
The making of a mahātma: Radhakrishnan's critique of Gandhi

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Summary: Radhakrishnan's panegyrics on Gandhi have reinforced the popular and now well-entrenched image of Gandhi as India's Great Soul. A cursory reading of Radhakrishnan's works might suggest that he was an unwavering supporter of Gandhi. Challenging this popular perception, the author argues that throughout his life Radhakrishnan remained critical of several facets of Gandhi's thought and practice. Among them, renunciation and celibacy (*brahmacārya*), and *satyāgraha* (non-violent resistance) with its methods of non-violence (*ahimsā*) and *swadeshi* (self-reliance) are recurring themes with which Radhakrishnan took issue. The author claims that neither the basis of Radhakrishnan's criticisms nor his estimation of Gandhi remained constant. Instead, Radhakrishnan's perception of Gandhi reflects the development of Radhakrishnan's own philosophical, religious and political sensibilities.

Résumé : Les panégyriques de Radhakrishnan sur Gandhi ont renforcé l'image populaire et maintenant bien ancrée de Gandhi comme la Grande Âme de l'Inde. Une lecture superficielle des travaux de Radhakrishnan pourrait suggérer qu'il soit un partisan inébranlable de Gandhi. En défiant cette perception populaire, l'auteur de cet article soutient que pendant toute sa vie Radhakrishnan est resté critique de plusieurs facettes de la pensée et de la pratique de Gandhi : renonciation et célibat (*brahmacārya*), *satyāgraha* (résistance non-violente) avec ses méthodes de non-violence (*ahimsā*) et *swadeshi* (indépendance) sont des thèmes récurrents que Radhakrishnan a remis en question. L'auteur prétend que ni le fondement des critiques de Radhakrishnan ni son évaluation de Gandhi ne demeurent constants. La perception que Radhakrishnan donne de Gandhi reflète plutôt le développement de ses propres sensibilités philosophiques, religieuses et politiques.

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...it was a habit with me to forget what I did not like, and to carry out in practice whatever I liked. (Gandhi 1993 [1927]: 10)

While Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948) may well be among the most recognized and influential figures in recent history, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) is perhaps the most prominent Indian personality in academic circles of the 20th century. A cursory reading of Radhakrishnan's principal works might lead one to the conclusion that he was an unwavering supporter of Gandhi. Initially, such a conclusion would not be unwarranted: Radhakrishnan wrote several articles on Gandhi, he dedicated his translation of and commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* to Gandhi, he edited a volume in honour of Gandhi's 70th birthday as well as a second volume to commemorate Gandhi's birth centenary. That Radhakrishnan refers to Gandhi as "mahātma" and as a "spiritual saint" would appear to lend further support to this conclusion. Like so many others, Radhakrishnan's panegyrics on Gandhi have reinforced the popular and now well-entrenched image of Gandhi as India's Great Soul. Less well known, however, are Radhakrishnan's criticisms of Gandhi.

Throughout his life, Radhakrishnan remained critical of several facets of Gandhi's thought and practice. Among them, renunciation and celibacy (*brahmacārya*), and *satyāgraha* (non-violent resistance) with its methods of non-violence (*ahimsā*) and *swadeshi* (self-reliance) are recurring themes with which Radhakrishnan took issue. However, neither the basis of Radhakrishnan's criticisms nor his estimation of Gandhi remain constant. Instead, Radhakrishnan's perception of Gandhi reflects the development of Radhakrishnan's own sensibilities—philosophical, religious and political. Thus, as Radhakrishnan's thought matured and as his historical circumstances changed, his public assessment of Gandhi became increasingly positive.

Radhakrishnan's assessment of Gandhi may be divided into three periods. During the first period, between 1915 and 1920, Radhakrishnan looked upon Gandhi not as a spiritual saint, but as a misguided thinker who was advocating an irrational and unethical program. The second period, between 1921 and 1925, marks a substantial and definitive transition in Radhakrishnan's assessment of Gandhi. This is for Radhakrishnan a period of divided allegiance between Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Specifically, in the six months between October 1921 and April 1922 we find lurking beneath a cautious defense of Gandhi as a religious and moral exemplar several of Radhakrishnan's sharpest criticisms of the Gandhian program. Finally, from 1926 onward marks Radhakrishnan's mature assessment of Gandhi in which Radhakrishnan sees Gandhi as one whose life is deeply spiritual and religiously motivated. Here we find not a cautious defense, but open admiration of Gandhi. However, while Radhakrishnan praises Gandhi for his spiritual accomplishments and personal fortitude, many of Radhakrishnan's earlier criticisms remain, though often circumspect and at times made in the privacy of personal correspondence.

Beyond Radhakrishnan's published works there is little in the way of detailed primary source material from which to draw a complete picture of Radhakrishnan's views on Gandhi. Aside from the plethora of strong scholarship on Gandhi and on Radhakrishnan, there remain two further sources. First, one may defer to Sarvepalli Gopal's summaries and analyses of Radhakrishnan's unpublished writings and private notes. Second, there is Gandhi's all too scant and often cryptic correspondence to Radhakrishnan.¹ While the latter gives us access to Gandhi's responses to Radhakrishnan, Radhakrishnan's correspondence to Gandhi is missing, leaving ample room for speculation and conjecture. The challenge therefore lies in constructing an historically responsible account of Radhakrishnan's assessment of Gandhi with an understanding that such conclusions be taken as provisional and subject to revision in the event that further evidence becomes available.

Failing the test of reason: Radhakrishnan's early assessment of Gandhi (1915)

There is precious little evidence from which to draw a complete picture of Radhakrishnan's early assessment of Gandhi, and what little there is comes to us second-hand through his son and historian, Sarvepalli Gopal. There are no references to Gandhi in Radhakrishnan's work prior to the two first meetings in Madras in 1915, and if any written correspondence between Radhakrishnan and Gandhi existed prior to this time, it is unavailable. However, the limited account of his first encounter with Gandhi suggests that Radhakrishnan found Gandhi to be philosophically misguided and morally irresponsible. In the course of their conversation:

Gandhi directed [Radhakrishnan] not to drink milk, which was the essence of beef; Radhakrishnan retorted that it followed that all human beings were cannibals for mother's milk could be described the same way as the essence of human flesh. Gandhi said, "You are too logical"....The conversation then turned to medical relief. Gandhi observed that there was little need for doctors; for example, in the jungle thousands of births took place without medical assistance. Thousands, commented Radhakrishnan, also died in the jungle. "How do you know?" said Gandhi. "How do *you* know?" was the reply. The conversation ended. (Gopal 1989: 28; Pyarelal: 1962; Minor 1989: 65)

At this time, reason and logic were for Radhakrishnan the yardsticks by which the merit of any view could and ought to be measured. Clearly, Gandhi did not meet Radhakrishnan's rational standard and Radhakrishnan was quick to point out the logical absurdities in Gandhi's positions. Moreover, here and throughout his life Radhakrishnan held a utilitarian view of ethics. The possibility of withholding otherwise available medical assistance and thus alleviating suffering was to Radhakrishnan not only irrational but morally reprehensible.

This first encounter with Gandhi was not only a failure to reach a meeting of the minds, but an unequal partnership. The 46-year old Gandhi was coming into his own and he had had the opportunity to reflect upon his experiences in England and in South Africa and had begun to give those lessons practical expression. At 27, Radhakrishnan had received his Master's degree from Madras Christian College only six years earlier and for only four of these years had he been teaching philosophy at Presidency College. It would appear as though Radhakrishnan's limited experience in the world at this time was offset by the assurance provided to him by his early academic and professional success and by his confidence in his own abilities.

Divided allegiance and cautious defense: 1921-25

The year 1921 marks a turning point in Radhakrishnan's assessment of Gandhi and his program. Several factors contributed to this shift in Radhakrishnan's thinking. The events in Amritsar two years earlier not only intensified Radhakrishnan's disillusionment with the West, and with the British Raj specifically, but reinforced his already blossoming nationalist sensibilities and his commitment to the goal of advaitic unity. Further, that Radhakrishnan occupied the George V Chair in Philosophy and was living in Calcutta at a time of unfolding communalism must have pressed home the urgency for momentum toward Indian solidarity.

Bengal was also the home of Radhakrishnan's most influential Indian mentor, Rabindranath Tagore. In 1921, Radhakrishnan's admiration of Tagore was at its height.² Radhakrishnan had come to appreciate Tagore's emphasis on aesthetics and the notions of religious intuition and the creative potency of religious life began to find their place in Radhakrishnan's philosophy. Radhakrishnan's philosophical sensibilities had grown beyond the methodological supremacy he had given to reason and logic. It was in this political, professional and religious context that Radhakrishnan expressed a cautious acceptance of Gandhi's personal achievements.

In "Gandhi and Tagore," an article published in October 1921 under the pseudonym "C. S. R.," Radhakrishnan sought to reconcile Gandhian practice and Tagore's religious ideals (Radhakrishnan 1921). Rather than "pointing in different directions" and "putting us to confusion" (14) by their "two seemingly opposing ideals" (16), Radhakrishnan suggests Gandhi and Tagore are united in their desire to improve and develop the soul. Radhakrishnan saw in Gandhi the ethical potential latent in Tagore's philosophy.

While Radhakrishnan set out to reconcile these "two seemingly opposites," it is clear that Radhakrishnan's own philosophical sensibilities were much more closely allied with what Radhakrishnan saw as Tagore's poetic insight and aesthetic religion. For Radhakrishnan, Tagore's creative vision is the spiritual completion of Gandhi's ethic, and Gandhi the moral potential of Tagore's religious artistry. According to Radhakrishnan, Gandhi claims sal-

vation comes only through suffering and that freedom consists in a detachment from the passions; Tagore, on the other hand, claims the end of suffering is perfection and true independence is dependence on the Eternal (17). There is a recognition here by Radhakrishnan that Gandhi is praiseworthy for his *personal* accomplishments in the ethical sphere. Gandhi possesses personal fortitude and self-restraint as well as a commitment to selfless service, undertakings which could lend themselves to Radhakrishnan's goal of advaitic unity.

While Radhakrishnan could see the value in Gandhi's *personal* self-discipline and the end to which such inner resolve could lead, Radhakrishnan remained skeptical of Gandhi's methods for achieving Indian solidarity and national unity. In Radhakrishnan's eyes, what worked for Gandhi was not necessarily transferable to Indians as a whole; Gandhi offered *a* method, but his was *one* of many possible alternatives. And it is here in "Gandhi and Tagore" that Radhakrishnan calls into question what he saw as the efficacy of the Gandhian program as a viable strategy for Indian solidarity.

Radhakrishnan saw Gandhi as advocating a life of unnecessary self-deprivation and joyless restraints. In a sense, Gandhi had gone too far. For Radhakrishnan, Gandhi lacked the joy and freedom of spirit exemplified by Tagore, preferring instead "a grim, austere attitude that life is suffering, it is a course of discipline, or a round of restraints" (15). Gandhi, says Radhakrishnan, "preaches the doom of the natural world, its pomps and vanities and proclaims and practises the blessedness of poverty and chastity. It is hard to think of Gandhi in silk robes and velvet shoes singing away the joy of life as it is to imagine Rabindranath in rags with ashes on his face and an alms-bowl in his hand preaching the glories of poverty" (15-16).

Throughout his life, Radhakrishnan resisted the classical *samnyāsīn* (ascetic) ideal, an end to which he saw Gandhi gravitating. Radhakrishnan rejected this ideal along with its world-denying implications. Gandhi's ascetic tendencies had the potential to work against the value Radhakrishnan placed on the ethical implications of Hinduism as he understood them. For Radhakrishnan, Hinduism clearly conceived and supported a utilitarian ethic in which the individual remained a full participant in society with an end to promoting social and religious unity, a unity Radhakrishnan understood in terms of the emergence of *brahman* in the world.

On a separate though related issue, Radhakrishnan took it upon himself to characterize and criticize Gandhi's demonization of modern technology and its prescribed abandonment. In Radhakrishnan's view:

[Gandhi] is the sworn enemy of all that goes under the comprehensive term of western civilization and seems to aim at a state of things when we would be free from trams and taxis, posts and telegraphs, doctors and lawyers. With him it is a delusive optimism to believe that machinery will save India. The effort of civilization, the labour of science, the progress of art have not added to man's happiness but have taken away something substantial from it. Gandhi pleads for the freedom of the

human spirit which is now at bay, as it were, before the horrible monster of a mechanical civilization. (14)

Remaining true to his philosophical training, Radhakrishnan objected to Gandhi's material minimalism on logical grounds: "It is a false theory to assume that we are spiritual in proportion to the fewness of the material instruments we employ" (14-15). Not only was Gandhi's ascetic impulse with its repudiation of modernism an affront to Radhakrishnan's ethical vision, but he was convinced that Gandhi's position was untenable based as it was on a fallacious assumption.

Likewise, Radhakrishnan was deeply disturbed by Gandhi's call for students to leave schools and colleges (Gopal 1989: 67). Such a "drastic step" was for Radhakrishnan misguided and myopic. For Radhakrishnan, Gandhi failed to recognize that "student life had its own sacred privileges which ought not be bartered away" (Radhakrishnan 1921: 24). Indeed, Radhakrishnan agreed with Gandhi on the need for educational reform, but objected to his "clean-slate" approach, siding instead with Tagore that "reform from within is more desirable and practical than outright destruction" (24) of the existing system.

Radhakrishnan took issue with Gandhi's support and encouragement of the *swadeshi* movement. "It seemed to Radhakrishnan a mental derangement on the part of Indians to believe that Gandhi was an authority in economics and education and social reform and everything else merely because he happened to be a spiritual saint" (Gopal 1989: 67-68). It is not that Radhakrishnan was inherently opposed to the burning of foreign cloth; instead, the merits of such a course of action ought to be decided on economic grounds rather than on the misguided assumption that Gandhi was an authority on all matters, religious or otherwise.

It is time to free ourselves from this mental derangement and the consequent confusion of the issues. Let us not mix up things secular and sacred but decide economic questions on economic grounds and make a huge bonfire of foreign cloth, if that be the most economical use we can make of it. (Radhakrishnan 1921: 24)

In "Gandhi and Tagore," Radhakrishnan's sharpest criticisms are directed to Gandhi's method of *satyāgraha* and its inviolable premise of non-violence (*ahimsā*). After questioning what he saw as Gandhi's dogmatic stand against an unrepentant British government, Radhakrishnan suggests that Gandhi's program in fact leaves room for the possibility of "active resistance" on the part of Indians.

It cannot however be admitted that Gandhi is right in thinking that the Indian Government has really no regrets about the events of 1919 and persists in ruling India by the sword. This, after all, is not to the point in an abstract discussion of the fundamentals. If passive resistance does not bring about a change, active resistance may be resorted to. We cannot say, that on the principles of Gandhi, active resistance of the aggressor is disallowed. (20)

While Gandhi would take issue with Radhakrishnan's characterization of *satyāgraha* as "passive" resistance, Radhakrishnan questions the Gandhian appeal to non-violent resistance as the only viable and morally acceptable alternative. If active resistance is undertaken, argues Radhakrishnan, it should not be done in a spirit of revenge or for punitive measures: "The right attitude to develop is a spirit of brotherhood and if resistance is to be offered, it should be in a spirit of humanity" (20). While Gandhi does allow for the use of physical force in certain circumstances,³ he would reject Radhakrishnan's proposal that active physical resistance on the part of Indians is morally justifiable. Conversely, Radhakrishnan's statement illustrates his discontent with what he undoubtedly saw as Gandhi's uncompromising and dogmatic stand on non-violence. This is not to suggest that Radhakrishnan agitated for violent resistance to British rule, but only that Radhakrishnan seems to be able to accept active, physical resistance on the part of Indians so long as such action was undertaken in promotion of the general good of humanity.⁴

Not only does Radhakrishnan call into question the strategic wisdom of *ahimsā* in the Gandhian program, but he is skeptical of the ability of Gandhi's *satyāgrahis* (non-violent resisters) to act with the same self-restraint exhibited by their leader:

Unfortunately, Gandhi makes mistakes with regard to his following. He can fight injustice with absolute calm and a clean conscience but ordinary humanity cannot fight unless the blood boils. For moral heroes, it may be possible to fight without hatred, without betraying any anger or impatience of spirit but ordinary men will have to pass through long periods of moral evolution before they can reach those heights. Gandhi's estimate of human nature should have been considerably upset by the Nankanasahib tragedy and the recent happenings in Malabar. (Radhakrishnan 1921: 22)

Radhakrishnan goes on to suggest that "[t]he vital defect is that [Gandhi's] political program is much too advanced for the large masses of those who call themselves his followers. It is likely that [Gandhi] may reconsider the situation in light of recent events" (22). Even after Gandhi called off his *satyāgraha* campaign early the following year, Radhakrishnan repeated and amplified these criticisms:

It is, however, a melancholy fact that those who call themselves his followers are not devoid of hatred. They assent to the formula of non-violence but do not understand its truth Many of those who fly under the banner of non-co-operation with something of the fervour of Gandhi though without his faith have stirred up the passions of the ignorant sections of the population and misled youthful enthusiasts. Nothing has hurt Gandhi so much as the acts of violence committed by some so-called non-co-operators. (Radhakrishnan 1922: 567-68)

And:

In an indirect way he is responsible for dragging into the movement people who do not share his faith or his hopes. The responsibility of a leader is great when large

masses of population have a superstitious reverence for him and venture out with him on the same voyage trusting to him as to a pilot. In his optimism, Gandhi forgets that the mills of God grind rather slowly. Society cannot be made to march in time with a saint. (568)

It is important to note that Radhakrishnan is not denying the goodness of human nature. Rather, his comment points to what he sees as Gandhi's overly optimistic expectation that Indians are able to restrain their lower, brute nature in order to meet the standards of self-discipline and passionate restraint Gandhi held for himself. For Radhakrishnan, Gandhi had become comfortable in his own spiritual accomplishments, but neglected to appreciate the inherent difficulty his example presented for his followers. Radhakrishnan believed that Gandhi ought to rethink his commitment to *satyāgraha* and to modify his expectations according to the dispositions and capacities of those he was attempting to lead.

Undoubtedly, Radhakrishnan's estimation of Gandhi heightened in March of 1922 in response to Gandhi calling off his *satyāgraha* campaign after the violence in Chaura Chauri. At the same time, however, Radhakrishnan took it upon himself to reiterate many of his earlier criticisms of Gandhi's program, an opportunity made all the more inviting by the "publication of an article by the synod of bishops of the Church of England in India denouncing Gandhi's non-violence as unchristian and contrary to the teachings of Jesus..." (Gopal 1989: 68). In a series of articles published anonymously in the *Indian Social Reformer* under the title "Anglican Bishops and Indian politics," Radhakrishnan took it upon himself to respond to and discredit the arguments of the Bishops. On the surface, these articles may appear to be Radhakrishnan's vindication of Gandhian *satyāgraha* and *ahimsā*. However, this was not so much a defense of Gandhian non-violence as it was an attempt to refute the Bishops' suggestion that Gandhi's non-violence was inconsistent with the ethics of Jesus. Radhakrishnan's argument was more polemical than political, and Radhakrishnan was careful to make the distinction: "...what staggers [me] most is that the Bishops...should believe that the non-violent method of [Gandhi] is not the same as that of Jesus. [My] only interest in the present [*satyāgraha*] movement is the non-violent aspect of it" (Radhakrishnan 1922: 548). In this vein, Radhakrishnan voiced his support of several of the Bishops' criticisms.

The present writer... has no quarrel with [the Bishops] if they look upon Gandhi as a knight of the impossible, "a beautiful but ineffectual angel beating his luminous wings in the void in vain"... The writer can understand the Bishops if they say that one who is "too proud to fight" cannot lead the country in its struggle for freedom. He cannot consider them unsympathetic if they dismiss Gandhi as a tyro in politics who is as ready to make mistakes as to own them or look upon him as a dangerous force who plays with fire in trying hurriedly to force up society to a higher plane, thus exposing it to the avenging power of facts. He cannot deem them unjust if they consider Gandhi to be a faddist trying to imitate the prophet of old [i.e. Jesus] and

bid the sun of progress stop in its course and go back. He can appreciate their cleverness if they declare, what Nietzsche said of the Jews of Jesus' day, that the cowardly and effeminate Indians unable to show open fight to the virile and robust Britishers have received the code of love as a simple act of self-preservation. He will agree with them if they dispute the wisdom of certain aspects of his movement such as the discourtesies to the Prince, crusade against Colleges, bonfires of foreign cloth and campaign of civil disobedience. (548)

Beneath the surface of Radhakrishnan's polemic was a strong undercurrent of criticism. Radhakrishnan saw *satyāgraha* as an ineffective and self-serving program and its leader as a political novice dangerously experimenting with the unbridled passions of the Indian population. For Radhakrishnan, Gandhi's success in his own spiritual accomplishments was a template far too advanced for the vast majority of Indians, many of whom Radhakrishnan feared looked to Gandhi as a saint for all seasons.

Radhakrishnan's anonymity in these articles allowed him to express his own political frustrations as well as his doubts about what he saw as the Gandhian program. Radhakrishnan was able to protect his professional investment as George V Chair in Philosophy and to remain the "objective" observer and reflective philosopher of whom many of his colleagues—Indian and British—had started to take notice. Radhakrishnan sympathized with Gandhi's goal of Indian solidarity and national unity, but had grave reservations about the wisdom and logic of Gandhi's strategies. Radhakrishnan was resistant to what he saw as Gandhi's "clean-slate" approach, favouring instead a policy of correction and adjustments within the existing system. Moreover, Radhakrishnan questioned the intentions of those who called themselves Gandhi's followers and was "unenthusiastic about a political campaign that assumed all its followers to be heroes" (Gopal 1989: 67).

Allegiance and tempered criticism: 1926-48

The year 1926 marks the beginning of the broadening of Radhakrishnan's academic career and professional mandate. Beginning with an invitation to give the 1926 Upton Lectures at Oxford University, Radhakrishnan embarked on a lengthy series of academic and administrative appointments in both India and abroad.⁵ In 1929 at the age of 41, Radhakrishnan had come into his own philosophically with his delivery of the Hibbert Lectures, later published in 1932 under the title *An Idealist View of Life*.

While Radhakrishnan's notoriety and reputation had extended beyond India, he was, in the two decades leading up to independence, confronted with growing unrest and division both in India as well as on the world stage. This time of increased crisis signaled all the more to Radhakrishnan an urgent need for unity and fellowship. For Radhakrishnan, Indian unity was the first step toward his goal of world solidarity and fellowship, an ideal that would culminate in the full unfolding of *brahman* in the world. Moreover,

Radhakrishnan was optimistic that reason, justice, common sense and a desire for world peace all pointed to India's freedom (Gopal 1989: 114; Radhakrishnan 1936: 147-50).

For Radhakrishnan, the primary means for achieving Indian unity was through education. The purpose of education, Radhakrishnan, argued was to instill in the individual a high standard of ethics. Only ethical individuals could remedy the communal rivalries which stood in the way of a united India. For Radhakrishnan, communalism was akin to dogmatism; it inhibited freedom of thought and expression and stymied creative potential. So long as communalism remained, India would become paralyzed and would be unable to progress.⁶ Universities and the ethically responsible individuals they produced were, for Radhakrishnan, the vehicles best suited for curbing communal animosity and promoting spiritual values. At the same time, Radhakrishnan recognized the urgent need for unity in the context of growing discontent, and he found that unifying potential in Gandhi.

Radhakrishnan had come to recognize that Gandhi's ethical example of personal fortitude and self-restraint offered a motivating and unifying force to Indians. For Radhakrishnan, not only was Gandhi a spiritual saint, but he was well-positioned to curb Indian discontent, to consolidate nationalist sentiment, and to push forward the Indian call for *swarāj* (self-rule). That Gandhi was able to rally and to motivate Indians superseded Radhakrishnan's earlier hesitation about the details of Gandhi's program. Though not without his reservations, Radhakrishnan saw that the momentum Gandhi brought to the nationalist movement was better than the alternative of standing still and allowing communal rivalries to go unchecked. Gandhi's program was the direction in which India *was* moving, and Radhakrishnan found this method to be sufficient to the extent that it contributed to Indian solidarity, to progress, and ultimately to his goal of a universal spiritual unity.

In a striking if rather general recommendation, Radhakrishnan tempers his earlier criticisms of Gandhi to say:

There is nothing wrong in absorbing the culture of other peoples; only we must enhance, raise and purify the element we take over, fuse them with the best of our own. The right procedure regarding the fusing together of the different elements tossed from outside into the national crucible, is indicated roughly in the writings of Gandhi and Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose and Bhagvan Das. In them we see the faint promise of a great future, some signs of triumph over scholasticism, as well as a response to a great culture. (Radhakrishnan 1989: 780)

With the confidence Radhakrishnan places in Gandhi as possible national and cultural consolidator, it appears as though Radhakrishnan had come to appreciate the fragmentary potential of his earlier criticisms.

While accommodation and high praise of Gandhi became the norm for Radhakrishnan, he continued to voice many of his earlier criticisms. The difference now was that rather than public, albeit anonymous, assaults on

Gandhi's methods, Radhakrishnan tempered his public criticisms and was careful to express his concerns directly to Gandhi. As late as 1944 Radhakrishnan reiterated and expanded upon his 1921 critique of Gandhian renunciation:

There is, however, some exaggeration when the ascetic code in all its fullness is prescribed, not merely for the *samnyāsins* but for the whole of humanity. Sexual restraint, for example, is essential for all, but celibacy is only for the few. The sexual act is not a mere pleasure of the body, a purely carnal act, but is a means by which love is expressed and life perpetuated. It becomes evil, if it harms others or if it interferes with a person's spiritual development, but neither of these conditions is inherent in the act itself. (Radhakrishnan 1944: 18-19)

In 1939 Radhakrishnan openly affirmed that Gandhi "was essentially a religious person who had become a political worker because his religious outlook meant a commitment to the whole of humanity" (Gopal 158). Moreover, Radhakrishnan was optimistic enough to suggest that Gandhi's non-violence "was the only possible means for such a religious person, and *satyāgraha* the only practical way of applying non-violence" (158). At the same time, Radhakrishnan's own inclination was that for the majority of Indians "such an approach availed no more than the whistling of the wind" (158).

In December of 1940, Radhakrishnan made it clear to Gandhi that he hated the whole idea of *satyāgraha* by the representatives of the people.⁷ Radhakrishnan was skeptical about the ability of Indians to resist the temptation of lapsing into unreflective reverence for *satyāgraha* leaders, whether it be Gandhi or elected representatives (Radhakrishnan 1922: 548).⁸ Radhakrishnan's fear was that unreflective admiration for the leaders of civil disobedience courted dogmatism and communal division. Instead, Radhakrishnan believed that it was the responsibility of political leaders to develop the potential of those they represented. From Radhakrishnan's perspective, political leaders, as members of the Indian *intelligentsia*, could be seen as enablers whose job it was to hold themselves above partisan and communal differences in order to facilitate the betterment of the individual and unity within society. Radhakrishnan advocated more positive action by the state than did Gandhi. Radhakrishnan's was a "top-down" approach to government. He favoured state control of "private interests and [the] regulation of social forces for the development of the individual," and even as early as 1933 Radhakrishnan was closer in his political sensibilities to Jawaharlal Nehru than he was to Gandhi (Gopal 1989: 140-46). Radhakrishnan believed that economics, education and social issues could be best administered and controlled by clear-sighted and forward-looking representatives of the people. Those in political office ought to remain above an ever-shifting popular sentiment. In Radhakrishnan's eyes, *satyāgraha* by representatives of the people not only was an abdication of social and political responsibility but carried with it the potential for further discontent and unrest among Indians.

Concluding reflections on means and ends

Radhakrishnan remained critical of Gandhi throughout his life. The basis and avenues of his criticisms, however, changed, allowing him to challenge the wisdom of Gandhi's program while at the same time exalt Gandhi as a spiritual saint. Undoubtedly, Radhakrishnan praised Gandhi for his own spiritual accomplishments; but Gandhi's ideals of renunciation and celibacy, and his methods of civil disobedience as modes of expression on the part of Indians remained perennial sources of discontent for Radhakrishnan. Ironically, though not surprisingly, those very features of Gandhi's program that contributed to his mass appeal were often precisely the targets at which Radhakrishnan took aim.

There is more than a hint of privilege, and arguably elitism, running through Radhakrishnan's criticisms of Gandhi. Radhakrishnan's "speeches and writings... were those of one who was born of the class of literati, ... not one caught in the mechanics of implementation" (Minor 1989: 135-36). Radhakrishnan never took it upon himself nor did he find it necessary to muster the support of the Indian masses. Throughout his life, he and his audiences were cut from the same cloth: largely English-educated, upper-class academics, philosophers and statesmen. Radhakrishnan's position "often seems to be that of a superior who tolerates the weaknesses of an inferior: truth is one, and those who have realized it can look benignly upon those whose inferior ideas and practices show that they still have ways to go" (137).⁹ Nor did Radhakrishnan conceive of his life and personal experiences as an example for others. Radhakrishnan articulated an ideal and it was the responsibility of the Indian *intelligentsia* to encourage and to facilitate its realization. Radhakrishnan located his ideal in the Upaniṣadic tradition, and the means for its fulfillment he found in the "experimental" methods of the ancient *r̥ṣis* (seers).

This discussion opened with a quote from Gandhi: "It was a habit with me to forget what I did not like, and to carry out in practice whatever I liked." What Gandhi "liked" became narrower and his expectations of himself more demanding over the course of his life. He internalized what he saw as India's failures as a reflection of his own lack of discipline and personal shortcomings. In a sense, Gandhi's world closed in on itself, due in no small part to his identifying an inherent relationship between means and ends. An end unjustly achieved, for Gandhi, was not an end worth having.

Radhakrishnan's commitment to advaitic unity remained constant throughout his life, but the means for attaining his goal became increasingly broad. Unlike Gandhi, Radhakrishnan concerned himself with ends. Insofar as Radhakrishnan appealed to the flexibility afforded to him by the "experimental" methods of the sages of old, Radhakrishnan was more willing than Gandhi to experiment with means. Moreover, Radhakrishnan's concern for means diminished as his own experiences broadened and his philosophical

proclivities matured. Within two decades what was initially undesirable to Radhakrishnan about Gandhi's program became a practical means for working toward a fellowship of the spirit. In 1915, Radhakrishnan criticized Gandhi solely on the basis of reason and logic. By the early 1920s, Radhakrishnan praised Gandhi for his personal accomplishments, seeing him as an ethical exemplar and "spiritual saint." At the same time, Radhakrishnan questioned the capacity of Indians to march in time with such a saint. Beginning in 1925, Radhakrishnan had come to realize the futility and divisive potential inherent in dogmatic stands on means. Indians had rallied behind Gandhi, and such unity, he believed, could make a positive contribution toward the further emergence of the Spirit in the world.

Notes

- 1 As contained in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (90 volumes, 1958-84).
- 2 Radhakrishnan had first become acquainted with Tagore's work in 1912 and had prior to this time authored two articles, "The philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore I" in *The Quest* VIII, 3 (1917): 457-77, and "The philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore II" in *The Quest* VII, 4 (1917): 592-612, and a book, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (1918).
- 3 In his reply to the Reader's suggestion that active, physical (brute) force is at times the correct moral choice, Gandhi says: "I hope you will not consider that it is still physical force, though of a lower order, when you would forcibly prevent the child from rushing towards the fire if you could. That force is of a different order, and we have to understand what it is. Remember that, in preventing the child, you are minding entirely its own interest, you are exercising authority for its sole benefit." Referring to Gandhi's statement, Parel adds: "Here we find Gandhi attaching an important qualification to the meaning of non-violence. The physical restraining of a child rushing to self-destruction is a non-violent act in Gandhi's sense of non-violence, for the physical restraining here results in the well-being of the child; besides it is not motivated by self-interest" (1997: 86 and footnote 169).
- 4 Radhakrishnan's reading of Gandhi's position on *ahimsā* and his desire to dislodge the inherent bond Gandhi saw between means and ends may reflect the lingering influence of B. G. Tilak. Tilak interpreted the *Bhagavad Gītā* in such a way as to justify the use of force in order to free India from the yoke of British rule. In 1915, the same year Radhakrishnan met Gandhi, Tilak had asked for and received a copy of an article Radhakrishnan had written on the *Gītā*. Tilak affirmed in his *Gītā Rahāsyā* that his "own work on the subject was on the same lines as Radhakrishnan's approach." See Gopal, *Radhakrishnan*, 28. Radhakrishnan's admiration for Tilak was later given public expression in his December 1921 article "Tilak as scholar" in *The Indian Review* XXII: 737-39.
- 5 Radhakrishnan began a series of speaking engagements abroad which took him not only to Europe, but to the United States and Canada. Over the next two decades Radhakrishnan held various academic appointments including the Spalding Chair at Oxford and was Vice-Chancellor at Andhra University (1931-36) and at Banares Hindu University (1939-48), as well as non-academic positions including his involvement with UNESCO (1946-51).
- 6 For an analysis of the role of education in Radhakrishnan's thought, see chapter 5 in Minor 1989: 57-73.
- 7 There is an assumption here that Radhakrishnan expressed his view in writing rather than in personal conversation. The source of his comment is a letter from Gandhi to Radhakrishnan in which Gandhi asks: "Why do you 'hate the whole idea of satyagraha by the representatives of the people'?" Letter dated 8/12/40 from Gandhi to Radhakrishnan in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1940), 214. Radhakrishnan's reply, if any, is unavailable.

- 8 Radhakrishnan writes: "The responsibility of a leader is great when large masses of population have a superstitious reverence for him and venture out with him on the same voyage trusting to him as to a pilot."
- 9 Minor is quoting R. David Kaylor, "Radhakrishnan as Proponent and Critic of Religion" in *Indian Philosophical Annual* XII: 63, as quoted in Minor, *Radhakrishnan*, 137.

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