

Gandhian Bio-Politics – Satyagrahi and the State

Abir Misra

Department of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi

Email Id: abir.misra@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper looks at Michel Foucault's conceptualization of Bio-politics as the increasing exercise of state control over the body and public space in Europe. Tracing the manifestations of this process in colonial India and South Africa, the paper tests the efficacy of the concept of bio-politics for an understanding of Gandhian politics. The paper showcases how Gandhi developed his own bio-politics to counter the intrusive bio-politics of the colonial state and, in the process, mapping the contours of the idea of the Satyagrahi as a non-violent sovereign individual and its relation with the state.

Keywords: Bio-politics, Satyagraha, State, Segregation, Body

1. Introduction

George Orwell, in an essay 'Reflections on Gandhi', wrote that Gandhi as a person did not make much of an impression on him and everything associated with Gandhi like home spun cloth or vegetarianism seemed unappealing to him. However, despite having such an 'aesthetic distaste' for Gandhi, which Orwell shared with many others who lived during his lifetime and after-words, he nevertheless felt the need to point out towards a specific quality of Gandhi that he felt went rather unnoticed. Orwell noted that 'it is clear even from the (Gandhi's) autobiography that his natural physical courage was quite outstanding: the manner of his death was a later illustration of this, for a public man who attached any value to his own skin would have been more adequately guarded' (Orwell, 1950). Incidentally, in the Gandhian framework, practices like making home spun cloth and vegetarianism, which Orwell found unappealing, actually seem geared instrumentally towards gaining and maintaining physical strength and also the courage, which Orwell appreciated. This physical courage and strength in turn, is an essential pre-requisite for and central to the meaningful performance of, Satyagraha, the Gandhian strategy of dealing with the entity called the State. It is this centrality of bodily courage, strength and also, importantly, health in Gandhian political practice that this paper focuses upon. The paper will firstly lay down how a concern for health and hygiene

developed in Europe, then proceed to show how these concerns shaped colonial state policies in India and South Africa and then finally analyse how Gandhi developed his own politics as a means to resist these policies.

2. **Health and Hygiene in Europe**

Michel Foucault has recorded that up till around the end of the seventeenth century, in Europe, religious and charitable foundations had mainly shouldered the responsibility of providing care to the poor, a class often perceived to be characterised by sickness and ill-health. These organisations, apart from taking care of children and providing food and clothes to the poor, also from time to time distributed medicines. Curing sickness was one of the many forms of assistances that they provided. This scenario began to change during the 18th century with the rise of capitalism and breaking down of the traditional statuses and roles. Charitable organisations were now criticized for helping keep idle men remain outside the production process. The de-sacralisation of the poor led to them being now seen as a source of labour power. Simultaneously, with charitable organisations no longer responsible for it, medical care began to be seen more and more as an objective in the hands of those who had political power. The issue was now to be dealt with through public policy, in short, through the State. One of the important aims of political power became the maintenance of bodily welfare of the population as a whole. The responsibility of maintaining medical welfare was given to a set of institutions which together came to be known as the 'Police'. The police broadly performed the functions of economic regulation, maintenance of public order as well as, now, ensuring healthy standards of hygiene. Foucault points out that in such a scenario 'the biological traits of population become relevant factors of economic management, and it becomes necessary to organise around them an apparatus that will ensure not only their subjection (*asujettissement*) but the constant increase of their utility' (2000 : 96)

3. **Colonial Attitudes towards Native Health**

The rise of Capitalism, while bringing to the forefront the question of social body hygiene in Europe, is also linked with another process – Colonialism. With the spread of colonialism, the concern for maintenance of the hygiene of the social body, took global shape. The category of people unclean and sick, which was earlier reserved for the poor in Europe, now came to be associated primarily with the colonised people, the Natives in the colonies. An example of this is to be found in

Colonial South Africa, where Indians and Africans were seen as unhygienic and the primary agents responsible for the spread of plagues. A plague, as reported, broke out at Witwatersrand in 1904. The Rand Plague Committee set up by the South African Government, reported that the plague broke out in 'Kuffir' and 'Coolie' locations in Johannesburg. The word Coolie referred to Indians and Kuffir referred to Africans. The locations where coolies resided were said to be densely crowded. When asked about the condition of the 'coolie location' in 1902, Dr. Porter, A Medical officer of Health, reported:

'Well! It almost passes description. It consists of congeries of narrow court-yards, containing dilapidated and dirty tin huts, without adequate means of lighting and ventilation, huddles on area, and constructed without any regard for sanitary considerations of any kind. In the middle of each sop-sodden and filth-bestrewn yard, there is a well from which people get their water supply, and as in other places, they chose this place for washing purposes, the urinals and closets in one of these places being in the immediate vicinity I have been in the place repeatedly, and it is as crowded as a rabbit-warren I consider the existence and continuation of that coolie location in the most emphatic manner fraught with danger for Johannesburg'. (Dube, 2012: 33)

This description of coolie locations as dirty and un-hygienic was neither devoid of truth nor was it in any way free of racist exaggeration¹. The attitude of colonial state towards Indians was profoundly shaped by the perception of them being unclean and filthy. But, before discussing the repercussions of such an attitude, a return back to Foucault is required.

4. **Body as an Object of Political Control**

The growing concern for health and hygiene of the population in Europe had led to general concern for the organisation of urban space. Foucault points out how 'the disposition of various quarters, their humidity and exposure, the ventilation of the city as a whole, its sewage and drainage systems, the sitting of abattoirs and cemeteries, the density of population' (2000: 99), along with other factors, came to be identified as major determinants of population mortality which was to be

¹ Louis Fischer, for instance, gave a somewhat more complicated and empathetic yet revealing description of the conception of cleanliness which Hindus in India brought to practice in which public uncleanness is coupled with immense concern for private purity - 'Hindus are expected to bath once a day, and water for washing hands and private parts is available in the most primitive toilets. Hindus also take special pride in the cleanliness of their personal pots, pans and drinking vessels. A Hindu will smoke a hukka water pipe or cigarette through his fist without letting it touch his lips, and he often pours water into his mouth instead of sipping it. 'This sense of cleanliness', Nehru notes, 'is not scientific and the man who bathes twice a day will unhesitatingly drink water that is unclean and full of germs ... the individual will keep his own fairly clean but throw all the rubbish in the village street in front of his neighbour's house ... Cleanliness, he adds, is a religious rite, not an end in itself. If it were, Hindus would be concerned with the cleanliness of others, including untouchables' (2012: 177)

maintained for a steady supply of labour for the process of production.²Populations were to witness increasing interference by authorities at the biological level. Apparatuses were set up to minimise the potential of individual bodies escaping from necessary medicalisation. Economic growth, in short, manifested itself partly in the form of growth in hygiene standards, both with respect to the body and public space, and also the growth of the role of the state in maintaining these standards. Foucault concludes:

‘Capitalism, which developed from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, started by socialising the first object, the Body, as a factor of productive force, of labour power. Society’s control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology, but also in the body and with the body. For Capitalist society, it was bio politics, the biological, the semantic, the corporal that mattered more than anything else. The Body is a bio political reality; Medicine is a bio political strategy.’(2000: 137)

5. **Native Bodies: Medication and Segregation**

With the rise of Colonialism in India, the Body, which in Europe had already come to be established as an object of authorised medical control, became an important ‘site of colonial power and of contestation between the colonised and the colonisers’(Arnold, 1993: 7-8). Western Medicine in Colonial India, for long, remained basically confined to enclaves where the British used to live. This was partly due to the recognition, both among natives and also Europeans, that local forms of medicine were more suited for local conditions and local diseases³. The shift to social medicine, already accomplished in Europe, took place in India only towards the late 19th century with the coming of a new kind of ‘tropical medicine’ based on the ‘Germ theory of disease’ (Arnold, 1993: 13). The coming of the new tropical medicine finally marked the intensification of state medical intervention in India as well as in other colonies. Like its European counterpart, the colonial state in India also attached a lot of value to maintaining population mortality because it was felt that due to immense loss of lives during plagues ‘the state loses a vast store of force. Which was never created to be squandered in this way. Taking, therefore, the lowest and most sordid view of the matter, Government is bound to do all that is in its power to improve the health of the lower classes, because

² This concern for the cleanliness of the public space in Europe contrasted with the exclusive concern with personal cleanliness that Hindus showcased.

³ Europeans sometimes turned to Indian hakims and vaidyas for assistance since they had a belief that local doctors would be more familiar with the diseases of the climate. (Arnold, 1993:11).

the fearful mortality at present existing among them is a direct and positive loss for the state' (Arnold, 1993 : 28). This politics of State medicine in India found replication in colonial South Africa.

In 1896, a plague had struck Bombay. It was believed that the plague came to India through ships from Hong Kong. This plague gave the South African government a reason to constantly keep a check on Indians and Indian ships coming to South Africa⁴. In Hong Kong, the state, in 1894, had used the army to carry out segregation and enforced hospitalisation of the effected. When the plague struck Bombay, Colonial Medical Service made a demand that similar efforts should be made there. Francis Dube writes –

Thus the city of Bombay fell into the hands of an army general and a doctor of the Army Medical Service, W. W. Beveridge, who had plague containment experience from Hong Kong. The result was the vigorous digging up earthen floors (due to Beveridge's belief that plague virus resided there), thorough disinfection operations, and ubiquitous house to house searches for plague victims by British Soldiers. (2012: 24-25)

Large scale fears of the spread of plagues had for a long time significantly shaped the dynamics of relations between different races in South Africa. These fears shot up after the plague spread in Bombay. South African government made efforts to segregate Indians in fixed localities and restrict their interactions with Africans or Whites. The Transvaal Government, for instance, which had passed a law in 1885 which denied property rights to Indians except in areas specially assigned, also restricted entry of Indians from neighbouring states unless the state secretary gave a special permit. Indian were thus confined to specific camps set apart from larger society. This method of controlling diseases and populations perceived to be as threats to larger society has interesting parallels withone that had developed in France in mid eighteenth century which Michel Foucault refers to as 'The Model of the Quarantine'⁵and also with a more universal and modern condition which Giorgio Agamben describes as the 'The State of Exception'⁶. It is here that Mohandas KaramchandGandhi enters the picture.

⁴ Francis Dube points out that in 1897, state authorities were given the right to inspect any incoming ship and destroy any property (2012: 24).

⁵ See Foucault's essay 'The Rise of Social Medicine'. (2000 : 144)

⁶ The exception, which entails a legalised suspension of law as well as basic civil and political rights (a situation that fits the condition of Indians in South Africa), has as one of its premises, the maxim - *necessitas legem non habet* (Necessity has no law). The comparison makes sense if we look at the concern for prevention of plague and diseases as a 'necessity' in the eyes of the colonial government in South Africa. (Agamben,2003:1)

6. Gandhi's Response: Bio-Politics Takes Shape

It has already been pointed out that the added stress on bodily hygiene and social health in Europe was guided crucially by economic considerations that came to the forefront with the rise of Capitalism in Europe. Incidentally, Gandhi too had seen, in the efforts to segregate Indians and restrict their movement in South Africa, an underlying economic logic. Gandhi asserted that this focus on disease and the subsequent segregation of Indians in South Africa was guided less by considerations of hygiene and more by the growing desire among Europeans to cut down competition given to them by Indian traders. Indians, who had lived in South Africa as indentured labourers, chose to remain there after becoming free and also had begun to engage in varied economic activities which, according to Gandhi, 'created trade jealousy among the white men who found no difficulty in picking our weakest points, viz, the habit of overcrowding, communal insanitation and some crude customs or superstitions' (Dube, 2012: 28). Gandhi had noted that 'hardly a dozen Indians had open shop there when Europeans started a powerful agitation' (1968: 39). The colonial health policy came to be seen as aimed less at eradicating disease and more at eradicating Indians⁷. The colonial state was thus painted as interested only in safeguarding economic benefits for the whites. This image of the colonial state among the Indians was accurate but also may have had a tinge of exaggeration⁸.

Despite all the 'precautions' taken by the South African Government, plague did eventually break out in 1904 in Johannesburg. Out of a total of 60 individuals who got infected by it, 46 were reportedly Indians (Dube, 2012: 29). Gandhi blamed the colonial government for segregating Indians in specific localities thereby paving the way for the spread of plagues only among them. The spread of plague was however also an occasion for self-introspection. Gandhi's struggle against the British did not blind him from the dismal state of sanitation among Indians. Indeed he saw in it the reasons for justification of the state policies of segregation. It is here that one finds ideas of social hygiene

⁷ This policy of eradication of Indians can be seen perhaps as a relatively moderate form of totalitarianism. Giorgio Agamben writes that 'modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of a state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system' (2003: 2). It is interesting that Indians in South Africa appear both as political and economic adversaries who are denied voting and property rights thereby facing exclusion and eradication from political and also economic system which appears monopolised by whites.

⁸ Francis Dube points out that the Transvaal government, after local bodies had refused to allow setting up of Indian Bazaars, had decided to 'override the prejudices' and allow Indians to set up bazaars at places that were suited for trade and easily accessible. However, such efforts were met with immense resistance by the local whites, especially after the plague broke out. Thus, there was to some extent a genuine concern for Indians among some officials of the government. Perhaps it will be appropriate at this point to simply say that exaggeration of the weaknesses of your political opponent was, and still is, an essential part of politics.

and bodily cleanliness becoming important ingredients in the struggle against colonial domination. Commenting on segregation and travel regulations put on Indians by Colonial government, Gandhi stated that –Such regulations, harsh as they undoubtedly are, ought not to make us angry. But we should so order our conduct as to prevent a repetition of them. And with that end in view, we should set about putting our houses in order as well literally as figuratively. The meanest of us should be stamped out of our midst. We should freely let in sunshine and air. In Short, we should engrain in our hearts the English saying that cleanliness is next to godliness (Dube, 2012: 32).

The colonial state, in ensuring hygiene and cleanliness, made explicit use of violence. Segregation of populations could not be fully accomplished without systematic application of brute force, as seen both in case of Hong Kong and Bombay. The case in South Africa was no different. Indians in South Africa had complained of forced entry by officials who threatened to ‘blow their brains out’ and made them march up to sanitary compounds where they were locked up in cells ‘without any word on why it was happening’ (Dube, 2012 : 31). Gandhi indeed had first-hand experience of state inflicted brute force, most famously, when he was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg for travelling in a first class carriage reserved for whites, which amounted to breaking rules of segregation. Events like these and many others played a crucial role in shaping of Gandhian Satyagraha which, apart from attaching central importance to social hygiene also came to lay stress on physical stamina and strength as a means of resisting the brute force unleashed by state agencies.

7. **Cleanliness and Caste Segregation**

Incidentally, Gandhi saw in the Colonial State’s policies of segregation of Indians, a reflection of Hindu society’s segregation of Untouchables. Comparing the conditions of living of Indians in South Africa with that of Untouchables in India, Gandhi noted:

In all towns inhabited by Indians, these locations were selected in dirty places situated far away from the towns where there was no water supply, no lighting arrangement and no sanitary convenience to speak of. Thus the Indians became the Panchamas of Transvaal. It can be truly said that there was no difference between their locations and untouchables’ quarters in India. Just as the hindus believe that touching Dhedhs or residence in their neighbourhood would lead to pollution, so did the Europeans in Transvaal believe, for all practical purposes, that physical contact with Indians or living near them would defile them (1968: 38).

Gandhi's imagination of the satyagrahi, was thus shaped, not merely by a concern to deflect the intrusion of the state but also with a concern to fight untouchability⁹. Gandhi creatively mixed his concern for promoting societal cleanliness with his concern for caste reform. This explains Gandhi's insistence on Satyagrahis maintaining cleanliness, of their homes and surroundings, on their own, including that of their toilets, and not imposing this task on 'Harijans'¹⁰. Gandhi imagined a society where each individual, irrespective of caste, would be his own scavenger, his own 'Bhangi'¹¹. The Savarnas (Upper castes), who were dependent on the Harijans for the cleanliness of their surroundings, and the Harijans, who were coerced into scavenging by the Savarnas, were both encouraged to free themselves from the shackles of the menace of untouchability through the practice of this principle¹². The Savarna individual, by cleaning his own toilet, will no longer depend on the Harijan individual. The latter, in turn, will no longer be coerced to engage into scavenging for the former. The Harijan, too, would thereby end up being only his own scavenger and not someone else's. This principle was put into practice, most importantly, in Gandhian Ashrams where everyone irrespective of caste took turns to do sanitary service and practices like inter-caste dining thrived, with significant changes being noticed in the attitude of upper caste members towards Harijan members. The Ashrams were sites of social experimentation, where Gandhi tested his caste reform policies before applying them to larger society. This aspect of Gandhian politics will however not be the focus

⁹ Gandhi saw a close link between Swaraj and eradication of untouchability. He believed that each is incomplete without the other: 'As in the matter of Hindu-Muslim unity so has there been misrepresentation in the matter of untouchability. It has been stated that I am sacrificing the interest of the untouchables for the sake of swaraj. I know that the lacs of untouchables will not believe any such thing of me. For me just as there is no swaraj without communal unity, so is there no swaraj without the removal of untouchability. But what I do feel is that without swaraj there will be neither communal unity nor removal of untouchability. He who runs may see that it is to the interest of the ruling caste to keep up the divisions among us. That caste is no more interested in Hindus and Mussalmans coming together than in the removal of untouchability'. See 'Untouchability' in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol 43, Page 264*

¹⁰ Gandhi had started referring to untouchables as Harijans or Sons of God. As opposed to Europe, where the poor were desacralized and were hence no longer the object of altruistic service, Gandhi had sought to Sacralise Harijans so that they could become objects of service by upper castes. The Satyagrahi was expected to engage in HarijanSeva, apart from resisting the state. It must be stressed that Gandhi understood HarijanSeva not as charity but as Duty.

¹¹ The word Bhangi basically means reformer or the remover of Dirt. Gandhi's larger project of cleanliness required everyone to take up the role of the cleaner, of the bhangi. Bhangi is also the name of an untouchable caste which was recognised by Gandhi as being lowest among the low. By encouraging every individual, irrespective of caste, to himself take up the 'impure' job of the bhangi, Gandhi sought to break the purity-pollution divide that served as the basis of segregation of untouchables/Harijans.

¹² Gandhi understood caste segregation and untouchability to be harmful not just for Harijans but also for upper castes and indeed for society at large. Louis Fischer mentions: 'Untouchability is segregation gone mad. Theoretically a device against contamination, it contaminates the country that allows it. Mahatma Gandhi knew this and he fought untouchability for the sake of the castes as well as the outcastes, but in fighting he defied a thousand taboos and roused a million fears, superstitions, hates and vested interests. Buddhism and many hindu reformers had attacked untouchability; Gandhi said little against it until he had taken action against it' (2012:177).

of this paper although its impact on the larger politics of Gandhi is undeniable¹³. Interestingly, apart from comparing them with untouchables, Gandhi had also compared the conditions of the Indians in South Africa with that of the Jews in Europe¹⁴. Towards the 1940s, with the success of South Africa behind him, Gandhi would finally complete the triangle by referring to Jews as the ‘Untouchables of Christianity’¹⁵.

8. **Bio-Politics and Brahmacharya**

With the rise of social medicine as an instrument of social control in Europe, there was firstly, a privileging of the child and secondly, an increasing importance of the family as the instrument through which correct management of childhood was to be carried out so that the child grows up to become a productive adult. The family was no longer seen as just a system a system of relations inscribed in a social status, a kinship system, a mechanism for transferring property but as a dense, saturated, permanent, continuous physical environment that enveloped, maintained and developed the child’s body’ (Foucault, 2000: 96). Similarly, an ascendancy in the status of the Doctor was noticed in Europe who ‘becomes the great advisor and expert ... Observing, correcting and improving the social ‘Body’ and maintaining it in a permanent state of health. It is the doctor’s role as hygienist that assures him his politically privileged position in the eighteenth century, prior to the accumulation of economic and social privileges in the nineteenth century’(Foucault, 2000: 100).These processes also found their way into the colonies and Gandhi was a living witness to them.

In Gandhi’s conception, the whole western system (Western Civilisation) was like the Upas Tree, of which medicine was but one branch¹⁶. A Gandhian answer to the privileging of the child and increasing importance of the procreating family for the State’s mission of medicinal control of bodies,

¹³ For a very brief account of Gandhi’s campaigns against caste, see – Nauriya, Anil. (2006). Gandhi’s Lesser Known Critique of Varna, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 41, No 19, pp. 1835-1838.

¹⁴Gandhi showcases, through the comparison with Jewish ghettos, a keen interest in International Politics. His concern was to develop a political method that could be used by minorities all over the world to fight for their rights, non-violently. To the list of Indians in South Africa, Untouchables in India, Jews in Europe, we can safely add the case of African Americans whom Gandhi had recognised as the group through which the message of non-violence would eventually be delivered to the world. This prophesy turned out to be true when Martin Luther King Jr adopted Gandhian methods in the Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁵‘They have been the Untouchables of Christianity. The parallel between their treatment by Christians and the treatment of Untouchables by Hindus is very close. Religious sanction has been invoked in both cases for the justification of inhuman treatment meted out to them.’ – (Published in Harijan, 26-11-1938). See ‘The Jews’ in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 068, page 137

¹⁶ The biological name for Upas tree is *Antiaris Toxicaria*. It is described in the Oxford English Dictionary as a fabulous Javanese tree that is so poisonous that it destroys life for many miles around. It is said to have a baleful power or influence. (Gandhi,1997: 62)

can be seen in the insistence on the practice of *Brahmacharya* or Celibacy. Advocating a place for celibacy in education Gandhi claimed that ‘though a body that has been developed without Brahmacharya may well become strong, it can never become completely healthy from the medical point of view’(Alter, 2000: 15-16).Indeed, Pehelwans in Akharas in India also practice celibacy as a pre-requisite for gaining health and strength. The Satyagrahi of Gandhi’s conception thus went beyond merely serving the interests of his family¹⁷. Gandhi saw state sponsored western medicine, which, through practices like vaccination, entered the body almost as soon as a child is born, as reducing the bodily capacity of Indians to fight diseases in a natural manner. Thanks to ignorance of this fact, he felt, Indians were producing ‘a race of cowardly, emasculated and spiritless creatures’ (Alter, 2000: 11).Hence, his appeal to married Indians was that ‘if they wished well for the country and wanted to see India become a nation of strong and handsome well-formed men and women, (they must) practice self-restraint and cease to procreate for the time being (Thereby) suspend bringing forth heirs to our slavery’¹⁸(Alter, 2000: 11).Gandhi was specifically critical of doctors who for him were worse than quacks:

What service will an army of doctors render to the country? What great things are they going to achieve by dissecting dead bodies, by killing animals, by cramming worthless dicta for five or seven years? What will the country gain by the ability to cure physical diseases? That will simply increase our attachment to the body (Alter, 2000:12). In his quest to destroy the power of the Doctor, Gandhi favoured scientific experimentation in various techniques of curing diseases in the Ashrams that were set up during the national movement¹⁹. He rejected Ayurveda for the same reason he rejected western medicine that ‘it placed the agency of healing outside the reach of everyone; it had become an elite upper caste urban system of medicinal healing’²⁰Gandhi’s search for an alternative source of health that was both non-violent and in sync with nature while being accessible to the

¹⁷‘Without the observance of Brahmacharya, service of the family would be inconsistent with the service of the community. With Brahmacharya, they would be perfectly consistent’.(Alter, 2000 : 25)

¹⁸ It is significant to note the kind of effect such an approach would have had on gender relations in India. It has been argued by scholars that patriarchy reduces women to mere child producing machines. Gandhi’s insistence on Brahmacharya and non-procreation can be seen as a call for women to move ahead from their role as child bearers, to come out and be part of the struggle.

¹⁹ Alter records that Gandhi encouraged a nature cure physician named Hiralal Sharma to ‘approach the ashram with the set purpose of discovering the means of preserving or regaining health in the ordinary Indian climate’ (Alter, 2000:13).

²⁰ (Alter,2000:13) One might also notice here that by recognising Ayurveda as being urban and upper caste, Gandhi recognised that it was not accessible to untouchables. His concern was to find way to remain healthy that was accessible to the downtrodden. Thus, once again, we see the cause of untouchability getting entwined with larger policies against colonial state.

multitude ended in him finally advocating nature cure. In his quest to democratise the benefits of this medical knowledge he even wrote two books which are said to be among his most read works at that time²¹.

Brahmacharya, which was considered a necessity for maintaining a healthy body, was however recognised to be a particularly difficult practice that required immense self-restraint. Hence, to prepare oneself for the eventual practice of Brahmacharya, Gandhi advocated the spinning wheel or the charkha. It is interesting that charkha has mostly been seen as an instrument of economic freedom and decentralisation, an answer to the great cloth producing factories in Manchester. Gandhi, however, also saw spinning as a form of exercise which required ‘drill like regimentation and self-control’ and could serve as ‘a form of therapy for young men who found it difficult to abide by Brahmacharya’²². Thus, spinning becomes a preparation for practice of Brahmacharya, which in turn is necessary for maintaining health and fitness and the spirit of self-restraint, which in turn is necessary to oppose the State, which is recognised as an agent of brute force, non-violently.²³ George Orwell’s distaste for spinning was perhaps because he failed to see this link between bodily fitness and spinning.

9. Diet and Strength

Also necessary for bodily wellbeing is proper diet. In pursuit of the establishment of an imagined celibate community, Gandhi laid immense stress on Vegetarianism. The celibate Satyagrahi of Gandhi’s conception embodied *ahimsa* (non-violence) and thereby claimed moral ascendancy. Gandhi conceived of desire as the root cause of *Himsa*, or rather saw desire *as* *Himsa*. He understood the act of meat eating as a manifestation of the bodily desire for taste and pleasure, which he considered a problem: Experience has taught me, however, that it is wrong to have dwelt upon the relish of food. One should eat not in order to please the palate but just to keep the body going. When each organ of sense sub serves the body, and through the body the soul, its special relish disappears

²¹ See. 1. Gandhi, M.K. (1948) *Key to Health*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan. 2. Gandhi, M.K. (1954). *Nature Cure*. Ahmedabad: Navjivan

²² Gandhi advocated – ‘Fix your thoughts exclusively on khadi (homespun cotton); countless men may be wedded to her and yet she always remains a virgin. And a man who takes her alone as a wife will still be an inviolate brahmachari’ (Alter, 2000: 19)

²³ Incidentally, the charkha was also a weapon against caste atrocities. Spinning khadi was a task mostly done by untouchables and by elevating khadi to level of an industry, Gandhi sought to improve their lot economically. Gandhi comments – ‘Very few people have any notion of what khadi means to harijans. Simple weaving is almost an exclusive speciality of Harijans Thousands of them are still dependent upon weaving’. See: ‘Khadi and Harijans’ in the *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi Vol 056, page 146-148*.

and then alone does it begin to function in the way nature intended it to do (Alter, 2000: 34).

Indeed, Gandhi felt vegetarian food was sufficient to maintain the body in this desired condition. After experimentally including raw chopped onions as a regular feature in his meals for a few months, Gandhi had eventually concluded that 'Onions were bad for the passions' and gave up the practice. (Kakar, 1996). Milk was given up for the same reason (ibid. 84). In this sense, Gandhi's advocacy of vegetarianism was free from considerations of Brahmanical purity and was the result of rigorous experimentation with food.

Apart from Spinning, Brahmacharya and vegetarianism, Gandhi also laid a lot of stress on exercise for maintaining physique. He was particularly unhappy about the condition of the bodies of the people of India:

I have travelled all over the country and one of the most deplorable things I have noticed is the rickety bodies of young men.... (Whereas Satyagraha requires) bodies of steel. (Alter, 2000: 16).

Exercise, for Gandhi, was not a means towards gross muscle building but to enhance control over the senses (Alter, 2000: 15). While Gandhi did harbour a fascination for individuals with strong muscles and tall built, which partly explains his particular reverence for Pathans²⁴, he insisted that they use it only for *Seva* and not for violence. Significant here is Gandhi's valorisation of Hanuman, whose strength, he saw, was not an end in itself but was instead a result of his devotion to Ram and a practice of celibacy (Alter, 2000: 16).

10. The Final Solution: Fasting

In addition to the aforementioned practices, what became central to Gandhian politics was a practice whose merits, Gandhi realised, were beyond the conception of most individuals. This was fasting. Central to fasting is the idea of *Akash*, which translates into void or vacuum²⁵. Gandhi understood cleanliness not merely in terms of outer physical hygiene but also, more broadly, in terms of inner achievement of this state of *akash*. Through fasting, a state of *akash* or emptiness can be achieved within the body thus linking the inner body with the outer *akash*, the universe. The union of

²⁴“Our non-violence should be the non violence of the Pathans. I have lived with them. They are not afraid of either killing or getting killed ... a Pathan boy is fearless ... if there is bloodshed he does not hide himself in his house ... he is not afraid of being hurt. I have seen one standing unmoved in the midst of blood gushing from his many wounds. I do not mean to say that all Pathans are like this. But I have seen such Pathans with my own eyes.” See *-Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol 066, page 436*

²⁵*Prithvi*(Earth), *Agni*(Fire), *Jal*(Fire), *Vayu*(Air), and *Akash*(Void) are identified as elements that constitute the world.

inner and outer *akash* signified the realisation of truth, the attainment of *moksha* or salvation. When this idea is taken to its extreme, the body begins to be seen as an obstacle to the union of outer and inner *akash* (Alter, 2000). This explains why Gandhi coupled the immense concern for bodily care with an equally immense disinterest in bodily survival. The satyagrahi took care of his body not to prolong its existence but to keep it fit for sacrifice: The current is nowadays not ashamed to sacrifice a multitude of other lives in decorating the perishable body, and trying to prolong its existence for a few fleeting moments, with the result that we kill ourselves, this body, this soul (Alter 2000, 34).

Thus, the satyagrahi, while showcasing immense love for his opponent's lives, cultivates detachment from his own life, his own body. He is forever ready to sacrifice his body for the attainment of truth, for freeing the soul, for becoming one with infinity, for Satyagraha. This explains why Gandhi made no effort to escape from his assassin Nathuram Godse's bullet. Similarly, in 1932, when Gandhi observed a fast to oppose the provision of separate electorates for untouchables (which he understood as a policy that would only perpetuate their political and social segregation), nobody doubted the fact that Gandhi would *actually* give up his life. These inherently spiritual attitudes and practices, which Gandhi showcased on various occasions, held tremendous moral force and had long lasting political repercussions.

11. Sovereignty over Death

State inflicted violence can also be seen as a means to free one's soul from the body and hence the Satyagrahi must showcase natural affinity to go and bravely embrace state violence and also provoke and encourage it²⁶. This explains why Gandhi insisted on people breaking laws that they saw as unjust and submitting themselves voluntarily to punishment²⁷. By doing so, more importantly,

²⁶ Reflecting on this aspect of Gandhi's politics FaizalDevji writes – 'The mahatma did not simply tolerate violence as a means towards some end but famously prized the suffering it produced on its own right. And this made Gandhi's dealings with violence more radical than his revolutionary peers (Hitler, Mao, Lenin), responsible though they may have been for much more of it than the old man in a breach-clout. Non-violence could only prove its claim to moral superiority by being tested against violence, without any reference to a political end required for this. And conceived of in this fundamental way, as a potential interest in every kind of interaction, personal as much as political, non-violence brought to light the moral dimension of all action, something obscured by the 'scientific' logic of communist and fascist ideologies' (2012: 4-5).

²⁷ Traces of this defiant yet non-violent ethos that Gandhi sought to cultivate in the people were noticed during the non-cooperation movement of 1922, in ChauriChaura. However, the incident infamously culminated into violence from the side of the people after which Gandhi suspended the movement. Shahid Amin writes: 'Allowed to pass unhindered in the direction of the Bazaar, the crowd celebrated the ineffectiveness of the police with derisory claps and by shouting a common north Indian abuse: the thanedar, and by extension the government (sarkaar), it said, were 'shit scared'. The police officer sought to recover lost ground by firing in the air. This signal was disregarded. It was as if an amber light, a cautionary signal of 'dander ahead, retreat', was read as the precursor of green, 'go ahead'' (Amin, 1995: 16)

Gandhi put forward a radical re-imagination of the idea of the sovereign individual: If we define as sovereign any authority that can ask people to kill and die in its name, then we must recognise that what Gandhi did was to split the concept of sovereignty down the middle. By separating dying from killing and prizing the former as a nobler deed, he was doing nothing more than retrieving sovereignty from the state and generalising it as a quality vested in individuals. For while such individuals may be unequal in their capacity to kill they were all equally capable of dying, demonstrating therefore the universality of suffering and sacrifice over violence of all kinds (Devji, 2012: 6). Thus, the celibate, vegetarian, healthy, strong, spinning, and most importantly non-violent Satyagrahi of Gandhi's conception has, as a constant point of reference, the State, whose intrusive tendencies he seeks to resist, whose segregation rules he seeks to break and whose brute force he seeks to invite and bear, only to expose the State's inherent immorality and in-turn highlight the meticulously cultivated morality of the satyagrahi self. Thus, what we find in Gandhi is not just a bio-politics whose object is the state but also what Joseph Alter calls a 'Bio-morality'. The individual body serves as the field where the truth is sought and the battle is fought. The body is the custodian of morality, something which the immoral state will necessarily seek to destroy but in the process unintentionally free its soul.

12. Non-Violence of the Brave

It is at this point that the distinction between passive resistance and Satyagraha needs to be highlighted. Gandhi understood passive resistance as non-violence of the weak, as a means of escaping the state violence due to lack of courage. Gandhi recognised that such practices had existed since long²⁸. An example of such practices can also be found among tribal communities in Gujarat had also adopted tactics of escape from the colonial state (Hardiman, 1987). Gandhi, however, actually preferred violence to such acts of cowardice²⁹. Unlike passive resistance, Satyagraha signifies resistance by the strong and courageous³⁰. This courage and strength was to be developed through the various bodily practices discussed earlier. What is crucial for Gandhi, however, is not

²⁸Gandhi writes: 'I remember an instance when, in a small principality, the villagers were offended by some command issued by a prince. The former immediately began vacating the village. The prince became nervous, apologised to his subjects and withdrew their command. Many such instances are found in India' (1997: 95)

²⁹ In Gandhi's view it was much better to be violent than to wear the cloak of non-violence to hide one's own fear or impotence.

³⁰Gandhi says: 'We may be weak and oppressed, but non-violence is not the weapon of the weak. It is a weapon of the strongest and bravest ... it is however true that passive resistance has been regarded as a weapon of the weak. That is why the name Satyagraha was coined in South Africa to distinguish the movement from passive resistance'. See – Speech at Edward's Mission College, Peshawar, May 5, 1938 in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol 067, page 66-67*.

merely the presence of courage and strength but the actual display of it in practice. This can be done only by provoking and facing state violence. Thus, a crucial aspect of Gandhian Satyagraha is the necessity to reduce one's chances of escape, to voluntarily put oneself in the line of fire³¹. Indeed, the state, with its tendencies to segregate populations and enforce restrictions on movement, provides ample opportunities for performance of Satyagraha.

In the case of the Adivasis of South Gujarat, Hardiman (1987) points out how the colonial state systematically made efforts to reduce their chances of movement and thereby of escaping the state. Indians in South Africa were also subjected to similar policies that restricted their movement. Indeed every modern state today seeks to regulate the movement of individuals across its borders through passport and visa procedures. But the most extreme version of this tendency of the modern state to segregate and bind populations was found in Europe, specifically in Germany, where article 48 of the Weimar constitution gave rights to the state to suspend fundamental rights and declare a state of exception. This policy was later carried on and arguably perfected by the Nazis:

Inssofar as its (the camp's) inhabitants (the Jews) were stripped of any political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most bio political space ever to have been realised, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation (Agamben, 1995).

Interestingly, it is in these inescapable camps, where Jews had neither choice nor chance of engaging in violence, that Gandhi found the conditions most ideal for the performance of Satyagraha, for putting his bio-politics in practice, for sacrificing the body, for reclaiming the right to sacrifice one's own life. It is here that Gandhi exhibited the role of an analyst and an advisor rather than a leader. Conscious that his suggestions were unlikely to be implemented, Gandhi nevertheless sought to expose possibilities that intellectuals and leaders in the West at that time did not see³². His concern

³¹ An example of this is found in the incident concerning Dharasana Salt Works which is also showcased in Richard Attenborough's Film Gandhi (1982). The journalist covering the incident in the film comments on the sight of satyagrahis walking up to embrace the lethal blows of the police: 'They walked, both Hindus and Muslims alike, with heads held high, without any scope of escape from injury or death. It went on and on into the night. Women carried the wounded and broken bodies from the road until they dropped from exhaustion, but still it went on and on. Whatever moral ascendancy the West held was lost here today. India is free, for she has taken all that steel and cruelty can give, and she has neither cringed nor retreated'

³² Gandhi pointed out that 'The Jews in Germany can offer satyagraha under infinitely better auspices than the Indians of South Africa. The Jews are a compact homogeneous community in Germany. They are far more gifted than the Indians in South Africa. And they have organised world opinion behind them. I am convinced that if someone with courage and vision can arise among them to lead them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair, can in the twinkling of an eye be turned into the summer of hope'. See 'The Jews' in *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 68, 139-140

in this sense, was less to provoke action, and more to provoke thought in the Heideggerian sense³³.

13. **Morality, Reason and State Officials**

Michel Foucault, while referring to Karl Marx's statement that 'Economics is English, Politics French and Philosophy German', pointed out that it was indeed in Germany that the *Science of the State* took form (2000: 328). Foucault linked the excessive rise in state power with the process of rationalisation. Dwelling, thereby, upon the possible ways of combating the excessive rise of political rationality, Foucault completely rejected the effectiveness of the use of reason. On this particular point, Foucault actually directly echoed Gandhi. The latter understood this science of the state, developed in Germany and perfected by Hitler, as premised specifically on the science of violence guided by systematic generation of prejudice and hate³⁴. Bhikhu Parekh writes that during his stay in South Africa 'Gandhi found that his white audience rarely entered into a dialogue with him and when it did, it repeated old stereotypes, relied on anecdotal evidence, gave credence to unchecked stories and displayed utter lack of objectivity' (1989: 145). Thus, Gandhi concluded that 'to men steeped in prejudice an appeal to reason is worse than useless' (Parekh, 1989: 145). This ineffectiveness of reason, according to Gandhi, led people to advocate violence which, however, led to an 'inflationary spiral' and destroyed the moral fabric of the community (Parekh, 1989: 146-148).

Thus, with reason being ineffective and violence being destructive, Gandhi sought to conceptualise a Science of Satyagraha (Karn, 1994) which was to be used when the opponent refused to talk or threatened violence or both. The purpose of Satyagraha, then is to basically resist violence and invite dialogue, to encourage the opponent to resolve disputes through reason. This explains why Gandhi showcased immense readiness to call off immensely successful movements on the assurance that talks will be held. Implicit in Gandhi is the understanding of human beings as essentially moral beings whose sense of moral judgement and reason is obscured by prejudice. It is to this sense of

³³Heidegger was of the opinion that 'man has for centuries now acted too much and thought too little' (Heidegger, 1968). Heidegger insisted that man is not capable of thinking about something as long as that which is to be thought about, withdraws. Perhaps, there was something about the Europe of those times, something lacking, something that withdrew, that led Jewish intellectuals to seek opinion from Gandhi at such a crucial juncture. That 'something' can very well be the idea of voluntarily giving up life, of gaining sovereignty over one's death, of reclaiming it back from the state which had monopolised death over time. Gandhi, through his suggestions, was at least able to rekindle debate over these issues.

³⁴Gandhi notes: 'You know what Hitler is doing in Germany. His creed is violence, of which he makes no secret. The other day we were told that the sword was their soul. The boys and girls there are taught science of violence from the beginning. They are taught to hate the enemy even in their arithmetic, and you will find that the examples have been chosen with a view to inculcate the military spirit. If we endorse their creed, we must recognise the necessity of inculcating the spirit of violence from infancy. The same thing is happening in Italy.' - *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Vol 073. Page 116

morals that the Satyagrahi seeks to appeal through his suffering. Gandhi, while responding to questions by Christian missionaries, had asserted that the 'belief in non-violence is based on the assumption that human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love',³⁵

Gandhi's immense faith in man's sense of morals and the appeal of love, however, was put to serious question with the rise to power of Adolf Hitler. It is sometimes argued that the non-violent tactics of Gandhi, which proved fairly successful against the British and, later, Americans, would have never worked against someone like Hitler (Dombrowsky, 2000). Hitler was generally perceived as someone who did not have any conscience and was thereby incapable of any kind of moral response. Non Violence was said to be ineffective against Nazis, especially after some cases of intense suffering in camps did not lead to any change of heart among the latter. Gandhi however refused to believe that Hitler was beyond redemption:

'That they (the sufferings) have not proved sufficient for melting Herr Hitler's heart merely shows that it is made of harder material than stone. But the hardest material yields to sufficient heat. Even so must the hardest heart melt before sufficiency of the heat of non-violence. There is no limit to the capacity of non-violence to generate heat'.³⁶

Gandhi's views on Hitler's moral convertibility are important because they shed light on the fact that Gandhi understood the state not merely as an abstract entity 'out-there'. The concept of the state tends to sometimes mask the actual dynamics of political practice (Abrams, 1988). Gandhi however showcases an ability to see beyond the mask. State for Gandhi was embodied in actual human beings that formed part of the bureaucratic setup, from the sovereign at the top to the peon at the bottom. Gandhi believed that if individuals who are part of the state apparatus can retain their moral nature, then they can actually make the state function in a manner that will actually promote social and economic justice, especially for the downtrodden groups like Dalits and Adivasis (Parekh, 1989: 118). But the maintenance of the morality of state agents was a task that members of society had to do on their own. The character that the state takes up, eventually, for Gandhi, would be a reflection of the character of the people:

Rulers, if they are bad, are not so necessarily or wholly by reason of birth, but largely because

³⁵ Discussion with Christian Missionaries, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 68, page 205

³⁶ See - 'Is non-violence Ineffective?' in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 068, page 277.

of their environment. But the environment are we - the people of make the rulers what they are. They are thus an exaggerated version of what we are in the aggregate. If we will reform ourselves, the rulers will automatically do so (Parekh, 1989: 125).

Gandhi, thus, escapes the shackles of impractical idealism. He envisions a morally vigilant society of satyagrahis who, if not fully negating the necessity of the state, would definitely transform its nature and functioning.

14. Conclusion

To conclude, the modern state attaches immense importance to the maintenance of bodily hygiene and health for the purpose of ensuring a steady supply of labour for the production process. The state sets up a rational apparatus of bodily medication in which bodies are not allowed to escape. This bio politics, which first took shape in Europe, invited a method of resistance in the form of Gandhian Satyagraha, where ideas of bodily hygiene and welfare remained central. Gandhi built a conception of the sovereign, celibate and vigilant individual, the Satyagrahi, who establishes his body as a site of resistance, in the process seeking the moral transformation of those who form part of the state apparatus. Through Satyagraha, which is elevated to the level of a science, Gandhi developed a method of resistance that could be applied in any context and used by any minority in any part of the world for reclaiming its rights and resisting unjust state laws. The state, which is primarily understood as an agent of brute force, can be made to work for the larger welfare of all through moral vigilance by the society at large, thus showcasing, in Gandhi, a shift from complete resistance to the idea of state to an eventual recognition of its potential to bring about welfare.

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