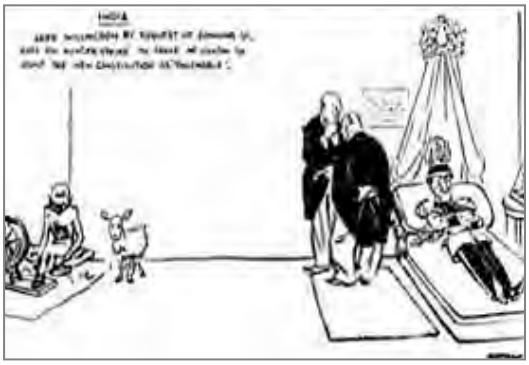
Sruti Bala

The Dramaturgy of Fasting in Gandhian Nonviolent Action

Abstract:
Gandhi referred to fasting as his «most potent weapon,» which he resorted to when all other means failed. How does the refusal to eat food work as a means of nonviolent protest? What does the method of fasting reveal about the politics and performativity of nonviolent action? Using a close reading of Gandhi's own writings on fasting as well as an analysis of the media coverage of his fasts, this paper explores the political dramaturgy of fasting, arguing that it is the fundamentally theatrical relationship between the actor and spectators that makes the fast into a nonviolent protest method.



[Fig. 1]

[Fig. 1] *Old Low's Almanack*, Evening Standard London, 31. October 1932. Source: «Mahatma Gandhi Foundation India, Digital Archive, Cartoon No. 62 http://www.mahatmagandhi.org.in. (Last access 27 July 2007).»

A cartoon in London's Evening Standard newspaper from October 1932 carries the caption: «India: Lord Willingdon, by request of Downing St., goes on hunger strike to force Mr. Gandhi to accept the new constitution as ‹touchable›.»[1] Two attendants watch with concern over the Viceroy, reclining on his bed with a stoic face and hands crossed in a stubborn manner. At the other end of the room, Gandhi sits on the floor bending over a spinning wheel. The goat standing next to him indicates his strict diet habits that prescribed small quantities of goat's milk. The cartoon is witty not only because of the stark contrast between the two men and the worlds they represent. It also hints at the absurdity of the fast, if the situation were to be reversed and Willingdon were to adopt the same method in response to Gandhi.

[1] «Old Low's Almanack.» *Evening Standard London*, 31 October 1932. Source: Mahatma Gandhi Foundation India, Digital Archive, Cartoon No. 62

How can the refusal to eat be effective as a form of protest? During four decades of his political career in South Africa and in the Indian subcontinent, Gandhi repeatedly used the fast as part of his ‹arsenal› of nonviolent action, integrating it into his worldview and making fasting into one of his personal trademarks. Much of the normative historiography of the Indian independence movement attributes the effectiveness of the fast to Gandhi's charisma or popularity as a leader, who was in a position to ‹move the hearts of the masses›, as it were. However, I believe such an explanation neither does justice to the societies and people who made a figure such as Gandhi possible in the first place, nor does it satisfactorily address fasting as a method, independent of any individual's charisma or apparently in-born authority. Gandhi's fasts present a good case to analyse fasting as a nonviolent method, since they abound with contradictions and reveal the complexities and unresolved questions of nonviolent action in social or political conflict. They also provide ample material for a dramaturgical reading and are an interesting example to test how tools and concepts from the field of performance studies can be meaningfully adapted to broaden our understanding of political interactions and processes.

I do not intend discussing whether in fact fasts are nonviolent at all or not. This would imply discussing the meaning and limits of violence on a normative, essentialist level. I prefer to take a dialectical approach, wherein nonviolence does not exist without violence and at the same time ask what it means beyond the absence of violence and how it is expressed and communicated. Gandhi's fasts responded to violence employing a politics of restraint and refusal. In his typology of nonviolent actions, Gene Sharp theorises nonviolent acts in terms of omission and commission.[2] Nonviolence involves renouncing and shunning violence on the one side, but intervention and active engagement in conflict on the other. Often it is a combination of acts of omission as well as commission, a refusal to perform certain acts on the one hand and explicitly performing other acts on the other. The hunger strike or fast as a type of psychological intervention can arguably be viewed as violent or at least aggressive, depending on the level of coercion and the self-injury and underlying objectives behind the act.[3] Whether Gandhi's fasts should be termed hunger strikes is a matter of debate that revolves around defining the relationship between nonviolence and violence. The political fast – and I use this term instead of the hunger strike in line with Gandhi's own terminology – demonstrates the thin line separating and connecting nonviolence to violent action. Not committing an act of violence is combined with demonstratively performing its refusal as well as creating alternatives to violent response. So the omission of an act itself becomes an act. Refusal or non-cooperation cannot just be negatively performed, that is, the refusal itself must be marked, framed, repeated and made perceptible in some way. In the combination of acts of omission and commission, nonviolence refers to both what it is not as well as what it is. The dialectic of omission and commission is also useful in demonstrating that not every action that is not violent necessarily becomes nonviolent. This essay is concerned with what constitutes fasting as a nonviolent act beyond the absence or rejection of violence. How was the fast performed and how was it registered in public memory as a key moment of mobilisation and harnessing of civilian protest?

[2] Sharp, Gene: *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. New York: Extending Horizons Books, 1973.

[3] Sharp distinguishes between the hunger strike meant to pressurise the opponent to fulfil certain demands, the morally motivated protest fast to express dissent and the satyagrahic fast meant to convert the heart of the opponents. See Sharp (1973), 360ff.

Gandhi undertook at least 18 major political fasts between 1918 and his death in 1948. Political and historical analyses have taken his fasts into consideration mostly in regard to the question of their outcome and implications for the issues concerned. Otherwise, Gandhi's praxis of fasting has mostly been viewed in terms of his spiritualised politics, as an introspective moment of soul-searching at times of national crises. This is how he himself describes his experience of the fast, as «cleansing», as «internal peace», as the «beckoning of a voice within»[4] and respite from the misery of the real world around him:

> *I am breaking my fast upon the strength of your assurances. […] I am plunging into this stormy ocean out of the haven of peace in which I have been during these few days. I assure you that in spite of the tales of misery that have been poured into my ears, I have enjoyed peace because of a hungry stomach. I know that I cannot enjoy it after breaking the fast.*[5]

Gandhi's employment of the technique of the fast as an instrument in politics emerged from his personal experiments with fasting and self-discipline. However, this must be understood in the light of the fact that historically, fasting and the praxis of asceticism have currency in South Asian public culture. The adaptation of the fast into the political sphere was greatly influenced by these cultural practices. In Gandhi's fasts, he characteristically merged and conflated the purification of the self with the purification of the nation, linking self-discipline to the disciplining of the ‹unruly masses›. Introducing the dramaturgical paradigm is one way of expanding and separating nonviolent action from its moral dimensions. Instead of questioning or justifying the value of nonviolence, the emphasis is on its analysis and on an understanding of how it is done. The dramaturgical approach links content to form, incorporating form into the ethics and politics of nonviolence.

The interpretation of political action in dramaturgical terms, for instance using the triad of performer-spectator-space is not new.[6] The

[4] CWMG (= «Speech at Prayer Meeting»). Vol. 98, 12 January 1948, 219.

[5] CWMG (= «Speech reprinted in Young India»). Vol. 25, 21 November 1921, 139.

[6] Art Borreca provides an overview of the different approaches to political dramaturgy, encompassing sociological, anthropological as well as performance studies perspectives. See Borreca, Art: «Political Dramaturgy. A Dramaturg's (Re)View». In: *The Drama Review* (TDR) 37:2, 2003, 56-79.

approach, which has been productively used, especially in anthropological studies, implies more than metaphorically introducing the language of theatre and performance analysis to describe social realities. It is not uncommon to describe Gandhi's fasts as ‹dramatic› or as a ‹staging› or ‹enactment› of politics. However it is challenging to probe the common perceptions behind such characterisations and consciously use dramaturgical terminology to explore what terms such as performer, stage, spectator, scene and act are doing to change how we think about the practice and performativity of nonviolence.

A clear formulation of demands

It is not true that Gandhi fasted simply out of compassion and empathy. His fasts were closely connected to political demands and conditions. These demands specified the terms of negotiation, explained the cause to which the fast was dedicated, and placed the fast in a broader context of actors and responses. At times they were addressed to an undefined larger public, to all citizens and communities, however the assurance of adherence to the demands was sought from specific community representatives and party leaders or colonial authorities.

The following extract from a speech by Congress leader Abdul Kalam Azad lists the demands of Gandhi during his last major fast shortly before his death in January 1948, following the Partition of India and Pakistan. The fast is usually described as a call for communal harmony, so apparently unattached to any concrete conditionalities. However, a closer look at his correspondence with party co-workers reveals the list of demands behind the general plea to end the violence.

> *Before coming here I went to Gandhiji again and asked him what we should do so that he may break his fast. He gave me seven tests, which should be fulfilled by the people. Assurances on these points, he said, must come from responsible people who can guarantee the proper fulfilment of*

> *these conditions. [...] No false assurance should be given. The conditions were as follows: 1) Complete freedom of worship to Muslims at the tomb of Khwaja Qutub-ud-Din Bakhtiar and non-interference with the celebration of the Urs which was due to be held there within a week. 2) Voluntary evacuation by non-Muslims of all the mosques in the city which were being used for residential purposes or which had been converted into temples. 3) Free movement of Muslims in areas where they used to stay before the disturbances. 4) Full safety to Muslims while travelling by train. 5) No economic boycott of Muslims. 6) Full discretion to Muslims to invite non-Muslims to live in areas occupied by them 7) Freedom to Muslim evacuees to come back to Delhi if they so desired.*[7]

[7] CWMG (= «Speech by Abul Kalam Azad at a gathering of no less than three hundred thousand people in Delhi»). Vol. 98, 17 January 1948, 250, Footnote.

The formulation of demands is characteristic of Gandhi's strategic combination of appealing to «the ocean of humanity» to fulfil certain conditions, but requiring that they do this out of their own accord and not because he asks this of them. Yet he addresses concrete persons such as community leaders, to provide him with the assurance that the demands will be met. The demands in this final fast are very broadly formulated, for criteria such as ensuring «complete freedom of worship», «voluntary evacuation of mosques» or «full safety» cannot be demonstratively proven. Placing a set of demands serves to draw attention to an issue as well as to the fast itself. This is very different from the understanding of the fast as motivated by individual or spiritual purgation alone. However, Gandhi superimposes and spiritualises the concrete political demands using the purification rhetoric, construing self-purification through the fast as the purification of the nation and thus resolving the real problem of communal violence with the gesture of atonement on behalf of all communities: «My fast should not be considered a political move in any sense of the term. It is in obedience to the peremptory call of conscience and duty.»[8]

[8] CWMG (= «Speech at prayer meeting»). Vol. 98, 17 January 1948, 249.

The end and the beginning

The logic of the fast as a political weapon lies in the crucial moment of its termination. There are not many options as to how an indefinite fast can come to an end: either the demands are fulfilled or the person on the fast is allowed to die, or the person voluntarily gives up the demands and ends the fast or is force fed and cannot continue the fast. This do-or-die principle, combined with the spiritualization of the fast, the pressure of media coverage, public support and political negotiations, made each of Gandhi's indefinite fasts a successful form of nonviolent intervention, by his own standards of measurement. In the case of the fasts of a limited duration, they served to register protest loudly and more visibly than institutionalised forms of confronting the opponent (meetings, protest letters) could do. They also put pressure to speed up the resolution of the issue at hand.

Several photographs document the breaking of Gandhi's fast. These depict moments of relief and a focus of supporters and the public on the vulnerable body of Gandhi being saved through a crucial sip of lime juice (see fig. 2). The moment of termination of the fast is in fact the climax to the negotiations and diplomatic and persuasive agreements, even though what remains visible is just the starving body of Gandhi on a bed. The vivid contrast is part of the dramaturgy of the act of fasting. The focus of interaction is centred around the body of Gandhi, around the act of keeping him alive, but the actual negotiations on the terms of the conflict take place elsewhere (see fig. 3). The fast is thus not a solitary act, but an interaction between different parties, bustling with activity.

[9] Photographs from the media gallery of the *Mahatma Gandhi Institute*, Mumbai: www.mkgandhi.org. Last access 9 August 2007.

[Fig. 2]

[Fig. 3]

[Fig. 2:] Gandhi breaks his fast to end riots following the Partition, New Delhi 1948. Source: Gandhi Serve Foundation, Image Archive http://www.gandhiserve.org. (Last access 27 July 2007).

[Fig. 3:] Gandhi being attended upon by doctors during his fast for democratic reforms, Rajkot 1939. Source: Gandhi Serve Foundation, Image Archive http://www.gandhiserve.org. (Last access 27 July 2007).

Similar to the termination of the fast, though not as laden with tension, is the beginning of the fast. Gandhi declared at a prayer meeting (his unique version of political gatherings) on 12 January 1948, that he would begin with a major fast unto death.

I ask you all to bless the effort and to pray for me and with me. The fast begins from the first meal tomorrow. The period is indefinite and I may drink water with or without salts or sour limes. It will end when and if I am satisfied that there is a reunion of hearts of all the communities brought about without any outside pressure, but from an awakened sense of duty.[10]

[10] CWMG (= «Speech at prayer meeting»). Vol. 98, 12 January 1948, 219.

Though it may seem trivial, the declaration of the duration and purpose of the fast is essential to and a very significant part of the act of political fasting. Without saying that one is going to refuse food, and explaining to an interested audience why this is a necessary step to take, the refusal to eat is in itself irrelevant and also apolitical. So just as eating is mostly a social and cultural affair, the refusal to eat becomes political the moment it is public. Were it not for the speech, which was also printed simultaneously in Gandhi's weekly Harijan, the fast may have gone unnoticed. For such an act to become a protest act, there needs to be an addressee who directly receives the announcement, especially because the fast appears at first glance to be a private pursuit. The declarative speech act thus inaugurates and marks the act of fasting. The performative moment in the announcement of the fast lies ironically in the non-performance of an act (i.e. not eating).

Gandhi concludes his speech and commences his fast with a plea: «I would beg of all friends not to rush to Birla House nor try to dissuade me or be anxious for me. […] Rather they should turn the searchlights inwards.»[11] I read this plea as an indication that what Gandhi needed in order to help his cause was precisely that people paid attention to the fast, he needed spectators who readily responded to the stimuli he

[11] CWMG (= «Speech at prayer meeting»). Vol. 98, 12 January 1948, 220.

provided. It is thus a profoundly theatrical gesture, when, by begging his friends not to rush to him, he in fact draws to their attention that they cannot remain distant onlookers absorbed in witnessing his fast, but that they are compelled to react and do exactly what he asks them not to do. Even as late as 1967, Gandhi's second personal secretary, Pyarelal Nayyar writes in an article on the right and wrong uses of fasting according to Gandhian standards: «To be legitimate, a fast should be capable of response.»[12]

[12] Nayar, Pyarelal: «The Right and Wrong Uses of Fasting: How Gandhiji's Standards Apply Today.» In: The Statesman, 3 January 1967, 6.

Mediatisation of the fast

To «be capable of response», to become significant in an arena of struggle, an act such as the refusal to eat, which is actually not visible at all, needs to firstly be made perceptible and secondly established as an event. Display and ostentation are vital to the political economy of the fast as an instrument of political conflict. The fast must be therefore seen in the context of its mediatisation, of its coverage in the press and audio-visual media, the support given to the person not eating by others, as well as the amount of attention given by the authorities concerned. Gandhi's fasts, especially after he became regarded as the leader of the elite nationalist movement, were met with awed response by the general public, with reports of whole cities leaving their lamps unlit in the evening in order to pay respect to him while he refused food. However there were other cases of less high-profile fasters in prison, who were, in fact, allowed to die without much notice. Gandhi himself seemed to realise that the profile of the person undertaking a fast did matter. In the case of the Ahmedabad fast in 1918 for the increase of wages of mill workers, a very local issue, not directed at the colonial authorities, he even forbade others to fast along with him. «Leave this to me […] fasting is my business», he is reported to have said to Anasuya Sarabhai, one of his supporters from the influential family who were in fact the mill owners.[13]

[13] Erikson, Erik: *Gandhi's Truth. On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*. New York 1969, 352.

There was something spectacular about the way his starving body was displayed and in which every sip of water he took became a newsworthy event. Gandhi's fasts were routinely accompanied by articles in journals on his own health and the process of the fast, by speeches, press meetings and public prayer meetings. Despite his anti-modernist stance, he consciously and effectively used the press and encouraged journalists to mobilise support and publicise his most intimate actions and thoughts. He also extensively wrote about his fasting in innumerable correspondences, as well as gave advice to others on the best techniques to follow in their personal fasting practice. Gandhi even acknowledged the attention he drew and reprimanded others who wanted to fast along with him, or in his place, since he realised that their protest would not have the same effect as his own. Diaries, personal notes as well as speeches are important in the process of mediatisation of the fast. Gandhi's private imagination became an important public matter, as he wrote and spoke in great detail of his body as well as of his fasting experiences.

Yet, despite giving instructions on the right and wrong ways of fasting, Gandhi himself pursued a variety of strategies of fasting. As a political instrument, Gandhi enacted the fast in different ways, involving various stages of negotiation, interaction and communication between conflicting parties, thus constantly generating new possibilities and outcomes. At one level, the fast is about the refusal of food and the politics of engaging others' responsibility in keeping him alive. At another level, it is about the fulfilment of certain political conditions and demands. At yet another, more discursive level, the fast is a critique of violence and the way in which nonviolence is done.

The weak, yet defiant figure of Gandhi on a fast is a sign that points to other signs as well as points back to itself. In an announcement of the fast for communal harmony in 1947, Gandhi used his body as a sign of opposition to the riots, as a stronger statement than would have been possible with words:

The weapon which has hitherto proved infallible for me is fasting. To put an appearance before a yelling crowd does not always work. […] What my word in person cannot do, my fast may. It may touch the hearts of all the warring elements in the Punjab if it does in Calcutta. I, therefore, begin fasting from 8.15 tonight to end only if and when sanity returns to Calcutta.[14]

[14] CWMG (= «Press statement»). Vol. 96, 01 September 1947, 318.

Through the foregrounding of his suffering, starving body, the fast was meant to draw attention to the issue of communal disturbances taking place in Calcutta, although he himself was in Delhi, thousands of kilometres away. In his speeches and journal publications, Gandhi mostly denied that his fasts were meant to persuade or coerce others into fulfilling his demands, although he nearly always, even in the case of the ‹fasts unto death›, formulated these demands in writing, in concrete wordings to specific office holders. This double strategy seems necessary from the point of view of keeping his body in the centre of attention while allowing the fulfilment of the conditions to be a secondary effect of the act. This does not mean the fast was used as an end in itself. But rather than being a medium carrying a message in and to the public sphere, his fasts were richly ambiguous in motives and significance, seeking to gain support and identification with the act itself and thus helping to constitute what its outcome could be. By placing himself «in front of a yelling crowd», he used his status to drive public attention to sympathise with him. Party representatives of the Muslim League and the Congress, and other public figures such as newspaper editors and religious leaders, who were the direct addressees of the protest fast, were compelled to enter into negotiations, because suddenly the issue of «mob violence» was connected to a prominent personality threatening to starve himself to death on this ground. In a sense the responsibility for the acts (the act of ensuring the end of violence and the act of ending the fast) was designated to them. Though the act appeared to be an act of Gandhi's individual volition, it involved other people and their actions in fact decided whether the fast had any significance.

As Gandhi gained reputation for the use of the fast, it gradually became less necessary to actually undertake one. Often it sufficed to merely threaten that he would go on a fast, without actually doing so. In a letter to a prison inmate, Gandhi quips on his awareness of the judicious use of the fast: «Formerly, I had to fast in order to make people do what I can now persuade them to do with a mere rebuke.»[15]

[15] CWMG (= «Letter to Ramdas Gandhi») Vol. 56, 11 August 1932, 317.

Staging the authenticity of the fast

The refusal to eat for an extended period of time is often termed as an extraordinary feat. The element of excess, show and hyperbole inherent in the act stands in contrast to the quotidian act of eating. As an example of nonviolent action, the political fast points to the debate on its authenticity.

For Gandhi, clearly the praxis of nonviolence assumes the status of something to be cultivated and refined, something that cannot be achieved easily. Why did Gandhi want to mobilise millions in all his civil disobedience campaigns, but choose to nearly always fast alone? Fasting was a subject of much of his correspondence. He advised many people to fast for health or religious reasons, but rarely approved of others undertaking a political fast on their own accord. «Not every one is qualified for undertaking it without a proper course of training.»[16] While he saw his own fasts as self-purificatory acts and acts of duty, he often reprimanded others who embarked upon a fast. So while he fasted against a separate electorate on grounds of untouchability in 1932, he dismissed the fasts undertaken by those affected by untouchability as sinful and harmful.

[16] CWMG (= Article in Harijan «Fasting in Nonviolent Action»). Vol. 8326 July 1942, 123.

> *If non-Harijan Hindus want, let them take Harijans to their temples with due respect. As long as that does not happen, let the Harijans stay at their homes and sanctify themselves with the purifying Ganga of their devotion. There is no need for them to fast before a temple. I*

believe that it is adharma *to do so. […] There is no merit in it. It is certainly sinful and everyone should keep miles away from such sins.*[17]

[17] CWMG (= Article in Harijan, «Harijans and Temple Entry»). Vol. 98, 01 February 1948, 308. A note on the terminology: Harijan, lit. «people of God», was coined by Gandhi as a positive word for those who used to be called Untouchables. The term was never accepted by the communities themselves, who viewed it as a paternalistic reference and preferred the term Dalit, the oppressed. Adharma: non-righteousness, injustice, immorality.

The fast was an innovative political tool, which attracted many groups involved in the nationalist movement. It carried multiple associations and found approval in a culture that values asceticism and abstinence. It was a way of engaging the opponents and introducing a sense of immediacy and dramatic escalation into the conflict, pushing for a solution and settlement of the issue at hand. Therefore it is not surprising that although Gandhi sought to be the sole authority on the correct use of the political fast, there were many others who appropriated it for goals and objectives that Gandhi may not have approved of himself.

Ridiculous fasts spread like plague and are harmful. But when fasting becomes a duty it cannot be given up. Therefore I do fast when I consider it to be necessary and cannot abstain from it on any score. What I do myself I cannot prevent others from doing under similar circumstances. It is common knowledge that the best of good things are often abused. We see this happening everyday.[18]

[18] CWMG (= Article in Harijan, «Fasting in the Air»). Vol. 90, 21 April 1946, 234.

Gandhi's own fast, a matter of duty, the best of good things, is contrasted to the way the method of the fast is abused and ridiculed by others who use it in similar circumstances. So it becomes an act, which can either fail or succeed. This process of making the fast into the ultimate weapon of nonviolence makes it most inaccessible and even super-human. An aura of awe and secret power surrounds the one who can use the fast against any adversary. By making this into his field of expertise, he in fact became an inaccessible and saintly person, a claim he then rejected. Gandhi explicitly rejected the glorification and worship of his person, as the Mahatma or as Father of the Nation, as he soon came to be regarded. He preferred to see himself in the position of the Editor, answering questions of an interested, critical but

devoted readership. The text Gandhi referred to as his most important work, Hind Swaraj, is formulated as a dialogue between an Editor and a Reader, with the reader mainly asking questions in the manner of a student and the Editor responding at length and convincing the reader about various issues. This creation of an enlightened protagonist on the one side and an ignorant but willing onlooker on the other is the type of relationship that Gandhi envisaged between himself and his public. So although he steadily sought to make nonviolence an accessible creed and not a product of elite theology or erudition, he stood above and apart from the masses he wanted to bring to order.

> *I as a specialist, want to tell you my experiences in this particular field. I do not think that I have any such contemporary who has made fasting and prayer a science and has been a beneficiary of it like me. I wish to make the country a beneficiary of my experience and with wisdom and sincerity, want to take it on the path of fasting and prayer.*[19]

[19] CWMG (= «Letter to Mazharul Haque»). Vol. 19, 20 March 1920, 481.

By declaring himself to be a specialist in fasting, Gandhi established an authority and authenticity for himself in being skilled and qualified to use his body in nonviolent protest in a way, which others could not be capable of, although they were urged to aspire to this ideal. This authority was a central part of the strategic use of the fast in political negotiations, since it created a space for the spectator and the gaze of the onlookers whilst maintaining the reins of control in his own hands. The reactions of the spectators and the addressees of the fast are no doubt crucial in deciding and shaping the outcome and political consequences of the fast. Yet, the advantage lies with the one undertaking the fast, performing the main act. Gandhi's fasts were an effective instrument of nonviolent action because they engaged with and even depended on the agency and responses of the spectators. Simultaneously, they were conceptualised in such a way that he strictly kept his position as subject and author of the fast, precisely because this was the precondition for the relationship between actor and addressee to

work. The dramaturgy of the fast implied that Gandhi's body alone could be in the position of the actor. The spectators were the opponents and addressees of the fast from different sides, sometimes British, sometimes Indian political leaders and contemporaries, sometimes an undefined general public. Without these spectators of the fast, without their responses and their reactions, they could not have worked. Spectatorship is therefore an essential category in the process of the political fast. Yet, in Gandhi's use of the body as a weapon of nonviolence, he alone was the signifier, the sole actor and author of the fast. Any other person or group attempting to fast was considered inauthentic, as resorting to the method «for stage effect» and using it as a manner of «suicidal manoeuvring»[20]. The assertion of the inauthenticity of others became an assertion of his own authority. Ironically, this authenticity was staged, it was negotiated with the spectators and required their participation in order to establish Gandhi's authority.[21]

[20] «Much of this discipline runs to waste because instead of being matter of the heart, it is often resorted to for stage effect. I would therefore warn the bodies of this movement against any such suicidal manoeuvring. Let them have a living faith in what they urge or let them drop it. We are now beginning to attract millions of our countrymen.» In: CWMG (= «Letter to the Editor of The Bombay Chronicle», reprinted in *Young India*). Vol. 19, 4 October 1919, 22.

Theatricality of the fast

The depiction of the fast as a solitary act may be valid at the physiological level, since it is one person not eating for a given period of time, however the fast as a political instrument must be viewed as an interaction between different actors with differing stakes in the conflict. Gandhi's fasts would have been politically meaningless if not for the attention they received, the responses they solicited and the interactions and negotiations that ensued from the moment the fast was declared. Yet so much of this happened behind the scenes, which resulted in the body and the words of Gandhi being in the limelight and appearing to absorb and completely overshadow the significance of those who responded to his politics of voluntary starvation and control. The fast as a political tool does not work in isolation. It is defined by the fundamentally theatrical relationship between the actor and the spectator. Much effort went into developing the fast as a nonviolent protest method in Gandhi's political career. It involved repeating and

[21] I would like to use the term «staged authenticity» to denote the necessity of staging, placing before an audience, in order to establish authenticity in the first place and to show the importance of the audience in affirming that authenticity.

stylising the act in a particular way, gradually creating a sense of identity and meaning through its repetitions and by referring to his own and other's previous usages of the fast in different contexts. The refusal to eat is not in itself nonviolent. It becomes a way of fighting a battle only when it is encoded within and enacted in a particular context using particular practices. Gandhi used every possible means at his disposal in instituting nonviolence through the fast. He also sought to set the limits and conditions of the act by proscribing certain practices while sanctioning others as legitimate.

Yet the fast does not work as a means of political interaction and conflict without its addressees. The spectators are as indispensable to the act as the actor himself who undertakes the fast. The fact that their responses and reactions are so essential to the act of fasting makes the concept of theatricality particularly valid here. It is the moment of enabling the spectatorship of acts in public life, that theatricality has a sense as a heuristic mode. Through the theatrical mode of the fast, the addressees are made into conscious spectators; they cannot look away. Gandhi liked to call this «an appeal to the best sides of the wrongdoer.»[22] What this implies is that by the act of voluntary starvation, the responsibility for oneself is shared with others, to an extent even transferred to the realm of the other's subjectivity.

[22] CWMG (= Article in Harijan, «Fasting in Nonviolent Action»). Vol. 83, 26 July 1942, 123.

Why the concept of theatricality? Performativity emphasises the agency of the actor, whereas theatricality focuses on the agency of the spectators, even while they remain spectators. The agency of the spectators is materialised in the body of the actor, namely in the starving body of Gandhi. In the nonviolent act of the fast, the spectators are engaged in either urging Gandhi to break his fast, or in ridiculing it and condemning his fast as coercive, or in fulfilling the demands he placed in order to voluntarily end the fast. While all this happens, the gaze remains on the body of Gandhi, keeping his authority undiminished and his status as the sovereign actor unquestioned. The figure of Gan-

dhi remains almost inert, while the world watching him bustles with activity when the fast is announced. Petitions are written to change laws, the public is urged to put a halt to violent clashes, round table conferences are summoned, community leaders meet to negotiate a compromise. Yet the narration of the political fast is framed in such a way that the addressees of the fast do not become visible as actors, even though they are actually doing something.

One may ask in what way the fast is more ‹theatrical› than any other form of protest, since the dependency of actors on the reactions of their spectators can be perceived as inherent to all forms of intervention or participation in conflict. To speak of Gandhi's fast as a theatrical act is to use theatricality as a «tacit concept», as Josette Féral would argue, i.e. one which can be used directly but described only indirectly.[23] Theatricality can mean several different things, and is used in a wide range of contexts, both within and outside of the theatre.[24] Since the example dealt with here clearly belongs to a realm outside of the theatre, the question is not whether Gandhi's fast has qualities of the theatre. This it certainly does, though emphasising this too much would decontextualize it as a political tool and take its analysis into a needlessly abstract direction. My dramaturgical reading of the fast and in particular the rehearsal and representation of Gandhi's body shows that the fast is a process that has to do with the gaze of the witnesses and spectators in a crucial way. This understanding of spectatorship is endowed with a sense of agency, a necessity to act and react, a manner of actively watching without being watched, acting without become the actor. It is this spectator's gaze that also characterises the form of the fast as a nonviolent method. Rather than annihilating or attacking the opponents, they are made to respond and participate in the process of the fast.

But this is different from the interactions of everyday politics, where debates, exchanges and responses happen in quotidian terms, because

[23] Féral, Josette: «Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language.» In: *SubStance. Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 31:98&99, 2002, 95.

[24] A good overview of the different usages of the term theatrical/theatricality is provided in: *Theatricality*. Eds. Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2003.

the role of the actor is unquestioned. Gandhi's insistence on his own authoritative knowledge of fasting and ability to use the tool in politics, his condemnation and rejection of other people's use of the political fast created and allocated a space for himself, and a space distancing himself from the audience. The space is constituted not just by himself, but by those to whom the fast was addressed, and those contemporaries who witnessed the fast, even without direct connections to Gandhi, through the widespread media coverage of the event.

In a sense, Gandhi's nonviolence had less to do with his refusal to eat than with those watching him and inscribing his act with importance and political relevance by reacting to it. The fast was a way of being looked at.[25] Gandhi's self was at stake, but not only because he was physically degenerating with every day of his fast. It was also at stake because the success or failure of the fast depended on the participation of its witnesses. Gandhi's vulnerability becomes his strength, for it is only because of the visible vulnerability that the others responded to him at all.

[25] This view of the theatrical differs from Elizabeth Burns' postulation of theatricality as a mode of perception. (Burns, Elizabeth: *Theatricality. A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*. London: Longman, 1972) My understanding of theatricality is closer to Josette Féral 2002 and Joachim Fiebach's Brecht-influenced reading of theatricality as a «particular mode of communication which foregrounds the body as the main means of presenting a role and self-presentation.» See Fiebach, Joachim: «Brechts Straßenszene. Versuch über die Reichweite eines Theatermodells,» in: *Weimarer Beiträge*, 1978, Vol. 2, 123-47.