Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire

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Written in 1909, Gandhi’s manifesto *Hind Swaraj* has proved itself to be a text for the twenty-first rather than the twentieth century. Across the course of the last century, the book was misunderstood, ignored, or consciously rejected. Jawaharlal Nehru famously dismissed it as “completely unreal,” while Gandhi’s mentor G. K. Gokhale thought it “so crude and hastily conceived that he prophesied that Gandhiji would himself destroy the book after spending a year in India.”1 These views have been echoed by others, and apart from an enthusiastic reception in the United States, *Hind Swaraj* remained marginal and unread, even as Gandhi himself came to be internationally feted.

Nonetheless, over the last decade a powerful resurgence of interest in the text has occurred, sparked in part by its centenary in 2009 but equally by a group of scholars interested in understanding Gandhi’s thinking on sovereignty outside the realm of abstract rights and the nation-state. In a recent book Faisal Devji notes that Gandhi’s ideas far exceeded any notion of freedom in a national framework but were rather a much larger experiment with India as its instantiation. “India’s mission, therefore, was not simply to
liberate herself from imperialism, but set the precedent that would free the world as a whole from violence.”

This view was rooted in Gandhi’s conviction that human society persists through the force of love and nonviolence, which enables the world to survive despite wars and violent events. Yet, as Gandhi noted, “history does not and cannot take note of this fact.” As Devji notes, “only violence . . . was historical, because it was sporadic and therefore transformative in the limited way that allowed historians to define it as either a cause or an effect.”

_Hind Swaraj_ offers a thoroughgoing critique of this configuration of violence, event, cause and effect, beginnings and endings. In a worldwide anti-imperial century, obsessed with just such endings and beginnings, it is hardly surprising that Gandhi’s logic has remained recessive. As we move into an era invested in unpicking the nation-as-method as well as understanding the persistence of imperial structures in the world, Gandhi’s text has started to come into its own.

Hence this essay explores _Hind Swaraj_ as a text that has changed our ideas of empire retrospectively, by fundamentally challenging the nexus of history and causality itself. Gandhi spoke of _Hind Swaraj_ as his seed text: as the seed comes to life, the seed itself is extinguished. Life within the seed may lie still and silent for a long time. Gandhi’s ideas in _Hind Swaraj_ have long lain dormant. This essay explores the radical proclivities and implications of the text by paying attention to its bilingual character and the nature of the ideas that this character enabled Gandhi to generate.

_Hind Swaraj was written_ between 13 and 22 November 1909 aboard the steamer _Kildonan Castle_ as Gandhi returned from England to South Africa. Ten days of almost continuous writing on the ship’s stationery was marked by a restless intensity that Gandhi had never known before. He wrote when he could no longer “restrain” himself. The handwritten manuscript consists of eighty-eight questions posed by a “Reader” and eighty-eight responses by an “Editor” in twenty chapters spread over 271 pages, with an introduction in five pages. When the right hand tired, Gandhi wrote thirty-eight pages with his left hand. Those pages strangely bear a hand more firm and clear. No question was left unanswered. The manuscript bears 228 marks of erasures and corrections. Of these, twenty-one pertain to the questions by the Reader and bring a sharper focus to the large questions _Hind Swaraj_ seeks to formulate: the meaning of human life and its possibility in modern civilization.
The journey aboard a ship is also a metaphor that can help us understand the fluidity of the text. It’s a text in motion. The very form of dialogue suggests motion, conversation, poser and counterposer, where both the question and its response could explore doubt, hesitation, and uncertainty. Gandhi’s choice of the form of dialogue was careful and deliberate. At once, he drew on the long tradition of exploring philosophical questions through the dialogic form and simultaneously sought to make the ideas more accessible to his readers. The essay form in Gujarati was not more than six decades old and was an acquired literary style.

This text was printed with meticulous exactness (in two installments, 11 and 18 December 1909) in Indian Opinion, the journal Gandhi nurtured as the voice of the struggle for Indian-Asiatic rights in South Africa and of Satyagraha as a mode of thought and of resistance. Gandhi’s own sense of his relationship with the text is complex and elusive. Three days after drawing the final line on the text, Gandhi wrote to his spiritual companion Hermann Kallenbach about his experiences aboard the Kildonan Castle. Almost as an afterthought, in the postscript he wrote: “I have . . . written an original book in Gujarati.” This is perhaps the only instance of Gandhi making a claim of this kind in which he sets forth an idea of authorship based on originality.

In the foreword to the text Gandhi wrote: “These views are mine, and yet not mine. They are mine because I hope to act according to them. They are part of my being. But, yet, they are not mine, because I lay no claim to originality. They have been formed after reading several books. That which I dimly felt received support from these books. The views I venture to place before the readers are, needless to say, held by many Indians not touched by what is known as civilisation, but I ask the reader to believe me when I tell him that they are also held by thousands of Europeans.” What does this “mine” and yet “not mine” indicate? As I have explained elsewhere, Gandhi seeks to clarify a relationship to the text that is at a distinct remove from the modern conception of text and authorship as something new and original. In the pre-modern Indic universe such a clarification would have been unnecessary. It is a relationship premised on the belief that the utmost given to a writer-composer is to be able to say in and for one’s time and context, that which has been known and recognised to be true. Authorship and text therein are a journey and a quest to discover the authentic and true. They are not meant to
intrinsically embody and signify the invention or creation of something "new" and "original."\textsuperscript{6}

Gandhi suggests that the claim of the text being his rests not so much on the authorship as on conduct. He said that the views were his because "I hope to act according to them." He reiterated this claim in the last line of *Hind Swaraj*. "I have endeavoured to explain it [Swaraj], and my conscience testifies that my life henceforth is dedicated to its attainment."\textsuperscript{7} The questions of authorship and originality for Gandhi are located within the domain of conduct, in one's ability to dedicate oneself to truth as perceived.

We need to comprehend the choice of language and the form of the text that Gandhi chose. As he sat down to write it, he must have been aware that his attempt was without precedent and entailed an endeavor to measure the meaning and worth of the modern impulse from a ground of cognition that lay beyond its ambit. Already in 1909 a large part of the world had been substantially recast according to the requirements of modern transformation set in motion in Europe. The few voices in Europe of caution and warning against the modern were confined to the lonely margins. In the world beyond Europe, critiques of the modern were confined to the details of Europe manipulating the stupendous gifts of modern civilization for its narrow selfish purpose. Aware of these debates, Gandhi chose to write *Hind Swaraj* in the form of a dialogue and in Gujarati. At first glance, every possible consideration seems to militate against this choice. In Gujarati, or indeed in any other modern Indian language, there was at that time nothing that could be read or seen as a rejection of modern civilization. In fact the modern capacity to transform and reorder the wherewithal of life was universally accepted as promising and good. The critique of colonization was cast in terms of impassioned denunciations of colonial exploitation and racial arrogance. The text had little bearing on the aspirations of the struggle in South Africa; in fact there are only two references to South Africa in the text. Gandhi's prime referents were India and Europe, modern civilization and meaning of life. In writing *Hind Swaraj* in Gujarati—a language on the remote margins of the modern—Gandhi affirmed two cardinal concepts on which the fact and possibility of human equality is predicated: (1) inherence in language of a capacity to make sense and take measure of things utterly unfamiliar and unknown, and (2) Gujarati as an opportunity to access folk and vernacular discourses. The sheer simplicity of the original text is striking in the extreme. In the words of Gandhi, it seems "crude."\textsuperscript{8} A
reader is sometimes utterly overtaken by the raw rustle of the prose. Vinoba Bhave, one of Gandhi’s closest associates and a man whose feel for the languages and literary traditions of India was incomparable, commented on the “crudeness” of the language of *Hind Swaraj*:

I have said crude because the words . . . which he [uses] later are not the words to be found in it. Just as the language of the *Upanishads* sounds crude to the ears, the language of *Hind Swaraj* also seems crude. When we look at Shankara’s *Bhasya*, the neatness of its language, its mode of explanation, the capacity to explain everything through argument, the language of the *Upanishads* in comparison to that appears crude. But the life and vigour that dwells in the crude language of *Upanishads* is not to be found in other languages of argument and science.9

Gandhi continued to believe that the cognitive universe of *Hind Swaraj* could be best captured in a language that had its roots in the Indic civilization and modes of thought. It is not a coincidence that *Hind Swaraj* was the only work Gandhi wrote that he chose to translate.

It is in the way Gandhi made this translation that this work bears the marks of a bilingual text. Bilingualism is not just the ability to think and express oneself in two languages. Rather, it indicates simultaneity and suggests a process whereby an idea is conceived and thought in one language and expressed in another—that is, whereby it becomes possible to express a concept, a notion, that is alien to one linguistic/semantic universe through another tongue. I propose that *Hind Swaraj* is a bilingual text in this sense.

It is most instructive to examine this idea through the notion that forms the core of *Hind Swaraj*, the idea of Sudhar, rendered in English as Civilization. Sudhar in Gujarati has a lineage. Before Gandhi, the term was used largely to indicate the idea and process of social and religious reform. In this sense, Sudhar encompassed the idea that Su-dhar was the good path, the righteous path (Su indicating the quality of goodness); hence Sudharo is equated with “good conduct.” But until *Hind Swaraj*, Sudharo had been used in the sense of reform (and largely continues with this meaning). Gandhi, by contrast, defines Sudharo as that which makes possible self-knowledge and self-rule. It is “that mode of conduct that points out to man the path of duty,” where “performance of duty and observance of morality” become
“convertible terms,” which allow us to “attain mastery over our mind and passion,” and “so doing, we know ourselves.”

Gandhi had a choice of two other and more prevalent usages to indicate civilization. These are sabhyata and sanskriti. In fact, when Gandhi writes in the English rendering that the Gujarati equivalent for civilization means “good conduct,” he is referring to sabhyata rather than sudharo. The Gujarati lexicon BhagvadGoMandal, in fact, says that sanskriti means civilization. Gandhi may not have preferred a notion of civilization that is intrinsically tied to Sanskrit and all the modes of thought and practices that were articulated through that language. But this still does not explain the choice of the term “Sudhar.”

Gandhi was clearly invoking Sudhar in two senses, which have been latent in Gujarati. First, Sudhar is not simply a good path but one that holds, bears; from the Sanskrit root dhri, dharayati. It holds and bears human society; it is sudhar; and only such Sudhar could make manifest to humanity the path of duty and open the possibility of self-knowledge. Sudhar is civilization in this sense. Second, Sudhar, unlike sabhyata or sanskriti, has a sense of movement. Sudhar, according to BhagvadGoMandal, suggests a movement toward virtue. It entails a choice in favor of the good and active, shunning all that is undesirable. It was this active, choice-enabling, virtue-enhancing possibility of Sudhar that Gandhi desired from civilization. Moreover, Sudhar in the more prevalent usage could also suggest reform, progress, contemporariness, change, and the influence of the modern West, all these senses being present in the English rendering.

There are instances in the Gujarati text where Gandhi has qualified the term “Sudharo.” The term “modern civilization” that is used in the English translation by Suresh Sharma and myself occurs in three distinct ways in the Gujarati text; as Sudharo, as aaj-kal no Sudharo, and as adhunik Sudharo. The term aaj-kal in Gujarati literally means “today and tomorrow.” It is used to indicate the contemporary and therefore transient nature of things; the term “modern” lacks this pronounced sense of transience. Interestingly, the term adhunik, which occurs only twice in the Gujarati text, also has a sense of transience, of lack of permanence, in Gujarati. By describing civilization as adhunik Sudharo Gandhi wished to emphasize not so much its modernity but the transient nature of that reality which passes under the name “civilization.” Therefore Gandhi declared that “this civilisation is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed.” In the Gujarati text he emphasized the self-destructive nature of modern civiliza-
tion by stating “te Sudharo nashkarak ane nashvant che” (this civilization is destructive and certain to be destroyed). This added emphasis is absent in the English text. In today’s Gujarati, both Sudharo as Civilization and adhunik as “ephemeral” have become recessive; we speak of adhunik in the sense of navin and hence modern.

In the Gujarati text, the term “Kudhar/Kudharo” (the wrong path) creates a play between Sudhar and Kudhar. This term, which occurs nine times in the Gujarati text, has been rendered as “civilisation only in name,” “civilisation as a disease,” and “reverse of civilisation.” In fact, six out of nine times Gandhi did not render the term “Kudhar” in the English text. This is true of many idiomatic Gujarati phrases. Gandhi either does not render them in English or chooses to provide a literal translation. He does not resort to equivalent idiomatic usages in English. For example, the Gujarati idiom “Miya ne Mahadev ne Na Bane” (Miya and Mahadev will always quarrel) is used to frame the argument about Hindu–Muslim relations and the had ver (inborn enmity) between the two communities. This idiom is used twice in the Gujarati text. Gandhi chose not to render it in English at all. In one instance he rendered it as “our very proverbs prove it,” and in the second instance as “the proverbs you have quoted.” While in case of “Jenu man changa che tene gher bethe ganga che,” Gandhi provided this literal English translation: “Those whose hearts were aglow with righteousness have the Ganges in their own home.”

Gandhi does something similar with the English phrases that occur in the Gujarati text. For instance, in the cases of the terms “extremists” and “moderates” he chose to explicate these terms in nonpolitical idioms: dhima (slow), utavala (impatient), bikan (timid), and himatvala (bold). Curiously, this explanation found its way into the English text as well. Where cultural practices that could approximate the English phrase were available, Gandhi used both terms in Gujarati. He explained “segregation” through the notion of ritual and in some cases temporary impurity, sutak. He invoked the outlaws of Saurashtra to explain guerrilla warfare: baharvatiya (literally, those who walk away). In case of the term “boycott,” he invoked much deeper cultural fears by describing it in terms of untouchability. The term abhadchet suggested that British cloth and machine-made things had not only to be shunned but were defiling. In what would be one of the most creative transpositions, Gandhi coined the phrase daya bal (force of pity or love) in Gujarati to capture the Christian sense of the active and transformative power of love, compassion, and pity.

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This kind of intertextuality between Gujarati and the English text is most evident in the case of four cognate terms: *daru-golo*, *hathiyar bal*, *top bal*, and *mara mari*. An entire range of fluid and interchangeable meanings is attributed to these four terms in Gandhi’s English text. He renders *daru-golo* as “brute-force,” “arms and ammunitions,” “gunpowder,” and “use of force.” The term “brute-force,” a force that is beastly, he employs to denote all those forces that oppose what Gandhi calls, in his English translation, “soul-force.” Apart from *daru-golo*, the term “brute-force” is used for *hathiyar bal* (force of arms), *top bal* (force of canons), *sharir bal* (body-force), and *mara mari* (violence). Both the act of violence and the instrumentality of violence he sought to convey through these terms.

Thus, in many of its central concerns, *Hind Swaraj* is a bilingual text; it was conceived simultaneously in two linguistic frames and rendered in two languages. It needs to be read in both languages as two original texts and not one as original and the other as a derivative translation.

*Hind Swaraj* is philosophically located at a fleeting, tantalizing moment in human history, in many ways aptly symbolized by the author’s journey aboard the *Kildonan Castle*. It is located at a moment where it is still possible to conceive of life outside the realm of the modern universe. In this moment, two modes of life and thought are present simultaneously. The first we may call amodern. Amodern is not antimodern. It is not nonmodern in the sense that “nonmodern” signifies absence of modernity. Amodern refers to something that lies outside the modern realm and has to be conceptualized without a necessary and inevitable referent to the modern. The other mode of life and thought that is present is modern civilization. *Hind Swaraj* should be read as a text that was written at a moment in history where both the amodern and modern universes existed simultaneously as large facts—however fleeting that moment might have been.

Gandhi’s deep unease with modern civilization stems from his argument that the purpose of a civilization is to make possible for those who live under it to know themselves. It is this capacity for self-understanding that defines civilization for Gandhi. “Civilisation is that mode of conduct that points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.”

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zation that makes possible knowledge of oneself is Sudhar, and one that precludes that possibility is Kudhar, or “reverse of civilization.”

For Gandhi, the essential character of modern civilization—Kudharo—is not represented by either the empire, the speed of railways, the contractual nature of society brought about by Western law, or the vivisection of modern Western medicine. Kudharo is also not represented by the use of violence as a legitimate means of expressing political dissent and obtaining political goals. The essential character of modern civilization is represented by denial of a fundamental possibility: the possibility of knowing oneself. Describing modern civilization, Gandhi says: “Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life.” This is an inadequate rendering of the original Gujarati, which could be rendered as “its true identity is in the fact that people seek to find in engagement with the material world and bodily comfort, meaning and human worth.” When the principal *purushartha* (four principal human endeavors) becomes a search for meaning and fulfillment in the material world and bodily comfort, it shifts the ground of judgment about human worth from the human person to the body and the material world. It is for this reason that Gandhi characterized modern civilization as “irreligion,” a “Satanic Civilisation,” and the “Black Age.” By shifting the locus of human endeavor outside the human person—to objects of bodily welfare—modern civilization also precludes the possibility of Swaraj (self-rule and rule over the self). “It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves.” This capacity to rule oneself is different from Home Rule or political freedom. Swaraj is predicated on Sudharo, a civilization that makes self-understanding its central concern.

Gandhi argued that Swaraj could not be obtained so long as Indians and the British remained in the vise-like grip of modern civilization. *Hind Swaraj* claims that this civilization is self-destructive and is certain to be obliterated. Anything that leads one away from oneself cannot be permanent for Gandhi. Despite decrying modern civilization and its emblems, *Hind Swaraj* is not a text of hatred. In fact, it is moved by deep love and empathy for those caught in the fire of modern civilization. *Hind Swaraj* is a theory of salvation, not only for India but also for Britain. Gandhi is at pains to point out that India’s struggle cannot be against the British but against the civilization they represent. He reminds the British that they are religious people, that their basic constitution as a people and a society is not flawed. Gandhi’s plea is that Britain be Christian in the true sense, and if they become moral and acknowledge that their pursuit is both irreligious.
and destructive, then the English can stay in India becoming moral people, not votaries of modern civilization and the empire that this civilization creates. *Hind Swaraj* is a rare document of contemporary thought that does not seek annihilation of the oppressor but in fact seeks their salvation. The duty of India for Gandhi is unique; it must not only realize Swaraj for itself but also free the British from the fires of modern civilization.

*Hind Swaraj* is a meditation on the question of means and ends. Violence for Gandhi is indelibly linked to modern civilization. Violence has to be shunned not only because Ahimsa (nonviolence, love, noninjury, non-killing) represents a superior morality but also because violence creates a distance between the self and the pursuit of Truth. “The more he took to violence, the more he receded from Truth.”17 Violence for Gandhi makes the possibility of knowing oneself even fainter. He therefore decries the argument that ends justify the means. He says: “‘As is the God, so is the votary’ is a maxim worth considering.”18 He likens means to a seed and ends to a tree, “and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree.”19 Not only is the relationship between means and ends inviolable, Gandhi argues for purity of both the means and the ends. One cannot worship God by the means of Satan. This emphasis on the purity of means and ends and their inviolable relationship between them is a unique contribution of *Hind Swaraj*.

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THE MEANS ARE MEDIATED through the human agency; in the final analysis, the pure means are those that are wielded by a pure person. It was this relationship between objects of senses and the attachment for them that attracted Gandhi to the Bhagavad Gita. He read the Gita first in Sir Edwin Arnold’s verse translation— *The Song Celestial*—with theosophist friends in England. The poem struck him as one of “priceless worth.” Verses 62 and 63 of the second discourse made a deep impression:

If one  
Ponders on objects of the sense, there springs  
Attraction; from attraction grows desire,  
Desire flames to fierce passion, passion breeds  
Recklessness; then the memory—all betrayed—Lets noble purpose  
go, and saps the mind,  
Till purpose, mind, and man are all undone.20
More than thirty years later at the time of writing his autobiography, these verses still rang in his ears. These verses claim that those—both individuals and, Gandhi would argue, civilizations—that make bodily welfare their object and measure human worth in and through them are certain to be ruined. The verses describe a state that is opposed to that of *brahmacharya*. When Gandhi read these stanzas in 1888–1889, he was still far from taking a vow of *brahmacharya*, even in the limited sense of chastity and celibacy, a central quest of his life. But what awakened in young Gandhi was a religious quest and longing that was to govern his entire life henceforth. The Gita became his lifelong companion. He translated the Gita as *Anasakti Yoga* in Gujarati. His engagement with the Gita, though deep, was in no way singularly unique. India's national movement displayed a marked preference for the Gita.

The path of the Gita for Gandhi was neither that of contemplation nor of devotion but that of *anasakta* (desire-less, unattached) action. This idea is embodied in the Gita in the image of the *sthitpragnya* (one whose intellect is secure); who acts without attachment either to the action or fruits thereof. Gandhi adopted two modes of self-practice to attain the state where one acts yet does not act. These two modes were *yajna* (sacrifice; a traditional Hindu concept) and Satyagraha; both deeply personal and simultaneously political.

The Gita declared that “together with the sacrifice did the Lord of beings create.” Gandhi saw this idea of sacrifice—of the self and not a symbolic, ritualistic sacrifice—as the basis of all religions. The ideal, of course, was Jesus; Gandhi said that the word *yajna* had to be understood in the way Jesus lived and died. “Jesus put on a crown of thorns to win salvation for his people, allowed his hands and feet to be nailed and suffered agonies before he gave up the ghost. This has been the law of *yajna* from immemorial times, without *yajna* the earth cannot exist even for a moment.” But how is one to perform such sacrifice in daily life? Gandhi’s response was twofold: for one he turned to the Bible, and the other was uniquely his own. “Earn thy bread by the sweat of thy brow,” says the Bible. Gandhi made this central to the life at the ashram and borrowed the term “bread labour” to describe it. The other form of *yajna* was peculiar to his times: it referred to the spinning that was an obligatory ashram observance, each member being required to spin 140 threads daily, each thread measuring four feet. This spinning was called *sutra-yajna* (sacrificial spinning). As his conviction regarding spinning as the true *yajna* deepened, his ashram, hitherto
called Satyagraha Ashram, was renamed Udyog Mandir (literally, temple of industry). Explaining the term udyog, Gandhi said: “Udyog has to be read in the light of the Bhagvad Gita.”

If the Gita and the state of the sthitpragnya informed and guided Gandhi’s spiritual quest to attain self-realization, Satyagraha was his chosen means to attain Swaraj.

**HIND SWARAJ ONLY SUGGESTS** and alludes to the idea of a satyagrahi and the practice of Satyagraha. Gandhi wrote an account of the struggle of the Indian people in South Africa, *Dakshin Africa Na Satyagraha No Itihas* (Satyagraha in South Africa). He wanted this account to be read alongside his autobiography, almost as a companion volume: “I need hardly mention that those who are following the weekly chapters of *My Experiments with Truth* cannot afford to miss these chapters on Satyagraha, if they would follow in all details the working out of the search after Truth.” Gandhi clearly saw his spiritual quest and political striving as enjoined and stemming from the same root. Satyagraha has its roots in a pledge, taken in the name of God and with God as witness. Satyagraha as a philosophy and a practice is recognition of the humanity of others. Without this recognition no dialogue about the nature of truth can take place. Gandhi insisted that Truth could not be one’s own relative, constricted idea of truth.

Gandhi increasingly came to believe that a person who wielded such a pure means had to be pure. In *Hind Swaraj* and *Satyagraha in South Africa*, this aspect is recessive, though he does mention the need for voluntary poverty, brahmacharya, and fearlessness. The reason for this recessive presence lies in the fact that during his South African years his understanding of the ashram and ashram observances had not fully matured. He had established two “ashram-like” communities in South Africa, but one was a “settlement” (Phoenix Settlement) while the other was a “farm” (Tolstoy Farm). Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* provided the initial impulse for Phoenix. Though it had a religious basis, “the visible object was purity of body and mind as well as economic equality.” Celibacy was not regarded as essential, in fact, coworkers were expected to live as family men and have children. Gandhi began to look on Phoenix as a deliberate religious institution after 1906, when he took the vow of brahmacharya and celibacy that became an imperative for a life devoted to service. In 1911, the establishment of Tolstoy Farm
was recognition that Satyagraha required a community where the families of satyagrahis could live and lead a religious life.

Gandhi as a satyagrahi is understood only when we understand him as an ashramite. Gandhi wrote two works, Satyagraha Ashram No Itihas (Ashram Observances in Action) and Mangal Prabhat (From Yeravda Mandir), to explain the philosophy and practice of ashram life. On his return to India Gandhi established an ashram at Kochrab in Ahmedabad on 25 May 1915. It shifted to the banks of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad in 1917 and was called Satyagraha Ashram, as it owed its very existence to the “pursuit and attempted practice of Truth.” Gandhi described the ashram as a community of men of religion. The emphasis was both on community and religious life. The word “religion” indicated a nondenominational idea of dharma. What gave the inhabitants an idea of being part of a religious community were a set of eleven vows (ekadash vrata). Three of these were Gandhi’s response to his times and context (removal of untouchability, equality of all religions, and Swadeshi), while the inclusion of bread labor was an innovation in the Indian context, where notions of social and ritual purity and impurity are determined also by the materials that one deals with. The other seven were part of many Indic traditions. Gandhi’s originality lay in the fact that he made them central to the political realm. Ashram observances were essential for those who wished to wield the pure means of Satyagraha.

Thus, Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj, his Satyagraha in South Africa, and his autobiography make sense only when read along with the ashram observances. In the last lines of Hind Swaraj, Gandhi made an assertion and a dedication: “In my opinion, we have used the term ‘Swaraj’ without understanding its real significance. I have endeavoured to explain it as I understand it, and my conscience testifies that my life henceforth is dedicated to its attainment.” The true meaning and significance of a life dedicated to the attainment of Swaraj can be understood only when one understands Gandhi as an ashramite.

Finally, one must face the question of lack of comprehension and unease that Hind Swaraj has aroused, both in Gandhi’s times and in ours. The possible answers might lie in the fluidity of the text. The meaning of the term “Hind Swaraj” kept evolving with Gandhi. It was no longer a text; it became sets of practices: Satyagraha, voluntary poverty, ashram life, constructive
work in villages, his lifelong striving to understand and eradicate untouchability and to secure Hindu–Muslim unity. When Gandhi spoke of *Hind Swaraj* as his seed text, he was referring to all these manifestations of its ideals. Text and life became inseparable. Another explanation for the lack of comprehension and unease is that *Hind Swaraj* came to be seen as an anti-modern manifesto. Nehru’s response was characteristic of it. All those who wanted a modern nation-state found the Gandhi of *Hind Swaraj* dispensable. Equally significant was a response from those who were oppressed by tradition—women, Dalits, religious and other minorities. They took Gandhi’s critique of modernity as an advocacy for obscurantism, oppressive tradition. His argument that modern civilization precludes the possibility of self-recognition was both alien and unacceptable to them. They also found Gandhi’s insistence on self-recognition as the sole ground from which Swaraj and Civilization emanates contrary to modern political practices and discourse. This is so because in Gandhi’s estimation it is the spiritual and the moral that are primary over the realm of the political, while contemporary politics sees itself as the final arbitrator of all questions, even questions of first principles.

But it is because of these multiple, divisive readings that *Hind Swaraj* invites us to engage with it again and again. It urges us to keep its ideas in motion.

**NOTES**


16. The term “Swaraj” occurs fifty-six times in the Gujarati text. The English rendering alternates between “Home Rule” and “Swaraj,” the choice being guided by the context of usage and the distance or proximity that Gandhi wished to suggest with his own vision. Out of fifty-six occurrences of the term “Swaraj” in Gujarati, it has been rendered as “Home Rule” in twenty-eight instances.
22. CWMG, 20:404.
23. CWMG, 43:203.
25. CWMG, 50:189.
27. They are Satya (truth), Ahimsa (nonviolence or love), Brahmacharya (chastity), Asvad (control of the palate), Asteya (nonstealing), Aparigraha (nonpossession or poverty), Abhaya (fearlessness), Ashprushyata Nivaran (removal of untouchability), Sharer Shrama (bread labor), Sarva Dharma Samabhav (tolerance or equality of religions), Swadeshi.