after all everything.” Mantena argues that Gandhi’s emphasis on means over ends may be better understood not as an disavowal of politics in favour of a purely ethical act, as Uday Mehta argues but “on the contrary, a plea for the heightened scrutiny of politics and its endemic dangers,” requiring a certain vigilance based on the realization that means are “ends-creative.” This interdependence between means and ends is best understood, according to her, not within the “enlightened instrumentalist model” or within “the model of exemplary action” but within the third model, which she proposes, one of “self-limiting, strategic action” which for her better captures the interactive logic of Gandhian political action, as well as its specific ethical thrust. In this way, Gandhi recognized and remained alert to the dangers that may accompany the practice of satyagraha despite the anticipated efficacy, thereby constantly
everyday activities like spinning and fasting, attempts to restore the materiality of everyday life which modern politics eroded.

In Mehta’s account, exemplary, non-violent action, for Gandhi, is a means to give substance to one’s everyday ethical life through scrupulous attention to its features and “is a private sort of subjective commitment utterly devoid of larger purposefulness” (370). Bilgrami’s account, on the other hand, sees Gandhian exemplary action as an act of conscience that does not have a principle underlying it but is nevertheless universal and therefore not just a subjective commitment. For Bilgrami, while Gandhi is denying a particular canonical conception of reasons where we conceive of reasons as flowing from a process of reasoning; this does not render the action itself subjective for its reason could be perceived in the act:

Being given a reason to act in a certain way by perceiving it in someone’s exemplary act is a form of access to reasons that is to be distinguished from access to reasons via the apprehension of universalized principles. It is to see the reason directly in the exemplary action; it is not to get access to it via some universalized principle that the action falls under (or generates). We would only fail to count perception as a source of reasons if we had a conception of reasons that regarded them as always flowing from some sort of reasoning. But it is precisely that sort of picture of reasons that Gandhi was denying. (Bilgrami 2012)

Bilgrami shifts the source of reasons to perception as opposed to a conception of reason that stems from a process of reasoning by the agent. Here, the action itself embodies reason and is available to both the agent and the perceiver, and hence is universal in its appeal. What enables the perceiver to access reason directly in the exemplary action? While understanding these as “acts of conscience” but without a principle underlying it helps us distinguish it from the way reflection on morality proceeds in the Kantian tradition, we still need to take into account that consciousness of the moral law is woven into the very definition of conscience, implying that means create the end and one has to be eternally vigilant to the violence that political activities may engender, expressed in his statement “we reap as we sow”.
which is central to the Kantian tradition. Kant conceives of conscience as an internal court of the categorical imperative where a judge (the concept of God pushed into oneself) renders verdict on a person’s deeds based on the law which is the categorical imperative. In short, categorical imperative or the supreme standard of morality is the imperative of a secularized conscience. It is conscience which provides the dimension of the obligatory and binding “ought” in the acceptance of moral truths and blames or acquits you based on whether your action is in accord with universal principles/law or not. Instead, we can simply take Bilgrami to mean that Gandhi’s action is perceived as the right action or as rational by others in the same situation because it maintains the coherence of a form of life. The action acquires its meaning from the current of moral activity within which it is enacted rather than from a fidelity to an external tradition of moral reasoning, here represented by the Kantian tradition. It is precisely this sense of right action that rings through Nehru’s fascinating description of Gandhi as “the magician” who “gauges a situation accurately and almost instinctively and has the knack of acting at the right psychological moment”:

He was obviously not of the world’s ordinary coinage; he was minted of a different and rare variety...They did not agree with his philosophy of life, or even with many of his ideals. Often they did not understand him. But the action that he proposed was something tangible which could be understood and appreciated intellectually...Step by step he convinced us of the rightness of action, and we went with him, although we did not accept his philosophy. To divorce action from the thought underlying it was not perhaps the proper procedure and was bound to lead to mental conflict later...[But] the road he was following was the right one thus far. (Nehru 1941, 190-91; italics mine)

That this did not mean that there was no deliberation involved is made evident by Nehru’s description who notes that Gandhi was able to convince others about the rightness of the action, step by step and they could intellectually appreciate it. It is striking that Nehru’s statement is the opposite of Trevelyan’s statement where Trevelyan approved of the fact that

195 See Chapter IV where I discuss Trevelyan’s account of conscience as consciousness of moral law.
the Indians were beginning to understand that “knowledge and thought” precede action. For, Nehru, the effort is in the opposite direction. It is to arrive at the right action by “divorcing action from the thought underlying it.” Nehru recognizes that severing actions from “the thought underlying it” may cause mental conflict in him later but yet admits that Gandhi’s route was the “right one” so far, and therefore reasonable.

It is precisely this Gandhian emphasis on actions _per se_ that the contemporary scholars focus on, recognizing it as departing from the Kantian frame. Consequently, their attempt is to rescue actions from a conception which sees them as executions of principled reasoning. They instead deflate the role of reasoning in actions. If we push this insight further, we arrive outside the Kantian frame to formulate another way of thinking about action: _reflection on action can take the form of another action and is transmitted practically_. This is precisely what the Gandhian emphasis on actions is about, which we shall henceforth refer to as ‘practical knowledge.’\(^{196}\) Without understanding the centrality of reflecting on actions in a practical form of life, we would be unable to understand why Gandhi emphasized craft-making in his alternative vision and how this was related to forming the ethical subject in the form of the satyagrahi.

**Gandhi’s Criticism of Colonial Education**

Gandhi’s engagement with education started with his experiments in Phoenix and Tolstoy Ashram in South Africa. However, his first articulations on the subject of modern education

\(^{196}\) Here, I draw from Balagangadhara’s hypothesis that practical or performative learning processes, which focus not on _knowledge about_ but on practical knowledge or _know-how_ regarding “how to live” dominate configurations of learning in Asia. The hypothesis renders both Tagore and Gandhi’s responses (as well as the responses of other nationalists) intelligible for us and allows us to see the similar framework within which they operate. See Balagangadhara (1994, 411–20). For an illuminating account on Gandhi and reflection on action in a practical form of life and ethical _know-how_, which I have drawn from to elaborate Gandhi on education, see Vivek Dhareshwar (2010; 2012).
are to be found in *Hind Swaraj* and need to be understood as part of his larger critique of Western civilization.

The publication of *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 marked Gandhi’s initial involvement in the Indian independence movement, though at this point Gandhi was fully immersed in South African politics and it would take almost a decade by the time he would lead the Indian freedom struggle. *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi informs us, was written in ten days on the return sea voyage from London to South Africa, after an unsuccessful meeting to represent the grievances of Indian migrants in South Africa. An event of central importance just before his arrival in London which made the writing of *Hind Swaraj* a necessity for Gandhi was the assassination of Sir William Curzon Wyllie, aide-de-camp to the then Secretary of State for India, Lord John Morley, by Madan Lal Dhingra and the euphoria that followed in various circles subsequent to Dhingra’s action. Gandhi had, without success, on previous visits to London presented his ideas of non-violent resistance to the members of India House, London, who included Indian radicals such as V D Savarkar and Shyamji Krishnavarma, and to which Dhingra belonged as part of the student community. The extraordinarily positive reception of Dhingra’s action, both among the diaspora and the Indian radical circles back home prompted Gandhi to put his thoughts down “furiously” in the form of *Hind Swaraj* (Mantena 2012; Hyslop 2011). Thus *Hind Swaraj* emerged as a form of reflection on Dhingra’s action and as a means to counter the rising influence of terrorists and revolutionary currents within Indian nationalism. It would not be wrong to say that *Hind Swaraj* is a larger reflection on the very ideal of swaraj and was meant to show that violent actions such as Dhingra’s was produced by a misapprehension of what true swaraj was.

*Hind Swaraj*, as is well-known by now, is staged as a dialogue between the Reader, who represents the views of the Western educated elite with Hindu-militant nationalist sympathies
and is enamoured by Western ideas and methods, and the Editor, who represents Gandhi’s views. The Editor dialogues with the Reader to show that while Indian nationalism opposes the British, its adoption of violent forms is un-Indian and is a product of being unthinkingly enamoured by the modern, Western civilization, “a civilisation only in name” (Gandhi 1997, 33). It is in this sense that the *Hind Swaraj* has come to be considered as one of Gandhi’s severest and sustained condemnation of the modern, Western civilization as being responsible for the ruination of the nations of Europe. Throughout it runs Gandhi’s anxiety of cognitive enslavement; the worry that the Indians would throw the British out but retain their ideas and institutions. This is most evident when the Reader, being impatient with the moderates and their method of petitioning legally through constitutional methods, articulates his views in favour of more violent forms of attaining swaraj. Gandhi’s response, in turn, is to show how the Western educated who thought they were being revolutionary in the form of violent struggle they had adopted were actually not being revolutionary enough because they remained infatuated with the Western civilization. They had used the British means and methods in their attempt to throw the British out, in effect, wanting “English rule without the Englishman,” desiring “the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger” (Gandhi 1997, 28). Thus, for Gandhi, swaraj was not a mere matter of sovereignty or of conquest, of displacing the British rule with Indian. Home Rule or swaraj was self-rule or self-control. Therefore, swaraj “is not to be had for one’s asking. Everyone will have to take it for himself. What others get for me is not Home Rule but foreign rule” (Gandhi 1997, 112). Thus, swaraj for Gandhi could neither be seized by force nor rewarded by the British. Swaraj and the means to it, satyagraha, was for oneself. Swaraj, in its deepest sense, was learning to rule oneself in the

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197 Anthony Parel underscores the fact that Gandhi makes a distinction between British people and modern British civilization. According to Gandhi, it is the latter which has corrupted the former. The root of this process he traces back to de-christianization (Gandhi 1997, 33).
sense of self-government acquired through certain practices of the self. It could, therefore, only be acquired by a process of internal working and reflection on the nature of actions.

For Gandhi, reflection on action did not involve accounting for actions by finding reasons, principles or justification for actions but required inquiring into the very nature of self and actions – of right and wrong action, of violent actions begetting violent actions, of refining and purifying action and of the nature of inaction. This would often involve facilitating inquiry into the body by inserting the body into various available matrix of practices of the self that enable such an inquiry (Dhareshwar 2010). Thus, Gandhi would go on to remark, “Those who believe that India has gained by Dhingra’s act and other similar acts in India make a serious mistake. Dhingra was a patriot, but his love was blind. He gave his body in the wrong way; its ultimate result can only be mischievous” (Gandhi 1997, 78). The allusion to Dhingra giving “his body in the wrong way,” a curious statement to make in this context, can only make sense when we see the centrality of the self-restraint and self-mastery gained through reflection on self, body and its relation to action.

When Gandhi wrote about modern education in the Hind Swaraj, he elaborated on two main themes. The first was that modern education was merely performing the task of producing clerks. This was both a way of capturing the nature of deskilling that had taken place, where skilled artisans who were earlier practitioners of exquisite crafts and art were forced to take up less-skilled but better paying jobs in government services as well as a way of stressing the unreflective activity that education had become. Secondly, he frequently contrasted the “knowledge of letters,” sciences or the knowledge of objects external to oneself, to ethical knowledge which was self-transformative and helped one be in accord with one’s immediate world. For Gandhi, modern education failed in the task of cultivating ethical learning which developed the capacity for right action. He further claimed that not only did modern
education not have any resources for ethical learning but it was destructive of it (Gandhi 1997, 100–05). Therefore, he declared that modern education was not merely unsuitable for the vast millions of Indians but destructive of practical forms of life.

Thus, in *Hind Swaraj*, when asked by the Reader for his opinion on modern education, Gandhi develops his criticism along two strands. One strand of his criticism is to show the mismatch between what liberal education is expected to do by the admission of its own proponents and how it fails even by its own internal standards. In his response to the Reader’s question as to whether all the efforts to make available modern education that were afoot were of no use, Gandhi’s emphasis is on the externality of the “knowledge of letters” which served as a mere instrument to be used or abused and the absence of ethical learning. Quoting Huxley’s definition of liberal education, where Huxley lays out the causal chain of command in the way reason, will and conscience come together in a man who has had liberal education, whose “intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine with all its parts of equal strength and in smooth working order” and whose “passions are trained to come to heel by a vigorous will, the servant of a tender conscience,” Gandhi derisively adds that “If this is true education then I must emphatically say that the sciences I have enumerated above [Geography, Astronomy, Algebra Geometry etc...that constitute higher education], I have never been able to use for controlling my senses” (Gandhi 1997, 101–02; italics mine). If liberal education was supposed to tame passions and prevent excesses through a judicious use of reason, the history of the Western civilization, according to Gandhi, had shown us otherwise and was full of examples of passions run awry. Hence, Gandhi repeatedly stressed the violence unleashed by Western civilization in the form of imperialism was endemic to it and *Hind Swaraj* betrays his anxiety that the extremist movement was resisting British rule using their own methods and for similarly crafted aims. Liberal education had equated freedom with the mere acquisition of agency and the development of character as the actualization of one’s will.
Positive goals such as independence of a nation could justify any means employed for the goal since the goal itself was laudatory. However, Dhringa’s actions showed how the means employed could change the nature of ends. Thus, when the Reader supports Dhingra’s action, Gandhi would emphasize the need to sacrifice oneself rather than assert oneself through the exercise of one’s will, or by grabbing “agency”: “Do you not tremble to think of freeing India by assassinations? What we need to do is to sacrifice ourselves. It is a cowardly thought, that of killing others. Whom do you suppose to free by assassination? The millions of India do not desire it” (Gandhi 1997, 77).

The second strand to Gandhi’s criticism was directed at the very notion of experience embodied in liberal education. Not only did modern education fail on its own terms but it produced a peculiarly opposite result which was harmful, dangerous and destructive of practical and experiential forms of knowledge which enabled inquiry into actions. Thus, the Gandhian stress on “experience,” where experience is understood as exploration combined with inquiry, with an active, searching dimension attached to it and not understood as sensory perception, perception of objects or as subjective interiority. In Gandhi’s iconic statement “what we have tested and found true in the anvil of experience, we dare not change” (Gandhi 1997, 66), the term registers none of the separation between “lived reality” which enters into opposition to “mere thought” but combines inquiry, explorations and experiments, with the stress on the active and the processual in it.198 It is in this context that one must understand Gandhi’s (and for that matter Tagore’s too) criticism of English as a medium of instruction, by placing it in the larger context of concepts that enable certain forms of inquiry and concepts that do not. Gandhi’s criticism of English must be understood as saying that the

198 See Koselleck (2002). Koselleck shows that the concept of “experience” once meant “to explore” or “to conduct an inquiry.” However, in the early modern period, the concept undergoes a shift. It is divested of its active, searching dimension and comes to be equated with sensory perception or “lived experience” and enters into an opposition with “thought” (45-48). It is the earlier unity where experience has the dimension of exploration and inquiry that we see as still alive in Gandhi.
concepts we learnt through English education were not experiential units in the everyday life of Indians while regional languages which possessed a repertoire of concepts that enabled reflection on action were fast becoming inaccessible.

The defining moment in which Gandhi further develops and articulates the inter-relationship between swaraj, reflective action and education took place four years after Gandhi’s return to India, which saw his dramatic rise as a central figure of the freedom movement in India. Gandhi went on to lead some of the first mass mobilizations, culminating in the famous non-cooperation movement, with the support of the Congress party. That swaraj was ultimately an educational goal, with true education being education for satyagraha would be more elaborately worked out by Gandhi. While satyagraha is fundamentally seen as a means of non-violent protest, Gandhi went on to develop it as a form of inquiry into the nature of actions and hence Gandhi would repeatedly remark that truth, nonviolence and a process of internal working were essential to the idea of swaraj.

Launched in December 1920, the non-cooperation movement led by Gandhi under the banner of the Indian National Congress was one of the first large-scale experiments in mass nonviolent action. The movement was to consist of the returning of Government titles, the boycott of government educational institutions, courts, government services, foreign goods, and elections and the eventual refusal to pay taxes. However, in the wake of the violence that occurred in Chauri-Chaura, the campaign had to be abruptly called off because Gandhi realized that the masses were not yet ready for non-violent disobedience. The violence that erupted compelled Gandhi to envisage a national reconstruction programme which along with its emphasis on swadeshi had an educational thrust. In the 1920s, several institutions and organizations came up to awaken self-reliance (swadeshi) and self-rule, with Khadi and village industries programme meant to redesign the economic and industrial life of the
country, both as a solution to the problem of rural poverty and unemployment, and as a means for self-discipline. These organizations were envisaged as distinctly separate and independent from the political wing of the freedom struggle and those who were part of these programmes were not to take an active interest in the political activities of the Congress (Devi Prasad 2012). The thrust of the programme was largely educational with the aim of cultivating economic self-reliance and the predisposition for governance of the self. Thus, in his foreword to the revised edition of the “Constructive Programme - Its Meaning and Place” (1941), Gandhi would stress that “the constructive programme is the truthful and non-violent way of winning poorna swaraj.” The constructive programme was to be a training for satyagraha, just as learning of arms was training for military revolt (Gandhi 1999, 88: 325).

Primary to this vision was the link that Gandhi made between the insertion of the body as a site of inquiry (Dhareshwar 2013, 42) and the cultivation of virtue.199 Gandhi had been developing the link from his days in South Africa which saw further intensification in his experiments in Sabarmati Ashram where Gandhi practised spinning, fasting and silence. He recreated several practical domains – the domain of health and dietetics, erotic and economy, which served primarily as matrices for the elaboration of practices of the self.200 It is through inserting oneself into these practical domains that Gandhi problematized the nature of ethical action. The 1920s can be seen as Gandhi’s attempt to set

199 See Akeel Bilgrami’s brief but illuminating foreword to Devi Prasad’s Gandhi and Revolution where he emphasizes the very different conception of moral education that underlies Gandhi’s thoughts: …Gandhi conceived of education as something that should be founded on making, not on learning, that it should involve the body and its habits as a path to the cultivation of virtue as well as to the development of skills and understanding. This is a very different idea of moral education than the acquisition of principles and normative imperatives...Much is made by commentators on Gandhi of the affinities between him and Socrates. But I think there is nothing in the celebrated dialectical or dialogical method, quite like this link between the dispositions of the body and virtue, on which Gandhi rested his ideal of education. Nayee Talim, as it is expounded in this volume, is a quite radical departure from even the heterodoxies of a Socratic conception of education (Devi Prasad 2012, viii).

200 These domains of experience are similar to those that Foucault delineates in his reconstruction of the practices of the self in ancient Greece. See Foucault (2005, 2003). For why Foucault’s account is important to understand the process of normativization of practical life in India and how Gandhi preserves the “actional frame,” refer to Vivek Dhareshwar (2010).
up these multiple sites of learning at a nation-wide level through the constructive programme and its emphasis on spinning.

**The Programme of National Education: The Gandhi-Tagore Debate**

As we noted earlier, the acquisition of moral knowledge as envisaged by the dominant Western tradition is to acquire normative principles and imperatives. In comparison with such a notion, learning ethical knowledge through actions and practice seems like a radical proposition. How did Gandhi envisage the relationship between the self, body, action in the acquisition of ethical knowledge? An examination of the debate around the centrality of spinning in the reconstruction programme reveals to us why Gandhi insisted on spinning as an activity and repeatedly asserted that it was the route to swaraj despite the fact that many objected to the emphasis that Gandhi laid on it.

Krishna Kumar has emphasized that Gandhi located the problem of education within the dialectic of man versus machine, with man representing the whole of mankind and the machine representing the industrialized West (K. Kumar 1993). However, Gandhi himself did not make much of this opposition. When asked about the compatibility between the swadeshi movement and the use of machines, Gandhi reiterated that he saw no opposition between the two. In his article “Swadeshi Vs Machinery” (*Young India*, September 9, 1919), he would maintain: “Pure Swadeshi is not at all opposed to the machinery. The Swadeshi movement is only meant against the use of foreign cloth…there is thus room in the country for both the mill industry and handloom weaving. So let the mills increase as also spinning-wheels and handlooms. And I should think that these latter are no doubt machines. The handloom is a miniature weaving mill. The spinning–wheel is a miniature spinning mill. I would wish to see such beautiful little mills in every home” (Gandhi 1999, 18: 389). It is clear that Gandhi recognized that spinning-wheels were in some sense machines too. Thus, we need to
understand his emphasis on the charkha and it being the route to swaraj differently. At a more obvious level, spinning an indigenous cloth was seen as a solution to several problems all at once – of rejecting foreign cloth that had destroyed local economies that were once thriving, as a certain way to channel the exquisite skills possessed by craftsmen and weavers over centuries which were fast disappearing\textsuperscript{201} of rural poverty and unemployment created as a result of economic disintegration and of producing people with a strong moral fibre. However, that Gandhi envisaged spinning as a way of creating a social order that integrated the various domains while simultaneously creating innumerable learning sites that induced reflection on action (especially in the wake of the violence that followed during the non-cooperation movement) at a nation-wide level becomes evident when we examine the Gandhi-Tagore debate. Such a form of reflection could only be enabled in practical ways by inserting people into a milieu of learning.

The celebrated Tagore-Gandhi debate has been a subject of several scholarly discussions. Yet there remains something opaque about Gandhi’s insistence on the charkha. Not many discussions have illuminated Gandhi’s perspective on the issue. Most accounts provide us with both sides of the argument only to focus on the love that cemented Gandhi and Tagore despite their differences, eager to maintain the greatness of both. While the deep love, compassion and mutual respect that characterizes all disagreements between Gandhi and Tagore is indeed one of the moving features of the exchange between the two, there still remains something mysterious about Gandhi’s insistence on the charkha as a path to swaraj. Some scholars have seen the debate around “the cult of spinning,” an example of Gandhi’s intransigence on certain issues, an intolerance to his opponents which led to their marginalization (see Giri 2002, 64). Amartya Sen, in his reflection on the debate observes, “If

\textsuperscript{201} In a “Speech at Women’s Meeting, Bombay” (May 8, 1919), Gandhi would remark “There was a time when a piece of Dacca Muslin could be packed into a little box and yet served to cover one’s nakedness well enough. Where did we find such craftsmen and such weavers? That Muslin was not made on any machine. How is it they have lost the skill now?”(Gandhi 1999, 17: 29)
Tagore had missed something in Gandhi’s argument, so did Gandhi miss the point of Tagore’s main criticism. It was not only that the charkha made little economic sense but, also Tagore thought that it was not the way to make people reflect on anything.” Sen quotes Tagore: “The charkha does not require anyone to think; one simply turns the wheel of the antiquated invention endlessly, using the minimum of judgment and stamina (A. Sen 2000, 74). Sen therefore makes a plea for a greater study on Tagore’s criticism and notes that “It was on education (and on the reflection, dialogue, and communication that are associated with it), rather than on, say, spinning "as a sacrifice" ("the charkha does not require anyone to think"), that the future of India would depend” (96). Certain others see Gandhi as asserting the symbolic value of spinning (Parel 2000, 17) and for some it was a mark of his empathy, where through the activity of spinning, Gandhi identified with the poorest of the poor (Giri 2002, 64) and asserted the dignity of labour.

At this point a longer elaboration of the debate is both in order and worthwhile. In his celebrated essay, “The Cult of Charkha,” which was published in Modern Review (September 1925, in Bhattacharya 1997), Tagore publicly questioned the centrality of charkha in the Gandhian reconstruction programme and objected to it being identified as a certain route to swaraj. Castigated by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray, a scientist and an ardent follower of Gandhi, for not being enthusiastic about the charkha, Tagore expresses his dismay at what seems a “blind acceptance of some guru’s injunction” and a process of “being levelled down into sameness” (100), a “repetition” which, according to him, is embodied in the caste system where each caste is identified with its function, allowing no dissent. Arguing that if “minds refuse incessantly to reverberate some one set mantra” (101), that should be cause for celebration rather than alarm, Tagore castigates the crowd psychology inherent in such a “wholesale conversion.” It indicated a collapse of judgement on the part of thinking people in expressing their “blind faith in charkha” as a solution to the poverty of the land:
But is it a likely policy to reassure grown up people by telling them they will get their swaraj, – that is to say, get rid of all poverty, in spite of their social habits that are a perpetual impediment and mental habits producing inertia of intellect and will, - by simply twirling away with their hands?” (103)

For Tagore, Gandhi’s stress on manual labour was infuriating because for him the mechanical spinning of the charkha was much like clerkship, a mentally non-stimulating, deadening activity, “a mindless habit” instilled in people, “labour divorced from mind,” of men being reduced to machines. So where is its potential for paving the way for swaraj? For Tagore, even its economic merit was far from proven and clearly a case of exaggeration. In associating the charkha with economics, Gandhi was mixing up economics and morality. To spin because one must obey the Mahatma “as an end in itself” is to give into irrationality and such a state of mind was “not helpful for attainment of Swaraj,” but an obstacle to it:

One thing is certain, that the all-embracing poverty which has overwhelmed our country cannot be removed by working with our hands to the neglect of science. Nothing can be more undignified drudgery than that man’s knowing should stop dead and his doing go on forever. (104; italics mine)

If one of the primary reasons for charkha was self-reliance, for Tagore it achieved just the opposite result and distracted attention from other more important factors in the larger task of national reconstruction: “this reliance on outward help is a symptom of slavishness, for no habit can more easily destroy all reliance on self. Only to such a country can come the charkha as the emblem of her deliverance and the people dazed into obedience by some spacious temptation go on turning their charkha in the seclusion of the corners, dreaming all the while that the car of swaraj of itself rolls onward in triumphal progress at every turn of their wheel” (106).

In Modern Review (September 1925), Tagore raises a few more questions in his “Striving for Swaraj.” (Bhattacharya 1997). Arguing against those who might forward that spinning is a creative act, Tagore reasons that that was far from true because by spinning “he does himself
what a machine might have done: he converts his living energy into a dead turning movement.” Like the machine which is mindless and knows nothing outside itself, likewise the man who confines himself to spinning “has no need to think of his neighbour, – like the silkworm his activity is centred round himself. He becomes a machine, isolated, companionless” (121). He therefore fails to concern himself with the interests of the village he is part of, taking active role in serving the people, driving out an epidemic and so on, activities in which one may actually see glimpses of true swaraj.

Referring to the cult of spinning as “an intoxication,” a “narrow path” as “the sole means of gaining a vast realization,” Tagore goes on to ask “What is this swaraj? Our political leaders have refrained from giving us any clear explanation of it” (114). If swaraj is about the freedom to spin, then Tagore argued, we already have it and if we have not availed of it, it is because the thread so spun could not compete with the product of the power mill. Secondly, even if spinning did manage to reduce poverty, it still would not be swaraj. If one conceded that profitable employment of the surplus time of the cultivator is of primary importance, then it needed a more precise and systematic thinking. “It is not enough to say: Let them spin” (115). The long and short of Tagore’s objections seems to be “give us the argument for spinning.”

Welcoming Tagore’s objections and reprimanding those who were intolerant to it, Gandhi, in his rejoinder “The Poet and the Charkha,” (Young India, November 5, 1925) admits that unlike the poet who creates his own world of ideas, “I am a slave of somebody else’s creation – the spinning wheel.” “The Poet is an inventor – he creates, destroys and recreates. I am an explorer and having discovered a thing I must cling to it. The Poet presents the world with new and attractive things from day to day. I can merely show the hidden possibilities of old and well-worn things” (Bhattacharya 1997, 123). What had Gandhi discovered? I would like
to suggest that what Gandhi had discovered was a new action within the coherence of a form of life which could serve to induce reflection on action at a nationwide level through the act of spinning, which suited the needs and demands of the time. This could be done not by asking or providing reasons for spinning (any or many would do, but that was beside the point) but by insisting on the very act of spinning.

Thus, Gandhian exemplary action is not as much about content but about teaching *the ability to think without thinking about*. Such an ability could not be taught by giving propositions or instructions but learnt only by doing and inserting oneself into a milieu of actions that enables the cultivation of such ability. The insertion into the activity would help sever external goals imposed on oneself by the normative principles of modern politics where one was prone to a third-person of view of oneself and others generated by various kinds of ideologies, thereby engendering violence. By inserting oneself within a tradition of activity, one is taught to orient oneself to the long-standing goals *internal* to the practice, thereby restoring a form of engagement with the world which is essentially practical. Gandhi here is drawing from the learning traditions of India which transmitted such a practical form of knowledge, a form of reflection which could only be acquired through immersion in the practice. To insert the body into such practices was to facilitate an inquiry into the nature of self and actions. It was to create conditions to inquire into and understand the relation between action, the agent and subjective goals. This was “to give the body in the right way,”

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202 I borrow this term from S. N. Balagangadhara who singles out “the ability to think without thinking about,” a form of reflection which is transmitted practically as one of the main features of Indian traditions. See Balagangadhara (2005).

203 In his “What is a Muslim,” Akeel Bilgrami points out: “Understanding a phenomenon is something that occurs in the third person. And, of course, we do often take such a third person stance toward ourselves. But, to allow such a stance to develop into defensive and reactive commitments is to rest with a third person conception of ourselves. It is to deny the first person or agent’s point of view (Bilgrami 1992, 1075). Gandhi’s criticism of Dhiranga seems to indicate that even when one sees oneself as an “agent,” one is already inscribed into a third person point of view. There is some resonance between Bilgrami’s “third person” and Vivek Dhreshwar’s *Adhyasa*: “Wherever experience gets covered over and misidentified there we have adhyasa.” In other words, the nature of “I” is covered over and misidentified with what it is not. See, Dhareshwar’s unpublished paper on “Adhyasa and the “I”: On some Aspects of Stereotypes” (Dhareshwar 2008).
unlike Dhingra “who gave his body wrongly,” where, to act was to merely transfer the agency to oneself, assert one’s will against an external world and if this required violence so be it. Gandhi himself had conducted such experiments in his ashram. Through spinning Gandhi saw a way to bring the masses into an active domain of learning to act reflectively, a certain form of *techne* of the self which would counter the violence generated by a third-person view of oneself that identitarian discourses based on nation, religion and other categories had produced.

Far from deadening the mind, such an act was meant to induce a great attentiveness, a state of mental alertness. Thus Gandhi retorted that spinning was not to the exclusion of all other activity and no one needs to abandon their calling for spinning:

> I have asked no one to abandon his calling, but on the contrary to adorn it by giving every day only thirty minutes to spinning as sacrifice for the whole nation….If the Poet spun half an hour daily his poetry would gain in richness. (124)

Far from bringing “a deathlike sameness in the nation,” the charkha would realize “the essential and living oneness of interest among India’s myriads. Behind the magnificent and kaleidoscopic variety, one discovers in nature a unity of purpose, design and form which is equally unmistakable…And behind the commonness of form there is the same life pervading all….And so do I hold that behind a variety of occupations there is an indispensable sameness also of occupation” (124). Thus, Gandhi argued, wherever charkha has taken root, one would already see a great deal of involvement in ameliorative activities in the villages and such indeed was the case. For Gandhi, it was not spinning versus education as Amartya Sen poses it, but spinning, given the context, was pedagogy for education, pedagogy for ethical learning and reflection. Gandhi would capture this thought in more direct ways in his notes on the Bengal tour (*Navajivan*, August 30, 1925) where he emphasized the importance of
constructive work in enabling reflection on experience and “making people aware of their own condition”:

...constructive work is the basis for solving political problems. Opinions may differ on whether this means the spinning-wheel or some other activity. But the time is drawing near when there will be a general agreement that the true solution of political problems lies in the education of the people. This education does not imply mere literacy but an awakening of the people from their slumber. The people should become aware of their own condition. (Gandhi 1999, 32: 362)

That action per se was central to Gandhi’s notion of education becomes evident in his proposal for Basic education or Nayee Talim, where once again we see the radical manner in which Gandhi draws up the educational vision for India, completely oriented around practical forms of knowledge, with the spinning wheel once again at the centre of it.

**Nayee Talim: Education through Craft**

Scholars have pointed out how despite Gandhi’s centrality and popularity in the nationalist movement, the newly formed independent Indian state came to disassociate itself from his political vision, following largely the political trajectory established by the British rule. This is true not just in the realm of politics, but also in the realm of education. Despite the fact that Gandhi was deeply committed to the task of providing an alternative educational vision for the newly established nation, and even proposed an alternative in the form of Nayee Talim in 1937, two decades after its implementation, it would recede into a non-mainstream method of education in the 60s.

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204 It must be pointed out that Gandhi’s notion of practical knowledge extended to encompass the judgement of ordinary people and their everyday ways of going about the world. He neither appealed to the truth of the scriptures like nineteenth century reformers nor did he condemn their everyday actions as “idolatry.” Thus, Bilgrami’s observation that Gandhi resisted “the idea that knowledge was something other than what we live by” (what we have so far referred to as “practical knowledge”) seems apt. See Bilgrami (2014, 142).

205 For a history of Nayee Talim, see Avinashilingam (1960), Sykes (1988) and K. Kumar (2007). Though the Kothari Commission Report was appreciative of Nayee Talim, it is considered to have receded in the late 60s.
It must be remembered that Gandhi proposed Nayee Talim as a solution to the problem of compulsory elementary education. Drawing the sphere of education as larger than that of mere literacy or acquiring a smattering of information about various objects and events in the world, Gandhi made productive handicrafts, involving manual labour, central to his educational programme. Handicraft would be the axle around which the students would learn the sciences such as arithmetic and geography as well as other skills such as reading and writing. In this Tagore and Gandhi were similar in that both organized their educational vision around performative activities. However, where Gandhi departed was that manual training should result in a useable article which could be sold, thereby being self-supporting. This “vocational” thrust of the elementary programme, he also extended to higher education where Gandhi was of the opinion that self-financed Agriculture-Colleges should be attached to related industries with the latter bearing the expenses of their education and their training. Similarly engineering graduates should be attached to the related industry and medical graduates to hospitals, working at live problems. The Law, Commerce and Arts colleges could be managed by the voluntary organizations and donations procured according to their requirement.

Gandhi’s proposal, which was meant initially for children aged 7-14 attracted criticism from several quarters. Some objected to his plan as neglecting the production of cultural subjects and instead imagining education purely along material lines. A professor from a well-known university charged that Nayee Talim resembled a factory mode of production. He likened the boys to workers on the semi-slave plantations of Ceylon and was of the opinion that it was equivalent to legalization of child-labour. In reply to the professor’s letter, Gandhi responded

Many opine that the moment it got taken over by the state, its course changed drastically. See Sykes (1988). Also see A. Sen (2013) for an alternative view point.
(Harijan, August 18, 1937) by saying that to call the pursuit of a vocation,\(^{206}\) as understood in his scheme, as a form of supplying labour for industries “amounts to an obstinate refusal to appreciate a series of facts. It is very like a man refusing to read the description of a human being and calling him a monkey, and because he has seen no other animal but a monkey, and because the descriptions in some particulars, but only in some, answers that of monkeys” (Gandhi 1999, 72: 232). He pointed out that in the plantations boys are treated as workers, as producing goods for profit. However, in his ashram, the boys are primarily learners who are engaged in the process of making and applying themselves in the process of making craft. The focus then is on the training and the formation of the child in relation to the larger society and not in the utilitarian end of making profit. In this way, a practitioner, with the necessary virtues and dispositions is formed by inserting the student in the domain of a particular tradition of activity and the ethical web and transactions the practice demands. Thus Gandhi insisted that it would be through a vocation that the all-round development of children would be possible. To an accusation from another writer that the idea smacked of medievalism, Gandhi replied (Harijan, October 16, 1937): “I do not know what happened in the middle ages. But I do know that the aim in the Middle Ages or any age was never to develop the whole man through crafts. The idea is original. That it may prove to be wrong does not affect the originality. And an original idea does not admit of a frontal attack unless it is tried on a sufficiently large scale. To say \textit{a priori} that it is impossible is no argument” (Gandhi 1999, 72: 334).

Once again, we see that the thrust is one of education as an art, of producing a “whole person,” flourishing in his/her fullness. Similar to Tagore in his diagnosis, Gandhi drew attention the crisis in education as one of crisis in \textit{education and learning} and offered

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\(^{206}\) Here we must understand vocation in the sense of a calling. In the Indian context, it could refer to that pursuit which suits the \textit{swabhava} of each person.
education through craft as a solution. Declaring that the existing system of primary education was not only wasteful but also harmful, Gandhi’s criticism of modern education was that the learners were removed from their milieu of action and practices. As a result, they were now lost to their parents. They had acquired a smattering of something, but whatever that was it was definitely not education. Education through craft would not only reinsert them into existing domain of practices but would also enable the practitioner of the craft to learn the necessary ethical comportment for it, which could then be extended to other similar situations as well, possessing a wider range of reference than the practice of the craft itself. 207

Underlying Gandhi’s emphasis on craft is the acquiring of expertise and skill in the practice of it. It would develop the “cunning of the fingers”, as well as train the learner’s mind. The student would learn how to make fine distinctions, distinguish good yarn from not so strong ones, the particular textures of cloth and the various processes involved in the picking of cotton and so on. 208 Learning to perform the necessary actions in the process often involved the cultivation of the right disposition, a certain kind of care, attention, awareness and mindfulness. Therefore, Gandhi would assert: “The method adopted in the institutions in India I do not call education, i.e., drawing out the best in man, but a debauchery of mind. It informs the mind anyhow, whereas the method of training the mind through village

207 The Gandhian model is not as unconnected to the larger educational task that Gandhi performs at a nationwide level through his satyagraha. Sainath in an article on wrestling brings out the connection well. Focusing on “Kushti Taleems” in Maharashtra, Sainath records his conversations with gurus in the numerous Kushti Taleems who emphasize the ethical comportment without which one cannot excel as a wrestler. Quoting Appasaheb Kadam, one of Maharashtra’s wrestling greats, who asserted that “the great teachers are all agreed that ethical training is crucial,” and that “a wrestler without a moral grounding will be a disaster,” Sainath recounts the legend of Gama: “Many teachers tell their students the legendary Gama pehelwan, the one undefeated wrestler of his time who vanquished the world’s greatest. Gama, born Ghulam Muhammad in Punjab, was a Muslim who stayed on in Pakistan after 1947. Teachers tell their students of the time he stood like a rock outside the colony of his Hindu neighbours, facing a violent mob during Partition riots. “That is how a wrestler should be,” is the refrain.” See Sainath (2013) “A wrestler’s life,” observed Andhalkar, legendary wrestler, former Olympian and guru, “is a kind of invisible tapasya” (Sainath 2013). What they single out is the ability of Gama or a Gandhi to perform the right action, especially when we know that they are not likely to have based their action on acquisition of moral principles learnt from liberal textbooks. In fact, Sainath (2013) notes that most of the wrestlers were not from educated classes.

208 Gandhi himself has an enormous amount of writing on the various kinds of distinctions in spinning. See Gandhi (1999, 47:1) where he even coins a new term, dhanurvidya, for the “science of carding.”
handicrafts from the beginning as the central fact would promote real disciplined development of the mind resulting in conservation of intellectual energy and also the spiritual” (Gandhi 1956, 14–15). Marjorie Sykes, in her book, The Story of Nai Talim, recalls her conversations with children and teachers who had learnt spinning as part of the Basic Education programme. The teachers told her that they pick cotton balls only when they are fully ripe, for then ‘a gentle touch is all that is needed, they come away easily. If they don’t, they are not yet ready for picking. We should wait another few days. We should not be impatient or greedy,’ emphasizing a know-how that comes with immersion in a practice. Sykes goes on to comment: “That was education too, education in how to handle other living things, plants and animals, with respect for the natural cycle of their own lives – education in one aspect of non-violence” (Sykes 1988). Exactly like in the learning of music, the standard of correctness is internal to the practice and the idea of doctrines or beliefs remain irrelevant in these domains of actions. The practice of craft would be woven into one’s everyday life and an article made would be used in everyday life, thereby integrating ethics, aesthetics and economics together. History, arithmetic, geography and mechanics would all be integrally correlated to the learning of a craft. In other words, immersion in the practice would precede or be prior to any theory.

Two questions arise here: What is the connection between the focus on the craft and the making of the satyagrahi? Second, how does focusing on craft enable reflection on experience? Clearly, Gandhi was drawing from the existence of rich traditions of craft that India was known for and which British colonialism is known to have destroyed. Teaching a craft involves transmission of sophisticated skills by a master to an apprentice, through specific forms of transmission. These involve complex learning traditions which are essentially practical, giving priority to the practice of the art over beliefs or theory. However,
ethical learning is more than just acquiring skills. Moreover, skilled expertise in an activity need not necessarily make a person ethical. How, then, we do we understand the link?

The Nature of Ethical Learning

If virtue is knowledge and ethical knowledge cannot be codified in propositional terms, then how is it learnt and transmitted? Gandhi’s stress on spinning and satyagraha as a mode through which one can become aware of the nature of action has some answers for the question.

In recent times, scholars have focused on the distinction between ethics based on know-what and know-how (Varela 1999; Varela 1993).209 While in the West, a tradition of morality which proceeds on “knowing what” in the form of universal norms or prescriptions has been dominant, of late there has been greater attention to ethical practice as “know-how.” This distinction draws from the Aristotelian conception of ethical learning where Aristotle sees ethical learning as closer to a know-how, rather than dependent on theoretical exercise based on reasoning (Aristotle 2000) where one acts self-consciously applying a certain rule of moral ideal or behaviour through reflection on a well-formulated moral principle.210

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209 The distinction between the two forms of knowledge “knowing that” and “knowing how,” has also been made by Dewey ([1922] 2007), Gilbert Ryle ([1949] 2009) and Oakeshott (1962). Ryle argues that knowing-how is a legitimate form of knowledge in its own right and is not to be seen as a derivative of or an illustration of theoretical knowledge. For a more recent account which explores the distinction between the two, see Winch (2010), Carr (1981), Carr (1979). While Varela draws from Dewey in order to further his thoughts on ethics, the distinction itself is very old and was first made by Aristotle in his Nicomachean Ethics (2000).

210 The thrust here is not on the right action for a particular circumstance but on realizing a certain end and acting in ways that accord with that end. As a result action itself is subject to continuous correction from the point of view of the end. Oakeshott captures it well: “‘Rational’ conduct is conduct springing from an antecedent process of ‘reasoning’. In order that a man's conduct should be wholly ‘rational,’ he must be supposed to have the power of first imagining and choosing a purpose to pursue, of defining that purpose clearly and of selecting fit means to achieve it; and this power must be wholly independent, not only of tradition and of the uncontrolled relics of his fortuitous experience of the world, but also of the activity itself to which it is a preliminary.” This Oakeshott refers to as “Reason.” By calling such an activity as “rational,” such a behaviour is recommended as desirable. However, as Oakeshott points out, this is a misconception. There is no end that can be stated in the form of propositions prior to the activity itself: “the spring of activity would still remain in knowing how to act in pursuit of that end and not in the mere fact of having formulated an end to pursue.” That an activity can spring from the pre-meditation on the propositions about the activity or that to teach an activity you have to convert our knowledge of it into propositions is what Oakeshott challenges. Thus, Oakeshott maintains the priority of practice over theory and the primacy of practical knowledge for all practices, including the sciences.
Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle distinguishes between three types of knowledge: *Episteme* or scientific knowledge which is said to be of things that cannot be otherwise and involves knowledge of first principles and is demonstrable, *techne* and *phronesis* which are essentially *know-hows* or practical disciplines involving knowing how to make a product and knowing how to act rightly respectively. Aristotle emphasizes that *techne* and *phronesis* have much in common: both are knowledge of “things which can be otherwise,” knowledge of “how to” rather than “knowing that,” and both are picked up essentially through practice and exercise (Aristotle 2000, 103–118). In other words, exactly as in the case of the arts or *techne* where we become good at an activity by doing it, we acquire virtues or ethical knowledge, or *phronesis*, by previous exercise of those activities or by doing them. Just as we become good builders by building, become better lyre players by playing the lyre, good swimmers by swimming (and not by learning about swimming), similarly it is by doing just acts that we become just, it is by doing generous acts that we become generous and by doing courageous deeds that we become courageous (Aristotle 2000, 24). No amount of instructions that tells one how to become courageous will help a person become courageous. Only the practice of the act will produce the desired disposition and the knowledge of what courage or fear is. Here, it is practice or actions, or more particularly, being inserted in traditions of activity, *which results in knowledge*. A failure to be courageous or to control one’s desire is not a “weakness of will” or a mental conflict as much as a failure to submit oneself to training, discipline, reflection and practices of the self in the past. Proper training results in mastery or what Varela calls “spontaneous coping” (Varela 1999).

Varela distinguishes between what he calls “spontaneous coping” that springs from ethical know-how (a more pervasive mode of being ethical in everyday life), and ethical action based

The rationalist, on the other hand, does not see practical knowledge as knowledge at all. See Oakeshott (1962, 84-86).
on rational judgement “in which one experiences a central I performing deliberate willed action,” (5) where we can own up to the action as “our own.” Varela’s contention is that those who study the mind, philosophers and scientists included, and those studying ethical behaviour, have focused more on actions that are a result of “deliberate and intentional analysis” with a focus on reasoning consisting mainly in application of principles while neglecting a more pervasive mode of being ethical which comes closer to a skilled behaviour which is “immediate, central and pervasive” (23). Varela’s claim is also that this negligence is not universal, for according to him the teaching traditions of the East have focused precisely on what has been neglected by the Western tradition. Thus, when Gandhi stresses on the cultivation of ethical learning which modern education neglects and organizes his vision around the learning of arts and craft, a similar assumption appears to underlie his conception.

In what specific ways does the learning of a craft help in cultivating ethical learning? At the first instance, we can draw a few similarities. When one learns a craft, the focus is on how to perform the right action through practice. A badly executed action will mar the object being made. A focus either on fruits of the actions or any other kind of subjective end is bound to be detrimental to the execution of the action. For example, a sports person when being trained is told not to focus on winning or attaining glory but on playing it right, to be attentive, mindful and alert. The various skills are learnt on the field through repeated performance. Similarly, first knowing about the action or prioritizing theory over practice may be an obstacle in the performance of the act itself. In this way, a certain orientation or an internal disposition towards action which we can call an action for its own sake, or a disinterested action is cultivated. Such an attitude is not an individual trait but acquired by insertion into an already existing arrangement of practice or a habit of conduct that we acquire by living with people who habitually behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. The necessary skills
and disposition result after a long period of cultivation such that at some point they begin to
look like what Varela calls “spontaneous coping.” Such an education gives us the ability to
act appropriately and without hesitation even if it does not give us the ability to defend our
actions as expressions of certain principles.

Secondly, a practitioner of art/craft cultivates a certain form of excellence through practice
which could get extended to other endeavours of life as well. However, this must not be
mistaken to mean that ethical learning is a merely technical skill that is learnt, though like a
skill, it is learnt by practice. Nor can we conclude that people who are skilled in various
crafts are necessarily more ethical than the others for a person with ethical know-how, very
obviously, applies oneself differently than an artisan does. Here too, Aristotle has some help
to offer. While noting the similarities between techne and phronesis, Aristotle notes that they
differ in terms of ends. While techne has a product or excellence in an art as an end,
phronesis has action, the right action at the right time in a given situation itself as the end. In
short, the goal/endpoint of ethical knowledge is right action itself and not action for the sake of
anything else. Thus, we would deny that someone who had excellent skills but used one’s
expertise for the wrong ends is a wise or virtuous person. While education through craft
need not necessarily result in a virtuous person, it provides the necessary conditions to
produce a particular orientation to action which is considered more desirable in a particular
culture. It is such a conception of ethical learning that seems to underlie Gandhi’s educational
vision.

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211 Aristotle would distinguish between varieties of Phronesis, some involving deliberation in the form of
practical syllogism to ethical action where the virtuous man knows what to do based on his prior exercise of
virtue and accumulated experience. Ethical action here is not about choosing from a set of available maxims (or
applying generalized rules) but grasping the concreteness of the situation. For an illuminating discussion on how
ethical know-how as “knowledge for the sake of oneself” is similar and different from technical know-how and
the varieties of Phronesis in Aristotle, see Gadamer (1979, 103–62). Of course, despite similarities in the way
ethical learning is envisaged, there are differences between Gandhian action and Aristotle’s Phronesis too. For
instance, the emphasis on the ability to think without thinking about seems peculiar to Gandhi and the tradition
he draws from.
Such an education would also create the internal disposition to reflect on experience, to be a *satyagrahi*, one who dwells in truth by being able to sever action from subjective wants (Dhareshwar 2010) and attain freedom in action. Hence, when violence breaks out and Gandhi is forced to withdraw the civil disobedience movement, spinning is the action through which he creates sites for people to reflect on the nature of human action. No amount of instruction that the protest has to be non-violent would work. This has to be individually realized only through performing the action within a larger milieu where social relationships and associations are emphasized. One would then be able to extend the affinities and similarities to the freedom movement as well. By inserting people into a larger milieu of spinning, Gandhi creates sites of ethical learning where people learn to detach their actions from individual ends and from mistaken ends where they confuse swaraj to be throwing the British out.

How does such a culture create this specific orientation towards action from the very beginning? Frits Staal, perhaps, has something of an answer. In his famous work, *Rituals and Mantras*, Staal forwards the hypothesis that rituals focus on the correct action to be performed and are meaningless, yet not without value. He argues that “Ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal,” “an action performed for its own sake” (Staal 1996, 131). It appears that it is through ritual that we are initiated into developing a certain orientation towards action, a certain internal disposition, which a culture considers desirable to initiate each generation into.

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*212* Staal also points out that the notion that ritual is action performed for its own sake is foreshadowed by Indian notions of tyaga, the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* and similar notions in other traditions such as *wu-wei* in Taoism. One is quite confounded by the fact that Staal ends this list by Kant’s categorical imperative! (Staal 1996, 133). Staal refers to Asian rituals as “rituals without religion” (388). He notes that Asian traditions do not follow the Western pattern of religion because their emphasis is not on doctrines or beliefs but on ritual. “In so far as doctrines or beliefs are mentioned at all, they are not primary but added: they are of the nature of secondary interpretations, often rationalizations and generally after-thoughts” created in response to Western expectations and demands” (390). Also see Balagangadhar who argues that while in the West, religion gives rise to a configuration of learning that is predominantly theoretical, in Asian cultures, ritual brings about a configuration of learning that is predominantly practical or performative (1994, 410–20).
Conclusion

Let me summarize what I have tried to do in this chapter. I examined the problematization of national education that emerged in early twentieth century India, and in particular looked at the responses of Tagore and Gandhi. The significance of this moment is that for the first time since the British rule, we have a nation-wide discussion on why the education brought in by the British institutions was no education at all and what indeed constituted true education. As part of their problematization, they also forward an alternative concept of education, with a focus on practical forms of learning without forsaking the sciences.

In their articulations on education we see that both Gandhi and Tagore hold that the education brought in by the British is no education at all because there is no cognition or reflection on experience taking place. The conceptual apparatus brought in by the British institutions have rendered our experiences mute or alienated us from it; we understood neither the West nor ourselves in a robust manner. Hence, Tagore constitutes that important moment in the history of education where cultural difference is located in the “life of mind,” in different traditions of learning and cultivation of mind (“mental traditions”) that characterize the East and the West.

However, while Tagore recognizes the difference, he is located like us, in the institution of the university. He can only attempt to make sense of this difference through the conceptual frameworks and knowledge practices inherited from the West. It is Gandhi rather than Tagore who embodies this difference. Gandhi constitutes that moment in the history of education where the educational task of removing avidya (ignorance) – the delinking of our actions from subjective ends and the removal of the third-person perspective which we have acquired towards ourselves and others due to the pervasiveness of normative framework and concepts in our lives - is performed outside of modern educational institutions by insertion into
practical domains. Thus, even though Tagore would have differences with Gandhi, he would almost on all occasions, submit to Gandhi’s directions.

We see that similar categorial structures are found in Gandhi and Tagore. Both hold that the ideal of education is the removal of the self (or the removal of a sense of doer-ship) and a discovery of the absence of agency, a startlingly different end from the Humboldtian ideal as expressed through the debate on Bildung. In the chapter on Bildung, we saw that Bildung defines itself explicitly against utilitarianism or the acquisition of skills as understood by training. Instead, the notion of self-formation involves the growth and the development of the individual through engagement with objects, and through the process of cultivating a theoretical orientation towards the world and oneself. It is to see the universe as a separate entity to be explained. The aim of such an education is to produce an individual whose “true,” unique self is actualized. Such a person is a self-determining individual whose actions derive from an end chosen through a process of reasoning based on principles. I traced the rise of these specific categorial structures through the triad of Kant, Humboldt and Hegel. In this chapter, through a study of Gandhi and Tagore, I show how similarly here education is not for livelihood alone or for acquiring of skills, though neither is excluded. However, such an education is different in its goals. Its goal is to produce a human being who can perform the right action. This necessarily requires one to realize that the “agent” and conceptual structures are mutually generative and one can act in freedom only when one discovers the absence of agency by submitting oneself to the form and ends of a particular practice. In such a culture, education constitutes initiating the newcomers into practices, in which the central focus is training the mind not to think about (or to think of one’s self from a third person point of view where the self emerges as an object to be thought about) but in orienting one to

\[213\] For an illuminating account of how various strands in Indian thought are concerned with different ways of understanding the absence of agency, see Balagangadhara (2005).
action for its own sake. Rather than one’s unique, original self which is actualized through education as it is in the *Bildung* tradition, the emphasis here is on finding out that which is common to all.

We can now understand that the “national” in national education is neither about the presence of Hindu, Muslim or Christian religious texts in the institutions, nor about educational institutions being run by Indians alone, or for that matter about establishing institutions catering to specific religious groups. It is in being initiated into the very mode of learning which is necessarily practical, non-discursive and embodied that Gandhi and Tagore marked the difference. Tagore once astutely remarked, “We cannot bring to life a particular system of education by naming it “national.” The system of education which is born of variously directed endeavours of various people of this nation, that is what can be called “national” (cited in Bhattacharya and Mukhopadhyay 1995, 5). He thereby connected “national” to something that is organic to the people. To find an expression of this, it is Gandhian Nayee Talim that we must turn to. Nayee Talim as a model of education is perhaps still the best model to capture the way performative art forms such as music (or for that matter *gamaka*, *yakshagaana*, dance among others) continue to be learnt in India, with an emphasis on long years of arduous training or *riyaz* under a mode of discipleship to the guru and integrally bound to ethical learning through various practices of the self. Rather than see Nayee Talim as an outdated model, I suggest that we see it as a model that even today best explains how learning pursuits that aim at creating practitioners of various performative traditions continue to thrive outside the university.

Gandhi’s educational vision also provides us with a different way of conceptualizing ethical learning. By likening ethical learning to a practical activity, Gandhi draws from Indian traditions of learning which are practice-based, where understanding the real nature of self is
arrived at through insertion into practices rather than given in advance doctrinally. Such a conception of ethical learning permeates the Indian social fabric and the traditions themselves are repertoires of action heuristics for such an inquiry. Gandhi’s vision thus needs to be seen as an invitation for us to understand our own learning traditions better without being parochial about them.

Our examination of Gandhi and Tagore on education seems to indicate that there is another conception of education at work, which we have not only been unable to conceptualize, but have barely begun to cognize. The differing conception of education partly accounts for why Gandhi and Tagore do not recognize the activity in institutions brought in by the British as educational in their sense of the term. As opposed to the knowledge of causes or the knowledge of the external world in which the universe is a separate entity to be explained, their emphasis is on practical forms of knowledge involving a ethical know-how where the world is a common dwelling-place. While the former is not rejected or thought to be “false” by either of them, it is not deemed as the most important form of knowledge. What then is the most important form of knowledge? It is what they refer to as “the knowledge of the self,” of knowing how to perform the right action. It involves training one’s desires such that one is able to perform actions without attachment to its fruits and one learns how to think without thinking about; in short, knowledge that transforms the individual’s ethos.

If Gandhi and Tagore cannot recognize the institutions brought in by the British as educational in their sense of the term, then would it be the case that the Europeans too had difficulty in locating education in India? I would like to argue that this indeed is the case. In the next chapter, I examine the early nineteenth century British surveys on indigenous education in order to show the compulsions of the European frame in recognizing what constituted education and what did not.