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Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles: The 'India Against Corruption' Movement, its Critics, and the Re-Making of 'Gandhi'

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India recently witnessed a prominent movement against state corruption led by the 'India Against Corruption' (IAC) group, which came under criticism for utilising the Gandhian hunger strike as a protest tactic. This essay examines the Gandhi and the Gandhianism conjured up by the movement's critics, who dismissed the IAC as either sacrilegiously un-Gandhian or anachronistically Gandhian. I argue that these critics reinstated Gandhi and Gandhianism as unidimensional, ossified and largely inimitable texts. In so doing, they glossed over the contradictions, experimentation and ambivalences that marked Gandhi's life and attributed to him a closure that he disavowed. This desire to reproduce or preserve the 'real' Gandhi needs to give way to more creative mimicry, so that his praxis can be reinvented and enlivened by social movements today.

Keywords: Gandhi; Anna Hazare; 'India Against Corruption'; IAC; hunger strikes; social movements; India

Anna Hazare. . .has certainly borrowed both style and technique from the Mahatma. . .
Like Gandhi, he fasts. Like Gandhi, he goes to prison. . . Like Gandhi, he has
mobilised large numbers of Indians. . . .¹

Hazare will never be Gandhi, of course. . . .²

Introduction

Arvind Kejriwal's office sits at the end of a quiet road in an area where the eastern edge of Delhi bleeds into Uttar Pradesh. This was the epicentre of the now disbanded 'India Against Corruption' (IAC) movement, which Kejriwal, an ex-bureaucrat, led with Anna Hazare, a well-known Gandhian activist, and others. I had visited this bungalow-turned-office many times in 2009 and 2010, while I conducted research on India's Right to Information or RTI law, with which Kejriwal was then associated, but had never seen it as crowded as it was on 22 March 2012.³ Media vans were parked outside and people milled about the front veranda.

I thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor of *South Asia* whose invaluable input helped sharpen my arguments.

¹ 'Indian Corruption: Gandhi's Mantle', *The Guardian* (17 Aug. 2011) [<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/17/anna-hazare-gandhi-india-corruption>, accessed 9 July 2013].

² Mitu Sengupta, 'Anna Hazare and the Idea of Gandhi', in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, no. 3 (Aug. 2012), p. 600.

³ I volunteered for Parivartan, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) founded by Kejriwal, which raised awareness about the RTI law. I have since followed Kejriwal's involvement in social movements and institutionalised politics.

The main office upstairs was packed with some sixty women and men, from across the class and age spectrum, discussing plans for an upcoming fast and rally.

The rally, to be held on 25 March 2012, was the IAC's latest action for clean governance. 'Team Anna', as the IAC leadership was popularly dubbed, initiated the fight for a new anti-corruption law—the Jan Lokpal Bill—in late 2010 and used hunger strikes as a key mode of protest. Prior to launching this campaign, both Hazare and Kejriwal were involved with the struggle to enact and implement India's RTI Act, which was supposed to make the state accountable and less corrupt. The RTI law was able to expose governmental wrong-doing, Kejriwal explained to me, but it did not provide the means to bring errant officials to book. Hence, he, Hazare and others began agitating for a Jan Lokpal Bill. The Bill proposed to set up a powerful and independent ombudsman's office with a mandate to investigate corruption charges against state representatives, and to prosecute and punish them if necessary.

The IAC used a *mélange* of religious and patriotic signs to sell their revolution: images of Bharat Mata or Mother India associated with the Hindu Right wing; posters of the revolutionary hero, Bhagat Singh, who was executed by the British in 1931; and Gandhian caps and photographs. Indeed, this campaign was labelled a '*satyagraha*' that would end graft and implement '*swaraj*' ('self-rule'), in obvious reference to Gandhi. The logic of bringing together Gandhi and Bhagat Singh—one an older, religious messiah of non-violence who was unsympathetic to socialism,⁴ and the other a young atheist Leftist who used different means to fight for India's freedom—seems odd. But this polyglot of symbols allowed the IAC to claim a fuzzy, yet inclusive, nationalist space, at once secular, religious, Gandhian, liberal or even ideologically neutral, given that corruption was presented as a simple moral problem.⁵ The extent to which this smorgasbord of symbols and ideological agility allowed the IAC to widen its appeal among the citizenry is debatable. But it did make the movement a target of critiques from across the political spectrum. Politicians, journalists, public intellectuals and academics argued that the IAC had a right-wing Hindu agenda, or that it was promoting anarchy, or fascist authoritarianism. Furthermore, many critics measured Hazare, a self-identified Gandhian, and his team's *satyagraha* against Gandhi and his actions.

In this essay, I home in on the critiques of the IAC that revolved around Gandhi, critiques which variously deemed the movement as sacrilegiously un-Gandhian or as anachronistically Gandhian. I am interested in analysing the 'Gandhi' and the Gandhianism conjured by critics of Team Anna.⁶ I argue that in evaluating Team Anna's Gandhian pedigree, the critics discursively produced Gandhi as an immutable relic with an ossified and, at times, worn-out ideology.⁷ Those who charged Team Anna with being un-Gandhian contributed to what Claude Markovits calls 'the already imposing hagiographic edifice built... by the many priests of the Gandhian cult'.⁸ They ironed out the ambivalences and controversies that marked Gandhi's life and, instead, deified an airbrushed, unmatched Mahatma.⁹ While such anointing of Gandhi was absent from the opinions of those who castigated Team Anna for using outdated Gandhian methods, they nevertheless referenced Gandhianism as a hardened

⁴ Perry Anderson, 'Gandhi Centre Stage', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 34, no. 13 (5 July 2012), pp. 3–11.

⁵ Mitu Sengupta, 'Anna Hazare and the Idea of Gandhi', pp. 593–601.

⁶ See Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma', in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 288–348.

⁷ Shiv Viswanathan, 'Pickling Gandhi and Tagore', IBN Live Blogs (9 Aug. 2011) [<http://ibnlive.in.com/blogs/shivviswanathan/2943/62605/pickling-gandhi-and-tagore.html>, accessed 9 July 2013].

⁸ Claude Markovits, *The UnGandhian Gandhi: The Life and Afterlife of the Mahatma* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), p. 1.

⁹ Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma', pp. 288–348.

praxis, rather than as an experimental and evolving one. Both sets of critics, thus, resurrected Gandhi and Gandhianism as standardised and fossilised texts. Ironically, during his lifetime, Gandhi resisted precisely this closure.

I proceed by introducing the IAC campaign and criticisms of its fasts, offering ethnographic observations and media accounts. I then tease out the complexities of Gandhi's hunger strikes. In fact, Gandhi left us with a bundle of contradictions that were not adequately addressed by the critics of Team Anna. By rendering the Mahatma as a relic who cannot or need not be replicated, these critics do a disservice to movements in contemporary India that attempt to enliven Gandhi differently. I end by arguing that this discursive production of the 'real' Gandhi, and the logic of duplication it rests upon, need to be substituted by mimicry and reinvention.¹⁰

A Satyagraha against Corruption and its Critics

In 2011, Hazare fasted thrice in an effort to bring moral pressure to bear upon parliament to pass a strong Jan Lokpal Bill. The government agreed to jointly draft the Bill with the IAC members and civil society representatives after the first fast in April 2011. However, this collaborative effort broke down in June, and Hazare announced another fast in August 2011. The government refused permission for this hunger strike and imprisoned Hazare and other members of Team Anna on 16 August. Shortly thereafter, it ordered their release, but Team Anna refused to leave prison. They demanded and were granted official permission for a fast, and the IAC leaders left jail after four days with much fanfare and increased public support. Hazare's hunger strike lasted for twelve days and drew tens of thousands of people. The government assured Team Anna that it would pass a strong Jan, or People's, Lokpal Bill, but then backtracked. Hazare began another fast in Mumbai in December 2011, ending it three days later. The IAC claimed that Hazare was unwell, but critics argued that the crowds he anticipated had simply failed to materialise. Meanwhile, the lower house of parliament passed a watered-down version of the Lokpal Bill, which subsequently stalled in the upper house at the end of December 2011.

The 25 March 2012 'token' fast, which I attended, came next. Its purpose was to underscore the need for tough anti-corruption measures by highlighting the murders of 25 whistle-blowers, including a number of RTI activists. I arrived at Jantar Mantar, a popular protest site in New Delhi, on the day of the rally and saw a lot of people sporting Gandhian caps with the words 'I am Anna' printed on them. Some wore 'Being Young' T-shirts bearing Bhagat Singh's image. They waved the Indian flag and shouted nationalist slogans such as '*Bharat mata ki jai*' ('Hail Mother India'), '*Inquilab zindabad*' ('Long live the revolution'), and '*Vande mataram*' ('I bow to thee, mother'). I had to pass through a metal detector to enter the fast venue. I noticed farmers' and workers' groups holding signs announcing their support for Team Anna. There were far fewer women than men. Posters of the murdered whistle-blowers had been put up everywhere. Media vans, boom mikes and journalists jostled for space, as did the police. There were water stalls and information booths where one could pick up pamphlets about the Jan Lokpal Bill. A few people hawked food.

Team Anna members sat on a stage, against a backdrop of a large image of Gandhi and smaller photographs of the dead whistle-blowers—all men—printed on a white banner. Framing the pictures were two captions in Hindi: 'War against corruption. How many more

¹⁰ William Mazzarella, 'Branding the Mahatma: The Untimely Provocation of Gandhian Publicity', in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 25, no. 1 (Feb. 2010), pp. 1–39; and Viswanathan, 'Pickling Gandhi and Tagore'.

martyrs?’ and ‘If there were a Jan Lokpal Bill in place, then maybe they would be alive’. Facing the stage was a seating area, packed beyond capacity. Most people stood and watched the events unfold on stage and on screens placed around the venue. IAC leaders and family members of the slain whistle-blowers gave speeches, which were punctuated by video clips about the ‘martyrs’ and about parliamentary debates on the Jan Lokpal Bill, poetry readings and patriotic songs. Kejriwal named fourteen government ministers facing allegations of corruption, amid loud cheering from the crowd.

Hazare, wearing his usual Gandhian garb, spoke at the end of the day. He emphasised the need to continue the fight for the Jan Lokpal Bill, for a whistle blowers’ bill, and for ‘*lokshahi*’ (‘people’s rule’). Hazare rued the sham freedom India had won in 1947 and exhorted the public to fight for ‘*sahi azaadi*’ or ‘true freedom’. He called for a revamping of development and land acquisition policies that exploit farmers and reward industrialists, and for the establishment of Gandhian ‘*gram swaraj*’ or ‘village self-rule’. And, in response to anyone who doubted his ability to fast given his advanced age, Hazare pointed to celibate living as his source of strength: another nod to Gandhi.

This fast was followed by a fast-until-death begun on 25 July 2012 by some members of Team Anna, which was called off on 3 August because the government refused to acknowledge, let alone negotiate with, the hunger strikers. Hazare declared fasts a waste of time and Kejriwal announced that the country needed a political alternative. The IAC disbanded. Kejriwal formed the new Aam Aadmi (common man) Party, while Hazare continues his non-party-based agitation.

Criticism of the IAC abounded in the public sphere.¹¹ The movement’s alleged connections with the Hindu Right were condemned. Many critics suggested that the IAC agitation was a farcical middle-class revolution conjured by and for television.¹² Team Anna’s fuzzy moral stand on corruption, which lacked a critique of structural inequalities and neo-liberal economic policies, was taken apart.¹³ Some questioned the efficacy of taking a state-dependent, legal approach to ending corruption, asking if this represented an ‘over-judicialization of resistance’.¹⁴ Many accused the IAC of making a mockery of the principles and institutions of democracy.¹⁵ They argued that the proposed bill would create an

¹¹ I watched debates on NDTV and surveyed newspapers, including *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India* and *The New York Times*, magazines such as *Caravan* and *Tehelka*, and the political blog site, Kafila (www.kafila.org).

¹² Manu Joseph, ‘Indian Revolution Born in Farce Ends in One’, *The New York Times* (4 Jan. 2012); and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, ‘At the Risk of Heresy: Why I am Not Celebrating with Anna Hazare’, Kafila (9 April 2011) [<http://kafila.org/2011/04/09/at-the-risk-of-heresy-why-i-am-not-celebrating-with-anna-hazare/>, accessed 9 July 2013].

¹³ Shoma Chaudhury, ‘Pride, Prejudice, and Candles in the Wind’, in *Tehelka*, Vol. 16, no. 8 (23 April 2011) [<http://tehelka.com/pride-prejudice-and-candles-in-the-wind>, accessed 9 July 2013]; Mridula Mukherjee, ‘Why This “Freedom” is False’, *The Indian Express* (23 April 2011) [<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/why-this-freedom-is-false/780101/>, accessed 9 July 2013]; Prabhat Patnaik, ‘Afterword on a Movement’, in *Monthly Review Zine* (12 September 2011) [<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/patnaik120911.html>, accessed 9 July 2013]; and Arundhati Roy, ‘When Corruption is Viewed Fuzzily’, *The Indian Express* (30 April 2011) [<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/when-corruption-is-viewed-fuzzily/783688/0>, accessed 9 July 2013].

¹⁴ Nandini Sundar, ‘Sparring Partners’, *Hindustan Times* (28 June 2011) [<http://www.hindustantimes.com/editorial-views-on/Edits/Sparring-partners/Article1-714934.aspx>, accessed 9 July 2013]. See also Aditya Nigam, ‘Anna Hazare, Democracy and Politics: A Response to Shuddhabrata Sengupta’, Kafila (10 April 2011) [<http://kafila.org/2011/04/10/anna-hazare-democracy-and-politics-a-response-to-shuddhabrata-sengupta/>, accessed 9 July 2013].

¹⁵ Pratap Bhanu Mehta, ‘Of the Few, By the Few’, *The Indian Express* (7 April 2011) [<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/of-the-few-by-the-few/772773/0>, accessed 9 July 2013]; and Mukherjee, ‘Why This “Freedom” is False’.

authoritarian and centralised Orwellian monstrosity,¹⁶ akin to an unaccountable ‘council of guardians’ as in Iran.¹⁷ Other critics raised serious questions about the representativeness of the IAC movement: who were ‘the people’ that Team Anna claimed to speak for? And why should unelected IAC leaders make laws? P. Sainath, a well-respected journalist, asserted that ‘There is a problem when groups not constituted legally cross the line of...democratic agitation...[and insist] that their fatwas be written into law’.¹⁸

The federal government described members of the movement as ‘armchair fascists, overground Maoists, closet anarchists...lurking behind forces of right reaction and funded by invisible donors whose links may go back a long way abroad’.¹⁹ The IAC, then, was cast as both an extreme Left and extreme Right anti-state conspiracy funded by the oft-blamed ‘foreign hand’. Politicians from different parties castigated the dictatorial bent of the IAC, arguing, as Lalu Prasad Yadav did, that ‘Parliament cannot be run from the footpath and roads’.²⁰

Public intellectuals and academics also levelled charges of undemocratic coercion: “‘Anna-will-keep-fasting-until-his-bill-is-adopted-or-amended-with-his-permission’”, which amounts to holding a gun to the head...of Parliament, and dictating that the bill it has produced must be passed, or else mayhem will follow’, stated Prabhat Patnaik.²¹ Shuddhabrata Sengupta likened hunger strikes to ‘suicide bombing in slow motion’, describing them as a form of violent ‘coercion [that] can never nourish democracy’.²² And Arjun Appadurai saw in the IAC demonstrations ‘disturbing echoes of mass rallies under Hitler and Stalin with the working and middle-classes adoring a mediocre and Chaplinesque figure who promises a new wave of moral cleansing’.²³

For a number of critics, the IAC campaign exemplified a dangerous strategy of righteousness that relied on ‘good’ people shaming ‘bad’ state representatives. This politics of virtue promulgated by supposedly well-intentioned men—they were almost all men—made a hash of democracy. Pratap Bhanu Mehta saw the IAC’s use of ‘coercive moral power’ and ‘vilification of the political processes’ as unreasonable, and as problematic in a democratic set-up: ‘We should not turn a complex institutional question into a simplistic moral imperative’, he said.²⁴

Gandhi, as symbol par excellence of the moral or ‘saintly’ idiom of Indian politics,²⁵ was the point of reference for these critics. Many argued that the IAC campaign represented a poor impersonation, if not a complete up-ending, of Gandhi’s values. Prabhat Patnaik alleged that ‘to call [Hazare’s] *fasts-unto-death* “non-violent” is wrong, since they are of the

¹⁶ Neera Chandoke, ‘The Seeds of Authoritarianism’, *The Indian Express* (12 April 2011) [http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-seeds-of-authoritarianism/774794/, accessed 9 July 2013].

¹⁷ Shuddhabrata Sengupta, ‘At the Risk of Heresy’.

¹⁸ P. Sainath, ‘The Discreet Charm of Civil Society’, *The Hindu* (17 June 2011) [http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columnists/sainath/article2110433.ece?homepage=true, accessed 9 July 2013].

¹⁹ Mehboob Jeelani, ‘The Insurgent’, in *The Caravan: A Journal of Politics and Culture* (1 Sept. 2011) [http://www.caravanmagazine.in/story.aspx?StoryId=1050, accessed 9 July 2013].

²⁰ Hari Kumar, ‘Shifting Debate over Lokpal’, *The New York Times* (India Ink) (27 Dec. 2011) [http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/27/shifting-debate-over-lokpal/, accessed 9 July 2013].

²¹ Prabhat Patnaik, ‘Messianism vs. Democracy’, *The Hindu* (24 Aug. 2011) [http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/messianism-versus-democracy/article2389694.ece, accessed 9 July 2011].

²² Shuddhabrata Sengupta, ‘At the Risk of Heresy’.

²³ Arjun Appadurai, ‘Our Corruption, Ourselves’, *Kafila* (8 Aug. 2011) [http://kafila.org/2011/08/30/our-corruption-our-selves-arjun-appadurai/, accessed 9 July 2013].

²⁴ Mehta, ‘Of the Few, By the Few’.

²⁵ W.H. Morris-Jones, ‘India’s Political Idioms’, in C.H. Philips (ed.), *Politics and Society in India* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), pp. 133–54.

“concede-our-demands-or-else-there-will-be-violence” sort, that is, of the coercive sort. Gandhiji’s fasts were not of this type’.²⁶ Mridula Mukherjee argued that whereas Gandhi produced ‘political beings out of India’s apathetic “dumb millions”’, Team Anna’s ‘disdain for the political class and the political processes of representative democracy... is most dangerous’.²⁷ Still others described Hazare as ‘pantomiming Gandhi’ and of being a ‘relic of Gandhi’s way of life’, but they also hinted that Hazare, like Gandhi, was an ‘obsolete man’.²⁸ To understand these critiques and the Gandhi and the Gandhianism they imagine, I turn to Gandhi’s fasts. My intention is not to paint a rigid picture of the man, but to tease out the ambiguities and tensions inherent in his praxis.

‘Epic’ Fasts

Gandhi’s fasts need to be set against his larger politico-moral ideoscape, an experimental and shifting pastiche of beliefs and practices that revolved around truth. Gandhi made insisting on truth—*satyagraha*—a ‘condition and consequence of the political’.²⁹ Truth, however, was not an absolute, objective and universal value, but an experiential category embodied and elaborated in practice.³⁰ Furthermore, Gandhi’s truth-based moral politics were directed both outwards, at the state and society at large, and inwards. He at once disentangled ‘the political’ from ‘the state’ and squarely located the self in this political space.³¹ Indeed, his body became an important site for political transformation, physical strengthening and moral regeneration, where truths could be worked upon. Joseph Alter terms this Gandhi’s ‘biomoral’ politics, which was both corporeal and moral, and aimed at the body and the body politic.³²

Thus, Gandhi’s call for *swaraj*, to be attained through *satyagraha*, involved not only national liberation and self-rule, but also entailed de-colonising bodies and minds. Throwing out the British while leaving intact Western institutions and lifestyles would not lead to freedom. Resisting the vices of consumption and excess—markers of immoral and violent modernity—and cultivating ethical and ascetic selves through bodily and moral discipline were integral to *satyagraha* and *swaraj*.

For Gandhi, celibacy (*brahmacharya*) and fasts were of a piece. Sex and food—as forms of sensual pleasures that emasculated the individual and national body—had to be renounced in ‘thought, word, and deed’.³³ He took the vow of celibacy in 1906 and argued that it helped purify and strengthen the body and mind. Fasting also symbolised physical and moral

²⁶ Prabhat Patnaik, ‘Anna Hazare and Gandhi’, *The Telegraph* (21 June 2011) [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110621/jsp/opinion/story_14136304.jsp, accessed 9 July 2013]. Italics in original.

²⁷ Mukherjee, ‘Why This “Freedom” is False’.

²⁸ Manu Joseph, ‘The Anna Hazare Show: The Comic Revolution of an Obsolete Man’, *Open Magazine* (9 April 2011) [<http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/voices/the-anna-hazare-show>, accessed 9 July 2013].

²⁹ Shruti Kapila, ‘Gandhi before Mahatma: The Foundations of Political Truth’, in *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 2011), p. 435.

³⁰ Uday Mehta, ‘Patience, Inwardness, and Self-Knowledge in Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*’, in *Public Culture*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 417–29.

³¹ David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours: The Global Legacy of His Ideas* (Scottsville, SA: University of Natal Press, 2003).

³² Joseph Alter, *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 4. See also Judith Brown, ‘Gandhi: Guru for the 1990s?’, in Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 82–97.

³³ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (trans. Mahadev Desai) (Charleston, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), p. 108.

cleansing and overcoming the self. Gandhi fasted routinely as a matter of religious duty, health and atonement and, less frequently, but more ‘spectacularly’, for politico-moral consciousness-raising. Fasting for him was a tactic of *satyagraha*: a means by which to walk the path of truth and deploy ‘the power of emptiness against a world full of violence and injustice’.³⁴ But it had to be used cautiously, selflessly and non-coercively. Gandhi’s dialogic and non-violent approach to politics involved changing people’s hearts.³⁵ A fast, therefore, could not be used to force loved ones and powerful people to yield under duress.³⁶ This, however, was not easily achieved in practice, making fasting a complicated strategy of *satyagraha*.

Gandhi’s 1913 fast at the Phoenix Settlement in South Africa set the tone for his subsequent use of this tactic. Two of his students had a sexual lapse, which necessitated that ‘the guilty parties... be made to realize [his] distress, and the depth of their own fall’.³⁷ In order to atone for his failings as a teacher and for his students’ sins, Gandhi declared a seven-day fast. He averred that fasting was a ‘drastic remedy’, not to be trifled with, but used to persuade the morally strong: ‘it presupposes clearness of vision and spiritual fitness. Where there is no true love between the teacher and the pupil... fasting is out of place’.³⁸ While the Phoenix fast taught residents ‘what a terrible thing it was to be sinful’, Gandhi admitted that it also ‘pained everybody’.³⁹ He did not, however, see his moral act as coercive.

Gandhi undertook one of his first well-known fasts in India in March 1918 to support textile mill-workers in Ahmedabad: they wanted a 50 percent increase in wages to compensate for inflation and disease, but were offered no more than 20 percent by their bosses. Gandhi, who personally knew many of the mill-owners, intervened on behalf of the workers even though he was not sympathetic to socialism: ‘I am not particularly disposed to favour workers as workers; I am on the side of justice and often this is found to be on their side... I can never think of harming the great industry of Ahmedabad’.⁴⁰ He requested a fair wage increase of 35 percent, which the owners refused, and a lockout began on 22 February 1918.

Gandhi asked the mill-hands to pledge that they would not return to work unless their demand was met and he issued leaflets to raise their awareness about the principles of *satyagraha*. The workers were to remain peaceful and non-violent and neither resent their employers nor cause any property damage. He exhorted them to do manual labour during the lockout to prevent destitution and assured them that he and the other leaders would not let them starve. They were to avoid slothful habits, give up addictive substances and gambling, and keep their homes clean. Most importantly, the workers were to stand by their pledge: ‘[Y]ou have taken it not because Gandhi wanted you to do so, but in the name of God’.⁴¹ The lines between persuasion, discipline and coercion, then, were easily blurred.

On 12 March, the owners offered the workers a 20 percent wage increase. Some workers wanted to return to work, but were prevented from doing so by their co-workers. Gandhi

³⁴ Alter, *Gandhi’s Body*, p. xi.

³⁵ Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*; and Mehta, ‘Patience, Inwardness, and Self-Knowledge in Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*’.

³⁶ Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, p. 52.

³⁷ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 180.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter *CWMG*), Vol. 14 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1969) [<https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi>, accessed 2 May 2014], p. 211.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

reminded them that accepting less than a 35 percent raise would dishonour their pledge and be unmanly. They could not, however, forcibly prevent others from returning to work: 'If coercion is used, the whole struggle is likely to be weakened and will collapse. . . . [W]orkers are to rely solely on the rightness of their demand and of their conduct'.⁴² He called for a strike and commenced a fast on 15 March.

Gandhi fasted because he saw the workers' resolve wavering under hardship and feared 'rowdyism on their part'.⁴³ He also got wind of their criticism of his friendly relations with the owners, and of him eating well and travelling in cars while they suffered. He needed to demonstrate his commitment to the cause and the sacredness of a pledge. 'I felt that, if I wanted to keep you to the path of *dharma* and show you the worth of an oath and the value of labour', he told the workers, 'I must set a concrete example before you [by fasting]. . . . Nobody can be . . . coerced to keep his oath. Love is the only inducement'.⁴⁴

Upon learning of Gandhi's fast, the mill-owners offered the wage raise demanded. Gandhi, however, refused the offer: '[W]e shall be ridiculed if we accept 35 per cent granted out of pity for Gandhiji. . . . Employers cannot and need not pay attention to this fast'.⁴⁵ He ended his fast on 18 March when a settlement was reached. Gandhi stated that the fast gave him peace. The fact that 'a new consciousness stirred in [the workers] and they got strength to stand by their pledge'⁴⁶ was, for him, a positive outcome. At the same time, however, he noted that his fast 'was not free from a grave defect' because it had put unnecessary, albeit unintended, pressure on the mill-owners, even though it was not directed at them.⁴⁷ '*My weak condition left the mill-owners no freedom. It is against the principles of justice to. . . make [people] agree to any condition or obtain anything whatever under duress*'.⁴⁸ Gandhi also regretted the behaviour of the workers and his own miscalculation of their capacity to suffer. *Satyagraha* required an absolute commitment and preparedness, both moral and physical, which he embodied, but the workers lacked. They had 'yet to learn how and when to take a pledge' and to follow the principle of non-violence in deed *and* thought.⁴⁹

Gandhi insisted on a persuasive path to politics, guided by good intentions and ethical ideals. The effects of his political acts, however, were ambiguous and uneven. His 1918 fast showed that pure motives do not always mean an absence of coercion. Although he took partial responsibility for this 'tainted' fast (and all the credit for its success), Gandhi did not doubt his own ability to lead by example or exert moral authority over the mill-hands. The workers, however, questioned his ability to speak in their name, given his personal relationship with their bosses, and were willing to defy his injunctions. The issues of force and representation would come up again in 1932, during another one of Gandhi's 'epic', yet controversial, fasts.

In 1932, he protested against the British granting separate electorates to Dalits (the depressed classes or untouchables, as they were then called).⁵⁰ Gandhi considered himself a representative of the Dalits because he had 'chosen' to live like one. He had accepted separate

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁴³ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 228.

⁴⁴ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 14, p. 257.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴⁷ Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 229.

⁴⁸ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 14, pp. 265–6 (italics in original).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁵⁰ This decision was the result of round table conferences (1930–32), where the British consulted Indian leaders, including B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi, on constitutional reforms.

electorates for Muslims, but not for the Dalits because, he claimed, they were Hindus and separate electorates would tear apart the Hindu community. The scourge of untouchability was a religious and moral issue, open to social and religious reform, but not to political intervention by the British. On 13 November 1931, Gandhi declared that he would ‘resist. . .with [his] life’⁵¹ separate electorates for Dalits, a pledge he reiterated on 11 March 1932 in a letter to the secretary of state:

I am painfully conscious of the fact that [a fast until death]. . .will be regarded by many as highly improper on the part of one holding my position to introduce into the political field methods which they would describe as hysterical, if not much worse. . . . [F]or me the contemplated step is not a method, it is part of my being. It is a call of conscience which I dare not disobey. . . .⁵²

Nevertheless, on 17 August 1932, the British announced separate electorates for Dalits for a twenty-year period; Gandhi then informed the British prime minister that he would commence an indefinite fast on 20 September unless this decision was reversed. He also requested that his announcement be made public. As soon as Gandhi’s plan was known, he was flooded with requests to change his mind. But he remained unmoved in his pledge to follow God’s command.

Similarly to 1918, Gandhi disavowed his fast’s potential as a blackmail tactic, despite the fact that he demanded that the government withdraw its legislation or face his death. He had given the government advance notice of his fast, which he claimed proved that he intended no malice.⁵³ He had also informed it that he would end his fast if ‘the British Government, of its own motion or under pressure of public opinion, revise their decision and withdraw their scheme of communal electorates for the “depressed” classes’.⁵⁴ Thus, it was not Gandhi who was forcing the hand of the colonial state, although public pressure might. Gandhi claimed that his fast was directed at neither India’s rulers nor at those who sought separate electorates; rather, its goal was to change the hearts of his co-religionists and supporters regarding Dalits. He wanted his suffering and sacrifice to motivate Hindus to abolish untouchability. Indeed, he declared that although his fast would end if the British revoked separate electorates, it would re-commence if caste Hindus refused to change their attitudes and practices towards untouchables. Ergo, his fast could not possibly be coercive.

The colonial government, predictably, thought otherwise. Prime Minister J.R. MacDonald expressed ‘surprise’ and ‘regret’ at Gandhi’s decision to ‘adopt the extreme course of starving [himself] to death. . .solely to prevent the Depressed Classes. . .from being able to secure a limited number of representatives of their own choosing to speak on their behalf’.⁵⁵ He

⁵¹ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 48, p. 298 [https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi, accessed 2 May 2014].

⁵² Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 49, p. 191 [https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi, accessed 2 May 2014].

⁵³ Gandhi contrasted his actions with those of Kelappan, a Hindu man who also began fasting on 20 Sept. 1932 to protest against the Guruvayur temple’s denial of entry to Dalits. Gandhi asked Kelappan to suspend his fast because he had neither sought Gandhi’s permission nor given temple authorities advance notice of his intention to fast. Gandhi saw Kelappan’s move as coercive and impure and forced Kelappan to end his fast on 2 Oct.

⁵⁴ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 50, pp. 383–4 [https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi, accessed 2 May 2014].

⁵⁵ Bhimrao R. Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker and Co. Ltd, 1946), pp. 83–5.

declared that the government would not alter its decision unless the affected communities collectively agreed to a different electoral arrangement.

Gandhi's fast began on 20 September 1932 in Pune's Yerawada Jail, where he was then imprisoned, and ended on 26 September when the British, sufficiently satisfied with 'community agreement', repealed the legislative award to Dalits. Gandhi saw this fast as an overall success: it was undertaken for noble, religious reasons and directed at persuading supporters to change their ways, rather than pressuring detractors. It also forced the issue of untouchability into the public consciousness. Some temples and public places started opening their doors to untouchables, as Gandhi had desired.

But Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar, who had borne the brunt of the pressure to fulfil Gandhi's wishes and of the British condition of Hindu unity, challenged Gandhi's claims. Ambedkar believed that separate electorates were vital for the political empowerment of the Dalits. He also realised that if Gandhi died during his fast, it would unleash untold violence upon them. He therefore agreed to reserved seats, instead of separate electorates, for Dalits under the Poona Pact, but he resented this bitterly. He disputed Gandhi's self-positioning as a spokesperson for Dalits and criticised his paternalistic approach to their uplift that focused on social reform, rather than equal rights. He saw Gandhi's fast as an 'extreme', 'reactionary' and illiberal act that would foment 'hatred' between caste Hindus and Dalits.⁵⁶

There was nothing noble in the fast. It was a foul and filthy act. The fast was not for the benefit of the Untouchables. It was against them and was the worst form of coercion against a helpless people to give up. . . constitutional safeguards. . . and agree to live on the mercy of the Hindus. It was a vile and wicked act. How can the Untouchables regard such a man as honest and sincere?⁵⁷

For Ambedkar, the 'tyranny of Gandhi's fasts [compared] with Nazi mind control'.⁵⁸ And for the British, such fasts were a 'form of political blackmail (*himsa*) for which there can be no moral justification'.⁵⁹

Questions about representativeness, force, violence and less-than-pure motives, then, were as much a part of Gandhi's 1932 fast as they had been of the 1918 one. In both cases, members of the subaltern communities he claimed to speak and suffer for challenged him. Both fasts involved disciplinary measures directed at communities that needed 'uplift' (textile workers and Dalits) as well as at the powerful (industrialists, caste Hindus and British officials). Gandhi claimed that these fasts were successful in that he achieved his aims, but they were nonetheless full of paradoxes. Their messiness, however, is smoothed over in the recent comparisons between Gandhi and Team Anna, which seek to recreate a fossilised Mahatma.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 270–1.

⁵⁸ Mazzarella, 'Branding the Mahatma', p. 27.

⁵⁹ Lord Linlithgow wrote this in a letter to Gandhi of 5 Feb. 1943 after the latter had declared a 21-day fast. See Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 77, p. 448 [<https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi>, accessed 2 May 2014]. In 1942, the Congress had refused to co-operate with the British in their war effort and threatened to lead a civil disobedience movement unless India was granted immediate freedom. The British refused and arrested Congress leaders, including Gandhi, for inciting anti-government protests. Gandhi blamed the government for the violence and demanded that it withdraw its charges and release the imprisoned Congress leaders, or else he would commence his fast. The government did not comply and Gandhi began fasting on 10 Feb. 1943, but won no concessions from the British.

The Sacred and the Profane

The claim that Gandhi ‘invented fasting as a “weapon of the weak”’⁶⁰ is a misnomer. He innovated upon existing modes of subaltern protest in a context where the British had altered the landscape of power and the language of protest.⁶¹ Tactics involving self-inflicted injury and/or threat of suicide, which had a long history in India, had been outlawed by the British on the grounds of violence and blackmail.⁶² Under these circumstances, Gandhi’s insistence on non-violent suffering, undertaken with compassion for one’s opponents, ‘gave an edge to protest’ and made it harder for the state to justify counter-violence.⁶³ Hardiman contends that the post-colonial Indian state takes hunger strikes seriously largely as a result of Gandhi’s legacy,⁶⁴ but the state has also often taken a violent approach to such fasts, as in the Irom Sharmila case,⁶⁵ or refused to compromise, as it did with the IAC. The government heeded Hazare’s call initially, but quickly reverted to repressing and ignoring the movement.

Team Anna took a Gandhian-inspired approach to ending corruption among the political classes. Corruption was positioned as unethical over-consumption, and fasting as the means to symbolically purge this excess. That Hazare was celibate and a practised hand at controlling his appetites, and that Kejriwal was an honest ex-bureaucrat and crusader for state transparency who reportedly ‘cleaned his own desk and emptied his own dustbin’,⁶⁶ reinforced the propriety and Gandhian-ness of their purification rituals.

Critics, however, claimed otherwise. They saw Team Anna as problematic, either because it was improperly Gandhian, or because it used Gandhian tactics that had become irrelevant in India’s modern, democratic age. Most criticisms took the position that ‘there can be no other Gandhi’. In a pointed attack, Gurudas Dasgupta, a member of parliament, declared: ‘Let us not be afraid of anybody. . . least of all somebody who pretends to be another Father of the Nation. There is only one father of the nation—Mahatma Gandhi’.⁶⁷ Such canonisation of Gandhi occurred outside the government as well:

To call the campaign Gandhian. . . was a . . . travesty. . . . [T]here has been deserved criticism of Hazare’s . . . zealous statement. . . that whoever is corrupt should have their hands chopped off. . . . [T]he real problem lies with the fundamentally lazy understanding of what it means to be Gandhian today. To discover the candle as an accessory or merely send an SMS is not being Gandhian. His satyagraha. . . demanded acute self-awareness, internal transformation and. . . immense moral strength. . . .⁶⁸

Shoma Chaudhury’s evaluation of the IAC rested on an implicit model of ‘true’ Gandhianism—self-reflexive, pure, non-violent, consistent and rigorous. Although she admitted that ‘Gandhi understood himself to be a flawed work-in-progress not an immaculate

⁶⁰ Ananya Vajpeyi, ‘The Grammar of Anarchy’, *The New York Times* (India Ink) (16 Sept. 2011) [http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/16/the-grammar-of-anarchy/, accessed 9 July 2013].

⁶¹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*.

⁶² Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, p. 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Sharmila, a Manipuri woman, has fasted since 2000 to demand the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, which gives the military unaccountable powers. Neither ignored nor taken seriously, she is ‘benevolently’ violated everyday by the state, which force-feeds her.

⁶⁶ Jeelani, ‘The Insurgent’.

⁶⁷ Kumar, ‘Shifting Debate over Lokpal’.

⁶⁸ Chaudhury, ‘Pride, Prejudice, and Candles in the Wind’.

one-stop morality shop',⁶⁹ she expected perfection from a campaign that claimed Gandhian pedigree. Mridula Mukherjee decried the IAC's misuse and overuse of Gandhi's fasting technique, believing it had cheapened it and 'robbed it of [its] moral power. . . .'⁷⁰

Prabhat Patnaik counter-posed Gandhi's purportedly non-confrontational fasts-unto-death against Team Anna's extortionist hunger strikes, claiming that they were 'as different from one another as chalk from cheese'.⁷¹ The goal of Team Anna's fasts was to 'extract some specific concession from an adversary', whereas that of Gandhi's fasts was to 'unite the people'.⁷² Patnaik claimed that Gandhi's 1932 fast 'was directed more against the practice of "untouchability"' and was, therefore, neither 'anti-British, nor...even a purely political fast'.⁷³ This literal and problematic reading of Gandhi's intentions ignores the political entanglements and effects of his acts. Patnaik described the IAC's politics as 'messianic' and, hence, 'fundamentally anti-democratic'.⁷⁴ Messianism, he argued, collapses 'the people' into the image of a saviour who speaks for them. The IAC's 'Anna is India and India is Anna' strategy exemplified messianic politics⁷⁵ because the drama unfolded on TV and turned people into mere spectators, rather than active democratic subjects. Patnaik lamented messianism's sway in contemporary India, which only served to emphasise 'the pre-modernity of our society and the shallowness of the roots of our democracy'.⁷⁶ The developmentalist underpinnings of this form of critique are obvious. Accordingly, progression to modern democratic rule entails leaving behind apparently regressive attitudes such as blind faith in a deus ex machina who will 'cleanse the world of evil',⁷⁷ and India is not quite there yet. Interestingly, Patnaik did not view Gandhi as a messiah, despite the fact that he was perceived as an otherworldly Mahatma by many.⁷⁸ Couldn't Gandhi's style be captured by the phrase, 'Gandhi is all Hindus, and all Hindus are Gandhi'?

Apoorv Anand, like Patnaik, did not find fault with Gandhi, but he castigated the IAC's 'Ur-Fascism' and what he saw as Anna's less-than-adequate imitation of the Mahatma:

Invocation of Gandhi makes arguments about the nuanced nature of Gandhi-fasts redundant. It is also not thought important that [a] fast was an absolutely personal decision for Gandhi. . . . He never wanted it [to] be turned into a public affair. But [in the IAC's case, a] fast is a collective decision performed publicly by a carefully selected holy old man. . . . You have now a Gandhi with clenched fists exhorting the masses to go for the final act.⁷⁹

Calling Gandhi's fasts 'nuanced' dampens the element of force inherent in them, and calling them 'personal' denies their performative and public nature. Anand and others who criticised the IAC for being a media-driven spectacle overlooked the fact that Gandhi had been an

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Mukherjee, 'Why This "Freedom" is False'.

⁷¹ Patnaik, 'Anna Hazare and Gandhi'.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Patnaik, 'Messianism vs. Democracy'.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ For example, see Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma'.

⁷⁹ Apoorv Anand, 'Reading Ur-Fascism in Our Times', *Kafila* (24 Aug. 2011) [<http://kafila.org/2011/08/24/reading-ur-fascism-in-our-times/>, accessed 9 July 2013].

‘indefatigable publicist’⁸⁰ who used the media available then to popularise and spread his tactics of *satyagraha*. Gandhi’s bodily experiments were not privatised. His body, after all, was an interface between the inner and the outer, the personal and the political, and a medium that carried social messages. Gandhi wanted to make his biomoral practices socially contagious and he used the mass media as a critical tool to ‘extend the self-probing of the ethically rigorous individual into a national project of collective accountability and transparency’.⁸¹ One could read Team Anna’s tactics in a similar way because its members also used their bodies as both message and messengers. They demonstrated, through mass-mediated bodily practices, including hunger strikes and sartorial choices, their embodiment of the self-discipline, sacrifice and purity necessary to build a transparent and non-corrupt political system. Their efforts, unlike Gandhi’s, however, were labelled shallow spectacles by many.⁸²

I now turn to those who challenged Team Anna’s outdated Gandhian methods, rather than its un-Gandhian-ness *per se*. Ananya Vajpeyi, for example, saw in the debates surrounding the IAC the re-enactment of an old tension—that between Gandhi’s ‘morally-based mass protest’ and Ambedkar’s ‘reasoned deliberative democracy’.⁸³ Indians wanting to end corruption could either ‘turn to the bulwark of their founding document constructed with so much effort by Mr. Ambedkar, or follow the new figure of Anna who reminds them in flashes of their greatest leader ever, Mahatma Gandhi’.⁸⁴ While conceding that Ambedkar’s imperative in trying to dismantle untouchability was a moral one, Vajpeyi suggested that his constitutional approach was incommensurate with Gandhi’s extra-constitutional pressure tactics. Overplaying the distinction between Ambedkar’s liberal and rational (read modern) perspective and Gandhi’s religio-moral (read anti-modern and saintly) world-view, however, occludes Gandhi’s complex engagement with modern political languages.⁸⁵ Gandhi was, after all, schooled in liberal law and influenced by Ruskin and Tolstoy, among others. His political methods borrowed as much from Western traditions of civil disobedience as from indigenous subaltern protest.⁸⁶ However, by positioning Gandhi’s and Team Anna’s strategies as unconstitutional and anti-modern, Vajpeyi denied their *hybrid* nature. The IAC’s tactical amalgam, for example, included drafting a law, negotiating with lawmakers and using print, television and social media to publicise its agenda. It also involved methods, like fasts, which speak the language of ritual. Fasts lend a religio-cultural veneer and ‘indigeneity’⁸⁷ to the modern idiom of governance and legal reform. No one knew this better than Gandhi, so Team Anna, in a nod to him and to the continued salience of saintly and traditional symbolism in the Indian political context, mixed tactics to generate cultural recognition and moral appeal for their technocratic anti-corruption agenda.⁸⁸

Vajpeyi also suggested that Gandhian moral tactics had little relevance in post-colonial India: ‘Now that India has had more than six decades of independent self-rule, electoral democracy, a parliamentary system, and... a strong and stable constitution, what exactly is the

⁸⁰ Mazzarella, ‘Branding the Mahatma’, pp. 18–9.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸² Gandhi was also criticised by Ambedkar and W.S. Wybergh, for example, for his illiberal theatrics and ‘trickery’, rather than reasoned debate and action. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸³ Vajpeyi, ‘The Grammar of Anarchy’.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Morris-Jones, ‘India’s Political Idioms’, pp. 133–54.

⁸⁶ Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*.

⁸⁷ Shiv Viswanathan, ‘The Fast as Politics’, IBN Live Blogs (19 Sept. 2011) [<http://ibnlive.in.com/blogs/shivviswanathan/2943/62722/the-fast-as-politics.html>], accessed 9 July 2013].

⁸⁸ See Morris-Jones, ‘India’s Political Idioms’, pp. 133–54.

role of a [Gandhian] mass movement?’ she asked.⁸⁹ By way of answer, she quoted from Ambedkar’s 1949 speech in which he had described *satyagraha* as ‘the grammar of anarchy’ best abandoned under constitutional democracy.⁹⁰

Madhu Trehan, a journalist, also invoked Ambedkar to argue that Gandhian methods, such as the ‘fasting business’, were unnecessary.⁹¹ She endorsed the IAC’s anti-corruption agenda, but criticised its emotional style of politics because it ‘touches a chord’ like ‘an art installation’.⁹² Team Anna needed to stop ‘play acting’ and using Gandhian tactics because they would not ‘make the nation move forward’, and because ‘creating a symbol with this Gandhi figure... is so out of touch!’⁹³ Trehan indicated that modern India needed a rational approach to change, rather than an affective one. For her, progress required leaving the Mahatma behind.

Manu Joseph similarly described Hazare as a ‘man with out-dated rustic ideas... It was exactly men like him from whom India had liberated itself in its struggle for modernity’.⁹⁴ Hazare ‘pantomimed’ Gandhi and, thus, represented pre-modern mentalities that were out of place in a liberalised India; small wonder, then, that Hazare’s ‘comic revolution’ had failed.⁹⁵ Although Joseph saw Gandhian ways as *passé*, he did not seek to dislodge Gandhi’s otherworldliness or the fixity of his ideas and ways: they had to be ‘museumised’, not relived, in present-day India.

These criticisms of Team Anna’s revival of Gandhian tactical relics intersect with Ambedkar’s contention that Gandhi stood for an anti-modern and regressive ideology that was only ‘suited to a society which does not accept democracy’.⁹⁶ ‘Gandhism’, wrote Ambedkar, was ‘in no sense... revolutionary... [but] a reactionary creed blazoning on its banner the call of Return to Antiquity’.⁹⁷

Gandhi, interestingly, dissociated himself from ‘isms’:

I have conceived no such thing as Gandhism... I have simply tried... to apply the eternal principles of truth and non-violence to our daily life... In doing so I have sometimes erred and learnt by my errors. Life has thus become for me a series of experiments in truth.⁹⁸

Truth, here, was a subjective principle worked upon through everyday experimentation. And Gandhi resisted being pegged to a dogmatic or static ideology because that implied a closure and ossification of what was, for him, an ongoing and fluid ethical praxis.

You will not call [my philosophy] Gandhism; there is no ism about it... All that I have written is but a description of whatever I have done. And my actions alone are the greatest exposition of truth and non-violence. Those who believe in these can

⁸⁹ Vajpeyi, ‘The Grammar of Anarchy’.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ ‘Will Anna’s Party Be a Game Changer’, *The Big Fight*, NDTV.com (4 Aug. 2012) [<http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/the-big-fight/will-anna-s-party-be-a-game-changer/241667>, accessed 9 Aug. 2013].

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Joseph, ‘Indian Revolution Born in Farce Ends in One’.

⁹⁵ Joseph, ‘The Anna Hazare Show’.

⁹⁶ Ambedkar, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, p. 295.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁹⁸ Gandhi, *CWMG*, Vol. 62, pp. 223–4 [<https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi>, accessed 2 May 2014].

propagate them only by following them in practice. . . . My work is there for them to emulate. But. . .this, too, is not permanent.⁹⁹

And, yet, permanence and rigidity are exactly what IAC critics map onto Gandhi and his ideas when they render him as a stylised emblem who cannot be replicated because he is otherworldly, not earthly, or who should not be copied because his fixed ideas belong to the past. The Gandhi that is used as a 'metre' of ethics or modernity is a stiff caricature of a man who imagined himself as a fallible and evolving human being.

Destabilising the Real

Shahid Amin has shown that 'Gandhi' was a fecund and polysemous signifier in colonial India, where there existed 'no single authorised version of Mahatma' among the masses.¹⁰⁰ Today, as several scholars have noted, Gandhi has been strait-jacketed into an authoritative, perfected and mainstreamed sign that is one-dimensional, singular and self-explanatory.¹⁰¹ This sign denotes a non-negotiable set of ideals such as non-violence, passive resistance and anti-modernism. This is a sanitised Gandhi who does not irk the consumerist ethos and nationalist machismo of the upper and middle classes in post-liberal India. When his radical political edges are dulled, his flaws erased and 'the corporeal grounding of his politics [and] his ethics. . .forgotten, Gandhi becomes, as it were, safe for the present: omnipresent yet inert, benevolent rather than demanding'.¹⁰² He can then be preserved and co-opted into the nationalist project as a global Indian brand.

Using what William Mazzarella calls 'Brand Gandhi' to sell causes in the Indian political field, however, can be a fraught exercise.¹⁰³ It can lend legitimacy, but it can also bring exacting comparisons with a presumed 'real': the real Gandhi and Gandhianism must be perfectly copied, not experimented with. Here, 'the real' marks a closed and totalising politico-ethical position that can only ever be imperfectly occupied by anyone other than the original Mahatma, or, as some argue, it need not be occupied at all because this position is incongruous and obsolete, though still fixed.

Indeed, Tridip Suhrud laments the loss of the real and richly-dimensional Gandhi.¹⁰⁴ 'The iconic/mythic Gandhi, the Gandhi of institutions, of Gandhians and of social movements', he claims, 'has deserted us' and even 'stylized caricatures' are unavailable.¹⁰⁵ Gandhians residing in ashrams have lost their organic ties with the marginalised and the 'will to confront the state'; the leaders of social movements inspired by Gandhi fight against the state, but only invoke the public, political 'Gandhi of mass mobilizations' and imbibe his 'practice. . .as technique', rather than attending to the 'deeply personal, spiritual and philosophical basis' of his biomoral praxis.¹⁰⁶

This desire for what Shiv Visvanathan calls a 'pickled' Gandhi,¹⁰⁷ preserved whole and as is, is echoed in recent comparisons between Gandhi and Team Anna that judge the latter as a

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 224–5.

¹⁰⁰ Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma', p. 342.

¹⁰¹ Alter, *Gandhi's Body*; and Markovits, *The UnGandhian Gandhi*.

¹⁰² Mazzarella, 'Branding the Mahatma', p. 30.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Tridip Suhrud, 'In Search of Gandhi', *Seminar*, No. 513 (May 2002) [<http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/513/513%20tridip%20suhrud.htm>, accessed 9 July 2013].

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Visvanathan, 'Pickling Gandhi and Tagore'.

counterfeit or an unnecessary resurrection of Gandhi. Such evaluations rest on the logic of duplication, where copying ought to be done faithfully or not attempted at all. Critics of the IAC who deify Gandhi as unrivalled and otherworldly, and those who take him (and Team Anna) to task for belonging to another time and space, indulge in abstraction and simplification. They reproduce the real Gandhi as a stable icon and an 'immutable text'¹⁰⁸ and participate in the authoritative 'enclosure' of the Gandhian sign.¹⁰⁹

The IAC put this sign into play by enacting a Gandhian-style embodied critique of a greedy and unethical political class. Their pantomime act, however, was seen as an unwanted mobilisation and destabilisation of the 'real' Gandhi. If to 'commemorate, one has to invent, misread, re-create, caricature',¹¹⁰ then the IAC represented an experiment in *mimicking*, not duplicating, Gandhi, which chipped away at the Gandhian icon. Mimicry, as Homi Bhabha has argued, is slippery:¹¹¹ it troubles the notion of singular and static originals, and it reproduces not sameness, but difference, where difference is inventive, unpredictable and dangerous. Mimicry's not-quite-the-same logic,¹¹² which leaves room for mockery and subversion of seemingly-settled positions, makes it a powerful and performative political act.

I would suggest that creative mimicry is the only way to *enliven* Gandhi. He was, after all, a performative genius and a canny publicist who made his biomoral experiments with truth spectacular and contagious: he wanted to infect the watching public so they could follow their own paths of truth, rather than imitating his in an exact fashion. His 'play' with truth could only serve as a flawed and partial guide to constructing an ethical life through trial and error. If Gandhi is to be relevant today in helping us to re-imagine governance, the ethics of development and technology, and bodies and consumption, then his ideas cannot be approached as a structure, with a clear inside and outside, but as structuring principles that inform political praxis, but do not lend it definitive form and results. He cannot be treated as an all-or-nothing ideal or as a 'static, bounded entity that must be policed'.¹¹³ Indeed, the term 'Gandhian' needs to be seen as a mutating and a performative positionality,¹¹⁴ given meaning through its iterative enactment and slippery mimicry in the present.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Mazzarella, 'Branding the Mahatma', p. 26.

¹¹⁰ Viswanathan, 'Pickling Gandhi and Tagore'.

¹¹¹ Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', in Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 152–60.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Mazzarella, 'Branding the Mahatma', p. 25.

¹¹⁴ On performativity, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), who uses the concept to de-essentialise and destabilise gender identities.