The Mahatma Misunderstood:
the politics and forms of South Asian literary nationalism

by

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For my parents and my brother

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Introduction:

Misunderstanding the Mahatma: the politics and forms of South Asian literary nationalism

The title of this dissertation is necessarily tendentious. I cannot claim a monopoly on accurate interpretations of the long career of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whose writings fill more than fifty volumes. What I have been interested in doing is examining why the fact of Gandhi's influence has been so distorting on histories of Indian nationalist thought and, in particular, on the history of Indian literature of the twentieth century. Few discussions of the movement for Indian independence from British colonization can avoid the long shadow that Gandhi casts over the events and ideas of the period. Gandhi's shadow, though, is both the safest vantage point from which to survey the terrain of Indian nationalism and a distorting screen through which the landscape is made to appear less troubling or treacherous than it is. This necessarily makes discussions of the gravitational pull of Gandhi's influence on the movement for Indian independence more than a little difficult, since one is never sure how much distortion one is accounting for, and it appears, then, that no matter how much one recalibrates, one is always encountering the Mahatma in a consciously or unconsciously misunderstood manner. The more one attempts to find Gandhians behaving in ways prescribed by Gandhi the less satisfied one is with the results. There are historical reasons for these mistakes, of course, not the least of which are Gandhi's willingness to accommodate a number of disparate ideas in the Congress Party, the wide range of sources from which he apparently drew inspiration, and the highly provisional and non-theoretical nature of

much of his writing. But the problem still remains: Gandhi was many things to many people but at no point were their ideas reducible to his, no matter how charismatic and important a figure he remains.

In post-independence India, however, Gandhi's ideas are no longer an unqualified good; whether because Gandhi may have offered suspiciously limited programs to minorities or because he "appeased" Muslims, both left-wing and right-wing detractors have found reasons to make Gandhi the root of the problems facing the post-independence nation-state. There are a few reasons to be suspicious of Gandhi's own responsibility for the crimes of India, not the least of which is that by the time that independence was negotiated Gandhi was at the lowest point in his influence over the movement and the Indian National Congress. But even if we accept the controversial thesis that Gandhi bears the lion's share of the blame, there are two problems that come immediately to the fore in attempting to separate Gandhi from his putative followers and assigning blame and responsibility accordingly. First, many intellectual strains attempted to root themselves in Indian thought by demonstrating their proximity to Gandhi as evidence of their nationalism, even when many of their political formations would later part ways with Gandhi's in important organizational and political schisms. This has had the result of allowing otherwise disparate political movements or at least movements with substantial differences to Gandhi to appear to be Gandhian or to proclaim themselves Gandhian (e.g. Gandhian socialism, Gandhian anarchism, Gandhian modernism, etc.). This is also the case with the literature of the 1930s and 1940s which has been canonized as nationalist, even though this description conceals more than it reveals, not simply since "nationalism" is stubbornly difficult to describe but also because the Indian National

Congress was uniquely successful at keeping its large tent erected well after independence. With a socialist at its helm and sections of the orthodox Hindu right, large industrial interests, as well as landed Hindu and Muslim aristocrats within its ranks, the Congress Party was a large popular front capable of defending itself from both flanks simultaneously and representing the political diversity of its membership. Added to this mix, then, was the charismatic presence of the Mahatma, who through his campaigns between the world wars transformed the Congress Party from an organization of primarily middle-class professionals to a mass party with a large peasant membership. There were, of course, challenges to the leadership of the Congress Party but aside from the Muslim League, few were successful at breaking the hegemony of the Congress Party and Gandhi as the chief representative of the national aspirations of several classes of Indians. But the success of the Congress Party at maintaining this coalition until independence (and in many ways for decades after independence) means that "nationalist" can be applied to ideologies and politics that are far more radical than what the post-Independence Congress Party could and did tolerate. And when the Communist Party of India formally entered the Congress Party they also brought a large section of the organized working class into the fold. Because most groups could attribute their grievances, at least in part to the British (rather than capitalism, caste, chauvinism, or communalism), every identity could also reasonably believe that it was represented within the Congress Party, even though at times this was the result of the Congress's Machiavellian populism rather than a serious commitment to durable social reform.

Second, and perhaps more troublingly, because of Gandhi's ecumenical reach and popularity as the personality most associated with the cause of Indian independence, the

use of Gandhi's name became shorthand for nationalist credentials, while disagreeing with him meant that one was marking oneself out as an opponent of independence. One index of this is the way that most important, public disagreements with Gandhi were always resolved by a return to the Gandhian fold, as in the cases of Nehru and Tagore. Another is Gandhi's own ability to maintain the unity of the Congress Party at almost any cost and thereby avoid the split which threatened the Congress Party from its inception (between the Moderates and the Extremists), and against which he spends a large amount of space in *Hind Swaraj* arguing. Many of the histories of the Indian National Congress have paid attention to the differences that emerged inside the party (the Lal-Bal-Pal faction, the Bose challenge, the Congress Socialists, the Hindu Mahasabha, etc.), but even these have been resolved in a post-independence historiography which sees the Nehruvian formula of "unity in diversity" resolve these debates and find for each an easy place in the nationalist pantheon. The result of these two twinned problems has been that even when Indian nationalism is seen as containing multiple political affiliations, the commonalities with Gandhi are prioritized over the differences. The result has been to produce a narrative of the movement for independence in which every strand of nationalism inexorably leads to the Indian nation-state in its Nehruvian incarnation.

Implicit in this reorganization of the genealogy of nationalist thought is the claim that there are substantive differences between the leadership of the Indian National Congress and the middle-class intellectuals who proselytized in its name, who knowingly or unwittingly used the banner of Gandhi to advance ideas that could only troublingly be reincorporated into later, mature Gandhian thought (usually affiliated with an aversion to technology and science, a reformist-democratic impulse towards religion, an idealization

of Indian village life, nonviolence in political methods, and a limited program of social redistribution). There is a story that remains to be told about the relationship between the radical intelligentsia and the nationalist movement, in which radicals were solicited and invited into the nationalist orbit in order to do the work of providing a nationalist image with which the downtrodden could identify only then to find themselves hemmed in when they attempted to expand the leftward potential of bourgeois nationalism. There were, of course, limits to what the Indian bourgeoisie that ran the Indian National Congress was willing and able to deliver, but there was no limit on what the middle-class was willing and able to imagine, and the sheer opposition between those two ideological and political structures finally came to head in the postcolonial dissatisfaction with the nationalist project. The Indian bourgeoisie needed freedom from British taxation and tariff policies in order to develop its own industry; but in order to set up a state complete with its protections for domestic production they needed the masses of Indians to be mobilized against the British, as their own economic and political strength paled in comparison to the crown's. In this project, the middle-class radicals were invaluable, since they not felt deeply the problems of colonialism in their own alienation but were also relatively free to engage in some of the most radical organizing experiments. At the same time, there was a limit to what the Indian bourgeoisie (landed and industrial) was willing to accept in terms of an organized opposition to the British, especially since peasant organizations threatened landlord interests and unions limited the powers of manufacturers to extract surplus efficiently. But if the radicals were good at moving peasants and workers into action, they were quite ineffective at and uninterested in disciplining them. The grammar of their radicalism was composed of principled

declarations, unable to accommodate the flexible and knotted realpolitik of the pragmatic subjunctive. If in this story radical intellectuals come off as dupes of more Machiavellian moneyed interests, then this is the result of the novelty of national liberation in the Indian case by which time the betrayal of the bourgeoisie was not a well-established pattern.

But their relationship to Gandhi was different. Even if he could be the best mouthpiece for the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, Gandhi was also dangerous since what he also did was make the masses of Indians aware of their political strength. Moreover, even the aura of the Mahatma had something of a primitive anticapitalism inbuilt to it, since Gandhi's own meager income, simple dress, vow of poverty, and charitable activities went a long way towards convincing Indians of the need for an anti-materialist philosophy. It was this yoking together of traditional forms with radical content which perhaps most excited young nationalists about Gandhi, and they happily preached ideas of reform in his name throughout the nation. The utility of "Gandhi" cannot be overstated, especially since India was still a nation which was dominated by regional politics (and which was only recently being imagined) and the name of the Mahatma was the only universal political currency. This is all the more important because Gandhi was successful in mobilizing large sections of the Indian middle-class into extraordinary acts of sacrifice, giving up jobs and education, in order to extend nationalist organization deeper and deeper into the country. By the 1920s, small armies of Indian students dropped out of British colleges on Gandhi's orders and returned to their villages where they hoped to fly the tricolor and distribute spinning wheels. What attracted them to Gandhi is of course in question, since this too has been the subject of nationalist oversimplification. It is probable that they felt the need to oppose the British

in nationalist-traditional ways or at least saw the emotional energies that such an idea could unleash and that they found themselves attracted to the simple, religious vocabulary that Gandhi had to offer. It is more likely, though, that they felt themselves on the cusp of important social transformations that could only be accomplished through decolonization and that Gandhi represented their best hopes for genuine democratic reorganization and unification of the country. Their grievances would have included the religious conservatism of the elite, the degraded condition of the women of their own families but also women at large, the horrible spectacle of poverty and caste-based chauvinism, the superstitious ideas of their communities which limited their own activities, and a blind religiosity which reconciled most to their fates and made them unwilling to rebel. It would have been in the hopes of social uplift and religious reform that young nationalists made their way back to their homes. When their intervening education took them to Europe—as in the case of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and Ahmed Ali—the radical nature of the ideas with which they returned was directly proportional to the distance they had traveled and their relationship to Gandhi all the more poignant, deep.

But having been educated in the cities (and some even in Europe), their return to the villages did not follow expected Gandhian patterns. Whatever they thought of Gandhian *sarvodaya* projects, they certainly believed that as far as reformist or modernizing projects went, Gandhi's suggestions were limited. But even these limited reforms (spinning yarn, boycotting liquor shops, buying domestic products, untouchable education) met with substantial resistance. At first, Gandhian reforms were seen not as organic recompositions of domestic ideals that had perhaps degenerated but as radical

disruptions of traditional patterns of life by degenerate modern ideas. When young high-caste men asked their parents to admit untouchables into their homes, this was not seen as benign religious paternalism but urban depravity and the beginning of *kaliyug*. When young Muslims asked their sisters to participate in nationalist struggles, this was proof of the sinful influence of western ways rather than an attempt to promote or solidify Islamic values or even a necessarily nascent feminist impulse. And, when young men had the audacity to argue that the Mahatma may have a point when he argued against British colonialism, they found themselves with few friendly auditors. The tradition-modernity dyad must have seemed unbearable in these moments where their modern allegiances had to be cloaked in traditional garb. Having used Gandhi to introduce limited reforms into their homes, the generation of the 1920s found themselves hardening into the conviction that their homes were impossible to transform, that no language could link them to the worlds of their families, that nationalism, while ideal, was something that had to be brought to the Indian from the outside in spectacular form. It was this experience that unified the writers who would form the Progressive Writers Movement in the early 1930s, an experience which also formed the core of their writing in Urdu, Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam. Having looked to Gandhi for a vocabulary for change and failed, they began seeking alternatives elsewhere. Their concerns were still overwhelmingly vernacular: social reform, scientific thought, critiques of orthodoxy, and exposes of domestic hypocrisy.

But then, somewhere between the 1920s and 1930s, this began to change. By the time of the Salt March, young nationalists were discovering that Gandhi was not only openly discussed but even worshipped, that nationalist ideas had not only audiences but

admirers, and Gandhian uplift programs were not only taken up but enthusiastically spread. This was not a linear development; it had fits and starts and evolved along different patterns in different places. But something was beginning to change in the experience of this section of the radical middle-class which now saw an increasing openness to reform and change in a Gandhian manner. Moreover, Gandhi became an entry-point for discussions of ideas beyond *sarvodaya* and non-cooperation: women's organizations which picketed liquor shops began to talk about real emancipation for women; inter-caste association was increasingly common; poverty and taxation were critiqued and people who benefited from them were excoriated against; education was seen as a virtue; indigenous models of progress and technology were unearthed and lionized. It was not inconsistent to be a Gandhian and believe that caste abolition, technological progress, social redistribution of land and wealth, gender equality, and an end to religious orthodoxy were on the horizon. Individuals who had never shown signs of political courage suddenly became leaders; untouchables demanded temples opened; women courted arrest; peasants resisted soldiers. And in many instances, rather than abandoning Gandhi for more radical leaders, the newly radical classes of Indians found themselves happily marrying Gandhi and their own demands for change. This was all the more complicated for the radical middle-class, since most students held on to Gandhian ideals begrudgingly and had learned from the experience of the 1920s that they might need to look elsewhere for sources of radical inspiration. Independence from the British was one thing, but organizing a new society on the hidebound ideas of the sleepy hamlets from which they had escaped must have seemed sheer nonsense. Having seen the world that modernity had created, these young nationalists turned to nationalism for the

intellectual and affective framework through which peasant relatives could be won over to modernizing their worlds for themselves. They may have created Congress committees in the countryside, but the aspirations were clearly urbane and cosmopolitan. And if along with Benedict Anderson we attempt to imagine the life-world of the individuals capable of imagining communities on a national scale (the civil servants, journalists, novelists, and the like), we have to take seriously the ways they understood Gandhi in order to imagine the India which satisfied their aspirations.

This is, more or less, the contradictory milieu which gave rise to first renaissance in Indian Writing in English, often referred to as the "Gandhian Age," in which nationalist writers attempted to describe this new experience of Indians developing political muscles and exercising them in their own interests, through the baggage of the previous decade, for a western audience. More should be said about this contradiction that can be experienced at the level of form, as it penetrates the novel to the level of the symbol. Anglophone nationalist literature by and large was written by a class of Indians who left their homes to be educated, mainly in England, but who returned to discover that there was a vast gulf which separated them from their families and their worldviews. This bears an important resemblance to the career of the nationalist civil servant tracked in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities,* where nationalism was only imaginable from the vantage point of the deracinated and mobile government employee and his coterie. The writers who produced this literature followed in Gandhi's footsteps, too, leaving India for a British education (though Raja Rao went to France and GV Desani left from Africa, while RK Narayan famously never left) and then returning to India to participate in nationalist agitations. Their European education, though, had a profoundly

different impact on them than did Gandhi's. After leaving England, Gandhi was convinced that the solution to the problems of colonial modernity lay in India's rural and therefore traditional values. Anglophone writers, though, were unable to resolve colonialism with a return to the village. Partly because they had chosen to write in English—a choice which necessarily allied them to a cosmopolitanism rather than provincialism—and partly because they could not tolerate the kinds of values that the village seemed to represent—sexism, caste chauvinism, orthodoxy and superstition, ignorance—there was no easy route for them back to the villages that they had left, often on penalty of excommunication.

The consequence of this experience was a double alienation felt by a radical middle class. On the one hand, nationalism became coterminous with the structure of feeling which separated them from their families, since they now discovered the joys of egalitarianism ruined by superstition, racism, chauvinism, and orthodoxy. Their ability to sympathize with their social and economic inferiors stood in sharp contrast to the inability of the world around them to do the same. The goal was to demonstrate that not only was the radical middle-class intellectual capable of feeling for the untouchable, the peasant, women, and the like, but also to show that at its core the alienation of the radical middle class from its families could only be understood from the perspective of its others who were equally repulsed by the etiquette of the middle-class home. Nationalism was in fact oddly necessary to overcome domestic alienation, substituting as it did one more palatable family for the biological one. On the other hand, nationalism also came to organize their experience of racism in the metropolis, where the daily encounters with anti-Indian prejudices seemed to dovetail with the reluctance of the British to accept the

legitimacy of Indian demands for independence. The response to this chauvinism was not only a compulsion to humanist pedagogy, a ceaseless sociological impulse present in the fiction of the period designed to show the humanity of Indians against a baseline racism, but also a political internationalism, which sympathized with the struggles of working class and minorities in Europe. This dissertation attempts to explore this problem of the simultaneity of elite-led populism and middle-class social democracy through investigations of formal contradictions in the literature of the 1930s and 1940s. The pitfalls of Gandhian leadership were major blind-spots for most radical intellectuals who often found themselves standing behind Gandhi in order to make their own anticolonial arguments to British audiences and readers. Still, the relationship between their democratic ambitions and Gandhi's was tenuous even if it wasn't openly tendentious. Insisting on a radical genealogy for this literature is not merely an act of defending Anand, Ali and Rao from legitimate criticisms of their blindness, but to demonstrate that nationalism was not merely an elite-driven movement. There were significant challenges that could have been made politically to the direction that the new national bourgeoisie was charting for the nation, but this would have required something that was missing in India and for which the authors of late-colonial fiction can only fractionally bear the responsibility for – independent political organization.

Writing in English, though, was symptomatic of certain problems and productive of others. First of all, the decision to write in English meant that the intended audience was European, first, and bilingual Indians second, especially since any political fiction ran the risk of irritating the censor who strictly limited what kinds of writings made their way back from the metropolis to the colony. There are still traces of the self-

consciousness of that decision in the multiple pseudo-sociological and anthropological gestures which constitute the tour guide-like introductions to each of these novels. But it is also discernible in the repeated complaints of these authors; finding British publishing houses that would print Indian fiction was quite difficult, particularly since the only thing one had to say to a British audience was didactic and polemical. Anand, Rao, and Ali only found their words published with the intervention of sympathetic novelists, especially Graham Greene and EM Forster, who intervened on their behalf and guaranteed sales with their patronage. This particular career of Anglophone writing meant that the kinds of issues that were being raised and read had primarily to do with colonization and its adverse effects on India, especially its culture. At the same time, the intellectual problems which preoccupied this fiction were derived from two different sources. The formal innovations of British modernism (and French modernism in the case of Rao) excited this coterie of writers: they found in Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and Ford a series of interrogations not only about the power of language to overcome individual alienation but also profound critiques of the empire from within. The content of their writing, though, bore more similarities to the vernacular fiction of the 1920s and 1930s that was being produced in Hindi, Urdu, and Kannada journals throughout India. There, the durable problem of paternalist responsibility confronting social inequality was repeated without resolution. Itself the outgrowth of the social reform movements of the late-nineteenth century, this vernacular fiction gave rise eventually to the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) which had a much more radical program than the various religious movements from which it originated.

In the main, the decision to write in English came out of the long itinerary of the intelligentsia of which they were a section: unmoored from their homes and alienated from their communities, seeking education and openings in England but discovering simultaneously European prejudices and a circle of continental radicalism, and returning to India to find the nation on the brink of its independence but still divided along the lines of class, caste, gender, and religion. In Benedict Anderson's famous formulation, the nation was imagined most importantly in the minds of these pilgrims who could only experience their Indian-ness in English universities, on English ships bound for the metropolis. As a result, English's pull, which each of these writers describes in their own ways as "natural" (Anand argued that he could not write well in Punjabi; Rao said that English was the language of his emotional makeup; Ali wrote in both, but wanted the audiences that English provided), was the product of an alienation that was both constitutive and perhaps traumatic for the literature they produced. The consequences of that decision are equally interesting, for unlike the British modernists who sought to resolve their alienation formally through experiments in language which might allow the subject to reimagine her relationship to history and community, south Asian Anglophone writers attempted to imagine a solution to their alienation not through a return to their class formally but through an immersion in the imagination of their social inferiors, by imagining their own alienation mirrored in the social and economic deprivation of peasants, women, untouchables, the dispossessed Muslim. It is indeed the case that Anglophone literature did some of the work of uniting the Indian intelligentsia to one another in the only language that they all spoke, but this necessarily had to take a detour through the lives of people who could not read the literature and who were not a part of

the class which was imagining the nation. Nationalists could only relate to one another through their others, since the one thing they ironically shared was their common alienation.

Tracing this long career, though, is important insofar as it sets up the intellectual contradictions to which this dissertation returns repeatedly in order to explain how this section of the middle class came to feel about the nation it was imagining. There are at least six contradictions at work here. I will list them before explaining how they affect the overall structure of feeling which comprises nationalist literature of the period.

First, the thinkers of the period both need Gandhi and feel the need to move beyond Gandhi simultaneously. This expresses itself in their use of Gandhi as the medium through which they sympathize with untouchables, peasants, and women, even as they feel that Gandhi might perhaps only offer sympathy and not any real change in the conditions of the downtrodden. But it is also felt in their sense of the importance of backing Gandhi against the British while being suspicious of Gandhi's plans for the nation.

Second, while they are writing for an international Anglophone audience (primarily British), the content of their literature is shaped by vernacular writing from India, even as they are experimenting with formal innovations in continental European modernism. In itself, this is not a contradictory set of affiliations and affinities. But in the case of nationalist writing, the vernacular roots express themselves as a drive towards authentic representation (against a British prejudice) while the modernist roots express themselves as a maneuver of homogenization (for a British sensibility). These two drives torque in necessarily

opposite directions not because of a failure on the part of the middle class to produce its own theory of literature but because of the Janus-faced nature of the class whose experience it was representing.

Third, while protests are erupting all around them, they continue to find around them a world which refuses to revolt. Partly because the litmus test for emancipation continues to be the middle-class home and partly because the middle-class retains a sense of class chauvinism which fails to see acts of resistance and liberation where they do emerge, consistently, the narrative gaze sets out and finds an India unwilling to revolt, even though the historical period is rife with the mobilization of millions of people in nationalist agitation. Lacking an explanation for the evolution of mass consciousness from docile to rebellious and always disappointed by the conservatism of their own homes, the writing of the period oscillates between enthusiasm and pessimism in the same narrative optics.

Fourth, they simultaneously believe in the possibility and the impossibility of a humanist consciousness that can spread. On the one hand, nationalist narratives can only be successful if they believe that democracy and democratic institution have a real viability and that depends on a confidence in a still underdeveloped political consciousness, usually troped as a national *bildungsroman*. At the same time, nationalism is suspicious of two real obstacles to the possible development of democratic humanism: the chauvinism of the old elites which prevents them from releasing control over the social institutions which democracy needs and the allegiance of the minorities to the old elites

(usually represented as either a perpetual obsequy or an unwillingness to recognize one's own oppression). Put differently, the omniscient narrator is always a humanist, while the terrain that narrator looks out upon challenges the limits of that very humanist presumption.

Fifth, in their attempts to expose and understand alienation everywhere, they make alienation a universal condition and the foundation of nationalist feeling. Ultimately, the structure of feeling that nationalist literature requires does not imagine the same nation over and over again, but rather imagines a sea of individuals unmoored from their old social ties, unable and unwilling to return to them, and so bound together by virtue of their common alienation. As a consequence, the figure of the nationalist in much nationalist literature is the oppressed minority who acts in the world as if she is already a middle-class, democratic subject. This nationalist ventriloquism poses certain problems since it is only a negative solidarity, immediately evacuated of emotional content once the source of the alienation has been eliminated. For our purposes, what is important is that nationalism could solve middle-class alienation and not resolve the alienation of the oppressed, so what appear to be parallel tracks in the anticolonial movement diverge immediately after independence. This is also the reason that acts of solidarity also appear as acts of appropriation.

Sixth, the nationalist middle class everywhere recognized the limits of Gandhi's politics and organizational strategies but was incapable of putting forward viable alternatives themselves, and had to settle for attempts at reforming Gandhian nationalism from within. Absent an organizational and political

alternative, the Indian National Congress was far too durable and important a force to be challenged on the ideological field alone. Even when the aspirations were radical technological development in the service of democracy (Anand), socialist reorganization of the means of production (Rao), or genuine cross-communal collaboration and solidarity (Ali), these had little space to develop outside Congress interpretations of these objectives and so suffered from the gravitational problem earlier discussed.

The resulting picture of nationalism—from the perspective of the radical middle class, arguably the only class capable of imagining the nation for the nation—is one in which far more radical experiments in acts of solidarity, political possibilities, and literary technique than can be explained by seeing this literature as a mirror of Gandhian objectives in nationalist agitation. While the authors themselves were unable to break the hold of bourgeois nationalism of the Congress variety, there novels are everywhere marked by attempts to think through new possibilities for nationalism and alternative futures for the nation. It is only after the middle class is collectively horrified by the problem of national disintegration immediately after independence that the radicals become conservatized. Still, post-independence conservatism was not a given; nothing demonstrates this more profoundly than the fact that the nascent Indian bourgeoisie had to rely on a putative socialist to carry out its development schemes mid-century. Anticolonial nationalism could now move towards statism; the radicals could become statesmen.

As I understand it, nationalism moves in two opposite directions simultaneously, avoiding the inevitable breach between its democratic and its majoritarian poles through,

on the one hand, an ideological divide papered over and even avoided by a careful slippage in vocabularies (democratic and majoritarian, after all, resemble each other) and, on the other hand, a political crisis between the more radical and more reactionary views of nationalism that can never come to a resolution since both poles need each other in order to win independence. The ideological problem presents itself thus: nationalism both intends to include the histories of all indigenous identities into its fold with greater or lesser mythological success and relegates minorities who refuse to identify with anticolonial politics as necessarily agents of colonialism. If the first operation is best represented by the enormous historical and geographical vistas represented in Nehru's *Discovery of India*, then the latter is indexed by Nehru's simultaneous reference to the problems of "divide and conquer" politics as the primary method of understanding the organizing efforts of Jinnah and Ambedkar. It is in fact the figure of Nehru who most successfully embodies the contradictory logics of nationalism, since his career from the Congress Socialists to the head of the independent Indian state maps cleanly on to the twin tracks on which nationalism simultaneously runs. This ideological problem also manifested itself at the level of political organization where the relative weakness of the left in India compared to Congress meant that Congress nationalism continued to remain flexible and durable. Not only did most left-wing breaks fare poorly, the Communist Party of India, arguably the largest left-wing challenger to Congress, folded itself entirely into Congress when this fit the needs of Soviet Union's aims in World War II. The consequence was a kind of pragmatic politics of unity at all costs which delivered more radical elements into the Congress Party and offered them no alternatives when they were disillusioned or troubled by the policies of state-led growth in the newly independent

nation. At the same time, the more conservative elements in Congress, both its industrial financiers as well as the more orthodox elements of the Hindu right, needed at the end of the day the more radical and democratic elements to be able to mobilize millions of people with the hopes of social transformation on a more egalitarian pattern and to discipline them with the logic of a controlled, patient politics of pragmatism.

This internal map of nationalism – cynical and Machiavellian as it is – bears little or no resemblance to the euphoric, triumphalist, and ultimately radical structure of feeling which marks the nationalist literary output of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact, it is only by reading very hard against the grain, as the postcolonialist readings of these novels do, that you can believe that novels about untouchable freedom are actually about the persistence of Brahminical prerogatives, that novels about the self-activity of peasant women are in fact narratives which capitulate to sexism, and that novels about the nationalism of the *sharif* denizens of Delhi are putatively apolitical. Perhaps worse still, it is only by ignoring the radical project of these novels, as the nationalist readings of these novels do, that you can come to the conclusion that the necessary and complete horizon of these novels rested in the post-independence Indian nation-state. At a minimum, the novels were far more democratic and socially redistributive than any reform ever accomplished by the Indian government; at a maximum, the novels were nascent expressions of a literary internationalism, which had lingering suspicions that nationalism could not accomplish the aims which it had set out for itself and still lacked a vocabulary in which to express that discomfort. And yet, there is still something compelling about both the postcolonial and the nationalist readings of these novels, especially since nationalism has simultaneously failed to deliver on its promises and maintained that those same promises

are still part of its program. As a result, nationalist literature bears within it traces of the unresolved tensions in nationalist politics as a formal contradiction. It is this contradiction which I have attempted to explain in this dissertation, a contradiction which I believe allows us to recover nationalism from its post-independence deterioration into a crass statism and to see in nationalism and nationalist movements the possibility of different outcomes which ultimately failed to come to fruition for political rather than ontological reasons.

Chapter 1: The Mahatma as Proof: the nationalist origins of the historiography of Indian writing in English

This essay seeks to explain a specific pattern in the historiography of the Indian novel in English which has dominated the critical discourse about the novels of late-colonial India. Specifically, this essay argues that interpretations and conventional understandings about the novels from the 1930s and 1940s were formed in response to and as a part of the language debates of the 1960s and 1970s and that these concerns have formed an interpretive orthodoxy from which readings of the Indian novel in English have not been able to shift. Even after the critical concerns in both the Indian and Western academy turned in the 1980s and 1990s towards postcolonialism, feminism, and minority criticism, the terms of the earlier debate continued to dominate, only in inverted form, and have made other formal investigations and inquiries into these novels appear either unnecessary or inaccurate. Finally, this essay explores the possibility that the Indian novel in English bears re-examination against the interpretive orthodoxies which have come to dominate the critical discourse.

By the 1970s, a consensus had developed about the origins and interpretations of the Indian novel in English. This national consensus consisted of the following propositions: while there may have been vernacular traditions, British masters, and early experiments in the novel in English from which it drew its inspiration, the Indian novel in English really came into its own in the 1930s; the 1930s were an important break in the periodization of the novel since it was clear that the novel's concern was now nationalism and it seemed to bear the imprint and influence of Gandhi, as opposed to the earlier

novels of the nineteenth century which tended to have a more personal and limited view; the Indian novelist in English was preoccupied with the representation of India in its entirety, usually for a European readership; its most important practitioners were Anand, Narayan, and Rao, though Bhattacharya, Desani, and Singh could be added without overmuch controversy.[1] By themselves, these propositions are hardly controversial, but the reason that these propositions and not others (e.g. the diasporic origins of the novel in English, the persistence of continuities between vernacular literatures and English literature, the rise of certain figures because of the publishing and patronage trends in England, or the influences of regional ideologies or local political movements or intellectual developments in Europe) came to dominate had as much to do with the history and form of these novels as it had to do with the needs of the academy and a wing of the Indian ruling class which needed to make the case for the national utility of English in the 1960s and 1970s. Novels in English could do what none of the vernacular literatures could do, namely suture together a geographically and linguistically disparate readership in its identity as Indian, and therefore had to be preserved as part of the national heritage. As a result, the Indian novel in English came into its own as the twin of the newly independent Indian nation-state, this orthodoxy triumphally contended, bearing all of the marks of a similar pedigree and bright future:

> It is no mere coincidence that there came a sudden flowering of Indian fiction in English in the 1930's—a period during which the star of Gandhiji attained its meridian on the Indian horizon. Under the leadership

[1] For a bibliographic representation of this development, see Dieter Riemenschneider's excellent *The Indian Novel in English: its Critical Discourse 1934-2000* (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2005).

> of Gandhiji, the Indian freedom-struggle already more than a generation old, became so thoroughly democratized that the freedom-consciousness percolated, for the first time, to the very grass-roots of Indian society, and revitalized it to the core. It is possible to see a close connection between this and the rise of the Indian novel in English. Fiction, of all literary forms, is most vitally concerned with social conditions and values, and at this time, Indian society, galvanized into a new social and political awareness, was bound to seek creative expressions for its new consciousness and the novel has, in all ages, been a handy instrument for this purpose. The 'Three Musketeers' of Indian fiction in English – Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R. K. Narayan started writing during the 1930's, and the first of the novels of the first two demonstrate the Gandhian impact convincingly.[2]

The terms which then came to define this approach to the novels of the 1930s and 1940s were "Indian," "nationalist," and "Gandhian" (as opposed to say "Punjabi," "modern," "secular," "Nehruvian," "diasporic," "imagist," "socialist-realist," "translational" or "experimental") since these were unproblematic virtues in the newly independent nation. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, once critical opinions had shifted with respect to the value of "nationalism" and Gandhianism with the growing national disillusionment with the Congress Party, the rise of viable and powerful separatist movements in India, and the growing support for the Naxalites on a number of college

[2] MK Naik as quoted in Feroza Jussawalla, *Family Quarrels: Towards a Criticism of Indian Writing in English* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1985) 158-9.

and university campuses, readings of these novels were merely inverted. The global attention on Salman Rushdie and his claims about the primacy of English as the only Indian literary language only brought this development into sharper relief by giving it a formal instead of a political aspect. But instead of reorganizing the historiography of the Indian novel in English, the postcolonial, feminist, and minority readings of these same novels found vice where there had previously been virtue. The novels of the 1930s and 1940s tended to be seen as allied to a variant of Congress Party politics and the agendas of its leaders, principally Gandhi; the novels continued to be perceived as homogenizing or flattening out the differences in the Indian nation in favor of a mythic or imagined national unity which could only be in the service of stamping out the rights and identities of minorities; the novels were seen as products of limited, chauvinistic, and elitist worldviews all of which were directly related to the novels' ideological proximity to nationalism. This essay seeks to map out how the terms of this historiography came to dominate the critical vocabulary and some of the problems that continue to plague such a historiographical consensus.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the canon of Indian Writing in English had become fairly well established in the Indian university. Courses on Indian Writing in English were now a part of most major university curricula at both the graduate and undergraduate level. A small industry of graduate dissertations and book length studies of Indian Writing in English was produced in the 1970s in order to cement the formation of the Indian English canon and to credential instructors in the new field. The crowning feature of this development was the Sahitya Akademi's publication of MK Naik's *A History of Indian English Literature* to fill the glaring absence of "a systematic,

comprehensive and critical history of this literature, clearly defining its nature and scope, adopting proper periodization and relating writers and school firmly to changing socio-political conditions."[3]

There may have been some early disagreements as to the exact genealogy and composition of the canon, but these were more or less resolved by the time that Salman Rushdie became an international celebrity and Indian Writing in English was thrust into the global marketplace in a new way. As new debates about the character of Indian writing emerged in the 1980s and 1990s – between those who advocated for English as the only important Indian literary language and those who saw it as a bastardization and exoticization of more developed vernacular literary traditions – understandings of the intellectual, political, and aesthetic preoccupations of the canon were mapped out. The new controversies were important to both the understanding of the terrain of Indian writing and the defense of the intellectual and literary output of the subcontinent, but in many ways they masked a deeper and more salient contradiction in Indian writing in English, in fact, may have been symptomatic of that earlier problem. For if the questions about which language was to represent India in the global literary marketplace had resonance, it was because India had just barely survived a fissiparous debate about the national language, which was resolved not by the parties agreeing to the three-language compromise, but by the needs of the nation-state in wedding its population to supporting the troops in the coming war with China.

[3] MK Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982) v.

Part of the reason that Indian Writing in English was so well-suited for this ideological role had to do with its origins, beginning as it did with some early experiments in prose and poetry in the nineteenth century – with figures like Raja Rammohan Roy, Henry Derozio, and Toru Dutt – and continuing through the early nationalist, political writings of members of the Congress Party, which secured for it a relationship to the nationalist pantheon. Despite the variety of thinkers and attitudes which might have been involved in the early nineteenth-century publications (though new research has argued that the origins extend back even further), Indian Writing in English really began to become interesting, the critical consensus stressed, at around the time of the 1930s when under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, literary practitioners began their first mature interventions into the Indian novel in English. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), RK Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935), and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) – now lauded as the three foundational texts of the canon – were understood to represent a radical break from the "old Macaulayan amplitude and richness of phrasing and weight of miscellaneous learning" which had characterized the previous generations of writers.[4] These three novelists were held up as markers for a new kind of English, an Indian English prose, which was capable of moving beyond a crass mimicry of the British intelligentsia and was able to offer a uniquely Indian contribution to the cosmopolitan world of English letters. And since each novel bore the clear imprint of the Mahatma – Gandhi appeared as a character or a clear theme in each of the novels – then certainly it was a confident Gandhian nationalism which had inaugurated the kinds of

[4] KR Srinivas Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962) 272,

radical formal developments that these texts evidenced. Consider, for instance, the defense of this literary history given by MK Naik, one of the leading figures in establishing the canon for Indian Writing in English:

> By 1930, Indian English literature was more than a century old; and yet, curiously enough, it had not yet produced a single novelist with substantial output. And then came a sudden flowering when the Gandhian age (1920-1947) had perhaps reached its highest point of glory during the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 'thirties.' It is possible to see the connection here, if one remembers that by this decade the nationalist upsurge had stirred the whole country to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier, making it acutely conscious of its present and its past and filling it with new hopes for the future. A society compelled into self-awareness like this provides a fertile soil for fiction and it is no accident that three major Indian English novelists – viz., Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao began their career [sic] during this phase. It was, in fact, during this period that Indian English fiction discovered some of its most significant themes.[5]

Now, whether or not these writers actually represented a stylistic break with the past is beyond the scope of this essay. What is of interest here is how nationalism under Gandhi was credited with making the kinds of changes in style, rhythm, syntax, and form of which Anand, Narayan, and Rao were seen as merely symptomatic. In fact, the seismic

[5] MK Naik, *Dimensions of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1984) 103-4.

political event which was the Civil Disobedience Movement (1920-2) could not but have found its aftershocks in the imaginative prose of Indian writers, this argument goes, since what it discovers in the prose is Gandhian. This was all the more problematic since Rao and Anand saw themselves as deeply critical of certain aspects of Gandhian nationalism and Narayan eschewed, for the most part, any sustained engagement in nationalist movements as such. Gandhi's relevance to the genesis of this new literary style or to the political direction of these novels, I contend, was based more on the needs of the post-independence Indian state and university than on the real proximity of these writers to a Gandhian worldview. The anxiety about English-language instruction in the new Indian university required a consciously aggressive re-reading of these texts to demonstrate the nationalist contributions that could be made in English, and I contend that by reading back through the needs of the post-independence Indian state we can begin to uncover a different legacy of engagement between literature and nationalism which begins to shatter certain notions of nationalist movements and their automatic and unmediated influence on the middle class.

In 1962, while making the case for reading literature with an eye towards both Western and Indian classical (Sanskritic) critical traditions, K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, then the doyen of criticism of English literature in India and Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University, produced a polemic about the role of the artist in a modern, independent India:

> The man of letters in independent India, whether he writes in English or in one of the modern Indian languages, has a part to play in projecting before the people a vision of the unity as well as the variety, the variety that is

held together by the unity, of India. A Hindi or a Bengali or a Tamil writer, while reflecting accurately the contours of his particular linguistic area, has also, and perhaps even more emphatically, to stress the undying elements in Indian culture. It is thus necessary for our writers to conceive their works simultaneously in diverse planes of reality so that the lesser may not hide the greater, nor the greater quite obliterate the lesser. In recent years preposterous theories were propounded to prove that the worse was the better reason, and the country was in consequence cleft in two. Siren voices are even now occasionally raised to bewitch us into perpetrating the cultural atomization of the Indian Union. There is no doubt that our men of letters – not the least those who write in English – can organize the best insurance against all such attempts … Even Indo-Anglian literature, though being appareled in a seemingly alien garb, is at its best Indian to the core, being (in C. R. Reddy's words) 'a modern facet of that glory which, commencing from the Vedas, has continued to spread its mellow light, now with greater and now with lesser brilliance under the inexorable vicissitudes of time and history, ever increasingly upto the present time of Tagore, Iqbal and Aurobindo Ghose, and bids fair to expand with our and our humanity's expanding future.' Literature in India, in the future as in the past, should function as a mystic bond of

> union between the individual and the State, the provincial unit and the national aggregate.[6]

These new Indian "men of letters" were responsible for doing two things primarily: binding the "undying elements of Indian culture" to the present in order to resist the impulse of modernity, and perhaps global cosmopolitanism, and tying the particular, regional expressions of artistic creativity to the needs of the newly emerging nation-state. The contradictions of such a maneuver are clear, it seems, even to Iyengar as he has to formulate and reformulate the project in an odd rhetorical stutter ("a vision of the unity as well as the variety, the variety that is held together by the unity, of India"), a strange redundancy that perhaps betrays another anxiety ("a mystic bond of union"), and the use of metaphysics as a metaphor for the challenges of India's linguistic diversity ("conceive their works simultaneously in diverse planes of reality"). But there is little doubt that Iyengar reflected a genuine hope for this emerging class of thinkers and artists. A newly independent nation would need to find some way of expressing its traditions and particularities, even as it became modern and general, especially if it was to have any hope of succeeding. And since an Indian zeitgeist could seamlessly speak in classical Sanskrit as well as modern Bengali, Urdu and Farsi (in C.R. Reddy's list), there was no reason to presume that the new nation could not find a voice in each of its 1,500 linguistic registers. Oscillating back and forth between languages and a modern Indian identity, these "men of letters," no matter what language they spoke, held out the best possibility

[6] K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, *The Adventure of Criticism* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1962) 243.

to train and nurture a sober, political, democratic populace. The nation only awaited its bards and their critic-patrons.

But Iyengar had clear stakes in the language these "men of letters" would speak, at least to one another. He had sat on the English Review Committee, appointed by the University Grants Commission in 1960, to evaluate the quality and character of English education in India and to make recommendations for its improvement. Composed of five English professors (G.C. Bannerjee, V.K. Gokak, C.D. Naramishaiah, A.G. Stock, and K.R.S. Iyengar – all of whom produced textbooks that would be used for university instruction) and two commissioners (S. Mathai and P.J. Philip), the commission was tasked with, among other things, "re-organising the M.A. course in English to provide for an intensive study of the language as a tool of knowledge rather than as literature."[7] While the Commission recommended that "Every student should have taken a paper on the English Language at some stage before he obtains the M.A. degree in English" the Commission also recommended requiring "two optional papers e.g., Shakespeare, American literature, Indian writing in English, etc."[8] The report, itself, is rather unremarkable, concluding, as it does, that English education in India is not nearly as advanced as it needed to be to serve the interests of the developing nation. But what is of interest is the intersection of the Commission's finding with the debates about language and literature that had been percolating in India since independence. It was necessary to shore up the credentials and quality of English instruction and education in India at

[7] India, University Grants Commission, *Report of the English Review Committee* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1965) 4.

[8] India, University Grants Commission, *Report of the English Review Committee*, 36-7.

precisely the time when its utility to the new nation was about to expire. Perhaps even more remarkable would be the consolidation of the category of "Indian writing in English" as a discipline of study for university graduates, perhaps for the first time here in any official state document.

The timing of Iyengar's polemic – a mere three years before the Indian constitution would have to be revised to establish a new national language to replace English – gave rise to its content; literature and criticism were being directed to perform a role slightly more mundane and banal than the Arnoldian characters from which Iyengar clearly drew his inspiration.[9] Here, artists and critics stand as the best and perhaps last line of defense in protecting the union in the face of growing movements towards "cultural atomization." For all of its longevity amidst the "inexorable vicissitudes of time and history," India unity was tenuous, and the intellectual elites of the country knew it. Debates begun under British occupation about the need for separate constituencies had empowered minority organizations to demand autonomy and unique representation in order to prevent the tyranny of the majority; first Muslims, then untouchables, women, Christians, and Sikhs began to mobilize lobbies to demand that the British Raj negotiate directly with them instead of their Congress Party interlocutors. This became the *bête noire* of the Congress Party which saw these separate electorates as strategies designed to "divide and conquer" India by pitting various communities against one another and by undermining its position as the sole voice for Indians. Congress's opposition to the separate electorates and its unwillingness to forge meaningful political

[9] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006).

alliances to remedy minority grievances hardened the beliefs of some who felt that a high-caste, Hindu nation could never successfully represent them: as Muslims, as untouchables, as non-Hindi speakers. After independence, minority demands were articulated by calling for secession from the Indian state. Pakistan had already successfully won its separation from India on the basis that there were two nations on the sub-continent, one Hindu and one Muslim, that each deserved its own state. And now there was a real fear that there were not two but hundreds of nations who could claim that their political identities and cultural rights were being trammeled under the weight of an imagined national unity.

And the risks were not slight, even if they were exaggerated. The opening salvos of the language wars were fired early, after the Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission was published in 1948, which threatened the aspirations of new linguistic states like Andhra, Kerala, Karnataka, and Maharashtra by concluding that "The first and last need of India at the present moment is that it should be made a nation. Everything which helps the growth of nationalism has to go forward, and everything which throws obstacles in its way has to be rejected … We have applied this test to linguistic provinces also, and judged by this test, in our opinion, they fail and cannot be supported."[10] Protests were not long in coming: in 1951, Swami Sitaram and several of his followers undertook (and then called off at the request of Vinoba Bhave) a Gandhian "fast to death" to demand the creation of an Andhra state to defend the rights of Telugu speakers in a Tamil state; in 1952, Potti Sriramulu fasted for fifty-six days to demand an Andhra state

[10] As quoted in Marshall Windmiller, "Linguistic Regionalism in India," *Pacific Affairs* 27:4 (1954): 299.

and died, setting off a wave of protests and riots; in 1953, several Andhra legislators resigned from their posts in Madras.[11] The central government was ultimately pressured into passing the Andhra State Bill (1953) and creating a new Telugu-speaking state and into quickly moving towards organizing a States Reorganization Commission that would recommend the creation of new states on linguistic lines.[12] And as the arguments for linguistic representation and particularism increased, it was not hard to imagine that the Indian nation could disintegrate from the inside out.

The genuine fear of those, like Iyengar, who were watching the language controversy develop was that the Indian nation was not nearly elastic enough a concept to contain the national ambitions of the various linguistic states and that the result would be the production of several mini-Pakistans ("and the country was cleft in two"). Each of the new linguistic states had been the products of well-organized lobbies who had advocated for the distinction of their regional culture and the irreducibility of their linguistic history.[13] And even though the new linguistic states were established within the borders of an Indian nation, it was not impossible to believe that the arguments of distinction and irreducibility would lead inevitably to the demand for another partition.[14] As a consequence, the solution of some critics, not unlike their American and British counterparts in the nineteenth century, was to locate a stable basis for nationalism in the

[11] Windmiller, 300-4.

[12] M. Ramaswamy, "Constitutional Developments in India, 1600-1955", *Stanford Law Review* 8:3 (1956): 376-380.

[13] See for instance Prakash Karat, *Language and Nationality Politics in India* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1974).

[14] Ramasamy, 378.

literature and criticism (in whatever language, but Iyengar's preference for English is palpable and not inconsequential) on to which the nation could stamp its imprint.[15] Forward-thinking "men of letters" were needed to develop a literature and a critical method that could inaugurate a national literature, sensitive to differences and history, but with an eye towards unity and the future. This was the Nehruvian secular slogan ("unity in diversity") marshaled to do the work that politicians and religious leaders had been unable to: establish a "mystic bond of union between the individual and the State" that could couple, permanently though not rigidly, the citizen to the center.

There were, though, a number of problems in such a strategy, not the least of which was its unsatisfactory appeal to those with legitimate grievances against the Indian state (for instance, Kashmiris seeking an independent nation or the people of Telangana who refused to be integrated into the Indian state) and the fact that the existence of more than 1,500 recognized languages in the 1961 Census of India meant that this national "man of letters" would have to be cloned at least a number of times.[16] But the problems that Iyengar was describing were indeed serious. As soon as the Indian constitution was written, debates began about how a linguistically polyphonous India would ever cohere. A newly independent India had to learn to speak a new language, or more precisely, to speak to each other and be understood. As early as 1949, during the Constituent Assembly's debates about the official language, discussions would come to a grinding halt with linguistic minorities fearing the consolidation of "Hindi imperialism." Sumathi

[15] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

[16] See also Dandapani Natarajan, *Indian census through a hundred years* (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General, 1972) and N. Gerald Barrier, ed. *The Census in British India: new perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981).

Ramaswamy describes the tragedy and comedy of these fraught discussions best: "The Assembly's proceedings broke down over several members' insistence that they would only speak in their 'mother tongue', much to the dismay of the majority who had no way of understanding what was being said. Members, especially from the South, frequently complained when chaste Hindi speakers took the floor. And every now and then, we read about members engaging each other in heated debate even while pleading mutual incomprehension."[17] This complicated mix of opportunism, nationalism, and egalitarianism was quickly coming to a head: local elites demanded rights for their constituencies as a way to shore up their own access to power at the center, which, once acquired, required the exact opposite approach to the language question; while the center, in the hopes of securing the allegiance of some powerful state groups, afforded rights selectively, generating only more demands for linguistic and political autonomy. The two realistic candidates for a national language, Hindi and English, mobilized extraordinary lobbies and inaugurated frighteningly intense protest.

National leaders knew that efforts toward manufacturing a monolingual nation-state would predictably be met with serious resistance, especially in those regions where people did not speak the language of the center. But linguistic diversity, argued north Indian Congress Party members, was a threat to national unity and central planning, represented a throwback to parochialism and the looming crisis of regional secessionism, and therefore could not be tolerated.[18] The project of squaring the linguistic circle may

[17] Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Sanskrit for the Nation," *Modern Asian Studies* 33:2 (1999): 353-4.

[18] Robert Desmond King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

have been doomed from the beginning, especially in the country that colonialism and nationalism imagined into unity, but if there were going to be a viable state, it would need a national language to facilitate the integration of peoples from all over south Asia into a democratic polity and to ward of the "fissiparous tendencies" that were making themselves felt.[19] To these tendencies could also be added the political mobilizations of the *Angrezi Hatao Andolan* launched by Rammanohar Lohia, a north Indian anti-Congress socialist who was more interested in "banishing English" than in the establishing of Hindi as national language and who was to turn eventually to electoral alliances with Hindi nationalism and Hindu revivalism, and the Jana Sangh, which began its own agitation in 1963 to abolish not only official English but public English as well, and went so far as to organize gangs to tear down street signs written in English.[20]

English, perhaps the logical choice for a national language as it had made possible all-India conversations in the Congress Party during British rule, was hardly an option for a nation whose new identity was based on a common struggle against British occupation and western imperialism.[21] After all, there had been much discussion before independence about national languages before independence to color the direction of the post-independence debate: Gandhi had written and spoken in favor of Hindustani, the Congress Party had passed resolutions in favor of shifting away from English, and the *Motilal Nehru Report* (1928) had recommended Hindi as the most suitable national

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[19] Selma Sonntag, *The Local Politics of Global English* (New York: Lexington, 2003) 62.

[20] TV Sathyamurthy, ed. *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[21] AB Shah, ed. *The Great Debate: Language Controversy and University Education* (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1968).

language.[22] This nationalist pedigree gave substantial weight to the arguments for Hindi, and the secular arguments for the language (national unity) became indistinguishable from the orthodox, conservative ones ("Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan"). So, the Congress Party, pressured by a Hindu revivalist wing and new communal forces, settled on a Sanskritized Hindi, and not Hindustani, as the new official, but not national, language of India and set about to dismantle the infrastructure of English-based governance, much to the chagrin of Nehru and the modernizers who saw English as the mechanism to de-communalize Indian politics and allow India to enter the world of international commerce.[23] Article 343 of the *Constitution of India* (1950) had called for a fifteen year time-limit for English to be replaced by Hindi in the Devanagari script, and inadvertently (though not unforeseeably) inaugurated a series of heated debates about the status of languages, education, nationalism, and minorities in a newly freed nation.[24]

One of the first steps in dismantling the English-speaking infrastructure involved re-writing the highly competitive Union Public Services examination in Hindi in 1965. Tamil-speaking students grew increasingly convinced that this was a maneuver designed

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[22] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983).

[23] Judith Brown, *Nehru* (New York: Longman, 1999).

[24] As the Indian Constitution originally explained:

"§1. The official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script. The form of numerals to be used for the official purposes of the Union shall be the international form of Indian numerals.

§2. Notwithstanding anything in clause 1, for a period of fifteen years from the commencement of this Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement:

> Provided that the President may, during the said period, by order authorise the use of the Hindi language in addition to the English language and of the Devanagari form of numerals in addition to the international form of Indian numerals for any of the official purposes of the Union."

to prevent their access to highly lucrative civil service jobs. Buoyed by an increasingly influential Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) Party, students and teachers protested: a Madras State Anti-Hindi Conference was organized in 1965; the DMK defied the ban on protests on Republic Day in 1965 and declared it a "Day of Mourning" for the loss of English; two student supporters of the DMK burned themselves to death in protest of Hindi.[25] The inability to contain the growing protests ultimately resulted in the legislative compromises of the States Reorganization Act (1956), the Official Languages Act (1963), and finally, the amended Official Languages Act (1967). No national language was finally to emerge, but English as a language was to become deeply politicized throughout India.[26] This was after all, only a political compromise; the social forces that had given rise to the anti-English and the anti-Hindi tendencies had not disappeared. Partly because of the legislative compromises, but also because of the new national focus on the central government created by the death of the Prime Minister and the conflict with Pakistan, the language issue was sidestepped but not completely resolved. The states would have their vernaculars; the center would speak Hindi and

[25] Duncan B. Forrester, "The Madras Anti-Hindi Agitation, 1965: Political Protest and its Effects on Language Policy in India", *Pacific Affairs* 39:1/2 (1966): 24-5.

[26] Robert Desmond King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Sajal Basu, *Regional Movements: Politics of Language, Ethnicity, Identity* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992), Y. D. Phadke, *Politics and Language* (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, 1979), Anil Baran Ray, *Students and Politics in India: the role of caste, language, and region in an Indian university* (New Delhi: RC Jain for Manhora Book Service, 1977), Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), and Prakash Karat, *Language and Nationality Politics in India* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1974).

English; but the anxieties about and the challenges against the nationalist credentials of English speakers would continue.[27]

It is in the context of this unresolved debate that Iyengar's polemic about the national "men of letters" becomes meaningful. The uneasiness of the political compromises meant that English continued to be tainted by its colonial heritage and Hindi by its northern chauvinism; and instead of bringing the nation linguistically closer together, the dividing lines seemed to be drawn even sharper. And Iyengar was concerned with not only the ability of the nation to survive intact, but with the future of its institutions of higher education as well. The "three-language formula" posed tremendous problems for university educators and administrators who were now faced with the daunting task of reorganizing their curricula and attempting to make instruction in the regional languages meaningful. Several would agree with Iyengar's protests:

> But one thing, perhaps, is possible. Let the text-books still be in English, let the English technical terms continue, let even the medium of examination be English. Let the teacher not hesitate, if he finds it convenient, to mingle English and the regional language to facilitate comprehension. Let the regional language be used on a functional basis, and not as an exercise in sentiment or purism, or as part of a campaign against English. A campaign against English in the field of higher education can only be a campaign against higher education itself.[28]

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[27] UA Asrani, *What Shall We Do About English* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1964) and RS Gupta and Kapil Kapoor, ed., *English in India* (Delhi: Academic Foundation, 1991).

[28] K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, "Messing up the Medium," *Retain English for Unity and Progress,* ed. K.P. Kesava Menon (Calicut: The Powra Sangham, 1968) 43.

Iyengar, himself was deeply suspicious of the arguments for tinkering with the established medium of instruction, seeing behind them the political maneuverings of northern Indian political opportunists: "if the regional languages alone are to be the media of instruction and examination, what is to take the place of English as 'link-language'? It cannot be that we are deliberately planning for chaos. Or can it really be, as Rajaji [C. Rajagopalachari] suggests, that 'behind the screen of chaos is the Machiavellian hope that Hindi will fill the vacuum and take the place of English … and become the sole medium of instruction in the universities and be enthroned as the language of the elite in India'?" [29] Opponents of English, in Iyengar's mind were disingenuous, placing political advancement over national progress: "[Replacing English] can only be a desperate leap in the dark. Let us not break up the nation's higher intellectual life."[30] And here, Iyengar was doing more than sounding the alarms of the impending destruction of ivory towers; Iyengar was consciously inserting himself into the debate about Indian development and progress. English, of course, represented not only the success or failure of higher education, but as the debates about the national language were demonstrating, English was also bound up in any strategy for national growth. A number of politicians and intellectuals had contributed to the debate, and the defense of English was relatively uniform along a few simple lines. English was scientific and commercial, while Hindi was inflexibly and awkwardly backward-looking.[31] English

[29] Iyengar, 44.

[30]Iyengar, 44.

[31] SP Aiyar, "Language and Modernization" in *The Great Debate, Language Controversy and University Education*, ed. AB Shah (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1968).

could be global and cosmopolitan, while Hindi was necessarily parochial.[32] English could be spoken by people all over India, while Hindi was the monopoly of the north.[33] The debate was, in fact, so uniform, that advocates for English felt little to no anxiety in proclaiming that a number of the pamphlets produced in the course of the debate borrowed wholesale from one another.

But there was one important residual anxiety that remained. Even if English were to demonstrate its superiority to Hindi by virtue of its modern, scientific, and commercial prowess, Hindi would always have one advantage – it was not a colonial language. Whatever else it could offer the Indian nation, English was severely debilitating for a nation which had only recently escaped the yoke of British rule. Iyengar's solution to this problem was to argue that since Indians had contributed to the development of English letters, it was quickly becoming a native tongue: "Nor must we forget that English has become for us more or less and Indian language and literature. Some of our greatest men and women have achieved triumphant self-expression in English, and added significant new dimensions to English literature."[34] And this would be the political and intellectual means by which literature would get wrapped up in the debates about language and how the hand-me-downs of the master would be dyed anew in patriotic colors. If Indians could produce good writing in English, if there were novels and poems written by Indians in English of quality and merit, than English could still be salvaged as

[32] C. Rajagopalachari, "Five Fallacies About Hindi" in *India Demands English Language*, ed. Isaac Mathai (Bombay: Mathai's Publications, 1960).

[33] KP Kesava Menon, *Retain English for Unity and Progress* (Calicut: The Powra Sangham, 1968).

[34] K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, *Two Cheers for the Commonwealth* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1970) 300.

a medium for Indians to communicate and grow. Moreover, Iyengar argued, that would be sufficient to shore English up from the charges of the Hindi-vadis and secure the benefits of English to the Indian state: "It would be folly therefore if we still sought, through chauvinistic or other coercive means, to treat English as something utterly alien, as something useless or even inimical to higher education in India, or as something that will serve us otherwise than in prompting and preserving the unity of India and raising its prestige and power in the comity of nations."[35]

Others would adopt this argument and amplify its terms. Since nationalists spoke and wrote in English, and since nationalist literature was produced in English, English was not merely an Indian language but a nationalist language as well: "let it not be forgotten that the best work of the Indian National Congress has been done in English; that the Constitution has been drafted in English and is yet to be translated into understandable Hindi; that Sarojini Naidu spoke and wrote patriotic lyrics in English; that savants like Aurobindo and Radhakrishnan have thought out systems of philosophy in English; that Vivekananda's works revitalizing Hinduism, were all in English. With these great examples before us, let not any Indian think that patriotism can be the monopoly only of those that can lisp in Hindi or a regional language."[36] The nationalist pantheon was culled for English-speaking members and their contributions to the nation would now be made to stand in for the credentials of English in a kind of political tautology. And this made the case for English language instruction all the easier. English was no longer merely the language of colonial oppression; it would now be

[35]Iyengar, *Two Cheers*, 300.

[36] A.R. Wadia, *The Future of English in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1954) 140-1.

framed as the language of international opportunity and liberal, secular thought, but most of all as an explicitly all-Indian, nationalist language.[37] The decoupling of language from literature would appease those who wanted the scientific and commercial advantages of English without feeling beholden to European values, while the broadening out of English to include commonwealth literatures would extend political decolonization to the canon.[38] English was being made into a uniquely pragmatic national discipline: its anti-colonial credentials were being uncovered; its utility in securing access to markets was praised; and its secular virtues were held up as unique solutions to the problems of communalism, parochialism, and social backwardness.[39] English education was re-made into a nationally significant project, alongside the introduction of Indian writing in English as part of the official curriculum in Indian universities, a curriculum that would have to be born into an extraordinarily politicized linguistic space.[40] University professors committed to an English-language education or at the very least the continuation of English as a subject found themselves having to defend the uses of English in an independent nation.

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[37] India, National Council of Educational Research and Training, Directorate of Extension Programmes for Secondary Education. *The teaching of English in India; report of the Conference on the Teaching of English in Schools, Delhi, April 15 to 20, 1963* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1963).

[38] As a consequence a number of changes were taking place in the curriculum: "Two major moves mark the reorientation of English studies in these post-Independence decades: the separation of the acquisition of the English language from the study of literature, and the shift from the definition of English literature as the literature of Britain to a broader characterization of English studies now concerned with all literatures in English." Susie Tharu, "Government, Binding and Unbinding: Alienation and the Teaching of Literature," in *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1997) 16.

[39] Tulsi Ram, *Trading in language: the story of English in India* (Delhi: GDK Publications, 1983).

[40] AB Shah, *The Great Debate: Language Controversy and University Education* (Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1968).

In response, a whole series of academic studies were produced in the 1960s and 1970s to defend not only the study of English as an Indian language but also defend the quality, read Indian-ness, of Indian fiction and poetry in English. Universities, especially in south India though not exclusively, churned out a series of rather quick and under-theorized accounts, largely plot summaries, of the Indian writing in English that had already been produced, as a way of justifying its continuing utility in the Indian academy. Artists who wrote in English were called on to write and give talks about the ways that English could speak to specifically Indian questions. Raja Rao's introduction to his 1938 novel *Kanthapura*, which famously argued "English is not really an alien language to us," was reprinted scores of times.[41] Publishing houses and periodicals began to cultivate a uniquely modern, national sensibility by creating a new reading public that would seek its news, culture, and commodities in English print.

But there was one more problem that remained in trying to make the case for reading Indian English-language novels as opposed to, say, Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or Matthew Arnold. For you could defend the study of English as pragmatic, but you could not then justify the study of Indian novels in English or what came to be called "Indian English," the inferior "babu-speak" of the natives. Indian English would always have the taint of mimicry and inferiority, the vulgar babble of the indigenes incapable of sounding beautiful let alone intelligent. Consider, for instance, CD Narasimhaiah's (one of Iyengar's colleagues on the English Review Committee) account of Indian studies in English in south India:

[41] Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (New York: New Directions, 1963).

> Kanthapura was prescribed in a South Indian university for undergraduate study in 1964. The award of a prize for The Serpent and the Rope in 1963 by the Sahitya Akademi at Delhi as the best novel in English by an Indian for the preceding three years, one assumed, had helped to make Raja Rao respectable and part of the establishment. But no, for before long those responsible found themselves to be the target of a vicious campaign to compel the university to withdraw Kanthapura from the prescriptions because, ostensibly, it was obscene, and because it was written in Indian English. Letters were written to the press, resolutions were passed by interested English teacher's associations in some colleges demanding the prescription of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice in place of Kanthapura, and the executive council of the University directed that the Academic Council take steps to withdraw the prescription … fortunately the vice-chancellor upheld the prescription because it was not good to break healthy academic conventions.[42]

And in response to this new argument, that if English was to be taught, it was to be the King-Emperor's English, novels from the 1930s and 1940s, which had been all but ignored when they were written originally, were re-discovered and paraded as exemplars

[42] C.D. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973) 76-7. Also of interest is the footnote on Page 77: "What adds interest to a dry fact is that subsequently when the President of India honoured Raja Rao with the award of Padma Bhushan the newspaper which had earlier published the letters of protest about *Kanthapura* announced him on its front page as 'Raja Rao, the author of the controversial *Kanthapura*.'" Also, Hemenway describes the content of the objections to *Kanthapura*: "It is something of a period piece in India today, but it was once the controversial center of a tempest in a teapot. Vested interests disapproved of *Kanthapura*'s negative portrait of Bhatta, the usurious Brahmin moneylender; of the crudity in actions and/or words of the British coffee-planter and the Indian police constable; and of the non-Victorian English in which the book is written. Hence, they fought tooth and nail to get *Kanthapura* removed from the list of prescribed textbooks in schools in the Mysore area" (81).

of a successful nationalist idiom. Not only because they were written in the heady days of the Indian struggle for Independence, but because they could be mined for a nationalist English, an English which was clearly in the service of the nation, and could perhaps be the basis for a literary criticism in which Indian English could also produce something of aesthetic merit. *Kanthapura*, *Untouchable*, and *Swami and Friends* would have to be dusted off and brought back to the center of a national debate, despite having been forgotten long ago.

But the nationalist credentials of these texts would have to be established. Iyengar laid the groundwork for a disciplinary study of Indian writing in English through a number of books designed to introduce college students to the mine of writing that had already been produced in south Asia. His two short studies, *Indo-Anglian Literature* (1943) and *The Indian Contribution to English Literature in English* (1945), make no reference to anything like "Gandhian literature," save an oblique reference to a commemorative volume marking Gandhi's birthday.[43] But the two later volumes, *Indian Writing in English* (1963) and the revised *Indian Writing in English* (1973), have entire chapters dedicated to "Gandhi Literature," the first focusing on more doctrinaire discussions of Gandhi's politics and thoughts, and the second more thoroughly discussing Gandhi's impact on the novels of the era. And, more specifically, Gandhi was transformed from being merely an influence on the general cultural milieu of a nationalist India and a competent polemicist in English to becoming a specific forebear to the entire project of Indian writing in English:

[43] KRS Iyengar, *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (Bombay: Karnatak Publishing House, 1945) 289.

> Although no great scholar, Gandhi knew very well the Old Testament in English, and his writing in English had accordingly a simplicity, pointedness and clarity that was in refreshing contrast to the heaviness often characteristic of earlier Indian writing. Thanks to the Gandhian example, Indian writing in English became recognizably functional. Gone were the old Macaulayan amplitude and richness of phrasing and weight of miscellaneous learning … Indian writing and speaking in English since the Gandhian revolution has tended to be wisely utilitarian, cultivating the virtues of clarity and directness and brevity rather than eloquence and elaboration and exuberance.[44]

Gandhi's political innovations are then cleanly coupled to stylistic innovations in English, and the utility of English for a Gandhian India is proven by metonymy. Gandhi's English would be proof that his earlier polemics against English were tactical not philosophical. And so Gandhi would become the way that these novelists were indigenized. And Gandhi's contribution to the development and study of Indian writing in English was nothing short of miraculous: "So profoundly did Gandhi impinge on the Indian consciousness that no writer … could have found it possible to be involved in the creative process without Gandhi's entering it overtly or obliquely. For what was India, what was Asia (indeed, to a historian with a true sense of values, what was the world?) of the first half of this century minus Gandhi? … [It] was Gandhi that broke the shackles all round. It was he that broke the cumbrous, Victorian periods which had enslaved the Indian

[44] KRS Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1962) 272-3.

writer like his counterpart in England; it is he who broke the word and freed the thought, and broke the thought and freed the thing and made us speak like men who had something to say, and not exhort like Gods or rant like demons."[45] Gandhi's English was actually anti-colonial, metaphorically smashing the enslaving idiom of a heavy, Victorian English. Few critics were as explicit as Gobinda Sarma, who, in his 1979 dissertation, *Nationalism in Indo Anglian Fiction*, penned the following justification for marrying English novels with Indian, read Gandhian, nationalism: "once I can show that Indo-Anglian fiction is nationalistic in spirit, all doubts about its not being Indian in spirit would be dispelled, and all prejudices against it will vanish. And once this happens in [the] case of fiction—the biggest branch of Indo-Anglian literature—the readers should be able to study other branches of this literature with an open mind."[46] In order to justify the study of English, Indian literary criticism was reading novels pragmatically. The perceived artistic inadequacies of an inferior English was compensated for with a healthy Gandhian supplement; as long as these novelists were nationalists, they were worth study.

But once the Indian credentials of English had been established, it seems, it became all too easy to read the case backwards. Once Gandhi's English was sufficiently nationalist, then his influence could be read back into every significant work in English produced by an Indian. For instance:

> Indian English literature of the Gandhian age was inevitably influenced by these epoch-making developments [the freedom movement] in Indian life.

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[45] C. D. Narasimhaiah, *The Writer's Gandhi* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1967) 53-4.

[46] Gobinda Prasad Sarma, *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1990)

> A highly significant feature is the sudden flowering of the novel during the 'thirties, when the Gandhian movement perhaps at its strongest. It is possible to see the connection here if one remembers that by this decade, the nationalist upsurge had stirred the entire Indian society to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier, making it acutely conscious of the pressure of the present in all fields of national life; and it is out of this consciousness that fiction, in Lionell Trilling's words, 'for our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination,' emerges. Fiction, as Hazlitt puts it, is constituted of 'the very web and texture of society as it really exists' and hence finds a fertile soil in a society in ferment. The work of K.S. Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao would not perhaps have been possible had the miracle that was Gandhi not occurred during this period. In fact, it was during this age that Indian English fiction discovered some of its most compelling themes: the ordeal of the freedom struggle, East-West relationship, the communal problem and the plight of the untouchables, the landless poor, the down-trodden, the economically exploited and the oppressed.[47]

Even if the connections to Gandhi were subconscious, they were inevitable and formative. Indian writing in English, therefore, could not help but write itself as Gandhians. And as a result of attempting to prove its nationalist credentials, "Indian writing in English" came for the critics to mean "Indian nationalist writing in English."

[47] M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982) 118.

The discipline that was forged, in many ways, to be a weapon in the national language wars, now bears permanent scars. It was no longer necessary to investigate a writer's politics or intellectual history or even to examine the allegorical or thematic or formal counter-currents at work in his or her writing, for writers from the 1930s and 1940s were made to bear the weight of the nation because they spoke of and about Gandhi. Rao, Anand, and Narayan were, of course, the big three, but others would round out the list: Venkataramani, Bhattacharya, Nagarajan, Ghose, and Singh. Others were excluded from the canon because they were either impenetrably apolitical (like GV Desani's *All About H. Hatterr*) or perhaps because they fell on the opposite side of new borders and hence made the case for nationalism harder (like Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*). But from the beginning the discipline has been politicized even as it has formed a consensus: today, the patrons and the critics of Indian writing in English agree that it is a cleanly nationalist genre. A re-examination of that legacy would open new possibilities in the understanding of both literary nationalism (as a space in which critiques of nationalist politics might press official movements in new directions) as well as the intellectual history of nationalism (as a much more fraught contest between intellectuals who were dissatisfied with official political strategies). This new engagement with literary nationalism, I contend, is all the more important now that colonialism and empire have asserted themselves more aggressively in the world today.

Chapter 2: "The Mahatma didn't say so, but …": Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and the sympathies of middle-class nationalists

> The most striking instance of radical thought unconnected with social action may be seen in the 1915 encounter of Gandhi with Hari Narayan Apte, the first great Marathi novelist. Gandhi attended a meeting of the Servants of India Society in Poona and heard their plans to try to arouse the Untouchables to a full realization of the injustice of their position. He told the group, 'I am afraid you will make Harijans rise in rebellion against society.' Apte told him, 'Yes, let there be a rebellion. That is just what I want.'[1]

There are at the core of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) two contradictions that organize both the form and the content of the slim novel. The first is inherited from political debates taking place in and around nationalist circles in India in the 1930s before the signing of the Poona Pact (1932). Because the Congress Party and its most vocal leaders were only willing to offer slow-paced, and largely symbolic solutions to problem of untouchability, advocates for the abolition of untouchability appeared to these nationalists to be collaborators with the British when they argued for greater reform, and the Congress Party, by corollary, was seen by radical untouchable political organizations as sacrificing abolition for the project of "national unity" and as a greater threat to the

[1] Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992) 64.

project of abolition than the British empire, which these organizations argued had no ideological attachment to the ideas of caste and untouchability. This situation was driving an ever larger wedge between the leading figures of both camps, usually represented by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, and was generally leading to the conclusion that independence and uplift moved in opposite directions. Anand's solution to the seeming incompatibility of nationalist and untouchable politics – the technological humanism advocated by Iqbal Nath Sarshar in the final pages of the novel – required a formal shift in the strategies of the committed novel to overcome this existing and heated political debate about who could represent untouchables. Because Anand's political alternative, while extant in the ranks of the Congress left, was relatively unpopular and since the political camps in the untouchability debates were already well-defined, both realism and allegory could more easily be exposed as partisan propaganda and therefore would be inadequate to produce the emotional (and therefore ideological) effect a novel like *Untouchable* required to suture together two seemingly opposed political worldviews. *Untouchable* would have to be a novel capable of convincing both wings of the debate of the possibility of a joint project for national liberation and abolition of untouchability, even if neither read the novel.

Ideologically, Anand's political solution would necessitate, on the one hand, a novelistic form that could guarantee the production of "authentic" untouchables (who could contradictorily convey their absolute alienation) who desired real social improvement, as opposed to the ones that were "content with their lot" (10) or were cartoons that were displayed as supporters of the Congress Party, and on the other, the

manipulation of forms of allegory to create a national imagination that could successfully incorporate the demands of its disparate members and was genuine about overcoming its caste chauvinism. This is a project, in Anand's mind, of genuine cross-caste solidarity: stitching together the demands of untouchables and the popular aspirations for a free nation, Anand attempts to demonstrate the utility of the humanist critique of religion, tradition, and empire for a more successful nationalist and untouchable politics. *Untouchable* accomplishes this task formally; the psychological realism and novelistic structure that Anand borrows from Joyce and Woolf allows him to produce an untouchable who is alienated to his core, while the national allegory that the novel gestures towards (even though Anand claims not to be interested in such symbolic maneuvers) allows Anand to marry this project for social uplift with the task of national liberation through the flexibility of the concluding term of his novel: "race-consciousness" (153).

But this particular resolution to the first problem opens up another contradiction, also inherited from the nationalist politics of the 1930s and one that the novel cannot overcome; namely, the humanist rhetoric of cross-caste solidarity was both a banner for the abolition of caste as well as a potential veneer for opportunist politics extant in bourgeois nationalism. The formal techniques could only produce temporary moments of solidarity; without real changes in the lot of untouchables in India, these moments of literary solidarity could only be read as opportunism, as alibis for a majoritarian nationalism that ignored or consciously suppressed minority demands. The idea that national liberation could secure modern flush sanitation and thus complete the disintegration of caste that the British had began was simultaneously a real goal of the

radical intelligentsia as well as the trappings of a promise to secure untouchable loyalty in the movement for national independence that could later be abandoned or ignored. Anand's formal choices replicated this problem: the psychologically realist untouchable of the novel has both the ability to create a genuine sympathy that leads in the direction of meaningful alliances as well as producing the outlines of the ideal (because appropriated and ventriloquized) untouchable poster-child for Congress Party politicians; the national allegory of the modern untouchable who moves towards technology and freedom is both the narrative of genuine liberationist politics as well as the ideological form of yoking untouchable politics to the nationalist wagon. And because this project relied on an anti-colonial humanism, the logic of the untouchable's revolt against the world necessarily involved a return to some imagined, ideal Indian nature and history which the untouchable inherited but was socially prohibited from realizing; the day-in-the-life form that Anand borrowed from Joyce and Woolf fit this form well as it moved both in the direction of a radical alienation of the subject and in the direction of a more global allegory of history and development. So at every instant, the logic of the novel turns on both the unique psychology of Bakha's reaction to the world as well as the draws upon a constructed national past which can legitimate both national liberation and untouchable freedom.

Both of these maneuvers carry the risk of subordinating the abolition of caste-based chauvinism to national liberation, and as a result critics have not been incorrect to criticize Anand for the alignment of his novel with Congress's failures to deliver on untouchable reform. But these critiques have failed to see that the nationalist ideological dead-end is in every instance the same as the ideological road to a real solidarity between

the radical intelligentsia and disenfranchised. The fact that anti-colonialism could give rise even temporarily to strategies that would overcome the problems that nationalism encountered with respect to the minorities question demonstrates that the conclusion of a nationalist politics is a contingent, political fact, not a philosophical one; the crimes of the nation-state are not identical with the aspirations and hopes of the people who were committed to anti-colonialism, even as they run on seemingly parallel tracks. The goal of this chapter will be to demonstrate that these contradictory strains of nationalism (liberationist and opportunist) are always alive in nationalist politics and nationalist novels, that a more formal reading of *Untouchable* can uncover these contradictions, and a more sensitive account of the political and literary possibilities available in the 1930s can show that the project of nationalism was not at all points doomed to producing the particular version of the Indian state that developed in 1947 and the immediate years. The fact of a novel like Anand's shows that anti-colonialism had both an elitist and a populist wing; and because the radical intelligentsia was incapable of producing broader political changes in Indian nationalism, its attempts at solidarity can now also appear to be blueprints for a politics of appropriation. But this, the chapter wants to demonstrate, is not the result of an ideological failure of anti-colonial projects as such, but a historical and political failure that was contingent on broader developments. And the preservation of the novel as index of this solidarity is necessary to understand its formal choices as well as the political climate of novelistic production of the 1930s.

Anand and Gandhi

Mulk Raj Anand's 1935 novel, *Untouchable*, has long been aligned with Gandhi's program for the uplift of untouchables.[2] Not only because Gandhi was a prominent advocate for untouchable rights but also because Gandhi had personally inspired Anand to re-examine the question of untouchability, Anand himself has often credited Gandhi for the genesis of his novel. His long confessional, *The Bubble*, details his early study of Gandhi's thought on the question of untouchability as well as his initial meetings with Gandhi.[3] Anand described Gandhi's effect on the novel in a short essay written some sixty years later: "One day, I read an article in *Young India*, by Gandhiji, describing how he met Uka, a sweeper boy, and finding him with torn clothes and hungry, took him into his ashram. This narrative was simple, austere and seemed to me more truthful than my artificially concocted novel *Untouchable*. I told Irene this. And, in a sudden fit of revulsion against my existence, in elitist Bloomsbury, I decided to go and see the old man."[4] The trip to India to visit Gandhi was also a move "away from the Bloomsbury literary consciousness to the neo-literary worlds, whose denizens have always been

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[2] Arun P. Mukherjee, "The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable': A Case Study," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 22:3 (1991) 27-48; Saros Cowasjee, "Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable: An Appraisal." *Literature East and West* 17 (1973): 199-211; Susheila Nasta, "Between Bloomsbury, Gandhi and Transcultural Modernities: The Publication and Reception of Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*," *Books without borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008): 151-69.

[3] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Bubble* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1984) 525. "I have been in the study devouring the words of Gandhi in Young India … As I turned the pages, casually reading here and there, I came across the story of Uka. In simple direct words, the Mahatma had written about how this sweeper boy had been brought to the Sabarmati Ashram, how he was despised by everyone, until he had a bath, washed his clothes and was allowed to sit in the kitchen-dining room among other members of the house, and how this untouchable rose to be the equal of all the other Ashramites, specially because Gandhiji insisted on everyone, including himself, taking a vow that, like Uka, everyone would clean latrines in turn. The Mahatma adopted him as his son, and appealed to everyone not to call the outcastes untouchables, but Harijans, sons of God."

[4] Anand, "Why I Write," *Creative Aspects of Indian Literature*, ed. Shantinath K. Desai (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995) 25.

considered 'vulgar' and unfit for respectable worlds."[5] And Gandhi's impact was immense on the final product. Some 600 pages, we are told, were edited down to 150 and the novel was completely reorganized:

> In retrospect, I feel that, under the tutelage of the Mahatma, who did not pretend to be an artist, I was able to exorcise all those self-conscious literary elements which I had woven into the narrative in anticipation of what the critics might approve of. He thought that the paragraphs of high-sounding words, in which I had tried to unite miscellaneous elements, in what was essentially a walk through the small town of my hero, must go. Also, the old man suggested the removal of my deliberate attempts at melodramatic contrasts of the comic and tragic motifs, through which the spontaneous feelings, moods and lurking chaos in the soul of Bakha, had been somewhat suppressed. And the Mahatma asked for the deflation of those clever tricks, which had made the expression of concrete detail into a deliberate effort at style.[6]

What is interesting here is that, for Anand, Gandhi represented a stylistic and formal innovation in his novel, not a political purification of the ideas within. Gandhi's intervention into Anand's novel have little to do with his specific ideas about caste or about the Indian National Congress Party, but more to do with the strategies for representing untouchables and for authentically reproducing the texture of their emotional

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[5] Anand, "Why I Write," 28.

[6] Mulk Raj Anand, "On the Genesis of *Untouchable*: A Note," in R. K. Dhawan, ed., *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1992) 11.

world. The novel is unmistakably concerned with the lives and struggles of India's untouchables, but the influence of Gandhi, Anand suggests, changes the register of any literary representation of untouchables.

Little remains of the original manuscript save a few sentences that are preserved in Anand's later essays and these give a sense of the range of changes that Gandhi helped to initiate in Anand's prose:

> I have so far used the language of the mocking bird indeed. I read my garbled, gargantuan rhetorical prose: "He saw giant masses of black bodies, stinking by the foulairtake of each ignoble creature, herdedinchains, to enter the doors of hells, held ajar by the horned doots of Yama, himself in Yab-Yam embrace with yami, sweating the oil of sweat, above the blood that oozed from flesh lacerated by whips, fear-stricken at being pushed into the ocean of filth, which exuded the smell of death," etc. Bathos! With the smell of Christian hell about it! And the fall! Infected by the neurosis of after the expulsion from the Garden of Eden![7]

Anand's revulsion with the Christian character of his borrowed modernism finds something important in Gandhi's preference for representations of untouchables in a realistic mode. In his probably inaccurate *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi*, Anand describes the conversation that took place between Gandhi and Krishan Chander Azad, Anand's alter ego:

[7] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Bubble* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1984) 527.

Gandhi: Mocking bird with a vengeance! Such big big words! You don't know, that Harijans sigh, moan, groan and say a few words! They never talk in such big words! You want to make them into Dr. Johnsons!

K.C. Azad: (Humbled) I have been following the method of James Joyce. Stream of consciousness of characters! He has coined a new language. With puns! Satirical words! Joined words! Poetic phrases! … I thought if I also use big words, and make puns, English people will think I have mastered the English language …

Gandhi: I thought the same in London! Then an English friend, a Quaker, told me to write simply. I began to translate into English from Gujarati. Why don't you write in your language?

K.C. Azad: I have no language. My mother tongue is Punjabi. But the Sarkar has appointed English and Urdu as court languages! … Except Bhai Vir Singh and Dhani Ram Chatrath Poets! Few of us write in Punjabi. The only novel writer is Nanak Singh. There are no publishers in Punjabi or Urdu. Even Dr. Muhammad Iqbal writes in Urdu and Persian not in Punjabi! No one can earn a living as a writer in Punjabi. In English—my novel may get published in London …

Gandhi: Acha! Write in any language that comes to hand. But say what Harijans say! And the poor say! Translate their speech literally. Don't use 'Thees' and 'Thous!' Above all you must be sincere! Truthful! Write of life as it

> really is! … Of the poor! Few writers have written about the poor! Only Sarat Babu! And Prem Chand! – I hear![8]

Anand's problem – that Indian writers get little attention in the vernacular languages – produces another problem: the inadequacy of certain English styles to capture adequately the topical material of Anand's novel.[9] Gandhi's exemplars, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Dhanpat Rai Srivastav (Premchand), stand out in this dialogue as alternative, realist poles to the literary embellishments of a modernist Joyce. The modernist English of Joyce here fails to capture to the reality and worldview of the untouchable, whose speech is limited, Gandhi argues with characteristic paternalism, as untouchables only "sigh, moan, groan and say a few words." And if the novel is to be written in English, it had to be a different kind of English than the English of modernism. Anand seems to absorb from Gandhi a terminology of authenticity from this exchange: sincerity, literalness, simplicity, and truth. The problem, rather than an adherence to Gandhian dogma, here, is that novelistic untouchables needed to be made real.

But the formal changes in the novel also seem to make Gandhi and his specific political intervention into the field of constitutional reforms in India and untouchable uplift much more prominent.[10] In the final pages of *Untouchable*, Bakha, Anand's central character, who has been haplessly wandering through Bulashah (most likely Bulandshahar, near Delhi) and suffered various insults at the hands of caste Hindus, finds

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[8] Mulk Raj Anand, *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1991) 22-3.

[9] *Untouchable* had been rejected, Anand claimed, by nineteen different publishers, a fact which had driven him to contemplate suicide before he found a publisher for the book.

[10] Shiva Niranjan, "The Nature and Extent of Gandhi's Impact on the Early Novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao," *Commonwealth Quarterly* 3.11 (1979): 36-46.

himself at a political rally about untouchability. The featured speaker, unsurprisingly, is Mahatma Gandhi, who, a Congress volunteers informs, "is not speaking about *swadeshi*, or on civil disobedience … The government has allowed him out of gaol only if he will keep strictly within the limits of his propaganda for harijans (men of God, as Gandhi chooses to call the Untouchables), for the removal of untouchability" (141). The political moment of this leg of Gandhi's campaign against untouchability (1932-3), follows the failure of the Second Round Table Conference (1931) and the Poona Pact signed at Yeravda Jail under the pressure of Gandhi's Epic Fast, both of which had been necessitated by a heightened critical pitch in the debates about untouchable representation in formal politics in the new constitutional government.[11] The appearance of Gandhi's speech in the final pages of the novel has often been read as the product of Anand's endorsement of Gandhi's often paternalistic strategies with respect to untouchables as well as the Congress Party plan for the independent Indian nation.[12] The text of Gandhi's speech was lifted from a *Young India* reprint of a similar speech that Gandhi gave as part of this tour, during which Gandhi made no small mention of his problems with the British constitutional reforms despite legal injunctions to the contrary:

> I have emerged … from the ordeal of a penance undertaken for a cause which is as dear to me as life itself. The British Government sought to

[11] Barren Ray, *Gandhi's campaign against untouchability, 1933-3: an account from the Raj's secret official reports* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1996).

[12] Susie Tharu, "Reading against the Imperial Grain: Intertextuality, Narrative Structure and Liberal Humanism in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*," *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* 24 (1986): 60-71, and Teresa Hubel, *Whose India? the independence struggle in British and Indian fiction and history* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996). Although, recently some have argued that the influence of Gandhi was at least mediated in terms of form through Joyce (even though this does not seem to affect the political trajectory of the novel's Gandhian bent). See for instance, Jessica Berman, "Comparative Colonialisms: Joyce, Anand, and the Question of Engagement," *Modernism/modernity* 13.3 (2006) 465-485,

> pursue a policy of divide and rule in giving to our brethren of the depressed classes separate electorates in the Councils that will be created under the new constitution. I do not believe that the bureaucracy is sincere in its efforts to elaborate the new constitution. But it is one of the conditions under which I have been released from gaol that I shall not carry on any propaganda against the government. So I shall not refer to that matter. I shall only speak about the so-called 'Untouchables,' whom the government tried to alienate from Hinduism by giving them a separate legal and political status. (146)

Gandhi's speech lays out the basic contours of his position at the Round Table Conference and the reasons for his unwillingness to compromise with Ambedkar on the question of separate electorates. First, separate electorates, which would have reserved certain seats for untouchables in the councils and only allowed untouchables to vote for them, were part of a "divide and rule" strategy, through which the British could hope to use the untouchable cause as a stick with which to beat the Congress's claims to represent the entire nation. Second, separate electorates would make it impossible for there to be any rapprochement between Hinduism and the untouchables by creating an irreparable breach between them, consolidated by "a separate legal and political status." And finally, separate electorates would ensure the longevity of untouchability as opposed to enabling

the move towards its abolition as political power would now depend on the perpetuation of the category.[13]

Gandhi's interpretation of the debates about separate electorates was representative of the growing opinion of the majority of members of the Indian National Congress: the proposed constitutional separation of untouchables from Hindus would make national liberation incomparably more difficult.[14] This conclusion was largely the result of the Congress's experiences in the wake of the Morley-Minto and Montagu-Chelmsford reforms and the political legacy of the Muslim League, in which the question of minorities in India was used to establish both adversaries to the Congress as well as the ideological architecture of the British claim that only they could rule so wide and disparate a nation as India.[15] The creation of separate electorates for Muslims had already produced a vocal constituency of Muslim elites who were dependent on and therefore allied to British patronage, and who repeatedly undermined the Congress's demands for responsible government and *swaraj*. Gandhi's fear had been that the creation of separate electorates for untouchables would merely reproduce the pattern of the Muslim League and produce another antagonist in the project for national

[13] Mahatma Gandhi, *Gandhiji in England, and the proceedings of the second Round Table Conference* (Madras, B.G. Paul, 1932) and Subhamani N. Busi, *Mahatma Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar: crusaders against caste and untouchability* (Hyderabad: Saroja Publications, 1997).

[14] CB Agrawal, *The Harijans in rebellion: case for the removal of untouchability* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala sons & co., 1934); Shri Ram Bakshi, *Gandhi and Status of Harijans* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1987); and Marguerite Rose Dove, *Forfeited Future: the Conflict over Congress Ministries, 1933-1937* (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1987).

[15] Manmath Nath Das, *India under Morley and Minto* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964); Vinod Kumar Saxena, *Muslims and the Indian National Congress, 1885-1924* (Delhi: Discovery, 1985); and Stanley Wolpert, *Morley and India, 1906-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

liberation.[16] This was also the expressed strategy of the British Empire, which had through the zero-sum game of census-based political representation demonstrated both its ideological commitment to the non-existence of a unitary India and to the exploitation of caste and communal hierarchies to prevent the formation of any unified movement.[17] The official position of the British continued to be the one expressed by Sir John Strachey: "there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India … that men of the Punjab, Bengal, the North-West Provinces and Madras, should ever feel that they belong to one great Indian nation, is impossible."[18] Regional differences then gave way to differences of religion and then caste distinctions; and as long as the Congress could not solve the problem of poor Muslims and exploited untouchables, the British could claim that their rule was a necessary defense of minorities in India. Ramsay MacDonald could in fact offer up the Communal Award (1932) with the belief that he was the sole defender of minority rights.[19]

But Gandhi's solution to this real problem of British rule masked other political debates the Congress Party's strategy created. While preserving the idea of national liberation seemed to require defending the idea of a unified India, it also threatened to empty the minorities problem of all content and sacrifice minority demands in the interests of a purported unity. First, as long as Congress was unable to put forward immediate, meaningful solutions to the minorities questions, their appeals for reform

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[16] David Arnold, *Gandhi* (New York: Longman, 2001) 201.

[17] Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979).

[18] As quoted in Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983) 2.

[19] V. P. Menon, *Transfer of Power in India* (New York: Sangam Books Ltd, 1995).

would sound like alibis for chauvinism, which the British happily exploited this to their advantage, especially as it preserved their rhetorical position as the liberal modernizers in India. And the more Gandhi insisted that he alone spoke for the Indian nation the more he alienated genuine leaders of minorities, especially Ambedkar, from the project of independence. Ambedkar had already indicated his willingness to abandon independence in favor of strategic alliances with the British, since independence might risk a caste-Hindu majority and the perpetual discrimination of untouchables: "no caste Hindu, once he occupies a position of influence, would allow a member of the Depressed Classes, to rise in the social or economic scale but, on the contrary would aim to stabilize his condition as a hewer of wood and drawer of water. We have more to hope from the British officer who, free from communal or caste bias, unfettered by any wicked tradition, is quick to respond to the prompting of his conscience and the dictates of humanity."[20] In the two narratives that were developing around Constitutional reforms, independence and abolition were becoming politically opposed, even though they were not philosophically mutually exclusive, as members of each camp had repeatedly professed their support for the demands of the other.

Gandhi, though, was unwilling to admit another problem that was also at the root of the Congress's inability to press for the reforms demanded by the minorities. For instance, the Indian National Congress contained elements that were both principally opposed to untouchability and those that were unwilling to implement the necessary reforms to eliminate untouchability (i.e. temple entry, opening roads, increased access to

[20] As quoted in Jaffrelot, 92.

wells and schools, and the abolition of caste). This was further complicated by the fears that had grown up in orthodox circles that untouchables were being converted to Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism, thus undermining the electoral power of Hindus and the number of seats that would be allocated to them. The Congress's inability to put forward any reasonable constructive program towards caste abolition was the direct result of the competing interests that had collected under its umbrella. For one thing, the caste chauvinism of the Brahminical right-wing, represented importantly by Madan Mohan Malaviya and the Hindu Mahasabha, of the Congress made it impossible for the Congress to adopt more radical solutions to caste discrimination, even after the Congress made the removal of untouchability a formal part of its constitution.[21] The orthodox, right-wing was able consistently to channel this sentiment into social service programs rather than political empowerment and to delay and defer political action on immediate questions like access to roads, schools, wells, and temples. And Gandhi's refusal to call for the abolition of caste all together provided the right-wing of Congress with sufficient cover for their more chauvinist ideas.[22]

But no less important were the positions taken by Congress's moderate and left wings: Gandhi's paternalist solution offered the untouchables temporary moral relief but left *varnashrama* and caste prerogatives relatively intact, while the left-wing's economic determinism, which argued that nationalism would lift all economic boats, had no

[21] S. K. Chahal, *Dalits Patronised: The Indian National Congress and Untouchables of India, 1921-1947* (Delhi: Shubhi Publications, 2002). Periyar E. V. Ramasami, *Why Brahmins Hate Reservations?* (Madras: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1983).

[22] Mahatma Gandhi, *Caste Must Go and the Sin of Untouchability* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1964).

specific plan for the untouchable future.[23] And even though the moderates and the left were convinced that caste-based discrimination had to be ended and had themselves engaged in social activism to that end, neither had a coherent plan that it could implement and neither was willing to open a rift with the orthodox, right wing to defend the principle of equality.[24] And more to the point, none were able to convince substantial numbers of untouchable political activists that their plan could produce the desired end. Necessarily, this vacillation in Congress reduced a number of their measures to symbolic proposals and began to establish a pattern of sacrificing the demand of abolition to the needs of national unity: by 1932, the Anti-Untouchability League had been taken over by the Hindu Mahasabha and been renamed the Harijan Sevak Sangh and its political content had been emptied; two legislative attempts (led by Ranga Iyer and Subbarayan) to abolish untouchability failed to get necessary support but also failed to called for the abolition of caste, and thus preserved caste hierarchies which amounted to the same thing as untouchability; Gandhi even began to hedge on important temple entry satyagrahas.[25] Congress members and their allies organized parallel institutions (like the All-India Depressed Classes Association) to Ambedkar's, in a conscious attempt to undermine his autonomous movement and to return untouchables to the Hindu-cum-Congress fold.[26] The most radical of the proposals offered up by Congress ended being Gandhi's

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[23] Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 266.

[24] See Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India*.

[25] Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)

[26] Nairanjana Raychaudhury Bhattacharya, *Caste, Reservation, and Electoral Politics, 1919-1937* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1992). Vivek Kumar, *Dalit leadership in India* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002).

compromise in the Poona Pact (1932), though the outcome of this electoral reform neither satisfied Ambedkar nor solved the still extant problem of untouchability.[27] In the best instances Congress's strategy for the alleviation of caste discrimination deferred the solution into the intolerably distant future. In the worst instances, the Congress plan put into play ideologies and forces which would benefit from the longevity of caste and caste-based associations while disarming any meaningful opposition. As a result, demands for the abolition of caste risked wrecking the fragile coalition comprising the Indian National Congress and were, therefore, too high a price to pay for the majority of Congress member.

Anand shared many of the Congress's opinions about the political debates that had emerged with respect to constitutional reform and devolution. In 1942, he published his epistolary defense of Congress Party positions with respect to independence and the negotiations that had been conducted with the British in *Letters on India*. In it, the argument that he advances is barely distinguishable from Gandhi's and the majority of the Congress moderates:

> This curt rejection of the advances of Congress, together with the emphasis on various communities and interests, would have been enough to confirm the suspicions of nationalist India, so often had the difficulties between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim and other minorities been used to withhold self-governing institutions. I have told you that Congress is a political body, with a membership of all kinds of

[27] Jagadisa Candra Mandala, *Poona Pact and Depressed Classes* (Calcutta: Sujan Publications, 1999).

> Indians, Hindus, Muhammadans, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, etc., without any religious or sectarian aims. As such it must be distinguished from the two primarily religious bodies, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League. These two, though they profess political aims, are, in fact, obscurantist, sectarian bodies which have been constantly used by reactionary and vested interests as counterpoise against Congress. In this regard, the British Government has been specially anxious to use the Muslim League, under Mr. Jinnah, an eminent lawyer, largely supported by the big landlords and capitalists of Northern India, as a stick to beat the Congress with. But as the Muslim League has never published its membership figures, and there are actually more Muslims in the Congress, the British Government's encouragement of its disruptionist demand for a separate Muslim state, called Pakistan, in the north of India is known to all reasonable people as a mischievous tactic to divide India and keep it in subjection.[28]

Anand's position with respect to the minorities question is amalgamative: the national party contains minorities and is qualified to represent them. This position shares, as well, a deep suspicion of separate representation both as an avenue towards collaborationist politics and as an irresponsible method of advocating for minorities by recognizing groups with unmeasured influence. That Muslims and Hindus might have had genuine grievances that the Congress was unable or unwilling to address does not seem to factor

[28] Mulk Raj Anand, *Letters on India* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1942) 5.

into Anand's account here, as any attempt to undermine national unity is read as a throwback to confessional closed-mindedness. Consequently, Anand concludes by advocating for the national politics of the Indian National Congress and its exclusive negotiating rights for the Indian people.

Anand was committed to the idea of an anti-colonial politics that could produce dramatic changes in the life and culture of India. His alignment of religious conservatism with British imperialism meant that in all places he saw the hand of one behind the political moves of the other. As a result, in some places, Anand's explanation of the political debates sounds even more feverish than the conservative elements in Congress:

> These communal or separate electorates were the most vicious thing in the election procedure and were deeply resented by the people of India. According to the scheme all the seats in both the Federal and Provincial Legislatures were distributed among several vaguely defined religious, denominational and other electoral groups so that there were special seats for Sikhs, Muhammadans, 'Europeans', 'landholders', women, etc., each group forming an electorate by itself and returning a fixed number of representatives. The eleven such groups who were to return representatives to the Federal Assembly were obviously intended to prevent the formation of a clear majority for any party or principle in the Legislature, and sabotage its functioning from the start.[29]

[29] Mulk Raj Anand, *Letters on India*, 134.

In Anand's view, separate electorates would make it impossible for national unity to emerge and would make it impossible to negotiate with the British in any meaningful way. The possibility of a confident, mature coalition politics seems to have been a too-distant horizon to take seriously, and the legitimate grievances of minorities in any representational scheme without a full franchise are here sidelined.

But in important ways, Anand's position on untouchability differs from Gandhi's and the Congress. Anand had recognized early on the failure of Gandhi's political strategy to offer up a more radical rejection of the foundations of caste: "Only [Gandhi] did not give up his belief in Sanatani Hindu faith in spite of his campaign against untouchability. And his acceptance of caste as a part of the Hindu faith militated always against his humanistic tendencies and limited his appeal to the secularists. His assertion that all the Varnas are Shudras, and the Brahmins should do leatherwork, is only a concession to reformism, though he wanted a revolutionary breakthrough from the organized Hinduism to a new casteless Hinduism."[30] Gandhi's position is problematic for Anand, who holds on to the belief that one had to break with caste and Hinduism in order to reach a casteless world. "There are many other contrarieties in his thinking. On the one hand he campaigns against untouchability; on the other hand he wishes to retain the outcastes in joint electorates with the caste Hindus and goes on a fast against separate electorates. Again he reveres the Hindu majority and their rites, with a bias which makes him refuse thirty percent representation to the Muslims in the legislatures after the second

[30] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Humanism of M. K. Gandhi* (Chandigarh: University of Punjab, 1967) 24.

Round Table Conference."[31] Still, Gandhi's position fit nicely with Anand's humanism in terms of its spirit, but the actual program for uplift would differ substantially from Gandhi's. Perhaps, for this reason, the central character of Anand's novel, Bakha, remains unimpressed with the strategy on offer from Gandhi. As Anand's narrator describes, "Bakha didn't understand these words. He was restless. He hoped that the Mahatma wouldn't go on speaking of things he [Bakha] couldn't understand" (146). Ironically, Gandhi's critique of Anand's language has become Anand's critique of Gandhi.

In many ways, this contradictory relationship to Gandhi's position and the position of Congress characterized the mood of the politically engaged intellectuals of the 1930s:

> Despite the complexity and deep ambiguity of Untouchable identity over a period of centuries, what became a conventional account of them emerged under the spur of British imperium in the years between 1870 and 1930. By about 1930 all the major political protagonists, Gandhi included, were prepared to agree that Untouchables were both a distinctive and an oppressed segment of the Indian population. This agreement was the basis upon which a huge machinery of institutional privilege was erected so as to right the historic wrongs. But the consensus masked powerful

[31] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Humanism of M. K. Gandhi*, 26.

differences as to the distinctiveness of the Untouchables, and these differences were progressively articulated in later years.[32]

This climate of deferred engagement gave rise in the late 1920s to Bhimrao Ambedkar's oppositional electoral reform strategy. Initially seeking alliances with the Congress Party and then with other minority organizations, Ambedkar had by the 1920s broken with Congress and abandoned its nationalism in favor of open alliances with the British, whom he believed had no interest in preserving caste and whose liberal imperial rule might offer the necessary legal reforms to do away with caste discrimination all together, and for political representation of untouchables by untouchables.[33] In 1928, he even met with the controversially composed Simon Commission, which convinced Ambedkar of the need for separate electorates for the untouchables and of the possibility of working with the British to enforce untouchable rights, which led to his vocal debates with Gandhi at the Second Round Table Conference. The hope for Ambedkar had been that electoral guarantees at the center would require coalition politics to develop in any new political formation and ensure that untouchables had at least a negative veto and therefore some political voice in the legislature. That this required participating consciously with the British's strategy of undermining the Congress while problematic was acceptable to Ambedkar, even though it left unresolved the question of whether the British would be willing to make radical changes to the caste structure in India and whether electoral

[32] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 14.

[33] Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: an Undelivered Speech* (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1990).

reform would, as Gandhi argued, strengthen rather weaken caste identity and thereby defer caste abolition from the other side.[34]

Anand on Caste

Some 50 years after the publication of *Untouchable*, Mulk Raj Anand wrote the preface to a new edition of Bhimrao Ambedkar's controversial *Annihilation of Caste*. While designed to commemorate the centenary of Ambedkar's birth, Anand also used his introduction as a way to explain the debates that had emerged about untouchability before Indian independence and, perhaps, to dust off his credentials for the cause of abolition. But what is important here is how steeped the Anand of 1930s was in the terms of the debate that had been opened up by the Round Table Conferences and the Poona Pact and the positions that had crystallized in their wake. Anand, here, makes it clear that the positions that Gandhi advocated were certainly reformist and thoroughly wedded to the very tradition which abolition had in its sights, while Ambedkar's position was derived from a more radically transformative and oppositional space. Anand does not hesitate to point out, for instance, that "Mahatma Gandhi, who himself stood for the abolition of untouchability, objected to the castigation of the fourfold Hindu Varnashram" and that Ambedkar was perhaps the sole true voice of India's most oppressed.[35] But Anand's own position is much more qualified:

> I had the privilege to know Dr. B. R. Ambedkar from the late twenties onwards. He criticized me for accepting Gandhiji in the role of liberator

[34] Thomas Mathew, *Ambedkar, Reform or Revolution* (New Delhi: Segment Books, 1991).

[35] Mulk Raj Anand, "Preface," *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1990) 9.

> of untouchables, in spite of the Mahatma's allegiance to Hindu Varnashram. I accepted his rebuke and did argue with the Mahatma, who justified his stand by asserting the need of unity of people of all persuasion in the interest of the political struggle against British Imperialist attempts to divide Indians through separate electorates. In fact, so strongly did he believe in unity of all sections of Indians that he 'fasted unto death' against the proposal of separate electorates for the scheduled castes.[36]

Anand, here, positions himself between both camps. While recognizing Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi's reliance on caste, Anand continues to defend Gandhi's position, though with qualifications. In other places, his criticisms of Gandhi and his support for Ambedkar's approach are much more pronounced:

> Mahadev Desai: Hindu Dharma has done many good things.
>
> K.C. Azad: There is no Hinduism without caste. Say the heads of Muths established by Shankara! God established the Varna Ashram—the four castes!
>
> Gandhi: Caste was necessary in the Vedic Period. It was according to duties to be performed.
>
> K.C. Azad: Dr. Ambedkar, the leader of the untouchables, says: there can be no Varna Ashram today. Ambedkar is a Shudra but has become a Barrister at law! You are a Vaishya but have also become a Barrister! And Mahatma!

[36] Mulk Raj Anand, "Preface," 9-10.

> Gandhi: Ambedkar wants separate electorates for Harijans. Like Jinnah for Muslims. We must keep together in the struggle for freedom. Some good things in our old Dharma! Lok Sangraha![37]

Anand's seeming political equivocation presents an interpretive problem for those who would like to align him neatly with either Gandhi or his adversaries. Anand is not, like Gandhi, committed to national unity at all costs, even when he sees the danger of the separate electorates; Anand's rage seems in places equally directed against Hinduism as much as against British imperialism, and in this instance, the compromise with orthodoxy suggested by Gandhi was not a serious option that Anand pursued. But at the same time, there is no break with Gandhi or open espousal of Ambedkar's politics or the clear charting of a course to an independent politics – and all of this makes reading his novel as national allegory more than a little difficult. The idiosyncrasies of this political worldview threaten to make the imagining of a coherent nationalist or anti-colonial project impossible, especially if his resolution to the problem of caste was left this vague. Equally satisfied by Gandhi and Ambedkar, Anand's position on caste resists an easy reduction into the various defined camps.

And perhaps even more startling is the fact that unlike the rest of the Congress Left, with which Anand is probably most easily placed, Anand stands out as one of the few who concerned himself with the question of caste and untouchability and not merely economic reform. Neither the Congress Left nor the Congress Socialist Party (established in 1934) had by the time of Anand's novel composed any important

[37] Mulk Raj Anand, *Little Plays of Mahatma Gandhi*, 29.

elaboration of the problems of caste and their strategies to reform or abolish it.[38] Nehru, in both his *Discovery of India* and *Autobiography*, deplored the existence of untouchability, but he was not unique in his view that caste, while odious, was not the central problem facing an occupied India.[39] Anand was charting new ideological territory, as a real program of economic uplift and social reorganization had not been fully articulated by the left-wing Congress leadership. In this respect, Ambedkar was perhaps a more useful guide; his writings on caste demonstrate a full reformist program. But Ambedkar's sabbatical from the debates with Gandhi after 1932 and his inability to organize an effective challenge to either the Congress or the British meant that his ideas were not on offer in the same way as Gandhi's.

To this problem must be added the confusion caused and possibilities created by British involvement in questions of caste identity in India. The changes that were taking place to caste and caste-based identities had been accelerating by the time of the 1931 census which aggravated already tense communal relationships as religious organizations lobbied for the inclusion of untouchables in their ranks. A number of administrative changes to colonial rule and practice – the development of caste categories in the census, the formation of caste-based fractions in the army, the proposition of separate electorates based on caste – as well as the new experience of social vulnerability produced by industrialization and urbanization had simultaneously increased the importance of caste in the lives of most Indians as the ideology of colonial modernity threatened, perhaps

[38] See Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India*.

[39] Judith Brown, *Nehru* (London: Longman, 1999).

impossibly, to erase caste all together.[40] If on the one hand, caste was the defining feature of a traditional and stagnating Indian society, and thus a justification for the beneficent because modernizing influence of British rule, caste and caste divisions were also hardening on a new basis as a consequence of that very rule. The production of a census that aimed at precise enumeration of a caste hierarchy produced an array of petitions and an ideology which has been called "Sanskritization," organized on the basis of appeals to the hierarchy to validate claims of upward mobility on the basis of personal uplift and reform. Caste-based organizations began to spring up throughout the country, and movements for the uplift of castes took hold in a number of states. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, political parties were formed around caste identities, and discussions in the two Round Table Conferences promised a new politicization of caste and the entry of lower castes into official political power. Upper caste partisans were also quick to seize on the new opportunities posed by colonial rule, not least because they had been the earliest recipients of British patronage, to ensure that they could monopolize the distribution of new rights and privileges to their benefit. But the British were not above reproducing caste-based occupations; sanitation workers were exclusively recruited from

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[40] N. Gerald Barrier, ed. *The Census in British India: new perspectives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), Nairanjana Raychaudhury Bhattacharya, *Caste, Reservation, and Electoral Politics, 1919-1937* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1992), Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), Christophe Jaffrelot, "Sanskritization vs. Ethnicization in India: Changing Identities and Caste Politics before Mandal," *Asian Survey* 40.5 (Sept.-Oct. 2000): 756-66, Dandapani Natarajan, *Indian census through a hundred years* (New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General, 1972), Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Susan Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

the ranks of untouchables before that exclusion was legislatively enforced. Rather than simply ending caste, colonial modernity was reshaping and perpetuating it – producing new oppressions alongside new freedoms and retaining some features of the old – all the while claiming for itself a singularly liberationist legacy.

For instance, the British engaged in a whole series of urban restructuring projects which were designed to modernize Indian cities. Bulashah (Bulandshahar) would be typical of the north Indian town redrawn in the wake of the 1857 Mutiny and the attendant anxieties of its recurrence; streets could be made wider and sections torn down to accommodate easier surveillance, but the development of modern urban technologies, especially sanitation, were usually left unsolved by the British administrations before they were hastily handed off to native municipal governments.[41] In the newly designed north Indian urbanscape, the cantonments would be kept separate from the city, to protect the colonial military from the inevitable outbreaks that would overwhelm Indian towns. Secluded in such colonial enclaves, the British attempted to inoculate themselves from the inhospitable biological environment of the native cities.[42] The failure to prevent the outbreak of "Asiatic cholera" had already convinced the British that their presence near crowded cities with poor sanitation in north India was already precarious. It became necessary to develop the power of institutions like the Delhi Municipal Committee and other local municipal bodies which could bring, before the establishment of dyarchy, public sanitation under the control of the British. But the need for a regime of sanitation

[41] Frederic Salmon Growse, *Bulandshahr, or Sketches of an Indian District* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1884). J. A. Turner, *Sanitation in India* (Bombay: The Times of India, 1914).

[42] David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 274-80.

was bound up with both British ideologies about modernity as well as an understanding of Indian backwardness; native resistance to modern sanitation was proof both of British enlightenment and of the need for continued occupation:

> In 1888, Dufferin ordered a general inquiry on the question of sanitation and hygiene in the social consciousness of the natives. One official reported that 'to the masses of the people, sanitation is foolishness.' The people, he argued, are uneducated, even 'inoculated by time and habit.' What was the point, it was urged by the majority opinion, of wasting effort on a people whose innate social conservatism prevented them from enjoying the benefits of anything new, that is anything modern? No doubt, William Crooke argued from Azamgarh, 'the time will come when they will comprehend the laws of hygiene, just as at some time or other they will get rid of the abject superstition which leads them now, where they will learn to treat their women properly, to discontinue infant marriage, and emerge from the comparative barbarism in which they are plunged at present.'[43]

As a consequence, the British could have it both ways: they could both insist on sanitation and delay its implementation. MD Dadabhoy called this policy towards untouchables and sanitation "benevolent indifference," but it had elements which the nationalist could critique without being overly cynical.[44] The natives, after all, were not

[43] Vijay Prashad, "The Technology of Sanitation in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies* 35.1 (2001): 124.-

[44] Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 26.

ready and that meant that old practices could co-exist alongside new city plans; British interventions into the urban landscape complicated the problem by disrupting traditional patterns of waste management and consolidating caste occupations.[45] The opening lines of Anand's novel are inflected with this sense of a colonial modernity that degenerates rather than improves the lot of the untouchables:

> The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal-clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes, and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides. The absence of a drainage system had, through the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive stink. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in. (9)

[45] Vijay Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom: a social history of a Dalit community* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Flanked by a caste-based urban economy and a military-colonial administration, the untouchable quarters in Bulashah accumulate the worst of both worlds. The "absence of a drainage system" can, it must be mentioned, only be recognized by a narrator who understands the failed promise of the colonial modernity, one who later reminds us that there are holes in the streets of Bulashah, "where, thanks to the inefficiency of the Municipal Committee, the pavement should have been but was not" (41). The growth of a colonial town does not solve the problem of untouchability; it complicates it by exposing its artificiality, its uncongeniality. And British modernity is doubly disappointing: first, in its failure to implement promised changes; and second, in raising expectations of a different present. The untouchable quarter is "uncongenial" precisely because alternatives were extant. Solutions to the problem of untouchability that persists in colonial urban spaces would require more radical changes than those offered up by British.

Anand and the ethics of solidarity

The choices facing the radical intellectual, then, were to make sense of the political positions on offer – Gandhi's religious reformism, Ambedkar's identity politics, or British imperialism – and chart out a different course from each of these. That Anand is unsatisfied with the various dominant ideas is reflected in the choices made throughout the novel: Gandhi's sympathy, not his ideas, attracts Bakha; Ambedkar is all but absent from the novelistic imagination, referenced only obliquely by the monocled, western-attired character at the end of the novel; Bakha's attraction for British modernity disappears in the final Swadeshi bonfire. And Bakha's dissatisfaction with the choices

before him runs parallel to Anand's own. This more radical position was articulated in his autobiographical essay, *Apology for Heroism*:

> But I did not let my imagination blind me to the fact that my hatred of Imperialism was bound up also with my disgust for the cruelty and hypocrisy of Indian feudal life, with its castes, creeds, dead habits and customs, and its restrictive religious rites and practices. I was one of many groping young men of my generation who had begun to question everything in our background, to look away from the big houses and to feel the misery of the inert, disease-ridden, underfed, illiterate people about us. The more authority humiliated us and insulted our intelligence by suppressing books and ideas, the more hungrily we devoured knowledge of the outside world, the more avidly we sought to contact others in Europe and Asia who we knew were thinking like us. And whether our dearest friends and nearest relations liked it or not, whether the Sarkar tortured us or talked to us persuasively, we had set our hearts on our liberation and those of other oppressed peoples, whoever they were, wherever they were and of whatever shape, size, and colour.[46]

This political move – an appreciation of the problems of the underclass and low-caste as part of the project of anti-colonialism – is at the heart of the formal choices in the novel. Anand and the other "groping young men of his generation" comprised a section of the radical middle class that saw in the discrimination faced by other oppressed groups a

[46]Mulk Raj Anand, *Apology for Heroism*, 53-4.

reflection of the chauvinism and censorship that they encountered. Imperialism and Hindu orthodoxy, having run their course together, have driven the middle class to seek out collaborators in "other oppressed peoples." This is a politics of internationalism and inter-caste solidarity that would push the limits of the official politics of Indian nationalism. But it would also establish, for Anand, a kind of emotional and intellectual parallel that could be used to explain how the middle class could find in the untouchable a key to the ambitions of both.

Anand's descriptions of the process of writing *Untouchable* are bound up in this pattern of seeing in the untouchable a pattern for the evolution of the radical intellectual. There were larger problems that the middle class had not thus far solved: it was too tied to tradition and superstition; it had not successfully manufactured its own revolt against either empire or orthodoxy; it had not felt itself a part of the larger changes that were taking place in India. As a result, the evolution of an untouchable capable of revolt, one who moves from "his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and docile acceptance of the laws of fate" (83) to the subject capable of revolutionary action, could serve as the model for a middle class searching for its own language of feeling, solidarity, politics, and art:

> I felt that, apart from the exuberance of my own egoism in the *Confession*, I had been trying to be truthful in Gandhi's way. But I had not so far faced our weaknesses. Our inability to revolt. Even the courage to call a spade a spade, as the English do. Unless I could become a revolutionary, I would not be able to free myself from the corrosions behind the façade of the Hindu in me and have a vision of the free life. The French [Aragon and Breton] were facing their nightmares more intensely and had strong

> opinions. I had so far vaguely accepted the innocent prayers of the peasant women, my mother, and Mama Dayal Singh's recitations of Guru Nanak's poems, for uplift. Here in Europe I must learn to apply the full light of reason to see things below their outer history. If we want to be free we must see that life is not only for personal salvation, but to live in and through others as the revolutionaries lived. I must take out the portion about the sweeper-boy Bakha from the confessional and write about him as a new kind of hero of India, a failure against the twiceborn, but one who makes the effort to come up from the labyrinths. I must create a hero, beyond the weak-kneed me. My nerves tingled at the inspiration which had just come. The clatter and talk of the café compelled me to look away. And I wondered if, in the first instance, I could change myself, before changing others.[47]

The charge of appropriating the untouchable for other political ends is already placed at the forefront of Anand's description of his own project. The writer as revolutionary must "live in and through others," all the while making of them models of "a new kind of hero of India." But what is important is that the impulse behind the appropriative move is also a move towards a different ethics, one in which appropriation changes both the writer and the untouchable. The untouchable's evolution would allow the radical intellectual to experience the world a new and develop a challenge, internally, to his own ideas about what could count as genuine liberation for both. The failure of the untouchable to revolt

[47] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Bubble*, 337.

is in all instances the failure of the radical intelligentsia to feel and understand life correctly, "the failure of the spontaneous revolts."[48] The untouchable's social position, for Anand, placed him in the position of being able to understand "things below their outer history": each act of rebellion immediately brings him into conflict with both Hindu orthodoxy and British imperialism.

But the alliance between the untouchable and the radical intelligentsia was a process that had not been fully completed. That Anand was attempting to address this rift in the novel is fairly straightforward, as the final pages of the book are devoted to an albeit hasty summary of the terms of the alliance against the British. But this alliance automatically poses another contradiction, one which I believe that Anand is less conscious of and one which both animates the emotional intensity of the climactic scene of touching and which has been the source of the charge most often leveled at Anand, namely, that strategies for solidarity are in every instance identical to the strategies for appropriation. In order to make the nationalist project meaningful to the untouchable, Anand has to imagine the conditions that would make the nationalists willing to offer and the untouchable willing to accept a joint program, one which risks putting the untouchable demands second and thus threatens to ignore at the end of the day demands for the abolition of caste. The radical solution that Anand poses requires winning national liberation as a prelude to the introduction of a technologically egalitarian sanitation regime which ends the logic of untouchability (i.e. end contact with nightsoil and the "pollution" which is at the heart of untouchability ends). And the problem is that

[48] Mulk Raj Anand, quoted in Atma Ram, *Interviews with Indian-English Writers* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1983) 17.

without a complete overhaul of the organizations and ideologies which composed nationalism in India, there would be no organic priority or coevality to the untouchable problem. Susie Tharu's description of the opportunist potential of Anand's novel is perhaps the clearest:

> At issue here is not his [Anand's] nationalist commitment (it is interesting that even Leonard Woolf, that great liberal friend of India found Anand's nationalist enthusiasms – as he did Virginia Woolf's feminism – excessive, and 'extreme Congress') but what happens when nationalism made its alliances with liberal imperialism. What is it, we need to ask, in this liberal nationalism – which we have tended to characterize as modern, or progressive – that keeps the untouchable working patiently while an enlightened administration attends to the resolution of his problem: the water-closet. How does a writer of Anand's statue become accomplice to a programme in which the oppressed, waiting for civilization to be brought to them, continue to be a source of cheap but proud labour?[49]

Tharu's conclusion, though, is that Anand is in fact an unwitting accomplice in the nationalist ploy to deceive the lower castes with its humanist rhetoric, and in detecting that potential (and most prominently Anand's endorsement of Gandhi over Ambedkar as index of that potential) she is not mistaken. Anand's humanism is also too broad, despite its Marxist and socialist tints, not to provide cover for opportunism, especially given his political affinity to Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress left. Any untouchable who courts

[49] Susie Tharu, "Reading Against the Imperial Grain," 61-2.

compromises with Congress would be held up as the exemplary untouchable, sacrificing his own personal liberation for a national one. Other critics of Anand's have pointed out that Anand's own caste and class position make it impossible to avoid the appropriation of the untouchable's voice and that ventriloquizing for an untouchable is the same as claiming to represent him at the Round Table Conference:

> However, as readers, we must examine and remain aware of the difference between 'a voice for' and 'a voice of.' We must take account of the fact that *Untouchable* represents the untouchables as they appear to the gaze of an upper class, upper caste Kshatriya Hindu, albeit a Marxist. This caste and class distance between the writer and the people he represents results in the erasure in the novel of the voice of the untouchable community as a dissonant discourse in the Indian social fabric. This absence is then substituted by the voices of the nationalist bourgeoisie speaking for the untouchables.[50]

For Mukherjee, the problem of representation only compounds the problem of untouchable revolt, as untouchables here are seen as an irreducibly "dissonant discourse" and their speech as necessarily confrontational towards the status quo. It also easily blends back into a defense of authority, as Teresa Hubel argues: "The novel [*Untouchable*] seems to demonstrate the necessity of elite leadership in the 1930s movement for untouchable uplift. It does not, moreover, endeavor to be conscious of the 'middle-classness' of its nationalism. This is particularly evident in the narrator's

[50] Arun Mukherjee, "The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*," 36.

occasionally condescending omniscience."[51] This suite of elitist movements – appropriation, erasure, and self-centeredness – is not the product of mistaken reading practices. Anand's text is indeed guilty of putting in place the rhetorical and emotional structures that enable nationalist appropriation of the untouchable's grievances as justifications for native rule. Untouchables do not speak for themselves in the novel – and as a result, the conclusion of the novel cannot be seen as the fulfillment of the untouchable demand for freedom. It appears, at every instant, to be the self-satisfied Congress member's view: that nationalism is sufficient to solve the problems of all, eventually.

But it should be obvious that the largest reason that Anand's *Untouchable* is read in the post-independence world as an endorsement of the opportunist rather than the idealist wing of Indian nationalism is because that idealist wing failed to produce the radical changes that it imagined were possible. There was no independent Indian sanitation regime which had the concerns of untouchables at its heart, nor was there a consistent critique of the religious and social basis for caste hierarchies. Even minor reforms like temple entry, educational access, and legal protections took a long time in coming. As a result, readings of the novel which highlight the novel's misplaced confidence in the technological future of the Indian state are not at all inaccurate. The only function of Sarshar's speech at the end of the novel would be to satisfy middle class audiences of their genuine progressive credentials while making empty but emotionally powerful gestures towards untouchable freedom. The counterfactual may be

[51] Teresa Hubel, *Whose India?*, 170.

unanswerable but is worth posing: had untouchables been able to mount as substantial an organizational and political force as say the Muslim League, the novel would have a completely different gloss. The kinds of futures that were being narrated in anti-colonial novels in India are judged by the facts on the ground; more positive readings of the status quo, which I have ignored here, produce more positive readings of the novel. Reading any anti-colonial novel, it seems to me, has to deal with this fact – namely, that the particular outcome of the national liberation struggle more than the content of the novel determines the character of the post-colonial reading.

And for that very reason, I think, it's impossible to stress that the novel opens up the possibility of alternative futures to nationalism and anti-colonialism, one which are not coextensive with the independent nation-state, which is also a future that the novel can only imagine. This is not an exercise in utopian wish-fulfillment but an attempt to diagnose the different intellectual currents that simultaneously reveal themselves in acts of political solidarity. If the radical intelligentsia genuinely believes in the project of emancipation of the untouchable, is there any representation of that desire that can satisfy the postcolonial critic, armed as he or she is with the inevitability of the nation's failures, without resurfacing as an alibi for those very failures? In this respect, I think that Anand represents an important case study in understanding a rhetoric of solidarity and its bi-directionality. If appropriation can result in the papering over of genuine untouchable grievances by the state, there is also the possibility, as Anand argues, that the attempt to feel like the untouchable changes the radical intellectual in important ways, "changing [himself] before changing others." This inquiry has to be the undertaking of a much more sensitive, formal investigation of anti-colonial novels that is willing to suspend the

historical outcome of national projects to understand the intellectual history of a given moment in the development of anti-colonial projects and the forces that were related to them. But such an inquiry could help to open new strategies for understanding the risks and the possibilities inherent in radical anti-colonial narratives and could match those alongside the contingent histories of the nationalist movement. It could expose both the limitations and the potentials of the nationalist commitment to end chauvinism and traditional patterns of exploitation. It could also provide a necessary corrective to current accounts of anti-colonial projects as necessarily reproducing western models of statecraft. But most importantly, it could salvage an ethical relationship to the other that intellectuals could refine into a real political praxis of solidarity.

As a point of departure, there was a history of untouchable revolt that neither Anand nor the Congress seems to have paid much attention to that demonstrates a continuous arc of struggle against both British imperialism and Hindu orthodoxy. A wave of strikes led by untouchable sweepers had broken out across the subcontinent in the last part of the nineteenth century (1873, 1876, and 1889). These had been in response to the development of sanitation reform led by British municipal councils which restricted the rights of untouchables and forced considerable wage reductions. The initial laws were framed to create a new, sanitized India that could avoid the cholera panics. But sanitation reform would also become labor reform as public hygiene demanded the regularization of untouchable labor. The United Provinces Municipalities Act of 1916 contained the following sanctions for untouchable work actions: “Should a sweeper who had a customary right to do the house scavenging of a house or building fault to perform such scavenging in a proper way, the occupier of the house or the building or the board

may complain to magistrate for felt. The magistrate receiving such complaint should hold an inquiry and should it appear to him that the customary sweeper has failed to perform the house scavenging of the house or building in a proper way or at reasonable intervals, he may impose upon such a sweeper a fine which may intent to 10 rupees."[52] The Punjab Municipalities Act of 1911 contained similar provisions: "Should any sweeper (other than customary sweeper) who is under a contract to do house scavenging of a house or building, discontinue to do such house scavenging within 14 days' notice to his employer or without reasonable cause, he shall on conviction be punished with a fine which may extend to Rs. 10."[53] The exorbitant fines placed on untouchables had the intended effect of deterring strikes, but also had the effect of generating a growing anti-British untouchable constituency. By the 1930s, untouchable revolts had been taking place all over India. A series of laws were passed by British legislators which created a monopoly on jobs, outlawed strikes and unions, and ensured that no strikes would occur in north India for almost twenty years. In 1931, the Communist Party of India had encouraged the formation of labor unions, the latter urging people to join "for the complete abolition of slavery, the caste system and inequality in all forms."[54] A 1926 strike of sweepers in Bulata crippled the town for weeks, and the success of the 1928 strike in Calcutta inspired the formation of sweepers' unions throughout India, the latter famous for a skirmish in which "women threw pots of excreta at policemen, who tore off

[52] SK Chahal, *Dalits Patronised: The Indian National Congress and the untouchables of India, 1921-47* (Delhi: Shubhi Publications, 2002) 37.

[53] SK Chahal, 38.

[54] B.T. Ranadive, *Caste, Class and Property Relations* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1982) 7.

their uniforms as they ran away, vowing not to return without permission to shoot at the strikers."[55] Little is known about the demands and the organizing that went into such labor actions, but they are at least a glimpse of the kinds of self-conscious activity that untouchables were engaged in. This political movement, had it grown, could have represented the future that Anand's Bakha looks out upon at the end of the novel.

A novelistic structure of solidarity

Untouchable, then, has to be mined for its formal strategies that enable the middle-class radical to see the project of untouchable liberation as his own project. There are two ways that Anand is able to accomplish this formally. First, the Joycean strategy of exploding a linear narrative in favor of the anarchy of daily experience allows Anand to ally Bakha's alienation with the alienation of the radical intellectual. Because he cannot actually reproduce the experience of untouchability, Anand finds in middle-class alienation an acceptable corollary for encounters with chauvinism and then proceeds to demonstrate how the untouchable is, in fact, exactly like the middle class intellectual seeking independence and freedom from his or her own encounter with British racism. It is, then, unsurprising that for Anand the writing of the novel was in part framed and structured by his own encounter with chauvinist practices in British milieus: "Anand angrily retouched *Untouchable* after a P & O boat voyage from England to India in which the British treated him as a contemptible outcast." [56] This is precisely the residue of the

[55] Vijay Prashad, "Between Economism and Emancipation: Untouchables and Indian Nationalism, 1920-1950," *Left History* 3:1, 9.

[56] Stephen Ignatius Hemenway, *The Novel of India*, v. 2 (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1975) 15.

pre-Gandhian version of the novel which continues to animate the spirit of the truncated Bildungsroman. The Joycean flaneur is mapped on to the itinerant Bakha and the profound disconnect between the subject and urban life provides some of the ideological texture of middle class dissatisfaction with the visual offerings of modernity except as consumable commodity. Bakha, armed now with Red-Lamp cigarettes, encounters the inner city as a sensory overload that is so overwhelming that it allows him to forget, as he stares "absorbed and un-self-conscious," that he is, in fact, an untouchable in the city (46).[57] This experience of middle-class castelessness then produces the very encounter of touching that is at the emotional center of the novel: "Bakha's mouth was open. But he couldn't utter a single word. He was about to apologise. He had already joined his hands instinctively. Now he bent his forehead over them, and he mumbled something. But the man didn't care what he said. Bakha was too confused in the tense atmosphere which surrounded him to repeat what he had said, or to speak coherently and audibly. The man was not satisfied with dumb humility" (47). In part, this scene draws its emotional power from the fact of its condensation of countless similar episodes that must have taken place across urban India that would have likely been identical in situation and circumstance. Indeed, it is the very reproducibility of the scene which allows Anand to get away with some rather clichéd and ideologically laden terms. It is also this reproducibility that

[57] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Bubble*, 426. "Like a bird, my eyes were uplifted towards home. I saw Lakha, Bakha, Rakha, Chotta, Ram Charan and family, in worn-out military uniforms, smoking stubs of Red lamp cigarettes dropped on the road by the Tommies in Lal Kurti. To be sure, the poorest of the poor accepted the world run by the upper people, the Sahibs, the Subedars and the babus. They were abject when they received anything from the well-off. Even a smile was a precious gift. They would be very surprised if I told them that I was their brother. Maybe, Allen Hutt's ideas could sway people ultimately, but the Harijans still believed in Gugga Pir and amulets against misfortune. I would have to be the mouth of all their silent mouths as I shall be 'England-returned.' They wanted crumbs and cigarettes and some country liquor, not words."

allows Anand to step outside and watch the scene, despite its focalization, from the perspective of sympathetic intellectual, still distant from the untouchable as such. And it is in this commitment to present Bakha, as he is, with all the ideological weight of the upper-caste view of untouchables and contemporary history in which the untouchables do not, it is supposed, revolt, that Anand creates this poignant scene of caste chauvinism. This is fairly indisputable: Anand's attempt to capture the authentic untouchable ends up reproducing the ideological baggage of the upper-caste view of the lower-castes. In fact, that is the only direction that authenticity, in this instance, could go. But despite this baggage, Anand's need to shore up the exterior of the untouchable with his internal, psychological vacillations ends up accomplishing what the external contact cannot, namely the crossing of the moral barrier which separates untouchables from caste Hindus.

And there is between Bakha and urban Bulashah an immense divide. At the moment of contact, Anand's narrator remarks: "But then he realized that he was surrounded by a barrier, not a physical barrier, because one push from his hefty shoulders would have been enough to unbalance the skeleton-like bodies of the Hindu merchants, but a moral one" (48). The distance is not only one of religious taboo but also of emotional and political significance: "But the barrier of space that the crowd had placed between themselves and him seemed to prevent his feeling from getting across" (49). And after being insulted and accused, when Bakha stands alone in the streets, the narrative overcomes what the social situation will not allow:

> But there was a smouldering rage in his soul. His feelings would rise like spurts of smoke from a half-smothered fire, in fitful, unbalanced jerks

> when the recollection of some abuse or rebuke he had suffered kindled a spark in the ashes of remorse inside him. And in the smoky atmosphere of his mind arose dim ghosts of forms peopling the scene he had been through. The picture of the touched man stood in the forefront, among several indistinct faces, his bloodshot eyes, his little body with the sunken cheeks, his dry, thin lips, his ridiculously agitated manner, his abuse; and there was the circle of the crowd, jeering, scoffing, abusing, while he himself stood with joined hands in the centre. (51)

Here the exterior perspective of the crowd has been replaced with a version that while interior to Bakha is still short of the intimacy of free indirect discourse. The version of rage and justice is still well within the worldview of the committed nationalist.

But the perspective switches again, to a mixing of free indirect discourse and first-person speech, which is Anand's own version of stream-of-consciousness. The method here allows Anand to take the authentic untouchable consciousness and expose it as a mirror of the middle class's reaction to the process of colonization:

> 'Why was all this?' he asked himself in the soundless speech of cells receiving and transmitting emotions, which was his usual way of communicating with himself. 'Why was all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him! And to think I was so eager to come to the town this morning. Why didn't I shout to warn the people of my approach? That comes of not looking after one's work. I should have begun to sweep the thoroughfare. I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. That man! That he should have hit me! My poor

jalebis! I should have eaten them. But why couldn't I say something? Couldn't I have joined my hands to him and then gone away? The slap on my face! The coward! How he ran away, like a dog with his tail between his legs. That child! The liar! Let me not come across him one day. He knew I was being abused. Not one of them spoke for me. The cruel crowd! All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The sentry inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That's why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That's why they don't touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don't mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That's the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!" (51-2)

While the narrative wants to presume that this is a genuine epiphany, the idea that an eighteen year-old untouchable encounters his own caste position for the first time in this way seems a little too staged for the accidental narrative of this day. It doesn't in fact work if it is only Bakha's emotional world, as the narrative would then collapse back on to the melancholic moods it began with. It is, rather, a combination of a readerly epiphany that is reflected in Bakha, a coming into realization of the contradictory emotional world of caste-chauvinism. But this has

the effect not only of making Bakha's emotions legible, it makes that legibility contingent upon the similarity of that experience to the Indian intellectual's understanding of his own subject position. These two processes – turning Bakha into the site of readerly emotional projection and mirroring middle class alienation in Bakha's experience – are the ways that Anand turns the narration of Bakha's sensitivity into a kind of Bildungsroman for the Indian middle-class reader. The procedure, though borrowed from Joyce, differs after the Gandhian intervention and insistence on clarity and simplicity:

> Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer. The contempt of those who came to the latrines daily and complained that there weren't any latrines clean, the sneers of the people in the outcastes' colony, the abuse of the crowd which had gathered round him this morning. It was all explicable now. A shock of which this was the name had passed through his perceptions, previously numb and torpid, and had sent a quiver into his being, stirred his nerves of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, all into a quickening. 'I am an Untouchable!' he said to himself, 'an Untouchable!' He repeated the words in his mind, for it was still a bit hazy and he felt afraid it might be immersed in the darkness again. (52)

Anand lifts the "quickening" from the Joyce of *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and here extracts from it a strategy of realizing alienation.

The second procedure is enabled by the introduction of Gandhi into the final pages of the novel. Not only because of the kind of political personality that Gandhi represented, but because of Anand's association of Gandhi with the authentic masses of India, his presence here enables the possibility of a real merger between untouchables and the middle class. Anand's own feelings about Gandhi are interesting in this respect; despite his disagreements with Gandhi's politics, Gandhi was necessary if one was to have any serious engagement with India: "But if I lost faith in the Mahatma, would I not be alienated from everyone at home—from the freedom movement itself? Gandhi was still my anchor. He had shown such a spirit of self-sacrifice, facing the Sarkar in campaign after campaign."[58] But Gandhi also represents something symbolic and important, and for that reason -- and here Anand's model seems to be Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* -- he can be a moment of contemplation which unites disparate individuals in their simultaneous consideration of him:

> He wanted to be detached. It wasn't that he lost grip of the emotion that had brought him swirling on the tide of the rushing stream of people. But he became aware of the fact of being a sweeper by the contrast which his dirty khaki uniform presented to the white garments of most of the crowd. There was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste. He was part of a consciousness which he could share and yet not understand. He had been lifted from the gutter, through the

[58] Mulk Raj Anand, *The Bubble*, 428.

> barriers of space, to partake of a life which was his, and yet not his. He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in its folds and yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living, quivering contact with it. Gandhi alone united him with them, in the mind, because Gandhi was in everybody's mind, including Bakha's. Gandhi might unite them really. Bakha waited for Gandhi. (138)

Unlike Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, though, there is no global narrator interested in reproducing the concentrated gaze on a car backfiring; the only other subject who is actually considering Gandhi at the same moment as Bakha is the reader.

And this sets up Anand's final exposition of the kind of sensitive humanism that he believes is necessary for a real solidarity to emerge between the nationalist and the untouchable. Amidst the heady afterglow of the Mahatma's speech in Gola Bagh, Bakha overhears a conversation between a poet, Iqbal Nath Sarshar, and a lawyer, R N Bashir, about the relevance of Gandhi's ideas for an independent India. The British-educated Bashir chafes at Gandhi's retrograde ideas: "Gandhi is a humbug … He is a fool. He is a hypocrite. In one breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu. He is running counter to the spirit of our age, which is democracy" (150). Sarshar responds in defense of Gandhi, but then switches to a defense of the machine and the Indian spirit, even though Gandhi may not have advocated a technological path for India:

> 'It is India's genius to accept all things,' said the poet fiercely. 'We have, through our long history, been realists believing in the stuff of this world, in the here and the now, in the flesh and the blood … Right in the tradition

> of those who accepted the world and produced the baroque exuberance of Indian architecture and sculpture, with its profound sense of form, its solidity and its mass, we will accept and work the machine. But we will do so consciously. We can see through the idiocy of these Europeans who deified money. They were barbarians and lost their heads in the worship of gold. We can steer clear of the pitfalls, because we have the advantage of a race-consciousness six thousand years old, a race-consciousness which accepted all the visible and invisible values. We know life. We know its secret flow. We have danced to its rhythms. We have loved it, not sentimentally through personal feelings, but pervasively, stretching ourselves from our hearts outwards so far, oh, so far, that life seemed to have no limits, that miracles seemed possible. We can feel new feelings. We can learn to be aware with a new awareness. We can envisage the possibility of creating new races from the latent heat in our dark brown bodies. Life is still an adventure for us. We are still eager to learn. We cannot go wrong. Our enslavers muddle through things. We can see things clearly. We will go the whole hog with regard to machines while they nervously fumble their way with the steam-engine. And we will keep our heads through it all. We will not become slaves to gold. We can be trusted to see life steadily and see it whole.' (152-3)

This is a defense of a kind of sensitivity and emotional openness that the novel has been building towards. The ability to see without sentimentality and to understand the "secret flows" of life has been articulated in the representations of Bakha's own feelings and the

development of a narrator capable of representing them "clearly." In fact, the kind of structure of solidarity that "stretches from our hearts outwards" depends entirely on the ability to see one's self in the untouchable. And the payoff of such an ethics is a super-charged technological development without the pitfalls of capitalism and the servility of empire.

But there are pitfalls here. The operation, through which the untouchable, the machine, "race consciousness," and the radical middle class are all shown to be the products of six thousand years worth of development, is necessarily vague, even as this vagueness is masked by the breathlessness of the speech. And the vagueness itself hides a contradictory genealogy: race-consciousness can be marshaled to explain an Indian proclivity towards innovation, open-mindedness, and change, but cannot explain the persistence of caste chauvinism. This is particularly important as the novel has also put forward an alternative genealogy of Bakha's residual servility, "which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent" (17), which had turned him into the "humble, oppressed under-dog that he was by birth" (58). At other times, Bakha also has inherited "The blood of his peasant ancestors, free to live their own life even though they may have been slaves" (64), while caste Hindus "did not relax the grin which symbolized six thousand years of racial and class superiority" (16). And this specific looseness of "race-consciousness" mirrors the vagueness of humanism that Anand has been attempting to put forward.

Because the solidarity between the middle class and the untouchable is fragile, it is all the more important that we take seriously the strategies that were

put forward by those who were interested in its development, even as we are sensitive to the failures that it eventually faced.

> The conscience itself is the residual sensitive awareness of the self, reaching out to illuminations, and then reversing its glance toward actualities. It broods over the realities and then it begins to recreate, without too much forethought of oneself, or the self of a character, out of the dark, subliminal world through echoes of all kinds of impulses towards a desire image. The desire image is never reached, but it is the aspiration towards a myth. What I could be, but I am not. And though the expression, through all kinds of contrarities, thrown into the panic of confusion, may ultimately modulate itself towards what might be, there is achieved a glow, a flow and a current of vital communication which may not only give a certain glimmering to the writer, but also reveal some candescence to the reader … Thus the individual who is singularly himself may become a universal character.[59]

[59] Mulk Raj Anand, quoted in Atma Ram, *Interviews*, 19.

Chapter 3: "The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but …": Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and the religious imagination of the Indian, secular, nationalist middle class

In July of 1921, Congress Party workers, as part of the national non-cooperation movement inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, picketed a liquor shop in Dharwar, a district in the southern part of the Bombay Presidency (now in modern Karnataka). Two young men had earlier fined an untouchable man for public drunkenness (as part of the local Congress Party's temperance campaign) and were arrested by the police for looting and sentenced to six months' hard labor. The charge and the sentence were both commonly seen as unfairly severe, and the Congress party was working to organize opposition to the capricious punishment. Emotions had therefore been raised, and the pickets were larger than they had ever been in Dharwar when the police indiscriminately opened fire on the crowd that would not disperse in the Khilafat Maidan. When the dust settled after the ensuing riots, three people were dead and several more injured.[1]

Gangadhar Rao Deshpande (later dubbed the "Lion of Karnataka" for his efforts in the movement for Indian independence and Karnataka unification) had rushed from Belgaum, where he had been organizing similar pickets at Gandhi's behest, to research the events on behalf of the All India Congress Committee and to preside over the funeral procession. He along with 29 other Congress and Khilafat Party members were arrested on trumped up charges of arson and looting in Dharwar; Deshpande and a few others

[1] RS Narayan, *Gangadharrao Deshpande* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1988) 112.

were acquitted, since they had not actually been present, but most of the other activists were imprisoned, despite efforts by the party and its lawyers to mount a defense.[2]

On July 14th, Deshpande presided over the Dharwar District Political Conference in Navalgand where he presented his findings about the events at Dharwar and the callousness of the government response firing upon a crowd of peaceful protesters, concluding with a fiery section in Kannada about the involvement of the District Collector of Dharwar and the local police in which he excoriated the actions of the British authorities. The meeting had been called to organize Congress Party activities in the area, and so was monitored by British spies, one of whom reported on Deshpande's speech. The content and the quality of the notes was suspect, but they included a section in which Deshpande purportedly described the British occupation as "Satanic Government" and "Ravana Rajya." The authorities were undoubtedly looking for any pretext to arrest Deshpande, and the police turned on these phrases as proof of Deshpande's sedition. In October, the Government of Bombay issued a warrant for his arrest under Section 124A of the *All India Penal Code* and charged him with sedition and inciting a riot for the content of his speech in Navalgund. Deshpande was arrested and stood trial.

The arrest of Congress Party agitators and propagandists was nothing new; the British authorities had been paying special attention to the Congress's activities and following the leadership very carefully. They had even extended their surveillance powers under the *Rowlatt Acts* (1919) which gave authorities the power to arrest and

[2] GS Halappa, *History of the Freedom Movement in Karnataka* (Bangalore: Government of Mysore, 1964) 127.

detain agitators suspected of terrorism without trial. But what was new in this instance was the criminalization, essentially, of political allegory, since calling the British Raj "Ravana Rajya," the courts argued, was tantamount to calling for religious insurrection against the empire. Religious language had been a part of political agitation against the empire for quite some time, but the courts had always tread carefully on criminalizing religious speech since the political alliances the British had built required gingerly preserving religious traditions so as not to alienate conservative forces on which the empire relied. The bulk of the charge had to do with Deshpande's calls for an end to the British occupation and his use of certain key words in Kannada and Hindi ("*Swarajya*," "*nasht*," "*beleendshahi*," "*rajya padyathi*") and whether they meant, in combination with the description of the British rule as "Ravana Rajya," a call for the violent destruction of British rule and amounted to advocating sedition and violent revolution. Deshpande, a lawyer by profession, made a lengthy response to the charges against him (while claiming "I don't wish to encumber the record of this case with any long statement") by allying himself with the non-cooperation movement and its aims, much of which relied on Gandhi's understanding of non-violence, self-government, and uplift. Deshpande had been unconvinced of the workability of non-violent non-cooperation by the time of the Calcutta Congress in September 1920 and had joined the minority, who saw it as a symbolic half-measure, in voting against it in Calcutta. But "Between September and December I studied the speeches and writings of Mahatma Gandhi, the author of this movement, and also watched its wonderful effects on the masses."[3]

[3] Halappa, 580.

The section of his response that the Sessions court was most interested in was the fifth, which detailed Deshpande's recollection of the speech at Navalgand:

> I do maintain that the greatest injustice has been done in the Dharwar rioting case as well as other picketing cases. I think I used the word, "Yama rajya" in describing the injustice that was going on at Dharwar. But I am positive that I did not make use of the expression "Satanic Government or Ravana Rajya"; for I have long since decided that *to imitate parrot fashion Mr. Gandhi* in the use of the words "Satanic Government or Ravana rajya" *is unbecoming to followers of his like myself*. Of course the expression "Satanic" has been so often repeated with impunity and referred to by high officials, from Viceroys downwards, Anglo-Indian journals like the Times of India and in Government publications, that it has by this time lost half of its charm and therefore most of its sedition, if there was any, but I know I have always enforced it upon myself purely as a point of discipline that *what is good for Mr. Gandhi is not necessarily good for me*, for I have not yet completed, as he has, the process of self-purification which justifies a critic to say anything that he honestly thinks proper to be said of this Government.[4]

Much of Deshpande's argument rested on the fact that the government spy in the audience could not have possibly taken accurate notes, since "I am a fairly fast speaker" and the notes recorded only 1100 words for a speech that was two hours long, since the notes "contain some sentences which I never uttered and some which I could not have

[4] Halappa, 586.

uttered," and since the spy had completely misrepresented the size and composition of the audience to which Deshpande was speaking (1000 as opposed to 300 primarily Brahmins, while all the witnesses against Deshpande were non-Brahmins). The bulk of his substantive argument, though, rested on the difference between the various terms for bad governance ("Satanic," "Ravana," and "Yama") and the difference between applying these terms to the acts and to the essence of British rule.[5]

But Deshpande's argument is interesting beyond the challenge being made to the reliability of government moles and theological debates about the difference between sinners and their sins. The argument, for Deshpande, turns on what can only be described as a legalistic convenience which betrays the contradictory milieu in which the new, local middle-class leadership of the Congress Party must have found itself. Deshpande, after all, used his allegiances to Gandhi in the rest of the defense as proof of his non-seditious behavior and the complete legality of calling for *Swarajya* and non-violent transfers of power to Indians. Here, though, in order to show that the censor has clearly made a mistake, has heard "Ravana" when he should have heard "Yama," Deshpande has to establish his distance from Gandhi. Gandhi's rhetoric, Deshpande argues is stale and perhaps superstitious; Deshpande's is not. Gandhi's use of "Satanic Government" and "Ravan Rajya" cannot be taken seriously as seditious, nor can it be used by "followers of his like myself," unbecoming as it is to parrot Gandhi as some kind of nationalist fashion. Gandhi has taken the necessary purifying steps to speak his mind in political matters; Deshpande, presumably, speaks naively or spontaneously of religion or politics. The

[5] Halappa, 582.

legal defense of his political speech has to sacrifice any loyalty to Gandhi in order to proceed, even as it attempts to suture that alliance back together. The proof that the censor has gotten it wrong, in this instance, is that there is a wide enough gap between Gandhi and the rest of the Congress that shorthand notes are no longer sufficient to decipher the political content of a speech; meanings must be interpreted anew, carefully.

Or, more precisely, the reason that he can be certain which religious metaphor he turned to is because he is certain that "what is good for Mr. Gandhi is not necessarily good for me." Deshpande, an English-educated, progressive lawyer, already marked for his largely secular and political contributions to the Congress Party, confesses his use of "Yama rajya" in describing the British occupation of India, while at the same time distancing himself from the popularized Gandhian epithets "Satanic Government" and "Ravana Rajya" (which would have been the foil to Gandhi's own advocacy of "Ram Rajya"), despite the fact that the differences in the terms would have been hard to parse. Deshpande did attempt to explain his meaning: "Yama rajya: This epithet is the most innocent of the three. Yama is a deity in Hindu Mythology. It is believed that this deity is invested with the duties of dispensing justice according to the karma of the person concerned … When I used this expression I had before my mind's eye the unjust and disproportionate punishments that were inflicted on two pickets."[6] The distinction he draws between the Reign of the God of Death and the Reign of the Demon King of Lanka was perhaps self-serving, and the mark of a clever legal strategist, especially since Ravana was mythologically no less dispassionately cruel than Yama and because taking

[6] Halappa, 584.

Deshpande's exegesis seriously means that "Yama Rajya" is perfect justice ("according to karma of the person concerned") and therefore useless as a critique of British rule. So in order to make the difference between "Yama Rajya" and "Ravana Rajya" clear, Deshpande attempts to police the semantic boundaries between the measured political speech of the lay Congress Party worker and the unfiltered, spiritual utterances of the Mahatma. Deshpande was, of course, concerned about the hypocrisy of the matter, especially if he was going to be singled out for using language that the largest newspaper in India and the head of the British Raj used regularly. But still Deshpande's defense is marked by the need to show both that the intelligentsia saw the difference between drumming up religious sentiment by pandering to its audiences ("to imitate parrot fashion Mr. Gandhi") and legal and political analysis and that between the Mahatma and the rest there had to be a carefully understood distinction when it came to language, politics, and faith – namely, a distinction between rhetoric and religion. In fact, the differences in rather similar religious terminology turns not on theological differences between Christianity and Hinduism or the difference between Hindu deities and demons, but between the Mahatma and the rest. Religious language, in the hands of the intelligentsia, could be a precise analytical tool without leading to the perhaps illogical conclusion of religious injunction; the Mahatma made injunctions (famously, "Swaraj within a year"), the intelligentsia educated.

The sessions court was wholly unimpressed:

> But by far the most important passage is the fifth which refers to the great injustice which had lately taken place in Dharwar. The accused denies that he has been correctly reported. He denies making use of the expressions "Satanic

> Government or Ravana raj", and pleads that the Inspector's notes showed that the epithets used by him referred to the injustice done by Government and not to Government itself. The epithets which are taken from the report are sworn to by the Inspector and several witnesses, and the accused has neither cross-examined them on the point nor called witnesses to contradict them. On the other hand on page 12 of his written statement he admits referring to the injustice going on in Dharwar, and as it appears in the charge, it seems to me that there is no real difference between calling Government Yama raj on account of its injustice and describing as Yama raj the injustice of which Government has been guilty … Differing from both assessors I find the accused Gangadhar Rao Balkrishna Deshpande guilty of an offence under Section 124 AIPC, and sentence him to six months' simple imprisonment."[7]

The case, though minor amidst the tens of thousands similar prosecutions of those arrested during the Non-cooperation movement, was important for a number of reasons. Deshpande was an important organizer in the region, and there were several large meetings in Karnataka organized to support Deshpande and demand his release. Moreover, EH Waterfield, the Sessions Judge, agreed that Deshpande's conviction was a test case, designed to measure whether the law could be used to criminalize speeches, and therefore marked one of the first times when certain kinds of religious allegory were sufficient proof of sedition, rather than outright calls for the overthrow of British occupation. Waterfield was also concerned that the proliferation of religious language to

[7] Halappa, 597.

demonize the British government, while no defense against prosecution, did mean that the jails would soon be filled with seditious nationalists and since religious language was everywhere used, it would be nearly impossible to know the difference between the truly spiritual and the deeply rebellious. Six months was the most that Deshpande could be reasonably sentenced to, despite the severity of the charge.

But even more interesting, perhaps, is that when representing religious ideas and mythological characters to the colonial court, authority no longer relied on scripture or scholarship (though Deshpande could count on his Brahmin background). There are no references to the *Vishnupurana* or the *Ramayana* or to the thought of a Shankaracharya to shore up the idea that Yama and Ravana are actually different and represent different kinds of approaches towards something as central as religious justice. It had now become possible to radically decenter religious and scriptural authority and to provide new interpretive and exegetical outcomes when strict scriptural readings would have produced alternative results. Deshpande certainly believes that he can represent religious thought and practice in a legal sense if not in a strictly theological one, but there isn't even the slightest hint of ambivalence that this might not be an acceptable procedure or that a religious argument might require a different kind of authority. It is telling that this democratic reading of religious myth is unconvincing to the courts, but more revealing is that such democratic interpretations are possible at all.

Deshpande, though, was no religious proselytizer; a practiced lawyer who had defended a number of important nationalist figures, Deshpande, despite his Brahmin background, was representative of a layer of the new middle class: English-educated, privately religious while publicly secular, nationalist, and progressive. He had also not

been a Gandhian, and had only recently become convinced of the need to organize as part of the non-cooperation movement. His political education and work prior to this point had been alongside the Marathi Hindu nationalist, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whose influence over Congress Gandhi had been carefully undermining. His use of "Yama Rajya" to describe the British occupation, then, forces an investigation of the differences between rhetorical and theoretical uses of religious allegories in making sense of and polemicizing against colonialism.

Deshpande's case was exemplary of a larger process of intellectual reorganization that was taking place amongst the nationalist intelligentsia, represented in the fiction of the period. By the end of the 1930s, the Indian middle class was beginning to see a way out of a certain intellectual impasse which had dominated its concerns, especially in its imaginative prose. The rise of Progressive writing (called *pragativadi* or *taraqqi pasandi*, as well) was coeval with a growing middle-class mistrust over an Indian religious past, a past which was seen as responsible for the current enslavement to colonialism, for the backwardness of the economy, for the oppressive and chauvinistic character of the Indian home, and the anti-scientific and irrational mood which seemed to prevent political mobilization. At the heart of this view was an intellectual consensus that crystallized around the idea that the peasantry was either incapable or unwilling to let go of a package of ideas that could be grouped around the overly flexible term "religion" and that this stood in the way of attempts at broader social reform which included but were not limited to nationalist agitation. Hinduism (and more precisely a particularly Brahminical variant of Hinduism) was so deeply welded into the ideological and emotional architecture of the Indian peasant, so this argument went, that its opposition to

civil rights for the low-caste, its superstitions, its ideas about female emancipation, and particularly its sense that changes to a traditional pattern of village represented the coming of the *kaliyug* all meant that liberalism and religion were seen to be mutual antagonists. Perhaps the most famous example of this view of religion could be found in *Angāre,* but it had its corollaries in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand and the later Premchand.

Much of this had to do with the class that produced imaginative writing in the 1930s and 1940s and their confrontation with the mixture of ideas that they encountered in their village homes and their urban schools. Despite Nehru's proclamations to the contrary, a substantial ideological and emotional rift had developed between the nationalist middle class and its peasant relatives. Their educations may very well have been financed through the explicit exploitation of rural labor through a network of semi-feudal and capitalist relations, but once they left the villages for urban colleges they could not encounter their homes as pastoral idylls any longer. It was not merely access to ideas in the cities which had transformed peasant students into cosmopolitan thinkers, it was also access to modernity (industry, science, development) with such rapidity which made imagining persistent peasant life impossible except as escapist fantasy or as a source for emotional renewal to reinvigorate urban life. Students were not merely "westernized" by ideas, they were modernized by life, more and more of which made the kinds of peasant worlds from which they had only recently emerged seem like a distant historical hangover, sometimes embarrassing, and not like a reasonable choice for the future: "The exotic [western] education gave little scope for a correct understanding and appreciation

of national problems by the students, and the English-educated youth became a class apart, with few things in common with the rural masses."[8]

But this process of differentiation between the urban intelligentsia and the peasantry began to undergo a reversal as a consequence of nationalist agitation. Between January and March of 1921, the Working Committee of the All-India Congress Committee, began calling for students to boycott and leave government controlled schools and colleges and for lawyers to give up their practices as a way to demonstrate opposition to the British occupation of India. Recent events in Amritsar and the passing of much more stringent restrictions on political expression and organization had pressed the nationalist middle class to respond, but they were also likely pulled into taking more aggressive political action by events that were happening in the countryside, where taxes to fund British wartime efforts, high prices, and the monetization of rent had wrecked the rural economy, strained already tense landlord-tenant-moneylender relations, and had produced a substantial swell of peasant rebellions across the country.[9] In response, the Congress Party had recently voted to implement an official all-India non-cooperation movement, and the student-lawyer boycotts were to be the first phase of its full strategy, which also included voluntary spinning of home-spun yarn (*khadi*), distributing 2 million spinning wheels (*charkhas*), boycotting foreign cloth and liquor (*swadeshi*), flooding the prisons and jails with non-violent protesters, boycotting elections, and ultimately a no-tax

[8] Halappa, 24.

[9] Dietmur Rothermund, *An Economic History of India, from pre-colonial times to 1991* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 66-70.

and no-revenue campaign.[10] Lawyers were not enthusiastic about giving up their practices, but students left colleges and universities in substantial numbers, with some estimates as high as twelve percent nationally.[11] While new nationalist colleges and universities were being established all over the country (like the Jamia Millia Islamiya in Aligarh or Gujarat Vidyapith in Ahmedabad), these were not nearly large or immediately attractive enough to absorb the students who had been radicalized by the call from the Congress Party. Small armies of nationalist students exited the classrooms and returned back to their villages and attempted to set up small nationalist groups and Congress Party branches. And when they returned to their villages in the 1930s, they found they needed a new vocabulary with which to deal with the urgency of their task while masking their own distaste for peasant life.

As a consequence, as the decade drew to a close, some members of the progressive coterie were moving towards the idea that "religion" was no longer an impervious barrier between the urban intelligentsia and its peasant relatives. Many had refused to fall into the secularist camp, but increasingly the question of religion was being re-examined by secularists who were attempting to find new explanations for political and social changes that were taking place more broadly and new methods for incorporating those changes into the texture of their form. Hinduism, in particular, though also Islam, possessed emotional and affective energies which could be used in the service of political and social change, and by the end of the 1930s, this group of writers

[10] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983) 204-5.

[11] PC Bamford, *History of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement* (Delhi : K. K. Book Distributors, 1985) 103.

set about experimenting with strategies to reflect these new ideas imaginatively. Part of this conclusion was due to the extraordinary and spectacular success of Gandhi's mobilizations during both the Civil Disobedience and Non-Cooperation campaigns and perhaps most famously during the Salt March, all of which used religious trappings to make political arguments for a shared nationalism. But there were other developments, as well, which seemed to link religion to progressive mobilization: the development of peasant organizations in Uttar Pradesh in the 1920s, the success of political theater in Maharashtra in the 1930s, and the spread of the Congress Party into the Indian hinterland in ways that had never before connected the urban and rural worlds in a seemingly static-free communication network. In fact, there was something serendipitous in the timing of these changes, as the range and rapidity of religious reform movements also meant that "Hinduism" was also something that was subject to serious public debate and inquiry and as a result available for creative reimagining. Gandhi was both a current within and a product of this pattern of religious reform. One of the consequences of such developments was the experimentation in imaginative writings of the ways that "religion" or "tradition" could be used in order to mobilize political sentiment. At the same time, Gandhi's entry into the scene of nationalist politics was demonstrating for many that religion was not an irredeemably conservative force, but that it carried with it an emotional content that could be used to induce people to act for change. More than a simple yoke on the necks of the peasantry and the poor, religious ideas could also be used to motivate social reform and social action; and here, precisely, it was the ability of religion to provide an avenue for the activity of the oppressed that inspired modernizers.

This, however, raised the immediate problem of disingenuity; while they might have bothered to be concerned at the tinny-sounding rhetoric their artificial postures produced, they were mostly concerned with how they sounded to themselves. Once secularized, the middle-class returned to religious views with some trepidation. There was, of course, the need to hold on to cultural moorings through which European colonialism could be critiqued, but there was a genuine embarrassment at the unwillingness of the peasantry to reform and uplift itself. This embarrassment was in many ways filtered through the Gandhian experience itself. In the 1920s, when Gandhi encouraged a boycott of English-administered school and civil service positions, the boycott was not widely honored, as most were unwilling to give up hard-fought social gains. But the ones that did honor the boycott, found themselves returning to their villages and encountering a conservatism which they had only recently abandoned. Having followed Gandhi out of the schools, they now turned their eyes towards their own communities which reacted with suspicion at the intrusion of "modern, city ways." Two solutions were then possible, and both of these were reflected in the literature of the period. The first, revulsion at conservativism followed by abandoning the village, was represented usually in vernacular literatures of the time. The second, an attempt to use the *Gandhian* sarvodaya projects to patiently win reforms in the villages, seems to have been the fondest theme of the English writing of the period. A third option, Tagore's paternalist Brahmo attitude towards both nationalism and the peasantry, seems to have not been widespread in literature, lacking as most writers did Tagore's social position and landholding status, but was pursued deeply in the visual arts.[12]

[12] Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism India's Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922-47* (New York:

But it was possible to hold, in this period, a contradictory relationship to religion and the use of religious imagery. On the one hand, the new urban, nationalist middle class was deeply critical of religious conservatism, seeing in it a barrier not only to economic development but to social justice as well. Few were as outspoken as Bhagat Singh, whose famous "Why I am an Atheist" was reprinted and read zealously. But it was quickly becoming impossible to believe that religion and the suite of ideas that went along with middle-class nationalism (a limited feminism, anti-untouchability, liberal education, redistribution of wealth, scientific progress), even when this was simply aping British values and Labourite politics, were not mutually contradictory. Simultaneously, though, religion had to be preserved as an emotional link between the secular intelligentsia and its peasant countrymen, whose unwillingness to become spontaneously secular or recognize their own oppression by religion was becoming something of an obsession of the writers of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the middle class had a number of different approaches to the problem of religious conservatism, some opting for religious reform movements that were growing at the turn of the century, especially in urban centers in the north, but others had developed independently critiques of religious ideas and were advancing their own ideas about the religious convictions of a new civil society. For the most part, even though, it was possible to both critique Hinduism for its excesses and privately retain Hindu beliefs, this required more complicated ideological moves and rationalizations and as the contradictions were becoming more socially acute intellectuals had to contend with the cultural needs of nationalism coming up against the rise of new conservative forces and organizations. There was an actual gulf between the

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Reaktion Books, 2007).

urban classes and the peasantry, even the upper-caste peasantry, when it came to religion. And in most instances, the only way over that gulf required a Gandhian bridge.

But the progressives were interested in a specific kind of modernization. Even though the garb was saffron or *khadi*, the spirit underneath was still atheist; as a result, the goal was to use the contradiction emotional content of a political religiosity in the service of abolition of religion all together. Religion was something of a link language, connecting for the first time the political ideas of the urban nationalist with the world view of the peasant through an idiom which she could understand. The gender of the peasant was also important, since the most obnoxious feature of a Brahminical Hinduism was the way that it not only abused women but seemed to succeed in reconciling them to their dismal fortunes. Religion, on the pattern of Gandhi and Tilak, though, could be used to bring women out of their homes, peasants out of their sleepy apolitical hamlets, and move them in the direction of secularism by slowly vitiating the key terms and underpinnings of Hindu thought. Unlike their nineteenth-century counterparts who sought to salvage religion by producing a variety of protestant reformations in Hinduism (e.g. the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, etc.), when these students returned to the villages they were interested in finding ways to move the village into a modernity that was nationalist, feminist, scientific, and ultimately secular. (The fact that this mission was never completed is the source of both the debate between Ananthamurthy and Bhairappa in contemporary Kannada letters and the source of the emotional architecture of a movie like *Swades*). The theory of the evolution of the peasant hadn't of course been fully worked out, but the confidence in an evolutionary sociology and in a politics of

radical social change compelled the nationalist middle class to take seriously the awakening of its peasant relatives.

And it is around the question of the evolving peasant that the intellectual contradiction in this pattern of progressive writing produced some of the most exciting experiments in literature. What was exciting for this class of thinkers was not the self-actualization of the peasant-as-peasant but the hope that any political pulse was a sign of the peasant becoming other than herself, abandoning her quiet, oppressive home for the dizzying world. But the confidence in this social evolution ran counter to the aesthetic principles of a broader nationalist sympathy which organized the vocabulary of the middle class. First of all, the villages suffered under colonialism: excessive taxation, unfair and incomprehensible property laws, police violence, and dismissive, arrogant administrators were permanent features of the colonial village. As a result, defending the villages from British colonization meant that rural life had to have its own emotional and political logic and at a minimum, that logic required peasants remaining peasants. The organization of the villages to oppose these aspects of British rule was Gandhian and premised on Gandhi's notions of the utopian village republic. Secondly, as the nationalist intelligentsia faced growing criticism internationally and domestically for appearing to be uppity, brown-skin sahibs, the language, appearance, and emotional structures of their nationalism looked towards the peasantry for an idiom in which to authenticate their rootedness to the soil. The Indian peasant provided a number of stock figures which could easily be deployed for this purpose: the industrious yeoman, the judicious village chieftain, the peasant beauty, and the generous landlord. Each of these

was resuscitated in some way as part of the larger architecture through which the nationalist middle class wanted itself understood.

This of course posed a problem. On the one hand, peasant life was abysmal and indefensible; on the other, the easiest way to deal with the politicization of rural life was to retain the ideal and charming pastoral view, placing such life under threat from colonial modernity. Both views of course found happy homes inside the Congress Party, since the debate between Nehru and Gandhi on the question of socialism was never really allowed to come to a head. Still, the ideological and intellectual tension remained, and for a class now hoping to imagine its independent future, the stakes were quite high. If the point was to turn the peasant into a countrywoman then idealizing peasant life, rural ideals, and pastoral aesthetics would necessarily be an emotional pull in the opposite direction. If the point was to preserve some sense of continuity with an unchanging rural idyll, then the hope that peasants could become urban would have to be abandoned. This was not merely a conflict over the pattern of social evolution that peasant women would follow; it was also a debate over what kinds of emotional resources and ideological standards the middle class could mobilize to make its case to speak for and with the nation. The rural village could be, in Tabish Khair's formulation of Rao's project, "universalized and idealized" but this would mean simultaneously abandoning the didactic and reformist impulse which characterized petit bourgeois aspirations for peasant relatives.[13]

[13] Tabish Khair, "Raja Rao and Alien Universality," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 33.1: 78.

It is in this sense that Raja Rao's career between 1930 and 1947 is of importance, as his early fiction is perhaps the most sustained meditation on the intellectual confrontation between the urban intelligentsia (usually through the frame of a suspicious, impatient realism) and the peasantry, especially its women. The main problem, though, is that Rao's fiction is still seen as more or less aligned with Gandhian ideologies—especially his views of utopian villages and a reformist, democratic Hinduism—with the result that his fiction is seen as the aesthetic arm of an ascendant bourgeois nationalism which would take the reins of the state after independence, with all of the triumph and disillusion that implies to the respective critical camps. Instead of looking for the places where the aesthetic project might run up against certain still raw, nationalist impulses, the trend in studies of Rao's fiction is to see it as a mirror of a religious nationalism on the Gandhian pattern. As one critic succinctly put it: "*Kanthapura* is a Gandhian novel. This is attested by its date of publication (1938), by the constant references to the Mahatma and by the very philosophy it sets out as an example."[14] For those allied to nationalist historiography, such a relationship necessarily means seeing in *Kanthapura* the triumph of a pattern of values and politics operating under the sign of Gandhi and not a much more complicated set of interactions between ideologies which both despise and idealize the Indian peasant.

Rumina Sethi's *Myths of the Nation*, the only book length study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, takes this proposition as its organizing premise. Looking at the history of peasant struggles from the 19th and 20th centuries, Sethi concludes: "Despite all the

[14] Michel Pousse, "So Many Freedoms," *Commonwealth* 12.1: 30.

ambiguities and confusions, and the maneuvers of the leadership, nationalist sentiment itself formed a very small part of peasant struggles, although it may be admitted that the national movement certainly provided an environment germane to the cause of the peasants."[15] In other places, her criticism is more scathing:

> But for those peasants, like Rao's, who had little to worry about, the need to join the national movement seems exaggerated. It is in cases such as these that we witness a contestation between fiction and history: the struggle to 'get rid of the Redman' is motivated only by a pure appeal of nationalism dictated by religion, enabling the author to present an ageless and static, depoliticized Indian peasantry which nationalist intellectuals would find attractive—a peasantry that is not threatening in any way, that is not class conscious, but one that homogeneously embodies ancient ideals of duty, commitment, and sacrifice … As a member of the nationalist intelligentsia, he is interested in depicting the peasants as having simple and romantic ideas of politics. Assisted further by using Gandhi as a deity, he marginalizes Gandhi's role in redressing peasant grievances, and confines it within the limits of divine grace, thereby keeping alive the iconography of a saintly agent whose presence and teaching would appear to be the only means of stirring the passivity of the population.[16]

The Congress, in this view, turned towards the peasantry cynically, molding their concerns to a more narrow, nationalist project, thereby running roughshod over the

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[15] Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation, national identity and literary representation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 115.

[16] Rumina Sethi, "The Other Side of History: the Politics of Representation in Nationalist Fiction," *South Asian Review* 24.1: 84.

genuine, independent demands that might have arisen had the peasantry been allowed to lead its own struggles. Others, like Anshuman Mondal, find a variety of ideological positions available in Kanthapura (socialist, Nehruvian, modernist, religious) but eventually see all of them subordinated to an "implicit and overdetermining Brahminical supremacism."[17] And the consequences are to see the novel as complicity in leaving unchallenged communalist attitudes again linked to Gandhi:

> Famously, in 1926, when his second son Manilal fell in love with a Muslim girl in South Africa, Gandhi refused to sanction any possibility of marriage. His argument is revealing, 'Your marriage will have a powerful impact on the Hindu-Muslim question. Intercommunal marriages are no solution to this problem." We can note the adjacency of Gandhi's thought here to received notions of legitimate communal identities within the composite nation. It is unsurprising, therefore, to find this anxiety over intercommunal 'contamination' reproduced in Rao's novel where the most graphic and horrifying act of violence centres on the rape of a Brahmin woman by a Muslim policeman. In the dark months of Partition, thousands of women would physically experience this paradigmatic act of communal violence.[18]

The list of scholars who see *Kanthapura* as participating in reproducing the problems of Gandhian nationalism is in fact quite extensive.[19]

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[17] Anshuman Mondal, "The Emblematics of Gender and Sexuality in Indian Nationalist Discourse," *Modern Asian Studies* 36:4, 932.

[18] Mondal, 935-6.

[19] In addition to the ones cited in this essay, also see TJ Abraham, "Flawed Gandhism or Hindu Fundamentalism? No Cheers for Kanthapura," *Indian Literature* 47.4: 162-6.

These patterns of reading Rao's fiction are descendants of the two main schools of historiography of Indian nationalism. Scholarship over the last 20 years has tended to see in nationalist deployment of traditional or religious idioms in one of two ways (though ultimately, these share certain key features). The first way is to see in this move the triumphalism of Congress-led nationalism. Gandhi's genius, so this line of thought contends, was to find a way to use traditional patterns of religious belief in the service of making a certain bundle of nationalist ideas—opposition to British economic control over India, the idealization of village democracy as a model for national governance, and mass political participation—available to the peasantry and the masses of Indians more generally. The second has been to see in this idiom of nationalism a kind of naïve opportunism which more or less paved the way for more dangerous kinds of emotional energies which saw their initial symptoms in the bloody rioting which erupted during and after the partition of the subcontinent but which has since become a durable and violent pattern of communal violence. As a result, attempts to think about the ways that nationalism and religion might have developed their respective ideologies in mutually constitutive and potentially progressive ways are normally short-circuited by the evidence of the late twentieth century: religion and nationalism produce a dangerous combination which leaves the nation incapable of dealing with communal extremism.

Common to both views, then, is the idea that religion was to be preserved through nationalism. The new mutually constitutive narratives of religious belief and nationalist mobilization worked in tandem to produce a set of ideas for an independent India which produced either a pattern of secular democracy or of intolerant communalism, but either way, was an irreversible process. But also common to both views is that Gandhian

nationalism only moved in the direction of the nation state, so that the intelligentsia's relationship to the peasantry could only be mischievous, at best, and predatory, at worst. Ranajit Guha's critique of those who overlook peasant interpretations of their own political activity is important, in this respect: "Unable to grasp religiosity as the central modality of peasant consciousness in colonial India [Suprakash Ray] is shy to acknowledge its mediation of the peasant's idea of power and all the resultant contradictions. He is obliged therefore to rationalize the ambiguities of rebel politics by assigning a worldly consciousness to the leaders and an otherworldly one to their followers making of the latter innocent dupes of crafty men armed with all the tricks of a modern Indian politician out to solicit rural votes."[20] Subaltern Studies has gone far in the direction of preserving the emotional and intellectual worldview of the peasant in this ideological transaction, whereby the peasant is able to carve out a space for political action and will that generates results that the nationalist could not have foreseen. The problem, though, is doubled when you have a class of intellectuals who were also attempting at moving the peasantry into politics that were more radical than those imagined by official nationalism. In the readings which suggest either religiously orthodox or statist ends for nationalist politics, the affective energies which drew the middle class nationalist to the peasant (the early twentieth-century homolog of the Subaltern Studies collective) are necessarily occluded.

The problem with such a view is not only its tendentiousness but also its inaccuracy. As late as April of 1948, Raja Rao was still unconvinced of the intellectual

[20] Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ed. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 81.

and political direction of India. He and Iqbal Singh edited a collection of essays which argued that the trajectories of the nation were still as of yet undetermined and that the nation was in some danger of an anti-intellectualist mood with respect to the project of nation-building; the introduction, while attempting not to sound alarmist, pointed to the pathology:

> We are today passing through a phase of extreme intellectual confusion and disorder. Such confusion is inevitable after a prolonged period of political struggle; but while there is no need to take it too tragically, it would be the height of complacency to refuse to acknowledge that it exists. Symptoms of acute disorientation are discernible even at the highest level of leadership—and that at a time when the critical situation in the country demands the greatest lucidity of thought and purpose.[21]

The problem was that the political mobilizations of the struggle for Indian independence had utilized a number of philosophical and theoretical terms in a derivative and sloppy way.[22] The theoretical apparatus of the nation relied overmuch on emotional output and not enough on finding an appropriate intellectual idiom to account for the specific features of the Indian condition and the consequence would be a hollow Indian nation:

> As a people we have a reputation for being somewhat excessively preoccupied with theoretical and abstract problems; yet in the sphere of political we have tended to neglect all theoretical discussion and have failed to define general

[21] Iqbal Singh and Raja Rao, ed., *Whither India? (Socio-Politico Analyses)* (Baroda: Padma Publications, Ltd, 1948) vii.

[22] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist thought and the colonial world, a derivative discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

> principles. This explains the distressingly ambiguous anatomy of most of our political movements and it leads in practice to some strange paradoxes. It is often difficult, for instance, to find a nationalist who can give a precise definition of his nationalism, a liberal who can explain his credo in terms which are not an insipid paraphrase of Mill and Bentham, a supporter of the Muslim League who can provide a coherent idea of the doctrinal implications of Pakistan, or even a revolutionary who can propound the dynamic logic of the *Communist Manifesto* except in borrowed phrases. Indian political movements appear for the most part to live on emotions rather than thought, heart rather than the head. The result is a general intellectual mendicancy, an inanition of political thought. If this tendency continues unchecked there is some danger that, far from being a nation of philosophers, we may well become a nation of insufferable philistines.[23]

This is, interestingly enough, an underdeveloped counter-explanation for the derivativeness of nationalism as it sees intellectual production in India as eventually being capable of overcoming its reliance on the west (and its bad paraphrases of western idioms) and not invariably trapped in the ceaseless repetition of European political thought. But what is also of interest here is that the genuine anxiety that there was much fuzziness to nationalist, liberal, and revolutionary thinking, and that far from being consolidated and confident ideologies, these were markers of political activity and expressions of political sentiment rather than articulations of developed political thought. Even if there were confident expressions of some aspects of political thought in India –

[23] Singh and Rao, viii.

and these were what the anthology attempted to group together – these were not understood except as caricatures by the cadre of political movements that comprised the stream of nationalism. For Rao and Singh, nationalism may have succeeded in producing a nation-state, but it had not achieved a national program.

> There are points which seem to be common to Gandhism and Marxism: both, for example, are activist in their implications. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to infer from this the possibility of their eventual reconciliation. They are two divergent world-views and as such do not admit of reconciliation. Ultimately, the choice for India in [the] field of political philosophy reduces itself to a choice between those two categorical alternatives. What would be her choice? It would be hazardous to enter the province of prophecy, but it may be pointed out that the assumption usually made by so many political writers in India, that the present dominance enjoyed by the Gandhian ideology is a constant of the Indian political situation, is not warranted by any rational considerations. Indeed, the lesson of history would be just the reverse.[24]

For Rao and Singh, Gandhian political futures were not a foregone conclusion. At a minimum they were interesting in investigating alternative political outcomes; at a maximum, they suggested that Gandhian politics were doomed, historically.

But beyond the larger trajectory of Rao's intellectual development remains the stubborn problem of accurately recording the intellectual inheritances of Rao's fiction. *Kanthapura* is a case in point. The suite of politics represented by the narrative arc of the

[24] Singh and Rao, x.

novel are selected from a series of political thinkers and movements extant in India: Gandhian *sarvodaya* finds its representation in the *swadeshi*, untouchable reform, and *panchayati raj* movements in the village; Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's socialist feminism characterizes Ratna's challenge to the sexist conventions of the village and Rangamma's socialist sensibilities; NS Hardikar's Hindustani Seva Dal finds its corollary in the women's Sevika organization and their nonviolence drills; the political *harikatha* that Moorthy organizes is an offshoot of Lokmanya Tilak's Marathi *harikatha* movement; the uses of yoga for political self-realization follow the same lines as those marked by Vivekananda; the view of the economic drain of Indian resources is taken from Dadabhai Naoroji; the hope for a secular future is troped as a turn toward Jawaharlal Nehru and the Congress Socialists; the utopian promise of socialism early on in the novel is Leninist and Russian. The figures that are explicitly and implicitly named in the novel mark both intellectuals who worked within and those who split from the Congress Party. The problem with reducing these to Gandhian nationalism depends on a reading of the Congress Party's activities in 1930s and 1940s as characterized primarily by agreement rather than debate, and it returns to the critic to disentangle those ideological maneuvers in the novel which imagine themselves to be allied to Gandhi and those for which the alliance is clearly fanciful. At best, Gandhi is the screen on to which ideological fantasies about nationalism can be projected; at worst, the reference to Gandhi occludes a more substantial debate that is taking place within the novel's development.

In addition to this admixture of contradictory political and intellectual tendencies is the novel is Rao's own attempt to imagine anew the relationship between

interpretations of a traditional and historical past in the service of a theory of evolution for the present. For Rao, in particular, this came through a resolution of certain problems faced by Kannada writers in the 1930s and 1940s in dealing with the durability of tradition. European interest in the history of the Indian cultural past was, of course, reinvigorated during the 18th century and then accelerated throughout the colonial period, as it became important to understand the past as a way of making sense of the putatively unchanging Indian present. But there was a concurrent renaissance of the Indian cultural past by Indians that began, perhaps, in the Bengali Renaissance in the late 19th century, and saw a variant of it in most of the major vernaculars in India throughout the early 20th century.[25] Kannada was going through its renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s in a movement called *navodaya*, whose major figures included Srikanthaiah, Kuvempu, D.R. Bendre, Shivaram Karanth, and Betgeri Krishnasharma.[26] *Navodaya*, like the other vernacular renaissance movements in British India, was led, for the most part, by western-educated Indians who saw themselves rejuvenating the cultural tradition of south Asia by adapting European forms to vernacular languages and regional themes. Here, the models would be British Romantic poetry (BM Srikanthiah translated many of these in 1920), continental European fiction, and Elizabethan drama. But no contradiction was seen between the nationalist sympathies of the leading figures (almost all were Congress Party members or sympathizers) and the adaptation of European tradition for the purposes of vernacular literary output. Furthermore, the social reform politics of this coterie were also quite forward-looking: anti-caste chauvinist, anti-sexist (at least in some

[25] Ram Sri Mugali, *History of Kannada Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1975).

[26] GS Amur, *Essays on Modern Kannada Literature* (Bangalore: Karnataka Sahitya Akademi, 2001).

basic ways), and economically redistributive. It was characterized by a sort of paternalistic obligation toward the peasantry, not the least because so much of the movement was composed of Brahmin men with land and occupation, with the artist now playing the central role of patron and guardian saint. The point, though, is that a wing of the bilingual Indian intelligentsia made a conscious choice to write in the vernacular to pursue social reform aims and popularize those aims within the subcontinent.

Some of the interest was apolitical and academic, but Indian antiquity would serve easily to make necessary arguments for the nationalist project. Indian antiquity was reimagined and repackaged in order to make the claims about Indian civilizational superiority to the British and to make the possibility of Indian self-rule a realizable horizon.[27] There were conservative projects which could also use the same procedure to marshal more aggressive forms of reaction: Shivaji mythology was probed for a successful anti-Muslim idiom in Maharashtra, while the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* were rediscovered with an eye towards making Hinduism a religion of the book, with the effect of codifying gender and caste hierarchies. But the re-appropriation of the past was not merely a conservative project, nor did backward-looking historical gazes irrevocably doom ideologies to backsliding into cultural reaction. In fact, progressive forces were also excited by renewed interest in Indian tradition as they hoped to mine it for proof of more egalitarian, scientifically innovative, and pacific tendencies that could demonstrate both a legacy of Indian dynamism as well as a successful Indian mind which required no

[27] See Manu Goswami, *Producing India, from colonial economy to national space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

colonial patrons.[28] After all, if there were a more meaningful Indian historical past, then colonialism could be sloughed off with little worry. The Indian cultural past was examined by the left as well as the right, in the hopes that it could be mined for proof of the kind of social order that both imagined as India's future. And in many ways, the dominant trope of this project was the rewriting of a syncretic Indian past, one that was capable of surviving invasion and appropriating the best of its invaders' traditions as its own.

This was the project of Jawaharlal Nehru's *A Discovery of India* which tried to trace an uninterrupted history from the ancient Indian kingdoms to the incipient modern nation state. The goal of such histories and projects was a use of the past in the service of a project of transformation that was still underconfident about developing an entirely new idiom. This procedure carried implicit risks, as nuanced readings of the past could appear undifferentiable from crass ones and were less likely to stabilize anti-hegemonic interpretations of the past. But the directions of these projects and the energies that they would bring into existence were still indeterminate and inchoate, as it was not clear which variants would win the ideological contests of the pre-independence period. And as a result, it was, perhaps, not surprising that a number of middle class intellectuals took seriously this past as the source of new, reinvigorated forms and perhaps the foundation of a political confidence that was as of yet lacking. Not all uses of the past led into the same ideological positions; and if history could have ideological consequences and give weight to differing political groups and ideologies, then a novel like *Kanthapura* would

[28] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

also have to be read with an eye to the version of history and tradition that was being resuscitated here to make the case for a certain kind of political future.

Their confrontation with conservative Indian society was two-fold. On the one hand, they faced a religious establishment which posed an immediate obstacle to the development of nationalism and provided a regular base for elite colonial loyalists. On the other hand, religious orthodoxy seemed not only to be coercive but also hegemonic in structuring the worldviews of those that the modernizers wanted to free. Everywhere the modernizers looked, it seemed, untouchables were servile, women obedient, peasants slavish, and the poor resigned to their fates. That they were blind to acts of rebellion that were a constant feature of South Asian colonial history is important inasmuch as it explains their inability to believe that peasants, women, untouchables, and workers were capable of resistance.[29] This lack of spontaneous rebellion in the face of oppression was in every instance structured by religious fatalism (*kismet* or *karma*) which saw oppression as a necessary punishment for purported sins in the past and demanded obedience to social hierarchies as obligatory redemption. As a result, much of the intelligentsia turned its ire on colonialism and orthodoxy simultaneously, seeing in them an unholy alliance bent on the collective ruin of colonized peoples. This was reinforced by the arrival of both the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha with their conservative agendas and their willingness to collaborate with the colonial power; institutionally, religion was finding itself defending the fact of India's subjugation and by corollary the subjugation of minorities, women, and the lower castes to the religious elites.

[29] See Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India* for an account of rebellions outside the nationalist fold.

That this modernist coalition ended up under the leadership of the Nehruvian state capitalists meant that the losing faction in the coalition was unable to press the Indian state for greater reforms, not because it wasn't committed to them, but because it was unprepared for the social reality it would confront once independence arrived and because it was unable to identify the conservative elements of the modernist leadership. At the heart of this version of nationalism was the confidence that once conservatism had been pierced and conservative worldviews had changed, it would be impossible to contain the seething tide of revolutionary activity. If religion was the marker of conservative inactivity or loyalist sabotage, then Gandhi's revisionist, protestant uses of Hinduism opened up new energies and ambitions for the peasantry and the middle class which hoped to lead them. More precisely, for one section of the intelligentsia, the hope was less that Gandhi could successfully discipline the peasantry into his model of the state and *panchayati raj*, but that his civil disobedience strategies would be ultimately uncontainable.

The worldview of the Indian nationalist intelligentsia writing in English shaped the character of the writing: modernizing, suspicious of religion, enthusiastic about a renaissance of and in tradition, alternating between revolutionary and liberal, confident without any real access to power, simultaneously ambassadors to the west and non-representatives in the east. This was reflected in both the formal choices of the earliest modernizing novelists and the genre of the frustrated reformer, who was unable to produce immediate changes in his domestic life, as well as the political choices and allegiances that these writers arrived upon. And here was another intellectual problem: to the west, this frustration narrative would be an excuse for the persistence of feudal

custom; to the east, this frustration narrative was ceaseless repetition, performing its own failures, confirming its own prejudices. Perhaps the two most important example of this genre in Kannada are Kuvempu's novel, *Kanooru Heggadithi,* and Sivaram Karanth's *Mannali Marige,* both of which deal with the utter incompatibility between progressive, urban ideas and traditional, rural ones. Having been educated in the west, armed with ideas about social change and reform, and working towards independence, the generation of writers active in the 1930s and 1940s had to seek out new explanations for the contradiction between the reformist impulses that seemed to be growing in India and the conservative hold that religious ideas seemed to have. This frustration inched towards a confidence in the inevitability of change, even while it was hamstrung by its own paternalistic belief in its own importance.

But Raja Rao's concerns were already broader and more complicated than the simple introduction of nationalism into the peasantry by the time he wrote *Kanthapura*. Even if that novel is read along its nationalist axis (as opposed to its experimental, religious, modernizing, feminist, or psychological ones), his other writings demonstrate an attention to and an engagement with concerns that were clearly becoming separated out from the range of issues which nationalism could easily encompass, and which the new, social novelist of the Progressive Writers Movement, was engaged with: representations of the worldviews of the peasantry, problems of modernity and modernization in village life, the durability of sexist ideas and their internalization by women, the irreconcilability of traditional familial expectations and urban social mobility, the viability of European languages in representing vernacular idioms and speech, the unwillingness of the low caste to challenge their oppression, and the role of

the intellectual in colonial India. His 1934 short story, "Javni," details the rational divide that exists between an already secularized young man (Ramappa) and the conservatism of the women in his family which binds them to a cycle of submission and brutality. Javni, a poor, low-caste servant (a midwife by birth, so likely from an untouchable caste), becomes the object of Ramu's attempt at social reform in his own family. She finds herself in the employ of Ramu's upper-caste family after the sudden death of her husband, the arrest of her brother-in-law, and the internal rivalries in her husband's family that it impossible for her to live on her own. Her primary recourse in this circumstance was religious – "I wept and sobbed and wanted to go and fall into the river. But I knew Goddess Talakamma would be angry with me, and I stopped each time I wanted to kill myself" – though she did eventually run away to her brother's home before finding a job with a Brahmin family.[30] Now working for the Revenue Inspector and his wife (Ramu's sister), Javni happily assumes the role of servant with all of the attendant submissiveness that chafes away at the sensibilities of the modern narrator: she eats "in the byre where her food was usually kept"; she saves her absurdly poor earnings to buy a lamb to slaughter for the goddess; she accepts her condition despite Ramu's attempts at convincing her to protest.[31]

But the constant string of tragedy in Javni's life also produces a deep attachment to the kind of calm that religion provides: "Should I live if that Goddess did not protect me? Would that child come to me if the Goddess did not help me? Would Mother be so

[30] Raja Rao, "Javni," *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947) 17.

[31] Rao, "Javni," 11.

good to me if the Goddess did not bless me? Why, Ramappa, everything is hers. O Great Goddess Talakamma, give everybody good health and long life and all the joys! Protect me, Mother!"[32] This humanist response to religion as a kind of salve butts up against the narrator's own rationalist critique of religion (especially of Javni's superstitious, animal-sacrifice version of Hinduism), which cannot tolerate the use of religion in propping up outmoded and outdated social customs and behaviors which should have long since fallen away. The two questions that the short story deals with, animal sacrifice and the injunction against inter-caste dining, make for easy targets as objects of embarrassment for the newly educated. But it also produces quite a bit of social friction when objections are raised:

> 'And what, pray, is being irreligious?' I continued furious.
>
> 'Irreligious. Irreligious. Well, eating with a woman of a lower caste is irreligious. And Ramu,' she cried desperately, 'I have enough of quarreling all the time. In the name of our holy mother can't you leave me alone!' There, tears!
>
> 'You are inhuman, inhuman!' I spat, disgusted.
>
> 'Go and show your humanity!' she grumbled, and, hiding her face beneath blanket, she wept harder.[33]

There is no middle ground in the imaginative universe of the young modernizer, between himself and the women he wants to reform. The narrator's attempt to introduce more modern ways of thinking are immediately rebuffed, both by Javni, who finds his notions completely unworkable, but also by his sister who identifies them as being part of the

[32] Rao, "Javni," 19.

[33] Rao, "Javni," 10.

new, urban ways of thinking. The debate turns, though, inelegantly around the inevitable opposition between religion and humanism, between the democratic and dynamic impulses of the narrator and the rural conservatism whose emotional content he both understands and loathes. And it slowly becomes clear that Rao's narrator attempts, but inevitably fails, to get around the easy versions of village life upon which he reflects: on the one hand are men, modernity, secularism, and progress; on the other, women, superstition, tradition, and conservatism. As Ramu's sister reminds him: "Men, Ramu, can never understand us [women] …You are too practical and too irreligious. To us everything is mysterious. Our gods are not your gods, your gods not our gods. It is a simple affair."[34]

At the same time as the ideological divisions clearly harden for Ramu, he resists thinking of this state of affairs as permanent. In fact, it his understanding of the neat oppositions between men and women, between modernity and tradition, are made possible only because Ramu's hopes for a democratic, humanist version of the world are frustrated by the reality of social relations in the countryside. As a result, even the moments of epiphany, where the narrator's progressive politics could easily emerge, he collapses backwards into clichéd figures and stereotypes as descriptions of Javni, only then to distrust his own impressions:

> I heard an owl hoot somewhere, and far, far away, somewhere too far and too distant for my rude ears to hear, the world wept its silent suffering plaints.

[34] Rao, "Javni," 6.

> Had not the Lord said: 'Whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come'? Oh, when will that day come, and when will the Conch of Knowledge blow?
>
> I had nothing to say. My heart beat fast. And, closing my eyes, I sank into the primal flood, the moving fount of Being. Man, I love thee.
>
> Javni sat and ate. The mechanical mastication of the rice seemed to represent her life, her whole existence.[35]

The experience of watching Javni eat in the dark, her food splashed with fresh cow dung, creates for the narrator a contradictory reaction. On the one hand, there is the easy return to clichéd characterizations of the peasant, content with her lot, whose "whole existence" can be reduced to her act of eating, while on the other, the narrator is absolutely unwilling to accept the solidity or the finality of that representation. In fact, the plea to a different kind of universalist divinity ("the moving fount of Being") is generated by a contradiction in an urban humanism whose empiricism cannot be reconciled with its idealism: the peasant seems at every point actually to be reducible to her stereotype. There is no progressive strategy of representation here: the peasant woman is simply a surface, easily reducible to both animal and machine, incapable of producing an interior into which the narrative gaze can pierce or which the narrator can use as an exercise in demonstrating his own expressive humanism. Rather, Ramu confronts in many ways his worst nightmare, the indecipherable figure of the peasant woman unwilling and perhaps even incapable of being modernized. Perhaps more aptly, Ramu's reaction can be explained as a crisis in the paternalist view of Brahmin modernizers who were unable,

[35] Rao, "Javni," 11-2.

immediately, to turn their caste-derived social authority into social change in the villages, especially when those reforms ran directly against extant versions of Hinduism in the villages. This is, of course, upper-caste elitism confronting its own chauvinism, but what is interesting, though, is the persistent, negative pull of a reformist impulse which prevents the narrator from retreating ideologically back into stable ideas about social hierarchies.

But in many ways, it was this problem – of a reformist Brahminical impulse unable to produce the changes that it desired – which was the preoccupation of Rao's return to the village in literature. In "Akkaya," (which first appeared in French in *Cahiers du Sud*) Kittu, another educated, young Brahmin, cannot bear the site of the long, physical degeneration of his beloved great-aunt, Akkaya. The problem once again is the contradictory way that Brahmin women imagine religion; Akkaya's religious beliefs on the one hand reconcile her to her degrading life as a Brahmin child-widow while at the same time they produce in her an illogical and impulsive hatred of the western medicine that can cure the typhoid which destroys her. And her slowly decomposing body becomes a symbol for the suffocating hold that religion has on movements for progress. A similar problematic emerges in "A Client" where a young student is tricked into an arranged marriage to "a charming girl of eleven or twelve."[36] In most places, the characterization of rural life in Rao's short stories bounces back and forth between an impulsive, paternalistic condemnation of superstitious practices and a sympathetic patience aimed at understanding the genuine hardships faced by the peasantry. There are,

[36] Rao, "A Client," *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947) 141.

of course, formal similarities with landlord-peasant relationships that are not overcome, but the fact that the impatience has to do with the pace of progress as opposed to persistence of obedience means that effects of power are shifting into new uses.

It is important to point out that the preoccupations with religion were also decidedly male. Rao's female counterparts, Vani and H.V. Savitramma, deal with the same series of questions but come to markedly different conclusions. For Vani, in her much anthologized short story "The Two Paintings," the oppressive relations are nested rather than singular. The peasant woman is at the mercy of her husband and father; the peasant husband, the whims of his insensitive employer, Raghunath. The pattern of multiple oppressive social relations is troped as insensitivity: familial, aesthetic, and interpersonal. The peasant husband, Gangaram, leaves his sick son to return to his work, despite the pleas of his wife. The rich zamindar, for instance, is able to patronize socialist realist art (spending the enormous sum of a thousand rupees on two paintings) but cannot understand the political or social content: "Triveni used to gaze at [the painting] and admire its grace, style, the distinct shades of colours used to highlight the different moods, and appreciated the aptness and beauty of the background. But neither the idea nor the underlying object of the painting appealed to her nor did she care to understand it. The painting, which could turn any one thoughtful even for a moment, failed to make a deep impression on her mind. She was absorbing its outward beauty with a smile"[37] Here the pattern of the divide between urban and rural sensibilities is turned into occasion to display the aesthetic and social insensitivity of the landed gentry

[37] Vani, "The Two Paintings," ed. and trans. Lakshmi and TV Subramanyam, *Third Eye: Women Writings from Karnataka* (New Delhi: Shrishti, 2000) 9.

towards its own servants. On the one hand, Triveni is clearly exceptional ("which could turn anyone thoughtful"); on the other hand, her insensitivity extends to her husband, Raghunath, who is equally unable to see the plight of Gangaram right before his eyes. Privilege, here, produces a kind of self-centeredness which makes the appropriate ethical and emotional abstractions into art indecipherable except as surfaces. Religious belief dissipates and disappears behind the more troublingly inhuman social relations.

In HV Savitramma's "Second Marriage," a Brahmin widower remarries a much younger woman, and in the narrative is between the pull of urban freedom (and its attendant accesses to education and employment) and rural obligations (domestic labor and spousal priorities). Bharathi, a modern, young woman, feels the domestic situation as a kind of overwhelming oppression of her own making:

> Finally Bharathi returned home to stay. Krishnappa felt as if a big burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Now there was no need for him to count the days when she would be ready to leave again. Bharathi sat in the bus looking out through the window. As she neared the place, one chapter of her life seemed to end. The mechanical routine of living, the prison sentence had to be endured again. Did everyone feel like that? Was everyone's family life so lifeless? Krishnappa was a good person. Very Patient. He was sensitive to others. If he were not so patient, would he in his old age, agree to send his wife for further studies? Bharathi knew this. She knew that it was her fault for not loving him. Or was it really her fault? Krishnappa stood waiting on the road as the bus came to a halt. He was sweating profusely in the hot sun, though he had covered his

head with a cloth. The servant got her baggage down and walked home. Bharathi and Krishnappa also reached home.[38]

Ultimately, the conflict is resolved with Bharathi's return to her village home, after having seen her life as inferior to that of Krishnappa's first wife. Common to both Vani and Savitramma, though, are the limits of what urban freedom can offer women. There is neither the assumed virtue that comes with compulsory cosmopolitanism nor the feeling that the world of rural India is without its own emotional and social satisfactions. As a result, religious belief is not the barrier to freedom as much as the caprice of overlords, the anarchy of the market, and the luck of marriage.

The group of writers in the vernacular, though, represents a much broader subsection of political viewpoints precisely because they were publishing in India with vernacular presses and much more open systems of patronage. Indian writers working in English, on the other hand, had to seek the support of British patrons in order to get their books printed, not only because the censorship laws were much looser in the home country and the books if printed in India would likely be proscribed immediately, but also because there was an implicit assumption that the books were doing the work of propagandizing British audiences about the need for an independent India. KS Venkataramani's *Murugan the Tiller* was first published in 1927 in London by Simkin, Marshall, Hamilton, and Kent and made almost no impression on British readers. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* was famously rejected by nineteen different British publishing houses, and was rescued from suicide when EM Forester interceded on his behalf and

[38] Savitramma, "Second Marriage," ed. and trans. Lakshmi and TV Subramanyam, *Third Eye: Women Writings from Karnataka* (New Delhi: Shrishti, 2000) 35.

recommended its publication. It was one of the few Indian novels in English to also be printed immediately in English in India. Other novels, like RK Narayan's *Swami and Friends*, which was helped into publication by Graham Greene whose recommendation to Hamish Hamilton was instrumental in saving the manuscript from obscurity, took more than a decade to travel from British printing houses to Indian ones, by which time they were already historical objects rather than ideological props of the nationalist movement. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, probably the most centrally recognized Gandhian novel in English was never printed in colonial India, making its way into Indian hands through returning students or tourists. As a consequence "Gandhian," when applied to these novels, could only have been descriptive about the content, not an indictment of the prescriptive ideological character of the influence or the effects of these books on Indian readers.

And so the question remains that when the middle class turned to using a religious scaffolding to buttress its nationalist arguments in the 1930s, did it encounter the same religion which had motivated the nationalism of the religious reform movements of the 1890s and 1900s? After decades of the Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and their spin-offs, had Hinduism become recognizable, even to the elite, as a monolithic and stable source of Brahminical authority and privilege, or had it become transformed, reimagined, and appropriated to defend new systems of power that were beginning to assert themselves? At the same time, reformist impulses in religion were not only challenging orthodoxy but were also providing a base for anti-colonial struggle. The initial reforms came from pro-western reformers who wanted to make Hinduism more like the rationalist Christianity they had encountered from the missionaries in India. The Brahmo Samaj in particular

attempted to take the criticisms of Hinduism that the missionaries launched and reform Hinduism from the inside. Raja Rammohan Roy led the movement in the early 19th century towards a monotheistic reinterpretation of Hinduism which also carried with it ideas about the emancipation of women (widow remarriage, ending dowry and child marriage, abolishing sati), the abolition of caste, and the introduction of scientific methods to religious study. Its beginnings in Bengal inspired many of the figures behind the Bengali Renaissance, including Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore. But the Brahmo Samaj was followed soon after by the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the theosophists, and the Ramakrishna mission. And by the time Gandhi had gotten to the scene, the varieties of interpretations of Hinduism were legion.

I want to suggest that even though the middle class was attracted to particular representations of the peasantry, which reflected their own ideas about rural life, it was not in the interests of preserving traditional kinds of paternalism or hierarchy but in order to find avenues out of the dead-end of rural life. There may, at the end of the day, continue to be a rather arrogant view of the possibilities of a satisfied peasant, but the arrogance was liberal democratic and narodnik in its sensibilities. The peasantry would need to be eliminated as a class and integrated into urban life. Joined to that agenda of peasant uplift was a project which wanted to profane secular forms from within in order to dissolve religious prerogatives all together. What *Kanthapura* succeeds in doing is finding a secular idiom, in English, of religious forms now seen as having to bend to modernity. In the narrative arc of *Kanthapura*, nationalism succeeds at doing more than making the peasants into countrymen (and countrywomen); nationalism also must put into play a number of social conventions and religious ideas that are transmuted by their

contact with and use by the nationalist movement. So, religion becomes a gateway to secular humanism; village ideals blend seamlessly into modern democratic institutions; and the sacred is literally profaned. *Kanthapura* does not bemoan the transformation of the village nor does it ally itself uncritically with a modernity that it sees on the horizon; rather the novel seems much more interested in tracking the ways that nationalism reorganizes conservative tropes and trends and uses them for progressive ends.

The original political impulse, though, sets the ideological contradiction – the fantasy is not national but individual and aggregate: that there can be a spontaneous, wide-scale, voluntary abrogation of brahminical prerogatives. When this liberal, individualist self-projection meets with an immediate backlash as caste hierarchies are upheld, defended, and reified by those religious forces in Rao's vision who are allied with empire, this allows the terrain to shift to reappropriation of the cultural past rather than a radical disengagement with it, since the audience for the change lies between an already secular, progressive worldview and the conservative apologists for empire, both of whom are vying for leadership of the peasantry. And this sets up the neat binary that was the intellectuals' version of nationalism: humanist, nationalist modernizers on one side; religious conservative loyalists on the other.

The postcolonial reading of such a situation was to see in this, correctly, a false opposition so that modernizing and conservative could describe the same social outcomes even if they named seemingly opposed worldviews. But such a reading misunderstands that the modernizers were also a coalition of forces, from the left and the right, who could collaborate on their opposition to Brahminical authority (up to a point) and British imperialism, but that ideological coalition would dissipate upon independence. To lump

the modernists together in this way makes it impossible to differentiate, Nehru, Tata, and Bhagat Singh, to create an artificially polemical example. It also allows postcolonial critiques to make a rather intellectually reductive move by which the consolidation of the repressive nation-state becomes the inevitable outcome of any anti-colonial gesture rather than arriving at the contingency of that future. But more importantly, it gets the contradiction wrong, or more precisely mistakes the leadership for the coalition, and misses the participation of a small coterie of novelists in debates with the ruling ideologues in Congress over the kind of future that would have been necessary for a successfully radical India. This is all the more complicated by the fact that the novelists were, for the most part, vague in their opposition and fuzzy in their proposals. The flexibility of Congress's idioms and the intransigency of the British meant that the pressure was always on producing a critique of empire rather than on producing a critique of certain national liberation strategies and so in many ways the emergent possibilities were often too nascent to be distinguishable.

But even still, the aesthetic and political project of *Kanthapura* bears little relationship to any variant of Gandhian nationalism. The village is destroyed; the peasants turn to violence; the women leave their homes; and the central goddess is left without any worshippers. Rao's turn to Gandhi marks an important sense that something more was needed than intellectual discomfort and cynicism with superstition, conservatism, and obedience which characterized the intellectual view of the villages (as opposed to the idealized village republics of the Gandhian variety).[39] Gandhi, here,

[39] Gandhi, *Hind swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

allowed the intellectuals to see the beginnings of a process of change which could reorganize the social patterns of Indian society, even as the terrain was not wholly compatible with the future they imagined. Importantly, Gandhi represented the first steps towards the evisceration of Brahminical hierarchy and challenges to empire simultaneously, even as Gandhi himself compromised repeatedly with both. And the terminus of this transformative impulse would be found, it was hoped, far beyond the reach of Gandhian prescriptions, perhaps even anathema to them.

There is also a gendered component to the strategy which sees the self-emancipation of women as part of the project, even when it is walled in by a kind of elitism which sees itself as benevolent in comparison to the existing chauvinisms. On the one hand, this novel is part of the trend in south Asian fiction which saw intolerable sexism in the home and began to blame women for their lack of opposition and rage to that sexism, while on the other hand, it intersects with a competing intellectual trend which saw the role of fiction in educating women out of their inferiority. Both views shared an important elitist belief in the inability of women to create the conditions for their own emancipation, but the intersection of these ideas in the novel means that ideas of women's consciousness and struggle are actually at odds and new forms are needed to find ways of describing the entry of women into the political sphere. That this comes on the heels of Gandhi's campaigns to encourage women to lead and participate in civil disobedience as well as the conscious construction of women's organizations as formal parts of the Congress Party apparatus and as a way to counterbalance the growing number of minorities represented by reservations in the central government that were allied against the Congress means that even the entry of women into politics was not fraught

with pressure from below and containment from above. As a result, the novel necessarily toggles between the docile stereotype of women (who incidentally need the religious imprimatur before entering into the political fray) and the heroic stereotype of the nationalist woman (who would find themselves consciously reflected in the iconography of the goddesses in the Hindu pantheon). In fact, the patronizing attitude towards women in the novel is a result of the naïve theory of social change that lies at the heart of the this nationalism, namely that western-educated radicals were necessary to bring Gandhi's ideas back to their villages, because they were committed to the kind of social change that Gandhi could only preach about. While, on the other hand, alongside those very patronizing ideas exist another set of ideas about the self-conscious participation of women in acts of political heroism independently from men. Even at the level of symbol, ideas of women would have to change in order to accommodate the mobilizing needs of nationalism. The Rani of Jhansi could not be iconized without the ripples being felt in homes throughout India. And, because of Rao's belief in the spontaneously insurrectionary character of peasant women, what is needed is an anarchist spark, with all of its intellectual overconfidence and arrogance, in order to provoke women out of their purported domestic stupor and into the confident cosmopolitan world of nationalist politics. So many Bimlas were being dragged out of purdah. This is Indian narodnism with an Oxford education: it shares aspects of French naturalism (Zola), British modernism, and Indian tradition represented for the west without allusion.

In the main, this characterization offers an important corrective to the ideologies of official politics and the recognized leadership of the Congress Party in India, which used minorities cynically and had no real interest in delivering meaningful reforms to

peasants or the low-caste. It is indeed the case that the landlord base of the Congress Party in the countryside limited the more radical elements of the peasant movement, as did the bourgeois base limit the working class in the cities, and the high-caste leadership limit the demands of the low-caste. One of the main problems, though, is that Anglo-American postcolonial literary studies have cherry-picked their political histories and in doing so have flattened out the complexities involved in the ideological debates that were extant in late colonial India. Gandhi, in this view, is seen to be part of the cynical deployment of bourgeois politics in peasant garb that co-opts more radical peasant movements into the nationalist fold. The Congress Party is seen as a mature nationalist movement with its post-Independence strategies worked out, rather than still caught in debates between more and less radical forces on the inside. The problem, in the main, with this static reading of the movement for nationalism is that it flattens out the terrain and makes it impossible to map out those places where intellectuals, subalterns, and activists might have actually been engaging with Congress in order to push it in other directions. But the application of this criticism wholesale to all parts of the nationalist movement has the danger of turning the nationalist leadership into a monolith and its supporters into uncritical mouthpieces for opportunist politics. This is not to say that nationalism could have solved the problems of minorities without a radical economic program, but the idealist sections of the middle class, who were being drawn into the movement in the hopes of progressive futures, could not have had the same agenda, even if it was unable to find fault with the Congress. Nationalism meant something different to those who would lead the new nation than it did to those who were describing the process of a nation coming into being, and even when the bards of the new nation were

thoroughly immersed in their own elitist, paternalist, sexist, and chauvinist worldviews, their literature was forced to confront those very ideas and change them.

In his reading of the subaltern studies collective, Sumit Sarkar puts the problem this way:

> Partha Chatterjee's *The nation and its fragments* epitomizes the latest phase of Subaltern Studies at its most lucid and comprehensive. And new binary has been introduced, 'material'/'spiritual' (or 'world'/ 'home'), probably to take care of the criticism that the earlier 'derivative discourse' thesis had deprived the colonized subject of all autonomy or agency. Through such a bifurcation, we are told, nationalists kept or created as their own an autonomous world of literature, art, education, domesticity, and above all, it appears, religion. They were surrendering in effect to the West, meanwhile, on the 'material' plane: for the efforts to eradicate 'colonial difference' (for example, unequal treatment of Indians in lawcourts, with respect to civil rights, and in politics generally) actually meant progressive absorption into the Western colonial project of building the modern nation state—a project inevitably left incomplete by colonialism, but realized by Indian nationalists. Here is a paradox indeed, for all commonsensically promising or effective ways of fighting colonial domination (political struggle, for instance, or even economic self-help) have become signs of surrender.[40]

[40] Sumit Sarkar, "Reading Subaltern Studies," *Reading Subaltern Studies Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia (Anthem South Asian Studies)*, ed. David Ludden (New York: Anthem Press, 2002) 411.

It is the goal of the rest of this chapter to return to the ideological debates which characterized nationalist organizing in Karnataka in order to offer up a different version of the process by which elite nationalism came to dominate its more radical counterparts.

Congress in Karnataka

If in the 1920s the movement for Indian national independence was concentrated and far more explosive in the cities, by the 1930s the movement had moved in important and substantial ways into the countryside and the peasantry and its concerns were propelled to the forefront of the nationalist demands of the Congress Party. This process was of course uneven throughout south Asia (Punjab experienced little rural agitation in the non-cooperation phase of the movement, while key cities in Maharashtra and Bengal saw even larger protests than before), but there was a renewed focus on the peasantry as both the new source of energy for the movement for independence and as an important political ally in the new democratic debates that political devolution and the census had opened up. Gandhi had already begun demonstrating the viability (and limited successes) of these tactics in visible ways earlier with his campaigns in Champaran in Bihar in 1916, Kheda (Kaira) in Gujarat in 1917, and Bardoli in 1925 in which Congress-led movements were able to mobilize large chunks of the peasantry to fight around issues of wages, rents, and taxes.[41] These campaigns differed from the Congress's activities in places like Uttar Pradesh, where there had been a growing independent political leadership and peasant movement that was in existence before the Congress arrived on the scene, and where

[41] Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 110-22.

Congress involvement was designed to channel peasant protests into safer directions against colonialism and taxation rather than the more radical demands of ending landlord-tenant property relations, abolishing rent, and implementing more radical redistributions of land. In these more properly Gandhian satyagrahas, the Congress's infrastructure was a necessary component to the political mobilization of the peasantry, and it was this pattern that the Congress sought to reproduce in the non-cooperation movement of the 1930s.

And so, as urban political fatigue set in and sapped the strengths of the urban branches of the Congress Party, new political opportunities were exploited and opened in the countryside and new leadership was both cultivated and trained in some spectacular civil disobedience campaigns. Karnataka (then divided between the Bombay Presidency, the Madras Presidency, and the prince state of Mysore) had experienced very little political agitation in the 1920s and became an important new front in the Congress Party's attempts to recruit new members, wage serious campaigns, and win political victories. Uttar Kanara (in the Bombay Presidency) also fit the general pattern of the Bardoli campaign: increases in tax and revenue assessments followed by bad rains; heightened enforcement of laws governing local land use, which came in to direct conflict with traditional patterns of cultivation and collection; development of peasant anger without political leadership or infrastructure; strong Congress influence amongst the landlord classes, especially the Brahmins; and an easy-to-organize defense campaign which could highlight the need for Congress-led political infrastructure. The Congress Party had, as a result, spent quite a bit of time and energy developing a political infrastructure in Karnataka (recruiting Kannada speakers, winning over the Tilakite

leadership of local groups to Gandhian strategies, and setting up new branches of the Congress Party throughout the countryside of Uttar Kanara, Dakshin Kanara, and Mysore) and had begun salting the villages for more spectacular kinds of resistance to British colonialism. The proximity of Gandhi's 1930 Salt March along the Maharashtran coastline to the Kannada speaking regions provided the Congress with the political theater that it required in order to inaugurate its no-revenue and no-tax campaigns.

But Karnataka was not entirely new to political struggle. In the decades prior to the establishment of large, organized Congress Party branches, there had been important local fights in which the peasantry, the new rural working classes (employed as migrant labor in large coffee and tea plantations in the foothills of the Ghats), and the middle classes in the smaller towns had demonstrated their willingness to take on authority and had even created regional networks through which they shared experiences and resources. Early political expressions were in the form of caste-based organizations, centered in the larger towns but providing resources and support to nearby villages, that were generally a part of the larger non-Brahmin movement that was spreading outwards from Tamil Nadu (in the Madras Presidency). In the early 1900s, the two most important non-Brahmin castes, the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas, organized the Veerasaiva Mahasabha and the Vokkaligara Sangha, respectively, and began work towards social reform in education, employment, and social uplift. In 1903, the Bombay Karnataka Parishat inaugurated a series of protests throughout the North Kanara district involving boycotting toddy and beedi shops, bonfires of foreign cloth, creation of swadeshi industries, and large political meetings. In 1905-6, major nationalist figures like Bal Gangadhar ("Lokmanya") Tilak toured Karnataka in order to establish more regional connections. These early organizing

efforts, though were still quite provisional, and Sumit Sarkar's assessment, that "of the four linguistic regions of south India, only Karnataka remained largely unaffected [by nationalist politics] – its political awakening would come in the 1930s," is fairly accurate.[42]

By the 1920s, though, important economic and political changes were forcing the movement to shift away from largely symbolic actions towards more concrete challenges to authority and the legal apparatus. Uttar Kanara was a likely candidate for Congress Party agitation since its proximity to Mysore (where the Congress Party was still legal) provided Congress organizers with political cover and because the peasants had legitimate grievances against the colonial state. There were two important economic questions for the peasantry of Uttar Kanara that the Congress attempted to mobilize around: access to wood and resources from nearby forests in places like Sirsi and Siddapur, and the increases in taxation that were affecting villages like Ankola. More serious enforcement of the Indian Forest Act (1878), which restricted the use of forest land and regulated the cutting of timber and the sale of wood, began to shave away at the resources that the local peasantry had access to and the income that they provided. In 1890, there were 240,399 acres under cultivation in the district. By 1915 that figure had dropped to 211,299 and by 1920, to 200,597 acres.[43] In 1914, there had been an upward revision in revenue assessments on land under the Revision Settlement, and this had only increased the financial burden on the peasantry. The combination of legal and financial

[42] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1989) 213.

[43] Halappa, 110.

pressures had also begun to force peasants to relocate or seek employment in other occupations, like the mines in Mysore or the plantations in Coorg.[44]

In 1924, at the Belgaum meeting of the Congress Party, the leadership of the provincial Congress Committee began the process of consolidating their infrastructure and penetrating politically into the Karnataka countryside. A number of organizations were established in order to spread Gandhi's constructive program throughout Karnataka, as were centers to train new volunteers and to coordinate a new upsurge in activity. In 1921, N.S. Hardikar, a Tilakite, established the Hindustani Seva Dal, a volunteer corps that worked in concert with the Congress Party; the relationship between the Seva Dal and the Congress were cemented when the Seva Dal helped to organize the grounds for the Belgaum meeting. The Karnataka Khilafat Parishat organized Hindu-Muslim cooperation on the demand for Khilafat, while the Bhagini Mandal Parishat set up training for women volunteers in Congress. The All-India Khadi Board and the Khadi Association were both set up in Belgaum in 1925 and 1926 respectively, and worked to distribute spinning wheels to and collect home-spun from villages. Most significantly, though, the Karnataka Non-Brahmin Conference, which had abstained from participation in Congress Party activities, fearing the Congress to be an upper-caste, Brahmin-led outfit, voted in 1930 to join the Congress. So, when the Congress decided to copy the model of the Bardoli Satyagraha in Uttar Kanara at the Dharwar Provincial Congress Committee in 1930, there were substantial organizations and leadership with sufficient training to help launch the project. The towns were more than willing to provide

[44] Ranajit Das Gupta, "Plantation Labour in Colonial India," *Working Paper Series* 140 (1990) 27.

leadership in the rural areas, and there was substantial spillover between British India and the prince-states:

> By early 1931, preparations for a no-revenue movement had started in some Karnatak districts, while a Fortnightly Report dated December 1930 referred to attempts being made in parts of Maharashtra 'to influence the Khots not to pay their revenue by inducing their tenants to withhold their rent.' There were some signs also of a spill-over of popular agitation into neighboring princely states. Volunteers from Mysore participated in the Kanara movement, while a powerful no-tax campaign developed in the central Indian state of Chhatarpur in Bundelkhand between October and December, headed, interestingly enough, by a 'notorious dacoit, Mangal Singh' who demanded reduction in land revenue and was 'said to have visions of carving out a state for himself.' On 30 December, a crowd of 20,000, including about a thousand armed with rifles, could be dispersed only by the timely arrival of a military contingent from British India; otherwise they would have 'advanced on Chhatarpur and forced the Maharaja to accede to all their demands.'[45]

But the experience of the 1930s in Karnataka ran counter to the model of organization, mobilization, and cooptation which was the explicit strategy of the Congress in other places. Partly because the no-revenue movement was lead by larger landlords in the villages, and partly because the crackdown on the peasantry was substantial, the Congress had no problem in loosening the reins in Karnataka, actually

[45] Sarkar, *Modern India*, 298-9.

allowing the protests to continue even after Gandhi had called off the non-cooperation movement nationally. So, when Gandhi ended the civil disobedience movement in 1931 (to negotiate with England) and then again in 1933, peasants in Uttar Kanara were not stopped when they continued their campaign against the Forestry Laws as well as their struggle to defend their properties from seizure by the British for non-payment of taxes and revenues (one of the forms of civil disobedience called for by Congress). Because landowners and tenants organized together against the colonial laws, there was no immediate rupture in the alliance between the landed and the landless, the high and the low castes. And the intransigence of the colonial state against the demands of both meant that the Congress was never in a position to face a serious political challenge from its left flank. In fact, Karnataka may have been exceptional, in this instance, of the party high command loosening the reins on a provincial Congress committee with respect to following the national diktat.

Certainly, in other places, the civil disobedience movement of the 1930s was characterized by a strong, interventionist Congress Party which attempted to control the movement of peasants, especially in those places where the renewed peasant militancy threatened to turn its ire on local landlords and moneylenders, many of whom were important backers of the Congress Party. This dynamic, of co-opting rural energies for nationalist campaigns, has led many to conclude rightly that the Congress Party attempted to both channel rural forces into campaigns that would net the Congress important electoral and bargaining victories as well as to contain the peasant movements that were beginning to challenge the leadership of the landlords and Brahmins on which the Congress Party relied in most areas. Cooptation was most pronounced in Uttar

Pradesh, where the Congress Party replaced existing *kisan sabhas* which had produced their own political demands and leadership with Congress Party leaders, occasionally imported, and redirected the fights against local exploitative landlords and moneylenders towards the British. It was also the case that the new rural movements were not developing entirely because of the Congress's efforts, though in some places they played an important part. The effects of the First World War as well the global economic depression of the late 1920s had taken a heavy toll on the Indian peasantry. And as the monetization of rural production had forced the peasantry to move away from subsistence production to production for the market and trade based on cash crops, a global economic slowdown threatened their livelihoods. The new, more militant peasantry turned its anger towards the unholy alliance between landlords, moneylenders, and the state, whose demands of rents, interest payments, and taxes were all becoming impossible to pay. In this context, the Congress's attempts at highlighting the British Raj (as opposed to local exploitation) played an important role in limiting just how far a number of these campaigns could go and how radical their demands could be.

Winning the leadership of these movements also required a change in style and tactics on the part of the Congress Party. Its leadership throughout its existence had come primarily from the middle classes: lawyers, newspaper editors, educators. Gandhi's leadership had begun the process of torquing the party in the direction of reproducing peasant simplicity. Peasant values became a part of the rhetoric of Congress leadership; *panchayati raj* became the leading slogan of the Congress's rural program; and peasant simplicity became the style of Congress's *sarvodaya* projects of *charkha* (spinning), *swadeshi* (domestic production), and *khadi* (homespun cloth). Gandhi's personality

became something of the model of a new leadership—dhoti-clad, religious, and soft-spoken—which harnessed traditional forms of authority to insert itself into a new position of leadership.

In this sense, nationalism did mean a cynical and opportunist appropriation of peasant politics and concerns for advantages in negotiating with Whitehall. Connections to landlords and reliance on high-caste leadership meant that Congress stopped short of more radical demands for redistribution of land, reduction or even abolition of rent payments, and an end to usury. This did not mean that the Congress could not net meaningful results for peasants, but it did mean that long term solutions to peasant problems were held back for fear that they would threaten the march to independence. Gyanendra Pandey's description of the evolution of Congress is insightful:

> By the end of the decade, however, the provincial Congress had done much to bring popular nationalism under control. The party that emerged out of the experience of civil disobedience, widespread election campaigns and ministry formation was far more sophisticated but a great deal more progressive than before. For it developed a more self-conscious conservatism in the form of support for social stability and insistence on measured and 'orderly' progress, even as it declaimed ever more radical slogans. One is tempted to say that the 'poor man's party', as the new generation of Congress leaders described it in 1920, had become a rich peasants' party by 1940.[46]

[46] Gyanendra Pandey, *Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh class, community and nation in northern India, 1920-1940* (London: Anthem Press, 2002) 187.

There are two important problems with the generalization of the Uttar Pradesh experience to the rest of India (though, it is important to point out that Congress opportunism and cooptation were not limited to the Uttar Pradesh experience). First, it flattens out the distinction between those places where the Congress had to be conservative in order to shore up its own landlord and high-caste base and those places where the Congress provided a meaningful infrastructure for protests and the development of campaigns. Secondly, it assumes that the peasantry had nothing to gain by being nationalist, or more precisely, that peasant concerns and nationalist ones moved in opposite directions. There would, of course, ultimately be no coevality of peasant and landlord interests, but it might have been possible for a while for the interests of the landlord (no-tax campaign) and the interests of the peasantry (no-rent campaign) to be expressed simultaneously, changing the character of both. So, while the criticisms of Congress certainly hold, and there were in all places limits to how radical a project the Congress was willing to endure, it was certainly the case that in some instances Congress activity, even when modest in its scope, was quite radical in the eyes of the local population. And it is certainly true that the impoverished, low-caste peasant faced with British revenue collectors and the police who enforced forestry laws had genuine grievances against the state, even while their grievances against local elites and landlords were also meaningful. In Karnataka, too, where some of the Brahmin landowning classes were willing to sacrifice their own claims to land in support of the nationalist cause and the peasantry, there was the possibility of a solidarity that makes the critique of Congress's opportunism less explanatory. Moreover, the middle class intellectuals who returned to their villages as part of developing the civil disobedience campaign clearly

did so out of the hope of changing the social relations in their homes, not in entrenching old ones. Not only because it would have been difficult to convince newly politicized students (the base of the new membership in Congress) that their job was to hold back peasant struggles, but also because many saw the entry of political questions into their families as a necessary part of modernizing them, Congress's attempts at disciplining this class would have proved difficult indeed.

The no-tax, no-revenue campaigns that the Congress Party initiated were by no means confined to obscure taluks in Uttar Kanara. The movement for withholding taxes was both regionally contagious and had a distinct national coordination, but the driving force was not merely the economic demands of the peasantry. The Congress was responding to some new political realities as well. As Nehru would comment: '"The cities and the middle classes were a bit tired of the hartals and processions,' but 'a fresh infusion of blood' could still come 'from the peasantry,' where 'the reserve stocks were enormous."'[47] These two political realities—a looser control over the campaign from the top and new rural energies being released from below—produced a dynamic in which opportunities for a more elaborate and complicated network of grassroots organizing could be realized. If, in the end, the peasantry were needed to recharge the Congress's political battery, then the tendency would be toward more experimental forms of political expression.

One of the consequences of this political experimentation was a greater role for women to challenge the official decision-making calculus of the Congress Party. In

[47] Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography Centenary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press,1989)

1930, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was part of the leadership of Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha. She not only organized a number of events along the route, but was responsible for organizing and leading the spectacular raid on the salt processing facilities in Dandi. But perhaps her most important contribution was an argument with Gandhi over the inclusion of women in the march. The original composition of the march was 71 people, none of whom were women. A number of nationalist women protested Gandhi's decision: Margaret Cousins, for one, excoriated against it in an article in *Stridharma*. While Gandhi had initially opposed the presence of women, arguing that it would be cowardly for the movement to hide behind its women as the British would never hurt women, Kamaladevi argued that women had a right to participate in the nationalist struggle. Many credit her intervention into Gandhi's organizing efforts for creating a space for women to participate publicly in the satyagraha and for forcing the Mahatma to publish an official letter asking women to come out into the streets.[48] The letter was then used to convince the Provincial Congress Committee which had been even more recalcitrant than Gandhi on the question. She was in fact later arrested and jailed for her part in the organizing of the march.[49] In 1932, as part of a Seva Dal camp in Borivli, Chattopadhyay was arrested when the police raided the camp. She was taken first to Arthur Road Jail (which had newly been constructed to house overflow arrestees from civil disobedience actions), but was then transferred to Hindalga Jail in Belgaum after she

[48] Sakuntala Narasimhan, *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, the Romantic Rebel* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999). See also, Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing, An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (London: Verso, 1993).

[49] Suruchi Thapar-Bjokert, "Gender, nationalism and the colonial jail: a study of women activists in Uttar Pradesh", *Women's History Review* (1988) 7:4, 583-615

was suspected of inciting the inmates in Bombay to revolt against their jailers and protest the terrible conditions in the jail.[50] Her long tenure at Hindalga Jail brought her into contact with women mostly from Sirsri-Siddhapur and Ankola in Uttar Kannara district who had begun to participate in civil disobedience in protest of the new tax increases and the more restrictive enforcement of forestry laws which prevented peasants from taking timber and using it for their own purposes. Large scale arrests had followed the civil disobedience some of which was coordinated with the local Congress Party leadership and had now filled the cells of the jails in Belgaum. And as a result, Kamaladevi had occasion to meet "women from the remote corners of Karnataka … the poorest women I had occasion to live in close contact with and get glimpses of their everyday life of want and hunger."[51]

Her descriptions of the experience and her interviews are some of the only accounts that we have the experience of the women of Uttar Kanara in English. As Kamaladevi recorded, "In 1932 this movement became a full scale No Tax Satyagraha and an integral part of the national political struggle drawing in participants from other sectors, especially the arecanut plantation workers, classed as among the most backward and poorest. It was reminiscent of Bardoli Satyagraha and though the Karnataka epic remains little known, nevertheless it was wide spread, involving thousands from all social and economic levels, the leadership however staying with agriculturists."[52] Significantly,

[50] Jamila Brijbhushan, *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay: portrait of a rebel* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976) 70-97.

[51] Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1986) 174.

[52] Chattopadhyay, 176.

for Kamaladevi, the campaign in Karnataka had a mass character and a local leadership, distinguishing it from the Bardoli campaign. Kamaladevi also noticed that the Congress was in many ways the late-comer to the scene of peasant organizing in the region:

> Uttar Kannada district of Karnataka had a long history of Satyagraha, even before Gandhiji's arrival on the scene. Unlike my own district of Dakshina Kannada, it was a predominantly agricultural and forest area, with a large poor, landless population, many living mainly on forest produce, grazing the cattle they tried to breed. Their demands had been for cultivable land, improved breed of cattle, adequate grazing area, remission of grazing fees and the like. From 1904 sporadic agitations had been going on. Early in 1914 a Vana Dukha Navrana Sabha (forest relief committee) was set up for better organized action. The workers were politically moved by every freedom breeze. Thus when Gandhiji launched his Civil Disobedience, every programme he advocated found an echo here, each adding a new vigour to face the resulting tribulations.[53]

Kamaladevi is, of course, retroactively writing the Karnataka epic seamlessly into the nationalist narrative ("moved by every freedom breeze" and "every programme he advocated found an echo here"). Her memoirs would be published well into the decline of the Nehruvian dream, perhaps as a kind of ideological buttress for a nationalism already facing significant critique. But the rest of her narrative is important in its taking stock of the range of peasant activity and organization which had occurred independently of the Congress Party. Guha and Gadgil confirm the narrative that Kamaladevi provides:

[53] Chattopadhyay, 176.

"Women also played a key role in a similar campaign in the coastal district of North Kanara (in present-day Karnataka), garlanding and smearing ritual paste on men who went off to the forest to cut the valued sandal tree. There, too, the timber was loaded on to carts and stacked in front of a local temple. When the men were arrested, the women symbolically breached the rules themselves, invoking the god Sri Krishna who had gone into the forest."[54] Still, Kamaladevi's record, here, differs in many ways from the pattern that is developed in the literature of the period, usually by upper-caste men, in which the only political impulse that a village feels has to be brought to it from without. In Kamaladevi's account, the organizing is initially spontaneous, indigenous and feminist.

Later in the same narrative, though, Kamaladevi backslides into the notion that political consciousness is not something that the women of Uttar Kanara possess, at least not without a Gandhian vocabulary into which their experiences have to be translated:

> How and why were these women here? I was overpowered by a million questions struggling to spill out of me. Quietly over the long evenings they told me stories. Since Gandhiji's call reached them, they had become aware of their own inadequacies, that they did not live as humans, in dignity, in self-respect. Their concepts of what they wanted was not just mere food, better houses, proper clothes, etc. Yes, they needed these but it was more than that, they explained. They wanted freedom, not only for them, but all who were today in bondage like themselves. As the great leader had called upon everyone of them to get free they must refuse to be in bondage. The heavy dues they were called upon to pay now

[54] Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadhil, "State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India," *Past and Present* 123 (May 1989) 161.

> seemed to them like the wages of slavery. They worked hard, they did not shirk from work but were not treated as humans. They repeated in a kind of anguish: 'No one should be in bondage.' Now they felt they were free for did they not prefer going to jail rather than be content to be slaves? 'Had they seen the Mahatma?' I asked. No, but they brushed that aside—never mind—his call had reached them. It needed much more *punya* (merit) to have his Darshan. He too was in prison to bring freedom for all. He too suffered like them, did not only ask others to suffer. He was a true leader—'Were you not afraid of the consequences when you broke the law?' I asked. Came an emphatic reply: 'No! We understand now that it is fear that makes us slaves. Our life circle was set that way from the moment of our birth. Our dharma, we were made to believe, was to drudge and live on the leavings. The Mahatma has made us free so we are not afraid. His care for us gives us respect. We are asked to serve, not slave.'[55]

Not just bread but roses, too, were demanded by the women of Uttar Kanara. Gandhi provided for them (in Kamaladevi's narrative) a vocabulary ("dignity," "self-respect," "freedom") through which to articulate their new political aspirations. There is, of course, a limit to how much Kamaladevi is willing to see, but despite herself, what emerges is a narrative not of Congress Party-led politics but of peasant women re-writing their own stories on top of other discourses. Never having met Gandhi, they feel free to interpret the Mahatma's political call for themselves; while still believing in religious restrictions, they now feel free to rewrite or reinterpret their own destinies. And even

[55] Chattopadhyay, 175.

though the aphorism is most likely Kamaladevi's ("We are asked to serve, not slave"), the sentiment reflects in some ways the joint enthusiasm of the peasant woman and the middle-class intellectual for an emancipated class of peasant women.

On to this demand of emancipation, of course, Kamaladevi grafts her own set of notions for what genuine liberation would and should look like:

> My prison mates hailing from there were an eye opener to me. Their description of their life made my hair stand on end. A full meal was a rare luxury, they simply had to make do with they could get. They covered their bodies with pieces of cloth. On a rare occasion like a marriage they got a full sari. Their horizon seemed non-existent. Did they ever dream of a different life? The question held no meaning. According to them for generations it had been so. There were no schools in their region, whereas I was used to at least one school in every village. Illiteracy was unknown to us. Their life was a far cry from what I had been familiar with.[56]

The country woman is turned into a countrywoman by way of her embourgeoisment: educated, well-fed, and clothed the peasant woman now has the opportunity to "dream of a different life." There is some degree of arrogance to the notion that what the peasant secretly wants is to be like you, but this because Kamaladevi only has a unidirectional notion of progress, even while there is no reason to suspect that she would not be open to others: "Such intimate communication was largely facilitated through my familiarity with their language, Kannada. But it had limitations. Their words and phrases sketched but

[56] Chattopadhyay, 175.

the outline. The intensity of their passion and the depth of their sincerity which was the core and had stirred my inmost being seemed to elude my vocabulary to give appropriate shape to it in concrete phrases."[57]

Kamaladevi cannot see anything but the reflexive economic and nationalist logic at work in the women's actions, as their political involvement in the campaign is not a signal of their conscious intervention but of their natures: "It was inevitable [impossible?] in this context for the women not to jump into the fray, especially as each day a new repressive measure was unleashed. Household goods, movable property, apart from land, cattle were seized and sought to be auctioned in lieu of the tax that was withheld. Household goods were being ripped apart looking for hidden gold. In addition auctions had now to be picketed and frustrated. The women naturally became deeply involved. The slogan went: Each day brings a new hour of trial and every trial an ever new symbol of national force."[58] At the same time, though, the heroism that the women manifest clearly strikes a chord with Kamaladevi:

> At first they had a dreaded thought they would all be molested by the police. How could they survive such shame? A few knowledgeable women were not daunted. They stoutly scorned such fears which they affirmed arose from the age old superstition that women were weak … In the forefront were Gauramma, Venkataramiah's wife, with a frail pale frame and Mahadevitai, even younger, hailing from a rich landed gentry. Eagerly a hundred women entered the arena. They did a million jobs as it were. They took long solitary journeys through the

[57] Chattopadhyay, 175.

[58] Chattopadhyay, 177.

> hoary forests, carrying messages, doing propaganda to rouse women in other villages, organized 'Prabhat Pheris,' pre-dawn singing processions, calling out women to action. The whole atmosphere became surcharged and all life in the region seemed to become enveloped in a conflagration.[59]

It is this self-activity, even when it is only rendered as nationalist campaigning, that draws out the enthusiasm of the middle-class nationalist, not because it stays within the ambit of the party high command ("enveloped in a conflagration") but because it turns the peasant woman into something that the urban intellectual can easily understand and empathize with.

The standard critique of the nationalist mobilization of women is to emphasize its cynicism. As David Arnold argues, "Indeed rather than advancing the women's movement in the 1920s and 1930s, Gandhi seemed intent on imposing on women a new regime of moral obligations and social constraints. In particular he appealed to middle-class women to give up their finery, foreign cloth and jewellery and to spin and wear khadi instead … Women's primary role was to manage the domestic environment, to be the 'queens of households,' and nurture swadeshi in the home. Except as servants of the nation they were not encouraged to venture much beyond the home."[60] And as a critique of Gandhian politics and the view of the inner logic of the Congress Party, there is little here with which to find issue. What is astonishing, though, is how little resemblance such a controlled release of women into the public sphere has with Kamaladevi's own view of the women who are inspired by nationalist agitation; Kamaladevi's emphasis is

[59] Chattopadhyay, 177.

[60] David Arnold, *Gandhi* (New York: Longman, 2001) 190.

not on the Gandhian dam but on the feminist current. It was not just a historical reality that women were entering to political activity in much more substantial numbers as part of the movement for Indian independence; it was also the case that it threw into relief a number of questions that the Indian middle-class needed answered. On the one hand, the new belief in the confidence of women as important political agents, themselves, meant confronting those women who were not in fact becoming more independent, freeing themselves of conservative ideas, and the lot. In some ways the movement for Indian independence gave cover to changes already in the works in smaller, but important ways in the villages and allowed women to challenge authority and come out into the streets under Gandhian banners. At the same time, the religious ideas under which women were becoming active might have been a problem for some of the more cosmopolitan middle class who needed to find more uniform strategies to characterize the development of their women. But the lack of progress of Indian women was not only a dominant theme in the case for continued British occupation, it was also becoming a persistent problem for the nationalist middle class which needed to believe that it could offer up its own superior solutions to the problems in the villages.

Secularizing Religion in *Kanthapura*

A fairly recent retrospective on Indian writing of the 1930s that appeared in India's most widely-read left-wing daily, *The Hindu*, argued for the authenticity of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. *Kanthapura* succeeds, the article argues, exactly where history fails at making legible the history of the freedom struggle in the villages in South India:

> In more senses than one, this so-called record in "Kanthapura" happens to be a true history of the times. For, the forces of history bring in too many changes too speedily for the villagers to digest. One single sentence and the entire movement is brought to the historian to be fixed in proper place though he may not have a shred of diary or personal memoirs to recreate those days. For, this is how it exactly happened and Raja Rao's reference to jewels being hidden deep beneath the earth is how the poor villagers sought to safeguard their meager riches. As an alternative, they placed the jewels in a niche in the wall and plastered it over leaving a private symbol or two to recognise the place. What follows also is pure history. The police charge upon men and women who refuse to budge. The police beat them up, pour gutter water and even pots of toddy on them. At last they manage to march them to the Santur Police Outpost. Only Rajah Rachanna and Lingayya and Potter Siddayya are detained. The others are taken in lorries and left in different places in the middle of the jungle. The Satyagrahis get back somehow and plant five twigs of toddy trees and a toddy pot as their Satyagraha trophies in the temple. Once again they go to the Skeffington Estate to stop the sale of toddy. The police get into action — a scene witnessed many a time during these days.[61]

We should, of course, be suspicious of the hyperbole ("One single sentence and the entire movement is brought to the historian to be fixed in proper place" and "what follows is pure history"), as it would require either some aggressive or naïve theory of

[61] Prema Nandkumar, "Tracing history accurately, the literary way" *The Hindu* 9 May 2003. http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/fr/2003/05/09/stories/2003050901130500.htm

representation in order to see the verisimilitude of fiction as a marker for reality, as such. But the account of the emotional effect and affect of the novel is still quite stunning. The novel does what diaries and records of the events cannot; it returns the gaze to the small, local details of the transformation of village life and by so doing manages to produce a seemingly irreproachable account of the past. This is something greater than the general production of truth-effects that we associate with realism or reportage, especially since the way this authenticity is manufactured has to do with the breathless pacing of the narrative, which is supposed to stand in doubly for the rapidity of a historical transformation and the time-lag required for peasant consciousness to catch up with history. Some 65 years after it was written, the novel still is for much of the English-speaking middle class of India the standard narrative of the description of the entry of Gandhian ideas and organization into the village. This is partly because much of the historical material on the participation of peasants in the nationalist movement is either written for historical specialists or is abstract hagiography of the nationalist leaders. It is precisely the emotional character and the specific worldview of the peasant which has putatively been occluded from the history. *Kanthapura,* then, serves to fill this gap; with its attention to hidden grain, local rituals, caste chauvinism, village geography, local idiom, and Gandhian politics is able to describe emotionally the contours of peasant enthusiasm for nationalist mobilizations.

If the emotional power of the novel comes from its satisfying of a need for an authentic account of the peasant and her entry into a political nationalism, then this of course begs the question. Middle class satisfactions, after all, are not automatic, and there is no reason to believe that nostalgia for village life is any real palliative to the

alienations of Indian post-independence modernity or to the reconfirmations of Congress Party hegemony, even though some have suggested that authenticity is almost always coded as peasant in India. At the same time, there is also no reason to believe that accurate portrayals of history – by whatever reasonable measure of verisimilitude – are necessarily more satisfying than less accurate ones, as with the contemporary debate about Shivaji. There is no automatic reason, after all, that the authentic should be satisfying, especially when it comes, cloaked as it is, in the garb of a counter-realist *sthalapurana*, about a fictional town that Gandhi never visited, a goddess whose myth has been distorted, and a peasantry which is substantially more capable of representing itself in the present. And since the real peasantry is never more than a few kilometers away from any major urban center in India, the fictional character need not be more available, emotionally rewarding, or ideologically comforting than the real. The quest for the authentic—whether historic or contemporary—merely conceals a different ideological lack.

What seems to be at issue then, what authenticity serves as a code-word for, is really the relationship between the urban middle-class and its peasant forebears established by prioritizing the needs of the former over the latter. The aesthetic satisfaction that *Kanthapura* provides for its urban readers is in its narrative that the rural, the orthodox, and the traditional are secretly and perhaps inevitably also the urban, the secular, and the modern. After all, the peasantry still persists in different ways but nonetheless continues in its opposition to and its distaste for the urban, and the idea that the nationalist movement shortened the distance between town and country continues to be a fantasy. Specifically, the pre-independence middle-class's English was unable to

provide for it the kind of political clout that it would have needed to secure for itself the moral leadership that it needed to win over the peasant and lower-caste sections of colonial India; it had to make compromises on both its social and religious programs in order to assure its political dominance (and this compromise is usually understood as the style and content of Gandhian politics). Pavan Varma's excellent essay on the "Great Indian Middle Class" argues that the post-independence petit bourgeois Indian oscillates between a putative morality and a powerful materialism in defining its own worldviews, and in both instances, *Kanthapura* is an unlikely candidate for the production of these ideologies.[62] After all, *Kanthapura* takes its Gandhi seriously, and not merely as a sign for the peasantry, and its characters slip far outside the orbit of Congress leadership by the end of the novel, engaging in exactly the kind of property destruction and violence that drew Gandhi's scorn in Chauri Chaura.[63] It seems more likely that interest in the novel's nationalism is motivated more by anxieties that continue to persist about the relationship between English and the nation than about the need to find an authentic nationalist past – especially when that nationalism has almost already triumphed. The need for university professors, critics, and patrons to shore up the Indian-ness of English novels and to argue against on the one hand the cosmopolitanism of the exotic postmodern "Indian" novel and on the other hand the persistence of an impoverished prose in English seems to require a successful Indian novel in English – and the criticism is necessary for the production of the emotional effect and a disciplined reader. For the cosmopolitan reader who would find satisfaction in reading about villagers moving

[62] Pavan Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999).

[63] Shahid Amin, *Event, Memory, Metaphor: Chauri-Chaura 1922-1992* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1995).

interminably toward nationalism, this "reality effect" would be a necessary part of the ideological structure of the novel, as it would confirm both the universalist nature of its political ambitions as well as secure its position at the head of a new democratic system of patronage and power. After all, if urban nationalism could be coextensive with peasant worldviews, the middle class could simultaneously avoid conflict between its demands and the peasantry (already emerging in Uttar Pradesh and specifically with the incidents in Chauri Chaura) and also arrive at the image of an authentic, suffering India which could be used to secure the moral high ground in negotiations with England. But such an opportunist fantasy risks collapsing into its own fantasy and does not do service to the genuine hopes that peasant uplift really could be a part of the nationalist agenda. The emotional advantage of such a relationship only works if the peasant benefits herself. The move towards English writing (i.e. self-conscious defenses of English as consistent with nationalism) marks out a position of the nationalist intelligentsia that was trying to find a strategy towards developing a secular future undermined by the present nationalist movement. If religion was seen as necessary as a mobilizing idiom, by giving confidence to a peasantry unsure of its own interests and political strengths, then it was also problematic for the kind of world that nationalism imagined. Moreover, since the forces of orthodoxy were aligned against nationalism, the nationalist movement necessarily undermined the hold of tradition as the basis for unity. For a number of English writers in English, then, it was possible to negotiate this contradiction by reducing religion to a form or a style in English which could then also empty the religious content out of the narrative. This move was itself contradictory – if there was an attempt to circumvent traditional authority and power then the move tended to stabilize certain stereotypical

representations of south Asians in English and not only ended up appearing as backsliding but could not confront its own paternalist attitudes towards the peasantry, and especially its women.

And here is where Rao's novel plays a unique role in the ideological foundations of the nationalist middle class. Under the guise of authenticity it provides a fantasy, and under the sign of religion it provides secularism, both of which can be read doubly, since the object of both procedures is to turn the peasant into something that her bourgeois cousin will recognize as herself. Either the novel works to shore up the foundations of the bourgeois nation state by homogenizing all interests under the party of the urban middle class, literally by turning everyone into a petit bourgeois, or the novel tracks the emergence of the peasantry into a new consciousness along the only tracks for which it has a vocabulary, the *bildungsroman*, if only to then return the peasant to her own still yet unimagined future. The same formal gesture cuts in both directions and can be read in both ways by its respective audience, and in both instances it turns on the quality of its authenticity. In the foreword to *Kanthapura*, Rao explains:

> There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this papal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of a village I have tried to tell. (vii)

Rao already easily mixes genres and styles: puranic, historic, epic, and folk narrative. The advantage of such a method is that it is always replete with the traces of authenticity – in fact, the emphasis is on an overdetermined authenticity. It is able to draw on the methods and rhythms of these narratives to prop up its own ideological apparatus. There is a tremendous amount of pressure, alongside with the narrative ease that a grandmotherly tale is supposed to maintain, on the novel to be able to be authentic. And this authenticity is not merely cultural or linguistic, but extends to the political, religious, historical, geographical, psychological, literary, cultural, and perhaps even mythical heritage of village India. In many ways, this appears to mimic the move that Rumina Sethi and others have identified as part of the nationalist repertoire where the nationalists return to the village to find the trappings of an authentic, unchanging village past. But the authenticity-effects betray an anxiety about authenticity, about the possibility of authenticity and the successfulness of such moves to produce an authentic, grandmotherly, village voice.

But certainly the grandmother is really standing over what has to be a large ideological and narrative chasm if she is supposed to do the work of turning the secular world of the nationalist movement into the sacred world of Hindu mythology. The procedure is allegorical, but there is no original narrative onto which Gandhian mobilizations can be grafted – this is allegory without referent, mythology without divinity. At once, Gandhi is like Rama and unlike Rama—geographical proximity, larger-than-life powers and presence, potentially an avatar of Vishnu (according to some of the more widespread rumors)—but in order for any of this to possible or meaningful, the procedure which has secularized the *sthalapurana* (the village folk epic about the

gram devata or *devi*) since the puranic is not precisely speaking a generic category. There are no conventions for puranic language or style (in Sanskrit or in the varied vernaculars and certainly not in English) merely narrative variations on given mythologies. The *sthalapurana* would normally either be the story of a local god or goddess (usually outside the official Hindu pantheon) or a mini-narrative set within another puranic story (in this instance, Rama, but also Parshurama, Krishna, etc.) with a local setting. A *sthalapurana* about Gandhi is in this way doubly secular: it is entirely outside of the realm of the divine; it is about a village which Gandhi never visited. Still, in the form of the sthalapurana what begins to emerge is the process through which the middle-class imagines the evolution of the peasant woman into a secular countrywoman. In a different context, Manu Goswami has criticized those who reduce appropriation of tradition to conservative political gestures as they "ignore the dialectic between social forms and forms of thought."[64] She argues, instead, that reappropriations of the Puranas were not merely holdovers of a traditional or antiquated pattern of historical consciousness:

> Puranic categories continued to inform popular temporal consciousness, but did so in ways that were self-conscious through the reflexive appropriation of specific categories and their investment with novel ideological meanings … The very understanding of Puranic-itihas as received tradition in emergent geohistorical discourse of the 1860s and 1870s … hinged on the formation of a historicist and modernist episteme that posited them as its own prehistory and within the

[64] Manu Goswami, *Producing India: from Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 163.

> framework of which terms such as Bharat acquired a novel ideological meaning. With the framework of this later discourse, tradition was no longer the remembrance and commemoration of a past that was fully coeval with the present. By figuring and claiming Puranic modalities as received tradition, emergent geohistorical discourse at once objectified and historicized the past in a paradigmatically modern historiographical operation.[65]

Goswami's warnings are particularly apt for a novel like *Kanthapura* which attempts to straddle the tradition-modernity divide formally. As she contends, the uses of the religious forms simultaneously reorganizes the political field and the foundations of a religious hegemony: "If dominant political discourse is subverted through religiosity, in what ways are hegemonic religious discourses shaped by political consciousness? Without such considerations, 'religiosity' becomes something of a static master category, one which is deployed for subversive political ends but which does not itself seem to change."[66]

As a result, it becomes possible to read *Kanthapura* as located in the precise moment when Brahminical authority and prerogative are breaking down in practice and being challenged, even as the forms of that authority continue to persist. Moreover, a *sthalapurana* that the peasantry can neither read nor hear serves little ideological value in the traditional sense. The first secularizing move is historical, though, and is recorded in the novel with the arrival of Jayaramachar, the *harikatha* man, into Kanthapura:

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[65] Goswami, 163-4.

[66] Priyamvada Gopal, "Reading subaltern history," *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studie*s, Ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 146.

> "Today," he says, "it will be the story of Siva and Parvati." And Parvati in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! "Siva is the three-eyed," he says, "and Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar." And then he talks of Damayanthi and Sakunthala and Yasodha and everywhere there is something about our country and something about Swaraj. Never had we heard *Harikathas* like this. And he can sing too, can Jayaramachar. He can keep us in tears for hours together. But the *Harikatha* he did, which I can never forget is about the birth of Gandhiji. "What a title for a *Harikatha*!" cried out old Venkatalakshamma, the mother of the Postmaster. "It is neither about Rama nor Krishna." – "But," said her son, who too has been to the city, "but, Mother, the Mahatma is a saint, a holy man." – "Holy man or lover of a widow, what does it matter to me? When I go to the temple I want to hear about Rama and Krishna and Mahadeva and not all this city nonsense," said she. And being an obedient son, he was silent. But the old woman came along that evening. She could never stay away from a *Harikatha*. And sitting beside us, how she wept!" (10)

Getting Venkatalakshamma to weep, in this narrative, is no small feat, since she is allied throughout the novel with the most conservative view of Hinduism (represented by Bhatta) and its opposition to the nationalist movement. But the *harikatha*, even as obliquely as it is represented here, manages to move Venkatalakshamma deeply, despite being composed of "city nonsense." In part, Venkatalakshamma is moved because of the quality of Jayaramachar's voice and his talent for storytelling. Jayaramachar would be the Kannadigan incarnation of the Tilakite *harikatha* movement, yoking as he does

nationalist ideas ("Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar" and "something about our country and something about Swaraj") to the architecture of traditional Hindu stories. What is important for Rao about the harikatha, though, is that it manages to get nationalist ideas to the apolitical and even the oppositional forces in the village. In fact, the harikatha appears to be the sole means for getting these ideas across. Later in the novel, when Moorthappa, attempts to explain Dadabhai Naoroji's "drain thesis" to the villagers, no one understands:

> "… And the next harvest's agents will come and bring veritable motor lorries, such as they have in the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and they will take away all your rice and you will have to go to Subba Chetty and buy perhaps the very rice that grew in your field, and at four seers a rupee too. The city people bring with them clothes and sugar and bangles. You will give away this money and that money and you will even go to Bhatta for a loan, for the peacock-blue sari they bring just suits Lakshmi, and Lakshmi is to be married soon. They bring soaps and perfumes and thus they buy your rice and sell their wares. You get poorer and poorer, and the Pariahs begin to starve, and one day all but Bhatta and Subba Chetty will have nothing else to eat but the pebbles of the Himavathy, and drink her waters saying, 'Rama-Krishna, Rama-Krishna!' Sister, that is how it is …"
>
> "Oh, I am no learned person," explains Nanjamma. "You have been to the city and you should know more than me. But tell me, my son, does the Mahatma spin?" (18)

This, too, would have been reflective of the historical experience of Congress Party organizing in the villages, with intellectuals confronting their own inabilities to match their political and economic theories to the lived experience of the peasantry. After all, one thing a peasant should be able to understand better than an urban intellectual is the drain of wealth away from the countryside, towards the cities and ultimately to England; this is the bread-and-butter of the peasant complaint. But here, the combine of moneylender, landlord, tax agent, police officer, and merchant are too complicated for the peasant woman to understand, despite the attempts at making the example personal ("the peacock-blue sari"), so she immediately turns back to the question of the Mahatma's personal example.

This narrative moment is a duplication of an earlier moment, in which the very process of the transfer of goods and commodities is ecstatically represented as an entrée into the geographical and cultural space of Kanthapura:

> Our village—I don't think you have ever heard about it—Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara. High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugar cane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forest of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, the turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambè and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted

cardamoms and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live. (1)

These are lines for which Rao is famous. The long polysyndetons, the enormous vistas, the poetical rhythms masquerading as translations of Kannada word order ("up the Malabar coast is it"), and the ecstatic series of cultural referents ("elephant-haunted valleys") are all designed to set the stylistic tempo of the narrative as well as the folkloric mood of its narrator. Anshuman Mondal, for one, has commented on the fineness of this representation of the economic nexus on which the Indian village rests: "The novel thus presents us with a matrix of space defined by a system of economic production (capitalism) at one end of which lies a terminus of production and the other end of which is a terminus of consumption (England). In between is a dislocated space filled by channels of mobility. The village of Kanthapura lies in this interstitial space, on one of these channels."[67] What Mondal does not seem to notice, though, is that the circuit of commodities is only described from a vantage point which betrays the peasant's own victimization; in Achakka's description, the exploitation is marginal and the movement is everything. And in order to produce so fine a political description, Rao is set up with a contradiction: a peasant woman can narrate the complex circuit of commodities which ends with British imperial consumption; but neither she nor her fellow peasants are able to see their own exploitation at the hands of such a process, when they are able to understand it all. The contradiction could, it seems, be resolved with recourse to the idea of the novel as a kind of narrative of development in which Achakka, the narrator,

[67] Anshuman Mondal, "The Ideology of Space in Raja Rao's Kanthapura" *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (1999) 34:103, pg. 104.

explains her own transformation, but that is not the novel's ambition. In fact, the novel needs both images of the peasant woman to be true simultaneously; it is symptomatic of its inability to imagine, even after the effects of the nationalist agitation, new, emergent patterns of consciousness and perception which it claims have made their appearance on the scene. The transformation of the central character is almost imperceptible for two reasons. First, the narrative is told entirely after-the-fact, which means whatever epiphanic moment divides the Achakka who knows from the naïve one who still holds on to her religious explanations for the ways of the world is never reflected in the text, except obliquely. Second, because the novel needs a naïve narrator in order to make the emotional content of the religious form necessary, the novel has to transition seamlessly between the narrator who believes in Kenchamma and the one who has turned to Gandhi. This is not just a theoretical problem of representing the twists and turns of colonial bildungsroman in which the native character both learns and forgets. It also reflects Rao's own deep ambivalence about religious explanations for peasant consciousness. If religious thought cannot be overcome from the outside, if the peasant grandmother cannot be induced to shed her prejudices by her own modernized offspring, then finding a narrator who both believes and begins not to believe becomes a new problem in the novel's attempts at imagining an emergent nationalism. Rao's own ambivalence centers around the problem of needing a subject who is both naïve and aware, and in essence, whose awareness can represent honestly her naiveté without recourse to critique. Because without the innocence, there is no need for the form, indeed no need for the novel, to reflect the imagined transformation of peasants into countrywomen. The gender politics of the novel are clearly allied to the development of a feminist peasant

consciousness, while the formal weight of the novel turns on the perpetual deferral of that evolution.

There are of course consequences to this oscillation. One of them is that religiosity is both the explanation for the formal innovation and impossible to achieve within the novel itself. Religious forms and celebrations were being revived for political purposes not only because of the middle-class belief that the peasants could not understand politics, but because they were immensely successful. For instance, "The celebration of Basava Jayanti, started in 1913 on an extensive scale on the lines of the Ganesha and Shivaji festivals in Maharashtra, was a great force in rousing the people to work for social uplift and in bringing about cultural awakening."[68] Not far from where *Kanthapura* is set, "Patriotic dramas such as *Bhavani Talwar, Simhagad, Bapu Gokhalyachi Pagadi* were staged in all the important towns. In Dharwar a dramatic troupe called 'Sri Sivaji Arya Samaj' was formed, which enacted nationalist dramas like *Rana Bheemadeva*. The Karnataka Vidyavardhaka Sangha had taken up literary activities and the Victoria High School was imparting education, both of them carrying on their work with a distinctly nationalistic bias and disseminating the new ideas of cultural revival and democratic government."[69] Even the literati were successfully experimenting with the *harikatha* form, as Alur Venkata Rao's *Karnataka Gatha Vaibhava* became popular as an account of the glories of Karnataka's glorious past. But in *Kanthapura*, the experimentation does not produce the advertised ends. Even while the characters are moved by Jayaramachar's harikatha, the description of the *harikatha*

[68] Halappa, 30.

[69] Halappa, 83.

itself falls completely flat, lacks any emotional or devotional character, and borders on farce:

> And lo, when the Sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujerat a son such as the world has never beheld! As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the kingdom of the sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So to our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. And as he grew up, and after he was duly shaven for the hair ceremony, he began to go out into the villages and assemble people and talk to them, and his voice was so pure, his forehead so brilliant with wisdom, that men followed him, more and more men followed him as they did Krishna, the flute-player; and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of foreign rule. Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God. Don't be attached to riches, says he, for riches create passions, and passions create attachment, and attachment hides the face of truth. Truth must you tell, he says, for truth is God, and verily, it is the only God I know. (11-2)

If the function of the nationalist *harikatha* or *sthalapurana* is to translate political idiom into religious structures of feeling, then in the novel the translation takes places without the feelings to which it is aligned. Not only does Gandhi not get anything resembling the wonderfully mischievous childhood of Krishna but he does not get narrated in terms which might even explain his heroic deeds. Gandhi is supposed to be mythological

character; in Jayaramachar's *harikatha* he is merely religious-cum-political injunction ("Fight, says he, but harm no soul"). In fact, so thoroughly secularized is the world of *Kanthapura*, that it is impossible even to reanimate the *sthalapurana* with nationalist figures. Quietly, perhaps, Rao even depopulates his *harikatha* with all of the stylistic innovations which make the rest of the novel interesting: the creative translations, the inverted word order, the emphasis on long, breathless sentences. It is not important, then, how the religious vocabularies are used to propel nationalist sympathies forward, merely that they are able to do so. Venkatalakshamma weeps, Achakka is moved, and the rest of the town begins to organize a Congress Party in Kanthapura as a result of the *harikatha*, but in the novelistic world, the religious idiom is a dud.

If the *sthalapurana*-style of the novel has more successful moments, they are in the rendering of the internal space of the Brahmin nationalist more easily readable as religious conversion narratives. In the fiction of the novel, Moorthy's conversion to Congress Party nationalism comes through his revelation of the Mahatma's political message:

> But Moorthy would have none of this. For, as everybody knew one day he had seen a vision, a vision of the Mahatma, mighty and God-beaming, and stealing between the Volunteers[,] Moorthy got onto the platform, and he stood by the Mahatma, and the very skin of the Mahatma seemed to send out a mellowed force of love, and he stood by one of the fanners and whispered, "Brother, the next is me." And the fanner fanned on and the Mahatma spoke on, and Moorthy looked from the audience to the Mahatma and from the Mahatma to the audience, and he said to himself, "There is in it something of the silent communion of the ancient

> books," … and beneath the fan came a voice deep and stirring that went out to the hearts of those men and women and came streaming back through the thrumming air, and went through the fan and the hair and the nails of Moorthy into the very limbs, and Moorthy shivered, and then there came flooding up in rings and ripples, "Gandhi Mahatma ki jai!" – "Jai Mahatma!" and as it broke against Moorthy, the fan went faster and faster over the head of the Mahatma, and perspiration flowed down the head of Moorthy. Then came a dulled silence of his blood … (32-3)

There are two things to say at the outset about this moment. The first is that the line between the nationalist and the narrator is paper thin, not only because the revelation has been turned into legend ("as everyone knew") but also because the quickening is duplicated first in the immediate crowd and then again in the narration of the episode; the ecstasy is in part Achakka's. Second, the conversion completes the mythology of the cult of personality surrounding the Mahatma ("mighty and God-beaming"), since Moorthy's becoming a Gandhian not only is written as divine (he never actually meets the Mahatma) but is also emptied of any political content. The encounter with Gandhi then sets up the emotional relationship between the nationalist-as-supplicant and the peasant woman who tells the story, substituting the theory of political education of one for the other.

This political education, though, requires certain kinds of educators, and a fairly affected pedagogy. Moorthy, in Gandhian fashion, calls off the political campaign in the village after the riot that ensues when the peasants rush to defend him from the police. After returning from jail, Moorthy fasts in order to rid himself of the hatred which he feels is the source of the violence in Kanthapura:

> On the third day such exaltation came over him that he felt blanketed with the Pariah and the cur. He felt he could touch the stones and they would spring to his hands, he felt he could touch a snake and it would spread its sheltering hood above him. But as he rose he felt such a dizziness enter his head that he had to hold to the wall to move, and when he sat down after the morning prayers he felt his heart beating itself away. His eyes dimmed and the whole temple seemed to shake ad sink, and the fields rose up with crops and canals and all stood in the air while the birds seemed to screech in desolation. And as he lay back on his mat, a languor filled his limbs and he felt the earth beneath him quaking and splitting. When he awoke he saw Rangamma and our Seenu and Ratna all in tears, and he moved his head and asked, "What's all this?" and Rangamma, so happy that he had at last awakened from his swoon, smiled back at him and said there was nothing the matter, and as he turned toward the courtyard he saw Pariah Rachanna and Lingayya standing with joined palms. Something was the matter, thought Moorthy, and holding to the pillar he slowly sat up, and he saw the sunshine flooding through the valley, while the canal water ran muddy as ever, and up the Bebbur mound the empty footpath, quivering in the heat, ran up into the Skeffington Coffee Estate. Then suddenly he broke into a fit of sobs, and they stood round him and asked, "What's the matter? What?" and Moorthy would not answer. Or somewhere behind the dizzy blare was a shadow that seemed to wail like an ominous crow, and he broke into sobs despite himself. (65-6)

The power of the language and the fast are palpable. Moorthy begins with a kind of religious revelry after experiencing something akin to an encounter with divinity, though

language is as close to high Romanticism as one can get. The fast-induced religious exaltation, though, ends abruptly as Moorthy begins crying. In the logic of the narrator, there is no accounting for this emotional breakdown other than the conversion of Moorthy into a Gandhian figure. But the language of the passage bespeaks another, quiet crisis of confidence. The hope, even in the carefully exuberant prose, is that the fast will spread the democratic impulses of Moorthy out into the rest of the world, that the reorganization of the perceptual field will induce a social reorganization on the same pattern. It is not surprising, then, that the experience of divinity is coded as touching the untouchable ("blanketed with the pariah and the cur") and a complete mastery over the natural world. But even as the religious mood of the passage continues through the rest of the chapter, culminating as it does in one more set of Gandhi bhajans before Moorthy reconvenes the "Don't-Touch-the-Government campaign," it has to pause to notice the failure of religion to induce democracy on its own. What brings Moorthy to tears is the fact that the two untouchable men (Pariah Rachanna and Lingayya) remain standing outside the temple and the scene outside remains entirely unaffected by the epiphanic structure of the political aspiration. The secular conscience of the author and the religious worldview of the narrator do not find themselves looking out upon the same world. If the use of the polysyndeton to approximate a spoken Kannada has in other places allowed Rao to press towards an authentic Indian-English, then here, there is a quiet slippage between the telescopic polysyndeton of the pseudo-sociological Achakka (who describes in detail the traffic of commodities, the arrival of the coolies, and the pomp of the religious festivals in near ethnographic detail) and the deeply internal and almost entirely inaccessible and privately revelatory Moorthy. Moorthy is, undoubtedly,

important in the novel, but this is the most intensely luminous examination of any memory or any feeling of a character; even the rape that takes place at the end of the novel is not afforded this kind of aesthetic attention. And it has the ability to make the modernist polysyndeton indistinguishable from the naïve, peasant one. Achakka's narrative has to oscillate between the authentic naïveté of Brahmin grandmother still wedded to religious belief and the slowly secularizing one that can communicate to her urban audience. Free indirect discourse is pressed into the service of religious ecstasy – but here the fantasy figuratively breaks down the socially organized religion in favor of a personalized, private one which can be made to stand in for an ideal secularism.

The other place where the *sthalapurana*-style shines in the imagistic representations of the political combat between the peasants and the British at the climax of the novel. After months of refusing to pay taxes, the villagers are faced with the forcible seizure of their lands and begin to construct barricades and organize defense campaigns to protect their property from being attached.

> And there was a shuddered silence, like the silence of a jungle after a tiger has roared over the evening river, and then, like a jungle cry of crickets and frogs and hyenas and bison and jackals we all groaned and shrieked and sobbed, and we rushed this side to the canal-bund and that side to the coconut garden, and this side to the sugar cane field and that side to the bel field bund, and we fell and we rose, and we crouched and we rose, and we ducked beneath the rice harvests and we rose, and we fell over stones and we rose again, over field-bunds and canal-bunds and garden-bunds did we rush, and the children held to our saris and some held to our breasts and the night-blind held to our hands; and we could hear the

> splash of the canal water and the trundling of the gun-carts, and from behind a tree or stone or bund we could see before us, there, beneath the Bebbur mound, the white city boys grouped like a plantain grove, and women round them and behind them, and the flag still flying over them. And the soldiers shouted, "Disperse or we fire," but the boys answered, "Brothers, we are non-violent," and the soldiers said, "nonviolent or not, you cannot march this side of the fields," and the boys answered, "The fields are ours," and the soldiers said, "The fields are bought, you pigs." And a peasant voice from back says, "It's we who have put the plough to the earth and few her with water," and the soldiers say, "He, stop that you village kids," and the boys say, "Brother, the earth is ours, and you are ours too, brown like this earth is your skin and mine," and a soldier shouts out, "Oh no more of this panchayat—we ask you again, disperse, and do not force us to fire!" Then, it is Ratna's voice that says, "Forward, brothers, in the name of the Mahatma!" and everybody takes it up and shouts, "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!" and marches forward. And a shower of shots suddenly burst[s] into the air, and we close our eyes, and when we open them again there is not a cry nor a shout and the boys are still marching forward, and the soldiers are retreating, and we say, "So that was false firing." (168-9)

And here the novel has completed its task of transformation: the *sthalapurana* is reduced to the stylistic organization of polysyndetons and simple conjunctions, with the religious elements completely excised; the entirety of the drama of defending the land turns on the perceptions of the women who are both fleeing and leading the struggle; and the conclusion of the breathless, imagistic depiction is the entry of women into a combative

consciousness and empowerment. Moreover, unlike other moments where the political epiphany has to be represented as religious allegory, here it is a perceptual epiphany alone. It has to be underscored that this is simultaneously the completion of the fantasy that the novel has set out for itself at the beginning and the very thing that the novel cannot provide an explanation for; women evolve in the novel despite themselves.

But this seems to be the unacknowledged contradiction at the heart of *Kanthapura*, because the authenticity effect requires a suspension of the content of the novel, the slow secularization and democratization of village life. If the novel moves towards producing authentic representations of Indian forms and Indian life, then it has a kind of imagined, static, stable identity on which it can rely. At the same time, if the novel persists in maintaining that the deterioration of Brahminical hegemony is necessary and inevitable, then this authenticity actually works to undermine its ideological aims. *Kanthapura* attempts to manage this contradiction by democratizing the form of the *purana* and demonstrating its flexibility to deal with the present and the particular and not simply origins and the general, but this carries with it necessary risks: the forms of the democratic *purana* risk being indistinguishable from its conservative source material and make it easier for either an appropriation of the new content or a simple ideological backsliding of the form into the religious orthodoxy it wants to protest.

The success of *Kanthapura* relies on an ideological fantasy about the nationalist convictions of the peasantry, one in which all that is needed for the peasant to become a nationalist is the introduction of religious metaphors and allegories into the explanation of nationalist problems. The nationalist middle class believed quite firmly that the impossibility of communicating political thought to simple-minded peasants could only

be overcome by recourse to Hindu iconography and mythology. And it needed the peasantry not only because of the sheer size of the peasantry but also because it needed to demonstrate that there was a viable, meaningful national aspiration which had democratic weight. As a consequence, its approach to this religious language was necessarily ambivalent. On the one hand, it was deeply suspicious of buttressing the very worldviews which were anathema to its own project. On the other hand, the middle class had not fully broken with its own religious ideas, and as a consequence, there was something of a nostalgic tinge to this kind of deployment of religion. But even here, the nationalist middle class had to confront a serious problem. If religion was a genuine barrier to politics, then undermining certain kinds of religious authority tended towards eviscerating religion all together. Once Brahmin men were no longer the sole authority on scripture, once caste was eliminated, once scripture was read as historical rather than as divine, there was a serious risk to the viability of Hinduism as a coherent ideological worldview. Once reformed, what continuity would exist between the protestant Hinduism of nationalism and the orthodox Hinduism which it confronted? Would this not merely risk backsliding into a kind of necessary political secularism?

The novel attempts to democratize Hinduism in two ways. First, the content of the novel moves in the direction of performing a successful reform movement. The Bhatta is replaced by Moorthy, whose authority grows throughout the course of the book as an alternative kind of Brahminical leadership. Upon the death of Ramakrishnayya, religious education is performed by women, where it had been the unique monopoly of men before. And reading scripture and offering commentaries were not only the exclusive prerogative of the high-caste, it was also confined to Brahmin men.

Untouchables are integrated into the political life of Kanthapura. The symbolic authority of the gram-devi is undermined as the villagers leave Kanthapura. Religious processions are unproblematically used to advance political agendas. Second, the form of the novel furthers the democratic impulses as well. Hindu religious forms are emptied out of their content and used to house nationalist ideas. Sthalapuranas can be told by women, and can be about secular figures, like Gandhi, instead of gods and goddesses.

The novel relies on tradition for two reasons. First, it needs an ideological structure which it believes can move the peasantry to act. This, though, is imprecise as the rhetorical form became, in some ways, the retroactive explanation of the middle class for the entry of the peasantry into nationalist agitation. Unable to move the peasants and their women to join the nationalist movement through their own rational arguments about the need for change, the middle class settled on the idea that religious forms were necessary as rhetorical structures for political arguments. This was middle class elitism avoiding a serious investigation of its own blind spots. Gandhi's successes at mobilizing the peasantry were explained by his use of religious forms: his dress, his simple speech, his religious allegories, etc. And, as a result, it became something of a truism that religious allegories for nationalist arguments would result in a successful communication of political urgency to the peasant mind. That the peasantry might have been moved out of its own understanding of the crimes and corruption of colonialism, finding security but not justification in religious forms, seems not to have been the mode through which peasant consciousness was understood. So, traditional forms became necessary as the rhetorical architecture of middle class nationalism when it was moved into the villages. Peasants did not understand Naoroji's "drain thesis" organically, but they could all be

made to feel the pain of the gods at the sight of the suffering Mahatma. As a consequence, the peasants that are convinced of the need to participate in nationalist projects, in this instance, are rarely persuaded by rational arguments or able to convince others by way of rational arguments. The traditional form is used to fuse together an alliance between the pre-rational peasant mind and the rational worldview of the middle class intelligentsia which closets its frustration with the slow-to-change peasantry. It also has the effect of making all peasant movements the consequence of the subterranean injection of nationalist ideas through middle class mouths. That the middle class would also perform the necessary self-effacing moves, rhetorically and historically, could not occlude its own persistent belief that it was necessary and responsible for resistance to take place. The continuation of tradition, in this respect, was necessary as proof of the irreplaceable importance of the middle class intelligentsia who could make the woes of peasant life intelligible to those who would otherwise quietly suffer the consequences of their own karma. Having outrun the peasantry in its first pass at modernizing them, and especially their women, out of their conservatism, the middle class intelligentsia found it had to backtrack by revising the form, but not the content, of their presentation.

But this use of tradition immediately encounters a problem. If the presentation of religious allegories is sufficient for moving the peasantry into action, it cannot succeed as the architecture of middle class satisfaction, especially as it begins as a kind of intellectual backsliding whose emotional powers are necessarily pre-cosmopolitan. It also has the problem of reducing its characters to superstitious cartoons rather than the rational citizens of a burgeoning democratic state. And so this version of tradition which enters into fiction as a solution to one set of problems (the naïve peasant) has to move,

seamlessly, into the elimination of those very problems (the conscious peasant) without completely undermining the ideological architecture which it has established. After all, undermining the traditional forms of nationalism threatens to destabilize the coalition between the peasantry and the middle-class as founded on manipulation rather than religious injunction, while leaving the traditional form intact smuggles in the conservative worldviews which were critiqued in the first place. In many ways, this contradiction helps to explain the tensions that are extant in *Kanthapura*: its characters seem to be both typical and individuated at the same time; the novel is both traditional and modern; the logic of protest is both pre-rational and rational.

Second, we are forced to contend with the possibility that religious authority, because it deteriorated unevenly across the country, could be meaningful in a different way in the villages than it was in the towns and cities. It would be necessary therefore to talk about a geography of meaning in colonial India in which readings, authorities, precedents and interpretations could vary radically on either side of the city limits. In the villages, where Brahminical authority was much slower in dissipating, especially in the south where Brahmins also constituted large land-holding blocks, it was still possible to see not just superstitious but jealously guarded religious worldviews which were defended not only by the elite but by the lower castes as well. There is a real contradiction between religion as loyalism and religion as the scaffolding for a new nationalist architecture, as of yet unsure of claims to its legitimacy. *Kanthapura* at once needs religion as an ideological warrant for its nationalist impulses, afraid as it is that the peasants don't care about the nation, and is suspicious of religion for the ways that it preserves the very things that the nationalist movement challenges. The novel is afraid of

the backsliding maneuver of deploying religion cynically and having it collapse into orthodoxy, as the orthodox are more than willing to deploy their own narratives. As a consequence, the novel anxiously pursues religious rhetoric in the hopes of finding a secularized version of it by the end. But because the novel's ambition is always a secular, progressive India it is remarkably unable to describe the religious convictions which motivate Hindus to become nationalists. And it hopes to achieve this through a kind of millenarian disillusionment with the religious promises of nationalism, which give way to more sober, political approaches to politics. This also requires the novel to pursue character types rather than fully fleshed out consciousnesses that might be able to provide the emotional content that the novel needs to justify itself. This procedure was enabled by an English reading public for whom Hinduism was best understood as a form and a nationalist intelligentsia which was happier pretending that the religious feeling was simply a form.

The puranic character of *Kanthapura* doesn't necessarily guarantee the novel's backsliding into a conservative Brahminical order, especially as the novel challenges the orthodoxy and chauvinism of that conservative Brahminism (in the figures of the Swami and Bhatta) and as the novel opens more democratic interpretations of texts and traditions. The novel can thus be read as part of the movement of indigenizing, de-Sanskritizing, vernacularizing and perhaps problematically modernizing the *puranic* tradition. Here, the religious character of the form of the novel gives way to its secular content – no new gods or goddesses enter the village; at the end of the story the village burns down; the novel abandons the formal characteristics of the puranas (the *panch-laksanas*). These are also interventions in the religious idiom as they are appropriations.

The *sthalapurana* forms gestures in the direction of producing an anti-*sthalapurana*: the story persists but the place and the gods who form the content of the narrative do not. And this is, essentially, the democratic move that the novel wants to open up.

Kanthapura achieves its imagined national unity by reference to religious forms, but at the same time it corrupts and renders those forms more democratic. Or to put it differently, *Kanthapura* repeats the relationship of politics and religion that Gandhi had already inaugurated without reproducing Gandhian conclusions. Some, like Hemenway, have argued that by leaving the characters "generally undifferentiated, undeveloped, rather uninteresting," and by highlighting how "it took thousands of anonymous Satyagrahis" in the movement for national independence Rao "is consciously instilling a feeling of nationhood in essentially disparate peoples."[70] But this seems to dilute overmuch the local and rural details of the novel into an amorphous national whole; Rao's procedure is a little more nuanced and mediated. Gandhi had already made it possible to look at religious imagery in a much more mercenary way and to arrive at independent understandings of religious texts and traditions, thereby undermining Brahminical authority and prerogative as the guardians of religiosity. Rao seems to continue this pattern of interpretive and individual uses of religion and a newly intense engagement with exegetical practice by severing forms and terms from their traditions and yoking them to a secular, modern project. Rao also borrows from the techniques of European modernism a use of the past as myth and as form which allows him to create an emotional buttress for completely different content. After all, if the *harikathas* and the

[70] Stephen Ignatius Hemenway, *The Novel of India*, v. 2 (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1975) 85.

religious discourses in the novel are designed to make its listeners cry, the ending of the novel induces not tears but an intensified sense of the coming changes ("my heart, it beat like a drum"). It replaces this formal religious unity with unity in action.

By converting religion into a style or a marker of authenticity (as opposed to an ideological worldview endorsed by established institutions), the novel also opened up another contradiction: the very form that the novel needed to move the peasantry was undermined by the secularization of those forms. Peasants could be moved by harikathas, but once those harikathas were translated into novels, there was no way for the harikathas to be moving. There is an ideological sleight of hand at work here. The middle class can use secular or fabular village story-telling in a way that it has no need for the *harikatha*, which it used only tactically and perhaps cynically. It was part of creating what Mukul Kesavan has called a "portable culture."[71] By the time of the heyday of the nationalist movement, the Indian classical tradition was an invented as a composite category, for there was no organic or natural connection between the cultural output of Indian antiquity, its purportedly Muslim middle ages, and its new nationalist forms. But this was also a contested invention, especially since the Muslim cultural contributions were deemed important by some and decadent by others. This has become something of a truism, but it is perhaps important to return to, especially as it helps readers of the development of this tradition understand the political, ideological, cultural,

[71] Mukul Kesavan, *Secular Common Sense* (New York: Penguin, 2001) 24. "For example, Hindustani classical music is part of the metropolitan Indian's baggage, but Carnatic music is not. This is because words matter in Carnatic music in a way that they have long since ceased to do in the Hindustani tradition. Hindustani music has been secularized over time but an appreciation of vocal Carnatic music depends on an understanding of the decotional songs of Thyagaraja or Purandaradasa. In a linguistically diverse country like India, the Hindustani classical tradition was always likely to prevail because it allowed connoisseurship without the effort of learning a language."

and psychological investments that such inventions were both products and productive of. All the more so, if one wants to suggest, as this essay does, that the forms of imagining a shared cultural past did not necessarily mean an endorsement of majoritarian national narratives, an insensitivity towards the interests and histories of minorities, or the reproduction of subconsciously conservative worldviews. Tradition and cultural forms were being marshaled in the service of a number of different ideological positions – and in an India searching for the idiom of its own independence the past became an exceptionally contentious battleground. Solidarity requires an idiom of unity, the terms of which are shaped by the received cultural heritage of the dominant groups, but the very imagination of that unity necessarily revises the original terms of the heritage, especially since the heritage does not produce spontaneous sympathy or political coalition. Each return to the past was, perhaps, out to establish a different view of the present and aspirations for the future, and was a response to differing perceptions of contemporary anxieties for which certain interpretations of the past were seen as potentially remedial and curative.

Rao's novel finds itself straddling two uneasy realities. On the one hand, it has inherited a belief in the inability and unwillingness of the peasantry to spontaneously modernize and the subsequent sociology of the peasant produced by the middle class: the peasantry is superstitious, conservative, and parochial. This is clearly a problem for a middle class that wants to believe its nationalism is in the interest of the exploited peasantry and needs to see itself reflected in the enthusiastic support of its peasant ancestry. On the other hand, Rao has also inherited an uneasy relationship with tradition. If tradition and an idealized Indian past are necessary components for a nationalism that

can voice its distinction from British modernity, then tradition also represents the very conservative and orthodox religious views against which nationalists are rebelling. So it turns towards formal solutions – religion and tradition are turned into styles and techniques rather than emotional architectures. In this way religion and tradition are preserved as markers of authenticity. This has the effect of democratizing the forms of religion and tradition and introducing secular, modern content into otherwise generically conservative structures.

But even his allies had a hard time swallowing Gandhi's views on religion. In the aftermath of the earthquake in Bihar, Tagore excoriated against Gandhi's view that the natural disaster was God's vengeance against Hindus for refusing to abolish untouchability.[72] Nehru found it utterly frustrating to contend with the Mahatma's personal view of religion which relied on an "internal voice" which directed his political and personal decisions.[73] At the same time, the leading secular forces in the Congress Party treated Gandhi's view gingerly, as the Mahatma had clearly proven that deploying a religious idiom for political ends could net meaningful successes, even when the religious idiom merely translated political grievances into divinely sanctioned resistance. The Congress Party, then, was an uneasy alliance between the forces of secular modernization and religious reform that engaged in a temporary coalition for national liberation. On the other hand, this fantasy also has its core a much more radical project, namely the full secularization of peasant consciousness, and the transformation of peasants into

[72] See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet: letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (New Delhi : National Book Trust, India, 1997).

[73] Judith Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

countrywomen. This is not subconscious – it is actually a requirement of the first, elitist fantasy, that it embrace a more democratic outcome. It is the failure of the middle class to see its own spontaneously democratic impulses reflected in the peasantry which prompts it to accept an intellectual leadership whose authority it already suspects.

But if this paternalism towards the peasantry was problematic, it was not problematic in the same way that the Congress Party was. This was a paternalism that grew out of an inability to believe that the disenfranchised could ever lead themselves out of their oppression; they would have to be led. But the hope was that this leadership would succeed and the paternalism would dissolve itself. That this is the alibi of all paternalisms should not blind us to the possibility that here, paternalism had a progressive bent; it imagined itself as a necessary part of the emancipatory and liberatory project of nationalism. In fact, it yoked social emancipation to nationalism, which it saw as succeeding where it had failed in inspiring people to move beyond the narrow confines of conservative religious belief. Once made nationalist, the oppressed would be able to manage their own futures. This is simply the necessary oscillation between narodnism and liberalism that characterized the political orbit of the early Indian writing in English. The same appropriation/intervention dynamic is at work in the characterizations of the women, untouchables, and working classes that populate *Kanthapura*. Clearly, these are not representations of the fully-formed political subjects that we want; their conservatisms, social worldviews, and fates foreclosed by other more powerful world-views. But even within these constraints, there are changes at work: untouchables, while still subservient, lead the struggles; women, even while domestic, reinterpret scripture and challenge sex-roles; laborers, even while docile, take stands against their employers.

There would be difficulties in reabsorbing these new identities and characters within a conservative nationalism – the new national idiom, while it produced new identities, produced new hopes and aspirations.

Chapter 4: The Missing Mahatma: Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and the genres and politics of Muslim anticolonialism

> When the Europeans came to the Orient, it was to an Islamic World; and they had been awed by Islam since the conquest of Spain, Sicily and parts of France in the eighth and ninth centuries. Islam had come to symbolize for them 'terror, devastation, the demonic hordes of hated barbarians,' as Edward W, Said says in his incisive analysis, *Orientalism*.[1]

> The life of Delhi depends on the Fort, Chandni Chowk, the daily gatherings at the Jamuna Bridge and the annual Gulfaroshan. When all these five things are no longer there, how can Delhi live? Yes, there was once a city of this name in the dominions of India.[2]

By 1940, when Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* was published, it would have been increasingly difficult, though not impossible, to be a Muslim and a nationalist in the United Provinces. A few important figures had managed to navigate the problem of communal loyalties: Shibli Numani, Abul Kalam Azad, and the Ali brothers had all made alliances with, joined, and publicly defended the political desirability of the nationalism of the Indian National Congress variant.[3] Jama'at-e-Ulema-e-Hind (later Jama'at-e-Islami), a relatively powerful collective of Muslim ulama from north India, would also, in 1941, come out in defense of an undivided India in opposition to Jinnah and the Muslim

[1] Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* (New York: New Directions, 1994) xi.

[2] Ghalib as quoted in Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) 25.

[3] David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

League and their "two nation theory."[4] Furthermore, the Indian National Congress paid at least lip-service to the idea of speaking for all of India by raising the slogan that Muslims were welcome under its large tent. Still, the contradiction between a Muslim identity and a nationalist one would have been palpable. Muslims appeared to give up longstanding, internal debates and fall into rank behind the Muslim League by the 1942 elections, while the Muslims in the Indian National Congress were more and more seen as Muslims in name only, and were thoroughly critiqued for their heterodoxies.[5] Leading Muslims in the Indian National Congress were devout, but the larger chunk of the Muslim membership would have been composed of secular, western-educated, professional, and left-leaning individuals. The Communist Party, when it entered into the Indian National Congress, brought with it thousands of young, secularized Muslims. The cumulative effect of these processes was to make Congress Party nationalism appear to be anathema to a properly Islamic identity.[6]

This division posed certain problems for Muslims who were either guardedly optimistic about the promise of a secular modernity or who still had hopes for convincing the vast majority of Muslims that India was a nation that could represent them and that Congress was a party which had their interests at heart. There were no shortage of reform movements in Islam; in fact, the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in colonial India saw the growth of movements for religious reform and

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[4] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1989).

[5] Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press) 1994.

[6] Gyanendra Pandey, *Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh: class, community and nation in northern India, 1920-1940* (London: Anthem Press, 2002).

revitalization that brought the question of Islam's relationship to a colonial modernity to the fore of public debate. But few of these reform movements were moving in the direction of anticolonial politics, while more orthodox elements in Islam seemed to shun politics all together in favor of political quietism. Part of the problem, of course, was the identification of anticolonial and nationalist politics with the Indian National Congress. The Congress was, after all, a different kind of organization than the Muslim League, both in its steadfast opposition to British colonial rule and in its hope for a social democratic future for India. But the Congress Party was making the project of winning Muslims over into its ranks difficult. First, the opportunistic use of Hinduism in order to win over large swathes of the peasantry and to generate alliances with Hindu reform organizations began to produce political effects that the Congress Party most likely did not endorse. Communal rioting in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the mobilization of Congress Party cadres on the basis of religious slogans and politics (like the defense of cows against slaughter) were beginning to convince Muslims that there would be no home for them in the Indian nation, and that a country dominated by Hindus would necessarily trample all over the religious beliefs and pieties, let alone the political rights, of the Muslim minority. More to the point, the disastrous negotiations at both Round Table Conferences seemed to put the Congress squarely against representational protections for Muslims and give credence to Jinnah's argument that the Congress was a Hindu outfit. Despite the fact that Gandhi and other leading members of Congress had campaigned against communal violence and sought to limit what they called "fratricidal politics," their commitment to unity at all costs prevented them from limiting

mobilizations that sought to use religious themes to activate large masses of Hindus under the banner of nationalist unity.[7]

But even if the threat of covert Hindu politics were not enough to make Muslims weary, the alternative was a thoroughly secular set of politics that were hostile to Islam in a different way. The alternative to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Madan Mohan Malaviya of the Hindu Mahasabha, of course, was Jawaharlal Nehru and his Congress Socialists, and for much of the secular Muslim intelligentsia (and the Progressive Writers Association), it was this wing which was ideologically attractive. The secularists shared certain politics – a belief in uplift for women and minorities, a program of social distribution of wealth and land, a narrative of the syncretic past of India, and a confidence in economic development to solve social inequalities – which made them an ideal fit for Muslim intellectuals who were already breaking away from religious ideas and embracing democracy and socialism. It also had the benefit of offering intellectuals a strategy for social transformation with its mass mobilizations and its ability to inspire large chunks of the population. The problem, though, was that the more one was excited by Congress, the less likely one was able to draw out Muslims into the mass protests and the nationalist agitations. Troublingly for some Muslims, the very politics which attracted the intellectuals were the very ones that they feared, since those politics often meant abandoning tradition entirely in favor of modernity, shunning anyone and anything which had even the slightest affinity for the past as a relic of a civilization already decayed and ideas hopelessly backwards. For Muslims who had come to see British

[7] David Arnold, *Gandhi* (New York: Longman, 2001).

colonialism primarily as a threat to their pattern of life and codes of behavior, the left wing of Congress offered little in the ways of political solace or program to which it could be drawn.

The Muslim League, however, was not an option for anyone opposed to British colonialism. Its collaboration with the British, opposition to nationalist agitation, and its elite politics often brought them into conflict with those who saw the project of nationalism at a minimum as a package of social reforms oriented around independence from the British. Despite entering into compromise arrangements with the Congress Party on a few occasions and demonstrating a willingness to oppose British policies, the general arc of the League's development led it to the determination that the British were a more reliable ally than the Congress and that collaboration was a better means for winning concessions from the empire than protest. Furthermore, the League was by and large a party of landlords, and that meant that the kinds of social reorganization which excited young Muslims about the Congress were removed from the table of demands that the League would raise. And, if the Muslim League could claim that there were tensions between Muslims and Hindus in India that deserved constitutional redress, its solution for a divided India meant a geographic nightmare for the majority of India's Muslims who lived in the heartland. But more to the point, the claim that there was a unitary Muslim identity which cut through differences of class (and caste), language, and sect was still being debated, and for many the idea of an Islamic state was not a move in a positive direction.

The decades between the Mutiny and independence had created, after all, substantial changes in the ways that Muslims understood their own lives and their

relationship to British rule and modernity. Still, there was now a growing fear amongst a section of the intelligentsia that there might not be a single track leading from religious thought to nationalism, and that the variety of options available for expressing Muslim identity might lead into loyalism rather than rebellion, even as modernity was making it possible for internal debates within Islamic communities to receive new energies. The growth of movements for both reform and religious revival were at least one index of the complexity of the issues raised for Muslims attempting to make sense of their cultural inheritances amidst enormous political and social changes.

> Paradoxically, British rule and the Muslim movement of revival and reform both served to heighten forms of Islamic/Muslim identification, which in principle should have meant heightened willingness to subordinate individual will to that of the community, but they also created the conditions in which some Muslims increasingly came to assert their desire for individual fulfillment as against the broader claims of the Muslim community and its laws. We see these developments in the emergence of Muslims who assert their right to interpret Islam for themselves, as opposed to accepting the interpretations of the ulama, through to the emergence of growing numbers of those who were Muslims merely by culture. In the later years of British rule such Muslims often held leftist views as progressive writers, socialists or communists. Amongst them there were also women concerned to raise and discuss in public issues which Muslims had traditionally kept concealed.[8]

[8] Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 286.

And for this class of Muslims who were moving leftwards, there was a genuine problem about how to win over their co-religionists to the side of anticolonialism. For it was increasingly clear that nationalism was leaving Muslims—either because they had accepted a religious fatalism or because they were skeptical of secular modernity—behind.

It is worth mentioning, by way of aside, that the number of people who fit this pattern (distrust with the Congress, hostility to the British, and rejection of Muslim League politics) was fairly small. The normal pattern would have been to fall into one of the three main camps (Congress, League, or secular socialist) or to follow one or another similarly organized political bodies. But for Ahmed Ali, the question that seems to haunt *Twilight in Delhi* and his own preoccupations with the formal experiments necessary to achieve a nationalist art is precisely the question of the quiet, nationalist Muslim (necessarily gendered male) who has been alienated by the various political options available to him. For Ali, it is not merely enough to continue along with the notion that modernity produces cracks within Islam which necessarily propel the Muslim male either into reactionary politics or nationalist ones. Such a position was really the driving force behind the *Angāre* project, when Ali along with Sajjad Zaheer, Muhammad uz-Zafar and Rashid Jahan composed a collection of Urdu short stories designed to be the opening salvo in a confrontation with the forces of conservative religiosity which were seen to be the single barrier to Muslim anticolonial activism. When Ali ultimately parted with the others it was over the question of how best to produce art which could participate in progressive and nationalist politics. Ali's rejection of the didactic forms of socialist realism championed by Sajjad Zaheer led him to projects like *Twilight in Delhi*, a novel

which shares none of the triumphalism of the nationalist fiction of the 1930s. The novel is at some pains to find ways to capture the sympathies of the Muslim male who has not yet found himself allied to one or another of the political ideologies, whose Islam has been both the basis for and a hindrance to his anticolonialism, and whose sense of the world oscillates wildly between a quietist fatalism and a smoldering rebellion.

Ali and *Twilight in Delhi*

Indeed, what is so perplexing about the novel and what has given critics the most trouble with *Twilight in Delhi* is the clarity of the political challenge raised in the introduction, "The rasion d'être of *Twilight in Delhi*," and the seeming lack of politics in the narrative of the novel, the sensitive account of the decline of a glorious, Muslim (and Mughal) cultural tradition and the seeming absence of any meaningful anticolonial politics. At the center of the novel are two men—Mir Nihal and his son, Asghar—neither of whom are interested in participating with nationalist politics as such, both of whom retreat further and further into private lives which are increasingly decayed or corrupted while the rumble of nationalist agitation can be heard outside of the walls of their homes. Neither do the two move closer to Aligarh or the Muslim League; Mir Nihal finds the heterodoxy of Aligarh troublingly modern, while Asghar, denied his education at Aligarh (the birthplace of the Muslim League), prefers to dote on *ghazals* and *qawwalis*.

Still, exploring as it does the lack of stewardship of Delhi by its new rulers and the pattern of decay that sets into its urban and cultural life, the novel itself is a lengthy criticism of British rule and the effect of that rule on the Muslim inhabitants of Delhi. Amin Malik for instance contends:

> The thrust of Ahmed Ali's thematic in this novel is to suggest passionately, prophetically, but always lyrically, that India's Muslims are falling on perilous times as they face the British occupation, conveying through the novel's title a dejected premonition of the subsequent fragmentation of Muslims in the subcontinent. The novel thus functions through nostalgia for the glorious era of the Mughals and prophecy about the pending collapse of the Muslim power and glory in India.[9]

For Malik, the novel looks backwards, lamenting British power for past crimes, powerless to do anything in the present. Harish Trivedi similarly argues that the novel's domestic drama overtakes the political drama of the streets: "Beyond the four walls to which [Mir Nihal] is now confined, the Rowlatt Bill has been passed and the British have on 30 March 1919 fired into a protesting crowd in Chandni Chawk, killing the son of a shopkeeper from Mir Nihal's own lane, but the great wave of national struggle that now arises remains only a dim and distant presence in the novel. Its moribund gloom and crepuscular ambience allow no room for any glimmer of hope for the future."[10] In both instances, the moodiness of the novel ("lyrical," "nostalgic," "dejected," "moribund," "crepuscular") prevents the inner landscape of the Nihal household from connecting to the tumultuous world that exists outside it; for most critics, the fatalism of the main characters is the fatalism of the novel as well.

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[9] Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004) 22.

[10] Harish Trivedi, "Ahmed Ali: Twilight in Delhi," *Major Indian Novels: an evaluation*, NS Pradhan, ed. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1986) 46.

There are good reasons to accept this charge of indulging in fatalism, wallowing in a kind of communally experienced pity. The refrain of the novel, peppered throughout, is the persistence of life: in part 1, "In the by-lanes, in the streets, the gutters stank, beggars whined, vendors shouted, and life went on …"; in part 2, "Days and weeks passed, as the years had flown before; and Life held sway as of yore over the empires of the world …"; and just before the conclusion, "Yet Life went on without any break or consciousness of change." But this is odd as well, since even if you accept the overwhelming presence of the Nihal household in the emotional space of the novel, dominated as it is by this sense of fatalism, by the end of the novel you hardly have any sympathy for that home. It is decayed and dying, steeped in a sexism which the novel chafes at, filled as it is with contempt for the treatment of women that takes place there. It loathes for instance Asghar's obscene sexuality – his wife dies from neglect and within a few months he is chasing after his dead wife's sister. It is a space of superstition and chauvinism. In fact the one redeeming quality is that by the end of the novel, Mir Nihal is forced to consider his own failure at participating in the political movements that are taking place on the outside.

The consequences of disconnecting Ali's politics from the novel results in readings like Harish Trivedi's, which despite its elegance, has the function of washing out any formal interest in the novel almost entirely: "Any suggestion of a coherent plot here, or any conscious literary plan to which it might have been written, is utterly overwhelmed by the almost autonomously rich texture; by the all-subsuming 'feel' of it. The events of the novel are not organically related; they are not in any way anticipated or prepared for with the exception of the two climactic celebrations; and, most importantly,

they do not arise one from the other to form any kind of flow."[11] For Trivedi, then, realism is frustrated by the lack of "conscious literary plan" even as the novel is designed to be an authentic representation of the historical feeling of the decline of Delhi. But this expectation of realism and plan (perhaps Trivedi means Bildungsroman) stands in the way of seeing the novel as simultaneously political and formally innovative. There is, in fact, a fairly marked rupture between the worldviews of the characters and the novel's approach to politics and representation, a difference which hints at the larger dynamic confronting the Muslim nationalist in late colonial India, when those identities (Muslim and nationalist) were felt to be pulling in opposite directions.

But in fact, *Twilight in Delhi* is not a departure from the more deeply politicized fiction of the 1930s in content. Rather, *Twilight in Delhi* has to be read differently than the fiction of the 1930s (not just Ali's, but most of the fiction produced by the progressives) precisely because it has the same aims. What differentiates Ali's project from the others is the fact that Ali has broken with an implicit sociology at work in progressive fiction (that the exposure of hypocrisy is sufficient to produce attitudinal changes; that the presence of contradictory personal politics is proof of the backwardness of certain classes) but has not broken with the political ambitions (anticolonial nationalism, feminism, social reorganization, private liberties) of progressive writing. *Twilight in Delhi* is also a novel that is marked by its engagement with debates in Urdu literature (which it of course wins since it is writing in English and therefore sidestepping the lion's share of the problems all together) and debates that are taking place within the

[11] Trivedi, 46-7.

Muslim middle-class about how to relate to British rule. It is only within that context that the strange moods of *Twilight in Delhi* can be read, and it is only in that way that the novel can be understood as tracing the complicated way that Ali projects his own tortured and problematic relationship with progressive literature and nationalist politics on to the family drama of the *ashrāf* classes in Delhi.

The goal of such a reading is twofold. First, demonstrating that nationalism was already seen by some as a project of compromise and collaboration between groups with potentially contending worldviews and goals means that we have to begin to rethink the narrative of nationalism as merely the hegemony of majority groups over minority ones. There was not only a debate about the terms of the entry of minorities into nationalist coalition but a rather extensive range of aesthetic experiments that were undergone in order to redirect affective sympathies towards anticolonialism. Second, by demonstrating that nationalism was not singular but varied, this reading of late colonial fiction also hopes to demonstrate that different futures were possible to nationalism than simply the construction of bourgeois nation-states. Ali proves this in the negative. *Twilight in Delhi* ultimately relies on both a contradictory theory of history and proprietary, aristocratic ideology of Urdu poetry in order to create the subtle moods necessary to express the ways that Islam and nationalism might be brought closer together.

In *Twilight in Delhi*, what emerges are both the affinities for and the dissatisfactions with nationalism – and ultimately a series of gestures which move the Muslim world of Delhi closer and closer towards official nationalist politics, even while the novel is suspicious that nationalism might not eliminate all the features of colonialism to which it objects. This is important for two reasons. First, because the dominant trend

in studies of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent is to see it as a movement of the majority elite – and therefore all attempts at speaking the discourse of nationalism necessarily reproduced the problems of nationalism more generally (disinterest in minorities, women, the poor except cynically) – minorities are seldom seen as having an influence on or debating successfully with majority idioms in order to craft for themselves a nationalism capable of meeting their own needs. So the procedure when reading nationalist literature tends to be to expose its limitations, especially since the nation-states that we inherit after independence fail to satisfy

Second, it's important in terms of the intellectual history of the subcontinent. The 1920s essentially marks the beginning of official communal politics in the subcontinent with the rise of the Muslim League and communal violence as electoral forces. But if we have a novel here which attempts to chart how either the Muslim elite were in fact moving closer to the Indian national Congress Party or perhaps more precisely a nationalist fantasy of such a move, then perhaps we can suggest alternative trajectories for nationalism as a whole – a nationalism which has contend with the aspirations of the minorities who were drawn to it.

Specifically, Ali's unique position in the literary history of the Indian subcontinent makes the case better than most that nationalism and nationalist politics were not matters of principled commitment to the leadership of Congress, but a contingent political choice – a choice that was secured by the belief not that nationalism would but that it could fulfill the aspirations of the intellectuals who were involved in the movement. But what makes this difficult is that Ali's novel has all but been eliminated from the national canon. It's rarely taught; no major dissertation or book in the last

twenty years seems to have engaged with it; most "histories of Indian Writing in English" tend either to ignore it or to give it a short shrift. Now this is not fundamentally an argument about canon-formation – but I do want to make one point about canons at the outset. The exclusion of this particular novel has warped the understanding of nationalism as a discourse within the late colonial novel in English.

The novel is really the story of Mir Nihal, a Sayyed in Delhi, whose son, Asghar, an Aligarh-style modernizer, wants to marry a Mughal girl, and the inevitable conflict that this produces in the household, their eventual reconciliation, and the slow deterioration of their homes under British rule. Despite the simplicity of the drama of the novel, the rest of the novel is really a painstaking, anthropology of the culture of Delhi at the turn of the century. The first part of the novel describes in detail the workings of the *ashrāf* home, domestic disputes, pigeon-flying, courtesan-going, mosque worship, marriage ceremonies, kite battling, street conversation, and urban architecture. The second part of the novel takes us through the Coronation of George V in India in 1911 and the move of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi alongside Asghar's wedding to Bilqeece. And the final part of the novel shows the deterioration of Asghar's marriage and the decay of the Nihal household: one son dies, the wife goes blind, and Mir Nihal has a stroke. It is in the main this domestic world that we are presented in the novel.

But there are politics that are ambient in the streets of Delhi throughout the novel. At the time of the Delhi Durbar of 1911, Mir Nihal, the central character of the novel comments that the people of Delhi had accepted foreign rule and returned to slavishness.

> There were those men of 1857, and here were the men of 1911, chicken-hearted and happy in their disgrace ... The past, which was his, had gone, and the future

> was not for him. He was filled with shame and grief, until the tears of helplessness came into his eyes and he wiped them from his cheeks. People were busy looking at the show, and the children were curious and shouted. They did not know yet what it all meant. It all seems a fair to them, thought Mir Nihal; but soon, when they have grown up Time will show them a new and quite a different sight, a peep into the mysteries of life, and give them a full glimpse of the sorrows of subjection. But happy are they who feel not, for they do not know, and miserable are they who see and suffer and can do nothing. (107)

Thirty pages and two years later, our narrator tells us that the mood has changed:

> The months passed by, and 1912 gave place to 1913. During the December of the previous year a bomb had been thrown at Lord Hardinge when he had held the 'Imitation Durbar', as the Delhi people called it. But the Viceroy had escaped death. The 'iqbal' of the British government had started asserting itself. Only the people had become disillusioned, and had started complaining about the hard days which were coming; and the Terrorist Movement was gaining ground all over the country. Already dissatisfaction with the foreign yoke had spread, and Bengal seemed to be taking the lead in this direction.

Mass consciousness in the novel proceeds the way that you expect it to in an anti-colonial novel. Ten pages later, Mirza, the milk-seller, speaks against the horrors of World War I and complains that the British have lied in order to preserve their rule, lied about the war and lied about their ability to improve the economy, bringing tears to the anonymous customers in his shop. By the summer of 1918, things have become unbearable in Delhi, and by 1919 Mirza's son has been killed by the British for participating in non-

cooperation activities. But these facts in the novel seem to have still inoculated the novel against the charge of containing a coherent anticolonial politics.

The problem that Ahmed Ali faces only becomes clear against the backdrop of the dominant impression that the Congress Party had of the same episode and the same social milieu that Ali is preoccupied with. If for Ali the problem is that the *sharif* home is isolated and therefore inoculated from anticolonial politics except psychically and in frustration, then the Congress Party could only rehearse the image of the unanimously anticolonial Delhi. Lal Mohan Ghose, president of the Congress in 1903, described the events of the Delhi Durbar this way in a speech to the convention of the Congress Party:

> We are not a self-governing nation. We are not able, like the English people, to change one administration for another by our votes in the polling booths. We have to depend entirely upon the justice of the British Parliament, for unfortunately it is only too true that, as time advances, our Indian bureaucracy, instead of coming into line with popular ideas, seems to grow more and more unsympathetic. Do you think that any administration in England, or France, or the United States, would have ventured to waste vast sums of money on an empty pageant, when Famine and Pestilence were stalking over the land, and the Angel of Death was flapping his wings almost within hearing distance of the light-hearted revelers? Gentlemen, a year has now rolled by since the great political pageant was held at Delhi against the almost unanimous protest of all our public and representative men both in the press and on the platform. On what grounds did they protest? They protested, not because they were wanting in loyalty to the sovereign, whose coronation it was intended to celebrate. But because they felt

> that, if his Majesty's Ministers had done their duty and had laid before him an unvarnished story of his famine-stricken subjects in India, his Majesty, with his characteristic sympathy for suffering humanity, would himself have been the first to forbid his representatives in this country to offer a pompous pageant to a starving population. However, our protests were disregarded, and the great tamasha was celebrated, with that utter recklessness of expense which you may always expect when men, no matter how highly placed, are dealing with other people's money, and are practically accountable to no one for their acts.[12]

What Mir Nihal can only experience privately, since this is the one moment in the novel for which there is no external corollary to the privately felt emotion, the Congress Party experiences publicly and uniformly. Despite the rhetorical deference to the King ("not wanting in loyalty to the sovereign"), the sentiment in Ghose's speech is clear: British rule is wasteful and nonrepresentational. And unlike Mir Nihal, who can only smolder in his own anger, Ghose can turn the same episode into political example.

The gulf between action and anger is clearly a problem for Ahmed Ali, since the ethic and the aesthetics of the novel move in the direction of finding perfect correlatives between internal and external moods. But for whatever reason, this relationship had been short-circuited when it came to the involvement of the ashrāf classes in anticolonial politics, and this was the problem that Ali returned to over and again. This is important for two reasons. The first is the one that concerned Ali – and this was the growing idea amongst the British rulers of India that Muslims had moved from being the greatest

[12] GS Halappa, *History of the Freedom Movement in Karnataka* (Bangalore: Government of Mysore, 1964) 79.

adversaries of Victoria to her greatest supporters. This was, after all, one of the principle reasons for moving the capital to Delhi and of performing the coronation as if it were a Mughal Durbar:

> One of the purposes of the 1911 Durbar was to bring all these Chiefs and their courts together, to help instill a feeling of pride in being part of a larger entity, the British Raj. The official account stated of the Durbar: 'It lacked nothing in oriental latitude and that picturesque wealth of pomp and circumstance which the East alone can give. Above all, it brought the King-Emperor nearer to the hearts of the Princes and peoples of India, and enabled them to show before the world their deep loyalty and devotion towards the British Throne'[13]

But this is the one fact that the novel refuses to accept. Even when Mir Nihal looks out at the audience watching the Durbar, accusing them of "slavishness," there is the sense that spectatorship is not the same as loyalism, and that underneath the enthusiasm for British pomp and circumstance lurks a deeper sensibility of resistance.

The novel is designed to explain the failure of colonial administration at winning over Muslim loyalties in the north, even as it explains the reasons for political passivity in public protests. As a consequence, it is written in the period between the decline of Muslim loyalism of the reformers (the Syed Ahmed Khan, Zaka Ullah, and Hali coterie, which CF Andrews calls the "Delhi Renaissance") and the rise of a confident Indian nationalism.[14] But there is a gulf separating the two movements that the novel also has to

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[13] As quoted in Stephen Bottomore, "'Have You Seen the Gaekwar Bob?': Filming the 1911 Delhi Durbar," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 17.3 (1997):310

[14] CF Andrews, *Zakaullah of Delhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

acknowledge. Syed Ahmad Khan famously encouraged Muslims not to join the Congress and to show fealty to the British as new patrons of an Islamic modernity.[15] And in the novel, any Muslim involvement in nationalist agitation happens off screen. The dominant ideologies of the principle characters are either introspective and therefore apolitical religiosity (in the novel, this is Mir Nihal) represented by the Deobandis to the north of Delhi and Muslim loyalism to the British Raj represented by Aligarh to the south (represented by Siddiq, the bania, unlikely to have gone to Aligarh, but still a mouthpiece for its views). The critiques then leveled against both quietism and loyalism lead in the direction of nationalism, but this is a nationalism in search of both an aesthetics and a character.

What becomes clear in *Twilight in Delhi* is that the novel treats the nationalist Muslim as an emergent fantasy, visible but only as an obscure shadow in the background. Unable to find the real correlative for its political ambitions, the novel attempts to resolve the problem with a turn towards form and a hope that a new kind of didacticism—careful, patient, coded—will accomplish what realism has failed to: the radicalization of the Indian Muslim reader. Harish Trivedi has described this formal procedure (though for different ends): "Ahmed Ali has no characters in the recognized sense because they would not be to his artistic purpose; it is not a human being but the city, the city as a human conglomerate, that is his hero. All his numerous characters are quickly and strongly realized in visual terms, and yet they do not even form a portrait gallery."[16] And

[15] Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930* (Delhi: South Asia Books, 1992).

[16] Trivedi, 48-9.

this is precisely why the political ideologies of the novel are coded in the form and the aesthetic affect it hopes to produce.

The second ambition of the novel is the idea that nationalism had something substantive to offer minorities – that people who should have been worried about the idea of a majority Hindu state might have felt that nationalism was still something to support. Ali's literary career with its incredible early variety and range of experimentation exposes the kinds of questions that the middle-class were grappling with; their literary endeavors became, not as the universities would argue in the 1960s and 1970s proof of their commitment to Congress but actually to the need to press nationalism beyond its stated political commitments. And if we can demonstrate that nationalism itself was a series of compromises, a series of political rather than philosophical choices, then we can attempt to rethink the reasons for the failures of nationalism to deliver on its promises.

Ahmed Ali's position in the literary history of the Indian subcontinent, and especially the history of its writing in English and its Muslim writing, is marked by two important events. The first was his participation in the important *Angārē* collection, a ground-breaking and controversial collection of Urdu short stories, which was proscribed by the British censor for its ability to hurt Muslim sensibilities in 1932. The reaction was, indeed, quite furious, with newspaper editorials and religious scholars denouncing the collection as the worst kind of heresy and calling for things far more vicious than the proscription of the book. The censor then recovered and destroyed all but five copies of the collection, prompting an outcry from artists in British India as well as nationalists who saw this as one more crackdown on Indian civil liberties after the passage of the much hated Rowlatt Act. Ali and his collaborators—Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, and

Muhammad uz-Zafar—became something of celebrities within the literary world of colonial India for not only their literary daring in the face of imperial censorship, but also their willingness to challenge simultaneously the conservative worldviews of the Muslim elite and the corrosive influences of British imperialism on the Muslim mind.[17] This group later became the nucleus of the All Indian Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA), as Sajjad Zaheer and others began to knit together meetings of writers from all over the subcontinent into an organization which could fight for freedom of literary expression under the British Raj. It also later contained the germ of the Communist Party of Pakistan, with both Sajjad Zaheer and Muhammad uz-Zafar holding key positions in the party leadership. Ali flirted with, but never joined the communists. Ali's later break from the All India Progressive Writers' Association after that organization became too expressly connected to the aims and ambitions of the Communist Party of India and Ali could no longer tolerate the ideological discipline that it demanded has also become an important part of that canonization.[18] Turned into something of a canary in a political coalmine, Ali's early career has been turned into an important index in the canon of the putatively corrupting influences of Stalinism on the formation of a committed literature in the subcontinent.[19]

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[17] Carlo Coppola, "The *Angare* Group: the *enfants terrible* of Urdu literature," Annual of Urdu Studies 1 (1981): 57-69.

[18] Ahmed Ali, "Afterword," *The Prison-House* (Karachi: Akrash Publishers, 1984): 168-9 and Sajjad Zaheer, *The Light: A History of the Movement for Progressive Literature in the Indo-Pak Subcontinent*, trans. Amina Azfar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[19] Almost every account of Ali's biography finds the need to mention his disaffiliation with the All India Progressive Writers' Movement. Importantly, a few critics have attempted to preserve Ali's place among the progressives, see Zeno in *Annual of Urdu Studies*.

The second episode, Ali's Pakistani citizenship, has all but erased him from the canon of Indian Writing in English. In 1947, Ali had been assigned British Council Visiting Professor of English at the National Central University at Nanking, a position which took him away from Delhi in the months immediately preceding independence and partition. By the time Ali was able to return, reclaiming his ancestral property became difficult in the turbulent times after Partition, a fact which not only left him bitter but forced him to move to Pakistan with his family. As a result, he was canonized as a Pakistani writer (as opposed to Indian), as most histories of Indian writing in English tend to leave him out (save MK Naik's), with specifically Muslim (as opposed to Indian) concerns.[20] His later positions in the Pakistani Foreign Service (as a diplomat to Morocco and China) and his place as one of the founding fellows of the Pakistan Academy of Letters, as well as receiving the *Sitara-e-Imtiaz*, Pakistan's highest literary award, have only cemented his Pakistani identity. Alamgir Hashmi, in a retrospective on Ali's life, calls him "the father of Pakistani literature in both English and Urdu" and argues that it was "Ahmed Ali's work that has generated much of Pakistani literature in English," while Tariq Rahman devotes an entire chapter to Ali's role in his seminal book, *A History of Pakistani Literature in English*.[21] The Pakistani-ness of Ahmed Ali is all the more interesting since his greatest literary achievement, after all, was the production of a

[20] See Iyengar and Narsimhaiah's histories, neither of which mention Ali.

[21] Alamgir Hashmi, "Professor Ahmed Ali," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 9 (1994): 44-8, and Tariq Rahman, *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* (Lahore: Vanguard Press, 1991), and Alamgir Hashmi, "Literature in English," in *English Postcoloniality: Literatures from Around the World*, ed. Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan (Westport: Greenwod Publishing, 1996) 107.

novel about deep connections between Islam and the now Indian heartland, about how Delhi, the capital of India, was at its core a Muslim city.

And this narrative of conservatization and betrayal, of an Ali who moves from flirting with radical left-wing politics to an Ali abandoned by an Indian home and who then writes about the core of Muslim culture and religion (feudal poetry in *The Golden Tradition*, religious questions in his translation of the *Qur'an*, and "arguably the first Muslim novelist of any consequence"), has colored in many ways readings of Ali's fiction. There are two reasons for this. The first is the historical reality of partition, which is seen as the inevitable result of the political retreat into religious identities that was taking place in the first half of the twentieth century. Partition becomes not only immeasurably important in understanding the fiction of the subcontinent, but the overwhelming fact of partition becomes impossible to read against, and narratives which participate in the deployment of religious idioms for political purposes are seen inevitably leading towards the moment where Muslim and Hindu identities became irreconcilably opposed. At best, Ali is understood to be a victim of circumstance, hopelessly contradictory, progressive and conservative, Indian and Pakistani, but rarely committed. Consider Gerhard Stilz's account of the arc of Ali's career:

> Born in Delhi in 1910, he chose Pakistan as his home and national identity after partition. This made him a victim and a vehicle of India's political predicament. His Muslim ancestry, background and education involved him beyond his will in communal antagonism. His nostalgic courting of past glories of the Mughals and his elegiac view of old Indian Muslim traditions seem to jar against the notions of progress and cultural change which he embraced at Aligarh Muslim University in

> 1926, which he then propagated as the co-founder of the Progressive Writers' Movement of India in 1932 and which he has defended ever since, as a businessman, but also as a man of letters. His passionate advocacy [of] Urdu as the most beautiful of Indian languages seems to be unduly compromised only by the fact that he published most of his own writings in English … Ali wavers between a modern aesthetics of change and the nostalgic longing for a romantic world of beauty.[22]

The canonized Ali, troubled, haunted, and plagued with a longing for a past that has been interrupted by modernity and at the same time progressive but not radical, makes it possible to read his later politics back into his earlier fiction. This is already an inevitable problem given the way that partition and communalism still overshadow all thinking about religion and religious identity in the subcontinent, but it is a particular problem with an author who has undergone a substantial amount of intellectual development and transformation. Stilz even manages to make Ali an unwitting party to "communal antagonism," though there is no evidence that Ali participated in or was used as a pretext for pre- or post-Partition debates of this kind. And the specific strategies—emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and symbolic—that a writer might deploy to come to terms with and explain the unique circumstances facing a Muslim, modern, progressive man, are markers of his failure (Harish Trivedi famously called Ali a "one-novel novelist") as a thinker and perhaps his position as an emblem of but not a participant in the debates that were taking place in colonial India.

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[22] Gerhard Stilz, "'Live in Fragments No Longer': a conciliatory analysis of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*," *Crisis and Creativity in the new literatures in English*, ed. Geoffrey Davis, et al (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1990), 369-70.

Ali's own introduction to *Twilight in Delhi* has not helped matters. In 1966, he revised his introduction to reflect the changed historical realities since the novel had been printed. "The *raison d'être* of *Twilight in Delhi*," we are told, was to show that "the damage done by colonial powers to the heritage of conquered peoples is irreversible."[23] The lengthy introduction begins by detailing the consequences of imperialism on the colonized, from the Aztecs to Africa, and goes on to explain how the British slowly destroyed the best aspects of Muslim and Mughal culture in India, generally, and Delhi, specifically. But the final paragraph of the introduction changes directions:

> Seldom is one allowed to see a pageant of History whirl past, and partake in it too. Since its publication, the Delhi of the novel has changed beyond nostalgia and recognition. *For its culture was born and nourished within city walls that lie demolished today; and the distinction between its well-preserved, jealously guarded language and the surrounding world has disappeared in the rattle of many tongues, even as the homogeneity of its culture has been engulfed in the tide of unrestricted promiscuity*. The British had only built a new capital outside the city walls. *The present rulers have removed the last vestige on which the old culture could have taken its stand and are moving it farther away towards Indraprastha, affirming the prophecy of the book*: Seven Delhis have fallen, and the eight has gone the way of its predecessors, yet to be demolished and built

[23] Ali, xi.

again. Life, like the phoenix, must collect the spices for its next and set fire to it, and arise resurrected out of the flames.[24]

Here, the independent and partitioned Indian nation falls into the long legacy of Delhi's conquerors, as one more imperialist that has devastated the country. Ali's problems with the construction of this Indian nation are already easily identifiable as a post-colonial dissatisfaction with the promises of independence and the horror of partition; India's new Hindu identity ("moving it farther away towards Indraprastha") has irreparably damaged the possibility of another renaissance of Urdu letters. Instead of producing a national renaissance with Delhi as its capital, the Indian nation merely reproduced and accelerated the pattern of previous conquerors ("removed the last vestige on which the old culture could have taken its stand"). But more troublingly, this Ali is also a cultural chauvinist ("the rattle of many tongues" and "unrestricted promiscuity") and a feudal apologist ("its culture was born and nourished within city walls that lie demolished today"), and in comparison to Stilz's picture, an out-and-out conservative, despite his opposition to British colonialism.

But there are two problems with the 1966 introduction. The first is that it is disingenuous about the cultural moment in which the novel was produced and the intellectual concerns which went into the specific composition of the novel. In the 1940 edition of *Twilight in Delhi*, Ahmed Ali penned the following markedly different conclusion to his introduction for the novel:

[24] Ali, xix-xx.

> Seldom is one allowed to see a pageant of history whirl past, and partake in it too. Ever since becoming capital in the early thirteenth century, imbibing knowledge and ideas and imparting cultures, becoming *homogeneous and cosmopolitan* in spite of the origin and ethnicity of its rulers and inhabitants, it had remained *the embodiment of a whole country, free of the creedal ghosts and apparitions* that haunt some of modern India's critics and bibliographers chased by the dead souls of biased historians of yesterday. Enmeshed in the prejudices and rules and rulers, they gainsay by the very nature of their studied silence, his rightful place to the author among his contemporaries; and in their self-seeking separateness deny the city of the novel its Indianness and wider cultural view and representational character, as against the verdict of history.[25]

The concerns for Ali, so soon after the heady days of the *Angārē* controversy and already drifting away from though not completely breaking away from the progressive politics of the group, are to find in Delhi the embryo of a national identity that can stand in for the whole country.[26] Delhi was ideal because of its history and because of its composite character as the hub through which different ethnic and religious groups could pass and intermingle. But Delhi was also important because allegorizing it secured in the Indian

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[25] Ahmed Ali as quoted in Mushirul Hasan's *A Moral Reckoning* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2005) 241. I have looked at several editions of this novel and cannot find the passage that Hasan reproduces. I have emailed Mushirul Hasan in the hopes of finding the passage in question. The plausibility of this passage being real is held up by an interview between Ali and Priya Joshi reported in *In Another Country*, 213.

[26] See "Translator's Note," in Ahmed Ali, "A Night of Winter Rains," trans. Snehal Shingavi, *Annual of Urdu Studies* 22 (2007): 240-1. Also, Shabana Mahmud, "*Angare* and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association," *Modern Asian Studies* 30.2 (1996): 447-467, and Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Sahiyta Akademi, 2006), 274-5.

nation a place for a Mughal and Muslim past. *Twilight in Delhi*, then was part of the project of overcoming the divide-and-rule politics of the British ("enmeshed in the prejudices and rules and rulers") and reanimating a humanist principle which could have found in Delhi the foundations of Hindu-Muslim collaboration and amity and would have used that humanism to revivify a more confident nationalist politics. There is, of course, a sleight of hand at work here, since this anti-communal Delhi is more or less a fantasy, but it does mark Ali's novel as a different kind of nation-in-miniature. After all, colonialism happened to the Muslims as well as the Hindus, Ali might have reminded us; and a new nationalist project would have to embrace both of its cultural heritages not only to fight against colonialism but in order to win adherents. As a result, in the earlier introduction, Ali also attempts to re-map India and Delhi, turning India not into the land that the Muslims invaded, but the land that the Muslims helped to develop, contributed to and even cared for. *Twilight in Delhi* makes Delhi both stand in for the rest of India and prove the longevity of Muslim contributions to the subcontinent.

There is a second problem with the later introduction. It poses an entirely different theory and ideology of history than the one that is explicitly laid out in the opening lines of the novel. The narrator of *Twilight in Delhi* informs us in one of the novels most lyrical and memorable passages that:

> But the city of Delhi, built hundreds of years ago, fought for, died for, coveted and desired, built, destroyed and rebuilt, for five and six and seven times, mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive, lies indifferent in the arms of sleep. It was the city of kings and monarchs, of poets and story tellers, courtiers and nobles. But no king lives there today, and the poets are

> feeling the lack of patronage; and the old inhabitants, though still alive, have lost their pride and grandeur under a foreign yoke. Yet the city stands still intact, as do many more forts and tombs and monuments, remnants and reminders of old Delhis, holding on to life with a tenacity and purpose which is beyond comprehension and belief.
>
> It was built after the great battle of Mahabharat by Raja Yudhisthtra in 1453 BC, and has been the cause of many a great and historic battle. Destruction is in its foundation and blood is in its soil. It has seen the fall of many a glorious kingdom, and listened to the groans of birth. It is the symbol of Life and Death, and revenge is its nature. (4)

This passage, with its references to the longevity of Delhi despite the cyclical pattern of its destruction and resurrection, presents Ali's "prophecy" differently than the 1966 introduction. Here, Delhi survives inconceivably despite the odds; Ali's reinterpretation of his prophecy ("the eighth has gone the way of its predecessors, yet to be demolished and built again") can smuggle itself into this reading only at some cost. In order to do so, the novel must be torque so hard against the anti-imperial political axle on which it turns as to rend the novel apart; for if the city is merely the location of the rise and fall of empires, none can claim any more political legitimacy (and its concomitant principle, political victimhood) than the other. Either Delhi is merely the site of the historical rise and fall of empires, or Delhi in its modern incarnation is the last in a series of great capitals; the two interpretations are mutually exclusive. And the novel's moodiness, its smoldering anger, requires a different interpretation of that cycle – the previous empires were Indian, after all, the contemporary one is not.

The cyclical character of the novel's themes (that Delhi rises and falls repeatedly) is only possible with the strong belief in the impending success of Indian nationalism against the British, even as it is anxious about the costs of that success. And the novel as a result oscillates between these two registers of smoldering anti-imperialist discontent and a real nostalgia for the cultural decay which is its source. In fact, it is only because of the residual memory of a past cultural glory that the Ali's anti-imperialism can even have an emotional solidity. The novel also relies on a persistent familial memory of the crimes of imperialism: the loss of property; the perpetual intrusion of Englishness, the repeated tales of the experience of the Mutiny; the changes in cultural codes and behaviors; the decline of the courtesans; the decay of buildings and monuments. At every turn, the experience of the everyday commingles with a persistent wound inflicted on sharif life by colonialism. But that memory is necessary because of the uneasy compromise that has been made to live in Delhi, namely the ever-shrinking horizons of the family are the price that has to be paid for life under the Raj.

The Urdu Delhi of Ahmed Ali

Twilight in Delhi has two ambitions. The first is to explain the effects of colonialism on *ashrāf* (Muslim elite) culture in Delhi in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This corresponds to the realist pattern of the novel. Charting the decline of a landed, aristocratic Sayyed household headed by Mir Nihal, Ali describes in some detail the pattern of life in a Delhi which is on the verge of extinction.[27] Amin

[27] The spelling of "Saiyyed" corresponds to Ali's transliteration of "Sayyid."

Malik describes the novel, thus: "The thrust of Ahmed Ali's thematic in this novel is to suggest passionately, prophetically, but always lyrically, that India's Muslims are falling on perilous times as they face the British occupation, conveying through the novel's title a dejected premonition of the subsequent fragmentation of Muslims in the subcontinent. The novel thus functions through nostalgia for the glorious era of the Mughals and prophecy about the pending collapse of the Muslim power and glory in India."[28] As a result, there is a pseudo-anthropological method in Ali's depictions of kite battles, Eid feasts, weddings, and household arguments. Ali himself described his procedure in planning out the novel as a kind of photographic record of the city:

> I had the idea in the back of my mind that I wanted to write this novel. I went and met as many people as I could and I watched everyone's actions as I walked down the street. I watched everything … I went to the Jama Masjid. I watched everyone—the pigeon-sellers, the pigeon-buyers, the pigeon-flyers—all those wonderful kaleidoscopic scenes and crowds. I also looked from the steps of the Jama Masjid at the Red Fort in the distance … I kept on watching, observing and imagining. I would try to see as many people in the Mohalla as possible, as many members of my family as I could … I went to see everyone. I was glad that it pleased my mother, but she didn't know I was doing it with something else in the back of my mind.[29]

But it is not merely a visual novel, since certainly part of what Ali had "in the back of his mind" was also a kind of cultural preservation of the sounds of Delhi. In addition to

[28] Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004) 22.

[29] Ahmed Ali, as quoted in Trivedi, 58.

describing the urban space of Old Delhi and the variety of men (usually distinguished by the shapes, sizes and colors of their beards and headgear) who populate its narrow streets and crowded spaces, Ali painstakingly translates over 60 poems and songs that would have made up a part of the standard repertoire of a connoisseur, almost all of them overheard by a character quite accidentally but always serendipitously.[30] Here, Ali differs from his collaborators in the *Angāre* circle who thought that the poetry and the culture of the urban elite in India should be abandoned in favor of a new populist literature that could be understood and used by the masses of Indians. The *Angāre* group in some ways shared the criticisms of elite Muslim culture that the Muslim coterie around Aligarh had also developed (specifically Altaf Husain Hali and Muhammad Husain Azad), finding it to be the source of the political decomposition and degeneration of a class and a race of people as a whole, even though their political conclusions were quite different. But for Ali, the negative consequences of colonialism are not merely limited to economic exploitation and military brutality. The cultural inheritances of Delhi were being eroded under the pressures of urban modernization brought on by the shift of the colonial capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Poetry would no longer be casually overheard.

Amir Mufti provides, perhaps, the most elegant account of the debates that erupted in northern India, beginning with the Mutiny and reverberating in the world of Urdu letters:

> In the decades following the suppression of the uprisings of 1857–58, with the collapse of the tottering social structure that had been the basis of the Urdu

[30] Trivedi counts over 30 different kinds of beards in the novel.

> literary culture of the ashrāf, or 'noble' elites in northern India, 'reform'—religious, social, cultural, political, and educational reform—became the slogan of what I would call reluctant embourgoisement among these social groupings. The Aligarh movement of Sayyid Ahmed Khan is only the most famous and influential of these reform efforts directed at Muslims. In the critical writings of such Aligarh-related figures as Muhammad Husain Azad and Altaf Husain Hali, the ghazal came to be singled out as the genre par excellence of Muslim decline and decadence, as too decorative, subjective, and impervious to nature, incapable of the sober intellectual effort and didactic purpose called for in the 'new' world. For nationalist writers beginning in the late nineteenth century, it became something like an icon of the vast distances separating the ashrāf Muslim elites from the space of the genuinely popular. Such distrust of the *ghazal* has survived into our own century among both the literary movements committed to the social purposiveness of poetry, including the Marxists of the AIPWA who were Faiz's contemporaries and comrades, as well as those whose commitment to the intellectual demands of modern poetry is in the name of art for art's sake.[31]

If Ali was taking sides, then his position had no other followers. Linking the culture of the *sharif* with the politics of the *taraqqi pasandi* (progressive) was a task few accomplished well and fewer thought necessary (Mufti singles Faiz out as perhaps the unique intersection between the two). This was, however, the only way it seemed to Ali to preserve culture heritage as a part of nationalist agitation.

[31] Aamir Mufti, "Towards a Lyric History of India," *boundary 2* 31.2 (2004): 245-274.

The 1930s saw the rise of progressive literature in the vernacular languages (*pragativadi, taraqqi pasandi*, etc.). While the various regional literatures had different versions of the basic socialist realist program at the heart of their literary projects, in Urdu, the questions were asked in a particular way. The *Angāre* collection was, in this respect, exemplary in the range of issues that it raised and the form to which those issues were affiliated. At its core, progressivism in Urdu was connected to a certain set of politics and attitudes about the world at large: a distaste for Islamic orthodoxy, usually troped as sexual hypocrisy ("*Jannat ki Basharat*"); a thorough-going criticism at the aristocracy for its cultural decadence and political quietism ("*Garmiyon ki ek raat*"); a suspicion of modernity as a potential style for giving old chauvinisms a new gloss ("*Jawanmardi*" and "*Dulari*"); a focus on the durability of the problem of sexism in the home ("*Purde ke picche*"); a concern that poverty was a limit on political activism ("*Neend nahin aati*"); a diagnosis of alienation as the modern condition ("*Muhavatton ki ek raat*"); a confidence in heresy as a challenge to hegemony of orthodoxy ("*Phir voh hangama*"); and a fear that traditional problems could only be solved by a modernity to which it was resistant ("*Dilli ki ser*").

Ali's chief complaint, and this is highlighted in his postscript to his collection of short stories, *The Prison House*, was that there was no reason to write only about the worker or the peasant. Having grown up in the world of sharif culture, Ali bristled at the notion that progressive writing had to abandon tradition and traditional forms. The move to write realist fiction with its appeal to mass readerships was, for Ali, a dilution of the power of Urdu literature -- he was interested in preserving continuity with that tradition. Moreover, there was no need in Ali's mind to write about peasants and workers only,

since political changes could be detected in the lives of the ashrāf Muslim as well. And this is really what you begin to see in *Twilight in Delhi* – a reconsideration of the experiments from *Angāre* in favor of a more deliberate consideration of the inheritances of tradition, especially poetry, on the present moment.

Ali had made a go of writing in Urdu, with both his participation in the *Angāre* project as well as his first collection of short stories, *Sh'ole*. Ahmed Ali writes: "We were filled with a zeal to change the social order and right the wrongs done to man by man . . . we dreamed of winning for Urdu and the regional languages the same respect and for the Indian people the same dignity which other civilized languages and societies enjoyed."[32] But neither project gave Ali the success or the notoriety that he was after. *Angāre* was banned by the British, and when the campaign to defend the project seemed to be taken over by Sajjad Zaheer's more staunchly Stalinist politics, he decided that the project was not for him. *Sh'ole* languished in obscurity, as Ali now found himself distanced from newly radicalizing Muslims who were drawn to the AIPWA and the more orthodox ones who had already branded him a rebel. As a result, Ali attempted to draw himself closer to new forms of patronage that seemed to exist in the new liberal moods of the British literati, themselves alienated from the project of empire and familiar with more radical idioms. But the cache of being a member of the Urdu literati was not easily portable into English. The moods of the ghazal did not seem to work in English, nor was there enough of a coterie of dedicated readers who could easily comprehend the intricate intertextuality that such a project might involve. Moreover, since the preservation of the

[32] Ahmed Ali, "The Progressive Writers Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu," *Marxist Influences & South Asian Literature*, ed. Carlo Coppolla (Michigan, 1974), p. 36.

ghazal in translated form in the novel was always linked to the immediacy of experience of the Muslim subject in Delhi, the novel also had to contend with an immediate tension: the search for new patronage made the impossibility of preserving old traditional forms even more palpable, though tradition was what was being marketed.

Much of the thematic content for *Twilight in Delhi* had been worked out in some of the stories from *Sh'ole*, but with completely different results. For instance, in "*Tasveer ke do Rukh*" ("The picture has two faces"), Ali describes the world of Nawab Sahib, a sharif man from Delhi, whose son, not unlike Asghar, is about to marry a woman not to his liking and therefore disowns him. Nawab Sahib, his wife tells us, is obsessed with the hobbies ("these are not hobbies, they are ruination itself") of the sharif man and in particular training pigeons. Nawab Sahib's day is marred by the mention of his son (who Nawab Sahib has disowned and whom he wishes dead) and by the insult he receives from the lower orders on the street that refuse to apologize for bumping into him. He is rescued by his friend, Mir Sahib, only to then be trapped in the phaeton when a stand-off between people protesting the Rowlatt Acts on one side and the Delhi police and British Army on the other. The resulting curfew and street blockade leaves the Nawab stranded:

> The noise of the commotion dimmed. It appeared as if people were confronting the police. Suddenly, another cry was powerfully raised:
>
> "Repeat: Long live Mahatma Gandhi!"
>
> And people chanted even more loudly:
>
> "Long live the revolution! Long live the revolution!"

> Nawab Sahib lived in Farashkhana. It seemed to him that it would be impossible for the phaeton to get there from here and so he thought it best to turn around and find a new way home through Chandni Chawk.[33]

In "*Tasveer*," Ali's indictment of the ashrāf elite who are unwilling to accept change in patterns of social behavior—from filial obedience, to marriage, to dress, to ideas about politics—is evidenced by their unwillingness to participate in Gandhian civil disobedience (already merging into more radical kinds of politics in this scene) and their own hypocrisy. Willing to say that injured protesters get what they deserve since they have the audacity to spit in the face of the benevolent British administration, Nawab Sahib ends his harrowing day with a visit to a peerless courtesan while demonstrators are shot indiscriminately by British security forces.

This would have been the pattern of the *Angāre* stories as well, as well as the dominant trend within the Progressive Writers Association: religion was hypocrisy, the elite were decadent, the British had to be stopped, but this required a wholesale reconsideration of culture and politics. The difference between Mir Nihal and Nawab

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[33] Ahmed Ali, *Sh`ole* (Karachi: Akrash Press, 1936) 20. My translation.

شور کی آواز دب گئ۔ یہ معلوم ہوتا تھا جیسے لوگ پولیس سے کچھ مکالمہ کر رہے ہیں۔ یکایک ایک اور نعرہ بلند ہوا :

"بول، مہاتمہ گاندھی کی جے"

اور لوگ زور زور سے چلائے

"انقلاب زندہ باد! انقلاب زیندہ باد !"

نواب صاحب فراشخانہ میں رہتے تھے۔ انھونے دیکھا کہ گاڑی کا اس جگہ سے لے جانا نا ممکن ہے اور اسی میں خیریت جانی کہ واپس لوٹ کر نئی سڑک سے چاندنی چوک ہوتے ہوئے گھر پہونچ جایئں۔

Sahib seems to have everything to do with the shifts in Ali's sensibilities in the years between the *Angāre* controversy and the publication of *Twilight in Delhi*. But this shift is not in Ali's sense that nationalist politics, represented by Gandhi, were no longer viable as the necessary political solution to imperial control of Delhi, but in his sense of how the Muslim elite were to be approached and how they were to be represented to the British themselves. The shift has to do with whether or not it would be sufficient to critique the ashrāf classes and their habits and hope that the resulting emotional picture would allow them to read their own failings and to learn new strategies for anti-colonial activism. The debacle of *Angāre*, its inability to consolidate more progressive forces, leads Ali towards a different horizon, one that has to move away from the hypocrisy of the Aligarh modernizers as well as the conservatizing control of the ashrāf. The lie that *Twilight in Delhi* wants to reveal is an impossible fantasy that beneath every seemingly quiet Muslim lurks a Gandhian waiting to erupt.

He had tried to get there faster. Before writing *Twilight in Delhi*, Ali wrote a one-act play, *The Land of Twilight*, an allegory about the kinds of ideological barriers that stood in the way of political radicalization. The play seems only to have been performed once at Aligarh, but it is some index of Ali's experimentation with a minimalist form and theories of political education. The plot is relatively spare: a handful of pilgrims on their way to their destination (freedom) encounter a watchman who bars their way with a variety of excuses from religion to politics until a newcomer arrives and dispenses with the ideologies of quietism.

Pilgrims:

(Shaking themselves from their stupor, shouting)

To Liberty! To Liberty!

Let us pass. Let us hurry.

Newcomer:

Fine talk indeed! All lies.

That is how you deceive them

With talk and talk,

With promises that mystify reality

Who goes to war? They? You!

For what? For what indeed? All lies.

You build your life on lies,

Carefully concealing the truth,

Seeing Twilight only violence, Terror ….

Who kills all good in men?

But that has always been

Your self-interested game,

Doping the people with

The narcotic of angels and religions,

Heaven and mysticism.

What self-hypnosis! God and Soul –

Indeed!

(to the pilgrims)

Listen not to his babble,

His mad and raging frenzy.

Will you get to your goal in this wise?

It is their way to beguile

And make fools of those whom they tread

Underfoot,

Without telling them, of course.

Away, away with him.

Pass through the gate.[34]

The verse-drama in *The Land of Twilight* is fairly easily recognizable as a socialist realist set piece: a prophet who has seen the truth now brings about a political awakening in the masses whose eyes have been covered with ideological blinders. The play, itself, though, is only vaguely about colonialism. It more properly deals with the dramatic reorganization of the perceptions of the pilgrims, once intimidated by authority, now confident in their rebellion. This would have been the preferred formal structure of the political novel of the 1930s: masses facing exploitation are unaware of their condition until external influences convince them of the righteousness of their cause. It relies on an implicit belief that ideology is incapable of dealing with contradiction (always troped as hypocrisy) and that people are free to choose, spontaneously, between a variety of worldviews once they are exposed to them.

What is important about the play, though, is how it demonstrates the exhaustion of a certain kind of inchoate sociology for Ali. By the time of Twilight in Delhi, Ali had already publicly admitted dissatisfaction with the progressives, and increasingly it would

[34] Ahmed Ali, *The Land of Twilight* (Lucknow: R.R. Sreshta, 1937) 22-3

have been difficult to believe that ideological awakenings – however these were structured – necessarily resulted in the linear progression towards nationalist and radical conclusions. Most have used Ali's dispute with Sajjad Zaheer to mark him off as something of a political sell-out, but this seems troubling since Ali maintains his political opposition to imperialism throughout *Twilight in Delhi*. What is interesting is that the novel is reflective of the failures of the kinds of automatic theories of national consciousness that were at the heart of the short fiction experiments of the generation of the 1930s. This was neither borne out by the experience of Delhi, where the influx of modern ideas had already begun to vitiate religious ideologies but had also managed to leave other ideas intact. The strange moodiness of the novel is best explained as the result of an intellectual dissatisfaction with the kinds of theories of literature that were coming to dominate the AIPWA. Instead, in *Twilight in Delhi* Ali begins to confront his real suspicions about the immediacy and transparency of nationalist conclusions, especially for the old social classes which comprised the Urdu-speaking landed families in northern India.

Rather than a theory of consciousness which presupposed not only the spontaneous acceptance of nationalism but also the inability of older ideas to adapt and explain modern circumstances, Ali seems to ruminate on the careful, patient, and deliberate moods that have to be created before a subject is fit for nationalist politics. Or more precisely, nationalism, for Ali, was a mediated set of relationships to the world in subjects who were already defined by ideologies that were simultaneously ill-suited and appropriate for nationalist ideas. In *Twilight in Delhi*, not only do generations not line up along conservative/radical axes, but class functions as a non-determining factor in

political consciousness. Landed families are just as likely to have nationalist sons (Habibuddin) and non-nationalist ones (Asghar). Formerly landowning ashrāf figures are just as likely to be hostile to the British as they are to the nationalists. And the small dramas of the home are non-decisive in the way that they are in the *Angāre* collection with its emphasis on the epiphany and the exposure of hypocrisy, both of which turn the moment of political awakening into a short-term fantasy rather than a deliberative evolution. What emerges in *Twilight in Delhi* is specifically the contradiction faced by the writers of the 1930s worked to its logical conclusion, namely, that nationalism was not something that could be brought to the broad masses from without quickly. If in the 1930s, the emphasis was on getting Indians to believe that they were being oppressed, by the 1940s it was no longer sufficient to "awaken" them. Nationalist ideas were already omnipresent and so the preferred epiphany had already happened and dissipated. Solving this problem required a different set of aesthetic theories, resistant on the one hand to the kind of fatalistic pessimism that results from political disappointments and on the other hand to the utopian promise of short range solutions to genuine contradictions.

But Ali's shift to slow, deliberate, patient explanations for the development of nationalist aesthetics and ideologies results in a different set of problems, since Twilight in Delhi manages to elongate the process of political radicalism but still maintain its focus on the domestic drama. Ali's inability to see beyond the family and the personal, in some ways, as foundations for the political, means that political orientation of the progressives was never abandoned, even if the aesthetic strategies were different. If the 1930s novelists and short-story writers in India were preoccupied with the strategies through which the personal could be exposed as political (sexist attitudes in the home,

debates about religion encountered through marriage choices, political debates between father and sons), they did so through the vignette, with its emphasis already on a politics about to crack through its shell, restrained only barely. There, the emphasis would have been both on the spontaneous awareness of the hypocrisy of the religiously orthodox and the politically aloof, usually through discussions of their sexual depravities, sexist attitudes, chauvinistic behaviors, loyalist sympathies, and decadent behaviors. This already presumed a certain distaste for the elite, landed gentry, but by extension was made to include all of those who enjoyed (already an indulgence) classical Indian arts and especially poetry, with its zones of dissemination centered on the *kotha* and the brothel. The intermingling of the anticolonial and anti-sexist politics of the 1930s turned in many ways on female sexuality and the predatory consumption of it by aristocratic, ashrāf men, themselves already either aloof from official politics or involved in merely opportunistic ways. As a result, the pattern of realism which tended to emerge contained a particular kind of ideological ethic, one which already saw liberal ideas about women emerging alongside nationalism and socialism. And in *Twilight in Delhi*, the resolution of the political contradiction will produce consequently problematic solutions to the sexism that the novel's realism cannot help but uncover in the home.

Ali's own attitudes towards sex and sexuality were themselves complicated by the relationship between modernizers and traditionalists in Delhi. In "*Shādi*" ("Wedding"), for instance, Ali presents a narrative very similar to the Asghar narrative in *Twilight in Delhi*. A young modernizer, Akbar Miyan, who has been educated in England and seems to embody the attitudes of those who after reading DH Lawrence and Havelock Ellis have different ideas about ethical relationships between men and women, arrives back home to

parents concerned about his bachelorhood. Consenting to marry after winning compromises about abandoning many of the old customs, Akbar Miyan stubbornly retains his principles, refusing even to help his wife out of the palanquin or to see her on their wedding night, since this would be like "visiting a courtesan." The narrator, however, pans to her chambers, where the "poor girl" sits in utter isolation, imagining that she has been "married to this room," all the while reminding us that modernizers have never even asked their wives what they want. Later, after his friends drag him back to his house, he has an erotic dream, remembers his wife, imagines that she longs for him, and decides to go to her. But at the moment he becomes decisive, he has a change of heart:

> Akbar got up quickly, and entering the courtyard, he made his towards his wife's room. Just as he stepped off the platform, he suddenly had a thought: "Perhaps people criticize '*Angāre*' to keep up appearances. After all, many people read the book in secret, like thieves, in the same way as I am sneaking up to my wife like a thief. Actually, most people read '*Angāre*' in secret. A smile spread across his face as he thought that last thought. "Lies, all lies. People live out their lives in lies."[35]

[35] Ahmed Ali, *Sh`ole* (Karachi: Akrash Press, 1936) 196. My translation.

اکبر جلدی سے کھڑا ہو گیا، اور انگنائی میں نکل کر دلہن کے کمرے کیطرف چلا۔ چبوترے سے اترتے وقت یکایک اسکے دل میں یہ خیال آیا، "شاید ظاہرداری کے لئے لوگ 'انگارے' کے برائی کرتے تھے۔ ورنہ بہت سوں نے تو اسے چھپ چھپ کر پڑھا، چھوری سے، اسی طرح جیسے میں اپنی بیوی کے پاس چوری سے جا رہا ہوں۔ لوگ غالبا 'انگارے' کو چہری سے پڑھتے تھے۔" یہ سوچ کر اسکے چہرے پر مسکریہٹ کی ایک جھلک پھر کئی۔ "جھوٹ سب جھوٹ۔ لہگ اپنی زندگی جھوت سے بناتے ہیں۔

The sensibility mirrors the problem in *Twilight in Delhi*, where Asghar (ironically which means "the lesser" to Akbar's "the greater") similarly projects his ideals about women – their sexual aggressions, their intellectual sharpness, their perfect, Platonic suitedness for him – onto his own wife, Bilqeece, who ends up dying from her husband's neglect, the consequence of her inability to measure up to the fantasy that he had projected. Only, in "*Shādi*," the ethical pendulum swings back to the modernizer who can at least claim the mantle of intellectual honesty and principled behavior. There are, it seems, limits to Ali's feminism.

But this problem of the desires of women, and specifically how they measure up to the fantasies of modern Muslim men, becomes the axis on which the sensibilities of Ali's politics turns, and which more clearly than anything else, expose the contradictory resolution he arrives at to the competition between nationalism and Islam. For if Ali is interested in women's desires as a litmus test for the sexist attitudes prevalent in ashrāf homes, then this desire is always reduced to the conservative and petty image of women as ideologically bound to domesticity, arranged marriages, traditional patterns of family, and service to husbands. In fact, the criticism of the modernizers is that they are unable to recognize in their own women the foundations of social and sexual conservatism, as they leapfrog over the necessary developments in women's minds that must take place before they are ready to accept existence outside the home.

In some complicated ways, too, Ali's novel begins with some implicit assumptions about the necessity of a kind of modernist, feminist impulse. Ascribing very little agency to the women in his novel (they are always lounging, fighting, non-reproductive, mad, etc.), Ali does find their condition to be less than admirable. The

idiom is already steeped in the clichés of the embarrassed modernizer who discovers that the women of the home are exemplars of the decay, decadence, and backwardness of society at large:

> In the zenana things went on with the monotonous sameness of Indian life. No one went out anywhere. Only now and then some cousin or aunt or some other relation came to see them. But that was once a month or so during the festivals. Mostly life stayed like water in a pond with nothing to break the monotony of its static life. Walls stood surrounding them on all sides, shutting the women in from the prying eyes of men, guarding their beauty and virtue with the millions of their bricks. The world lived and died, things happened, events took place, but all this did not disturb the equanimity of the zenana, which had its world too where the pale and fragile beauties of the hothouse lived secluded from all outside harm, the storms that blow in the world of men. The day dawned, the evening came, and life passed them by. (29)

More problematically, the women in Ali's novel don't seem to want to their own liberation. This can provide little comfort to those who would see in Ali the kinds of patronizing ideologies common to male, liberal modernizers who saw women's improvement as the burden that only they could bear. Still, Ali does seem to be groping towards a position in which women's improvement is necessary for radical changes in Delhi/Muslim society at large. In fact, sexism sets the upper limit for personal and aesthetic satisfactions in the novel. The romance narrative is truncated because of it; the political narrative has its horizons shortened because of it; and the narrative refuses to find another idiom in which to imagine internal dynamism in Muslim society as a

consequence of it. As Francis Robinson reminds us, "The gendering of Muslim identity was a feature as women became a key part of the battlefield across which the discourse of Muslim progress was fought."[36]

The privileged place for working out the strategy of social development and conflict is the domestic space in Ali; yet the home is also an idealization and as such it allows us to bring into sharp relief the narrative and ideological differences between an ashrāf, Urdu literary idiom and a modernist, sociological approach to the effects of colonialism. For the home is both an overdetermined ideological space and a specific site for the transaction of real, family business: it is both an outmoded, conservative relic and the site of the contradictions in the ideologies of home, family, and religion, and later, poetry, culture, and politics. Outside of the space of the political streetfighting and a microcosm of it at the same time, the sharif home becomes the place where the rarefied world of social conservatism is shown to be simultaneously teeming with radical politics just barely beneath the surface, where conservative sexual mores are experienced as both limits and possibilities, where culture and religion are both isolating forces and prods back into the demands for political transformation. So the home becomes the place where Ali can both savagely critique colonial social relations and persistent feudal ones, simultaneously finding comfort in the ideological moorings of the Muslim, landed aristocracy, especially its proprietary view of the city and its command of the poetry, and being horrified by them. Asghar's contemplation of Delhi and its transformation, his

[36] Francis Robinson, "The British Empire and Muslim Identity in South Asia," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (1998) 6:8, 274.

passive observations which are transformed immediately into novelistic symbol, has this dual quality in built to it:

> As he [Asghar] came into the by-lane a strong gust of hot wind blew dust into his eyes. A small cyclone formed itself, and particles of dust, stray bits of paper and feathers rose in the air circling and wheeling, rising up above the house-tops in a spiral, and as the force of the cyclone died down they descended limply, fluttering and tumbling back to the earth. Somewhere nearby two women were quarrelling inside a dilapidated house:
>
> > 'O God, give me death. I am tired of this life …' (21)

It is not merely that the home is the last refuge against the ecological and social devastation created by the uneven modernity of colonialism, but also that the sexist strictures of the home bleed out into the world as anti-colonial critique. It is the woman's complaint about her life which reproduces and vocalizes the city's complaint about its colonial masters and the subsequent decay and deterioration that it brings about. The zenana becomes the unwitting site of social critique, precisely because it is the rarefied symbol of an ashrāf elite that has to confront colonial modernity head on and fails to do so and the sexist and secluded world that it manufactures for its women, and the site of anticolonial politics.

In Ali's novel, the perfect adequacy of the domestic squabble for Asghar's moods cuts in both directions. Perhaps the complaint is launched at the world outside, in which case the emotional world of the home provides some respite from the decay of colonialism. Here, it seems, the complaint is internal to the *sharif* home, and as such seems to work in the direction of abrogating the claims of ashrāf politics for a progressive

politics. In fact, the image torques against itself, since it is precisely into this world of domestic complaints that Asghar is seeking entry, whose foreclosure occasions his moody travel through Delhi. But Ali wants to have it both ways: the progressive reform of the *sharif* household happening alongside the preservation of ashrāf literary culture. It was precisely this notion of a complete rupture with the cultural past that Ali resisted the most. But it was not simply a return to a putative past which Ali wanted – in fact, the novel retains all of its distaste for the social patterns which persist in the home. What it wants is social reform in the home alongside the best of Urdu poetry. And it is that preoccupation – the preservation of a cultural past – which becomes the dominant theme for Ali's anticolonialism and provides Ali with the intellectual and emotional vocabulary from which to connect the isolated world of the *sharif* home with the heady days of nationalist politics. This was after all something that the nationalists could do – they could preserve the buildings and the music and the emotional space of *sharif* culture. That was something that the British were decidedly uninterested in doing.

The Politics of Ali's Delhi

The second ambition of *Twilight in Delhi* is to explain the simultaneous ubiquity of Muslim hostility to British rule (either as an expressed anticolonialism or as opposition to colonial modernity) and its concomitant absence from the world of nationalist politics, and by explaining the contradictory emotion, find a way to overcome it. This has, of course, the benefit of also solving the first set of problems, since if the *ashrāf* classes have an incipient anticolonial ethic, even if muted and complacent, then the culture which shapes their internal worlds has a politics that can be legitimately workable for nationalist

purposes. As a result, Ali looks for politics in the elite, while the progressives and reformists would look for political change to come from below. But the *ashrāf* were politically quiet even if angry. In the closing pages of the novel, the decline of a culture and the decline of the city turn into the pathetic, political death of Mir Nihal:

> Memories of days and hours came swarming like flies upon him, and he thought of his life from childhood to the present day. Delhi had fallen, he reflected; India had been despoiled; all that he had stood for had been destroyed. Only a year ago a new wave of freedom had surged across the breast of Hindustan. People had become conscious and wished to come back into their own. The Home Rule Movement was started, and there were prophetic rumblings of distant thunder as the movement went sweeping over India. But, somehow, all this did not affect Mir Nihal. It was not for him, the martyrdom and glory in cause of the Mother Land. His days had gone, and a new era of hopes and aspiration, which he neither understood nor sympathized with, was beginning to dawn. His world had fallen. Let others build their own. He was one of those who had believed in fighting with naked swords in their hands. The young only agitated. Let them agitate. He was unconcerned. (175)

This is the tortured political landscape of the novel, one in which all but a handful of characters see the British as something to be resisted if not hated, and where simultaneously the *sharif* home is impervious to the political agitations that are taking place on the streets of Delhi. There are multiple explanations for the political complacence that persists in the novel, and here it is the feeling of the loss of the glory of a civilization, while in other places in the novel, passivity is the product of a fatalism that

is linked to Islam and the domestic space. Politics takes place on and in the streets, while quiet resignation dominates the home. For *Twilight in Delhi*, this mood of Muslim anger at the occupation of Delhi by British troops and the garish Durbar of George V is the necessary corollary to the mood of fatalism and defeat which seems to govern the emotional retreat into the domestic space. The constant oscillation between the domestic and the urban spaces, between resignation and protest, sets the emotional landscape for a novel interested in charting the sociology and psychology of the purportedly apolitical Muslim.

It seems to have been clear to Ali that charting a course towards nationalism from Islam would require different logics than modernity and progress, terms which seemed to gravitate in favor of British rule, even though he seemed to be attracted to the political and moral impulses that those terms held out. Their opposites, tradition and stasis, had the advantage of producing anticolonial politics as they tended to produce ethics and aesthetics that were resistant to British colonial modernity and rule, but the social order that they defended was itself hardly worth the effort. This was not a unique problem for the Indian intelligentsia, as reformist, revivalist, and loyalist movements publicly debated the variety of ways that tradition and modernity might be used to best create a set of values that the present could draw from. But in Ali's novel, the debate is carried out in a formal register: the novel deliberates on the variety of ways to salvage an Urdu culture through a novel written in English. There is, of course, no need for such a strategy to be contradictory. Many have in fact noted that it was through English that the vernacular

languages and literatures became revitalized.[37] But in the novel, the tension between British modernity and Urdu tradition is consciously felt in the decisions to write in English. The translation of a classical idiom into a modern one, across languages, had the function of producing a relatively unique aesthetic ideology, one in which the terms of the tradition/modernity debate were freely mixed, selectively deployed. As a result, Ali's novel shifts between the worlds of the classical and the reformist literati (the Old and the New Light, or *Nayi Roshni*), between the modernizers and the anti-modernizers hoping to save *sharif* Delhi from the hands of the British and in spite of the Muslim elite who were presiding over its decline. The only preservation that was possible, it seemed, was a nostalgic recollection, or rather a present already prepared to be nostalgically recollected.

The translation, though, necessarily papered over the debates that persisted within *ashrāf* circles, where modernity was legible as a pattern of behavior and a set of beliefs about the world, and could not be hidden by poetic repertoire. This meant, in part, that the kind of culture that Ali was preserving also needed to fit his needs: a cultural tradition worth preserving rather than shedding as decadent holdover; a poetic past that was commonly seen as threatened by British rule; and an aesthetic worldview which was inclusive of India but resistant to colonization. As a result, it was to Urdu poetry rather than Islam that Ali turned for a cultural vocabulary that extended through the ashrāf classes and beyond. For one thing, Urdu literary culture had the benefit of inheriting the syncretic tendencies of North Indian Mughal rule:

[37] Amit Chaudhuri, *The Vintage Book of Modern Indian Literature* (New York: Vintage, 2004) xvii-xxii.

> Here [northern India] many Muslims lived in towns, and the higher orders, the ashraf, were a much larger proportion of the Muslim population than in other parts of India. In upper India, much of the old order had survived the vicissitudes of British rule, and not only Muslims continue to have a large share of government posts but many of the big landowners in the region were Muslims. Despite their successful propaganda to the contrary, Muslims enjoyed a solid educational base both in the old learning and in the new secular instruction. But these notables of north India belonged to an elite which by tradition was not exclusively Muslim. In the heartland of the Muslim dynasties, the Faithful lived among a sea of unbelievers, who were not to be converted by persuasion or by the sword. Accordingly, their system of rule had to be tempered to fit the necessities of peoples beyond the range of Muslim doctrine, whether at the summit of society or at its base. The ruling groups around the courts of northern India embraced a striking medley of peoples, Muslim as well as Hindu, for the most part more committed to their own fortunes than to the integrity of their creeds … From these accommodations, there emerged an Urdu-speaking elite with its famous syncretic culture, neither wholly Muslim nor Hindu, but a creative combination of influences from both, recruited from several communities, floating upon society like an oilslick upon the water, but destined to be broken in modern times by the waves of populism from below.[38]

[38]Ayesha Jalal and Allan Seal, "Alternative to Partition: Muslim Politics Between the Wars," *Modern Asian Studies* (15:3) 1981, 419.

Additionally, Urdu poetry had the benefit of being substantially flexible to incorporate the variety of feelings that modernity itself was producing.

Ali had no worked out theory of how the Urdu poem might accomplish this feat, but his feeling that it might be useful certainly explains the ever-present translated poem in *Twilight in Delhi* as well as his attempt to preserve pre-1857 poetry in his anthology of Urdu poetry, *The Golden Tradition*. Retrospectively, we can even see the viability of Ali's nascent feeling:

> The Urdu *ghazal* and the constellation that surrounds it—metrical structures, histories of composition and reception, Persianate vocabulary and thematic conventions, and the image associated with it of an imperial culture in decline—retain a distinct place in the postcolonial Indian cultural imaginary, from popular 'Hindi' cinema to such a work of Indo-English fiction as Anita Desai's *In Custody*, despite the massive effort in recent decades to denaturalize and alienate Urdu to contemporary Indian culture and society. Perhaps like no other poetic form in northern India, the history of this lyric genre is inextricably tied up with the emergence and development of national culture, and in no other form, not even the Hindi *git*, or 'song' that is sometimes said to be the national-popular poetic genre par excellence, are the contradictions of the social so deeply inscribed.[39]

Consider the fact that *Twilight in Delhi* laments more than anything else the decline of Urdu poetry in Delhi, both already designed as miniature representations of the culture

[39] Aamir Mufti, "Towards a Lyric History of India," *boundary 2* 31.2 (2004): 245-274.

and geography of the whole of India. The list of Urdu poets that Ali translates—Bahadur Shah Zafar, Shauq, Dagh, Dard, Mir—all come from the Mughal court in Delhi and all are made to stand in for the cultural of an India (even when Delhi competes with Lukhnao in the novel) now under threat from British rule.

> Only some monuments remain to tell [Delhi's] sad story and to remind us of the glory and splendor—a Qutab Minar or a Humayun's Tomb, the Old Fort or the Jama Mosque, and a few sad verses to mourn their loss and sing the tale of mutability:
>
> > I'm the light of no one's eye,
> > The rest of no one's heart am I.
> > That which can be of use to none
> > —Just a handful of dust am I.
>
> And as if to echo the poet king's [Bahadur Shah] thoughts, a silence and apathy of death descended upon the city, and dust began to blow in the streets, and ruin came upon its culture and its purity. Until the last century it has held its head high, and tried to preserve its chastity and form. Though the poet who sang its last dirges while travelling in a bullock cart to Luknow, city of the rival culture, managed to keep silent and, to preserve the chastity of his tongue, did not indulge in conversation which his companion … But gone are the poets too, and gone is its culture. (4-5)

In the poetic history that Ali creates for Delhi, derived as much of it is from Azad's *Ab-e-Hayat*, Delhi was intimately linked to its poetry, so much so that a mere recollection of Bahadur Shah's poetry produces a spontaneously fabricated response in the city ("a

silence and apathy of death descended upon the city"). The virginal city, protective of its "chastity" and "purity," now ravaged by British rule has produced a corollary bastardization if not out and out devastation of the cultural products of British-controlled Delhi. It is important to mark here, that the idea that Delhi was simultaneously syncretic (Hindu and Muslim) and "pure" is, of course, a contradiction that the novel cannot resolve without some effort. Here, the resolution is papered over through an Indian identity: Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are Indian, British colonialism is not. In fact, there are daily reminders of the composite character of Delhi that Mir Nihal sees on his walks:

> Right in front of him was the Red Fort built long ago by Shah Jahan, the greatest of artists in mortar and stone, but which was now being trampled by the ruthless feet of an alien race. On his right, beyond the city wall, was the Khooni Darwaza, the Bloody Gate; and beyond that still was the Old Fort built by Feroz Shah Tughlaq many more centuries ago. Still beyond stretched the remnants of the past Delhis and of the ravished splendor of once mighty Hindustan—a Humayun's tomb or a Qutab Minar. There it was that the Hindu kings had built the early Delhis, Hastinapur or Dilli; and still in Mahroli stands the Iron Pillar as a memory of Asoka; and other ruins of the days of India's golden age, and dynasties greater than history has ever known. Today it was this very Delhi which was being despoiled by a Western race who had no sympathy with India or her sons, thought Mir Nihal. Already they had put the iron chains of slavery around their necks (106).

That the monuments Ali lists are literally commemorations of the sacking of Delhi by one or another invading forces are here presented in an unironic fashion. It is something of Ali's style to place these contradictory ideas next to one another unselfconsciously, though my reading of this text wants to hold out the possibility that this was both inevitable and innovative as an attempt to resolve the problems produced by nationalism. Most nationalist histories have to rewrite the past in order to present the story of a lost grandeur, but here that lost grandeur is literally the list of ruins and relics which were destroyed by successive empires, at the very moment that the novel wants to criticize the British for doing the same.

Such a lack of irony is only possible in late colonial India, after the publication of books like Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India*, with its goals of explaining to the British and to Indians themselves that India was, in fact, a single country. This is not to argue that theories of composite nationality did not exist before Nehru, but rather it is to argue that the idea that "sympathy with India or her sons" ought to be the touchstone for good imperial rule is marshaled against the British only after some patient reorganization of the historical past for a nationalist end. That "sympathy" means something like democracy or political devolution; here, by metonymy, it also comes to mean poetry and architecture in the double sense of stewardship over the aesthetic past and something akin to the reproduction of an indigenous structure of feeling, Hindu and Muslim, which is impervious and superior to British urban planning.

But this sense of stewardship is also in part, proprietary and aristocratic. At the very moment that the coronation procession moves past the Jama Masjid, Mir Nihal

recalls the last uprising of Delhi's Muslims against the British in 1857, when defense of religion and defense of city merged into defense of a building:

> It was this very mosque, Mir Nihal remembered with blood in his eyes, which the English had insisted on demolishing or turning into a church during 1857. As he thought of this a most terrible and awe-inspiring picture flashed before his mind. It was on the fourteenth day of September, 1857, that most fateful day when Delhi fell into the hands of the English, that this mosque had seen a different sight. Mir Nihal was ten years of age then, and had seen everything with his own eyes. It was a Friday and thousands of Mussalmans had gathered in the mosque to say their prayers. The invaders had succeeded at last in breaking through the city wall after a battle lasting for four months and four days. Sir Thomas Metcalfe with his army had taken his stand by the hospital on the Esplanade Road, and was contemplating the destruction of the Jama Masjid. The Mussalmans came to know of this fact, and they talked of making an attack on Metcalfe; but they had no guns with them, only swords. One man got up and standing on the pulpit shamed the people, saying that they would all die one day, but it was better to die like men, fighting for their country and Islam. His words still rang in Mir Nihal's ears (106).

It is important that the structure is a mosque; it's not likely that 5,000 Muslims would have defended, for instance, the Red Fort should Metcalfe have wanted to turn that into a church. But in the slippery aesthetic and emotional categories set up in the novel, the Jama Masjid is already almost secular and here what Mir Nihal recalls is not the religiosity of the rebellion but its manliness. The crowds around him now cannot see that

the Delhi Durbar in the way that Mir Nihal sees it, as an extension of the urban devastation and cultural humiliation of 1857, because they have lost a fighting spirit ("blood in his eyes").

But for now, the preservation of Delhi's culture was linked to the critique of the stewardship of Delhi by the British. The streets and structures are in disrepair; the wall that surrounds the city is being torn down; the very feeling of the city, the feeling which is responsible for the characteristic Delhvi ghazal, is being ruined by British rule. This trope in the novel works in two ways. First, it is a realist rendering of the decay of the domestic and commercial spaces in Old Delhi. Hosagrahar's pathbreaking architectural history of Delhi documents the depth of the deterioration of the urban landscape:

> By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the city [Delhi] was far more fragmented. Minarets, bazaars, and narrow lanes confronted boulevards and Beaux-Arts designs all filled with the clutter of daily life. Tantalizing remains of skilled craftsmanship jarred with the workshops and shacks that crowded once elaborate courtyards, while mansions had become decrepit tenement houses or warehouses. With the establishment of New Delhi in 1911, historic Delhi became an embarrassment to the shining new capital of the British Empire in India.[40]

The urban space was undergoing a vast transformation from the combination of the dispossession of much of the ashrāf classes after their property had been confiscated by the British and the influx of capital drawn to Delhi by the shift of colonial power from Calcutta to Delhi.

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[40] Jyoti Hosagrahar, "Mansions to Margins: Modernity and the Domestic Landscapes of Historic Delhi, 1847-1910," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60.1 (March 2001): 26.

> Between 1858 and 1862, a land transaction of bewildering complexity was carried through. The confiscation of the houses of all Muslims who could not prove themselves innocent [of involvement in the Mutiny], the demolition of a large number of houses in order to build the Cantonment and the railway line, and the necessity to compensate the owners of these houses, were all linked up into a single operation. It led to one of the most remarkable revolutions in the ownership of urban property. Broadly speaking, it gave much of the property which had belonged to suspect Muslims into the hands of comparatively few individuals who had liquid cash, and involved the government, because of its own amateurishness, in an unnecessary loss.[41]

The situation had repercussions for the organization of the sharif home as well:

> The loss of income made it impossible for the haveli owners to sustain either the patronage or the earlier opulence. The impoverished rais (aristocrats) were caught between their old elite ways and the reduced incomes. Having never worked, the gentry of yesteryear did not consider employment an option. Their sons were unskilled and quite often entirely uneducated. Incapable of selling their services, the new generation of impoverished highborn became increasingly destitute. A few, who obtained a Western education, received high posts in the British government. Others began to subdivide and sell their mansions, confining their own accommodations to a few rooms around a few courtyards. Between 1850 and 1910, Haveli Bangash Khan, for instance, lost its streetfronts to shops and

[41] Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) 29.

> multiple owners subdivided the property. As the city lost its orchards and gardens and shrank into the space within its walls, so did the havelis diminish in their grandeur.[42]

This is more or less the dynamic at work in the drama of *Twilight in Delhi*, the slow deterioration of a feudal economy and its replacement by a colonial capitalist one produces profound changes in the private and public worlds of the ashrāf. In *Twilight in Delhi*, the question more or less becomes who will run the Nihal household and how: the eldest son has died; the youngest has abandoned tradition and moved out; the patriarch lies paralyzed. The effects of colonialism on the Nihal household, then, are a kind of national allegory in miniature on the claustrophobic world inhabited by Muslims after the 1857 Mutiny. The unique intervention of the novel is to map this urban and domestic decline alongside a cultural stagnation.

In order to do so, though, the novel mobilizes a conceit which strains at the realism of its recording of Delhi's decline. In Ali's novel, every poem maps perfectly on to the mood of its auditor; in fact, a *ghazal* or a *qawwali* or even the stray bawdy song cannot be heard without an immediate and precise mood being struck in the closest character. As Asghar describes his romantic troubles to his sister, Begam Waheed, a Sufi *qawwali* about unrequited love begins next door; as he climbs the steps of the brothel for an unexciting encounter with a courtesan, Mushtari Bai, "from nowhere, as it seemed, a man appeared singing a verse from Dard" (52); when the narrator complains of the claustrophobic domestic world which suffocates the women who are trapped there, a

[42] Hosagrahar, 32.

beggar's song reproduces the narrative emotion; and when Asghar feels guilty about having emotionally abandoned his wife, a tonga-driver begins to "sing in a hoarse voice the latest sad and melancholy tune" (174). This is almost cinematic soundtracking. Part of this, of course, is derived from the mystique of Delhi, with its reputation for being steeped in its poetic traditions. But that reputation is used, here, in the service of an extended trope which connects the internal world of the residents of Delhi to the perfect adequacy of the poetic atmosphere in which they experience their moods.

That poetic adequacy then bleeds into a network of expressionist symbols through which it is not only the poetry but the whole of the immediate external world which reflects and gives shape to the psychic one. Asghar's unsuccessful visit to Bilqeece's home is mirrored in a pigeon that "misbehaved in its flight and the dropping fell near Asghar's foot" (20); the depiction of the "repressed lives of Indian women" (30) is matched in "the wind blew the leaves to and fro, dust floated in the air, at night the cats quarreled over bones under the wooden couches or miaowed and caterwauled on the roofs" (31); and occasionally the poetic and the material compound the effect of both on the characters in the novel: "Only now and then a dog barked somewhere, or an engine shrieked far away touched by the beauty of the voluptuous song" (39). In another way, this why Ali's expressionist procedure is so poignant. The city literally becomes the perfect representation of the complex internal moods of its residents, whose unhappy moments find the perfect *qawwali* being sung just next door, or whose philosophical moments find their perfect referents in the pigeons being flown. There is in Ali's Delhi an immediate and unmediated compatibility between the inner consciousness of the characters of his novels and the world that they are able to experience immediately and

unmediated. The destruction of this world, as a consequence, becomes all the more problematic since it threatens to ruin the architecture, physical and psychic, which buttresses the poetic and literary compositions of the city itself.

But even in the descriptions of the city, there is a remarkable tension. On the one hand, any description of old Delhi's landscapes results in a picture of Eliotic urban decay: "Heat exudes from the walls and the earth; and the gutters give out a damp stink which comes in greater gusts when they meet a sewer to eject their dirty water into an underground canal. But men sleep with their beds over the gutters, and the cats and dogs quarrel over heaps of refuse which lie along the alleys and cross-roads" (3). On the other hand, the city has a spiritual interior which is both impervious to colonization and resistant to decay: "Yet the city still stands intact, as do many more forts and tombs and monuments, remnants and reminders of old Delhis, holding on to life with a tenacity and purpose which is beyond comprehension and belief" (3). And then again, the very structures which resist decay are themselves falling apart: "Yet ruin has descended upon its monuments and buildings, upon its boulevards and by-lanes" (5). In some ways, this tension between a city that must be able to be both survivor and victim, timeless and timed, is both a product of and reason for the political and philosophical contradictions that the novel also has its heart.

The metaphorical trick by which Ali manages to have it both ways is to turn the urban scene into both a reflection of the interior moral and cultural universe of the Muslims of Delhi and to see in the urban landscape the moorings for that very universe. The urban space is humanized, anthropomorphized: Delhi sleeps, stands, and lies; it is conquered and raped, looted and ignored, and holds on to life. But at the same time, the

urban space is the only solution to the pathetic and permanent alienation felt by its denizens. So, Asghar's moods always manage to find their perfect reflection in the patterns of urban movement that are only possible in the city: qawwalis echo his own disquiet; vendors sing his love songs; and the streets resound with voices of his own subterranean political inclinations.

If colonialism was something that happened to the Muslims rather than to the Hindus, if colonialism was primarily about replacing one set of rulers (Mughal) with another (British), and replacing one set of values with another, then the primary victims of colonial occupation would have been Muslims. *Twilight in Delhi*, though, reflects a profound anxiety about this understanding of colonialism (which empiricism and cultural nationalism prevents it from critiquing). Not only have Muslims failed to revolt against colonialism in any serious way, they are in fact moving towards the worst aspects of colonialism, allying themselves to it, abrogating their own cultural and moral traditions. For instance, this is a novel that wants to have it both ways politically. Asghar's modernist ethic clearly triumphs over the traditional views of marriage, family, and life represented by his father, both emotionally and actually, in the first half of the book only to give way to a much more corrupt, selfish, and decadent kind of modern romance in the last half, when Asghar turns his affections to his recently dead wife's sister. Mir Nihal's traditional worldview seems to be throughout the course of the novel increasingly claustrophobic and fore-shortened, and therefore his robustly anti-English views cannot be the foundation for a vague nationalist polemic which Ali clearly sympathizes with. The fact that there is no good basis for a clean, nationalist, Islamic ethic from which to narrate the decline of the city means that Ali has to piece together the worldview from

series of inadequate perspectives. Furthermore, having already been burnt by the reception of his polemics in *Angāre,* Ali's restrained criticisms of Muslim orthodoxy restrict the ways in which Ali can arrive at a robust picture of the importance of an Islamic past to a syncretic nationalism.

This is also the reason that Ali has to return to an almost pre-political Delhi to stage his family drama. The historical bookends of Delhi's interregnum, between the end of the 1857 *Bagavat-e-Hind* (National War of Liberation) and the transfer of the imperial capital to Delhi, mark perhaps the last days of Delhi's independence from Britain, and the last time that the Delhi would be confined to its traditional borders. Afterwards, Delhi would expand north and south and the walled city would be transformed and modernized, a suburb for a new, Indian Versailles. But if the relationship between the poetry and the city is supposed to the mark of a lost grandeur, then the compatibility between the current urban setting and the denizens of Delhi poses some difficulties. After all, unity between the public and private worlds cannot both be lost and preserved simultaneously; or put differently, the decline of Delhi cannot both kill art and produce a fine novel. This however is the very murky atmosphere which the novel hopes to preserve, since its loyalties are so evenly divided. On the one hand, the novel wants to retain the cultural vocabulary of the past as a reminder of the Indian-ness of Delhi's Muslims. On the other hand, Ali finds the world of the *sharif* home dangerously moribund. Not only is the home the space of uniformly sexist attitudes towards women, but it is also bound up with religious orthodoxy and superstition, political passivity, and also suspicious of science. The problem for Ali throughout *Twilight in Delhi* is that the nostalgic voice of cultural preservation and religious masculinity is coupled to a critical vocabulary of social

modernization, secularism and feminism that Ali has not abandoned from the *Angāre* project. So while Ali chafes at the slow vitiation of the urban space which gave rise to the *ghazal* and the aesthetic unity of Delhi, the novel is also at pains to defend the walls of the *sharif* home as anything other than the bastions of superstition, sexism, and stagnation. This produces the odd tension in the novel between the inner spaces of the Nihal household and the larger vistas of the urban world of Delhi. If the former is seen as the feminized and petty space of domestic conservatism, that conservatism is necessary both as a place from which to launch a radical critique of the effects of colonialism on the city at large but also as the source of the emotional vocabulary of the *ghazal* which the novel is also trying to preserve.

And it is this combination of modernist sensibilities that grow out of a literary idiom of "traditional" Muslim culture in the north that gives rise to what many critics have identified as the uneasy mood of *Twilight of Delhi*. It is a political novel which eschews any lengthy discussion of politics; it is a social novel which centers on a more or less cloistered family; it has a poetic content grafted onto a novelistic form; it is an Indian sensibility depicted uneasily in English. These oscillations are simultaneously necessary for the emotional impact of the novel (which relies on a coeval disgust and sympathy with the domestic and political situation) and produce the central contradiction of the novel. Namely, cultural decay only uneasily produces a political rallying cry. English has already replaced Urdu, the Muslim elite have already been removed, the religious sensibilities have already been transformed – the past can only be imagined back into existence as a motive for political struggle at great imaginative costs, many of which undermine the very foundation on which they are built.

But this tension between the insides and the outsides of the homes refracts a larger contradiction that the novel is at pains to articulate openly. The vocabulary from which a confident, Muslim, anti-colonial nationalism could emerge has all but vanished by the late-colonial period, after the Muslim League had captured the mantle of Muslim politics (more or less) in North India, while dissolution into the purportedly Hindu mainstream nationalist movement would have satisfied some of the political desires but left none of the cultural and emotional registers intact. This, then, becomes Ali's preoccupation in *Twilight*: how does one critically preserve a *sharif* culture in Delhi while not becoming a loyalist? Or more importantly, what does one do with the fact that anticolonial Muslim identity seems to have built into it a preservation of some of the most reactionary political and social ideas? Most of the *ashrāf* had, after all, moved steadily closer and closer to the Muslim League's politics and farther and farther away from the kind of confrontational anti-colonialism that Mir Nihal fantasizes about in his recollections of the "men of 1857" (107). And the novel's setting between the Indian War of Independence (1857) and the years immediately after the Delhi Darbar (1911-4) leading up to the first wave of the Gandhian Civil Disobedience Movement (1919-22) mark perhaps the last time when Muslim identity and nationalist belief might not have run at odds with one another. And it is only for the brief period of time between the coronation and WWII (or between Khilafat and the rise of the Muslim League) in which such a political and aesthetic rapprochement is possible. The strategy for such a reconciliation is a pan-Indian nationalism, which finds its representatives in people like the Ali brothers and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. The matrix of ideas that these people represented were not only contradictory, but also marginal: secular nationalism of the Congress variant;

modernizing in education; private religiosity; anti-imperialism of the middle-class variant.

In many ways, the debate in the late colonial period was an extension of the debate that had begun in the aftermath of the 1857 war for Indian independence, with the formal declaration of British rule over India. Then, the debate was between those who retreated into private religiosity (and retained their hostility to the British) and those who entered into public life, attempting to reform Muslim identity in search of new British patrons. In his social history of the Urdu ghazal, Ralph Russell explains the divisions that emerged after the suppression of the mutineers:

> Those in the first camp maintained their strong (if now mainly silent) hostility to the British, withdrawing from the political arena and clinging firmly to their traditional religion and culture in the hope that conditions might one day emerge in which they could regain their former dominance. The other camp took a very different stand, calculating that the old Muslim elite could never fully regain its old ascendancy, but could hope to persuade the English to take them on as junior partners provided that they made a complete break with the past, and identified their interests completely with those of the British. To do this they needed to acquire a modern education and adopt, wholesale, British cultural norms. It should be stressed that it was not merely to win British approval, fundamentally important to them though this was, that they took this view. They were convinced that it was the mastery of modern science and the adoption of modern ways of life that had been the basis of British pre-eminence, and that they own Muslim

> community would never prosper or win a place of honour in the modern world unless it did likewise.[43]

But this picture of north Indian Muslim politics presents a problem for anyone interested in reading *Twilight in Delhi*, a novel ostensibly produced in this intellectual crucible, in the last possible moments of meaningful intervention into the debates about Muslim nationalism. Ali's novel lacks all of the moralizing quality of the New Light fiction, represented perhaps best by Nizar Ahmed's *Ibn ul-Vaqt* and *Mirat ul-Urs*, with its need to lay out the arguments in favor of modernity with all of the zeal of new converts. At the same time, this is novel which chafes at the domestic decay of the households of the orthodox, with their repressed women and their psychological stagnation.

This may not have been entirely wishful thinking, for as Ayesha Jalal explains, the cracks were beginning to emerge in the politics of Muslim loyalism well before the Durbar of 1911:

> Already by the late 1880s Britain's imperial policies in India and new colonial conquests in the Islamic world were leading more Muslims to shun Sayyid Ahmad's policy of non-participation in the Congress and stolid loyalty to the raj. Muslims from the North Western Provinces had taken to attending the annual sessions of the Congress in increasing numbers … Since 1895 Shibli Numani had been publicly opposing his old patron's policy of Muslim non-participation in the Congress. Differences with his colleagues at Aligarh led Shibli to help found the Nadwat-al Ulema in 1898, an institution which he believed would give fillip to his

[43] Ralph Russell, *Hidden in the Lute* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 180.

personal aspirations of greater status as an intellectual leader of India's Muslims.[44]

Still, there are problems with Jalal's formulation, since it relies on explicit membership in the Indian National Congress (and the numbers disprove rather than prove this trend) and leaves out the larger trend of Muslim identity-formation in the complicated world of communal awards and rioting in northern India. The number of people who followed Numani into the Congress were few and far and between. But the point is still important: it was possible to imagine a politics of opposition to the British beginning from one's identity as a Muslim, and as long as this was possible, then collaboration with the Congress and Gandhi were not entirely out of the question. The Muslim League is, though, absent in this novel, as are Gandhi's attempts at collaborating with the Ali brothers in the campaign to preserve the Islamic Caliphate in Turkey. The absence of those sections of the politic establishment which have become important in understanding the post-independence narrative of the movement for independence makes reading the expressionist moodiness of *Twilight in Delhi* all the more difficult, precisely because it does not seem to conform to the pattern of Muslim politics in any recognizable way. The ideological field had not been closed, and Ali moved into the debates about Urdu poetry in order to find a commonly agreed upon resolution.

In his study of early twentieth century literary histories of Urdu, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi reveals the variety of ways that Urdu greatness was perceived as lost and attempts to reclaim it were articulated:

[44] Jalal, 93-95.

There are three dominant models:

A) The literature of the past was better, more ‘natural’. So the history of Urdu literature shows decay by virtue of a consistent deviation from the ‘natural’. There is no renewal possible. One should salvage the best of the past, and start afresh. Literature should be pressed into the service of social reform and change, should be made more ‘natural’.

B) The literature of the past was better perhaps, but it was limited in scope. It grew old quickly, and died, and is now beyond revival. A new beginning is needed, and even possible. The new start should be firmly grounded in European (read, ‘British’) pragmatism, and in an ethic that is service-oriented.

C) The literature of the past was indeed better, but the past can’t be recaptured. There are many reasons why there can be no going back, but the main one is that the times have changed. All that one can do now is to selectively cultivate the best of the past.

These positions are not always clearly stated, but are like major premises, though inarticulate at times, running though the writings of three greatest modernizing Urdu critics who wrote between 1875 and 1914. The first model bears the stamp of Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), the second bears the stamp of Muhammad Husain Azad (1830-1910), and the last one is derived from the writings of Shibli Nu‘mani (1857-1914). The most interesting thing about these authors is that while they might not have always agreed on quite what constituted the past, they

were agreed on the point that literature, at least Urdu and Persian literature, seemed to have an inveterate tendency to decline with the passage of time.[45]

The first two positions, interestingly, correspond to the views that were circulating around Aligarh Muslim University. Hali's *Muqaddamah-i-Sher-o-Shairi* was written in consultation with Syed Ahmed Khan, while Azad's *Ab-e-Hayat* continues to be standard reading for Aligarh students today.

The end of the Urdu Renaissance in Delhi coincided with the rise of the Muslim League in North India, though neither occupied exactly the same cultural or political space as the other. If the former was concerned with interventions into education, culture, and religion, the latter saw itself primarily as a counter-weight to the Indian National Congress in matters of political devolution in negotiations with the British Raj. While most nationalist histories have tended to view the former as the progenitor of the latter, some critics, like Mushirul Hasan, contend that the cluster of figures around Hali, Syed Ahmed Khan, Zaka Ullah, and others held a range of views which could not be condensed into the two-nations theory in any reasonable way and which revealed a nascent anticolonial ethic if not politics.[46]

Urdu letters at the turn of the century were turning towards Aligarh. Its two most important figures, Nazir Ahmad and Altaf Hussain "Hali" were already aligned with Aligarh and working towards more serious reorientation of the whole of Urdu letters. The most serious polemic was waged against conventions in Urdu poetry which were

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[45] Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 15-6.

[46] Mushirul Hasan, *A Moral Reckoning: Muslim Intellectuals in Nineteenth-century Delhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

held to be responsible for the decline in the morality of the ashrāf classes and for the decadence that had found its way into Islam. Ahmad, in *Fasana-i-Mubtala*, famously declared that "what else is there in our poetry other than lovemaking and vulgarity?"[47] Hali's *Musaddas* went farther and found that Urdu poetry had left the backdoor open for not just immorality but for heresy, as the prime figures in the ghazal moved in the direction of idol-worship and adultery.

This reform movement was the cultural expression of the loyalist middle classes, who despite having been affected by the repression following the 1857 war of independence, found themselves reliant on and finding opportunities with British rule that had not been open to them before: employment, patronage, education, and religious freedoms. This was done both in the sense of producing a loyalist faction of Muslims as well as social uplift:

> The notion that Muslims as a 'class' were 'backwards' received support, then, from well-publicized statistics, and elicited a good deal of official British solicitude. Muslims of the *kacahri* milieu were probably the first people in India to benefit from such a designation, but at the cost of altering their own estimate of themselves. Muslims now were laggards, all sulking in their tents, dreaming of lost empires and reciting decadent poetry. Some Englishmen who interpreted the 1857 Revolt as an effort to restore Muslim rule felt some urgency in winning over Muslims, drawing them into the system of British rule and British values. An 1859 Educational Dispatch from the Secretary of State in London had urged

[47] Nazir Ahmad: "ہمارے یہاں کی شاعری عشق بازی اور بے تہزیبی کے سوا ہے کیا؟"

> special attention to problems of Muslim access to education. Hunter's polemic in 1871 on the Indian Musalmans, his reiteration of these concerns as chairman of the Educational Commission in 1902, and a petition from a Calcutta-based Muslim political association in the same year all prompted full-scale governmental enquiries and a large literature of diagnosis and prescription for the problem of Muslim education. Muslims required special attention and, some argued, special treatment.[48]

The class thus produced found it necessary to advance a different cultural idiom: chaste in its taste, didactic in its literature, loyalist in its politics, and Islamic in its faith. While they were split on the question of language, Zaka Ullah advancing Urdu and Syed Ahmed Khan in favor of English, they were united in the belief that Islam had declined and needed to be revitalized, and that revitalization would happen through cooperation with the British and adding western rationalism to a Unitarian Islam. And their opponents were found in both the orthodox *masjids* of Delhi as well as the newly nationalizing groups of Delhi. They excoriated against the feudal remnants in Delhi who were not only unable to adapt to the challenges faced by colonialism but were also unwilling to take advantage of opportunism to insert a dynamic force into the religious and cultural idioms of Muslims.

Mir Nihal represents a kind of visceral anti-English ethic, rooted in his being "an aristocrat in his habits, a typical feudal gentleman" (28), opposed to Aligarh. He detests Asghar's modern habits (wearing English clothes and shoes) and has convinced Asghar

[48] Lelyveld, 86.

that had he "stayed in Delhi he wouldn't have even allowed me to learn to English" (36). Instead, Mir Nihal prefers traditional pastimes: pigeons, courtesans, alchemy, and religion. There is even a fairly clear generational divide between Mir Nihal and his children, who are unable to express their own emotional worlds without recourse to an almost clichéd poetic idiom (which would have been the vernacular of a certain kind of *ashrāf* upbringing); Mir Nihal on the other hand remains decisively prosaic. Habibuddin, Mir Nihal's son, on the other hand, is the model for the growing Khilafatist sentiment in the city. His son recites "*Sarfaroshi ki tamanna*" to much praise from his friends. Habibuddin ("friend of the faith"), a government official (who has yet to abandon his post as part of the Khilafatist boycott), is self-consciously nationalistic: "The English frankly say that they fear no one but Muslims in India and that if they crush the Mussalmans they shall rule with a care-free heart …" (183)

Saeed Hasan becomes the model for the Deobandis, who consciously absent themselves from politics (in favor of a quiet personal religiosity and political critique):

> Saeed Hasan did not much believe in patriotism. He had completely failed to sympathize with the movement and was disinterested. He was one of those who accept an order of things and come to believe in it. For they did not wish to take any trouble to think for themselves. So long as a thing did not disturb the placidity of their lives they never said anything against it. The game of Politics was too difficult for Saeed Hasan to understand. Besides, British rule did not meddle with his life, although a foreign modernity and ways did go against the grain because they directly affected him. That is why, whereas he raved against English ways of living and thought, he never said anything against the foreign

> rule. Life went on peacefully for aught he cared; and that was all he was interested in, like most Indian fatalists (185).

Here, the idea of political passivity is found to be a pervasive cultural problem, and Saeed Hasan is immediately molded into a national type: objecting to the style but not the political content of empire, Indian fatalism made it possible to reconcile life under Britannia. But there is also the seemingly strange idea that British imperialism is characterized as a kind of banality – "so long as a thing did not disturb the placidity of their lives" – or at least a kind of low-grade and slow-moving violence whose most obvious features were cultural rather than economic, juridical, or geopolitical. In such a context Ali's intervention is not only to show the decay of the city (the destruction of the architecture of Delhi, a long-standing convention of the *shehrashob*) and the growth of a substantial underclass (the omnipresent beggars), but also to move the debate into why questions of culture and ways of life also warranted more political confrontation on the part of Muslims in Delhi.

The debate between the characters, though, is never fully resolved, because it cannot be. At best the various positions elicit momentary sympathies and dissipate, frustrated. But in each instance, the frame of Ali's novel is to turn the political debates into debates about poetry and debates about the city. This was both a formal innovation and an inheritance of specific emotional and aesthetic theories circulating in Delhi at the time of the composition of the novel (as well as, perhaps theories from British modernist texts that Ali was reading at the time). At the same time, though, Ali's cosmopolitan and non-moralizing idiom sets him apart from the rest of the Delhi elite which was looking for other solutions to the political and intellectual crisis created by British rule. While

most of Delhi was looking either outwards to Aligarh or inwards to Jama Masjid, Ali's gaze constantly moves through the decaying remnants of a Delhi which stood in opposition to the British pattern of life. And as a result, his preservation of the ghazal in translation meant taking a side in the cultural skirmishes that were taking place in Delhi at the time. But at the same time, *Twilight in Delhi* seems to share some of the conclusions that have been reached about Urdu poetry by the reformers, since the novel is characterized by a sense of an arrested cultural and political development. Between 1857 and 1911, nothing really seems to change for Muslims living in Delhi. It takes a few years for Muslims to return to the city after having been thrown out in the aftermath of the Mutiny, but little changes in the Muslim worldview. It's telling, too, in this vein that Ali's intertextual practice relies very heavily on 18th and early 19th Urdu poets from Delhi, in order to maintain the fiction that there has been little or no interesting cultural output in Delhi in the 80 years between the mutiny and the publication of the novel. Clearly this is part of the polemic against colonialism and the effects of colonialism on not only the imagination but also the urban landscape which gave rise to the complicated and unique linguistic innovations of the Delhvi ghazal. But there is also a kind of political polemic against the cultural output of Muslims in the intervening years. These cultural failures had failed to produce the desired political and aesthetic outcomes, and *Twilight in Delhi* would be an attempt to solve them.

Ali's novelistic politics

Urdu poetry contains a specific genre for the occasion of the decline of a city and its empire. The *shehrashob*, also extant in Turkish and Persian, becomes important in

Urdu poetry around the 18th century when Urdu began to replace Persian as both the court language and come into its own as a literary language. Other poetic forms also follow the Mughal court into South Asia (the *ghazal*, *masnavi*, *musaddas*, *nazm*, *qasida*, *soz*), but in some ways, Delhi was uniquely suited for the *shehrashob*, since it had been the capital of several empires in the subcontinent and overtaken, the novel reminds us, at least seven times. *Shehrashobs* are poems occasioned by the sacking of a city; they tend to be formally varied (the *musaddas* – six line stanza -- and the *ghazal* – the two-line stanza -- being the two most common metrical and rhyme schemes) but common in their content. *Shehrashobs* describe the decline of a city, either before or after conquest depending on the political orientation, through a cataloging of the features of the city: its marketplaces, its artisans, its structures, and most of all, its poetry. Either because of the depravity of the conquerors or the corruption of the residents, cities that were once grand have now come upon ruin, and so the elegiac structure and tone of the *shehrashob* simultaneously reproduces past greatness even as it contends that that greatness is completely irretrievable.

The Urdu *shehrashob* differs from its Persian and Turkish cousins in many ways, but the one that contemporary Urdu critics are keen on reminding readers of is that the Urdu *shehrashob* eschews the homoerotics of the Persian and Turkish forms. One of the conventions of the *shehrashob*, in this respect, is to describe the denizens of the city, from the perspective of an itinerant, *bazaari*, public optics, their occupations, but also the beauty of their young men ("*ladkon ki khubsurati ka hazliya andaaz*").[49] The sacking of

[49] Naeem Ahmed, *Shehrashob: ma'muqadimah o havashi* (Dehli: Jamal Printing Press, 1967) 9.

a city, after all, brought with not only the destruction of the architecture and the monuments that had made a city unique, but also created a situation where the streets were now filled with new bodies, which the poems necessarily saw as an unattractive, in order to expose the depth of the decline between the former paradise and the current hell. As a result, the *shehrashob* in Persian and Turkish, the critics remind, often lingers on the bodies of young men in the streets and how their beauty makes a particular city the envy of all men. The point here is not to debate the virtue of homoerotic urban poetry, but to demonstrate that the *shehrashob* itself was a flexible poetic form, shaping itself to the moral and political conventions of its generations. The modern Urdu shehrashob, after all, develops in the conflict with colonial modernity and is many ways a product of the debates taking place in Urdu about the decadence of the ghazal (itself a homoerotic genre) in order to preserve a sanitized version of the cultural past.

The other important debate which affected the *shehrashob* in the modern period was the debate about the benefits of material and worldly poetry. Unlike other genres of Urdu poetry which lent themselves to the metaphysical and the introspective, the *shehrashob* was seen as decidedly and decisively material and worldly.[50] There has been, in recent years, an extensive debate about the materiality of the *ghazal* (some believe that the *ghazal* is the product of historical circumstances, while others argue for the inviolability of its lyric frame), but the *shehrashob's* credentials in this respect are more or less acknowledged by most critics. Naeem Ahmed, who has written one of the two texts on the history of the *shehrashob*, argues: "Shehrashobs are both a description of

[50] Ahmed, *Shehrashob: ma'muqadimah o havashi*, 9.

life and an investigation of it. These poems are not a consequence of thoughts of pain (*khayaal-e-arayi*) but a product (*takhliq*) of the conditions of their times. For this reason this genre is a reflection of its environment (*mahaul ki akaas*)."[51] In Ahmed's history, the *shehrashob*'s unique qualities (*ahmiyat aur azmat*) are characterized by its reliance on realism (*vaqayat aur haqiqat* – literally, comprehension and reality) through plainness, seriousness, and comprehensiveness (*sadaqat, girayi, geharayi aur sadagi*). [52]Ahmed is, it should be clarified, continuing the Aligarh distaste for the *ghazal* by resurrecting the *shehrashob* as the chaste and grave poetic tradition that one can support, but his explanation of the stylistic features of the *shehrashob* is still persuasive.

The *shehrashob* describes not only the events of the sacking but the political, social, cultural, economic, and financial (*siyasi, samaji, tehzibi, ma'ashi, aur ma'asharti*) transformation of a city under new rule.[53] Beginning with Mir Jafir Zetli and Mahmud Shakir Naji, the shehrashob became an important index of the allegiance of poets and writers to particular heads of state and their unwillingness to accept fealty to new leaders.

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[51] Naeem Ahmed, *Shehrashob ka Tahqiqi Mutalah* (Aligarh: Adabi Akademi, 1979) 272.

سہرآسوب زندگی پر تبصرہ بھی ہے اور تنقید بھی۔ یہ نظمیں خیال آرائی کا نتیجہ نہیں بلکہ اس دور کے حالات کی تجلیق ہیں۔ اس لئے یہ صنف سخن اپنے ماحول کی عکاس ہے۔

[52] Ahmed, *Shehrashob ka Tahqiqi Mutalah,* 272

اس میں سیاست، معاشیات اور روزمرہ زندگی کے حالات و داقعات شعریت کے ساتھ نظم کئے گئے ہیں اس کی اہمیت اور عظمت کا راز یہ ہے کہ اس کے بیان میں صداقت، گیرائی، گہرائی، سادگی اور پرکاری ہے اور فنی عناصر کی صرف اس حد تک آمیزش کی گئی ہے کہ ذہن جمالیت اور فن کاری میں گم ہو جانے کی بجائے واقعیت اور حقیقت کی طرف ملتفت ہوتا ہے۔

[53] Ahmed, *Shehrashob: ma'muqadimah o havashi,* 10.

This particular type of *shehrashob*, Naeem Ahmed and others call the "*tabahi o barbadi*" *shehrashob*. The other variety of the poem (not given a precise term by the major critics) is about the internal decline of a city, already in ruin, mismanagement, and decay, ready for new leadership and deserving of conquest. The *shehrashob* was, in this respect, flexible enough a genre to accommodate the poetry of protest and the poetry of loyalism, looking forward and backwards historically, depending, of course, on the particular poet and his patron. It also relied on a specific theory or interpretation of history, one in which the sacking of a city was decisive politically, even if poetically productive.

And for a novelist like Ahmed Ali, who was looking for a form capable of linking a Muslim emotional frame with a nationalist politics, experiments with the shehrashob could, in fact, be productive. In a different context, Priya Joshi has argued that Ali's method was to take indigenous narrative conventions and selectively graft them onto the novel, thereby creating a unique formal and ideological structure which the novel could deploy selectively:

> His was a form of literary indigenization that had severed all ties with the Victorian literary world and in which empire is represented largely as a distorting and corrosive power rather than a productive cultural influence … *Twilight* was a singular attempt at vernacularizing the novel with almost exlusively local preoccupations … Ali's formal and cultural influences in *Twilight* tend to be from the Urdu and Persian poetry that flourished in Mughal India. The transaction he engages within *Twilight* is an oddly paradoxical one, freely utilizing an imported language and form but vigorously eschewing other cultural influences from them

altogether. Few Indian novels before or since *Twilight* have been as sternly selective.[54]

Consider, in this vein, the difference between Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali's famous *shehrashob*, "*Jite ji maut ke tum munh mein, na jana hargiz*," and the temporality and idea of history in *Twilight in Delhi*.

Hearken to me, do not go into the ruins of Delhi.

At every step, priceless peals lie buried beneath the dust,

No place in the world is so rich with hidden treasure.

Even the traces of what reminded us of the city's destruction are gone,

Dear Heaven, can there be greater oblivion than that?

Those are gone have forgotten us. We too have ceased to think of them.

Times have changed as they can never change again.[55]

Can you point to any family that which does not bear scars?

Dear heave, that made us weep, cease, I beseech you,

But do not let strangers mock us.

If they were to know our plight, not only friends

But the whole world would pity us.

O cup-bearer, who passes the last round of wine.

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[54] Joshi, 212-3.

[55] مٹ گئی تیرے مٹانے کے نشان بھی، اب تو

اے فلک اس سے زیادہ نہ مٹانا ہرگز

وہ تو بھولے تھےہمیں ہم بھی انہیں بھول گئے

ایسا بدلا ہے، نہ بدلے گا زمانا ہرگز

Do not fill it to the brim, and let no thirst be fully quenched.

For now their long spell of good fortune lies asleep.

Do not awaken them, O wheel of time, they are in deep slumber.

O mirth and joy, hasten hence, Delhi is no place for you any more,

Yes, once Delhi was the center of art and science

But the art of poetry is dead, never to be born again.

Do not grieve for the glories of the past.

'Ghalib,' 'Shefta,' 'Nayyar,' 'Azurda' and 'Zauq' will never come again.

After 'Momin,' 'Alavi' and 'Sehba,' who is left to speak of that art of poetry.[56]

Not only does the emotional logic of Hali's *shehrashob* require a complete rupture between the present and the past, it also binds its listeners into a shared community of loss, one which experiences the trauma of losing a city in the same ways. The death of poetry ("*sha'iri mar chuki*"), the destruction of the distinctive architecture ("*mit gaye tere mitane ke nishaane bhi*"), and the loss of intellectual capital (" '*ilm-o-hunur*"), make it impossible to return to the past. There is, of course, always a tension in poems of lament, which reproduce the very thing that they claim to be irretrievable, but this tension does not undo the symbolic axis of the poem which turns on the impossibility of recuperating a loss ("*chipe chipe peh hain yan, gauhar ekta teh khak*"). What the *shehrashob* requires, of course, is the utter victimization and devastation of an urban space and a way of life in order to both explain the political change as trauma and to produce a version of that

[56] Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali, "The Devastation of Delhi – A Lament," trans. Yunus Jaffrey in Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) xviii. Gupta's note mistakes this poem for a "*marsiya*" when it is one of the "*ashob ghazalen"* (a subgenre of the *shehrashob*) that was presented as part of the *Fugan-e-Dilli* Mushaira in 1874. See Naeem Ahmed, *Shehrashob: ma'muqadimah o havashi* (Dehli: Jamal Printing Press, 1967).

trauma as a unique episode, not just in collective memory but also in history ("*aisaa badlaa hain na badlegaa zamanaa hargiz*").

Certainly there are elements of the *shehrashob* in Ali's novel. The detailed description of the landscape and particularly the buildings and monuments, the cataloging of more than 60 different pieces of poetry (both high and low brow), the repeated refrain of the loss of Delhi's grandeur and its patrons are all formal features of the *shehrashob*. Though, it is not merely the content but also the form of the shehrashob which Ali borrows. Consider this passage from earlier in the novel:

> But gone are the poets too, and gone its culture. *Only the coils of the rope, when the rope itself has been burnt*, remain, to remind us of past splendor. Yet ruin has descended upon its monuments and buildings, upon its boulevards and by-lanes. Under the tired and dim stars the city looks deathly and dark. *The kerosene lamps do light the streets and lanes, but they are not enough, as are not enough the markets and the gardens, to revive the light that floated on the waters of the Jamuna or dwelt in the heart of the city*. Like a beaten dog it has curled its tail between its legs, and lies lifeless in the night as an acknowledgement of defeat. (5)

The strange symbolic intensity without clear referent of the "coils of rope," "the kerosene lamps," and "the light that floated on the waters" are translated versions of images that are the staple of the *shehrashob* (in Hali these are the "priceless pearls" and the "cup-bearers"). There is also the repetition of "they are not enough, as are not enough," simultaneously rhyming and setting of the stage for the light literally to be extinguished

from Delhi. There are other places where the novel appears to lift entire passages from Hali's shehrashob and use them as its own:

> What happened to the great poets of Hindustan? Where were Mir and Ghalib and Insha? Where were Dard and Sauda or even Zauq? Gone they were, and gone with them was the wealth of poetry. Only a poverty of thought had come to stay, reflected Mir Nihal, and in place of emotion and sentiments a vulgar sentimentality. Time had reversed the order of things, and life had been replaced by a death-in-life. No beauty seemed to remain anywhere and ugliness had blackened the face of Hindustan … (176)[57]

It was no longer, though a *shehrashob* that was being turned into a novel – here as in many places in the novel a quiet substitution was being made. Hindustan slips in for Delhi. It is not the case that the *shehrashob* wasn't capable of myths of national glory, but it presumed that the nation was telescoped in the city. Or rather, that there was no need to talk about the whole of the nation since its capital and its culture was destroyed. Here, that culture is nationalized: Dard, Sauda and Zauq are no longer Delhvi poets but national poets. The destruction of Delhi and its poets no longer affects simply the city but the entirety of the nation.

But Ali takes the conventions of the *shehrashob*, a genre of male, public spaces, and moves them into the domestic, private world. The domestic space is, then, subject to the same kind of telescoping procedure. The home is not merely the home but a reflection of homes throughout India. Ali's narrator tells us, in a rather typical moment

[57] Mir (1723-1810); Ghalib (1796-1869); Insha (1756-1817); Dard (1721-1785); Sauda (1713-1780); Zauq (1780-1854)

of feminist sympathy: “In the zenana, things went on with the monotonous sameness of Indian life.” Women are not merely women in the household, but representations of the patterns of sexism that are writ large in the subcontinent, as when Mehro’s fantasies about her engagement are described as “the inhibitions which grow in the repressed lives of Indian women like cobwebs and mushrooms.” There is also a pattern of throwaway phrases like “women hold a subordinate position in Indian life.” The sky in Delhi doesn’t just darken, it darkens “with a beauty peculiar to India, bringing associations of joy and love and spring.”

And there is of course Mir Nihal’s eventual retreat into his home after his stroke, which occasions another transformation of the emotional space of the world into the political space of colonial India:

> New ways and ideas had come into being. A hybrid culture which had nothing in it of the past was forcing itself upon Hindustan, a hodge-podge of Indian and Western ways which he failed to understand. The English had been beaten by the Turks at Gallipoli. Even this had not affected his heart. He had become feelingless and *was not interested whether the Caravan stayed or moved on*. The old had gone, and the new was feeble and effete. At least it had nothing in common with his ideals or his scheme of things.

There is something in that line – “not interested whether the Caravan stayed or moved on” – which is indicative of Ali’s procedure. Conventional lines of Urdu poetry are smuggled back into the English prose of the novel as accounts of the feeling of the characters. At the very moment when Mir Nihal is contemplating his unfitness for the changes being wrought on Delhi, the narrator, in a bit of rhetorical flourish, makes the

idiom of the poem Mir Nihal's own. And so the experiences of the city, its poets, its monuments and its residents all become linked in a network of filiations held together by a shared, though translated, idiom of Urdu. The *shehrashob* structure of the novel moves it in the direction of generalizing the experiences of a family, of a city, to stand in for the whole of the nation. And here is perhaps the most interesting of Ali's arguments in *Twilight in Delhi* – colonialism was first and foremost felt by the Muslim population of India. These visions of urban decay, of a past splendor rendered permanently irretrievable, or the persistence of ruins whose only function is to remind of the gulf that separates the past from the inadequacies of the present, these are consistent with the structures of the *shehrashob*. In many ways, this would be the emotional architecture that not only made up the world of Mir Nihal's generation, but also provided some connection to the world of anticolonial politics as well. There is also the possibility that this novel imagines that it is not a part of the tradition of novels that are written with the didactic purpose of educating the passive into political agents, but sees the need for reconsidering the casual, organic methods that we have for narrating the process of radicalization and all of its troubling and disarming suburbanizations. Politics here is not only domestic but domesticated, transferred as it is to the zenana where the sexist attitudes of the narrator mix with a purported empiricism about the lack of desire of women in the Muslim home to uplift themselves.

As a result, for Ahmed Ali, the novelization of the shehrashob is not simply the translation of a shared feeling from one genre to another (and one language to another), it is also an attempt to take a lost worldview – militant opposition to the British through an idiom of Muslim masculinity – and transform it into an politics and poetics that can be

salvaged for the present. At issue here are both the intellectual's sense of his separation from his cultural past and also the sense that it should be possible to manufacture a Muslim anticolonial radicalism. As he watches the Durbar procession pass the Jama Masjid, and recalls the last Muslim uprising in Delhi against the British, Mir Nihal is overwhelmed with a feeling that the past is irretrievable:

> There were those men of 1857, and here were the men of 1911, chicken-hearted and happy in their disgrace. This thought filled him with pain, and he sat there, as it were, on the rack, weeping dry tears of blood, seeing the death of his world and of his birthplace. The past, which was his, had gone, and the future was not for him. He was filled with shame and grief, until the tears of helplessness came into his eyes and he wiped them from his cheeks. People were busy looking at the show, and the children were curious and shouted. They did not know yet what it all meant. It all seems a fair to them, thought Mir Nihal; but soon, when they have grown up Time will show them a new and quite a different sight, a peep into the mysteries of life, and give them a full glimpse of the sorrows of subjection. *But happy are they who feel not, for they do not know, and miserable are they who see and suffer and can do nothing. A fire burns within their breasts; but the flames do not shoot up. Only the soul is consumed by the internal heat* and they feel dead, so dead, alas … (107)

Mir Nihal, of course, has it wrong: the people do feel, the novel reminds us, since they will only a few pages later challenge the British rule in Delhi quite spectacularly. But the question for Ali is how to overcome Mir Nihal's isolation from politics, itself a projection of the novelist's isolation from a cultural past. But in this instance, the moment of

translated poetic idiom (and here it is almost cliché) – "A fire burns within their breasts; but the flames do not shoot up" – is oddly simultaneously a figure for political quietude and a figure of expansive sympathy. The fire burns doubly, for both the apolitical and the frustrated, joining in them in a shared affective, albeit imaginary, structure. This is also why the figure of disenchantment has to be repeated twice in the passage: first, when Mir Nihal recognizes the impossibility of recovering the spirit of 1857; and second, when he exposes the Durbar, presumably for the men of 1911, as a hollow, political spectacle. This last maneuver, though, is outside the scope of the shehrashob, which presumes a shared history and interpretation of the past, in fact relies on that shared collective memory to move into figures of exaggeration and hyperbole. Disenchantment is novelistic, and novelistic precisely in the ways that the progressives from the 1930s hoped to use literature as a didactic form.

The difference between the *shehrashob* and Ali's novel is precisely the transformation of the intermediary classes between the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. It may have been possible to believe that there was a collective expression of loss in Delhi after the Mutiny. In fact the publication of *Fugan-e-Dilli* and the massive *mushaira* which collected together some of the greatest poets of Delhi in order to mourn the loss of the city were testimony to the ways that certain patterns of literary and political community still existed in the immediate aftermath of the British crackdown on Muslims in Delhi. After the British had consolidated power, though, and after the waves of Muslim reform and modernization movements, it was no longer really possible to believe that there was a shared experience of the trauma of colonization. In Mir Nihal's terms, this is the split between the "men of 1857" and "the chicken-hearted." In fact, Ali

has to look in the most unexpected of places, the well-to-do and orthodox Sharif home in order to find instances of anticolonial revolt and a recollection of the trauma of the Mutiny. It is from this space that anticolonialism can extend its political reach, since Mir Nihal becomes increasingly political not because of his access to the larger political world but as he retreats farther and farther into his own domestic and private life. Ali's novel has to borrow some of the conventions of the *shehrashob* not only because so much of the experience of colonization and the complaint of Muslims in Delhi was linked to the destruction of an entire pattern of life, but also because it becomes the one way to retrieve the moment of anger and trauma produced by colonial rule than still has the ability to unite Muslims as Muslims against the British. This was also metonymy – Delhi was India writ large and Delhi was Muslim – as a result, India could be the land of the Muslims, as well. This was a problematic gesture, but none the less interesting in how it completely ignores the hegemony of nationalist parties, forging instead an alternative explanation for political solidarity and for the engagement of minorities with the nationalist mainstream, making a nationalism all of their own.

But the *shehrashob*, by itself, would have been inadequate, because its temporalities are far more abrupt, which brings it markedly close to the didactic literature from the 1930s. Cities once sacked are permanently transformed in the logic of the *shehrashob*. The trauma is immediate and the urban space is irretrievable, except imaginatively. There is nothing in the present which recalls the grandeur and the splendor of the past. The *shehrashob* relies on a complete rupture in history; new rulers are so different from past ones that the poetry reels on superlative axes in order to demonstrate how different are the vistas and the sensibilities. *Twilight in Delhi*, on the

other hand relies on two different temporalities: one which extends the process of decay over decades (rather than a single traumatic episode) and another which recycles previous narrative and ideological frames to make sense of the present. Moreover, the *shehrashob* was ultimately a public poem, not only because of its importance as a political utterance designed to demonstrate loyalty to patrons and an unwillingness to sell one's pen to the most recently empowered, but also because its optics were intensely fixated on the bazaar and the street. The city as a whole faced ruin: its artisans, merchants, professionals, and poets. In *Twilight*, not only do the bazaari classes benefit from the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, but the *ashrāf* classes fare well, too, as both Asghar and Habibuddin have lucrative careers working for the British government. More to the point, the novel's complex moods and its need to demonstrate the local and specific patterns of life in Delhi and their charms and significances mean that the novel cannot have unambiguous views about the processes of change that the city is undergoing. Resentment of the British exists alongside of resentment of the past, even as those positions fight over the symbols to produce their necessary meanings.

It is in this vein that the novel also produces two kinds of explanations for its twin versions of historical decline: on the one hand, decay is the product of a hidebound Indian civilization that has left Indians unable to progress; on the other hand, decay is the unique product of British colonialism. There is the linear time of colonial modernity which produces the steady deterioration of the *sharif* household and the cyclical temporality of a long, purportedly Muslim view of history which has already absorbed the decline of the British Raj as an inevitability of moving the colonial capital to Delhi. Delhi, after all, has seen the rise and fall of seven empires, and this reality makes it possible to insert an

anticolonial worldview without a concomitant revolutionary sensibility. Islamic opposition to misrule does not require a thoroughgoing reorganization of the social order. In many ways, though, this reflects a conservatism in Ali's thinking, burnt by the reaction of the Sunni orthodox elite in north India for participating in the *Angāre* project, but still hoping to find a way to reconcile a respect and a love for the cultural products of a conservative world. There is a genuine, non-ironic nobility in Ali's representations of Mir Nihal, even at the moments of his pathetic decline. This same respect for conservative culture appears in both the semi-ethnographical account of Asghar's wedding, clearly written for outsiders, as well as in the detailed and unavoidable encounter with the *ghazali* moods of young, *sharif* men.

This oscillation between the novel as critique and the novel as pedagogy is also part of the ideological tension of the nationalist who is also a modernist and a Muslim, whose cultural identity is at odds with his own political beliefs and who finds only unsatisfying outlets for his political concerns. For instance, even if Gandhi is the only solution for more radical kinds of challenges to British rule in Delhi and south Asia more generally, Gandhi has no solution for the crisis of patronage that the changing rule in Delhi has inaugurated. In fact, in order to get to Gandhi both literarily and politically, one has to have already abandoned the prospect of returning to a literary Urdu ashrāf culture, and that is the compromise that remains throughout the course of the novel absolutely untenable. The pains of colonialism are felt in the Nihal household precisely because the family are the scions of the feudal privilege of Mughal Delhi; but that cultural idiom holds no real emotional intensity from which to raise a challenge to colonialism, both because it had been defeated in 1857 and because that idiom finds the

audience that it can attract increasingly diminished by the changes in power. Moreover, the permanently transformed landscape of Delhi in the aftermath of 1857 has not only made the defeat of Bahadur Shah a permanent memory, but it has also defeated and demoralized a leadership which did challenge and might have risen to challenge empire again. The decline of feudal power has the ability to turn India's Muslims into nationalists, but this emotional trajectory is fraught with certain pitfalls: the sexism of this worldview leads it towards self-destructive and decadent ends (Asghar); the inability to assert the remnants of its prestige towards political ends tends towards passivity (Mir Nihal); and the religious trappings of its politics leads it to rationalize an abandonment of politics even when this is its natural proclivity. And it is this double-bind which Ali finds himself attempting to solve, seeing as he does the necessity of anti-imperialist politics but being dissatisfied with nationalism, seeing the problems with Islamic practice but its necessity for constructing viable communities of resistance. Into this mix must also be added the complicated tone of the novel – a mix of nostalgia and disgust and desperation – which seems to cut against the possibility of utopian futures, normally the standard fare of nationalist literature. The concluding sentence of the novel, for instance, abandons any possibility of human intervention in the political future: "And night came striding fast, bringing silence in its train, and covered up the empires of the world in its blanket of darkness and gloom …" (200) This is a narrative pose that is both victim of and unaffected by the powers of empire, which can imagine both the passing of empire as natural phenomenon and can find no character throughout its survey of Delhi capable of leading such a revolt. Moreover, the only effect that the novel maintains, even its closure,

is possible is a kind of moodiness about empire, a mood that must be aestheticized before and while it is being politicized.

Part of this was the consequence of being unmoored from the movements for change from which they were alienated, but part of it was also the desire to be able to voice the strategies and ambitions of individuals for their own emotional, psychic, and social improvements. And in *Twilight in Delhi*, these desires are contradictory: romance produces problematic family arrangements; careers produce alienation; and literary ambitions are separated from patronage and languish in obscurity. As a result, the escape from feudal hierarchies and rigidities opens into a world of both dizzying freedom and radical alienation. These formal contradictions are not the function of bad writing, but the symptoms of an intellectual class that has become unmoored from tradition and yet still depends on, that is deeply critical of the past but still derives pleasure from it. And in many ways, this is precisely the problem of the progressive nationalist with genuine classical training: a new kind of form is needed in which the coming into being of a new world retains in important ways the defining characteristics of the old one.

And here is where the intellectual problem becomes an aesthetic one for Ali. However one tries to reorganize the terrain, the British imprint will be felt as part of the heritage of Delhi and there is no way to undo the fact of its conquest and its reorganization of the urban space. In the novel, this is the problem with Asghar's wedding set right next to the Coronation Durbar. If in the one instance religious orthodoxy has to give way to modern ideas about love and romance which threaten the purity of the bloodline, then in the other, the new regime brings about the obsequy and decay of the old order through its interpenetration of the otherwise pure. There is, in fact,

no place from which one can be principled: hybridity is not preferred over purity, but neither is the obverse; the old is preferred to the new, except when it comes to attitudes about women, religion, and politics; the upper classes are not preferred to the lower, except when they demonstrate the ability to oppose the British.

The only way that the past can be smuggled into the present, the only redeemable aspects of tradition that can be preserved are art and architecture. In Ali's Delhi, it is not the city as such that survives (since even Indraprastha bears only a faint geographical and urban similarity to the Delhi of the novel's present), but the artistic tradition of the past. And this is what makes Gandhi important, or more precisely, why a vague nationalism, that could have been everything to everyone, but was understood precisely every time it was deployed, was so productive of the kinds of narrative ambivalence that Ali needs. *Shehrashob* simply will not do, since we have no allegiances to any of the rulers of Delhi, even if the British are the most despised of the bunch. The novel's attempts to preserve the literary heritage and jettison the rest is only possible in the ranks of a movement that has already come to question an unadulterated modernity and an orthodox tradition, a movement which happily and uncritically borrows from both in order to construct its idioms of the future.

For Ali, then, there was a serious problem with the kinds of political options that were available to Muslims as nationalists in late colonial India, and in some ways, the novel oscillates between a view of an aestheticized apolitical Delhvi past and a political horizon, bounded by Gandhi, which it is struggling to approach. Gandhian politics and ideas are only obliquely a part of the novel, perhaps as collaboration with Gandhi was foreclosed more generally in Muslim politics in India with the collapse of the alliance

between Gandhi and the Ali brothers. The failure of Ali to produce a compelling narrative for the unity of Islam and nationalism were in part failures on his part, ideologically, to see the kinds of barriers that really did stand in the way of an unambiguous Muslim nationalism. They were, however, also failures of the Congress Party to articulate politics which could connect with the *ashrāf* in Delhi and bring them into the nationalist fold. That may have already been an impossibility given the kinds of ways that the British were able to insert themselves into the class conflict that existed in the United Provinces and make that conflict manifest as communal rather than economic. But that is hardly the problem for Ali. The novel itself bears testimony to the fact of a creative intellectual engagement with the terms of nationalism to make them meaningful for a minority community, engaging with a number of formal experiments in order to overcome intellectual contradictions, in the terms of that community.

Conclusion: Nationalism and Internationalism

This dissertation really grew out of two preoccupations that intersected quite by accident during the late 1990s. The first was the extraordinary durability of the language debate in India, which had died down but was not resolved by the time that Salman Rushdie penned his now famous essay "Damme, this is the Oriental scene for you!" in the *New Yorker* in 1997. What had originally erupted in the 1960s and 1970s as a conflict between various bureaucratic aspirants for positions in the central government who saw their fortunes foreclosed (or enhanced) by the potential replacement of English with Hindi at the center was quickly being turned into a defense of the aesthetic and cosmopolitan virtues of English over the vices of vernacular literary production. Rushdie seemed to be campaigning for including Indian texts in the canon of important world literature but was simultaneously relegating the rich tradition of South Asian vernacular literary composition to the proverbial dustbin of history in favor of the putatively cosmopolitan Indian novel in English. The tendentiousness of Rushdie's claims was not lost on many, and several writers emerged to challenge the notion that India could only be represented through its Anglophone ambassadors. When Rushdie's *Mirrorworks* and Amit Chaudhuri's *Vintage Book of Indian Writing* came out, the language debates had been fully renewed, though without the political partisanship that characterized the debates in the 1970s and 1980s, which centered primarily on the question of access to government jobs at the center.

The consequence of the new debate, oddly, was to align English with pan-Indian-ness and cosmopolitanism and simultaneously to connect vernacular composition with

regionalism or parochialism, certainly a false dichotomy, but an intractable one nonetheless since those were also the virtues that the partisans ascribed to the vices their opponents identified. As a result, my discovery of Indian literature was oddly confounded by the fact that there appeared to be no vernacular predecessors for Rushdie, who claimed a Sternean/Swiftian pedigree for himself, who later claimed to have found a potential father-figure in GV Desani's *All About H Hatterr*, which he almost certainly read only after *Midnight's Children*. By the time of Rushdie, so to speak, the gulf between Anglophone and vernacular literature was wide enough to suggest that they were not merely reflective of different worldviews, but that the various practitioners bore very little in common with one another.

Still, before Rushdie, several Indian academics had attempted to produce an account of the development of that baggy and deformed monster, Indian Writing in English, in which a chronology if not a genealogy of Anglophone literature was discernible. The most interesting thing about this chronology is that it acknowledges but cannot account for the linguistic and literary flexibility of the earlier experiments in English writing. For instance, the first peak in Anglophone writing in South Asia was generated by writers who were fully bilingual, drawing on sources as varied as the Punjabi epic *Heer-Ranjha*, the high Urdu of Hali's *Musaddas*, and the folk idioms of Kannada *sthalapuranas*. These writers were of course motivated by new technical developments in European modernism, whose primitivism and perhaps Orientalism afforded writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and Ahmed Ali the space in which to reorganize their vernacular literary inheritances by translating them into an idiom which was simultaneously flexible enough to be indigenous-nationalist and express a modern

sensibility and experience. In different ways, the language of the north Indian bazaar, the Kannadigan peasant, and the Urdu literati found themselves in novels written in English, sometimes seamlessly, more often abruptly, rendering the larger modernist problematic of the representation of an individual's alienation all the more poignant in its translated form. The residual question about the relationship between Anglophone South Asian literature and the vernacular languages and literatures still remained to be asked.

The second question had to do with the revival of the national question and classical forms of imperialism (rather than corporate globalization which had characterized the style of control over the global economy by the large capitalist powers after the Vietnam War) at the beginning of the 21st century. For me the central issue was Palestine and the resurgence of the second Intifada in 1999, but to this were soon added the American occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the imposition of American military bases throughout central Asia, the revival of the movement for Kashmiri independence through the nonviolent struggle of the Jammu-Kashmir Liberation Front, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and then its repulsion by Hizbollah in 2006, the renewed demand for an independent Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka and the genocidal campaign against Tamils by the Sri Lankan government, and the military campaigns against Balochi and Pashtun separatists by the Pakistani army. This of course conflates three kinds of imperial and national questions which need to be disentangled: the resurgence of American imperial control over Southwest Asia by military means and the establishment of satrapies in Afghanistan and Iraq in particular; the long-standing colonization and occupation of land by newly independent states with interests opposed to the indigenous populations, especially in Kashmir and Palestine; and civil rights struggles of minorities in newly

independent states that were taking on the shape of demands for separation, as in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils and the Gurkhas in Assam. The problem still seemed to be that the national question rather than having been resolved was asserting itself anew in interesting and complex ways since in many instances these demands for separation were being made against states that had been established as the result of successful anticolonial liberation movements themselves. The justice of the demand for separatism seemed to be at odds with the pervasive view in the academy that nationalism was ultimately a doomed project and that its partisans were necessarily chauvinist and elite and its outcomes failures.

The simultaneity of these questions led me to reconsider Indian nationalism at its highest point between 1919 and independence, during which time the Congress Party began to lead mass popular protest against British colonization. This is, of course, the high point of Gandhian political mobilization and the influence of the Mahatma on Indian political thought. The hagiographic representation of the movement by nationalist historiography left much to be desired, of course, since it papered over real problems of the movement for independence and the politics of the Indian National Congress: the perpetually deferred demand for caste equality; the very limited program for economic and social redistribution; the unwillingness to part company with orthodox political outfits; the utter failure to deal with the Muslim question; and the subordination of peasant protests to landed interests. But equally troubling was the notion that there was little redeemable about the movement because of these very pitfalls, a view which gained in popularity with the rise of postcolonial studies in the Anglo-American academy, especially since it brought the British empire to its knees and inspired and gave

confidence to the national liberation struggles in Africa and the rest of Asia which followed India's independence. Very little of the literature about Indian nationalism holds out the possibility that nationalism was in fact double-edged: it simultaneously held within it the germ of more radical social change as well as a much more virulent form of exclusivist chauvinism; it needed to mobilize in real ways demands for emancipation while at the same time bringing to power a class of people who had no interest in the kind of social redistribution which would be the basis of that emancipation.

And this is why Gandhi is perhaps so profoundly interesting for any study of radical thought and mobilization in the nationalist movement. Not only was Gandhi singularly effective at moving people into mass action through the simplicity of his slogans and the local targets for his campaigns which made entry into nationalism easy, but Gandhi was perhaps the only politician who had the ability to pull the brakes on nationalist mobilizations. If on the one hand, Gandhi's appeal to protest the Rowlatt Acts could start the non-cooperation movement (1919-1922) it was his fasts after the "Himalayan blunder" of Chauri-Chaura which brought nationalist agitation to a dead-stop. Ideologically Gandhi was also something of a strange reformer: he was for untouchable uplift but opposed to the abolition of caste; against British rule but for Indian service in the armed forces during WWI; for democratic interpretations of Hinduism but unwilling to expel orthodox elements from the Indian National Congress; horrified by peasant poverty and opposed to landlord excesses, but against a redistribution of land; in favor of working class organization, but an advocate for benevolent managerial control; a principled opponent of communal violence, but unwilling to allow genuinely cross-communal organizations flourish.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the strange literary career of late-colonial Anglophone South Asian fiction in the now canonized novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao and the often ignored writings of Ahmed Ali. Anglophone South Asian literature of the 1930s and 1940s is normally identified by its nationalist pedigree. Written in the heady days of an anticolonial movement on the cusp of success, much of this writing finds itself easily written into the standard nationalist hagiography of the independence movement. Many of these novels contain long sections devoted to Gandhi, characters whose lives are changed upon meeting Gandhi, epic scenes of Gandhian civil disobedience against the British, and very little in the way of challenges to the hegemony and influence of the Indian National Congress on the struggle for national independence. As a result, most of the secondary literature about Anglophone writing from the period finds that the literature merely exists within the gravitational field of Gandhi, unable to escape his orbit, perhaps even illuminating Gandhi's legacy in the darkness of post-independence critique. Ultimately, though, none of them were able to resolve an intellectual contradiction which repeats itself in the formal composition of the literature of the period; moving in directions more radical than Gandhi's they were unable to find an idiom other than Gandhi to make those ideas manifest. Put another way, revolutionaries found themselves speaking repeatedly as reformers.

This was, we must add, not simply a rhetorical convenience. At the end of the day, it also reflected a belief in the possibility of moving through (as opposed to against) Gandhian ideas towards more radical conclusions. The failure of that radical gesture to come to fruition, though, was not the result of an intellectual disability but a political one: by the time it was necessary to push farther to the left, the left had more or less

abandoned this as an organizational task. But there were genuinely radical moments in the nationalist imagination. It was possible for a young Muslim man to imagine that India was, ultimately, a nation for and of Muslims at a time when the calls for partition were growing increasingly loud. It was possible for a young Brahmin landlord to believe that the voluntary abrogation of caste privileges was something that would happen alongside nationalist struggle. And, it was possible for a middle-class student to believe that he had more in common with an untouchable boy than with the elites who ran the country. Those were merely a few of the more radical structures of solidarity that nationalism threw up in the period before independence, as it needed to imagine that the new Indian nation would actual deliver on serious reforms for the downtrodden, minorities, and women. It was this vision, rather than a crass realpolitik which animated the literary impulses of the generation of the 1930s and 1940s. It is also a homologous impulse which animates the national liberation struggles that are ongoing today. It has been my hope that this dissertation plays a part at least in resurrecting the radical promise of nationalism from its critics so that contemporary national liberation movements can be seen in the internationalist frames that they imagine for themselves.

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