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# Gandhi, Non-Cooperation, and Socio-civic Education in Gujarat, India: Harnessing the Vernaculars

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This article offers an interconnected, grounded understanding of how two Gandhian endeavours in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India, make us rethink the notion of "education" in terms of civic and communal engagement. Drawing on local, vernacular ways of living, learning, being, reasoning, and believing—in this case Gujarati—I show how these endeavours engage in civically minded projects in the wake of two devastating events in the city, namely a massive earthquake in 2001 and horrendous Hindu-Muslim riots in 2002. The exploration is intended to not only move us all toward rethinking traditional notions of "education," but toward offering insights into how critical practice functions in non-Western contexts.

Key words: civic education, Gandhian ideologies, critical practice

> This Non-Cooperation movement in India is really being worked out … by Mahatma Gandhi … in its essence, it implies the resistance of evil, by forbearance, not by violence; by endurance, not force; by suffering, not by slaughter.
>
> Charles Andrews, a British missionary, staunch supporter of Gandhi and the Non-Cooperation Movement, 1922, p. 15

> My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines. To assent to such a doctrine is for me a denial of God. For I believe with my whole soul that the God of the Koran is also the God of the Gita and that we are all, no matter by what name designated, children of the same God.
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> Gandhi, 1940, p. 235

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> About 1 billion people in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal felt the earthquake which devastated the western desert state of Gujarat on 26 January, 2001—India's Republic Day. Measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale, the quake was centered near the town of Bhuj. The death and destruction were enormous; more than 95% of buildings were destroyed in a 200-kilometre radius from Bhuj.
>
> Breaking News Mediapearson, 2002

What can I say in the West about the tumult, despair, and pain that has plagued my home state of Gujarat (India) for the last 4 years? The cumulative effects of a devastating earthquake (January 26, 2001) and the Hindu-Muslim riots that ensued after the post-Godhra carnage (February to March, 2002) have left wounds and scars of the sort that make speaking of these issues in the cold genre of an academic essay a travesty. And yet I write of them because there are pockets of active secularism, angry resistance, and deep anxieties seeking to be assuaged and articulated. Although the gory details of both the earthquake and Godhra-carnage hit the Western media—cementing the already negative images of abject poverty, misery, and communalism of that (my) part of the world—the local forces countering such devastations got little or no voice in the West. Although this article cannot come close to accounting for the numerous local ways in which various groups in the city of Ahmedabad leapt into action,[1] I shall devote myself to explaining in some detail the work of two endeavours committed to communal and educational change in very different ways. As is evident, the take on "education" presented here is not the usual one—of teaching and learning in formal contexts of classrooms and institutions—but one that is intended to move us toward becoming collectively open to realizing that very valuable "education" often goes on outside the constraints of classrooms: in ashrams, in madrassas, in extracurricular programs, by local, politically minded youth, all drawing on local vernacular ways of healing rifts. Indeed, "education" in both these institutions is civic and community education that seems to assume Gandhian ideals of "Non-Cooperation" (and nonformal education) and that is aimed at primarily effecting changes in the community, sometimes before addressing issues relevant to formal education.

Two primary questions I address in this article, then, include the following:

1. What are some ways in which individuals and institutions carve out spaces—educational, material, physical, and emotional—by which to effect community change?
2. In what ways do such actions and orientations nuance and expand our understanding of "education," and "critical practice?"

The present focus on "community and participatory development" is by no means new. Barnes and Mercer (1995) write of ways in which "disabled" peoples in a vari-

ety of contexts have campaigned against "disabling" practices and attitudes; Miller, Rein, and Levitt (1995) describe, among other things, how groups such as Mothers against Drunk Driving or Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States began as "self-help" groups that eventually grew into nationwide efforts with messages oriented toward changing aspects of the external world. Likewise, Gill Gordon (1995) speaks of ways in which community development plans target issues of sexual health in Africa that consider local, social, and cultural environments around the HIV epidemic. Numerous other scholars (see Craig & Mayo, 1995, for fuller discussions) document ways in which people gather around causes that serve to change not only the lives of the participants but the practices of the larger world (Gordon, 1995). The work of the two endeavours described in this article is interestingly similar and dissimilar to the work described earlier. The similarities lie in efforts to raise awareness of local, civic concerns that concern all humanity—of issues around drugs, HIV, environment, drinking, elder abuse, among other things—and finding relevant, local responses to address them. As with most of such work, the "localnesses" of such endeavours tend to set them apart. In the present case, the people directly involved in such work are making connections between several large domains including religious conflicts, Gandhian ideals, vernacular sentiments, institutional orientations, nonformal learning, community service, and, most important, what "education" means outside the classroom. It is this confluence of connections along with a thick strain of doing such work quietly that affords their work a particular distinctiveness: not only does it open up for discussion our collective understandings of "education" (and its entailing concepts which have become naturalized) but it also exemplifies a kind of sociocivic practice that is committed to harnessing people's moral impulses without being overtly confrontational (Buzelli & Johnston, 2002; Johnston, 2002). Although applied linguists have written about integrating and highlighting political strains in classrooms (Benesch 1993, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999, 2002; Morgan 1998, 2004, Pennycook, 1995, 1996, 2000), little research has addressed educational issues in nonformal domains in non-Western spaces, and this essay attempts to bridge this gap in scholarship.

The two institutions informing this article are (a) a very poor, vernacular-medium women's institution in downtown Ahmedabad (where much of the recent Hindu-Muslim rioting occurred), and (b) the Gandhi Ashram (which was historically Gandhi's home and office and continues to engage in Gandhian projects and be a source of Gandhianism in the state). My involvement in and with the two institutions is not equal by any means, being more extensive and long-term in one case and not so in-depth with the other. The institution with which I have had extensive contact is the former; my acquaintance with the women's college goes back about 8 years and is part of a larger evolving pool of materials gathered over several years. At the risk of presenting these materials as a finite set when my work with and regarding English-and Vernacular-medium education is ongoing, I list them as follows:

1. They span three institutional contexts (an English Medium [EM] middle class, Jesuit college, a private middle class EM business college, and an inner-city, poor Vernacular Medium [VM] women's liberal arts college).
2. Twenty-one semiformal interviews with faculty members across the three institutions, each of which lasted about an hour and a half long, more than 80 interviews with EM and VM students, more than 109 hours of classroom observations in the three settings.[2]
3. A variety of written documents ranging from official bulletins, student writing, assignments, newspaper articles, and exams.
4. A range of informal discussion meetings where teachers freely exchanged ideas about teaching practices, workloads, and institutional and state-level educational policies.

My involvement with the Gandhi Ashram, on the other hand, is more recent. Although Gandhi's ideologies and ways in which they impact vernacular-medium education in Gujarat are issues I have been concerned with and have written about (see Ramanathan, 2003, 2005a, 2005b), it has only been in the last 2 years that I have begun to attend and participate in some of their workshops that are directly oriented to addressing community issues. My seeking out people at the Ashram has been intentional, and is propelled in part by the increasingly rabid Hindu nationalistic rhetoric emanating from the Gujarat state government (and until recently the central government as well). There has been much discussion (in newspapers, among people, in schools, and in the group of teachers with which I work) about the state having "forgotten Gandhi" and his teachings in the wake of the recent Hindu-Muslim violence in the city. Gandhi's views on Hindu-Muslim unity have generally been viewed as anathema by some factions of the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state, because he was seen as supporting Muslims too much, and for espousing a view of Hinduism that was generally deemed "effeminate." My sustained engagement with one of the VM teachers (discussed here) prompted me into seeking other pockets of practice that countered some of the dangerous political ideologies threatening secularism, and the workshops at the Gandhi Ashram seemed, in many ways, ideal. Not only do they have Gandhi's larger philosophy of Non-Cooperation against political hegemonies at their core (more on this presently), but they also opened up for me a way of understanding both how Gandhianism is situated and how particular dimensions of the identities of participants (Kanno, 2003; Menard-Warwick, 2005; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004) get laminated. I was able to see how Gandhianism is first collaboratively interpreted in workshops, then applied and translated on the ground in most local of contexts, and then recast and reinterpreted by individuals and groups as they regroup. Furthermore, I was invited to participate in the workshops—to be trained both as a volunteer and participate in the discussions—which gave me a chance to engage in these settings in interestingly complex ways. Typically held in

May and June, these workshops cover a range of topics, including discussions around some key Gandhian writings, his views regarding working with the poorest of people, the variety of Christianized Hinduism that he practiced, and searching for ways of translating and interpreting his ideals in small ways.

What is presented here, then, are skeins of Gandhianism that are echoed and enacted in divergent nonformal educational settings, a selective focus that renders this exploration incomplete. Although in a previous article (Ramanathan, 2005a) I called attention to how Gandhian ideologies could be seen to be linked to the nationalistic rhetoric of the Hindu BJP—in that the latter has opportunistically targeted "vernacular" sentiments to dredge up prurient fascist sentiments—in this article, I show how vernacular traditions (ways of educating, living, thinking, being, operating)—become valuable ways of challenging not only political hegemonies, but of becoming bridges in the face of serious upheavals. A reason for calling attention to this point is to show that discourses around the "vernaculars" (Adejunmobi, 2004) are diverse, fluid, and constructed, with some aspects and associations around them being highlighted in some contexts over others; my attention to particular constellations around them, then, is not intended to cancel other constellations out.

Each of the institutions presented here have individuals who have spearheaded communal work and have found nontraditional ways of building civic strains into what they consider "education." Although facets of both of these institutions are very strongly devoted to interpreting "education" in broad, Gandhian terms of communal rehabilitation, it is their "socioeducational" work especially in the aftermath of the two devastating events—the earthquake and the riots—that is the impetus for this article. Toward underscoring my varying and intersecting presences in the two endeavours—as observer, participant, and native—I frequently use the first person when describing and making connections between a variety of latent and complex phenomena. (I am only one of several voices represented in this text; see Holliday, 2005, for a discussion on voices in qualitative research texts.)

## THE CITY, THE EVENTS, GANDHI'S NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT: SOME BACKGROUND

Although the two horrific events—the earthquake and the Godhra riots—affected many parts of Gujarat, it is in the city of Ahmedabad that I am situating this article. Ahmedabad is the city in which I was raised, schooled, and where I have family. It is also the city in which I have strong connections with some teachers since the start of my ethnographically oriented project on English and vernacular language teaching several years ago. One of the biggest cities in the

state with a population of over 5 million, it is primarily a commercial one given to businesses and mills of different sorts. The state has been in the last 4 years grappling with its tarnished image, especially since the riots 3 years ago (more on this presently). Indeed, the recent defeat of the BJP central government and the victory of the Congress party has had the media speculating whether the BJP spent too long, ostrich-like, burying its head, not acknowledging that the atrocities in Gujarat had a big role to play in its defeat. The central government of Gujarat, however, still remains in the BJP stronghold, much to many people's chagrin and outrage.

The earthquake of 2001 that occurred around 9 a.m. on January 26 (about the time that most educational institutions in the city were holding Republic Day celebrations) measured 7.7 on the Richter scale, and although the epicenter of the quake was in the small town of Bhuj, about 200 miles from Ahmedabad, its tremors were felt very many miles around. An estimated 17,000 bodies were recovered, more than 30,000 people were reported dead or missing, 166,000 or more were injured, and over a million homes were destroyed. The devastation in Ahmedabad, needless to say, was extensive, with school buildings crushing little children marching for the Republic Day parade, with flats and apartments coming down on families getting ready to start their day, with businesses being decimated, never to be resurrected again.

As if this were not enough, the following year, on February 27, 2002, the city broke out into the worst Hindu-Muslim riots in recent years. The events allegedly unfolded like this (there is a lot of room for debate here about how planned or accidental the whole scenario was. Indeed, the case is still pending in the courts): 58 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya (a Hindu holy site) had their train cabin set ablaze outside Ahmedabad. The train had made a scheduled stop, during which a scuffle between some of the pilgrims and a tea vendor began, started to escalate, and eventually culminated in the train compartment going up in blazes and the pilgrims being burnt to death (allegedly by a group of Muslims). This led to a vicious collective anger on the part of the hard-line Hindus that resulted in a horrendous week of rioting where Muslim homes were burnt, businesses looted, women raped, and children killed. More than 1,000 Muslims died. The chief minister of the state—who is still in office—has been accused of not having done enough to protect the Muslims.

But this gruesome event did not just appear from nowhere. Percolating tensions between Hindus and Muslims reach far back into history to colonial times (Engineer, 2003; Varadarajan, 2002). However, there are clear events in the last decade or so to which this recent violence can be directly linked, most notably the tearing down of a 16th-century mosque by fundamentalist Hindus. A fascist, right-wing, pro-Hindu ideology (*hindutva,* as it is referred to) begun by the recently defeated BJP government a decade ago, in its zeal to desecularize the country and make it a Hindu *rashtra* (nation), is the partial backdrop against which to understand the pro-Hindu/anti-Muslim zealotry.

## A CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND FOR THE TWO INSTITUTIONS: GANDHIAN VIEWS ON NONFORMAL EDUCATION, COMMUNITY SERVICE, AND NON-COOPERATION

Because both institutions echo Gandhian views in a variety of direct and indirect ways, I would like to provide in this section a brief and interconnected understanding of those Gandhian ideals most pertinent to this discussion, namely, (a) the value of harnessing the vernaculars (including those of promoting vernacular-medium education), (b) the importance of community service being an integral part of a basic education, and (c) promoting nonformal education that encourages a healthy development of civic citizenship.

Each of these ideals gets encased in the larger rhetorical strain of "Non-Cooperation," which Gandhi advocated during his struggles for Indian Independence (Bakshi, 1983; Gottlob, 2003; Guha, 1997, 2004; Raju, 1920; Sarkar, 1994), and which people at the two institutions interpret and enact differently, given the immediate constraints they operate under and the political differences from the times this strain was originally set adrift and local conditions today. However, as people in both institutions concur, it is the very fact that they can each draw on Gandhi to justify, interpret, and enact their projects that points to the universality of the leader's message. Because Gandhi was originally from Gujarat and because the endeavours considered here are located in Ahmedabad—with one of them being at Gandhi's Ashram, no less—it should come as no surprise that pockets of Gandhian ideologies still run strong in Ahmedabad. Indeed, at a time when there has been a lot of discussion about the shame in Gujarat—Gandhi's home state—having "forgotten Gandhi" (and his messages about Hindu-Muslim unity) in the wake of the riots, there is all the more reason to single out and point to pockets where his ideals still run strong; hence this article.

Gandhi's views on the issues mentioned earlier are scattered in a range of newspapers, including *Harijan* and *Young India.* In Table 1 I provide excerpts from his speeches and writings that best encapsulate his views on these issues. I have emphasized segments that I think have direct and indirect bearings on aspects of civic and nonformal education central to this article.

Gandhi's views, discussed earlier, have to be interpreted in the political context in which they were made. From approximately 1920 to 1947, Gandhi's views were decidedly nationalistic, because he and his allies were trying to rally the country toward destabilizing the Raj. Because his views on the aforementioned issues were, to some extent, anti-English—because he felt that the language divided the country—his championing of the vernaculars sits in a polarized position (and simplistic by today's standards) vis-à-vis English. In the aforementioned excerpts, Gandhi's views on enhancing the vernaculars (see Table 1) so that Indians are "not foreigners in their own land" are directly tied to

TABLE 1
Gandhi on Education

On vernacular-medium education

1. *I hold it to be as necessary for the urban child as for the rural to have the foundation of his development laid on the solid work of the mother-tongue.* It is only in unfortunate India that such an obvious proposition needs to be proved. (Gandhi in *Harijan,* 9-9-39, cited in Kumarappa, 1954, my emphasis)
2. The only education we receive is English education. Surely we must show something for it. *But suppose we had been receiving during the past fifty years education through our vernaculars, what should we have today? We should have a free India, we should have our educated people, not as if they were foreigners in their own land, but speaking to the heart of the nation; they would be working amongst the poorest of the poor, and whatever they would have gained during the past fifty years would be a heritage for the nation. …* (Gandhi, cited in Kumarappa, 1954, p. 13, my emphasis)

On (non) formal education

1. But unless the development of the mind and body goes hand in hand with a corresponding awakening of the soul, the former alone would prove to be a poor lop-sided affair. By spiritual training I mean education of the heart. A proper and all-around development of the mind, therefore, can take place only when it proceeds *pari passu* with the education of the physical and spiritual faculties of the child. They constitute an indivisible whole. According to this theory, therefore, it would be a gross fallacy to suppose that they can be developed piecemeal or independently of one another. (*Harijan,* 8-5-37, cited in Prasad, 1924)
2. By education I mean all-round drawing out of the best in children—body, mind, and spirit. *[Formal] Literacy is not the end of education nor the beginning. It is only one of the means whereby men and women can be educated.* (Gandhi in *Harijan,* 31-7-37, cited in Prasad, 1924, my emphasis)
3. [Nonformal education] … *will check the progressive decay of our villages and lay the foundation for a juster social order in which there is no unnatural division between the 'haves' and the 'havenots'* and everybody is assured a living wage and the rights to freedom. … *It will provide a healthy and a moral basis of relationship between the city and village and will go a long way towards eradicating some of the worst evils of the present social insecurity and poisoned relationship between the classes.* (*Harijan,* 9-10-37, cited in Prasad, 1924, my emphasis)

Fundamentals of basic education

1. All education to be true must be self-supporting, that is it will pay its expenses excepting the capital. …
2. In it the cunning of the hand will be utilized even up to the final stage, that is to say, hands of pupils will be skillfully working at some industry for some period during the day.
3. *All education must be imparted through the medium of the provincial language.*
4. In this there is *no room for giving sectional religious training.* Fundamental universal ethics will have full scope.
5. *This education* whether it is confined to children or adults, male or female, *will find its way to the homes of the pupils.*
6. Since millions of students receiving this education will consider themselves as of the whole of the India, they must learn an interprovincial language. This common inter-provincial speech can only be Hindustani written in Nagari or Urdu script. Therefore, *pupils will have to master both scripts.* (Gandhi in *Harijan,* 1-11-47, cited in Prasad, 1924, my emphasis)

his opinions on developing communities (for "the poorest of the poor" ) and making community service an integral part of any education. Likewise, his opinions on both basic and nonformal education, interlaced as they are with his points about vernacular education, were oriented toward viewing education in broader, community-oriented terms to draw out "the best in children," to build a "healthy and moral" base for both "the city and the village," to be entirely secular in its orientation (with "no room … for sectional religious training," and to eventually transform the "homes of the pupils."

This commitment to strengthening communities through the vernaculars was inextricably tied to the Non-Cooperation Movement, which he began in an effort to gain *Swaraj* (self-rule). As pointed out by Charles Andrews in the opening quote of this article, this movement had nonviolent resistance at its core: Non-Cooperation for Gandhi and his followers meant, among other things, working with the Raj toward getting them to believe that quitting India was the best step for both the Empire and India. In practice, this meant quietly resisting British rule, boycotting British goods, championing home-grown traditions and vernacular practices, while remaining on friendly terms with the English. The following extended quote seems to best capture this aspect of his philosophy:

> And if we intend to follow out the policy [of non-cooperation] … we must get their [the Raj's] certificate that they feel absolutely safe in our midst and that they may regard us as friends although we belong to a radically different school of thought and politics. We must welcome them to our political platforms as honoured guests. We must meet them on neutral platforms as comrades. We must devise methods of such meeting. *Our non-violence must not breed violence, hatred, ill-will. We stand like the rest of fellow-mortals to be judged by our works. A programme of non-violence for the attainment of swaraj necessarily means ability to conduct affairs on non-violent lines.* That means inculcation of a spirit of obedience. Mr. Churchill, who understands only the gospel of force, is quite right in saying that the Irish problem is different in character from the Indian. He means in effect that the Irish, having fought their way to their s*waraj* through violence, will be able to maintain it by violence, if need be. India, on the other hand, if she wins s*waraj* in reality by non-violence, must be able to maintain it chiefly by non-violent means. This Mr. Churchill can hardly believe to be possible unless India proves her ability by an ocular demonstration of principle. *Such a demonstration is impossible unless non-violence has permeated society so that people in their corporate, i.e. political, life respond to non-violence, in other words, civil instead of military, as at present, gains predominance.*
>
> … If we approach our programme with the mental reservation that, after all, we shall wrest the power from the British force by force of arms, then we are untrue to our profession of non-violence. … *The choice in my opinion lies between honest non-violence with non-cooperation as its necessary corollary or reversion to responsive co-operation, i.e. co-operation-cum-obstruction.* (Gandhi, 1922, in Prasad, 1924, p. 75)

Although Gandhi's message of nonviolence seems to be ironically completely forgotten in Gujarat, given the recent horrific riots, the larger strain of Non-Cooperation seems to still resonate, and the two endeavours described in this essay assume this mantle for me. As we shall see, Non-Cooperation in the two spaces emerges as a deeply historicized awareness committed to doing the opposite of repressive, silencing ills. The quiet way in which both projects bridge perceived gulfs are reminiscent of Gandhi's insistence on responding to tyranny by searching for nonviolent, quiet alternatives that tap the moral instincts of humans.

## THE TWO ENDEAVOURS: DRAWING ON NON-COOPERATION TO EXPAND "EDUCATION" AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

### The National Social Service Scheme at the Women's College

Located in the inner city, the women's college is a low-income Gujarati-medium liberal arts college in downtown Ahmedabad where much of the rioting of 2002 occurred. In my previous writing (Ramanathan, 2005a, 2005b) regarding this college, I have discussed ways in which the National Social Service (NSS)—a nationwide, Gandhian, social service organization—a chapter of which is in this school, engages many of the institution's female students in extracurricular activities that directly target community needs (Norton, 2000). The larger NSS of which this college's chapter is a part falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports.[3] Engaging them in what I often think of as "back-door" approaches to critical practice, the scheme is devoted to training these students in teams of two or three before sending them out into "adopted villages" and other remote areas (that are generally far removed from adequate medical care and other general living amenities). Begun in commemoration of Gandhi's centennial year in 1969, the organization encourages students to volunteer time toward social projects, including those relating to literacy, health, sanitation, women and children's welfare, AIDS awareness, drug addiction awareness, human rights, and national integration.[4] Added to this list is the recent work by this school to address the needs of families most affected by the two events. In the section that follows I detail the orientation of the NSS chapter as it functions in this college, how through one person's vision it has responded to the community's needs, and ways in which it expands and nuances our notions of "education."

The person who started and continues to run the NSS in this college is Mr. P. Although he teaches English literature, especially 19th century British literature in Gujarati at the college, this retiring, quiet gentleman has over the last 10 years devoted much of his free time to translating the best of Gandhi's ideals—of service,

self-respect, valuing the vernacular backgrounds of his students—to specific contexts of practice. Realizing that he operates in a context where speaking openly of sociopolitical issues is most incendiary—in downtown Ahmedabad where much of the rioting occurred, in a very poor, diverse college with students from both Hindu and Muslim (as well as other) backgrounds—this man works toward expanding his view of education by connecting it to issues of "citizenship," taking pride in being "Gujarati," and relying on what is currently within one's reach to ply instruments of change. When asked about why the classroom was not a viable sphere for his message, he said the following:

> The classroom is the most incendiary place to raise community issues … you see, the students come from such different backgrounds, with such divergent points of view, how can I bring up political and community issues, especially now when everyone, but everyone is reeling from the riots? Some of my students have lost their homes, some family members. *But I will say this: I know that I want to address these issues somehow; I want them to know that education is not only about what they learn and what we teach in classes about Dryden and Congreve, it is about participating in the community.* It is about taking the best of literary values—connecting to other humans—and living them. So rather than be overtly political about it, I channel their and my energy in my projects where the focus is on the community, regardless of who the members of the community are, and I have both Muslim and Hindu students working in these projects. (FI,[5] June 2, 2004, my emphasis).

When the earthquake hit, he organized his students into groups that went out and worked in the community: in communal kitchens for people that were left homeless, in contacting municipal authorities for clean drinking water, and in getting blankets and warm clothes because it was the winter. Because the riots occurred around the time that many of the students were to take their final university exams, and because the exam centres were far away and there was curfew in town, he organized buses that would take students from riot-affected areas to the exam centres.

As he explains in the previous excerpt, "education" for him is more about "connecting to other humans" than it is about what is taught and learned in the classroom, and moving toward this end, without engaging in divisive political rhetoric is instrumental in his mission, because his focus is on "what needs to get done, what the reality in front of me is like" (FI). One way that he works toward this goal is by emphasizing in his workshops (for NSS volunteers) what being "Gujarati" means: its diversity (the fact that it is a native language for a diverse set of people including Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Jews), the fact that it is home to other migrant Indians (like my family who are originally Tamilian but who have settled in Gujarat), the fact that it is the birthplace of Gandhi who represented the last word

on community service, nonformal education, and above all Hindu-Muslim unity. He says the following:

> My job is to create a space whereby such sentiments and values about community participation can flourish. The last 3 or 4 years have been so painful for so many people in this state. I want to be able to say that when my students graduate they do so with some pride and awareness of the ties that bind them to their fellow citizens. That the riots should have happened here in Gandhi's home state, when his life's actions centred around Hindu-Muslim unity—how do I not get my Gujarati students to see that irony? My problem is: how do I get them to realize this inductively? How can I make that realization happen quietly, without dogma, without saying too much? (FI)

One way by which he communicates his message indirectly is by not speaking about NSS issues in the classroom, or in corridors where students abound, but by relying on his NSS student volunteers to "spread the word" as indeed they do. He explains as follows:

> It is crucial that this work not become a dogma … given my position, my speaking of it directly runs that risk. I speak of it in workshops, I organize their camps, I attend the training sessions with them; I want to do all that, but I will not seek students out by speaking of it directly. They have to want to do this work. The value of nonformal education is that it remains nonformal. You take it into the classroom and it is gone. Pfff … like that! They have to hear of this community work from other involved students; they have to see their classmates being fulfilled by this. (FI)

Echoes of Gandhi's views on nonformal education are obvious here, as indeed is the Gandhian insistence on proceeding with such work quietly and indirectly. Although nonformal education has traditionally been conceived of as an educational alternative—operating outside the constraints of the classroom—the changes that such education seems to seek eventually make their way to classrooms. This is certainly evident with the NSS-related work that student volunteers present. I was able to observe at least three to four such instances where NSS student volunteers would speak of their work before Mr. P arrived in class. In several instances, students of their own accord also made connections between what they were learning in their classes with issues they were wrestling with in the field. In an Economics class, for instance, I heard several of these NSS student volunteers make valuable connections between how issues related to the state and national budget had direct connections to allowances for the farming women they worked with (*yeh BJP ka budget hain na, usme to kheti-vaadi ke liye itna jagah nahin hain; the BJP's budget does not really have much room for farming-related issues; SI, 35:2*); how eco-

nomic theories of rural development in Africa resonated with issues in rural Gujarati (*Africa ki jo developmental economics ki baate ki, na, voh to hamaara Gujarat mein bahut relevant hain; the developmental economics of Africa that we have been studying is relevant to Gujarat; SI, 28: 3*), how connections between the monsoon and agrarian economics percolated down to water purification projects they were involved in (*yeh agricultural economics aur baarish ka season hain, na, uska bahut sambandh hain hamaare water purification projects mein; there are many co-relations between the rainy season and agrarian economics on the one hand and the water purification projects we have been involved in, on the other; SI, 31:1*). Thus, although Mr. P. does not directly use the classroom as a site for promoting community change, his work eventually makes its way back to classrooms, a fact that seems to fill him with quiet pride.

## EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY AT THE GANDHI ASHRAM

This theme of quietly working on community problems is most resonant in the Gandhi Ashram, as well, which houses a program called *Manav Sadhna* (MS; *Human Improvement*). The Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad is the largest of Gandhi's ashrams, because this particular one served as his headquarters during the struggle for Independence. On the banks of the river Sabarmati—which runs through the city—the ashram is located on spacious grounds. One side holds his library and archival materials about him, and on the doorway to this section is a huge tribute to Martin Luther King. The other side of the ashram has what used to be his living quarters: his spinning wheel, his desk, rooms of his closest allies. The ashram, even today, is a place that welcomes the poorest of the poor and offers a haven and rehabilitation for those seeking it.

All work that goes on in the Gandhi Ashram seems to embody quintessential Gandhian ideals of self-reliance, cross-religious unities, nonformal and basic education, and a thick strain of quiet Non-Cooperation. Begun by three people—JP, AP, and VJ—in 1991, MS today runs more than 20 well-developed community-oriented programs. Born and raised in the ashram because his father was a staunch Gandhian follower, the first of the three has Gandhi "in his bones," so to speak, and much of what follows in this section is drawn from my interviews with him, from sitting in and participating in workshops he has led, and from interviews with other people at the ashram with whom he has put me in touch.

Although there are several similarities between the NSS work of Mr. P and the projects of MS—both have strong Gandhian strains, both enhance the vernaculars, both are community oriented—there are interesting differences. Unlike the project run by Mr. P., where civic engagement is parallel to formal, classroom-based learning, the focus of the projects at the Gandhi Ashram is on interpreting all education

as "civic education" and on attending to the most basic of human needs—food, clothing, shelter—before addressing any issues related to formal learning. Also, unlike the NSS project, the children that the Ashram caters to are the extremely poor. When I spent time at the ashram in May and June 2004, JP recalled how the three of them began their program with the explicit aim of working with the poorest persons they could find. Although he narrated this to me in Gujarati, I am presenting it later in translation. (I need to note here that I am deliberately choosing to present extensive, fuller quotes to mitigate the loss already encountered in translation, a process that necessitates the adding of more layers of "distance" from the very first layer of the narrator's recounting and my interpreting in Gujarati, to my then presenting and interpreting this narrative in academic English in the West):

> The three of us had noticed that a lot of village people, because of a scarcity of resources in villages—equipment, money, water—migrate to the cities and they live in slums. And we found that mothers work as cleaners/maids in people's homes, fathers work in pulling handcarts and they send their children out to pick rags. The childhoods of these children are completely lost. Middle class children have all they could possibly have but these others have no opportunities and we decided we wanted to work with these children. "Think globally, act locally" [...] So the three of us started our work. The three of us took along biscuits, chocolates, some clothes and we set out in a rickshaw and went to the Naranpura crossroads. I still remember this and there we saw two children working in a tea stall, making tea, and serving it to customers. We asked the tea-stall owner if we could sit with the children and chat with them. Hope you don't mind. We started talking to the children who were clearly suspicious of us. "Who are these people who are asking me all these questions?" they thought. We told the children: "We came to be friends with you. Will you share a meal with us?" The children said yes ... and when we got to know them, we gave them clothes, cut their nails, shampooed their hair, got them shoes. We went again in a few days, and by then, these children had talked about what we had done for them with their friends and before long they would wait for us to come, calling "*Jayeshbhai Virenbhai*" [...] We soon realized it was getting very difficult for us to cater to all the children there and so asked "will you come to the Gandhi Ashram? We have a campus there and we can introduce you to people there. Can you come once a week?" Our very first program was "Back to childhood" in '91. We had each done work with children before this, but this was our first *Manav Sadhna* project. Soon thereafter, the children started coming, first 10, then 15 [...] They seemed to enjoy coming here. We used to give them baths, clothes and then began helping them with their homework. You'll see some of them today [...] They've grown but are still here. They were dirty, unbathed, with unwashed clothes [...] We showered them with care, told them

> stories, prayed with them, showed them films and sang songs with them. We did a lot through play and then would eat together with them. … (JP, GA, June 3, 2004)

The aforementioned quote not only explains the kind of people MS works with but also orients us to the uncomplicated way in which those working with MS went about finding the kind of children they wanted to work with ("The three of us took along biscuits, chocolates, some clothes, and we set out in a rickshaw and went to the Naranpura crossroads … ;" definitely a reminder to the rest of us that reaching out to help is most simple), a simplicity that seems to permeate all the various projects in which they are involved. Jayesh explained the following to me: "For us education is community work; if schooling does not teach you to connect with your fellow humans, then what good is it?" It is a view that is at once reminiscent of Gandhi's views on formal education, partially captured in the quote that follows:

> I do not for one moment believe that my life would have been wasted, had I not received higher or lower education. Nor do I consider that I necessarily serve because I speak. But I do desire to serve and in endeavouring to fulfill that desire, I make use of the education I have received. … Both you and I come under the bane of what is mainly false education. I claim to have become free of its ill effect, and am trying to give you the benefit of this experience, and in doing so, I am demonstrating the rottenness of this education. (Gandhi, cited in Mukherjee, 1993, p. 187)

"Formal education" for Gandhi, then, was "false education," a view that is now interpreted by the MS people in terms of "true" education being civic or communal engagement.

Like the NSS-related work at the women's college, MS is committed to working with and around social stratifications, including Hindu-Muslim tensions, some of which were exacerbated during the quake (and very definitely during the riots; indeed, there had been reports that particular groups of peoples, including Muslims, did not get the aid they needed; see Engineer, 2003). JP, AP, VJ, and the MS volunteers began working with some very poor, destitute villages in a corner of Kutch (not far from the epicenter), with 80% of its population being Muslim, and with the Hindu population migrating. Almost all the homes had been decimated. JP explains as follows:

> There was almost nothing left there. We wanted to do something about this. *We did an initial analysis and educated ourselves of their needs*: broken down homes, no resources, no fodder or water for livestock, the general geographical conditions of the place (frequent cyclones and hurricanes). Over the last few years we have reached a point where it is self-sufficient, stopped

> migration, worked out Hindu-Muslim tensions to where during the recent riots, not one of these 47 villages reported anti-Hindu, anti-Muslim incidents. (JP, GA, June 3, 2004, my emphasis)

This close attention to "educating oneself," of figuring out and questioning one's own default assumptions, has echoes of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation, and finds interesting articulation in the idea that we each need to "not cooperate" with our default views but attempt to step outside them by "educating ourselves" by learning from others. A point that illustrates this best has to do with MS's work in a set of villages after the massive earthquake and ways in which they went about rehabilitating the lives of the villagers after paying close attention to the needs of the local people, and by drawing extensively on their valued, vernacular ways of living. Robin Sukhadia, who has worked with MS in some of these villages, explains the conflicts many of the villagers experienced between the modern kinds of houses that were being built for them after the quake and the "traditional" homes they were used to and wanted:

> There has been tremendous financial and infrastructural support pouring into Kutchh after the earthquake, and so many NGOs [non-government organizations] and international agencies and religious organizations have come here to build homes and rebuild this area … new hospitals have been built, new roads, new homes, but sadly, *it seems to me, that many of these projects (which are funded mainly from abroad) have very insensitively proceeded with building living "communities" without much thought as to the traditional way of life here … and it seems that many of the villagers and farmers who lost everything here, do not wish to live in homes that resemble city homes and pre-fabricated enclaves … the villagers, who have lived off the land for generations, have no where to put their cattle, to grow their crops, or to stay connected to the land in these new homes … sadly many of the homes are empty because the villagers have decided it is better to be homeless than succumb to these imposed forms of living which are being built in the name of service to the poor but … MS's approach here, thankfully, has been very different.* They have, instead of imposing designs and architects, rather empowered the local communities to design their own homes in their traditional methods…*they have built Bhungas, beautiful, mud-based round buildings that have been in use for hundreds of years here … not surprisingly, these structures were the only ones that survived the earthquake … they are very practical and make sense for this environment.* So, *Manav Sadhna* provided the guidance for the reconstruction of their homes, and the community … [look at] what happens in the name of service. … " (Sukadia, 2004, my emphasis)

The idea of drawing on, listening to, and documenting what a community needs permeates all aspects of MS's projects and is a key issue in the orientation workshops for MS volunteers. Not only are the volunteers—all of whom are Gujarati—reminded of and educated in Gandhi's ideals in the workshops but they also

are encouraged to make connections between the work they do and the specific Gandhian ideals they are enacting. So, whether it is working in a very poor Urdu-medium Muslim school (that municipal authorities have largely ignored) or finding clothes and food supplies for a very poor farmer who is suffering the consequences of a bad crop and little rain, or organizing the celebrations of a key religious holiday—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, among others—the volunteers are provided platforms and contexts whereby both their conceptual understanding of Gandhi and their practice are extended and looped into each other. One of the volunteers told me the following: “These workshops are not just about educating ourselves about Gandhi, but about bringing our work back to Gandhi [...] We go out and do Gandhi’s work, but we each have to come back to Gandhi”(JP, June 11, 2004).

Interestingly, politically and community oriented as is all of this work by MS, there is little or no reference to political events, and ways in which they have exacerbated social and religious stratifications in the city. When discussing the work done by MS volunteers after the riots, no overt mention was made of Gujarat’s chief minister (who has been accused of not doing enough to protect the Muslims) or of the incendiary rhetoric of the ruling BJP state government. The idea that “there is a job to be done” and “I have to do it” (JP, GA, June 10, 2004) seems to be a dominant theme, and Non-Cooperation during this time was and still is enacted in terms of quietly engaging in the opposite of all riot-related acts: of making shelter, finding lost relatives, distributing food and clothes, finding employment for the numerous widowed women, providing a haven for orphaned children. Although all of the volunteers at MS are engaged in various riot-related projects, it is with the children that they are most concerned. JP explains as follows:

> If we wish to reach the parents, we have to start with children. It is only through our work that we pass on our message. We cannot formally teach anybody anything; we can only do. In the end, everything we learn goes back to the community. Why not start with the community in the first place? Why not start with children? (JP, GA, June 3, 2004)

Clearly, distinctions between “civic engagement” and “education” have blurred here; they are in this context almost synonymous.

## STEPPING BACK AND ADDRESSING LATENT STRAINS AND COMPLEXITIES

Pulling back from the nitty-gritties on the ground, I would like to address several issues that have thus far remained latent. The first of these has to do with connections between ideologies and practice: Are the associations between Gandhian ide-

ologies and local practice overdrawn (Ricento, 2000, Wiley & Lukes, 1996)? Although the dangers of over-romanticizing the vernaculars are ever present, especially when writing about them in English in the West (see Ramanathan, 2005a, 2005b, in press, for connections between the vernaculars and right-wing Hindu fundamentalism), they are also rich sources of civic engagement. Although the metanarratives around Gandhi's Non-Cooperation have been deliberately eroded by the state government—because factions of the BJP have viewed Gandhi's views on Hindu-Muslim unity as "wrong" and his larger philosophies as "emasculating" and "effeminate"—endeavours such as the ones detailed here make us realize that coexisting with all the social gulfs and disparities are pockets of active, humanistic rejoinders. Arundhati Roy, the noted Indian novelist-turned political activist, maintains that fascism has to be countered in its local forms. She writes the following:

> Fascism is about the slow, steady infiltration of all the instruments of state power. It's about the slow erosion of civil liberties, about unspectacular, day-to-day injustices. … It means keeping an eagle eye on public institutions and demanding accountability. *It means putting your ear to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless. It means giving a forum to the myriad voices from the hundreds of resistance movements across the country that are speaking about real issues—about mining, about bonded labour, marital rape, sexual preferences, women's wages, uranium dumping, weavers' woes, farmer's worries. It means fighting displacement and dispossession and the relentless, every violence of abject poverty.* (Roy, 2002, my emphasis)

Certainly the works being done by MS and Mr. P. are local, action-based translations of "putting [our] ear[s] to the ground and listening to the whispering of the truly powerless": figuring out that the homes being built by the NGOs after the quake ran counter to the villagers' ideas about stable, sustainable shelters, arranging for buses to ferry students from riot-torn areas to exam centres, working to ensure that colleges and classrooms remain safe havens, spreading the notion that formal education by itself is not enough and that civic education and engagement are key to anything having to do with "education." Not only are these local critical practices crucial to note, the manner in which such civic engagement is carried out seems key as well. Both endeavours are committed to carrying out their work quietly, with Mr. P. sidestepping active promotion of his NSS projects lest they become dogmas, and with Jayesh at MS not engaging in political debate about the state's BJP government but in focusing "on the job to be done." Non-Cooperation for them both isn't just resisting perceived social tyrannies, but doing so by drawing as little attention to themselves as possible. The role of the vernaculars in these scenes isn't to be minimized at all, because it is in local ways, values, modes, and practices—Gujarati in the present case—that communities and societies participate in their own development (Bayley &

Schecter, 2003; May, 2001; Morgan, 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995; Wiley & Wright, 2004).

In winding down, I would like to address some of the tensions involved in presenting this material to the West: not only did the crossovers between the varied and complexly intertwined spaces of religions, political landscapes, geographical locations, discursive practices, and languages seem unwieldy, the cold, overentrenched, and perhaps overvalued genre of the academic essay seemed woefully inadequate as well, especially given the agonies and suffering around the quake and riots. For a long time, it seemed safest to speak of these issues only in Ahmedabad, and to not wrench them out of the South Asian spaces in which they are embedded. But temporal distance, experimenting with this hybridized textual form (part personal narrative, part academic essay), and a gnawing sense of the importance of heightening awareness in the West of non-Western civic and community engagements, have opened a space whereby speaking of these issues now seems less like a travesty and more of a sharing of insights about how nonformal education translates into civic efforts at healing community rifts. As Morgan (1998) points out, communities remind us of collective responsibilities; engagements in them prompt us to ask the following: "who speaks with authority? When, where, and how can people respond?" (p. 23). In this case, the combinations of community responsibilities, sociocivic engagements, nonformal education, and Gandhian notions of "Non-Cooperation" work to partially dislodge some of our collective and sedimented notions of West-based, formal "education" toward alternate spaces whereby people in non-Western domains respond to their communities' needs by going beyond constraints of formal classrooms to nonformal contexts and assume the authority to speak by harnessing the most local of resources, namely the vernaculars.

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## ENDNOTES

[1]Some activist groups in Ahmedabad include the following: (a) *Janvikas*—an organization that focuses on the empowerment and development of non-government organizations (NGOs) in Gujarat; (b)

*Janpath Citizens Initiative*—a coalition of over 200 local grassroots NGOs coming together in the days following the Gujarat quake; (c) Navasarjan Trust—led by Martin Macwan—an organization representing Dalit rights in India; (d) *Rishta*—a Gujarat Jesuit writers' cell—engaged in a series of workshops for the development of vernacular media, especially for Christian and Muslim youth; and (e) *Manav Sadhna*—run out of the Gandhi Ashram.

[2]The following is the data gathered specifically at the women's institution: interviews with 2 administrators, 8 faculty members, and 25 students; 38 hours of classroom observations; and a range of informal discussions with teachers in a variety of contexts, primarily outside the class. Written documents from this institution include exams, student responses and notes, notices on bulletin boards, textbooks, and syllabi.

[3]It is supposedly the largest youth service organization in the country with a membership of more than 4 million youth.

[4]Yearly camps and training are offered for all volunteers for minimal fees as well as extended camps for college-going youth. Themes of some camps in the last few years have been "Youth for sustainable development," "Youth for wasteland development," and "Youth for greenery."

[5]FI refers to Faculty interview, SI to Student interview, GA to Gandhi Ashram.

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