

August 2, 2023

Gandhi and Liberal Modernity: The Vexed Question of Caste

By: Akeel Bilgrami

Gandhi's thinking on caste must be frameworked within his opposition to capitalist modernity and its destructive effects on the peasant. His ambivalences on caste owe to his efforts to integrate his idealized philosophical stances with his responses to the contingencies of the freedom struggle.

I will begin on a self-conscious note. For some years, I have put off writing about Gandhi's views on caste for my long-gestating book manuscript on Gandhi's thought. The subject had become so fraught, as a result of recent invectives directed at Gandhi, that I did not trust myself to not get caught up in an ideological maelstrom in which anything one said by way of trying to merely even understand his views would come off as a kind of apologetics, which I had no wish to produce since, for all my admiring interest in him, I am not a Gandhi-*bhakt*. Indeed, as will emerge in what I am about to say, he is sometimes quite wrong on this subject as, no doubt, on others.

What I am certain of, even so, is that his views on the subject and his motivations in forming them have not always been understood with the necessary depth. It is fine to find someone to be wrong, so long as you get right what you think is wrong. And it is with that in mind that I write this essay to present the larger framework within which, I think, his ideas about and his struggles over caste must be understood.

I don't believe that we can fully come to grips with the subject of Gandhi on caste unless we situate it in his very deep anxieties about modernity, in particular capitalist modernity and the political structures of liberalism...

I do not believe that we can fully come to grips with the subject of Gandhi on caste unless we situate it in his very deep anxieties about modernity, in particular capitalist modernity and the political structures of liberalism, which were, in his mind (surely accurately), an essential surrounding context of capitalism in the Europe of his colonial masters. Though, as is well-known, Gandhi was not a revolutionary socialist, even a glance at *Hind Swaraj*¹ reveals that he recoiled from capitalism every bit as much as Marx had done. His recoil, of course, was not based, as it was in Marx, on a deep and systematic diagnostic analysis of capital, but rather on a deep and systematic understanding of the effects of capital on the culture and the cognitive mentality of a society and its peoples.

Let me begin with two preliminary stage-setting points.

First, it is well-known that Gandhi repeatedly says that he believes in caste but not caste as hierarchy, perversely putting the point by saying that caste as hierarchy is a distortion of the originary *varna* ideal. What, then, is he contrasting caste-as-hierarchy with?

One way to put it is that he believes in caste as *heterogeneity*, not hierarchy. I believe this is the right way to describe the great importance he placed on the need to retain the *professional diversity* of a society that is given to its people by the traditions of caste (conceived non-hierarchically). The concept of heterogeneity is apt because, for him, diversity of work and profession is one amongst the many other aspects of a *general cultural* diversity that he believed India's longstanding pluralism had always respected.

But all this needs more patient exposition, precisely the exposition that is skirted when commentators on Gandhi wheel out like a mantra the meaningless phrase 'organic communities' to characterise his view of Indian social life, a lazy slogan that avoids the hard work of providing a framework analysis that is needed, an analysis that works out how a diversity of professions (and the wider cultural identities in which it traditionally nests) stand in contrast with the straitening effects of capitalist modernity that creates a form of life which undermines the heterogeneity of a culture and then consolidates that by adopting a form of governance defined upon a homogenising notion of 'citizenship'.

We must not forget that at the time when he was writing, the idea of *multicultural* citizenship had never been articulated as a political theory. That idea only surfaced with any *self-conscious* explicitness in our conceptual repertory in the last two decades of the 20th century to address the problems that had slowly emerged due to post-Second World War migration from former colonies into European nations. So, all that Gandhi could appeal to was an unselfconscious pluralism that he claimed was everywhere present in Indian history.

His initial scepticism about some prominent ways of opposing caste hierarchy (such as, most prominently, Ambedkar's) was prompted by an anxiety that the opponents relied on the liberal democratic apparatus of governance and citizenship that were essentially tied to a capitalist modernity and abstracted away from the plural cultural elements he cherished.

|| We must not forget that at the time when he [Gandhi] was writing, the idea of multicultural citizenship had never been articulated as a political theory.

It may be protested that Ambedkar's successive powerful formulations for minority rights for Dalits reflect his own sort of commitment to pluralism since minority rights, understood very generally, are often seen as reflecting a polity's commitment to pluralism. But this would be to misunderstand Ambedkar. Nothing in his specific understanding of minority rights for Dalits can be invoked to cast him as a sort of proto-multiculturalist in the way that I have cast Gandhi. He formulated minority rights with a view to seeking protection and justice for Dalits, not with a view to perpetuating their cultural identity. Such rights were intended to empower Dalits until such time as that empowerment could be deployed towards the eventual goal of the 'annihilation of caste' and caste identities.

Thus, unlike the minority rights in Europe, Canada, or Australia,² which are formulated in the name of multiculturalism, Ambedkar's understanding of such rights was purely instrumental, relevant only until such time as Dalits achieved that eventual goal. Indeed, his sympathetic remarks on the aspiration of Indian Muslims to being a 'nation' rather than merely seek minority rights suggests that his entire conception of minority rights has nothing to do with any doctrine having to do with questions of culture and diversity, or with questions of claims to nationhood, questions that might have place for an intrinsic rather than a merely instrumental notion of identity.

|| Gandhi's insistent recall of what he sees as India's history of an unselfconscious pluralism was an essential part of his overall opposition to the threat of capitalist modernity that he felt was looming in India's future.

But, now, equally, there is a misunderstanding about Gandhi that might arise and must be corrected.

I have, as I said, cast him as a proto-multiculturalist. But there is a conspicuous difference between his views and the more explicit recent multiculturalisms in Europe, Canada, or Australia. These have all embraced an evolving globalised form of capitalism. Their opposition is only to a state of liberal-universalist secularism adopted by the European modern that refuses to recognise cultural difference. By contrast, Gandhi's insistent recall of what he sees as India's history of an unselfconscious pluralism was an essential part of his overall opposition to the threat of capitalist modernity that he felt was looming in India's future. It is this opposition that has to be presented as the framework that illuminates his views on caste and the cultural pluralism in which he thought his idealised, non-hierarchical conception of caste had its significance.

The second preliminary point of stage-setting that needs to be made is this. As anyone who has read Gandhi's evolving remarks on this subject knows, in the last decade or more of his life, he gradually shed his commitment to caste, even in these idealised terms I have briefly expounded.

As early as 1935 (indeed he began to say such things even earlier, starting in 1927), he famously wrote a piece in *Harijan* with the title and message, 'Caste Has To Go', thereby converging in many of his views with Ambedkar, though even then with hopes for a different framework of thought than Ambedkar's unblushing adoption of the modern rubric of parliamentary legislation and liberal democracy. Once Gandhi realised that that rubric had gradually come to be central in the formulations of a national movement that was gearing itself to acquire statehood – a rubric forced on it by the Crown's constitutional form of concessions towards Indian self-governance in the two-and-a-half decades before independence – Gandhi altered his idealised stance on the subject of caste to adjust to that emerging rubric, even as he held out in his more visionary pronouncements for an entirely different and novel ideal of state and governance.

All this, therefore, requires us to integrate Gandhi's idealised philosophical stances with his evolving activism in the struggle for Indian freedom, an integration that is bound to be tense and ridden with ambivalence for the glaringly obvious reason that activism, unlike philosophical reflections, speaks to more contingent demands. So, the tasks at hand are complex and subtle, hardly surprising when dealing with a thinker as complex and subtle as Gandhi and a political arena as complex and subtle as the national movement he led.

II

Let me, then, begin on these tasks of providing the frameworking backdrop of Gandhi's attitudes towards caste by citing a remark he makes in a dispatch to *Young India* on 29 December 1920. "The beauty of the caste system," he says, "is that it does not base itself upon distinctions of wealth possessions. Money, as history has proved, is the greatest disruptive force in the world."

We must ask: What does he think life is before this disruption? And what is the significance of the disruption for his conception of caste as heterogeneity?

The idea seems to be that before the pervasive influence of money, different people are better or worse off in different respects. So, inequality in respect x can be redeemed by a reverse inequality in respect y . But money standardises all this heterogeneous differentiation and creates a single measure of equality and inequality and, in fact, generates inequality along a single dimension, destroying the heterogeneity of caste in its ordinary ideal form,³ where no disrespect comes from having different professions, and where all of work, whatever it may be in this differentiation, offers dignity to the labourer.

We have the very broad outlines of the framework that is needed to understand Gandhi's views on caste if we link these remarks about the disruptive effects of money to his related and repeated dismissal of the subject of economics and its 'laws' as it developed in the West and the notion of 'the economy' that it studies.

Like money, these distort the relations to the world that Indians have for centuries inhabited. For Gandhi to deny that there was any such thing as an economy in that sense amounted to the claim that all there is in India is society and culture, not economy. Usually, when Gandhi spoke of an economy, the attitude his remarks reflected was that if society and culture simply adopted policies that were morally right, they would *eo ipso* amount to what was economically sound. Economy had no independent status that set it apart from society and culture and morality.

This attitude is a fundamental plank of Gandhi's opposition to modernity, first formulated in *Hind Swaraj*, with its repudiation of the cognitive outlooks shaped by capitalism. In 1909 when he wrote that work, he thought India was at the crossroads that Europe was in in the early modern period. His shrill and harsh tone in that work reflected his desperate anxiety that India would seek to go down what he viewed to be the lamentable path of political economy and political governance that Europe had taken in the passage from its early to its late modernity. We must interpret all of the stances that I have cited above – about money, economics, and the very idea of an economy – as reflecting his understanding of what he thought existed before and after the passage of these developments that he lamented and wished to avoid for India's future.

Usually, when Gandhi spoke of an economy, the attitude his remarks reflected was that if a society and culture simply adopted policies that were morally right, they would *eo ipso* amount to what was economically sound.

What is it to think that economy was to be equated with society, not to be seen as something standing apart from it? Gandhi's ideas about work are crucial to answering this question.

When, as in India, and in Europe too for centuries prior to modernity, an economy is not something other than or independent of society, work is not something that is undertaken for ends – that is, for making a living rather than merely being a way of living. It only comes to be a means to further ends when money is erected as an object of a goal, something to be earned by one's work for what it can gain for us. It is this which then introduces the idea of an economy as an autonomous sphere, abstracted from life or living and not determined exhaustively as it had been for centuries by the fabric of social life itself.

In Indian society, according to Gandhi, the routine structures of existence were all there was that motivated human actions and human work. There were no distinct economic motives. Not only did the millions of peasants that comprised Indian society simply do what custom demanded or indeed what their masters demanded, even the masters, for all their possessions and privilege, only did what tradition and society demanded of them, whether religious, administrative, political, military, or courtly. Neither for peasant nor for overlord was there any angle or orientation that was properly called an economic orientation. Society and its demands on them were all that defined them.

Though Gandhi had anxieties about the development of towns and what they would bring in the future, at the crossroads he claimed India was in, he thought that what occurred in towns was merely 'business' and the conduct of business, such as it was in 1909, was also completely inseparable from non-economic social and traditional concerns. It was not prompted by the idea of a generalised conception of gain. It is partly to shun this generalised conception and to stress instead this ongoing and longstanding nature of Indian

society that Gandhi undertook to comment on one of the chief moral and social lessons to be learnt from the *Gita* – that work must be undertaken as service and social and religious duty handed down to one by custom, rather than as something for ulterior ends of personal acquisition.

Gandhi was not denying that human nature may always have been given to avarice. What he was denying in these remarks is that this aspect of human nature was never generalised in India into an ideology or an economic outlook.

It is only when money acquires wide scope in society, Gandhi claims, that a new and distorting element is introduced, transforming the nature of labour. No longer does one person work for another for subsistence and sustenance. Rather, monetisation makes work into a measurable quantity, a commodity to be made available by one's own free will, selling it in something called a market, transforming the very idea of market from the traditional idea of a marketplace to the abstract thing that generates the notion of an economy and an apparently sophisticated subject called 'economics' that studies it by constructing 'laws'.

To put it in a more contemporary form of words, to retain caste was to resist the market ideal that undermined traditional social relations by setting up the freely saleable labour of atomised individuals.

Apart from labour, even the very idea of property is transformed. Some members of Indian society certainly were possessed of tangible riches – mansions, palaces, jewels, glittering dress, bullion, forts, armaments. But once these come to be expressed in monetised terms and a person's worth is measured with a number assigned to it, this new form can be deployed with indefinite flexibility as investment for returns and profit.

With these hitherto unknown motives of working for gain or deploying one's possessions for profit, the notion of an economy emerges and all of life is transformed. But no one's life would be more transformed, Gandhi feared, than that of the Indian peasant, who would be utterly dispossessed by this transition and made into a socially untethered labourer, moving from pillar to post to sell his labour, in constant fear of destitution. His chief focus, when it came to the Indian people, was always on its millions of peasants.

This creation of the economy as a self-standing formation, independent of social relations, and the distorting abstractions that it visited upon the concepts of labour and property and the living marketplace, was precisely something to be resisted by stressing the idealised conception of caste that he, in his early writing, refused to give up. So, when he said that caste before its modern corruptions into a hierarchical system was just a Hindu ideal of a sort of dispersed version of guild differentiation, this should not be understood as mere social conservatism because it cannot, I claim, be understood independently of his rejection of the transformations that came with the notion of 'making a living' in a market society, when economy is now a self-standing thing independent of society and an abstraction from social relations.

It is interesting to note that Gandhi's views here are identical to how Adam Smith describes some premodern and precapitalist societies where, to quote Smith, "each person was supposed to follow the trade of his father and would even sometimes be supposed to have committed some sacrilege if he did not." Gandhi himself invokes *Jataka* stories to make the point and speaks of a social differentiation based on apprenticeship within families that acculturate one into the form of labour or craft or trade. Members of different castes, in Gandhi's understanding, did their own particular differentiated work without hierarchy (as he put it, as part of their *swadharma*), without contempt for one another. That work was an end in itself in accord with social norms constitutive of society, and the notion of an economy was not separable from any of this. To put it in a more contemporary form of words, to retain caste was to resist the market ideal that undermined traditional social relations by setting up the freely saleable labour of atomised individuals.

It is interesting to note that Gandhi's views here are identical with how Adam Smith describes some premodern and precapitalist societies where, to quote Smith "each person was supposed to follow the trade of his father and would even sometimes be supposed to have committed some sacrilege if he did not."

Such a framework for understanding Gandhi's views on caste is often missed because of a failure to grasp what should be a quite obvious methodological point. We should be drawing a significant – even if obvious – inference from the fact that Gandhi never made any serious effort to present any detailed historical evidence nor even any historical reconstruction for what he pronounced to be caste as heterogeneity of this sort, nor of the form and manner in which hierarchical corruptions were first formed.

In the commentary on the *Gita*, Gandhi said he read the work not as history but rather as myth and religion and poetry. But his disregard of history in the context of caste has a somewhat different theoretical motivation. Even if we move away from his claims for the heterogeneity of caste to his more general claims about India's unselfconscious religious pluralist past, he never sought to present any serious historical evidence for this. In fact, Nehru's *Discovery of India*⁴ is a far more conscientious effort to do so, despite the fact that it is not to be viewed as serious historical scholarship.

But, it would be a comical form of misunderstanding to think (not that this has deterred many from thinking it) that because Gandhi offered no evidence for the historical existence of his idealised non-hierarchical caste system nor made any effort to show how the hierarchies of caste did emerge in history (by, say, a study of Harrapan civilisation and its successors and the emergence of the Brahmana caste conceptions in the way, for instance, Kosambi did), he was some kind of brash and amateur historian with a false empirical hypothesis.

The obvious (yet significant) inference to be made instead is that Gandhi, as a social philosopher writing on caste, is invoking a conjectural past in a theoretical deployment of mythos with the same theoretical motivation as a much more modernist mythos is invoked by any number of political philosophers, who appeal to a conjectural past when they, for example, posit a social contract. No social contract was ever drawn up in history. It is not the point to present it as a historical occurrence. The idea rather is to set up a normative ideal by presenting it as occurring in a *conjectural past* with a view to exploring and and critically assessing what *did* occur in history.

The political philosophers in question explored and assessed notions of state and governance via the normative model of a social contract. So also it was Gandhi's purpose in setting up a normatively idealised conception of caste in conjectural history to explore the facts of caste hierarchy as we know them and to assess the claims to progress in capitalist and liberal modernity as a path to overcoming them. It is with a view to presenting a negative assessment of these latter claims that Gandhi posits the conjectural past of a non-hierarchical conception of caste.

So, for Gandhi, to generate such a notion of an individual freely selling his labour in the emerging ideal of a market was the wrong way of addressing the hierarchical distortions that had entered caste.

What does this imply for his own accompanying assertion that over the centuries terrible discriminations had emerged between castes that corrupted it into becoming a hierarchical system? That is to say, what moral and practical response does this corruption into a hierarchy invite, once the framework I have presented and the cautionary methodological point I have just made are in place?

From the point of view that I have been expounding so far, where there is no economy but only society, Gandhi could obviously only give one answer to this question. The problem of an emergent hierarchy was to be addressed by society, internally and morally resisting its own corruptions, rather than introducing a newfangled and extraneous notion of an economy in which each individual transcended the social embedding in caste and made him or herself available to something we now call the labour market. That would be to make labour a commodity. No longer would one man work for another in return for an assurance of sustenance and subsistence and belonging. If one now, as an individual, freely sold one's labour to a buyer and what one was paid for it was not enough to sustain one – well, no one was responsible for that in the new freedom to be found in such a system, certainly not the buyer. He had no responsibility over and above paying the price that he could get away with paying in what came to be called 'the market'. What happens next was no care of his.

Gandhi's economic idea of a trust, something that could not possibly be expected to be implemented in a market system so conceived, was precisely to ensure that that responsibility was not shirked in social relations. But such social relations were exactly what were undermined by the idea of a market, a self-standing idea of an economy independent of social relations. So, for Gandhi, to generate such a notion of an individual freely selling his labour in the emerging ideal of a market was the wrong way of addressing the hierarchical distortions that had entered caste. Hindu society (read large by him as Indian society), qua society, not economy, must seek internal moral resistance to these emerging hierarchical distortions.

It is very important to point out here that Gandhi's ideas of this internal form of social resistance against society's corruptions was not the notion of religious social reform that had emerged in the last half-century before he was writing, which were drawing somewhat schizophrenically upon the ideals of European modernity, whose claims he was resisting. Rather, he was explicitly drawing upon much more folk and popular religious and spiritual traditions: Bhakti, including the early Varkaris, Gujarati Vaishnavism, as well as various

sant poets of Gujarat, and an assortment of regional sects and movements (which D. Nagaraj discusses in his excellent early article on Gandhi⁵) such as Satnami and Mahima, to name just two, all of which sought reform entirely outside the modernist liberal categories with which India's colonisers had influenced the newly emerging intellectually minded social and religious reformer.

Moreover, Gandhi also made clear that such internal social and moral change to overcome the emerging hierarchies of caste is possible only in unalienated societies where individuals are able to think from a larger point of view than their own, just the point of view that is undermined by the relations that defined a market conception of economy. If India were to address these emerging hierarchies that had contaminated the guild ideal of caste as diversified professions, by turning to capitalist modernity, one would have to rely not on internal resistance but rather on what Marx called primitive accumulation that dispossesses the peasantry from its embedding in existing social relations (which were, no doubt, exploitative), and sends them – as Gandhi put it – from pillar to post to sell their labour to avoid destitution, migrating to towns defined by market relations, entering there into new forms of exploitative class relations and – in Marx's vision – forming new solidarities to resist such exploitation, *and thereby overcoming the hierarchies that had emerged in the caste relations of their erstwhile peasant existence.*

I still have in my possession a scribbled note by my father in his journal, which reads: "The machine will do far more than the Mahatma did to undermine caste by bringing different castes together to work on it." It is these claims of modernity that Gandhi instinctively denied and I turn now to examine what those instincts were.

III

In Part VIII of Marx's *Capital* (volume I),⁶ 'primitive accumulation' is seen as the coercive, frequently brutal, extermination of communities of a precapitalist form as a result of the deracination of petty producers from the sources or the means of their particular form of producing (peasants from their land, primarily), and who then morph into a proletariat, either in the form of metropolitan industrial labourers or a 'reserve army' of the unemployed. These accounts, though they observe the coercive and brutal nature of this destruction of precapitalist communities, are nevertheless also presented as their transformation into a new class formation in which the old primordial, hierarchical, oppressive features of social life (whether caste, tribe, clan, or religion) are undermined, even if they are replaced by the newly minted oppressive features tied to the specifically exploitative and alienation-inducing conditions that metropolitan capital imposes on industrial labour. This is the larger theoretical claim standing behind the far too simple and facetious entry in my father's journal.

Now, it would seem that Gandhi's inferred conclusion from his own critique of capitalist modernity (that caste hierarchies ought to be undermined by internal transformation without the destruction of precapitalist communities, that is, without their transformation into new class formations) amounts to a normative stance against this view of the levelling effects of primitive accumulation (The 'ought' there signifies the normativity of the stance.) This is one central aspect of what we regard as his anti-modernism and his social conservatism.

However we assess that normative stance, what I want to focus on instead is a more descriptive instinct Gandhi had, when he refused the relevance of Western frameworks of thought (including Marx's) as being relevant to large agrarian societies like India.

What I am suggesting is that Gandhi understood well that in the colonised lands, given quite different empirical features,... these lands simply cannot absorb the displaced millions as industrial labour.

To expound this, let us first ask a counterfactual question about the effect that primitive accumulation (this dispossession of the peasantry from their land to create its great manufacturing towns and, in doing so, the undermining of the primordial ties and hierarchies of precapitalist community) had on European populations.

Imagine the following scenario that is counter to fact: There is no settler colonialism that diffuses capital by moving vast numbers of the European peasant population dispossessed by primitive accumulation to various parts of the world such as across the entire Atlantic or to the Antipodes or to the southern corners of Africa.

In this counterfactual scenario, huge numbers of peasants, who in fact migrated, instead live and remain sedentary in Europe. What reason is there to think that this massive population of peasants would have been absorbed into a new community of industrial labour? There is no serious likelihood that they would be accommodated inside the domain of capitalist production. They would remain as a vast precapitalist community outside of capital's domain. What grounds are there, then, for thinking that Marx's account of the effects of primitive accumulation would so much as apply to whatever characterisation one would give of them? The crucial question

arises: *would they have overcome the oppressive hierarchical and divisive features owing to caste and other such ties?* – the tribal divisions, the deeply riven religious schisms that were typical of European society of the time (just consider the fact that whole wars were fought for years on end over obscure religious issues such as transubstantiation!).

So really, I am asking whether Gandhi might have taken his normative stance about internal social transformation about caste – whether or not we agree with it – because of a canny understanding that in colonial and post-colonial capitalism, the colonised lands were the factual version of something that was merely the counterfactual scenario in Europe as I just presented it above.

To put it differently, primitive accumulation, as it is presented in the canonical Marxist accounts, depends, I am claiming, not on the truth of theoretical analysis, but on the observation of entirely contingent empirical features in European history – the fact of massive departure of peasant populations to other parts of the world as a result of settler colonialism. There could be no such analysis of primitive accumulation as Marx offers if these contingent empirical features were not also present.

As a result, there is no reason to think that this particular section in Volume 1 of *Capital* amounts to a bit of theory at all. A theory implies the generalisability of its main claims, or a claim to some *telos*, or some structural explanatory power that accounts for diverse phenomena. But, if I am right, the account has no such properties. It is a local observation about European history over a specific span of time. (If you wanted a vivid example of the ‘provincialisation of Europe’, Marx’s account of primitive accumulation, as I am reading it, seems to be stepping up to the plate.)

What I am suggesting is that Gandhi understood well that in the colonised lands, given *quite different empirical features* (no prospect for large-scale migration of displaced populations – as occurred in Europe – due to laws that restrict such transcontinental migration), these lands simply cannot absorb the displaced millions as industrial labour. In fact, they are not even likely to be transformed into a reserve army.

Gandhi understood with clarity that his people, the vast agrarian populations of India, are just simply gratuitous in the kind of brave new economic formations which primitive accumulation produced in Europe, economic formations we tend to characterise with such terms as ‘growth’ and ‘development’ and view as overcoming the primordial hierarchies and schisms. Thus, internal transformation to address caste hierarchies is not just normatively right, but it is made descriptively necessary because primitive accumulation would not in any case lead to the emergence of a relatively liberated (even if differently subjugated) industrial labour in India. Instead, even industrial labourers would continue to be caught up in the ‘primordial’ and hierarchical features of precapitalist community, something we see everywhere in urban India today and in the politics of identity that surfaces not just in rural but in metropolitan India as well. (Just to give one example, sociologists have observed that communal riots occur predominantly in cities, a symptom of the precapitalist community’s metropolitan survival.)

IV

Here, then, is where we are in the argument to understand Gandhi’s attitudes towards caste. We have expounded his denial that Indian society in 1909 was characterisable by an independent formation called ‘the economy’ and his insistence that in India, unlike Europe, it is society, culture and morality, and nothing else that defines our relations to each other and the world as well as shapes our motivations that yield our public behaviour. We then pointed out that though he had argued that those relations were once defined by an idealised set of caste relations in terms of professional heterogeneity, these were no longer so characterisable but had admitted of deep and invidious hierarchies. This combination of points, we said, is what yields his inference that internal resistance within Hindu society is the only right way to address the hierarchies that now define caste relations.

We then considered whether allowing for the very notion of economy as an independent sector of human life that filled Gandhi with anxiety would offer an alternative and more ‘progressive’ way of addressing these social hierarchies of caste, as is on offer in the standard accounts of primitive accumulation owing to Marx? With the aid of a counterfactual, we concluded that Gandhi’s instincts were that quite apart from his normative recoil from these developments of capitalist modernity, these accounts were not theoretical accounts but local observations of an extended moment in one continent of the globe, inapplicable to large agrarian economies of the colonies of the south. Whatever we thought of his own normative stances, they anyway would not and could not, according to Gandhi, address the hierarchies of caste that defined Indian society.

The time has come then to take up a question that I had mentioned in my opening remarks. How do these philosophical and normative stances of Gandhi, the philosopher, relate to Gandhi, the central activist figure in Indian history in the first half of the 20th century,

leading a nationalist movement against British colonial rule?

One way of approaching this question is to notice that Gandhi's philosophical stances about the relations between economy and society (read as I have been reading them by viewing India in 1909 as being at a crossroads that Europe was in, in early modernity) were remarkably similar to the stances taken by the Narodniks in Russia, who stressed an idealised version of their own precapitalist formations and sought to construct a populist nationalism based on a similar recoil from the capitalist incubation that European nations had embraced, seeking more direct routes to radical transformation than Marx (at any rate, the Marx of *Capital*, we have been discussing) had envisaged for Europe. (The Marx of the last decade of his life, who learnt Russian and explored in his ethnological notebooks and various other writings the Russian peasant communes is, of course, another matter.)

Now, as we all know, Lenin had conducted a famous polemic against the Narodnik position. But what is not often noted is that Lenin had also made a distinction that is relevant to understanding Gandhi. In a work entitled, *The Economic Content of Narodism and the Criticism of it in Mr. Struve's Book*,⁷ Lenin writes this (I am going to quote him at some length):

I make a distinction between the old and the contemporary Narodism on the grounds that the former was to some extent a well-knit doctrine evolved in a period when capitalism was still very feebly developed in Russia, when the petty-bourgeois character of the Russian nation had not yet been revealed, when the practical side of the doctrine was purely utopian, and when the Narodniks gave liberal society a wide berth and instead went among the people. It is different now: Russia's capitalist path of development is no longer denied by anybody, and the break-up of the countryside is an undoubted fact. Of the Narodniks' well-knit doctrine, with its childish faith in the village community, nothing but rags and tatters remain... In place of aloofness from liberal society we observe an... intimacy with it. And it is this change that compels us to distinguish between the ideology of the peasantry of the old Narodniks and the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie of the later Narodniks, who had become like Janus, with one face looking to the future and the other to the past with its obsolete social forms.

What should be clear is that if there is an affinity between Gandhi and the Narodniks, he, in his own mind, would have viewed himself as falling under Lenin's characterisation of the 'old' rather than the 'later' Narodniks. So the question before us is whether, over the decades after *Hind Swaraj* and more particularly from the 1930s on, Gandhi was altering his attitudes towards caste because the contingent opportunities that the Crown was bestowing upon the national movement by constitutional concessions towards self-governance, were forcing him to withdraw his (to use Lenin's phrase) "aloofness from liberalism" and finding himself having to keep in step with and respond to Ambedkar's (to use Lenin's rhetoric again) "intimacy with liberalism."

This transformation of the national movement was not restricted to matters of governance. What Lenin calls the Narodnik "ideology of the peasantry," a label that in some crucial respects captures the Gandhian critique of capitalist modernity I have presented in this essay, could no longer fully dominate the national movement. Ambedkar was, from Lenin's point of view, par excellence the face of what he called "the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie," with its wholehearted embrace of the liberal-democratic apparatus. This was the ideology, whose effects on the national movement, forced Gandhi into chronic ambivalences and steered him to his exquisite reversals on caste, because he was now rendered by these contingent developments into resembling the later Narodniks, who Lenin describes as "Janus-like, one face to the future and the other to past, obsolete social forms."

|| The peasantry in India, as Gandhi pointed out again and again, has to constantly struggle so as to not be divided by caste or religion.

Nothing displayed the ambivalences more than the events surrounding the signing of the Poona pact. These ambivalences are more complex than the simpler dichotomies of traditional and modern, peasant ideology and petty bourgeois ideology, would suggest, because of the contingent demands of an anti-imperialist movement. Staying with Lenin's evocative classical image, the Gandhian mask of Janus that looked to the future had to now address the issue of the representation of Dalits in electoral politics.

This may give one the impression that it is the other face of Janus looking to 'obsolete social forms' which exhaustively determined his stance that there should be no separate electorates. After all, did not Gandhi say that separate electorates would undermine the unity of the Hindu people? But to take these words to be backward looking in any simple sense is to misunderstand his motives because that unity for him was – at bottom – the unity of the Indian peasantry in the freedom struggle, a unity that he regarded as indispensable for

the struggle.

Unlike the celebrated Russian Mir, which was taken by both the Marx of his last decade and the Narodniks to already reflect the promise of peasant solidarity in the fatherland, the peasantry in India, as Gandhi pointed out again and again, has to constantly struggle so as to not be divided by caste or religion. And it was this face of Gandhi, that of the peasant ideologue (of Lenin's description of the Narodnik) who wanted the entire peasant class to be mobilised in the nationalist struggle, which was motivating him just as much as any concern about a unified Hinduism. Gandhi's Khilafat movement had been explicitly launched with a view to overcome the potential religious divisions of the peasantry by involving the Muslim *kisans* (as well as the Muslim urban poor). His resistance to a separatist politics of caste that would emerge if he conceded to Ramsay Macdonald and to Ambedkar was just as much to preserve an undivided Hindu peasantry in the nationalist mobilisation. (If he also made concessions to upper caste Hindus – which he did till the 'Caste must Go' phase of his thinking emerged – that was also motivated by this goal of unity.)

It is surprising to me that none of the detractors of Gandhi's stand against Macdonald's Communal Award have linked in detail his motivations for opposing a separatist politics of caste which would divide the peasant population of India with these motivations for launching the Khilafat movement that I have just mentioned with entirely similar motives, attributing to him instead only the motivation of preserving an obsolete form – the idealised conception of a unified Hinduism.⁸

Gandhi's Khilafat movement had been explicitly launched with a view to overcome the potential religious divisions of the peasantry by involving the Muslim *kisans* (as well as the Muslim urban poor). His resistance to a separatist politics of caste that would emerge if he conceded to Ramsay Macdonald and to Ambedkar was just as much to preserve an undivided Hindu peasantry in nationalist mobilisation.

All this I say, by way of trying to get right the motives underlying Gandhi's Janus-like predicament and the stance they prompted in him in the signing of the Poona Pact *in the very specific historical and political context* in which he found himself in the early 1930s. I have not taken up at all the issue whether Gandhi's stance was, *in and of itself*, right.

Of course, it is not obvious what point there is to an assessment of an action or decision 'in and of itself'. Decisions and actions of this kind are always made in contexts, historical and political. So, two questions arise. Does it make sense to abstract them from those contexts and assess them in and of themselves? And even if one does, should one not, then, return to the contexts in which they actually occur and see if the abstracted, context-free assessment is to be overridden by the compulsions of the context?

I think the answer to both questions is 'yes'. But, though I have more or less well-worked out views on it, in a brief paper I cannot address the second of these questions because that requires a very extended discussion, for which there is no space here. Regarding the first question, I do think there is point to considering and evaluating a decision or action of this sort, in and of itself. It can reveal things about both morals and politics and the human psychology around morals and politics. So, I turn briefly now to conclude this essay by doing so with the decisions and actions around the Poona Pact.

Irfan Habib, in a recent lecture, said with complete and confident conviction that Gandhi, rather than Ambedkar, was indeed right on the grounds that the Pact got the Dalits more representation than the Communal Award would have given them. I am much less confident of this and my reasons – paradoxically – owe as much, if not more, to Gandhi's thinking on the subject as to Ambedkar's. The issues, as I said, turn on the moral psychology of politics.

Both Ambedkar and Macdonald had made their moral-psychological point very clear. They proceeded from the assumption that in the electoral field, social groups vote with nothing but their group interest in mind. Thus, if there was a general electorate rather than separate Dalit electorate voting for Dalit candidates in reserved seats, they would vote for those Dalit candidates who would best serve their, rather than Dalit, interests. Gandhi's opposition to this proceeded with a quite different and much more idealistic assumption. A group whose members are not socially alienated from each other will not vote with narrow factional self-interestedness, but vote from the point of view of what is best for the worst-off amongst them.

This commitment to an unalienated society is, of course, what both Gandhi and Marx – coming from their quite different political positions – had erected as an ideal. Gandhi's idealism on this matter is dismissed by his detractors beginning with Ambedkar himself in that period, with some recent commentators even dismissing this moral psychology as the hypocrisy of a 'Brahminical hegemonist', a remarkable accusation to bring against a man who worked at great cost to himself (and eventually to his life) for decades to oppose

untouchability.

But even those who do not make this accusation, dismiss Gandhi's stance as being too idealistic. In-group/out-group thinking, they say, cannot be avoided when it comes to parliamentary politics and the face of the Janus Gandhi that was forced to look to the future where such politics had been imposed by colonial rule was simply not facing up to this cynicism.

Gandhi's idealism on this matter is dismissed by his detractors beginning with Ambedkar himself in that period, with some recent commentators even dismissing this moral psychology as the hypocrisy of a 'Brahminical hegemonist', a remarkable accusation to bring against a man who worked at great cost to himself (and eventually to his life) for decades to oppose untouchability.

My own view is that the failure of Gandhi's moral psychology of caste politics here is not that he fails to face up to the truth in the assumption that social groups always vote with their own interests in mind. There is no wholesale crime in holding out for a more idealistic conception of what human subjects are capable of. Rather it is Gandhi's failure to acknowledge that social groups, even when they are not cynical in this way, too often *lack the imagination* to really grasp the detail of the nature of the suffering of other more deprived groups and thus fail to grasp what exactly it is that will best serve their interests.

It is this failing of human moral psychology, the failure of imagination – at least until an unalienated society is substantially achieved – that makes me think that Habib's view of the Poona Pact is not convincing. As I said, paradoxically, Gandhi himself, in various things he wrote, acknowledged the importance of guarding against the inadequacies of human imagination. He acknowledged it when he wrote in *Young India* in 1921:

I would be rather torn to pieces than disown my brothers of the suppressed classes. I don't want to be reborn, but if I have to be reborn, I should be untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and affronts levelled at them in order that I may endeavour to free them from their miserable conditions.

He acknowledged it again when he said in another such dispatch in 1924:

We must first come in living touch with them by working with them [...] we must be pariahs too and see how we feel to clean the closets of the upper castes and have the remains of their table thrown to us...Then and only then will we represent the masses...

Both these remarks acknowledge how much personal strife and striving must be undergone or undertaken before one can rise to the imagination that is needed. But Gandhi quite simply failed to acknowledge and guard against such failures of imagination when he insisted that we can rely on caste Hindus in a general electorate to vote for those Dalit candidates who will serve Dalit interests best. When ambivalences are forced upon someone's philosophical stances by the contingent demands of history on one's political activism, such failures are hardly surprising. These ambivalences are unresolved to this day.

V

I have been arguing in this essay, Gandhi's entire thinking on the subject must be situated in the larger framework of his opposition to capitalist modernity and to its destructive effects on the peasantry of large agrarian societies of colonised countries like India. Let me conclude, then, by putting aside the question of caste and speak just a word – more generally – to the lasting issues raised by this framework.

The Leninist image of Janus (for the Narodniks in their later phase), which I have invoked to present the ambivalences of Gandhi (looking both to the future of an India landed with a bourgeois-democratic framework for politics while also looking back to a philosophical vision of politics and political economy that would appear obsolete within it) have continued to haunt Indian politics.

Even when Gandhi was alive, as early as in the National Planning Committee of 1938, the backward-looking face of the Janus Gandhi, which was represented there by J.C. Kumarappa, was sneeringly side-lined by Nehru and his associates who dominated the committee, careening forward with visionary ideals derived from Soviet models of industrial development, summarily dismissing as obsolete forms all aspirations for development built up from a peasant base with decentralised governance. In the rest of that fateful century, the only explicit representation of the peasant point of view in mainstream parliamentary politics at the national level came from Charan Singh,

a leader whose aspirations for the peasantry were wholly conceived within a framework of agrarian capitalist structures that Gandhi had struggled to protect the peasantry from.

It is this complete failure in our nation's politics to formulate a politics of regard for the peasantry outside the framework of bourgeois politics and its increasingly wholehearted embrace of late capitalist modernity, that leaves us dangling to this day with completely unresolved questions about the peasantry's relations to a fragmented, impermanently employed, barely unionised urban working population, to say nothing of the continuing unresolved questions of caste.

Akeel Bilgrami is Sidney Morgenbesser Professor of Philosophy, and Professor, Committee on Global Thought, at Columbia University.

Footnotes:

1 M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, ed A.J. Parel, Oxford University Press, 1997 (originally published in 1909)

2 Of course, in Canada and Australia where multiculturalist ideas have had strong theoretical expression, the cultures in question are not merely those of immigrant communities, but indigenous communities as well.

3 When I say it destroyed the heterogeneity in a society –of which, for him, professional diversity as represented by his idealized notion of caste in its originary form is one important element—I don't mean to suggest that he thought it was monetization that introduced the hierarchical aspects of caste. All I mean is that, for Gandhi, monetization begins -by its straitening effects-- to quite generally undermine all the many forms of diversity in a plural culture which he cherished. So, the point about how money homogenizes a range of different things (including the heterogeneities of caste) is not intended as giving his account of how hierarchical elements emerged to corrupt the idealized form of caste as heterogeneity that he had posited. In fact, as I will point out later in the essay, he gives no historical account of that emergent phenomenon, nor any historical evidence for that posit of a non-hierarchical system of caste.

4 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, Penguin 2004 (originally published in 1946).

5 D. R. Nagaraj, 'Self-Purification vs Self-Respect', chapter 1, *The Flaming Feet*, South Forum Press in association with Institute for Cultural research and Action (ICRA), 1993.

6 Karl Marx, *Das Capital* vol 1, translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books 1990.

7 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1894/narodniks/ch04s1.htm>

8 A couple of further well-known points about the specific context in which these issues arose must be noted, one regarding Ambedkar's views and one regarding the relation between Ambedkar's and Gandhi's. (a). Ambedkar's insistence on separate electorates was made in the context of a scenario in which adult franchise did not exist. Were adult franchise in place, his theoretical position was that reservation for 'untouchables' would suffice. (b) My bringing in Gandhi's fervent stress on the unity of the peasantry in the struggle for freedom as a crucial addition to his view that Hinduism should not be rendered disunified as it would likely have been by separate electorates, is done with a view to addressing a point that Ambedkar had made in response to this latter Gandhian view, viz., that Hinduism was already divided by caste. If one did not bring in the central relevance of the stress on the unity of the peasantry in understanding Gandhi's views, Ambedkar's position in this disagreement would be much more obviously right. These issues are echoed in familiar disputes between Marxists and those who oppose the idea of class struggle on the grounds that it divides society. Gandhi's relations with the Left and Communist strand in the freedom struggle is another very complex and interesting matter and though it does echo some of these issues of unity and caste division, it does not do so in any simple or obvious way.