



Pergamon

Futures 31 (1999) 205-219

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**FUTURES**

## Gandhi, the civilizational crucible, and the future of dissent

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### Abstract

The recent nuclear tests by India have established that the possibilities for dissent in our times have dangerously narrowed. When a country that was led to its independence by the chief theorist and practitioner of non-violence, Mohandas Gandhi, must demonstrate to the community of nations that it is a 'manly' power, that is an indubitable sign of how far any dissent from realpolitik has become merely a distant hope. But, there is still a future for dissent, where dissent will not be couched only, or even, in the various idioms with which the West is familiar. The life and teachings of Gandhi furnish the first clue for an emancipatory politics of knowledge. Gandhi had a profoundly ecological view of life: he recognized neither the infallible authority of texts nor the sanctity of imagined traditions, but he was also the foremost critic of modernity and its cultural practices. Gandhi was tethered, as well, to the ethos of Indian civilization, and in the deep mythic structuring of this civilization, which was more hospitable to plurality than is possible under any nation-state, lie other clues for a politics of knowledge that allows more room for genuine dissent. To move towards a politics of the future, where cultural difference is not compromised by a mere multiculturalism, a thoroughgoing critique of modern categories of knowledge is required. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. The narrowing of the future: India's bomb and the demise of dissent [1]

When in May 1998 India conducted five nuclear tests, it became clear just how remote the possibilities are for dissent in our times. Having finally achieved its long-desired quest for the summit of power in Indian politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party, some of whose supporters have openly declared their membership in organizations that were implicated in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, was eager to stake a place for India in world politics. Previous Indian governments have shared this ambition, and for some years India has quietly been lobbying to secure, in howsoever distant a future, a permanent seat for itself at the Security Council on the grounds that it is the dominant power in the Indian sub-continent and is poised to become an important factor in Asia and the Pacific. Many Indian politicians and commentators have been inclined to think that India's population, now nearing a billion, alone warranted such a big country's inclusion in the Security Council, while others point to the scientific and technical Indian manpower that is now widely dispersed around the world; and yet others have thought that the recognition of India as more than another 'pip-squeak nation', to use the none too charitable language of more than one arrogant American foreign policy expert, was owed to it on account of its great civilization. Almost no Indian commentator paused to consider whether the United States would ever contemplate the admission of a new country as a permanent member of the Security Council without the alteration of the Council itself to reflect a yet more complex hierarchy that would still allow the United States to remain *primus inter pares*, or whether the United Nations might not become an obsolete entity by such time as India was permitted to enjoy the paltry remains of an abandoned feast. The hawks in India's foreign policy and defense establishments were scarcely required to be detectives to deduce that the five permanent members of the Security Council's were also the world's only declared and recognized nuclear powers. If India had to make a bid for power, why should it not do so by elevating itself to the ranks of the degraded members of the nuclear club?

The most resounding failure of our times is that no nation that seeks to be a great player in the world feels it can do so other than by embracing the brutal and xenophobic zero-sum politics of the nation-state system. India has been a nation-state for only fifty years, and it has been a part of one empire or another for several centuries; but it has been a civilization for at least a few thousand years. Though the members of the Bharatiya Janata Party and other Hindu militants proudly describe themselves as adherents of a 'glorious Hindu civilization', they know this civilization only as a historical fact, and understand almost nothing of its sensibility. They little know that civilization derives from *civilitas*, or civility, and that the loudest Hindus have seldom been the best Hindus, and sometimes they have been not Hindus at all. Only a political leadership profoundly ignorant of India as a civilizational entity could have thought that it is destined to be a great player in the modern world system as a nation-state, and that in any other mode India was bound to be unappreciated and ignored; and only those contemptuous of the spiritual heritage of a civilization would have had the effrontery to explode nuclear devices on the auspicious occasion of the Buddha's birthday, and have the message relayed to them, upon the successful deton-

ation of the bombs, that 'Lord Buddha is smiling'. In this matter they were perhaps emulating their political heroes: when the first test of the atomic bomb was successfully conducted by Robert Oppenheimer and his associates, Churchill received a telegram with the following words: "Babies satisfactorily born" [2].

With its attempted entry into the grotesquely named 'nuclear club', India signified its willingness to accede to the rules by means of which its members conduct themselves. That India should have done so shortly after it marked the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi is the most palpable indication of how far India has increasingly stripped itself of its capacity to dissent from the mandates of realpolitik. Throughout the years of what is solemnly remembered in India as the 'freedom struggle', Gandhi sought to engage the British, and indeed even his many Indian critics, on terms that, from his standpoint, would be morally compromising neither to himself nor to any of his opponents. If freedom is indivisible, then the adversary has as much to gain from the struggle as does the victim: that was Gandhi's first principle of dissent from the world of what James Carse has described as "finite" games [3].

In such games, there are always winners and losers; and if some people might be inclined to the rejoinder that neither India nor Pakistan are winners, and consequently there are only losers, it would do well to remember that the armaments industry, the military-industrial complex, and the nation-state system must invariably emerge triumphant from the nuclearization of South Asia. Gandhi's peculiar mode of dissent was to enter into what Carse characterizes as an "infinite" game, the purpose of which is not to win (as it is with the other game) but to continue playing, and thereby give our assent to the proposition that as human beings we are morally bound to the principle that the conversation must never cease. In "infinite" games, rules are not set, and if they are, their transgression is tolerated if not encouraged. Conjoined to this philosophical dimension of play were the rudimentary elements of a Gandhian grammar of dissent: thus, during the crucial negotiations leading to India's independence, the numerous parties to the deliberations had to bear with the fact that once a week Gandhi was bound to the complete observance of silence, a silence that allowed him to listen to the still voice within, much as it rendered mute the chatter of endless voices. Where to the British Gandhi's resort to fasting was merely another instance of the unpredictability if not irrationality of the Oriental politician masquerading as a saint, to Gandhi it was an expressive and healing mode of communicative action. Gandhi uniquely came to formulate an engaging dissent and a dissenting engagement.

As we ponder, then, over the deeper significance of India's forays into militaristic nuclearization, it becomes imperative to inquire into the possibilities of dissent in our times. If in the arena of global governance the nation-state system seems ever so firmly entrenched, notwithstanding its many obituaries that have been written by post-colonial theorists and the zealots of globalisation theory, then can we think of no other forms of collective expressions of the political will? Must all deviations from what the West has construed as the legitimate expression of dissent, in forums of its choice and with the supposedly rational outlook of Western man, condemn errant nations to the status of 'rogue' or 'pariah' entities and open them to condign

and unforgiving punishment? And what of dissent within the industrialized 'democracies'? From a Foucauldian standpoint, doubtless, the prospects for dissent must look slim. As Foucault was to argue, the apparently dissenting practices found in modern democracies themselves constitute the apparatus of power, and power sustains itself by generating discourses which are apparently opposed to it but which in fact sustain the network of power. Dissent is permitted to flourish on the understanding that it will ultimately enhance the very same structures of power that it appears to defy: "Power is tolerable only on condition", Foucault writes, "that it mask a substantial part of itself" [4]. What, then, are the languages in which dissent can be expressed, and how does one signify one's dissent from those very political processes, economic forces, and epistemological structures that have made even of dissent a sexy commodity? What other ways might there be of framing our stories?

## 2. The past of the future: history and story-telling

Since for some years I have been employed as a historian, I am presumed to have a critical interest in the past. The 'historian', as that word is commonly understood, is charged with conveying the sense and meaning of the past to the present and future generations; and indeed the past is the special provenance of the historian, much as 'caste' and 'ritual' were the preeminent domain of the traditional student of Indian society and anthropology, respectively. The historian, one might even say, nurtures the past, as parents nurture their young: the past no more lives on by itself than do the young, and at every turn it must be cast into new and different molds, remembered and sutured. Like every other historian, I have encountered a great many people, now working as store clerks, accountants, engineers, taxi drivers, dentists, auto mechanics, office managers, visa officers, and in a myriad of other professions who have unequivocally told me that history was their 'favorite' subject in school, and that history remains for them, in their endeavor to earn a livelihood, a 'fascinating' subject. 'Fascinating' is one of those many words in the English language, which are multiplying with alarming alacrity, that are designed to prevent any further communication and arrest the deployment of one's ratiocinative faculties; and when stories of murder, child abuse, despotic tyranny, and most of all the incomprehensible suffering of others (the famine in Sudan, ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and Bosnia) become 'fascinating', it is a sure sign of how language works to deaden rather than arouse the sensibilities. On a more benign reading, words are seldom used with the precision that would make them enchanting to us.

It so transpires that though history was 'fascinating' to all these people, none of them ever took it up for further study: as the detractors of history will note, the detail is too crushing, some events are extraordinarily remote, dates seem to lose their particularity, and the lives and antics of many subjects appearing in historical narratives are too far removed from common experience to warrant the interest of anyone other than a specialist. In the last twenty years, however, the objections to history have assumed an altogether different aspect. A great many people found that historians of earlier generations were little interested in representing the experiences

of those who had stood at the margins of society, and they felt chagrined to find out that their ancestors were no more than a people without history. Some voices had been dulled into silence, others had been repressed; and historical narratives appeared to present a seamless account of the white man's ascent to prominence, his achievements in arts and the sciences, and his enthronement of the life of productivity. Meanwhile, certain strands of post-structuralist theory were trying to lay to rest the teleological claims of Enlightenment narratives, and the story of 'man'—already grossly deficient without the story of the 'other half'—no longer seemed to be capable of being encapsulated within the framework of Western democracy; similarly, among literary theorists, attention was increasingly turning towards 'minor literatures', just as anthropologists were finding that the so-called 'primitives' were not without philosophy while Western civilization had its 'rituals', from hot-dogs at baseball games to fraternity rites of passage. Cumulatively the effect was to generate a veritable explosion in various identity-based histories, which have now reached the point where they have attached to them, as do the professional disciplines, the entire academic paraphernalia of conferences, journals, research centers, and the like. What is in truth a profoundly complex question of philosophy, that is what constitutes 'personal identity', has been transformed, in the usual American manner, into a monstrously boring subject that is pursued with an extraordinarily self-indulgent passion.

While conventional history has been subjected to a battering from which one would have thought it incapable of reviving its fortunes, the commonplace consensus that the 'lessons of history' will guide to us a better future remains wholly intact. Though many will not unreasonably infer that the past is the bread and butter of the historian, it is more daring to think of history as the contemplation of the future, as a vision of the possible. The advocates of history point to its pedagogic and didactic uses, but nothing can be more pedestrian and deadening than the mundane thought that somehow the 'lessons of history' will lead us into a better future. But by far the greater part of the problem is that though our histories have improved, they are still histories: the modern sensibility is firmly tethered to history, and no one would wish to do without the sense of history. Now that women, colonized subjects, the laboring poor, oppressed minorities and numerous others who constitute the greater part of humankind have found that history can be a hospitable home to them as well, the last objections to historical discourses have nearly disappeared. History no longer furnishes substantial ontological or even epistemological problems, since it is widely believed that dominant historical narratives can increasingly be manipulated, without much offense to their practitioners or wider segments of society, to accommodate minority and oppressed histories or even multiple pasts.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to contend that history is now poised to become the universal narrative of our times [5], a narrative whose appeal is wider than that of positivist science at its helm. Science has always had its detractors, and even among many of its most well-known early adherents were those, such as Newton himself, who had to suppress their own inclination towards alternative ways of knowing and competing conceptions of truth; and over the centuries a more systematic set of critiques of science has come into place. The almost effortless ease with which history, on the other hand, has incorporated minority pasts into its master framework

is a striking testimony equally to its capacity for generating an illusory pluralism, its elimination of other modes of comprehending the past, and its mesmerizing attraction for all possible dissenters. Some may dispute this account, and point, for example, to the controversy generated by the release of the National History Standards in the United States in 1996, but disagreements about whether Alice Walker and Tillie Olsen ought to be substituted for 'dead white males', or whether Harriet Tubman should be accorded the same recognition reserved to the so-called Founding Fathers, should not obfuscate the understanding that there is a general consensus on the desirability of having history also serve the interests of marginalized peoples. History has been saddled with the imperative of making people 'feel good' about themselves, and it is one of the many palliatives, alongside fitness clubs, healthy eating, counseling, user-friendly therapy, and Deepak Chopra's ayurveda, that comprise the pharmacopoeia of late modernity. The shaman of yesteryears is today a 'subaltern historian', a transformation that gives the archivists some reason to live but bodes ill for the future of other knowledges. History is assuredly but one form of story-telling, as is science, and it is useful to probe why these forms of story-telling began to predominate in Europe a few centuries ago, and so inquire into their relation to colonialism, imperial knowledge formations, and the pathological violence of modernity. Many other forms of story-telling are disappearing before our eyes, though they are the breast milk of knowledge, and their survival is just as critical for a future that is ecumenical and egalitarian as mother's milk is for the nurturance of infants.

It is perfectly apposite that India, which along with China is one of two continuing civilizations from remote antiquity, should have very little of a recorded past [6]. This is also a civilization where the preponderant portion of the population, not insignificantly, cremates rather than buried its dead. Uncharitably, one might interpret this, as did certain colonialists, as the propensity in India to be as disrespectful of the dead as of the living, but more nuanced and culturally sensitive readings are possible. The myth of fire remains an enduring one for almost every civilization, but perhaps nowhere in the world has the myth been so woven into every fabric of culture and everyday life as in India. In the epic Ramayana, Sita ('she who is from the earth'), recovered after many years from captivity by her husband Rama, must undergo *agni-pariksha*, examination by fire, as proof of her chastity before she can be accepted again as his lawfully wedded wife. Again, if India's most notorious historical cultural practice is deemed to be *sati*, the self-immolation of the widow at the funeral pyre of her husband, the Hindu marriage, the union that is expected to give shape to new life, takes place around the fire: the dead devour the living, but from death proceeds new life as well. Everything in India must return to the elements: that too is the basis of a sustainable future. Though nationalist-minded Indians, since the early part of the nineteenth century, have taken umbrage at the suggestion that India has not had much of a historical sensibility, and though modernized and civic-minded Indians deplore the indifference of their countrymen and women to museums, historical monuments, and other relics of the 'national heritage', the ahistoricism of the Indian sensibility remains one of the most attractive intellectual, spiritual, and cultural features of Indian civilization. This ahistoricism was Indi-

a's preeminent mode of dissent, and we might concur with Gandhi when he wrote: "I believe in the saying that a nation is happy that has no history" [7]. We have yet to learn that what is often taken for lack is only another form of fulfillment.

### 3. The fulfillment of the future: Gandhi and the ecological vision

In thinking of how we could work towards a future that will be fulfilling for every human being, and where dissent will be allowed to have an existence other than as a normal oppositional practice which subtly performs the work of oppression, we might perhaps wish to take recourse more often to the teachings, writings, and social practices of Gandhi. According to the received view, Gandhi was not so much a systematic thinker as a man of action: he wrote no great political or social treatises, and the gargantuan 100-volume set of his collected writings scarcely contains what one might call a complete sociological work, with the exception of an extended account he wrote of his early life and work in South Africa. His short little pamphlet, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (1909), which is the inspired and even messianic work of an anti-modernist, offers a critique of industrial civilization, but many of Gandhi's followers and admirers have been more embarrassed by it than proud to offer it as a sample of their master's intellectual prowess. There was hardly a subject on which Gandhi did not have fairly elaborate thoughts, and he had concrete views about the individual, the family, and society: yet he was no system-builder. He was quite insistent on the need for *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence), and *tapasya* (selfless sacrifice), and his life can be understood as an expression of his commitment to *brahmacharya* (celibacy, attainment of godliness), but these, and some other well-understood ideas in Indian thinking, were the building blocks of Gandhi's existence. Gandhi's name is associated with no particularly complex set of theories, and the only doctrine that can be attributed to him is the technique he forged of non-violent resistance, or *satyagraha*. Gandhi himself gave every appearance of endorsing the view that he was to be construed as a doer rather than thinker, when he declared quite unambiguously that his life was his message, and that his writings were to be 'buried' with him at his death. (That his sensibility was shaped by more than Indian civilization, and that he continued until the very end to adhere to a dialogic and tentative conception of truth, is attested to by the fact that he wished to have his writings 'buried' rather than 'burnt'. Writings that are buried can always be resuscitated and given a new lease of life: truth is once again put through the hermeneutic machine.) If in Indian terms it is through works (*karma*), devotion (*bhakti*), or knowledge (*jnana*) that one can attain liberation, then the common representation of Gandhi as a *karma yogi* seems not inappropriate.

It is undoubtedly the conventional view of Gandhi, which persists in the representation of him as a man of action rather than as a thinker (and much less a theorist), which predominates in academic circles and among intellectuals from whom one might have expected greater sensitivity. The emergence of post-colonial theory, which valorizes the work of third world writers and heroic figures of resistance [8], has done almost nothing to make Gandhi attractive or even respectable to intellec-

tuals. There is scarcely an important thinker with an international reputation in the American or British academy now working on colonial discourse or postcolonial theory who has deigned to give Gandhi serious consideration, though otherwise every such thinker is second to none in his or her anti-colonialism and anti-racism. Most academics, even those who are associated with calls for 'resistance', and who imagine themselves as constituting the sole voices of dissent in an academic world that is increasingly taking on overtones of corporate management, are ultimately aesthetes: they have virtually created the discipline of non-dissenting dissent. That may be one reason why Gandhi, who also evokes an aesthetic disdain, not least of all for his sartorial and eating habits, his renunciation of all the finer things of life, and his indifference to 'art', has never evoked much interest among fashionable academics. These post-colonial theorists, as the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. amply demonstrates [9–11], have also made a bizarre fetish of Frantz Fanon, and the luster that surrounds his critical exposition of violence makes Gandhi's advocacy of non-violence seem banal and pedestrian.

Perhaps dissent (as disagreement, opposed to assent or agreement) has a strange and unremarked upon affinity to non-violence: it too is cast in what for our times is the much detested 'negative' modality, and few self-proclaimed revolutionaries would prefer non-violence to violence. It is a portent of the inability of intellectuals even to conceive of dissent that Raymond Williams, in his famous *Keywords* [12], could find no place for 'dissent', or even 'non-violence', in his essential vocabulary, though 'violence' is given recognition with utter predictability. No scholar who has pored through Gandhi's writings can, however, miss the extraordinarily razor-sharp and subtle distinctions that Gandhi made between non-violence and violence, and his delineation of violent non-violence, violence that is non-violent, the non-violence of the weak as opposed to non-violence of the strong, and the violence of some forms of non-violence [13]. That the supposed 'dissenters' of the American academy, who are impugned by their conservative critics in the academy and media for their political radicalism and intellectual relativism, should now be construed as beacons of an emancipatory politics of knowledge is only one of the minor absurdities of our times.

Gandhi gave us, in the language of some other commentators, 'the gift of the fight' [14,15], and showed that resistance is most capably and morally forged through active non-violence. The peculiarity of the fight in which Gandhi was engaged, whether with the British or conservative elements in Indian society, was that Gandhi sought to ensure that there would be no losers, and that every affected party would emerge from the fight with a richer conception of life. Though little is understood of how Gandhi's technique of resistance might be applied in our times, in the face of terrorism, carpet-bombing, and nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare, it is Gandhi's ideas that are beginning to display a resilience and longevity of which we are only dimly aware. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, there has never been a more systematic thinker than Gandhi: thus, though he did not pen an architectonic work, his ideas across a vast array of subjects, from politics, religion, education and law to hygiene, nutrition, sanitation, and child-rearing suggest a patterning that cannot be witnessed in any other life of our times. Gandhi inaugurated the modern



struggles against colonialism and racism, just as he was the first thinker to initiate a far-reaching critique of modernity; and if in his writings and pronouncements he abided by the traditional division of labor between men and women, he not merely opened his ashrams to women but insisted that, in practice, all duties were to be shared equally between women and men [16,17]. No leader of any independence movement did more to integrate women into the struggle. Nobody was enjoined to perform any social task which Gandhi had not himself undertaken, and no work was too small that Gandhi did not find it immensely valuable, worthy of wholeheartedly plunging into its execution.

In innumerable respects, Gandhi shows us the path to the future, though ironically he is often denounced for his allegedly hidebound adherence to some noxious traditions. I shall point here only to three considerations. First: The 'talisman' he offered shortly before his death reminds us that thinking about futures cannot be merely left to the forecasters, economists, and management specialists, and that all concern for the future must simultaneously be read as an intervention in the present: "Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away" [18] Secondly, Gandhi was firmly bound to the idea that freedom is indivisible: no person is truly free when others are unfree. So, in the struggle for Indian independence, he was guided by the principle that the emancipation of Indians was incomplete if the British could not be freed from themselves. Indeed, the emancipation of the oppressor requires greater reservoirs of strength and fortitude than does the emancipation of their victims. We must strive to ensure that our future will encompass a moral inclusiveness; and, as well, our very dissent is incomplete if it does not allow others to partake in the dissent, and if it does not create the conditions for further dissent. There is an egalitarianism in dissent, too.

Finally, as Gandhi's own life shows, our conception of the truth must remain hermeneutic, dialectical, and dialogic. His vegetarianism, for example, has been inspirational for many, and it is his reverence for all living beings that has made him important to Indian environmentalists and the German Green Movement alike. However, unlike 'vegans' in the post-industrial nations, Gandhi would readily have served meat to his meat-eating guests, even to those who knew him as an extraordinarily devout vegetarian. Similarly, while championing prohibition, Gandhi declared that he would much rather see alcohol openly consumed before him rather than have it drunk on the sly. No theorist of 'jouissance', unlike the heady academic deconstructionists who are almost without exception grimly righteous and joyless, Gandhi nevertheless engaged in hearty laughter. Again, unlike the 'deep ecologists', to whom he is sometimes likened, Gandhi would not have been ecocentric, and he would have been aghast at the misanthropic tendencies of many who style themselves friends of the environment. Though the word 'environment' never appears in his writings, he nurtured every living thing that came into his care, and he was the most

meticulous practitioner of recycling long before the idea had crept into the lexicon and sensibility of affluent citizens of the industrialized nations. Important letters were penned on the back of used envelopes; all organic waste was funneled back into the soil; and Gandhi may have done more to devise a toilet appropriate to Indian conditions than any sanitation engineer. While deeply caring for animals, Gandhi would have disavowed the keeping of 'pets', and he would have asked the ferocious defender of animal rights to ponder over their own propensity towards violence. Gandhi could be quite irreverent, though the Gandhians will be among the last to arrive at that understanding. And so to the caveat: before we deliver our future to those 'friends' who would be its custodians, it would be best to ask if their conception of the future has room enough for more elastic and expansive conversations on truth.

#### 4. The shape of the future: the ethos of Indian civilization

No one, as the Indian tradition insistently reminds us, should be without a mentor or spiritual guide, and Gandhi's own practices and ideas constitute the lodestar by which a guide to conduct can be formulated. Yet it is abundantly clear that neither self-fulfillment, nor a political vision, is possible without some civilizational anchor. Gandhi himself was anchored in Indian civilization, from the syncretistic customs of Indian villagers to the multitudinous depths of the *Mahabharata*. He also came to mirror, as even the best of women and men must do, the shortcomings of that civilization: while purporting to speak for the nation, his critics charged, he was unable to look after his own family, and his eldest son turned against his stentorian authority. India has never seemed to be able to look out for the material needs of its body politic, though this was undoubtedly part of Gandhi's endeavor when he pleaded with the nation to turn to spinning. Nonetheless, though Gandhi came to represent Indian civilization in much of its spiritual complexity and cultural efflorescence, just as figures like Ramana Maharishi, Sri Ramakrishna, and Rabindranath Tagore have drawn out some other aspects of Indian civilization to which Gandhi was unable to give adequate expression, it is necessary that we move from Gandhi to the larger ethos of which he was the most eloquent spokesman. For one thing, notwithstanding the proliferation of gurus and spiritual teachers within India, it is the principles of anonymity and impersonality that have always been most valorized in matters of intellectual and cultural production; likewise, it is clear that the so-called Gandhians are, in general, the least reliable expositors of Gandhi's thought, the least likely to appreciate (to appropriate the title of Croce's work on Hegel) what is living and what is dead in Gandhi. Knowledge may be more reliable in the hands of experts, but it presents more playful and arresting possibilities when it is turned over to amateurs.

If Gandhi is so compelling a figure, it is not only because of the extraordinary standards he set for himself and others, his intellectual acumen and moral acuity, his relentless quest for the truth, his resistance to colonialism and all other forms of oppression, his deeply ecological view of life, and his profound commitment to the democratization of the public realm. Paradoxically, as the leader of the nationalist

movement, he alone had almost nothing invested in the nation-state. He was surely the first (and quite likely the last) Indian political leader to understand that power exists to be disowned, and that there can be strength without power. His political negotiations stemmed not from considerations of expediency, nor even from the principle of reciprocity, which would be considered an honorable achievement on the part of any modern politician, but from his notion of the gift. He gave his endorsement to the Khilafat, a movement aimed at restoring the authority of the Caliphate over the Muslim holy places while Britain sought to dismember the Ottoman empire, but not in exchange for any promise from Indian Muslim leaders that they would forbid cow-slaughter; nor did he champion Hindu-Muslim unity principally on the noble grounds that peace is to be preferred to violence, much less on the expedient grounds that together Hindus and Muslims could more effectively resist colonial rule. He took the view, rather, that Hindus and Muslims were incomplete without each other, and that Indian civilization would be irreparably fractured by the separation of the two faiths.

To locate the sources of Gandhi's strength, and his unique appeal across the most diverse strands of India society, it is imperative to recall the deep mythic structuring of Indian civilization. The modernizers and rationalists have trivialized myth, opposing it to history and science, tarnishing it with responsibility for the worst evils of our times (thus the 'myth of the Aryan race', or the 'myth of the white man's superiority', both of which ironically point to the wholly destructive manner in which science and history were conjoined in the service of debased ideologies), when it is myth alone which has retained the open-endedness that the formal disciplines and discourses no longer possess. "Myth provokes explanation but accepts none of it", writes Carse, adding: "Where explanation absorbs the unspeakable into the speakable, myth reintroduces the silence that makes original discourse possible" [19] Similarly, it is the categories of modernity, rather than those derived from tradition, which bear most heavily the impress of oppression and inflexibility. 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' were never such until relatively recent times. They partook of each other's festivals, even worshipped at common sites, but all this is unpalatable to the *Hindutvavadi* [20,21], the modern proponent of a strong Hindu nation-state. Hindu and Muslim musicians played together, and the great Allauddin Khan himself rendered obeisance to the goddess Saraswati; now, by way of contrast, there are even attempts to establish that instruments such as the sitar and the tabla are alien to India, being of 'Muslim' or 'foreign' origin.

Or, consider this: We like to imagine that gender-bending is characteristic of the modern endeavor to free ourselves of repressive sexual mores, but the Odissi tradition of Indian dance has for a very long time given expression to the view that a man might feel himself like a woman trapped in a man's body. In Indian traditions of painting and poetry, Krishna often appears as his consort Radha, just as Radha appears as Krishna. Indians even set aside space for what anthropologists describe as the third sex (*hijras*), though even that designation is restrictive [22]. Hijras are surely neither male nor female, but they are also neither non-male nor non-female, as well as both male and non-male, and female and non-female [23]. Modern sexuality, even at the supposedly liberated heights where bisexuality, homosexuality, lesb-

ianism, sado-masochism, and group sex are recognized as authentic expressions of sexual desire and conduct, still works within the boundaries established by each of these terms. These are not, in other words, dissenting forms of sexuality, but merely other forms of the finite game of sexuality centered in conventional heterosexual love. The hijras, on the other hand, represent the kind of ambiguity which has always been integral to Indian self-understanding and self-realization. It is a pointed fact that supporters of India's decision to conduct nuclear tests have argued that, in exploding the nuclear devices, India removed the ambiguity in which its nuclear program had been shrouded. This is the characteristic aspect of the modern nation-state, which cannot easily countenance open-endedness: ambiguity, uncertainty, and liminality are equally feared, and it is demanded of humans that they unequivocally declare whether they wish to be construed as Hindu or Muslim, secular or religious, modern or traditional. The modern nation-state is always insistent on the preservation of its borders, whether construed in geographic, cultural, or epistemological terms. For dissent to have any future, we will surely have to forgo our allegiance to the nation-state and to impoverished notions of 'home', while we embrace in its fullness the more nurturant ethos of civilization.

##### **5. The politics of the future: the critique of modern categories of knowledge [24,25]**

As the trajectory of this paper has taken me from Gandhi (the person) to Indian civilization (the ethos), so now we can entertain the largest and most far-reaching concerns about the future. Not everyone will give their assent to the category of civilization or even culture, even when they are sympathetic to critiques of the nation-state: as every student of the history of European discourses knows, much exploitation has also taken place in the name of civilization. It is invariable that some people should think of themselves as more civilized than others, and the mission assumed by European colonial regimes to civilize the primitives, heathens, savages—'natives' all—scarcely requires comment. The phrase, 'civilizing mission', was scarcely coined in jest. One has only to go through the pages of the popular nineteenth-century American periodical, *Harper's Weekly*, which carried on its masthead the adumbrative sub-title, 'A Journal of Civilization', to understand how a great many people have always been construed as being without 'civilization'. The recent resuscitation of the term by the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington, who has inelegantly argued that the conflicts of the future will be between civilizations, will do nothing to revive its fortunes [26,27]. There is also the treasured injunction of Benjamin, who reminds us that "there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism" [28]. Nonetheless, there is no reason why those limitations which are attached to certain historical discourses of 'civilization' should restrain us from probing its ecumenical and emancipatory possibilities, just as there is no compelling argument for supposing that the terms through which 'Western civilization' is understood can be suitably deployed for understanding 'Indian civilization'. If India is most inadequately understood as a nation-state, then

advancement, when in fact real parity can only be furnished with the elimination of debased institutions? Who decides what is 'terrorism', what is the distinction between 'autocratic' and 'totalitarian' states, and what are the parameters of 'human rights'? Why must the world revolve around the polarity of Western universalism, or the notion that Western-style democracy represents the apex of human achievement and possibilities, and Western exceptionalism, according to which the West alone displays those collective qualities—commitment to human rights, the ethos of individualism, the spirit of capitalist enterprise, the belief in freedom of speech and expression, the craving for learning—that allow for the fulfillment of human lives?

These are questions of politics, of knowledge, and of the politics of knowledge: and for too long has the West been allowed to exercise a monopoly over what kind of questions are asked and the manner in which they are to be asked. Had Gandhi, for instance, allowed the British to frame his choices for him, he would not merely have been consigned to deploying those modes of 'resistance', whether that be constituted as the recourse to arms or the adoption of parliamentary and polite procedures of redress, which the British considered to be legitimate expressions of dissent; rather, his entire moral and cognitive framework would have been captive to a colonial epistemology which had firm notions about the 'self', the 'other', and the respective place of colonizers and colonized in a moral universe. Gandhi's critique of modernity was mistaken for a crude assault on the West, just as his scathing attack on industrial civilization was caricatured as an obscurantist retreat into agrarian primitivism; and if Gandhi's politics of the body—from his endeavor to embrace womanhood to his espousal of the predominantly feminine practices of spinning and fasting—was ridiculed as the unmanly and effete politics of a cowardly race of people, so his unabashed defense of the centrality of religion to politics was dismissed as characteristic of the Indian's inability to think in other than religious terms. That Indian Marxists, liberals, and modernizers, not to mention his virulent critics who describe him as the 'father of Pakistan', have been unable to disavow these criticisms of Gandhi is a sure sign that no emancipatory politics of dissent can emanate from these quarters. Nor is every critique of Western universalism condemned to be merely a particularism. There may yet be other universalisms, as this paper has suggested, and perhaps in the future we will move to a greater appreciation of local universalisms, and consequently to formulations of dissent that are not merely disguised forms of oppression.

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the onus is on us to furnish the terms whereby it might more creatively be understood as something other than as a civilization as well.

As we prepare to enter the next millennium, it is also emerging that people are no longer principally oppressed by the exercise of brute force. Though the recent punitive air-strike against Sudan and Afghanistan launched by the United States in its bid to strike at the heart of an alleged terrorist network made a great splash, the few dozen casualties inflicted in this brazen act of banditry pale against the hundreds and thousands of people who are killed daily in unseen acts of oppression. Bombs create an enormous din, but the machinery of death works more efficiently in the stealth of silence. Part of the work formerly performed by colonial powers, despotic regimes, and punitive expeditionary forces has now been transformed into other mechanisms of international policing, such as the deployment of sanctions and the isolation of regimes declared, sometimes almost unilaterally by the United States, to be 'outlaw states'. These contrivances continue to keep nations in submission, but the greater part of the world's people are no longer truly oppressed even by such mechanisms. Many more people have been killed in the name of 'development': it is enough to displace them from their traditional lands and deprive them of their livelihoods, apparently all for their own good. The unknown millions killed in China's famine during Mao's time died not on account of any military necessity, or at the point of the sword, but because of the unprincipled and ruthless attachment among the leadership to ideas of 'progress' and 'productivity'. On the less visible side, we have yet to chalk up the casualty count of those who, in having abandoned their traditional diets for the cream-laden, sugar-rich, and meat-opulent cuisines of northern Europe and America, are now stricken with heart disease, hypertension, hideous obesity, and all the other diseases of the affluent West. Behold the wonder of the West: sometimes it kills by making people lean and mean, as the testimony of innumerable famines in India under colonial rule strikingly shows, and at other times by making them corpulent and opulent. Nor have we included in our statistics of violence those natives who, in abandoning reliable indigenous systems of medicine, are now suffering from the excesses of Western medicine, victims just as often of iatrogenic illnesses. In countless unbeknown ways, the West—and increasingly its surrogates and satellites around the world, whose fecundity rate exceeds that of the normal population by a long margin—continues to take its toll of the rest of the world.

No future can be promising unless it entails a thorough-going critique, and dismantling, of modern knowledge systems that have given us the interpretive devices with which we have sought to make sense of our lives and the world around us. The disciplines have shackled us too long, while the experts continue to make their living and killing as medical specialists, financial advisers and loan sharks to the Third World, and development officers. Can it be much of an enlightenment when democracy is reduced to elections, where the only candidates must all have huge repositories of wealth, or when a purported 'new world order' is established on the basis of total war, the manipulation of international law, and the shameless patronage of despotic states? What kind of egalitarianism is it when women consider their admission into the military on equal terms as men as a sign of their political and social

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