

# Gandhi Centre Stage

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**See also from Perry Anderson and this issue of the London Review of Books:**

[India 1947: Why Partition?](#) (ESSF article 26033), and

[India: After Nehru](#) (ESSF article 26034).

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‘Astonishing thought: that any culture or civilisation should have this continuity for five or six thousand years or more; and not in a static or unchanging sense, for India was changing and progressing all the time,’ marvelled the country’s future ruler a few years before coming to power. There was ‘something unique’ about the antiquity of the subcontinent and its ‘tremendous impress of oneness’, making its inhabitants ‘throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities’. Indeed, a ‘dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilisation’.

In patriotic reveries of this kind, today’s admirers of Nehru, even some of his critics, are not to be outdone. For Manmohan Singh, his current successor in Delhi, India’s struggle for independence has ‘no parallel in history’, culminating in a constitution that is ‘the boldest statement ever of social democracy’. With no obligation to official bombast, scholars fall over themselves in tributes to their native land. For Meghnad Desai, the ‘success story’ of modern India in combining unity with diversity is ‘nothing short of a miracle’. For Ramachandra Guha, the ‘humdrum manifestation of the miracle of India’ crinkles in its very banknotes, with Gandhi on one side and their denomination in 15 languages on the other, its radiance anticipating, ‘by some fifty years, the European attempt to create a multilingual, multireligious, multiethnic, political and economic community’. For its part, Indian democracy – Pratap Bhanu Mehta declares – is ‘a leap of faith for which there was no precedent in human history’. ‘Especially fortunate’ in its millennial traditions of ‘public arguments, with toleration of intellectual heterodoxy’, according to Amartya Sen, ‘independent India became the first country in the non-Western world to choose a resolutely democratic constitution’ – founding an adventure that, in the eyes of Sunil Khilnani, represents ‘the third moment in the great democratic experiment launched at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the American and French Revolutions’, which ‘may well turn out to be the most significant of them all, partly because of its sheer human scale, and partly because of its location, a substantial bridgehead of effervescent liberty on the Asian continent’. This is ‘the most interesting country in the world’, even the lesser of whose aspects are entitled to their garlands: after independence, its absorption of princely states a ‘stupendous achievement’, its foreign policy ‘a staggering performance’. Nehru himself, ‘in the hearts and minds of his countrymen’, is ‘George Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Eisenhower rolled into one’.

All countries have fond images of themselves, and big countries, inevitably, have bigger heads than others. Striking in this particular cornucopia of claims, however, is the standing of their authors: names among the most distinguished Indian intellectuals of the age. Nor are any of the works from

which these tributes come – respectively, *The Rediscovery of India*, *India after Gandhi*, *The Burden of Democracy*, *The Argumentative Indian*, *The Idea of India*, *Makers of Modern India* – either casual or uncritical about their subject. All are eminently serious studies, required for an understanding of the country. What they indicate, however, is something they share with the rhetoric of the state itself, from Nehru to Singh: the centrality of four tropes in the official and intellectual imaginary of India. Telegraphically, these can be termed the couplets of antiquity-continuity; diversity-unity; massivity-democracy; multiconfessionality-secularity. Issuing from an independence struggle perceived as without equal in scale or temper, each has in its way become a touchstone of – in a now consecrated phrase – the ‘idea of India’. Though by no means every mind of note subscribes to the full bill of particulars, they enjoy what in Rawlsian diction might be called an overlapping consensus. What realities do they correspond to?

For the nationalist movement against the rule of the British, it was an article of faith that, in Gandhi’s words, ‘India was one undivided land ... made by nature’, in which ‘we were one nation before they came to India’ – ancestrally, indeed, ‘fired ... with an idea of nationality in a manner unknown in other parts of the world. We Indians are one as no two Englishmen are.’ Nehru’s claim of an ‘impress of oneness’, going back six thousand years, persisted from the prewar writings collected in *The Unity of India* to his final dispute with China, in which the Mahabharata could be invoked as proof that the North-East Frontier Agency had been part of Mother India from time immemorial, rather as if the Nibelungenlied were to clinch German diplomatic claims to Morocco. Such notions have not gone away. The facts gainsay them. The subcontinent as we know it today never formed a single political or cultural unit in premodern times. For much the longest stretches of its history, its lands were divided between a varying assortment of middle-sized kingdoms of different stripes. Of the three larger empires it witnessed, none covered the territory of Nehru’s Discovery of India. Maurya and Mughal control extended to contemporary Afghanistan, ceased much below the Deccan, and never came near Manipur. The area of Gupta control was considerably less. Separated by intervals of five hundred and a thousand years, there was no remembered political or ideological connection between these realms, or even common religious affiliation: at its height the first of them Buddhist, the second Hindu, the third Muslim. Beneath a changing mosaic of mostly regional rulers, there was more continuity of cultural and social patterns, caste – the best claimant to a cultural demarcation – being attested very early, but no uniformity. The ‘idea of India’ was a European not a local invention, as the name itself makes clear. No such term, or equivalent, as ‘India’ existed in any indigenous language. A Greek coinage, taken from the Indus river, it was so foreign to the subcontinent that as late as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans could define Indians simply as ‘the natives of all unknown countries’ and use it to describe the inhabitants of the Americas.

When the British arrived, it was the sprawling heterogeneity of the area that allowed them, after a slow start, to gain such relatively swift and easy control of it, using one local power or population against the next, in a series of alliances and annexations that ended, more than a century after the Battle of Plassey, with the construction of an empire extending further east and south, if not north-west, than any predecessor. ‘India’s segmented society and denationalised governments did not constitute a serious challenge to the British,’ one leading native historian, B.B. Misra, has written; ‘Indian troops ... conquered the country for Britain.’ There is a touch of exaggeration, and anachronism, in the judgment. But it delivers a basic truth. Foreign conquerors were no novelty in the subcontinent, whose northern plains had known successive waves of invaders from the tenth century onwards. For many, the British were not necessarily more alien than previous rulers. The latest invaders would, of course, always require their own soldiers too. But if the British could gain and keep a firm grip on such a vast landmass, it was because they could count on its multiple fragmentations – ethnic, linguistic, dynastic, social, confessional.

For a century after the seizure of Bengal, sepoys in the command of the East India Company

outnumbered whites by up to nine to one. The Mutiny of 1857, which came as a severe shock, altered the mixture. Thereafter, the policy of the Raj was to hold the ratio at two to one, and make sure that native detachments developed no common identity. Charles Wood, secretary of state for India under Palmerston, made no bones about the objective: 'I wish to have a different and rival spirit in different regiments, so that Sikh might fire into Hindoo, Goorkha into either, without any scruple in case of need.' 'As we cannot do without a large Native army in India,' the Eden Commission (1879) would subsequently explain, 'our main object is to make that army safe: and next to the grand counterpoise of a sufficient European force, comes the counterpoise of Natives against Natives' - for example, 'that distinctiveness which is so valuable and which, while it lasts, makes the Muhammadan of one country despise, fear or dislike the Muhammadan of another'. The mutineers in Delhi having sought restoration of Mughal power, Muslims were suspect as recruits thereafter, becoming the exception in an army based on particularist identities - no all-Muslim units were ever allowed within it. The key groups on whom the British came to rely most were, as Wood indicated, Sikhs and Gurkhas, both relatively small and marginal communities, joined later by Pathans and Punjabis. Recruits came from among the least literate groups in the countryside, with a preference for poor peasants. No natives could become officers, as they could in French colonial armies of the same period.

Mustering a peacetime strength of some 200,000-250,000, the Indian army was the largest employer in the Raj, and always absorbed a third to a half of its revenue. Regularly deployed overseas, it constituted, in Salisbury's famous words, 'an English barrack in the Oriental Seas from which we may draw any number of troops without paying for them'. Its services included provision of soldiers for imperial expansion in the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia, and cannon-fodder on a heroic scale in the First World War, when 1.3 million mustered for Asquith and Lloyd George. But its primary function remained domestic intimidation, the maintenance of British rule by threat or exercise of force. Laid out across the country, its cantonments were a permanent reminder of what power was master in the land. In the north-west, along the marches with Afghanistan, border fighting and phantasms of Russian invasion kept large forces in the field. But internal security was always the top priority, requiring the use of British troops in greater numbers than native levies, the reverse of deployment on the frontier; Gurkhas - aliens too - were 'praetorians of last resort'. A large police apparatus, already 150,000 regulars by the 1880s, operated as the forward screen of repression. Down to the end, the Raj remained a garrison state, as its viceroy pointedly reminded the cabinet in 1942: 'India and Burma have no natural association with the Empire, from which they are alien by race, history and religion, and for which as such neither of them have any natural affection, and both are in the Empire because they are conquered countries which have been brought there by force, kept there by our controls, and which hitherto it has suited to remain under our protection.' Attlee, scandalised like any good social democrat at the utterance of such truths, complained that this was 'an astonishing statement to be made by a viceroy', sounding like 'an extract from anti-imperialist propaganda speech'.

Coercion never sufficed on its own: it always required its complement of collaboration. That came from two principal supports. Two-fifths of the territory of the Raj, and a fifth of its population, were left in the hands of princes, mostly Hindu, under the watchful guidance of British residents: feudatories owing the preservation of their wealth and power to the overlord. In the rest of the subcontinent under direct British rule, landlords - Muslim or Hindu - were beneficiaries of the colonial regime, not a few having originally acquired their property through its good offices, and all enjoying its protection in their exploitation of tenants and labourers beneath them. These forces were natural subordinates of the Raj. Less so were merchants and manufacturers, who came over time to form the nucleus of an industrial bourgeoisie, harmed rather than helped by an imperial economic system designed to give British exports control of Indian markets. Without tariff protection, many came to be resentful of the empire. Yet ambivalence was rooted in the conditions of

their growth, since it was British railways, binding the subcontinent together geographically, that extended their potential field of profitable operations, and British rule of law that assured them stable rights of possession and mechanisms of transaction.

The modernising force of the Raj was not limited to its locomotives and law books. It was official policy to produce a native elite educated to metropolitan standards, or as Macaulay famously put it, 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'. The confident prescription overlooked the fact that common among such opinions were liberal verities capable of being inconvenient in the Oriental Seas. Two generations later, a layer of articulate professionals – lawyers, journalists, doctors and the like – had emerged, the seedbed of Congress nationalism. The British had taken over the subcontinent with such relative ease because it was politically and socially so tangled and fractured, but in imposing a common infrastructural, juridical and cultural grid on it, they unified it as an administrative and ideological reality for the first time in its history. The idea of India was theirs. But once it took hold as a bureaucratic norm, subjects could turn it against rulers, and the nimbus of empire dissolve into the charisma of nation.

The capsizal was gradual. Congress, founded in the 1880s by a circle whose leading light was an Englishman, remained for some time a pressure group of notables seeking no more than colonial self-government. The first outbreak of more radical nationalist agitation, prompted by Hindu anger at Curzon's division of the province of Bengal, came two decades later. To check it, the Liberal government elected in 1906 introduced a carefully calibrated representative element into the provincial and central legislative machinery of the Raj, allowing for a minority of members in each to be elected on a complex franchise of some 2 per cent of the population. The aim of the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 was prophylactic. As Delhi cabled London, 'we anticipate that the aristocratic elements in society and the moderate men, for whom at present there is no place in Indian politics, will range themselves on the side of the Government and will oppose any further shifting of the balance of power and any attempt to democratise Indian institutions.' Congress, while regretting the provision for separate Muslim representation, welcomed the changes as a liberal constitutional reform, and expressed its loyalty to the emperor when George V arrived for the Durbar of 1911. Three years later, it gave unstinting support to the empire in the Great War.

This was the stage onto which Gandhi stepped on his arrival in Bombay in 1915, after 21 years in South Africa. Though preceded by his reputation as a fearless spokesman for the Indian community there, he had no experience of political life in the subcontinent, and initially confined himself to study tours and setting up an ashram in Ahmedabad. But by the end of the war, his active support of local struggles by indigo labourers in Bihar, farmers and textile workers in Gujarat, bringing tactics he had developed in South Africa to each, had given him a countrywide reputation. Within another two years, he had transformed Indian politics, leading the first mass movement to rock British power since the Mutiny, and remaking Congress as a popular political force. After the upheaval of 1919-21, he twice again launched campaigns, in 1930-31 and 1942-43, in size each bigger than the last, challenging the authority of the Raj in successive landmarks of a struggle for national liberation.

In orchestrating these great movements, Gandhi displayed a rare constellation of abilities in a political leader. Charismatic mobilisation of popular feeling was certainly foremost among these. In the countryside, adoring crowds treated him as semi-divine. But, however distinctive and spectacular in his case, this is largely a given in any nationalist movement. What set Gandhi apart was its combination with three other skills. He was a first-class organiser and fundraiser – diligent, efficient, meticulous – who rebuilt Congress from top to bottom, endowing it with a permanent executive at national level, vernacular units at provincial level, local bases at district level, and delegates proportionate to population, not to speak of an ample treasury. At the same time, though temperamentally in many ways an autocrat, politically he did not care about power in itself, and was an excellent mediator between different figures and groups both within Congress and among its

variegated social supports. Finally, though no great orator, he was an exceptionally quick and fluent communicator, as the hundred volumes of his articles, books, letters, cables (far exceeding the output of Marx or Lenin, let alone Mao) testify. To these political gifts were added personal qualities of a ready warmth, impish wit and iron will. It is no surprise that so magnetic a force would attract such passionate admiration, at the time and since.

But Gandhi's achievements also came at a huge cost to the cause which he served. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw quite a few leaders of national movements who were men of religion – the Grand Mufti and the Abbé Youlou, Archbishop Makarios and Ayatollah Khomeini, among others. For most, their faith was subordinate to their politics, an instrument or adornment of essentially earthly ends. In a few cases, like that of Khomeini, there was no significant distinction between the two: religious and political goals were one, and there could be no conflict between them. Within this gallery, Gandhi hangs apart. For him alone, religion mattered more than politics, which did not coincide with, but subjoined it. There was a further difference. Not only did he hold no religious office, but his religion was to a peculiar extent homemade, unlike any existing belief system at the time. Quite how strange a potpourri this was will not be found in the industry of glozing commentary that has grown up around his ideas, adjusting them for contemporary usage in much the same way as the Pentateuch becomes a blueprint for universalism and the Quran all but a trailer for feminism. We owe the first scrupulous account of it to Kathryn Tidrick's *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life*, which came out five years ago, to a deafening silence, not only in India – that was perhaps to be expected – but on the whole in this country too.

The composition of Gandhi's faith, Tidrick has shown, was born of a cross between a Jain-inflected Hindu orthodoxy and late Victorian psychomancy, the world of Madame Blavatsky, theosophy, the planchette and the Esoteric Christian Union. The two were not unconnected, as garbled ideas from the former – karma, reincarnation, ascetic self-perfection, fusion of the soul with the divine – found occult form in the latter. Little acquainted with the Hindu canon itself in his early years, Gandhi reshaped it through the medium of Western spiritualisms of the period. His one aim in life, he decided, was to attain *moksha*: that state of perfection in which the cycle of rebirth comes to an end and the soul accedes to ultimate union with God. 'I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven, which is *moksha*,' he wrote, 'in this very existence.' The path towards it was 'crucifixion of the flesh', without which it was impossible to 'see God face to face' and become one with him. But if such perfection could be attained, the divine would walk on earth, for 'there is no point in trying to know the difference between a perfect man and God.' Then there would be no limit to his command of his countrymen: 'When I am a perfect being, I have simply to say the word and the nation will listen.'

Crucifixion of the flesh, in this conception, meant far more than the vegetarian prohibitions prescribed by his caste background. Not in food, but sex lay the overriding danger to liberation of the soul. The violence of Gandhi's revulsion against carnal intercourse of any kind mingled Christian fears of sin with Hindu phobias of pollution. Celibacy was not just a duty for the dedicated few. It was enjoined on all who would truly serve their country. 'A man who is unchaste loses stamina, becomes emasculated and cowardly. He whose mind is given over to animal passions is not capable of any great effort.' If a married couple gratified these, it was still 'an animal indulgence' that, 'except for perpetuating the race, is strictly prohibited'. At the height of political mobilisation, in 1920, even conjugal union was impermissible: all Indians must forgo sexual relations, as 'a temporary necessity in the present stage of national evolution'. Complete continence – *brahmacharya* – was of such transcendent importance that an involuntary ejaculation at the age of 65 was matter for an anguished public communiqué. At 77, testing himself by sleeping nude with his great-niece, he wrote: 'Even if only one *brahmachari* of my conception comes into being, the world will be redeemed.' If his conception were to be universally adopted, the logical result would be 'not extinction of the human species, but the transference of it to a higher plane'.

The extremity of such convictions was not confined to the bedroom. Its evils were age-old. Other, no less deadly dangers were more recent in origin. Gandhi enumerated some of these in the one consolidated statement of his fundamental beliefs, *Hind Swaraj*, written in 1909. There he explained that machinery 'represents a great sin'; that 'railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague' and 'increased the frequency of famines', accentuating 'the evil nature of man'; that 'hospitals are institutions for propagating sin. Men take less care of their bodies, and immorality increases'; that a peasant needs no 'knowledge of letters', which could only make him 'discontented with his cottage or his lot', neither 'elementary education or higher education' being 'required for the main thing', to 'make of us men'. All these ruinous innovations were exports of the 'satanic civilisation' of the West, whose 'votaries calmly state that their business is not to teach religion' - 'some,' incredibly, 'even consider it to be a superstitious growth.' But 'India will never be godless,' and to restore it to its pristine condition, just one effort was required, 'to drive out Western civilisation. All else will follow.'

In the years after his arrival in the subcontinent, although he never repudiated them, Gandhi did not insist on such radical atavisms. Sexuality had to be fought, but modernity could be more tactically sidestepped in pursuit of the cause embodied in the title of his work. *Swaraj* was 'self-rule'. Politically speaking, it was in effect a call for Home Rule on Irish lines, though this was not an analogy to which he was ever tempted to appeal, since the national movement in Ireland was identified with two strategies - parliamentary and insurrectionary - both of which he rejected for India. But for Gandhi self-rule was far from simply political. It was mastery of the passions and of the senses in the ascent of the soul to its appointment with divinity. *Swaraj* was a religious imperative, its political form no more than a means to a higher end. It entailed not a struggle to evict the British from India, but a struggle of Indians with themselves that, if won, would bring the British to reason. The method of that struggle was passive resistance - non-violence. Gandhi had come upon this conception in Tolstoy, where it was already suffused with religious yearning. But his own version, *satyagraha* (a neologism he liked to translate as 'truth-force'), was an original development of it. Tolstoy, unconventionally vegetarian and pacifist though he became in advanced old age, remained a Christian. Gandhi, in drawing on his ideas, gave them a distinctively Hindu cast, fusing them with millennial traditions of a more radical asceticism and extra-terrestrialism. 'Passive resistance' he felt too weak a term for the movement he set out to inspire: truth was not passive, it was a force. He had shown how effective it could be in South Africa, where Indians were a small immigrant minority. What could it not achieve on native soil, where they were the totality of the population? *Ramarajya*, he told the crowds at his meetings, was within reach if they followed his teachings - the Golden Age of the god-hero Rama, born in Ayodhya, victor over the demon Ravana, for two thousand years the stuff of Hindu legend.

The original politics of the Congress elite had been studiously secular. Gandhi's takeover of the party not only gave it a popular basis it had never possessed before but injected a massive dose of religion - mythology, symbology, theology - into the national movement. The power of political mobilisation in the register of *Hind Swaraj* was manifest. But it posed an obvious problem. Could the Muslim millions be rallied in the same idiom? In South Africa, Gandhi had been a staunch advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity, and no confessional divisions had marred his campaigns of non-violence there. He himself maintained that all religions preached the same truths, so there was no basis for division. But there the two communities were recent implantations, bound together by a white racism of which they were indifferently victims. In the subcontinent, a long history of conquests and conflicts divided the two.

For Gandhi it was impossible to be impartial between the faiths they professed. At a personal level, he was perfectly sincere in holding that all religions were equal before the Lord. At a political level, one religion was, inevitably, more equal than the other. Hinduism was indigenous to the subcontinent, and peculiar to it. Islam was neither. Gandhi came from Gujarat, and his knowledge of

subcontinental Muslim culture was very limited. A dutiful son of his faith, he declared, 'I yield to none in my reverence for the cow,' and warned his son against marrying a Muslim on grounds that it was 'contrary to *dharma*' and - a telling simile - 'like putting two swords in one sheath'. When he wished in *Hind Swaraj* to explain why India had been one nation long before the arrival of the British, he did not invoke the ecumenicism - alleged or otherwise - of the Emperor Akbar, but 'those far-seeing ancestors of ours who established Shevetbindu Rameshwar in the South, Juggernaut in the South-East, and Hardwar in the North as places of pilgrimage': holy sites scarcely magnets of national identity for Muslims. No mosques or monuments of Islam feature as pendants. When he announced in 1919 that 'India is fitted for the religious supremacy of the world,' the very claim belying any kind of equality, few could doubt which religion he had in mind. The *Ramayana*, after all, was 'the greatest book in all devotional literature'.

How then was such a Hindu revivalist to unite Muslims in a common national struggle? On the one hand, he could not do so on a secular basis without denying everything he believed in. On the other, he was realistic enough to know that reiteration of the precept that all religions converged on the same goal, however frequent and well meant, might cut little ice with followers of a prophet who had given famously short shrift to idolatry of the Juggernaut sort. The solution he hit on was to rouse Muslims to action against the Raj under the banner of Islam itself, in a cause whose overtly confessional objective trumped any of the generic Hindu motifs with which he would colour the national movement. Defeat in the First World War had left the Ottoman Empire at the mercy of the Entente. Its last sultan before the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, the notorious Abdulhamid II, had sought to prop up a dwindling authority by dusting off his claim to the symbolic title of caliph, for centuries a worm-eaten relic in the dynastic attic. By 1919 the Allies were in Istanbul. The Young Turks were gone, but - technically - they had never ousted the dynasty: a nominal sultan remained. What would be the fate of this figure, and the notional pan-Islamic authority attached to him?

Under the Raj, Muslims had steadily lost ground after the Mutiny. No longer the masters of the region they had once ruled, not fully trusted as soldiers, they stooped with difficulty to bureaucratic employment by the British, had little business experience and, possessed of an administrative idiom of their own in Persian, did not take readily to education in English. By the turn of the century, it was obvious how far they lagged behind Hindus in government service, industry and the professions. Alarmed at this downward slide in their community, reformers sought to create a better-educated Muslim elite, and notables, led by the Aga Khan, prevailed on the British to ensure that Muslim votes would not be swamped by Hindu majorities once a narrow electoral franchise was granted, by allowing them separate electoral rolls and seats.

So matters stood in 1914, before taking an unexpected turn with the final dénouement of the Great War, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the Arab world, the end of Turkish rule came as a liberation, if a shortlived one, before British and French imperialism divided up the spoils. In the subcontinent, with no experience of Ottoman oppression, the fall of the empire was perceived by many Muslims as a humiliation which resonated, emotionally if not practically, with their own descent in the world - the last great Islamic power crushed and dismembered by foes foremost among whom were the British rulers of India. A clamour began that the caliphate itself was in danger.

For Gandhi, this was an opportunity to demonstrate Hindu-Muslim unity in practice by rallying Hindu opinion behind agitation to protect the Commander of the Faithful. That more secular Muslims - Jinnah among them - regarded the issue as not merely irrelevant, but thoroughly regressive, a breeding ground for clerical posturing, did not deter him. Nor was he moved by the dismay of friends who pointed out Arab feelings about Ottoman imperialism, not to speak of the fate of the Armenians. What counted was that this was a religious cause, in which Hindus could join with Muslims against British injustice. That his fellow Hindus would feel much solidarity over such a

strained, remote question was unlikely. But the year 1919, which saw the formation of an All India Caliphate (*Khilafat*) Committee, was also the scene of Gandhi's first attempt at an All Indian *satyagraha*, in protest at the legislation prolonging wartime powers of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment into the peace. Response to Gandhi's call proved patchy, and in the face of harsh repression – including General Dyer's notorious mowing down of an unarmed crowd at Amritsar – faded within a few months. But when the official report on the massacre, and the surrounding exercise of martial law in the Punjab, was released a year later (naturally, an extenuation of these), Hindu political opinion was outraged. In the same month, the draft provisions of the Treaty of Sèvres for winding up the Ottoman Empire were published. The Khilafat campaign had from the outset insisted not only on the preservation of the caliphate, but its continued guardianship of Mecca and Medina, and control of the Jazirat-ul-Arab, or effectively the whole Middle East. The treaty did not do away with the dynasty, but severed the Porte from all its possessions in the Arab world. Gandhi promptly denounced it as 'a staggering blow to the Indian Mussulmans'.

Now linking the issues of the Punjab and the caliphate, while making it clear the caliphate had priority, he launched a mass campaign of Non-Cooperation with the British in August 1920. To this he brought all his outstanding gifts of organisation, energy and imagination, promising the nation 'Swaraj within a Year'. Non-Cooperation would escalate through four ascending levels, if the Raj did not yield: first, renunciation of all titles and honours conferred by the British; next, resignation from positions in the civil service; then, resignation from the police and army; finally, refusal to pay taxes. In practice, emphasis fell on a boycott of courts, schools, council elections and – especially – foreign goods. The campaign electrified the country, drawing in social layers and geographical regions hitherto untouched by nationalist agitation, throwing up self-organised volunteer forces for pressure and picketing, setting off stoppages and riots, against the background of the economic hardships of postwar deflation, and a wave of strikes and unionisation. Mobilising Hindus and Muslims alike, and engulfing Calcutta and Bombay in tempests of political unrest, the movement posed the greatest threat to British rule since the Mutiny. Desertions from the civil service, police and army were few, but calls for these were rhetorical gestures by Congress. The ultimate weapon in its arsenal was the last: a tax strike. The structure of the Raj depended on the land revenue it extracted from an overwhelmingly agrarian population. Without this, it could not be sustained. On 1 February 1922, Gandhi announced that in the face of British obduracy, it was time to proceed to the highest stage of Non-Cooperation. He would initiate refusal to pay taxes in the Bardoli district of Gujarat.

Four days later, police in the small town of Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh fired on a crowd protesting food prices, killing three demonstrators; counter-attacking, the infuriated crowd put paid to the policemen in the station where they had barricaded themselves. On learning the news of this unthinkable event, Gandhi declared a five-day fast of penance, and to general stupefaction, without consulting anyone, called off the whole national movement. He could do this, because such was by this time his aura that Congress had granted him 'sole executive authority' – in effect, dictatorial powers – six weeks earlier. No single decision of his would ever be as fateful as this. How did he justify it? He had sinned, he explained, in failing to realise that the Indian masses were not yet spiritually advanced enough to adhere to the non-violence which he had always said was a condition of obtaining *swaraj* within a year, as he had promised.

It is conventional to take this explanation at face value. Certainly, Gandhi had shown increasing unease at the turbulence his campaign had unleashed in India, the incident occasioning his volte-face perhaps only a final straw. Yet, contrary to legend, his attitude to violence had always been – and would remain – contingent and ambivalent. At the start of his career, as is fairly well known, he twice volunteered for active service, even if stretcher-bearing, for British colonialism in South Africa – first in the Boer War, and then in the crushing of the Zulu rebellion of 1906. These engagements preceded his exposition of *satyagraha* in *Hind Swaraj*, and could be taken as the stumblings of a pre-



Damascene. But when the First World War broke out, he was not only still eager to organise an ambulance corps for the British in 1914, but in mid-1918 went out of his way to try and drum up recruits for the inter-imperialist slaughter in Flanders, tramping as far as Bihar in a bid – happily a dismal failure – to round up more villagers for the trenches. ‘The ability to use physical force is necessary for a true appreciation of *satyagraha*,’ he told them. ‘He alone can practise *ahimsa* who knows how to kill’ – in fact, the ‘practice of *ahimsa* may even necessitate killing.’ Reassuring wives that if they lost husbands they could console themselves with the thought that they had ‘fallen in the discharge of their duty’ and would be theirs ‘in your next incarnation’, he urged his listeners to ‘fight unconditionally unto death with the Briton’.

Did he then change his mind in planning the strategy of Non-Cooperation in 1920? On the eve of the campaign, he had expressly allowed for lapses in the struggle. Great movements could not be halted if a people went astray. ‘No general worth the name gives up the battle, because he has suffered reverses, or, which is the same thing, made mistakes.’ Indeed, so far from flinching at the prospect of hitches, he declared: ‘I would risk violence a thousand times [rather] than risk the emasculation of a whole race.’ The remorse at Bardoli was not in any way conclusive. Twenty years later, he would tell compatriots: ‘We have to take the risk of violence to shake off the great calamity of slavery.’ And a few months later: ‘Supposing a non-violent struggle has been started at my behest and later on there is an outbreak of violence, I will put up with that too, because it is God who is inspiring me and things will shape as He wills. If He wants to destroy the world through violence using me as His instrument, how can I prevent it?’ In 1942 he informed reporters that in India ‘rivers of blood’ might be ‘the price of freedom’. In 1946, thumping the table, he told the viceroy: ‘If India wants her bloodbath, she shall have it.’

Such is the record. To read it as evidence of mere hypocrisy on Gandhi’s part would be a mistake. There can be no doubt that he was, so far as he himself went, sincere enough in his commitment to non-violence. But as a political leader, his conception of himself as a vessel of divine intention allowed him to escape the trammels of human logic or coherence. Truth was not an objective value – correspondence to reality, or even (in a weaker version) common agreement – but simply what he subjectively felt at any given time. ‘It has been my experience,’ he wrote, ‘that I am always true from my point of view.’ His autobiography was subtitled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, as if truth were material for alteration in a laboratory, or the plaything of a séance. In his ‘readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment’, he was freed from any requirement of consistency. ‘My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements,’ he declared, but ‘with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment’: ‘since I am called “Great Soul” I might as well endorse Emerson’s saying that “foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”’ The result was a licence to say whatever he wanted, regardless of what he had said before, whenever he saw fit.

The effects of such a conviction on the political culture of the movement that he led could not but be corrupting. Admirers point out that Gandhi nearly always replied, calmly and courteously, often with a touch of wit, to anyone who wrote to him, high or low. He was an impeccable correspondent. But to real intellectual exchange he was a stranger. He was trained as a British barrister, and argued like one, as a lawyer not a thinker, changing his brief from day to day. The condition of this ductility was not fees but faith. His religious belief in himself was rock-like, impervious to doubt or objection, guaranteeing in the final resort that all he said, no matter how apparently contradictory, formed a single bloc of truth, as so many scattered words of God. For while he modified or diluted or inverted positions as time went by, enabling a vast industry of later glossators to represent him as transcending earlier limitations in a spiritual progress towards ever greater political wisdom, he rarely disavowed directly anything significant he had once said or written. Even his ardour for the wars of British imperialism, for which he was reproached by those who had opposed them, elicited

no regret: he had sincerely believed in the honourable intentions of the empire, and it was not his fault if it had failed to live up to them. *Hind Swaraj*, its battery of archaisms a stumbling-block to those who pointed out that he was using railways and doctors and not actually rejecting schools, he defended to the end, writing in 1945 that he still stood by its system of government.

Characteristically, he added: 'It is not necessary for me to prove the rightness of what I said then. It is essential only to know what I feel today.' Throughout his career in India, he claimed both to rise above consistency – growing 'from truth to truth', it was to his latest version that the world should attend – and unswervingly to embody it. 'Whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two.'

Thus at the crux of 1922, when Gandhi called off the mass movement he had launched, his dismay at a local breach of non-violence was genuine enough, but insufficient to determine his decision: he would take exactly the opposite line in 1942, envisaging such outbreaks in advance. The efficient reason for his sudden retreat lay less in his religious beliefs, whose very fixity allowed for such flexibility, than in his political outlook, connected as the two ultimately were. The goal of Non-Cooperation was swaraj within a year. What did that mean? In January, a month before his decision at Bardoli, Gandhi spelled out what it did not mean: 'Assuming that Great Britain alters her attitude as I know she will when India is strong, it will be religiously unlawful for us to insist on independence. For it will be vindictive and petulant.' What India should seek was a status like that of South Africa, within a commonwealth of equal partners that retained the British connection. Six years later he repeated his opposition to any demand for independence, a notion unintelligible to the masses, as opposed to *swaraj*: 'It is a sacrilege to displace that word by a foreign importation of doubtful value.' Making clear the difference was not merely terminological, he declared: 'My ambition is much higher than independence.' To head off pressure for it from a younger generation in Congress, he invoked a loftier national eminence to come: a 'world commonwealth', in which India would no longer be an equal but 'the predominant partner, by reason of her numbers, geographical position and culture inherited for ages'.

Gandhi's resistance to calls for independence stemmed from the same fear that governed the abrupt quietus he delivered to Non-Cooperation. He did not want to evict the British in India if to do so was to risk a social upheaval. Revolution was a greater danger than the Raj. Behind his refusal of any prospect of it lay both religious belief and social calculation. On the one hand, Hinduism bound all who adhered to it into a single interwoven community, in which each was allotted their appointed station. To break its unity by setting one part against another was contrary to divine order. On the other, the movement he called into being in 1919 was extensive, but not comprehensive. The Congress he commanded was a coalition with determinate frontiers. It comprised industrialists, traders, professionals and better-off peasants; it did not include urban workers or the rural poor who formed the vast majority of the population. To pit these against their employers or landlords was to divide what God had joined; to mobilise them against their rulers, to risk setting fire to the country. Class conflict was out. 'We must gain control over all the unruly and disturbing elements,' he explained as labour unrest boiled up during Non-Cooperation. 'In India we want no political strikes.' In the countryside, as a newspaper account of one of his speeches put it, he 'deprecated all attempts to create discord between landlords and tenants and advised the tenants to suffer rather than fight', in the cause of preserving national unity. Property was a trust that had to be respected and – should that be necessary – protected. Under the Raj, such protection was afforded by the law and its guardians, the police. In Chauri Chaura, a mob propelled by economic grievances had respected neither, in an awful warning of what popular passions might unleash in India. At all costs, their momentum had to be stopped.

Bardoli, where Gandhi had planned to lead a refusal of the land revenue, was an area within his native Gujarat where Congress was well implanted and which he knew at first hand. It was also,

however, within the zone of ryotwari cultivation, where peasants paid taxes directly to the state, rather than in the huge zamindari sector where taxes were collected in the form of rent by landlords, passing on a due proportion to the state, and refusal of the revenue would mean a social revolt against them. But even in its most cautious form, a tax strike threatened the existence of the Raj, by pulling its economic infrastructure out from under it, and therewith its ability to enforce its will coercively. If it were observed countrywide, imperial law and order would face not a nebulous swaraj within a year but a complete breakdown. This was the spectre – as he saw it, Chauri Chaura writ large – at which Gandhi drew back. The Raj must get its revenue if it was, as he wished, to remain on Indian soil.

While this drama was unfolding in India, a battle in parallel was being fought in Ireland. By the summer of 1920 Non-Cooperation and the War of Independence were in progress together. Gandhi called off the first in February 1922, as British forces were sent packing by the second: the treaty conceding the Irish a Free State had been signed just two months before, and by August the 26 counties were shot of them. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had always stationed a much higher number of troops relative to population in Ireland than in India, with a lower proportion of local recruits: typically, a military establishment of about 25,000, and a constabulary of 10,000, for an island of 4.5 million inhabitants, less than a hundred miles from England – a ratio of 1:130. In India, 4000 miles away, where the machinery of repression mustered some 400,000 for a population of 300 million, the ratio was 1:750. Yet within less than three years, an Irish guerrilla of not more than 3000 combatants at any one time had destroyed the colonial police and effectively driven the colonial army – upped to 40,000 for counter-insurgency – from the field in the larger part of the country. Had there been any synchronised campaign in India, with its hugely more favourable balance of potential forces, not to speak of logistics, the issue could hardly have been in doubt. Instead, there was the fiasco of Bardoli, and the postponement of independence for a quarter of a century. The price of national liberation was not small in Ireland: division of the country and civil war. But it was tiny compared with the bill that would eventually be paid in India.

Its first instalment came when Non-Cooperation was scuttled. Muslims, once stirred to action and then unceremoniously abandoned by Gandhi, by and large never trusted him again. Jinnah, a member of Congress long before Gandhi, and architect of its pact with the Muslim League (of which he was by then simultaneously president) at Lucknow in 1916, had already left the party in a mixture of dismay at the radicalisation of its tactics and disgust at the sacralisation of its appeals, once Gandhi took over. Disliking intensely what he saw as the confessional demagoguery of the caliphate campaign, when it collapsed he sought a second arrangement between the League and Congress for constitutional advance within the electoral machinery of the Raj, expanded since 1920 to give the vote to 6 per cent of adult males and more leeway at central and provincial level to the native elite. In 1927, he proposed a pact that would reserve Muslims one-third of the seats in a central legislature in exchange for a single rather than separate electorates. Nehru père, charged with drawing up its constitutional proposals by Congress, at first accepted this. Then he produced a report reducing the quota to a quarter, and rejecting any reservations in Punjab and Bengal, where Muslims were a majority of the population but a minority of the electorate – elsewhere, they could be ‘settled by throwing a few crumbs here and there’. At an All Party Conference in Calcutta, Jinnah’s attempt at amendments were shouted down. A penultimate chance of unity between the two communities was cast to the winds.

By 1928 Gandhi, after a spell in the wings, was centre stage again, and Congress membership increasing by leaps and bounds, a recruitment drive lifting it from 80,000 to 450,000 by 1929. Faced with resurgent nationalist mobilisation, the incumbent viceroy, the future Lord Halifax, promised India what Gandhi had by now redefined as the swaraj he sought, dominion status within the empire. In March 1930, when talks failed to extract fine print from the pledge, Gandhi unleashed his second

great campaign of civil disobedience, whose spectacular first act was a march to the sea in defiance of the state's salt tax, which had recently been increased. This time, the response was geographically wider, but communally narrower – virtually no Muslims took part – and the repression swifter and greater: 60,000 arrests, including the entire top leadership of Congress, double the number in Non-Cooperation. But salt was not land, the danger to the Raj far less. In practice, the tax mostly continued to be collected and little revenue was lost, the main impact of the movement coming once again from mass boycott of foreign goods. Unrest was sufficient, however, for the viceroy to release Gandhi and reach a deal with him to suspend the movement and attend the Round Table Conference on constitutional reform in London, assembling dignitaries from zones of both direct and indirect rule in India, which Congress had hitherto boycotted.

At the conference, Gandhi – unaccustomed to multilateral negotiation – was baulked by Muslim and Sikh insistence on separate electorates, and disconcerted by demand for the same from the Untouchable leader Bhimrao Ambedkar, within what he saw as his own community. Returning empty-handed to India, he resumed civil disobedience. A tougher British crackdown saw him jailed again, with further mass arrests, and by the spring of 1932 the movement had been defeated, with nothing tangible to show for it. In the summer, London announced that Untouchables would be granted separate electorates. Caste was now, irrevocably, on the table, and for the first time Gandhi's religious beliefs were put to a direct political test.

What was his attitude to caste? He had set it out while Non-Cooperation was surging, in 1920-21. Untouchability was a heinous crime. But it was an excrescence that had nothing to do with caste itself, which was not a human invention, but an immutable law of nature itself. There was no element of hierarchy in it. 'The caste system is not based on inequality, there is no question of inferiority,' for 'if Hindus believe, as they must believe, in reincarnation, transmigration, they must know that nature will, without any possibility of mistake, adjust the balance by degrading a Brahmin, if he misbehaves himself, by reincarnating him in a lower division, and translating one who lives the life of a Brahmin in his present incarnation to Brahminhood in his next.' There was no need to adjust the balance in this life: 'Interdrinking, interdining, intermarrying, I hold, are not essential for the promotion of the spirit of democracy.'

On religious grounds, it was essential to preserve the division of society into four fundamental castes, for it was this that had saved Hinduism from disintegration. 'If Hindu society has been able to stand it is because it is founded on the caste system. The seeds of *swaraj* are to be found in the caste system.' To destroy it would mean that 'Hindus must give up the principle of hereditary occupation which is the soul of the caste system. The hereditary principle is an eternal principle. To change it is to create disorder. I have no use for a Brahmin if I cannot call him a Brahmin for my life. It will be chaos if every day a Brahmin is to be changed into a Shudra and a Shudra is to be changed into a Brahmin.' Caste, indeed, was not just the cornerstone of Hindu India. Properly respected, it might be a universal balm: 'It can be offered to the world as a leaven and as the best remedy against heartless competition and social disintegration born of avarice and greed.'

Over time, he would tone down such claims. Trying to fend off Ambedkar's attacks, he would later explain that the fourfold order of *varna* was not to be confused with subdivisions of *jati*, which were a deplorable corruption of it, disavowing the latter as 'nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger,' while continuing to uphold the former: '*Varna* and *ashrama* are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of *varna* teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling.' In due course, he would try to dilute *varna* itself with successive adjustments to make it more palatable to egalitarian opinion, at the cost of emptying it of any content save the irreducible core of its identification with Hinduism itself, as religious belief in the moral duty of hereditary avocation and its bearing on the transmigration of the soul. This he never abandoned.

The threat to Gandhi posed by the prospect of Untouchables gaining the right to their own electorates thus went much deeper than fear of another British device to divide the national movement, like the separate rolls granted to Muslims, real though this was. More fundamental questions were at issue. If Untouchables were to be treated as external to the Hindu community, it would be confirmation that caste was indeed, as its critics had always maintained, a vile system of discrimination, relegating the lowest orders of society to a subhuman existence with which the smallest brush was pollution, and since Hinduism was founded on caste, it would stand condemned with caste. To reclaim the Untouchables for Hinduism was an ideological imperative for the reputation of the religion itself. But it was also politically vital, since if they were subtracted from the Hindu bloc in India, its predominance over the Muslim community would be weakened. There were 'mathematical' considerations to bear in mind, as Gandhi's secretary delicately reported his leader's thinking on the matter. Most menacing of all, Gandhi confided to a colleague, might not Untouchables, accorded separate identity, then gang up with 'Muslim hooligans and kill caste Hindus'?

To cut off these dangers, Gandhi – still in prison – announced that as 'a man of religion' and leader of 'numberless men and women who have childlike faith in my wisdom', he would fast to death until the award was rescinded and Untouchables were bundled back into the Hindu electorate. The sensation was enormous. Ambedkar was summoned post-haste to Gandhi's jail in Poona to avert the passing of the Great Soul. His own view of the religion he was being told to embrace was unflinching: 'No matter what the Hindus say, Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity' – words few Indian intellectuals would dare utter today. Gandhi, though he had long condemned Untouchability as odious, had never taken any drastic political action against it: sin it might be, but not sufficiently mortal to warrant a fast unto death. Granting Untouchables their own rolls was another matter. Against that he would put his life on the line. Under colossal public pressure, and physical threats to him and his community if he stood firm, Ambedkar yielded to Gandhi's blackmail.

A 'pact' was reached to give a larger number of reserved seats to Untouchables elected, not by their own kind, but by Hindus at large – depriving the community of political autonomy by ensuring that Congress could pick its Uncle Toms for these places. In 1918, after he had fasted to secure a settlement of a wage dispute in Ahmedabad, Gandhi had expressed some misgivings, telling his ashram after the event: 'My weak condition left the mill-owners no freedom. It is against the principles of justice to get anything in writing from a person or make him agree to any condition or obtain anything whatever under duress. A satyagrahi will never do so.' Businessmen were entitled to such scruples. Untouchables would be beneficiaries of a higher consistency. Of the satyagraha of 1932, Ambedkar wrote: 'There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people,' forcing them to 'agree to live on the mercy of the Hindus'. He regretted his capitulation at Poona to the last.

Victory over Ambedkar could not alter checkmate by the Raj. For another two years, after civil disobedience had been crippled as collective action, Gandhi persisted with 'individual' acts of it, in and out of fasts and prisons, touring and preaching against untouchability, to purify the religion that had invented it. Eventually, in the spring of 1934 he allowed Congress to call off the liability of its formal commitment to a campaign that was now defunct. The government lifted its ban on Congress, and a few months later he announced his resignation from the party. The gesture did not mean he was retiring from politics. He was withdrawing to a position from which he could dictate policy when he wished, without having to take responsibility for day-to-day decisions of Congress where he was not in sympathy with them. He could rely on the incumbent president of the party, a conservative Bihari associate, and his successor, the younger Nehru, not to challenge his authority if he chose to exercise it.

By the end of the decade, however, a new cohort was starting to do so, pressing both for Congress to adopt socialism as a goal, and more radical measures to dispatch the Raj. Gandhi had always rejected any talk of socialism, as a breach of the sacred trust in which capitalist property was legitimately held, threatening to have nothing to do with the party if it took it up. Nehru, who talked of socialism, but never crossed him, functioned as a breakwater against tendencies in the party which might otherwise have been more difficult to handle. The leader of the new left-wing current, Subhas Chandra Bose, a Bengali heading the All India Youth Congress, was another matter, standing for a coalition with the Muslim peasant party in his native province that was no less anathema to the Marwari businessmen of Calcutta, Hindu chauvinists to a man, than his socialism. The wealthiest of these, the magnate G.D. Birla, not only bankrolled Congress to the tune of millions of rupees, but was a long-time follower and intimate of Gandhi, 'dazzled' by his 'superhuman personality'. When Birla made his feelings known, Gandhi put his foot down, and the Congress high command duly scuppered Bose's inter-communal initiative. Not long afterwards Bose, whose fearless militancy and commanding intellectual gifts had made him hugely popular in the party, was nonetheless elected president of Congress. In the following years he was re-elected, defeating Gandhi's candidate in the first contested election for the presidency in the party's history. This was an unprecedented affront, which Gandhi, who was not prepared to let democracy get in the way of his will, swiftly punished, toppling Bose in an inner-party coup, and then forcing him out of Congress altogether. In the late 1930s, his sporadic interventions more often blocking than taking initiatives, such was more or less the sum of his achievements.

When the Second World War broke out, however, he took centre stage again for the last time. With limited knowledge of, or interest in, the outside world – admiring Hitler as, in his way, a fellow ascetic, since 'he has no vices. He has not married. His character is said to be clean'; 'although he works all his waking hours, his intellect is unclouded and unerring' – he zigzagged from initial support of the British declaration of war on Germany in 1939 to requiring individual demonstrations of *satyagraha* against it in 1940, to a sudden decision that the British must be driven forthwith from the subcontinent, come what may, in 1942. The Quit India movement was imposed by Gandhi on a reluctant Congress leadership, which was not convinced by it. It was his final throw, and this time he not only called for a tax strike but accepted in advance that violence might break out. Riots erupted across the country, police stations were attacked, railtracks torn out.

For a wave of younger fighters, it was an insurrection for independence. But Congress had never prepared for one, indeed envisaged any such thing, and the Raj was now on a war footing – the Indian Army would swell to two million troops after 1939. The rebellion, without training or leadership, was put down with fusillades on the ground, strafing from the air, 60,000 arrests, 4000 casualties. After the event, Gandhi described it as a calamity. His third and last campaign against British rule had ended in a failure as complete as those of the first two. By 1945 he was politically speaking a back number. Of the anti-colonial leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, few ended their careers with much glory, many among the ruins of their hopes or reputation: Nasser and Nehru broken by posturing and rout on the battlefield, Sukarno dying a prisoner in his palace, Ben Bella in exile and oblivion, Makarios with his country truncated and occupied for the duration. An assassin's bullet spared Gandhi a comparable fate, embalming him in the martyr's death that by then he wanted. 'Had that stupid and shortsighted fellow allowed Gandhi to live his natural life, and die a natural death like all mortals,' one compatriot wrote, 'he would have, I am quite certain, grown weightless like, say, Vinoba Bhave,' his futile epigone. The verdict is overstated. But the part of truth in it is written in what would become of his ideals today: a face on a banknote.

*Satyagraha* had not been a success: each time Gandhi had tried it, the British had seen it off. His great achievement lay elsewhere, in the creation of a nationalist party, whose road to power forked away in another direction. For in the end independence did not come from passive resistance, let

alone sexual abstinence, individual or universal. It was the result of two other dynamics. The first was the broadening of the electoral machinery first introduced by the British in 1909, and expanded in 1919. Designed originally as a safety valve to co-opt a native elite, and disregarded by Congress as long as Gandhi set its course, it remained the standby of the Raj as nationalist pressures mounted. In 1929, a scheduled ten-year review of the system set in place after the First World War fell due and, undeflected by civil disobedience, issued after three Round Table Conferences in the Government of India Act of 1935, the longest bill ever passed by the British Parliament. At the outset, Halifax had made a public promise of eventual dominion status, lifting India to the position of Australia or Canada as a self-governing state within the empire, date unspecified.

The Act, envisaging a federal constitution for the subcontinent integrating its areas of direct and indirect rule through negotiation with its princely rulers, was the fruit of Baldwin's acute anxiety to avoid another Ireland. It did not mention the term dominion, to which Conservative backbenchers led by Churchill took strenuous objection, but made all legislative bodies – provincial and central – elective, and extended the franchise from seven to 35 million voters. Arriving on the heels of Gandhi's retreat from political life in 1934, it cleared the way for elections in 1937 that delivered Congress victories across the country. By 1938, eight out of 11 provinces were under Congress rule, and party membership had soared from 470,000 in 1935 to 4.5 million. The wine of electoral success had done what the water of non-violence had failed to do: give Congress a political weight and strength that neither rulers nor rivals could henceforward ignore. It would be the last time the party threw itself into a popular campaign with such vigour. Thereafter, its power essentially rested, as D.A. Low, one of the finest historians of India, has remarked, on mass approbation, not mobilisation. But that would be enough. 'The consensus pursued by the high command in the 1930s,' Ian Copland has written,

*"was at the expense of important sections of Indian political society which were deliberately left out in the cold – the poor peasantry, the tribals, the factory workers and the people of the [princely] states. The Congress's attitude to these groups was suspicious, resentful and above all paternalistic. Like the British Raj, the Congress high command believed it knew what was good for the Indian people, and like the Raj it did not suffer gladly those who defied its leadership."*

Once in office, its provincial governments often proved as repressive of labour or the left as the colonial authorities. The social forces they represented formed a conservative coalition, which neither required nor welcomed an awakening of the poor. Its arrival posed no threat of upheaval to the Raj.

After 1937, it was obvious to all that the horizon of electoral advance could only be some form of independence, which was now bound to come sooner or later. But that the British remained determined to defer that resolution as long as they could, and retained the power and the will to stretch it out for quite some time, was equally clear. The viceroy of the period, Linlithgow, hoped it could be indefinitely. Nehru thought independence would probably come in the 1970s. What changed these expectations overnight was a hammer blow from outside. Supplying the force from which Congress had always shrunk, the Japanese army swept through South-East Asia, knocking over French, Dutch and British positions within a few weeks of the start of the Pacific War. In February 1942, Singapore surrendered. By the end of the first week of March, Rangoon had fallen. In April, Colombo was bombed, and Japanese planes were attacking ports south of Orissa. Even Churchill now realised that political concessions might be needed to shore up the Raj, and Stafford Cripps was dispatched to reach a deal with the major parties in India, where he promised dominion status at the end of hostilities, in exchange for full support to the war effort. Congress, emboldened by the turn of events, demanded immediate formation of an Indian government instead, and when the deal fell through, was pushed by Gandhi, who believed Japan would win, into Quit India.

That could be crushed. Yet the offer of proximate dominion status, once made, was difficult to revoke. It had been conditional, and the condition not met. But withdrawal of it became politically impossible, not least because of the formation of a Provisional Government of Free India by Bose, who had escaped arrest in Calcutta and via Russia and Germany had reached Singapore, where he took command of the 60,000 Indian prisoners of war there as an ally of Japan. Under Bose, the dedication and courage of the Indian National Army – uniting Hindu, Muslim and Sikh combatants – in battle against the British in Manipur and Burma won such widespread admiration in India, not least from Gandhi himself, that prosecution of its officers had to be dropped after the war in the face of angry mass demonstrations. Superior American might overpowered Tokyo by 1945. But the blows the Japanese army and its allies had dealt European colonialism in South-East and South Asia were irreparable. At war's end, the independence of the subcontinent was a foregone conclusion. What was not decided was the form it would take.

## **Perry Anderson**

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**P.S.**

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