

MAHATMA
GANDHI

NONVIOLENT POWER IN ACTION

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR



DENNIS DALTON

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WITH A NEW PREFACE, AFTERWORD,
AND CHRONOLOGY BY THE AUTHOR



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Photographs of Gandhi and letters were provided by Pyarelal Nayar and S. K. De, then director of the Gandhi Memorial Museum and Library, Rajghat, New Dehli. Special thanks to Pyarelal for his detailed comments on and dating of these photos.

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Preface

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For my students, with thanks.

*And to remember those
courageous and powerful few
who marched to Dandi
in pursuit of freedom.*

A variety of incidents in my life have conspired to bring me in close contact with people of many creeds and many communities, and my experience with all of them warrants the statement that I have known no distinction between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and colored, Hindus and Indians of other faiths, whether Muslims, Parsis, Christians or Jews. I may say that my heart has been incapable of making any such distinctions.

—Gandhi

The power of nonviolent action has been demonstrated amply throughout the world since the second edition of this book in 2000. In that year, nonviolent power succeeded dramatically in Eastern Europe, employed by student groups like OTPOR in Belgrade to oust Slobodan Milosevic. But the most striking evidence came in the Middle East, where activists led nonviolent mass action against the longstanding authoritarian regimes of Zin El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. As the world watched and worried in early 2011 that these revolts would degenerate into violence, nonviolent power quickly deposed the despots. Pundits on both the left and right failed to anticipate the success of “soft power” against these entrenched governments; if considered at all, nonviolent action was quickly discounted as impotent.

The most notable exception to these skeptics is the American political theorist Gene Sharp. Against arguments that dictators like Milosevic and Mubarak were impervious to the power of nonviolence, Sharp has consistently and cogently expounded strategies to overcome them. Since Sharp published *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power* in 1960, he has steadfastly promulgated his theories (in works noted in the afterword). OTPOR activists in Serbia and protesters in Cairo have openly acknowledged their intellectual debt to Sharp’s strategies for using mass nonviolent resistance to replace dictatorships with democracies.

Thus the idea of nonviolence has continued to circle the globe in improbable ways. From its origins in all of the great world religions, most significantly in the Hindu idea of *ahimsa* and Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, it has leaped centuries to the interpretations of Thoreau and Tolstoy, to Gandhi’s breakthrough in South Africa, and to the works of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gene Sharp in the United States. These are only a few obvious examples. Hundreds of writers have perpetuated the idea; millions have marched to bring it to life. Among all who have either theorized about this phenomenon or actively participated in civil disobedience against unjust authority, Gandhi’s thought and leadership are unquestionably the most prominent.

Harold Laski, an eminent English political theorist and citizen of the empire that Gandhi was then in the process of overturning, observed when Gandhi arrived in London for the last time: “No living man has, either by precept or example, influenced so vast a number of people in so direct and profound a way.”¹ This has also been the judgment of history if we compare Gandhi’s enduring relevance to that of all the other leaders of major mass movements—violent without exception—during the twentieth century. Gandhi’s claim to uniqueness rests both on the originality of his thinking about power and even more on his uncanny ability to put his theory into practice. Nonviolent power in action defined his career: the creative ways that he used it excite the world today. We can see human events, if only for a moment, through

the lens that Gandhi above all others provided, without a bias toward the power of violence.

The aim of this study is to explain and understand the genius of Gandhi's singular achievement. Although the book recounts, especially in the third chapter, extensive criticisms of Gandhi's leadership by his Indian contemporaries, I write for the most part with a strong sympathy for my subject. Most of the book is given to two lengthy case histories of his exercise of power: the mass civil disobedience campaign of 1930 and his fast for Hindu-Muslim unity in 1947. I chose these examples to show Gandhi at his best, using power strategically and wisely. In each case, the dramatic force of nonviolent power is highlighted because this is the purpose of the book: to offer lucid examples of how Gandhi connected his aim of liberation with the methods of nonviolent action.

As I have emphasized in the afterword, from the time that I arrived in India in 1960, I was fortunate to connect with Pyarelal and Sushila Nayar, the brother-sister team that served as Gandhi's personal secretary and physician, respectively. They were a remarkable pair of instructors, discussing in detail my questions and doubts about Gandhi, never turning away my queries about his personal and political life, whether concerning his conduct on the famous salt march (where Pyarelal was at his side) or matters of his health and diet. During the subsequent decades that I corresponded with both of them, in India and from London and New York, we exchanged manuscripts, including the ten-volume biography that they wrote together and the chapters of this book.

I will mention, after the Nayars, only a few of the many other Indian friends who provided me with their remarkable insights into Gandhi. First and foremost is S. R. Mehrotra, who from the beginning of my graduate studies in 1962 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, guided me through the labyrinth of the old India Office Library files, explaining and interpreting records of the Raj in laborious detail. His awesome knowledge of the Indian National Congress has since been published; his recent discoveries behind Gandhi's writing of *Hind Swaraj* are featured in the afterword. For over fifty years, Sriram Mehrotra has been my steadfast mentor on Indian history.

Nirmal Kumar Bose served as Gandhi's Bengali interpreter and biographer during the period of partition and generously shared his understanding and serious criticisms of Gandhi during the final year of his life. K. K. Swaminathan and C. N. Patel, editors of Gandhi's *Collected Works*, allowed me to work with them on their scrupulous production of this opus and shared their intricate knowledge of difficult passages. In Delhi B. R. Nanda, author of several distinguished studies of Gandhi, gave vital assistance when he was director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, as did S. K. De when he directed the Gandhi Library at Rajghat. Raghavan Iyer, analyst extraordinaire of Gandhi's philosophy, commented on my work from the period when he taught at Oxford University to later at the University of California. Bimal Prasad sponsored my research in India and arranged seminars at Jawahar University in Delhi, as did R. Kumar at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in Simla.

Finally, I have dedicated this book to those who accompanied Gandhi on his salt march because, along with Pyarelal, they tried in earnest to recreate that historic moment through their personal narratives. Dr. Haridas Muzumdar, one of the marchers, provided extensive written documentation as well as a series of interviews.

During the years that I studied and then lectured at SOAS (1962—1969), Hugh Tinker first supervised my doctoral dissertation on modern Indian political thought and then became my colleague. For decades after, he remained a close friend who read and criticized drafts of the

entire book. No British or American historian helped me as much to appreciate the workings of the Raj because, unlike other English historians, he had served in the Indian Civil Service and then explained it in voluminous writings. W. H. Morris-Jones was the other Briton who helped me grasp British-Indian history and politics in the age of Gandhi, and he encouraged me for three decades to complete this book. It is a pleasure now to acknowledge the value of his comments on chapters 4 and 5 when they were first presented in seminars and conferences on the Partition of India at SOAS in 1965—1967 and 1974.

Professors Stephen Hay and James Hunt were American scholars and good friends who long focused their research and publications on Gandhi. They read and criticized preliminary drafts of chapters 4 and 5 when presented as papers at conferences in Mexico City and Toronto. Through their writings on Gandhi I have gained more perspective on his place in history. Barbara Stoler Miller, my colleague at Barnard College, offered important comments on Gandhi's use of the Vedic tradition when she read the introductory chapter of this book. The unflagging encouragement of Leonard Gordon during the last forty years should have been enough to spur my completion of a dozen books. As a preeminent historian of Bengali political leadership, he was not known for his sympathetic attitude toward Gandhi. But he concentrated his critical powers on this book, reading the entire manuscript at various stages of its evolution. His detailed suggestions of innumerable leads and sources could not have been more constructive. Legions of American students of India are indebted to Ainslie Embree for indispensable support, and I feel privileged to count myself among them. As noted in the afterword, Thomas Weber, an Australian scholar, not only made a close study of Gandhi's salt march but actually walked the entire route himself checking various points for historical accuracy. I appreciate the opportunity to have read his detailed account a decade ago in manuscript form.

It should be evident that those above who have read part or all of this study are not responsible for its lapses; the responsibility remains fully with the author. Anyone familiar with my writings on Gandhi over the last forty-five years may recognize parts of this book in previous incarnations. References to all of these early articles are given in the bibliography.

Research for this book was undertaken in India, London, and South Africa as well as throughout the United States. It received support from SOAS, University of London; the American Institute of Indian Studies; the American Council of Learned Societies; the American Philosophical Society; the Olin Foundation; Barnard College; and the Southern Asian Institute at Columbia University.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the staffs of the India Office Library and Records, London; the British Library, London; the SOAS Library; the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi, especially Mr. V. P. Joshi; the Gandhi Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi; the National Archives of India, Delhi; the Gandhi Library, Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad, especially Mr. Kisanbhai Trivedi, Mr. Amrut Modi, Mr. anil Patel, and Mr. Digar K. Dave; the Gandhi Ashram at Sevagram; the M. N. Roy archives at the Indian Renaissance Institute, Dehra Dun, especially Mr. R. L. Nigam; the University of California Library at Berkeley; the University of Chicago Library; the King Library and archives at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Georgia; and the Barnard College and Columbia University Libraries in New York. In South Africa, the personal attention of Sushil Gandhi (the Mahatma's daughter-in-law) and her extended family in Durban is much appreciated, as well as the hospitality and instruction of Mr. a. D. Lazarus, an esteemed

educator.

The special efforts of close friends on this project should be mentioned. Daniel Argov, an Israeli historian of India, arranged for my research on Gandhi at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1966. Peter Juviler and Leslie Calman of the Barnard College Political Science Department team-taught courses with me in the 1970s and 1980s, listened to many of my lectures on Gandhi, and helped me with their countless comments to formulate what have become the main themes of this book. Jim Caraley, chair of my department for thirty years, was a consistent source of strength and my brother, Terry, continues to be an unfailing source of wit. In addition to my students, who have provided me with remarkable reinforcement for over forty years—and this book is in part dedicated to them—two individuals have defined friendship for me by giving it in abundance: James Shokoff and Phillip Hubbart, professors of English and law, respectively.

Above all, and always there, is Sharron, my spouse of over fifty years. We met in Kathmandu and began our journey through India, England, New York, and the American West, her birthplace. She remains my fiercest critic and closest friend as we have tried to improve each other's books and teaching. Without India and Nepal we would have never met, so we remain in debt to those countries most. Our two sons, Kevin and Shaun, walked with us on our recreation of Gandhi's salt march, were adopted by Sushila Nayar when we lived in her home and she in ours, and experienced with us the wonders of South Asia. In turn, they have given us our four grandchildren: Mia and Sierra, Hadley and Blaise, and a new dimension of life. Finally, it is my pleasure to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Wade Weast and Michael Simon at Columbia University Press.

Notes

The epigraph to this preface comes from Gandhi's *Autobiography* in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1961), 39:221.

1. Harold Laski, comment, *Daily Herald*, September 11, 1931.

If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.
The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.
(New York: New Market Press, 1983), p. 71.

This book is dedicated to my students because its interpretations emerged from teaching experiences during the last four decades in South Asia, Britain, and America. A year after the book's publication, I went to Nepal as a Fulbright scholar and used it as a text in a political theory course at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, the very place where I had begun teaching in 1960. Students then and there, as always and elsewhere, taught me Gandhi's many meanings. This feedback continued when I returned to my classes in New York. From these exchanges, two aspects of Gandhi's originality appeared that I initially missed or understated, so I take this opportunity to discuss them here.

First, from 1904, a decade after he had arrived in South Africa, Gandhi said he discovered the sanctity or dignity of manual labor, insisting that all those in his community value working with their hands. He relates in his *Autobiography* how reading John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* inspired a conviction "that a life of labor, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the craftsman is the life worth living," that heretofore "this idea had never occurred to me" (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 39: 239). Whatever Ruskin's initial influence, Gandhi developed this conception of work for his own purposes, to reinforce a growing egalitarianism that eventually distinguished his social reform program. Ruskin would not have recognized the philosophy of work that ultimately crystallized in India, where Gandhi used it to attack a caste hierarchy that systematically devalued manual labor.

Gandhi's originality on this point can be appreciated when one realizes its differences not only from Ruskin but especially from the social practices and vast intellectual traditions of India. If any single idea demonstrates or stamps Gandhi's credentials as a social reformer, it must be his theory and practice of work. The idea pervades his whole reform program, from the abolition of untouchability to construction of village latrines and wells. His unique emphasis on public health and sanitation required social workers-cum-political volunteers to engage in labor that would routinely defy caste restrictions. In the hybrid conditions of his ashram communities, this principle was pushed to the limit, initially creating severe tensions between caste Hindus and *harijans*.

In the common kitchen especially, as each member of the ashram performed his or her daily duties of food preparation and cooking, ancient norms of class and caste, sex and religion (as Muslims and Sikhs mixed with Christians and Hindus) provided endless grist for these mills of conflict resolution. Pyarelal Nayar, one of Gandhi's closest coworkers for twenty-eight years, liked to observe how much more of Gandhi's voluminous writings are devoted to management of his ashrams than to political campaigns because the former proved by far the toughest testing grounds for his "experiments with truth."

In a representative comment on labor made a year after returning from South Africa to India, Gandhi reviewed his program of social reforms, including spinning of cotton cloth and

wearing of *khadi*. Then, speaking especially to an audience of Indian students, he concluded, “You may ask: ‘Why should we use our hands?’ and say ‘the manual work has got to be done by those who are illiterate. I can only occupy myself with reading literature and political essays.’ I think that we have to realise the dignity of labour.... I consider that a barber’s profession is just as good as the profession of medicine.” This must have seemed outrageous to his audience, first because according to caste proscriptions, a barber’s work was meant for untouchables, and second, in colonized India, the medical profession, like law, promised entry into a Westernized elite.

But he was not finished. Only when these ideas are clearly understood, he insisted, “and not until then, you may come to Politics,” practicing it not merely as a method of reform but as a creed of right principles infused with one’s religious faith. “Politics, divorced of religion, have absolutely no meaning.... Politics are a part of our being” (CWMG 13: 234). This was Gandhi’s statement in 1916, at the beginning of his thirty-year term of national leadership, and the demands that he made then were nothing short of revolutionary: profound changes in thinking about work, caste, religion, and politics, forming a nexus of ideas that young people must consider and adopt if they wanted to participate in the all-inclusive profession of politics.

Within four years of this speech, Gandhi was at the head of the first mass political movement in India’s history. The extreme demands that he placed on political workers served not as an impediment but as an inspiration. In this new definition of politics as profession and creed, the performance of daily manual labor as a means to develop personal discipline, integrity, and identification with the peasantry became the litmus test for proof of national citizenship.

The second aspect of Gandhi’s originality as a political thinker and leader is the way that he forged connections, in theory and in practice, among the ideas of freedom, nonviolence, power, and civic responsibility. This book’s focus is on freedom (*swaraj*) and the power of nonviolence (*satyagraha*), but Gandhi usually connected these ideas with a concept of responsibility or moral obligation to improve society through nonviolent action. This connection is implied in the introduction and made explicit in [chapter 5](#) (pp. 164–166), but it needs more clarification and development. Gandhi speaks often of how Indians must exercise responsibility to attain their freedom, and he conceives of this obligation in several ways.

First, he clearly distinguishes between liberty and license as the difference between true freedom (*swaraj*) and mere “independence” (p. 2). The latter suggests for him a lack of discipline and self-awareness, whereas *swaraj* requires of the citizen a growing sense of social unity. Second, following Thoreau, he argues that the quest for freedom incurs a definite political obligation or “the duty of disloyalty” when the state fails to represent the people’s interests and needs. That is, “Disobedience of the law of an evil state is therefore a duty” (CJVMG 43: 132–33). Finally, he moves beyond Thoreau by contending that the freedom struggle demands active participation in social reforms, i.e., no one is free until all are free from deprivation and discrimination. In the freedom struggle, volunteers or *satyagrahis* must dedicate themselves to the “uplift of all” (*sarvodaya*) by working in the range of reform programs noted above.

All citizens were obligated to keep the peace in times of civil strife. This duty became especially important in 1947 when India plunged into civil war as it gained independence from Britain. [Chapter 5](#) details the history of Gandhi’s leadership during this crucial period, but the conceptual connections among freedom, nonviolence, and civic responsibility me

reinforcement. The main point about civic duty is Gandhi's insistence that it was the clear and present obligation of the Hindu majority to protect India's Muslim minority. Hindus justified oppression of Muslims by arguing that in their newfound democracy, a majority had the right to prevail; this is what popular sovereignty meant. Gandhi countered with a liberal affirmation of minority rights and then went further by contending that majority rights should be earned through fulfillment of civic responsibility. In the great public squares of New Delhi, outside the chambers where India's new federal constitution was being written, Gandhi spoke urgently to his "Brothers and Sisters":

What I am going to tell you today [June 28, 1947] will be something very special. I hope you will hear me with attention and try to digest what I say. When someone does something good he makes the whole world partake of the good. When someone does something bad, though he cannot make the world share his action he can certainly cause harm. The Constituent Assembly is discussing the rights of the citizen. As a matter of fact the proper question is not what the rights of a citizen are, but rather what constitutes the duties of a citizen. Fundamental rights can only be those rights the exercise of which is not only in the interest of the citizen but that of the whole world. Today, everyone wants to know what his rights are, but if a man learns to discharge his duties... if from childhood we learn what our dharma [sacred duty] is and try to follow it our rights look after themselves The beauty of it is that the very performance of a duty secures us our right. Rights cannot be divorced from duties. This is how satyagraha was born, for I was always striving to decide what my duty was.

On the next day, he resumed his theme, applying it directly to the problem of religious conflict:

Yesterday I talked to you about duty. However I was not able to say all that I had intended to say. Whenever a person goes anywhere certain duties come to devolve on him. The man who neglects his duty and cares only to safeguard his rights does not know that rights that do not spring from duties done cannot be safeguarded. This applies to the Hindu—Muslim relations. Whether it is the Hindus living in a place or Muslims or both, they will come to acquire rights if they do their duty.... This is a paramount law and no one can change it. If Hindus consider Muslims their brothers and treat them well, Muslims too will return friendship for friendship The duty of the Hindus is to share with the Muslims in their joys and sorrows. (CWMG 88: 230, 236–37)

During the struggle for independence, Gandhi demanded that Indians accept responsibility for British colonization: they had allowed it to occur and could end it by doing their duty through satyagraha. When this struggle ended but brought civil war in its wake, Gandhi again insisted that his people accept and then exercise responsibility. How could they claim to enjoy the rights in a free India when failing in their duty to maintain peace and order? Swaraj through satyagraha still required the acceptance of social and political obligations for democracy to survive.

On August 15, 1997, as India celebrated fifty years of independence, an official ban was lifted on access to confidential documents of the British colonial government. Suddenly thousands of pages contained in almost 800 separate files became available at the India

Office Records collection in London (now located in the new British Library). These files comprise the carefully kept records of the Raj's secret service, or Indian Political Intelligence (IPI), described by archivists as "a shadowy and formerly non-avowed organization, within the Public and Judicial Department of the India Office in London, devoted to the internal and external security of British India." The IPI, reporting to Scotland Yard as well as to the India Office, maintained from 1916 to 1947 scrupulous surveillance of all "Indian revolutionaries" principally Gandhi and other leaders of the Indian National Congress. It reported on the movements, censored or proscribed objectionable Congressional or communist literature (including, for example, Gandhi's first tract, *Hind Swaraj*), and regularly intercepted and monitored personal and political correspondence. The newly opened files show that the mission of the IPI was amply met: the reports are highly detailed and documented, often thoughtful, perceptive, and elegantly written.

This fresh data substantiates a main thesis of [chapter 4](#) on Gandhi's civil disobedience: that his use of nonviolent power effectively disarmed the Raj by creating a paralyzing ambivalence in their attempt at rule. It may appear that he achieved this with ease, but the records show that the British struggled hard to master the situation, agonizing over the predicament, searching for historical precedents when there were none, trying to determine the basic sources or dynamics of Gandhi's power. One lengthy report on Gandhi assessed the status of his leadership after the conclusion, in 1934, of prolonged civil disobedience. The tone throughout is exasperated and battle weary, resentful of "Gandhi's malevolent attitude" and "his determined retention of the civil disobedience weapon." Yet, citing an informant, the agent reports that there seems no way to stop him with "everyone hanging on Gandhi's smallest word (because he has the power).... *It is clear that nothing can be done without Gandhu and, therefore, no one has the strength or courage to challenge him*" (parentheses and underlining in original). After citing several informants to substantiate further this analysis, the report distinguishes the "most striking fact" of Indian politics by 1936:

Gandhi was much the master and director of Congress as ever and he had lost none of either his political astuteness or his inveterate hostility to British rule. Over and over again he intervened to save an open break between "reformists" and "revolutionaries" [liberal against violent factions within the Congress], and, in every such case, it was not difficult to see in the compromise that he brought about that, even when he appeared merely to have temporized, he had, in fact, kept Congress on the course chosen for it by him, deviating neither too far to the right, nor too far to the left, but steering all the time for the destination of mass revolution.

The British were clearly caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they deplored Gandhi's "hostility" to their rule and his determined course of "mass revolution" that will end the Raj. On the other hand, Gandhi was surely preferable to the terrorists or communists on the extreme left because the British were never ambivalent about violent opposition. They deemed it hateful and crushed it unmercifully. They hesitated only with Gandhi because however "malevolent" his attitude, the method of nonviolence confounded them. Again and again, the intelligence agent presents the consuming question: how can the government effectively counter Gandhi's "dominating personality," "all-pervading influence," "appeal to the masses" and the confidence of the commercial and professional classes," "while the whole of Hind

India regards him as a Saint who can do no wrong”? “Gandhi is the key-stone in the Congress movement,” “Gandhi’s triumph is a personal triumph... for his personality—to many his semi-divinity—has no rival in India” [Intelligence Bureau. Home Department. May 1, 1931. LOR/L/P&J/12/235]. British imperialism never found an answer to its Gandhi problem because it could not decipher the code to satyagraha, the secret of nonviolent power. Yet how ironic that an obscure English secret service officer should have described the Mahatma’s power in terms that rival those of his most admiring hagiographers.

The analysis of British ambivalence that is presented in this book, especially in [chapter 4](#), has been more recently developed in a trenchant study by D. A. Low, *Britain and India: Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity, 1929–1942* (1997). Low demonstrates through an exhaustive use of British Indian sources and incisive analysis of all sides of the independence struggle that “the British frequently found themselves trapped in the coils of their own ambivalence.” He explains how Gandhi’s ingenious use of satyagraha served “to force the hand and make them grant India the swaraj it demanded in accord with their own self-avowed liberal values.” From unprecedented case studies of Gandhi’s interaction with the Raj, Low concludes that “It is now indeed possible to see that it was above all Gandhi’s masterly grasp of the critical requirements of the Indian national movement in its momentous battle with India’s profoundly ambiguous British rulers that gave him the towering position he came to hold in the Indian national movement” (pp. 31, 38–39). It may be seen, therefore, from Low’s account as well as from the compelling data on this subject now available, that Gandhi succeeded because he wielded power in a unique manner. Alone among leaders of mass political movements in this century, he first conceived and then applied an entirely original method of action, satyagraha. Its use from 1906 to 1948 introduced a new mode of politics that Gandhi called “inclusive” rather than “exclusive.” He demonstrated the power of this inclusivity when expressed, as it must be, through nonviolent action.

Old age is often unkind to political leaders, especially the most powerful or popular. They seem, like Churchill or many American ex-presidents, to outlive their usefulness. If they remain in power, like Mao and Nehru, they may preside over their own worst years. Gandhi in old age offers an instructive example of how nonviolent power may endure. In his late seventies, Gandhi’s direct influence on Congressional policy declined as Nehru, Patel, and other leaders felt forced to accept the partition of India. Yet in other respects Gandhi’s power grew, with his most dramatic and successful fasts in Calcutta and Delhi. The former, in September 1947, as Gandhi approached his seventy-eighth birthday, is examined in [chapter 5](#). The latter, equally effective, occurred in January 1948, only two weeks before his assassination, and was devoted to the same cause, the resolution of Hindu—Muslim conflict in this time in India’s strife-torn capital city.

Nicholas Mansergh, a British historian of the partition cited below, commented on Gandhi’s use of power in these two fasts: “In this, the last year of his life, Gandhi’s influence was transcendent—It was his preaching of the doctrine of nonviolence more than any other single factor that stood between India and bloodshed on a frightful scale” (p. 159). The recently released files offer striking support of Mansergh’s assessment. One lengthy report of Gandhi’s conduct in Delhi after India gained independence ranks among the eloquent testimonies to his power. This is all the more remarkable because it was written by a senior representative of the government that Gandhi and his movement had just defeated. M. A.C.B. Symon, newly appointed high commissioner for the U.K. in India, writes with a tone

and direction that suggest a resolution of earlier ambivalence. The report concurs with estimates of Gandhi's power offered by Lord Mountbatten around this time (e.g., pp. 233–34) but Symon provides details derived from firsthand observation of Gandhi's final four months in Delhi (September 9 to January 30), when he resided "in Birla House exactly opposite the Office of this High Commission":

During these months Birla House became the focal point of political activity for all India. Day after day, the most important personages in the Dominion of India, as well as its most distinguished visitors, came to see the Mahatma here. Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel, when they were not away from Delhi, were almost daily visitors. Next to these was Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the Indian Christian Minister of Health as well as Maulana Kalam Azad, the Nationalist Muslim Minister of Education. Jai Prakash Narain and other Socialist leaders were also frequent visitors. Provincial Governors and Prime Ministers, too, always called on him when they visited Delhi and meetings of the All-India Congress Committee were invariably held in Birla House. Day after day people of all communities, rich and poor, came to visit him for guidance, assistance or consolation. Many of these were Sikh and Hindu refugees from Pakistan who had suffered personal bereavements and the loss of their homes. Day in and day out, too, Muslims of all classes of society, many of whom had also suffered personal bereavements in the recent disturbances, came to invoke his help. Normally too fearful even to leave their homes, they came to him because they had learned and believed that he had their interests at heart and was the only real force in the Indian Union capable of preserving them from destruction. Little groups of them, often belonging to the humblest classes of society, and including women, were frequently to be seen waiting outside the gates of Birla House until the Mahatma had time, as he always did, to listen to their requests. And each evening during these recent months congregations—again made up of all classes of society, including many members of the Indian Defence Services—assembled for his prayer meetings and listened to his daily exhortations that all races and creeds belonged to India; that all have the same rights; and that they must live in peace and amity together. There must be no retaliation on either side and conditions must be restored under which Muslims could return to safety to their homes in Delhi and non-Muslims to Pakistan.

It would be a mistaken impression, however, to suppose that Gandhi devoted these last months of his life exclusively to social and humanitarian tasks. Through this constant stream of visitors he was able to keep in remarkably close touch with Indian opinion and continued to play a most important role as the principal adviser of the Indian Government on all major political issues. Scarcely any important decision was taken without his prior advice, whether the subject was the movement and rehabilitation of refugees, Congress policy or the Kashmir issue. And when he disagreed with any decision taken it was not long, as in the recent case of the non-implementation of the Indo-Pakistan financial agreement, before he took determined and successful steps to have it revoked—Gandhi entered upon what proved to be the last of his many fasts. His action immediately evoked expressions of goodwill from all over the world including Pakistan and on the third day of the fast the Indian Government as a gesture to him announced their willingness, in flat contradiction to their determination of a few days

previously, to implement the recently concluded Indo-Pakistan financial agreements. Three days later on 18th January, Gandhi agreed to break his fast on receiving assurances from all communities in Delhi that Muslim life, property and religion would be both respected and protected.

The success of the Delhi fast would cost Gandhi his life. His effective pressure on the new Indian government to meet payments owed to Pakistan and on Hindus to cease persecution of Muslims persuaded his extremist Hindu assassins that they must wait no longer. Yet Gandhi's power was not finished: it was his murder, more than any other single event, that finally shamed his community into ending India's civil war. Symon concluded his report with this judgment: "Gandhi in these latter months genuinely came to believe that the future well-being of the Indian Union was entirely contingent on communal concord and that, if need be, he was prepared to sacrifice his life for this cause" [IOR/L/I/1/1379. A.C.B. Symon to Noel Baker, New Delhi, February 4, 1948, British Commonwealth Affairs, No. 093].

After Gandhi made this sacrifice and the world rose to assess his life, Britons familiar with India tried earnestly to express how much had been lost. E. M. Forster, who had observed the Indian independence movement firsthand long before writing *A Passage to India*, contrasted Gandhi's "mature goodness" as a leader with the "blustering schoolboys" among his contemporary politicians. Forster concluded that Gandhi "was not only good. He made good and ordinary men all over the world now look up to him in consequence.... 'A very great man I have called him. He is likely to be the greatest of our century.'" Edward Thompson, an Oxford historian, wrote how after he had talked at length with Gandhi, "The conviction came to me, that not since Socrates has the world seen his equal for absolute self-control and composure... he will be remembered as one of the very few who have set the stamp of a *idea* on an epoch. That idea is non-violence, which has drawn out powerfully the sympathy of other lands." Then Thompson concluded with his hope and belief that "a sane and civilized relationship" might develop between Britain and India. "If that should come to pass, when the insanity now ravaging the world has passed away, then my country, as well as India, will look on this man as one of its greatest and most effective servants and sons" (*Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan, 1956).

Thompson thus foresaw the end that Gandhi most desired, the mutual redemption of England and India from their long and painful experience of colonialism. With satyagrah Gandhi argued, there could be neither enemies nor losers, but only, in the end, victory for all. This is the demonstrable virtue of nonviolence.

• INTRODUCTION

Real swaraj [freedom] is self-rule or self control. The way to it is satyagraha; the power of truth and love...

In my opinion, we have used the term “*swaraj*” without understanding its real significance. I have endeavoured to explain it as I understand it, and my conscience testifies that my life henceforth is dedicated to its attainment.

—M.K. Gandhi,
Hind Swaraj, 1909¹

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was called “Mahatma” (“Great Soul”) because of his extraordinary achievements as leader of the Indian movement for independence. Gandhi was not primarily a theorist but a reformer and activist. When pressed for a treatise on his philosophy, he protested that “I am not built for academic writings. Action is my domain.”² Yet he was guided by values and ideas that remained remarkably enduring throughout his life. Chief among them were his unique concepts of freedom and power, or, to use his terms, of *swaraj* and *satyagraha*. As seen from his statement quoted above, these were closely connected ideas, related to each other as means to end. He did, as he promised in 1909, devote his life to the pursuit of *swaraj* and he redefined the concept by insisting that individual freedom and social responsibility were no more antithetical than self-realization and self-restraint. In his pursuit of freedom he transformed our conception of power through his practice of nonviolence and *satyagraha*. Today the Mahatma has come to mean innumerable things to multitudes around the world. At least one of his important achievements was to show how the use of nonviolent power may clarify and enlarge our understanding of freedom.

Freedom as Swaraj: Redefinitions

In the heat of India’s struggle for independence from British rule, the goal of *swaraj* was constantly invoked. It often meant simply freedom for India. But Gandhi argued that the word should mean more than political independence. When in 1931 he was asked to define the term precisely, he said it was not easily translated into a single English word. But he then went on to explain its meaning as it had evolved since the beginning of the nationalist movement:

The root meaning of *swaraj* is self-rule. *Swaraj* may, therefore, be rendered as disciplined rule from within.... ‘Independence’ has no such limitation. Independence may mean license to do as you like. *Swaraj* is positive. Independence is negative.... The word *swaraj* is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which ‘independence’ often means.³

When Gandhi invoked ancient Vedic tradition in this way to define *swaraj*, he knew that it would allow for interpreting the idea of freedom in two distinct senses. *Swaraj* meant literal “self-rule” and could denote, in a strict political sense, a sovereign kingdom’s freedom from

external control.⁴ Or it could mean freedom in a spiritual sense as being free from illusion and ignorance. From this perspective, one is liberated as one gains greater self-knowledge and consequent self-mastery. Obsessions with money or other means of domination become addictive forms of human bondage; freedom comes as we learn through self-discipline to rule ourselves. Thus *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Gandhi's primary text of Hinduism, saw the liberated individual as one who "acts without craving, possessiveness," and "finds peace" in awareness of the "infinite spirit," thereby being "freed from delusion."⁵ The *Chandogya Upanishad*, like the *Gita*, defined freedom in a spiritual sense: "self-governing autonomy" and "unlimited freedom in all worlds," were the traits of swaraj in the sage. As in the *Gita*, this liberation evolved from a higher consciousness, an awareness of the unity of all being, the identity of oneself with the universal Self or *Atman*.⁶

This philosophy which related spiritual freedom or swaraj to a perception of the unity and oneness of life became the source of a vital stream of Gandhi's ideas: his conceptions of nonviolence, truth, and tolerance flow from it. And each of these important ideas, together with swaraj, denoted individual self-discipline. The traditional sage's "unlimited freedom" flowed from an enlightened self-restraint. Because the sage perceived a spiritual equality in the sacred connectedness of all life, an infatuation with power or drive to dominate others violated that vision; in their stead came self-control and an expansive sense of social duty. Thus *The Bhagavad-Gita* acclaimed the liberated sage as "the man of discipline" and affirmed that "Arming himself with discipline, seeing everything with an equal eye, he sees the self in all creatures and all creatures in the self."⁷ No lines from the *Gita* were more essential for Gandhi's idea of swaraj.

These were the meanings of swaraj—political and spiritual—that came from India's ancient tradition into the twentieth century to inspire the independence movement with a philosophy of freedom. But Gandhi was not the first Indian nationalist to interpret the idea of swaraj for the movement. The nationalist movement had begun in the late nineteenth century and India had its philosophers of freedom before Gandhi. Among these political leaders, swaraj at first implied no more than political liberty or national independence. Prominent leaders of the Indian National Congress like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Dadabhai Naoroji meant by swaraj only this. In 1906, Naoroji, then elder statesman of the Indian National Congress, proclaimed the goal of swaraj as political autonomy in these terms:

We do not ask any favours. We want only justice. Instead of going into any further divisions or details of our rights as British citizens, the whole matter can be comprised in one word—"self-government" or *Swaraj* like that of the United Kingdom or the Colonies.⁸

Soon after this, though, other Indian theorists developed further the meaning of swaraj. They argued along the lines stated later by Gandhi, that swaraj must mean more than just independence. "Self-rule" required what *The Bhagavad-Gita* and Upanishads demanded: knowledge of the individual self. Only this knowledge could produce a higher form of spiritual freedom, that is, freedom from the illusion of separateness and freedom to realize the universal Self. The aim of these theorists was not, of course, to discard the goal of India's independence but to forge a synthesis of two meanings of freedom, political ("external") and spiritual ("internal") liberation.

Aurobindo Ghose and Bipin Chandra Pal, both Bengali theorists from the extremist faction of the Indian Congress, were the first to shape this synthesis that Gandhi eventually adopted. They insisted that *swaraj* was too sacred a word to be translated as the Western notion of political liberty. Ghose argued that “*Swaraj* as a sort of European ideal, political liberty for the sake of political self-assertion, will not awaken India.” An ideal of “true *Swaraj* for India” must derive from the Vedantic concept of “self-liberation.”⁹ Pal took the idea of *swaraj* still further by defining it as “the conscious identification of the individual with the universal.” Its correct meaning derived not from Indian liberals like Dadabhai Naoroji but “in the Upanishads indicate the highest spiritual state, wherein the individual self stands in conscious union with the Universal or the Supreme Self. When the Self sees and knows whatever is as its own self it attains *swaraj*: so says the Chandogya Upanishad.” Pal then contrasted this Vedantic conception of *swaraj* with the modern European notion of freedom, arguing as Ghose did the superiority of the classical Indian view:

“Indeed, the idea of freedom as it has gradually developed in Europe ever since old Paganism was replaced by Christianity with its essentially individualistic ethical implications and emphasis, is hardly in keeping with the new social philosophy of our age. Freedom, independence, liberty [as defined in Europe] are all essentially negative concepts. They all indicate absence of restraint, regulation and subjection. Consequently, Europe has not as yet discovered any really rational test by which to distinguish what is freedom from what is license.” Western thought should learn from the Indian philosophy of freedom because it is not negative but positive: “It does not mean absence of restraint or regulation or dependence but self-restraint, self-regulation, and self-dependence.” This follows from the core principle that “the self in Hindu thought, even in the individual, is a synonym for the Universal.”¹⁰

In this analysis of *swaraj* and freedom, the Bengali theorists set the ideological foundation for Gandhi’s construction. As Pal, Ghose, and eventually Gandhi conceived it, the idea of *swaraj* had three distinct components. First, while it pretended to reject the European liberal concept of freedom as “negative,” in fact it accepted that idea as one essential element of *swaraj*. Freedom for India, they believed, must include complete independence from England and after that guarantee the basic civil liberties that British liberalism had preached but denied Indians in practice. This was fundamental to their vision of an independent India. Gandhi later asserted that “Civil liberty consistent with the observance of non-violence is the first step towards *swaraj*. It is the breath of political and social life. It is the foundation of freedom. There is no room for dilution or compromise.”¹¹

Yet, if civil liberty was a necessary condition for *swaraj*, it could not be deemed sufficient: it lacked an essential correlate of social responsibility. Thus, the next part of their thinking about *swaraj* was a criticism of the liberal idea of liberty. They argued that Europeans saw the freedom of self-realization as mere self-aggrandizement, conceiving of freedom as unrestrained pursuit of selfish aims at the expense of others. So the Western notion of progress meant only a compulsive competition for material goods and never cooperation for a secure and just community. A corrective was needed and they prescribed a theory of freedom compatible with the value of self-restraint, and containing, as Pal intended, a decidedly positive quality.

This conceptualization of freedom bears some similarities with European political philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G. W. F. Hegel, or T. H. Green, who formulated theories of “positive” freedom in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹² The Indian

however, consistently infused into their thinking about freedom insights from their own tradition. The “positive” freedom that they constructed argued that self-knowledge could lead to a discovery of human unity and thus reconcile the antagonism between individual and society so characteristic of the liberal concept of liberty. Ghose expressed this best:

By liberty we mean the freedom to obey the law of our being, to grow to our natural self-fulfillment, to find out naturally and freely our harmony with our environment. The dangers and disadvantages of liberty [when conceived in the ‘negative’ sense]... are indeed obvious. But they arise from the absence or defect of the sense of unity between individual and individual, between community and community, which pushes them to assert themselves at the expense of each other instead of growing by mutual help.... If a real, a spiritual and psychological unity were effectuated, liberty would have no perils and disadvantages; for free individuals enamored of unity would be compelled by themselves, by their own need, to accommodate perfectly their own growth with the growth of their fellows and would not feel themselves complete except in the free growth of others.... Human society progresses really and vitally in proportion as law becomes the child of freedom; it will reach its perfection when, man having learned to know and become spiritually one with his fellow-man, the spontaneous law of his society exists only as the outward mould of his self-governed inner liberty.¹³

In his extensive writing on freedom, Ghose contended that “the spirit of ancient Indian politics inspired for our age a new perspective on political theory. Its cooperative rather than competitive approach to social life bred a secure self-discipline. The “spirit” of Indian culture as distinct from its corrupt “forms” (manifest, for example, in the caste system), fostered mature self-restraint and with it a harmony of political and social interests. Spiritual freedom meant liberation from attitudes of political or social separateness that foster ideologies of xenophobia and exclusivity. The idea of positive freedom or *swaraj* is thus inextricably interwoven with attitudes of inclusivity.¹⁴ These two categories of “exclusivist” separatist thinking contrasted with an inclusivist perception of “unity in diversity” became essential to Gandhi’s philosophy.

The importance of Bengali theorists like Ghose and Pal for the Indian idea of freedom should be recognized but not exaggerated. It was Gandhi who translated the theory of *swaraj* into political reality through a program and style of national leadership. But it was not just his activism that was unique. He shaped the theory of *swaraj* in at least three novel ways. First and foremost, he connected it with his conception of *satyagraha* or the power of nonviolence. Others like Pal had observed that *swaraj* signified a spirit of human unity but they did not then deduce from that a strategy of nonviolent change. The ancient Indian idea of *ahimsa* (literally “not violent”) posited the value that harming others was tantamount to injuring oneself but it took Gandhi to use this as an underpinning for political and social reform. He alone theorized that India’s freedom could be attained only through nonviolence—that *swaraj* required the power of *satyagraha*—and simultaneously worked out ways to put it into practice.

Another distinctive feature of Gandhi’s idea of *swaraj* was his persistent relation of the personal to the political. “*Swaraj* of a people,” he declared, “means the sum total of the *swaraj* (self-rule) of individuals,”¹⁵ and “... political self-government, that is, self-government for a large number of men and women, is no better than individual self-government, and therefore

it is to be attained by precisely the same means that are required for individual self-government or self-rule.”¹⁶ That is, personal self-rule or self-realization, attained through knowledge and examination of oneself, is the foundation of national independence. This view of swaraj demanded that the quest for India’s freedom begin with each individual assuming personal responsibility for changing attitudes of intolerance and exclusivity. He stated succinctly this conception of swaraj when he wrote: “The outward freedom therefore that we shall attain will only be in exact proportion to the inward freedom to which we may have grown at a given moment. And if this is the correct view of freedom, our chief energy must be concentrated upon achieving reform from within.”¹⁷ “Outward” or “external” freedom is thus only one part of swaraj: political independence can be nothing more than a “means of measuring the freedom of the self within.” The right aim of those “who wish to attain true freedom” should be “an improvement in the self.”¹⁸

This idea of “inward freedom” associates swaraj with an internal journey or search for self-knowledge that liberates one from the sort of fear and insecurity that fuels both a desire to dominate or to be dominated. It was the willingness of Indians to cooperate with the British Raj out of fear that troubled Gandhi. The fruit of “internal freedom” is a personal liberation from fear. Raghavan Iyer captures the essence of swaraj in his trenchant analysis of the idea when he says that it involves “a demanding and continuous process of self-cultivation.”¹⁹

This relates to Gandhi’s own evolution as a leader and the profound changes of ideas and identity he experienced. “The pilgrimage to Swaraj” he said, “is a painful climb,”²⁰ and his own life can be viewed as an arduous journey. As such it may be compared with others who have suffered from racism and whose response might be seen as a personal struggle for freedom from fear and domination. The last chapter of this book compares Gandhi with Malcolm X, and examines the latter’s autobiography as comparable to Gandhi’s because both suggest a pilgrimage to self-realization. In this sense, Malcolm X personifies a quest for “inward freedom” that is at the heart of swaraj.²¹

The last point that Gandhi developed in his theory of swaraj was his insistence that social reforms were essential for India’s freedom. When he asserted that “the movement for *Swaraj* is a movement for self-purification,”²² he meant that individuals must take responsibility for a change of attitude to overcome three major problems in Indian society: Hindu-Muslim religious conflict, the evils of caste and untouchability, and economic inequality. Each of these areas of social corruption was an obstacle to swaraj and must be tackled coterminously with the fight for political independence.²³ “The sooner it is recognized” he said, “that many of our social evils impede our march towards *Swaraj*, the greater will be our progress towards our cherished goal. To postpone social reform till after the attainment of *Swaraj* is not to know the meaning of *Swaraj*”²⁴

In relation to Gandhi’s ideas about social reform, the analysis in this book focuses on the problems of caste and untouchability ([chapter 2](#)) and Hindu-Muslim conflict ([chapter 5](#)). His commitment to attaining social equality is evident in his personal example: he lived a life of simplicity. When he claimed that “The *Swaraj* of my dream is the poor man’s *Swaraj*” and stressed his own identification with the poor, his word was accepted as authentic because of his consistency of thought and deed. Moreover, he built a movement that was social and not just political, around the need for self-sacrifice among its leaders: “Without a large, very large army of self-sacrificing and determined workers, real progress of the masses, I hold to be an impossibility. And without that progress, there is no such thing as *Swaraj*. Progress towards

Swaraj will be in exact proportion to the increase in the number of workers who will dare sacrifice their all for the cause of the poor.”²⁵ This economic aspect of *swaraj* was expressed in his idea of *sarvodaya* or “welfare of all,” which asserted that “Economic equality is the master-key to non-violent independence.”²⁶

Satyagraha as a Form of Power

William Shirer went to India in 1930 as an American journalist to report on what he then saw as Gandhi’s “peculiar revolution.” Fifty years later he wrote a remarkable memoir about the visit. He described the civil disobedience campaign of that year in compelling terms and then concluded that *satyagraha* was Gandhi’s “supreme achievement,” which “taught us all that there was a greater power in life than force, which seemed to have ruled the planet since men first sprouted on it. That power lay in the spirit, in Truth and Love, in non-violent action.” Whether or not Gandhi in fact “taught us all” this lesson, the phenomenon of the power of *satyagraha* is there for all to know. And whether or not one accepts that this power derives from “Truth and love,” the Indian independence movement remains one of the largest mobilizations of mass energy in history; it did exercise a form of power dramatically different from that of governments or armies or violent revolutions. This was because its leadership conceived of how to convert the power of nonviolence into political action.

Gandhi defined *satyagraha* as the power “born of Truth and Love or non-violence.”²⁸ As early as 1909, he presented it as his method for attaining *swaraj*. He believed, on the basis of his use of civil disobedience in South Africa from 1906 to 1914, that the power of nonviolent action identified with *satyagraha* was uniquely suited for achieving the “inward” as well as the “outward” freedom of *swaraj*. The word *satyagraha* was coined by Gandhi by joining the Sanskrit *satya* (truth) with *agraha* (holding firmly)²⁹ and the historical context of this derivation will be traced in the next chapter. He drew a sharp distinction between *satyagraha* and “passive resistance” because the latter allowed for “internal violence,” the harboring of enmity and anger among resisters even when they commit no physical violence. Gandhi asserted that unlike passive resistance, “*Satyagraha* is gentle, it never wounds. It must not be the result of anger or malice.”³⁰

Much depends on the intent or motive of the *satyagrahi* (practitioner of *satyagraha*). Wrong motives occur when the intent is only to attain victory or satisfaction of a selfish interest. A *satyagrahi* concentrates on the common interest and strives not for retribution but to transform a conflict situation so that warring parties can come out of a confrontation convinced that it was in their mutual interest to resolve it. This was not unlike the scene in 1947 when without mutual recrimination the British left India after centuries of colonization. The way that the conflict was conducted, evidenced in the salt *satyagraha* examined in [chapter 4](#), served to produce this result at the time of India’s independence. Another example of the dynamics of *satyagraha* was the Calcutta fast, the focus of [chapter 5](#). Here Gandhi’s use of the fast transformed a Hindu-Muslim conflict so that the civil strife could end with renewed commitment to peace.

Gandhi’s conceptions of *swaraj* and *satyagraha* were both related to the emphasis that he placed on employing the right means to attain an end. This was another of the key ideas that he had expressed in *Hind Swaraj*. He argued there that: “the belief that there is no connection

between the means and the end is a great mistake. Through that mistake even men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes.... The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree.... We reap exactly as we sow."³¹

Thus Gandhi can say that "Means and ends are convertible terms in my philosophy of life."³² When it was rumored in late 1924 that he would be invited by the Soviet government to visit the USSR, he replied that he had been courted by Communists before, and reflected unfavorably on the Russian revolution:

I do not believe in short-violent-cuts to success. Those Bolshevik friends who are bestowing their attention on me should realize that however much I may sympathize with and admire worthy motives, I am an uncompromising opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes. There is, therefore, really no meeting ground between the school of violence and myself.³³

Whenever he considered the kind of revolution that India needed, he stressed this emphasis on means as the basis of *swaraj* and *satyagraha*. As he planned the mass civil disobedience campaign that would be called the salt *satyagraha*, he went before the Indian people to argue his case in these terms:

No one will be able to stand in our way when we have developed the strength to win *swaraj*. Everyone's freedom is within his grasp. There are two alternatives before us. The one is that of violence, the other of nonviolence; the one of physical strength, the other of soul-force; the one of hatred, the other love...If we want *swaraj*, we shall have to strive hard and follow one of these two courses. As they are incompatible with each other, the fruit, the *swaraj* that would be secured by following the one would necessarily be different from that which would be secured by following the other.... We reap as we sow.³⁴

When Gandhi assumed leadership of the nationalist movement in 1919 he described *satyagraha* in terms of a metaphor that likened it to "a banyan tree with innumerable branches." The trunk of the tree, he said, consisted not only of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) but also of truth (*satya*).³⁵ So the last component of *satyagraha* to be introduced here is Gandhi's concept of truth. He begins with a warning to each of us: we must continually remind ourselves of our fallibility by recognizing our limitations. Human understanding is always imperfect and thus incapable of possessing absolute truth.³⁶ We may believe in truth or God, or, as Gandhi did, in Truth as God. But we cannot possess complete knowledge of either and "the claim to infallibility would always be a most dangerous claim to make."³⁷

Nonviolence therefore becomes imperative in any human conflict because there are inevitably partial and contending perceptions of truth. Leaders of nations are notorious for their claims to carry truth as they lead their people into battle. Gandhi offered his method to the world as a corrective: "*Satyagraha* ... excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish."³⁸ When Gandhi was questioned in 1920 by a Government tribunal about the volatile nature of civil disobedience, a British official asked: "However honestly a man may strive in his search for

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