

Part I

Gandhi: The historical life

I Gandhi's world

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in the Victorian era. He was thus as much a person of the nineteenth as the twentieth century. Born in 1869, only twelve years after the uprising of 1857 that reconfigured British rule in South Asia, he witnessed the acceleration of imperial rule in India as a child and as a young man. His life was lived against the backdrop of the monumental changes that brought the British Empire to the peak of its extent across the globe and then its retraction and demise. During these years, the British harnessed the Indian economy for metropolitan benefit and presided over an increasingly interventionist state. Gandhi was, in many ways, a product of the Victorian age, and made as much use of ships, telegrams, railways, and print as anyone of his generation. Conversely, he quickly perceived the coercive and exploitative nature of British assumptions of supremacy, and the ways in which the fusion of the Indian and British economies was at the cost of the well-being of many Indians. He was an onlooker, seeing through the Victorian world of pomp and ritual splendour to the calculated imperial brutality that it sustained. His was a world of agrarian extraction from the countryside alongside growing urban poverty and sprawl. Gandhi was thirty before his first major political triumphs in South Africa, and nearly fifty before he emerged as a national figure of unrivalled stature on the Indian stage. His ideas were honed during a religious Indian childhood and by his early encounters with the British Empire in its numerous incarnations and guises: from the subtle and indirect influence of culture and language to the face-to-face confrontations with imperial administrators and British officials. His ideas and philosophy were also sharpened in a number of imperial settings; living in a princely state, in African colonies, in the margins of the British Empire in Gujarat, and also in its imperial centre, London. This chapter does not pretend to be comprehensive given the scope of this geography and the rich variety of Gandhi's global encounters. However, it does try to set out what some of this Victorian world may have looked like through the eyes of a young

man coming of age in the 1880s in Western India in a moderately prosperous family, and aims to trace Gandhi's world from his birth until the writing of *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, which marks the maturation of many of his ideas.¹

I. BETWEEN PORBANDAR AND A WIDER WORLD

Through the eyes of Gandhi's childhood town, both the great reach and the severe limits of British imperial power in South Asia are tangible. Gandhi's early childhood was spent in Porbandar, a coastal town in the western Kathiawar peninsula, in today's Gujarat; his family moved to the nearby town of Rajkot for his education at the time of his father's appointment as a leading adviser to the Rajasthanik court in 1876, when he was eight. The princely states, like the state in which Gandhi was born, still made up two-fifths of India, and were only indirectly controlled by the British. After the shock of 1857, when violent rebellion had been widespread and, at points, well coordinated, British policies of annexation had shifted to accommodation with existing Indian maharajas. The form of indirect rule in the Kathiawar peninsula relied on the manipulation of kinship and patronage networks by two hundred and twenty nominal princes and upon close ties to British residents and representatives who had the final power to arbitrate. There were only ever fewer than two thousand British colonial officials in the whole of India, although there were also missionaries, soldiers, and businessmen. Nonetheless, the princely states were under British control in a system of informal imperialism; Diwans (senior ministers of princely states) were often handpicked by British residents, and princely heirs were denied their right to rule at the whim of British officials. The social composition of India was overwhelmingly agrarian and rural; more than ninety per cent of Indians lived in rural areas in 1901, with many others living in smaller towns of fewer than five thousand inhabitants. As an urban child, Gandhi was not well connected to the hinterlands of his home town: what today are quite short journeys then took many days by bullock cart. Yet even at this local level, the politics of British rule were decisively demonstrated and felt. Rajkot was a divided town, with one half acting as a small British cantonment town and civil station, while the other, much poorer half was the capital of Kathiawar state.²

Quashing the uprising of 1857 had come at a considerable financial and psychological cost; the British killed many thousands of Indians in retaliation and spent £36 million in the process. First-hand accounts of the rebellion and folk songs about the uprising were in circulation

during Gandhi's childhood, although Gujarat was not at the epicentre of the events that had dominated Delhi and the United Provinces in 1857. Indian royal families, such as those of the Kathiawar princes whom Gandhi's family had served as advisers for six generations, were being disempowered or carefully armlocked by the power of the state. By the time Gandhi was eight years old, the first Delhi Durbar was being celebrated to mark the coronation and proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India. The introduction of monarchical concepts of feudal loyalty and fealty, from Indian landowners and princes to the sovereign, were being institutionalized with theatrical flair. While he attended primary school in the late 1870s, the British were trying to secure the frontiers of the Raj against Russian threats in Afghanistan, and by the time Gandhi was attending high school in Rajkot, British imperial ascendancy was being consolidated across the globe. The race to annex sub-Saharan Africa sped up after the Berlin conference of 1885. Protectorates were being continually established and consolidated in Africa through Gandhi's youth; rebels in the Sudanese Mahdi rebellion suppressed and Egypt formally occupied. As an avid reader, he would have been exposed to, and felt himself to be part of, this global perspective on world affairs, even from the small and poorly connected rural town of his youth.

Looking around the rural cotton-growing districts near his town, he would have been aware of the cash croppers, day labourers, and landless peasants living in the countryside, poorly dressed and living from hand to mouth. Cotton from Maharashtra and Gujarat would be shipped to Britain from Bombay. Elsewhere, eastern Bengal was supplying the world with jute, and white-owned tea plantations were established in Assam and Darjeeling. It was on an indigo plantation at Champaran, in Bihar, that Gandhi would later launch one of his first campaigns on Indian soil. Mines in Eastern India provided coal and coke for export, and fuelled the work of Indian factories.

Gandhi would have been far less aware that peasant cultivators were being settled on the land in India, armed brigades and local armies were being disarmed by imperial forces, the extensive forest lands of India shrinking, and nomadic peoples pushed into settled agriculture. The 1871 Criminal Tribes Act restricted wandering nomadic groups, and there would have been far less sign of these groups in Kathiawar than a generation earlier. Some actions by the imperial state rarely impinged directly on urban service elites like those in Gandhi's own milieu, although he would have certainly seen soldiers passing through Rajkot. By 1880, there were sixty-six thousand British and one hundred and thirty thousand Indian troops in the Indian army. Some of these

troops were being sent into the rural hinterlands to crush further uprisings against British incursions. In the 1880s and 1890s, tribal revolts in Bihar and the North East were suppressed, Moplah uprisings continued on the Southern Coast. Growing urban areas were not immune from unrest. Early labour consciousness was apparent in Calcutta jute-mill riots, and there were no-revenue movements against agricultural taxation at times of famine in Maharashtra.³

The Raj and the changing patterns of power in the Indian subcontinent impinged directly on Gandhi's childhood education. Gandhi viscerally felt the British presence in India at school: from the fourth standard, English had become the medium of education for him for most subjects; textbooks were carefully controlled and vetted by the British administration. Macaulay's 1835 minute on education, and his aim to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals" had long been superseded by perspectives on empire, which stressed the maintenance of a firm line of difference between Indians and British rulers based on spurious racial or civilizational rationales.⁴ Nevertheless, English was the medium of education, and an English school inspector whom Gandhi's teacher wished to impress is the first European to feature in Gandhi's memories of boyhood.⁵ In British India, the state had acknowledged its duty to expand primary education since 1854, albeit a duty that remained more honoured in the breach than in the observance: male literacy rates were a little over 11% for British India in 1911 and just over 1% for women.⁶ Gandhi's failed attempts to teach his child bride to read and write haunted his memories. Education remained an elite privilege with a bias towards higher education in the presidency cities, which skewed education towards those who could directly profit from engagement with the Raj. Missionaries were one important presence on the edge of Gandhi's childhood. "In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their Gods", he recalls in the *Autobiography*, and certainly, the zeal of missions in South Asia has increased considerably in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁷ British evangelical groups were joined by missionaries from the United States and Europe, who usually lived apart and were somewhat excluded from the polite society of the Raj.

One thread that ran through much of this experience, and which pushed a young man like Gandhi towards eating meat, wearing Western suits, learning English, and studying the law, was the invocation of racial superiority and British greatness inherent in many different facets of imperial rule. As Britain's relative position in the world was

steadily threatened, the defensive reactionary responses of an empire grounded in a hierarchical conservatism and scientific racism came to the fore. This was justified by a perception of Indians that emphasized their separateness, difference, and backwardness, whether in scientific experiments, photography, or paintings. In Britain itself, class distinctions were being challenged, and the franchise was extended in 1866. Yet in India, the utilitarian vision of an empire based on a commonwealth of equals (only ever popular among a limited section of the British elite) had been superseded.⁸ Liberal pressures for increasing Indian participation in the consultative spheres of the Raj had to be squared with the assumption of Indian difference and repeated assertion that Indians were not capable or ready for self-rule. Undermining this, and clearly apparent to a man of Gandhi's intelligence from a young age, was the contradictory logic of an imperial system that also suggested that Indians could become 'gentlemen' and could be admitted into the system. This was a confusing and contradictory world for a young man. British imperial greatness, and metropolitan imperatives, were routinely invoked – but from the perspective of Porbandar and Rajkot, much of this was viewed through the lens of an imaginary world created in newspapers, textbooks, and pamphlets.

Gandhi was reading printed pamphlets 'from cover to cover' during his youth. This would have been impossible for someone of an older generation. "About the time of my marriage, little pamphlets costing a pice or a pie (I now forget how much), used to be issued, in which conjugal love, thrift, child marriages and other such subjects were discussed".⁹ It is difficult to underestimate the impact that printing and the distribution of reformist literature by Indian publishers was having on late nineteenth-century India. Gandhi's youth coincided with the commercialization of vernacular print literature. Low-priced pamphlets and a range of books were more freely and cheaply available than ever before. For the first time, these became affordable commodities that the literate classes could own. In Urdu, for instance, there was a fourfold increase in the production of books from 1868 to 1895.¹⁰ The advantages of lithography over moveable type had become apparent in the early nineteenth century, but the increasing availability of paper produced in local mills and the adoption of the steam press meant that books and pamphlets could be produced much more cheaply than in the past. Furthermore, rather than relying on imported texts or European ownership, more Indians, such as Naval Kishore in Lucknow, were moving into publishing, establishing presses and newspapers. The mushrooming of public libraries, the creation of dictionaries, and translation

between English and Indian languages added to the democratization of print. The development of a Gujarati print culture was well underway – the Gujarat Vernacular Society, for example, was founded in 1844 – and Gandhi himself would play no minor part in developing this through his own writings such as *Hind Swaraj*. Many books and pamphlets presented the escapist pleasures of romantic poetry or historical stories, but there was a strong tendency towards the discussion of pressing questions of social reform in pamphlets. Pamphlet wars had long been part of the encounter between Christian missionaries (some of the first people to own and use printing presses in India) and spokespeople for Islam and Hinduisim. By the late nineteenth century, popular subjects included child marriage and family relations, sex, diet, and women's education; all topics that would be greatly significant to the development of Gandhi's thought. Similarly, vernacular newspapers that had been in circulation since the early nineteenth century took on new significance, reaching larger numbers of readers and using more colloquial language. It was a good moment for a gifted writer and journalist like Gandhi to emerge in the public sphere.

Modern government stretched out its tentacles, as the Company Raj was transformed into a modern bureaucratic system manned by officers who taxed, policed, codified, and punished. In 1885, before Gandhi had finished school, local self-government was expanded, significantly in the same year that the urban-based Indian National Congress met in Bombay for the first time, with the blessings of the Viceroy. In 1892, legislative councils were created, and in 1909, a new but restricted franchise meant that Indians could form majorities in (non-binding) legislative assemblies. The Indian colonial system was based on the Indian Civil Service (ICS), whose officers, the so-called heaven born, were almost invariably white at the highest levels until the interwar years. Satyendanath Tagore was the first Indian to pass the Indian Civil Service examination in 1863, but the system was stacked against Indians, as the competitive entry examination had to be sat in London, and the questions and age limit all favoured British gentlemen. Approximately four thousand Indians worked for less remuneration and lower prestige in the 'uncovenanted' civil service. The racial differentiation between the different branches of the Raj, and between Europeans and Indians in general, was becoming more pronounced, as British men (and increasingly more women) in India secluded themselves by developing hill stations as holiday retreats, and residential quarters in most towns, which set them apart from the Indian 'masses', as did their preferred leisure activities. Beneath this apparently ordered surface, Europeans experienced tensions: anxieties

about Christian doctrine and the place of missionaries; fears of racial miscegenation; the difficulties of the remaining small communities of Anglo-Indians and poor whites; the tensions of progressive Indianization of the services; and, by the turn of the century, the problems of recruiting enough suitable British candidates to join the ICS and to officer the Indian army. Anxiety about the protection of racial superiority fuelled the reaction to the Ilbert Bill in 1883–4; a vocal European outcry against the extension of Indian magistrate's power to try Europeans prosecuted in criminal cases. Gandhi was growing up in a world where the solidity of British power in India was not as secure as it seemed at first glance and where the extension of power to Indians within the civil service, military, and policing arms of the state was the only way to underpin the continued structures of the Raj. Gandhi was well attuned to the vulnerabilities in this system: even before leaving for South Africa in 1893, he had been ejected from the office of a Political Agent in Kathiawar when making a request on behalf of his brother, on the British Political Agent's orders, but at the hands of an Indian peon, who "placed his hands on my shoulders and put me out of the room".¹¹ The erosion of these coercive bonds between Indian subordinates and British colonial superiors was part of Gandhi's psychological and political achievement.

Much of Kathiawar was peripheral to the central foci of the British Empire. Western Gujarat was a seafaring place in an empire that was increasingly land oriented; Gandhi's world was a princely state, rather than a directly administered area of British India, and far from the imperial presidency cities of Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay where the rapid pace of imperial intrusions was most obviously visible. Gandhi's first visit to Bombay was as an adult en route to England, and he had only travelled to the textile town of Ahmedabad, the closest major city to his childhood home, for the first time in the previous year to take his matriculation exam. Therefore Gandhi's early life was far more directly shaped by the customs and local traditions of Porbandar and Rajkot, growing up in a parochial fisherman's and sea trader's world, which was "renowned for its toughness and shrewdness" far more than by direct encounters with the Raj.¹² Gandhi's boyhood was shaped by the politics of the Kathiawar peninsula and by the domestic politics of living in a three-storey ancestral house shared by his father and his five brothers and their families. This gave him a unique vantage point from which to view the British Empire and also meant that his world was not simply shaped by dichotomies between metropolis and periphery in London and Delhi. As Gandhi is at pains to indicate in the *Autobiography*, the

“imperial geographies” of his imaginative, boyhood landscape were not dictated simply by the power of the Raj.¹³

Sea routes and trading links connected what is now Gujarat to many parts of the empire. Gandhi was also closely connected to this maritime world. Across the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, complex webs linked together ports from Durban, Zanzibar, and Aden to Rangoon, Penang, and Colombo. The post-dated projection of nationalism and national borders may have been far less important to labourers, merchants, and traders using these routes than later accounts suggest.¹⁴ Indentured labour recruited from the north Indian regions of UP and Bihar was shipped to work on white-owned sugar plantations in Natal and Mauritius until the early twentieth century (the indenture system was banned in 1917); in the mid-1880s, there were still ten thousand Indians resident in Natal as indentured labourers, working for a nominal pittance and locked into labour agreements of five years or more.¹⁵ The elite Gujarati diaspora, of which Gandhi would become such a distinguished member during his two decades in South Africa, stretched from Bombay and Karachi to Mombassa, Aden, Durban, and the Indian Ocean ports. This group of traders, businessmen, and professionals made their living from trading goods like cloves and pearls, warehouse storage, money lending, currency exchange, and supplying goods and services. “In the hundred years from the 1830s to the 1930s nearly thirty million Indians travelled overseas and some twenty-four million returned”.¹⁶ Indian-ness and a shared sense of national community could be imagined and constructed with more saliency by those living away from home than on Indian soil. Gandhi’s aspiration to travel and live abroad was far from unique, and these patterns of remittances, investment, and labour migration paved the way for the great worldwide diaspora of South Asians in the twentieth century and its contradictory impulses of cosmopolitanism and national pride. Imperial trade and business networks meant that Gandhi and his colleagues moved seamlessly between South Africa and India. A job offer to work for a law firm in South Africa reached him in Gujarat, and he made several return visits to India during the two decades he lived in South Africa. While in South Africa, he maintained contact with leaders in India and built relationships with reformers like Gokhale by sending letters and exchanging articles. Naturally, this also meant he could construct political methods in South Africa that would also have resonance in India.

England loomed large in Gandhi’s thinking as a young man and as the symbolic destination for achievement and advancement in life. The idea of London as the centre of the world had percolated into the

thinking of colonized subjects. "Time hung heavily on my hands in Bombay", he later remembered. "I dreamt continually of going to England".¹⁷ After his matriculation, Gandhi was determined to study law in London. Rajkot's population of thirty-six thousand was a tiny fraction of Bombay's, which had more than half a million inhabitants and paled in comparison to London's three and half million. Urbanization and industrialization were driving connections between the imperial metropolitan centre and the rapidly booming Indian cities. Communications and technologies meant that people and goods could travel more rapidly than ever before: between 1873 and 1890, the rail freight carried on Indian railways grew more than fivefold, and there were eight and a half thousand miles of track and twenty thousand miles of telegraph wire by 1880. Rajkot's inclusion in the rail system was important enough to warrant a mention in the *Autobiography* and delivered some of the greatest changes to his hometown that Gandhi saw in his lifetime. Gandhi's later campaigns would make much of the railways, as he spent countless days and nights covering vast distances. He also denigrated railways in *Hind Swaraj* for 'impoverishing' the country, bringing speed, greed, and divisiveness.¹⁸ The real beneficiaries of the railways were investors and military commanders who could move troops at great speed, but a by-product was the opportunity for travel and political connection for Gandhi and his contemporaries. Sea routes similarly opened up connections between cities, ports, and metropole. The Suez Canal was opened in 1869, the year of Gandhi's birth, and it was not only elite Indians who could consider long-distance journeys for Haj, pilgrimage, family visits, or trade. According to the London City Mission, there were between ten and twelve thousand seamen or *lascars*, the majority of Indian origin, in London by the late nineteenth century.¹⁹

Gandhi left for England in 1888 and stayed there until 1891: the journey by ship took a little over six weeks. Shipping would come to have a double function in the nationalist imaginary: it was both a real and pressing issue of industry and opportunity, linked to trade and supply routes, the possibilities for investment and revenue but also an emotive and symbolic issue. As Javed Majeed wrote, "One of the ways in which travel disempowered Indian travellers in the nineteenth century was the increasing awareness they had of the extent of British power as they journeyed from India to Britain, usually on British ships".²⁰

During his travels, Gandhi also saw the shipping of raw materials from India with his own eyes. Much of Britain's growth was being driven by Indian goods. Industrialization and the expansion of cotton mills favoured the mechanization of production and the growth of the

satanic mills of the Midlands. 'De-industrialized' India was turned into a supplier of unprocessed raw materials. Textile imports into India were peaking during Gandhi's childhood, making up nearly half of all imports in 1870–1. The Indian landscape was being transformed by the growth of cities too; Indian factories also began to boom, jute was processed in Calcutta and cotton in Ahmedabad and Bombay, although usually to the benefit of European financiers, managing agents, and entrepreneurs who created monopolies for themselves. Upcountry migrant labour drafted in from the rural hinterlands or pushed off agricultural land by famine or unemployment was locked into seasonal production or worked for day wages. "The workers in the mills of Bombay have become slaves", Gandhi commented in *Hind Swaraj*.²¹ The development of these megacities – Bombay, for instance, tripled in size in Gandhi's lifetime – marked a sharp departure from the power of the regional bazaar and administrative towns, such as Allahabad, which had been typical of the earlier nineteenth century.

In these presidency cities, the solid, European buildings of the presidency capitals such as Madras Fort, "extensions of Europe in Asia", gave way to Indo-Saracenic building projects, clearly intended to impress upon Indians the supremacy of British power, while legitimizing such claims by styling them in an Indian idiom.²² Bombay's Victoria Terminus embodied the Gothic revival and was opened to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. This rail terminus linked up the cotton grown in the Western Indian villages of India with the British Empire. Gandhi must have seen the new, famed rail terminus, completed one year earlier, when he made his first visit to Bombay en route to Britain the following year; it was an echo of St. Pancras station, which was twenty years older and in the heart of Gandhi's Bloomsbury. These new architectural projects were closely linked to the force of imperial ideas. Thomas Metcalf notes, for instance, the sudden proliferation of municipal clock towers in Indian cities after 1857, albeit framed in elaborate Indo-Saracenic towers; a reminder of the Victorian virtues of punctuality and industry perceived to be missing in Indians.²³ Calcutta, which remained the capital of British India until 1911 when it was replaced by New Delhi, must have seemed a very distant Eastern place – and the domination of Indian politics by Bengali *bhadralok* elites educated in the Presidency town was alien and remote from Gandhi's experience before the twentieth century. It was his good fortune that the gravitational centre of Indian politics was shifting westwards across the country, as the economic boom of Bombay and the westward orientation of the empire brought Calcutta into eclipse. Later, through dialogue with

the Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, and through his support of the swadeshi movement against the Partition of Bengal in 1905, Gandhi would also find inspiration in the east of India, and close the circle in his geographical imagination of India as a territorial entity.

The all-encompassing nature of the Victorian empire, the power of the imperial myth, and the difficulties of subverting the imperial system are reflected in Gandhi's continuing loyalty to the empire, when, even as a frustrated citizen in South Africa where he battled racial prejudice, unfair legislation, and pioneered his campaigns while developing his spiritual practice, he continued to view his world through the inevitable framework of British imperial rule. He lived in South Africa from 1893 until leaving Durban for the last time in 1914. During the Boer War of 1899–1902, Gandhi famously organized an ambulance corps in support of the British. Indian troops were again being used against the Boer rebels, and his own participation in this war tested Gandhi spiritually and morally:

Suffice it to say that my loyalty to the British rule drove me to participation with the British in that war. I felt that, if I demanded rights as a British citizen, it was also my duty, as such, to participate in the defence of the British Empire. I held then that India could achieve her complete emancipation only within and through the British Empire.²⁴

The *Autobiography* cannot be taken as merely a historical document, and this statement also works at a metaphorical level; Gandhi's relationship with the idea of the Raj was clearly highly nuanced by this stage. Perhaps the point to note here, however, is the imperial pressures and strands of loyalty were so intricately interwoven, and connected so many different aspects of life, that it took many years for Gandhi to think in terms of an Indian nation-state or independence from British rule. The paradigm shift from an imperial world, in which European empires ruled, fought wars, and carved up territory, to one of nation-states was a revolutionary change from Victorian to twentieth-century thought.

2. THE CHANGING SOCIAL WORLD

For all its internationalism, Gandhi's world was also rooted in a quintessentially Indian home. The ancestral house of the Gandhis was built around two temples, and it was questions of religious propriety, women's duties in the household, diet, and marriage that set the rhythms

of everyday life. His mother is idealized in Gandhi's writings as a loyal Indian woman: chaste, devout, and dutiful, fasting and eating after others, rising early and dealing with all the children of the extended household. A sharp demarcation of domestic and public space, however, seems to have been less clear in Gandhi's Porbandar than in other contemporaneous parts of Raj; the courtyard and public spaces of the house were constantly open to his father's visitors who would come to eat in the family home. Gandhi's father would even carry out domestic chores while discussing business matters. Local people remembered Gandhi's father "sitting in the Shrinathji temple day after day, peeling and paring the vegetables for his wife's kitchen, while he discussed politics".²⁵ The house was therefore not a sealed domestic middle-class space but was closely connected to the politics of the Kathiawar peninsula. This reflects Gandhi's own fusion of private and public politics. This part of Gandhi's world, seeped in caste, religion, gender politics, and Indian tradition, was equally important to his later career; his knowledge and experience of religion and caste in the late nineteenth century would help him to pull together the threads of Indian nationalism in the twentieth century, and to construct his powerful reformist vision of Indian-ness.

Gandhi's Vaishnavite family was steeped in religious practice and custom. His mother visited the Vaisnava temple daily, fasted, and prayed, and his father listened to recitations of the Ramayana, which left a deep impression on the young Gandhi. As with all the major religions in the subcontinent processes of classification, social reform and regularization were formalizing Indian experiences of religion in the nineteenth century, and increasingly questions were raised about the orthodoxy or appropriateness of particular religious expressions. The Arya Samaj was founded in 1875 in Bombay and in 1877 in Lahore, and influentially campaigned for a reformist Hinduism, heavily influenced by Christianity, which rejected Brahmanism and pilgrimage and emphasized a textual basis for Hinduism. The leader of the movement, Dayanand Saraswati – an older Gujarati from Kathiawar – visited Rajkot in the 1870s and started a branch in Gandhi's childhood town.

This was also an era of the 'traditionalization' of Indian society as society became more stratified, static, and settled; the rapid expansion of cash cropping, boosted by the arrival of the railways, increased the mercantile power of Hindus engaged in supplying agricultural credit and merchants entered district councils and caste associations. Respectability and caste hierarchies helped to prove credit worthiness and to cement political leadership, and the expansion of cow protection leagues, social reform movements, and the patronage of festivals and temples was

central to this. Hindu expressions of piety therefore were closely imbricated with politics. Merchants took a leading role in religious reform and in political mobilization. On his return from London, Gandhi had a profound spiritual encounter with Raychandbhai in Bombay, a family friend and jeweller, "Raychandbhai's commercial transactions covered hundreds of thousands. He was a connoisseur of pearls and diamonds. No knotty business problem was too difficult for him. But all these things were not the centre around which his life revolved. That centre was the passion to see God face to face".²⁶ Trade, business, and piety were entirely complementary in Gandhi's experience.

Caste, perhaps the central organizing principle of Hindu society, was being institutionalized as caste associations, and literacy made it possible for fellow caste members to link up across longer distances in new ways. Jatis and caste subdivisions predated colonial rule in India. This was the primary kinship group one looked to for marriage partners, economic ties, and benefits. Now, new processes of modernity and imperial codification meant that caste was being expressed in more vocal and obvious ways. Texts became the foundation for caste and piety, purity, and status were more regularly scrutinized. This is vividly shown in Gandhi's own youth. When he chose to cross the 'kala pani' or black water to go to London to study law – thereby, according to the beliefs of some Hindus, 'breaking' caste – he was disowned by one section of his caste's association. This decision was communicated from a caste meeting in Bombay back to the community leaders of his home.

Meanwhile my caste people were agitated over my going abroad. No Modh Bania had been to England up to now and if I dared to do so I ought to be brought to book! A general meeting of the caste was called and I was summoned to appear before it.²⁷

The headman, incensed by Gandhi's intransigence, swore at him and promised to fine anyone who assisted his passage. Gandhi's experience also shows though how, paradoxically, transport connections and new wealth were also making it harder for caste leaders to dictate to their fellow kin. Gandhi left for London despite the admonition of his caste headman. Caste associations and groups looked for uplift and higher status, claimed status based on genealogies and real and invented family lineages, and policed who was in and out of the caste. The Aryan claims of Brahmins were reinforced by new ethnologies and the emerging arts of Western scientists who used physiological characteristics and the new technologies of photography to classify and label their subjects of study. Lower-caste groups seeking uplift through 'sanskritization' were rarely

successful, although some moved from unclean occupations such as toddy-tapping to raise their collective position over the course of the century: many Untouchables would later contest caste by rejecting their place in the Hindu tradition entirely, seeking status as 'dalits' and by claiming pre-Hindu indigeneity within India – an idea that would bring them into direct conflict with Gandhi whose own position on caste remained reformist but conservative.

This was a heterodox and reformist world then, but also one that was far more influenced by Jainism and Hinduism than by Islam. Gandhi's hometown was far from the remaining Mughal courtly cultures and large urban concentrations of Muslims, which shaped the political dynamics of Delhi and North India. India's Muslim population was more than twenty-five per cent. During the process of colonial encounter, the Muslim community was asking many of the same questions about propriety and rightful action as the other religious groups. The educational centres for Muslims in the United Provinces at Deoband, Lahore, and Aligarh were founded during Gandhi's youth. Deoband would play a vital role in directing orthodoxy and formalizing an Islamic curriculum for Indian Muslim students, while Aligarh was a space for modernizing Muslim elites to square piety, reform, and Western scientific ideas. It was a Muslim firm that employed Gandhi and attracted him from Gujarat to South Africa. But Gandhi's early life was lived far from these North Indian Persian-Islamic centres (in comparison to Nehru's early life, which was much more influenced by the old Persianate elite) and his knowledge of Islam was circumscribed and mediated through Gujarati trading Muslim castes and, later, through close interaction with Muslims in South Africa and, later still, during the Khilafat movement.

Pre-colonial histories of community conflict and regional warfare had undoubtedly been exacerbated by colonial processes that simplistically divided communities against each other through administrative interventions and decisions. Older histories and myths of conquest and domination created regional heroes such as Shivaji and lineages, which relied on the demonization of the Mughal other. Gandhi was astutely aware of this; in *Hind Swaraj* he poses the question, "Has the introduction of Mohammedanism not unmade the nation?" to rebut this with a firm assertion of British divide and rule policies and a strong call to unity-in-diversity.²⁸ Indians lived with a community consciousness by the late nineteenth century: an awareness of religious community, of purity-pollution and of community difference but this had not yet hardened into frequent violence. Muslim political separatism and political self-definition in Delhi, Punjab, and the United Provinces became more

salient in later years alongside the growth of Hindu fundamentalism expressed in militia groups like the RSS, founded in 1925. In the twentieth century, conflict between nationalist and exclusionary visions of Hinduism and Islam would evolve into their most destructive forms. Separate electorates were created in the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909, and violent clashes in the name of religion became routine in some urban areas around issues such as cow protection, music being played in front of mosques at prayer time, and the observance of religious festivals of Holi and Mohurram.

Gandhi's life was also shaped by his interaction with women – in particular, his wife and mother, Gandhian followers, social workers, and teachers. As he remarked, "I have worshipped woman as the living embodiment of the spirit of service and sacrifice", and he frequently invoked the ideal of Sita as a model to which women should aspire. By the late nineteenth century, reform groups had mushroomed in many urban areas of India; "they focused on sati, female infanticide, polygyny, child marriage, purdah, prohibitions on female education, devadasis (temple dancers wedded to the gods) and the patrilocal joint family".²⁹ The leading reformers were men. Reforming the worst excesses of violence against women and protecting children may have been inspired by male patriarchal control more than humanitarian concern for woman as a general category. The symbolic category of woman and the political sensitivity of 'the woman question' may have mattered more than the actual daily experience of women themselves. Certainly, it was a hotly contested ground between colonial reformers and Indian nationalists who wished to demonstrate their own cultural superiority or claims to progress and enlightenment.

Child marriage was a feature of Indian life in the nineteenth century that particularly concerned Gandhi because of his own boyhood marriage at the age of thirteen, something he denounced as a 'cruel custom' in his writings.³⁰ This was a fraught subject between reformers and the colonial officials – some British officials used salacious details to slur Indian morality and 'backwardness', while Indians defended, explained, or campaigned against the custom. In 1891, the criminal code amended the law to raise the age of consent to twelve years, but it was an issue that would repeatedly become a political battleground in the twentieth century, especially when Katherine Mayo's infamous book, *Mother India*, denouncing Indian treatment of women, appeared in the interwar years. As with sati for the earlier generation, so now child marriage was a locus for much broader debates about modernity and authority.³¹

It is evident that educated mothers were seen as the desirable guardians of new nationalist citizens, and that the control of family diet, cleanliness, and purchases was an important space for articulating a will to political autonomy. This was a space where the Indian householder could try to control the intrusions and assaults on the Indian moral economy by the colonial regime; this applied to Muslim women, as well as Hindu women, and magazines and books urging Muslim women's education and reform and urging against superstition were published from Lahore and Aligarh. Gradual improvements in women's education and literacy rates enabled many more women to have an important stake in their families' budgeting, nutrition, and housekeeping, and to consume new products as they came onto the market: hair oil, lipstick, machine-made saris, and soap. Nevertheless, literacy was still an elite skill for women. Even at independence in 1947, female literacy was estimated at ten per cent.

The 'new patriarchy', as Partha Chatterjee terms it, may have created an illusory effect of new freedoms, while middle-class Bengali women became the repositories of all that was respectable, proper, and spiritual in the Indian home, and their respectability had to be more carefully policed than ever before.³² Gandhi's leadership was well attuned to political methods such as fasting, spinning, and salt making, which chimed with the everyday duties and responsibilities of 'decent' women, drawing heavily on middle-class respectability and pride in women's thrift, cleanliness, and chastity. Gandhi cleverly negotiated the boundaries of colonial masculinity and femininity set by the Raj and drew many women into political activism in the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi's youth coincided with 'the great acceleration' of European imperialisms, the invasive modernity and boom in laissez-faire trade which reoriented the world system around the European metropolises. Goods and people could be moved around the globe at a new pace, and profits could be accumulated quickly. Gandhi's early life was set against the background of a growing imperial reach and systematic expansion of imperial control in India, much of which was implemented by Indians themselves. Much took place imperceptibly over the *longue durée* and was invisible to the naked eye. There was a shift from capital vested in land to business and banking interests. Monetization, cash cropping, and the interconnectedness of markets developed. Hunter-gatherers

and nomadic peoples were being pushed to the margins or eliminated altogether. Growing uniformity in the bureaucratic ambitions of nation states meant the erosion of older forms of sovereignty, ongoing shifts in religious and local forms of authority, and encroachments on the moral economy of peasant livelihoods. In turn, radical resistance intensified, national attachments arose, and racial awareness was exacerbated.³³ Part of Gandhi's genius was his vivid and palpable awareness of these changes and their coercive force. The strength of feeling in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* against 'civilization' and the 'progress' presupposedly brought by new technologies and transport systems can be properly understood only in this light.³⁴ Gandhi railed against the invasive and immoral aspects of modernity in *Hind Swaraj*. This was a deep and complex outcry against the long and steady incursions into a premodern society that could no longer be revived or even properly remembered. This was not an isolated reaction but one shared by some intellectuals across the globe – hence Gandhi's sympathy with Ruskin and Tolstoy.

Victorian imperialism had a pompous and theatrical Victorian façade, which emphasized the rights of an 'invented' traditional ruling order in India and loyalty to the Queen Empress. Gandhi experienced some of these grandiose imperial visions directly. Beneath it also lurked the uncertainties and inner contradictions of the British in India, which began surfacing with increasing regularity. Gandhi's life bridged the peak of this imperial hubris, and its decline and demise; he perceived the weakness of the imperial system and was able to invert orientalist stereotypes of Indian spirituality and rural stasis against the imperial regime in his unique political philosophy.³⁵

Gandhi's own position was peculiarly marginal to the great contemporary debates in British imperial policy in India, compared to, say, Jawaharlal Nehru who was born in Allahabad – a classical colonial corporate town – and who grew up in the thick of colonial debates about legal reform, religious conflict, land ownership, and provincial self-government. Gandhi's world was quite different and was both parochial and international. This peripheral role, looking outwards to the broader oceanic networks and inwards to local pre-colonial 'traditions' meant that Gandhi inhabited a very particular space in Indian nationalism. It gave him simultaneously the detailed insight of a local boy matched with the global insight of an international observer. It enabled him to conceive Indian independence in a reworked and unique fashion, drawing on local idioms but refashioned for the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 For good general overviews and accounts of the late nineteenth century in India, see Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1994); Crispin Bates, *Subalterns and the Raj: South Asia Since 1600* (London: Routledge, 2007); Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1985–1947* (Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 1983); Peter Robb, *A History of India* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2002); Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2004); Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. A. J. Parel (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 2 For an interesting insight into Gandhi's childhood, see Erik Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-Violence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).
- 3 Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 43–65.
- 4 For a discussion of the various ideologies driving British rule in India, see Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 5 M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai, first pub. in serial form in 1927, part I, chapter II.
- 6 Brown, *Modern India*, pp. 96–148.
- 7 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part I, chapter IV.
- 8 Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*.
- 9 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part I, chapter IV.
- 10 On the development of print literature in modern India, see Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (New Delhi, India: Permanent Black, 2007); Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001); Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 11 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part II, chapter IV.
- 12 Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, p. 103.
- 13 For an excellent reading of Gandhi's *Autobiography*, see Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 14 On the Indian Ocean as a social and political arena in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 15 Thomas Metcalf, *Forging the Raj: Essays on British India in the Heyday of Empire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 208.
- 16 Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, p. 73.
- 17 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part I, chapter XII.

- 18 Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, chapter IX.
- 19 On South Asians in Britain and the wider Diaspora, see Michael H. Fisher, Shompa Lahiri, and Shinder Thandi, *A South-Asian History of Britain: Four Centuries of Peoples from the Indian Sub-Continent* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007); Siddiq Sayyid, N. Ali, and V. S. Kalra, *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (London: Hurst, 2006); Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: The History of Muslims in Britain, 1800 to the Present* (London: Hurst, 2004).
- 20 Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity*, p. 76.
- 21 Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, chapter XIX.
- 22 Metcalf, *Forging the Raj*, pp. 106–35.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 24 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part III, chapter X.
- 25 Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi, The Early Phase* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan, 1965), pp. 192–3.
- 26 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part II, chapter I.
- 27 *Ibid.*, part I, chapter XII.
- 28 Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, chapter X.
- 29 Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–10, 92–121.
- 30 Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, part I, chapter III.
- 31 On reform and debates about women in India, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1995), and *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, England: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 32 Partha Chatterjee, 'Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India', *American Ethnologist*, 16.4 (Nov., 1989), pp. 622–33.
- 33 C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914. Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, England: Blackwell, 2004).
- 34 Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*. See also Parel's introduction in *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*.
- 35 Richard G. Fox makes important arguments about Gandhi's 'affirmative orientalism'. See Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).