Battlefield Banaras

Few, including sitting MP Narendra Modi perhaps, know of the Mahatma's enduring relationship with the city.

- Ram Chandra Guha

Gandhi liked to say that India lives in her villages. Seeing cities as emblematic of the avarice of modern civilisation, he founded two rural settlements in South Africa and two more in India. Yet one of the many paradoxes of Gandhi's own life was that he was profoundly shaped by cities. It was through the Vegetarian Society of London that he first learnt the value of organised collective action. It was in that society's journal that he cut his teeth as a published writer. And it was in London that he made his first English (and Christian) friends.

Gandhi's two-decade-long stay in South Africa was also radically altered by his experiences of city life. He was based first in the port city of Durban, where he finally succeeded as a lawyer, having previously failed in Bombay and Rajkot. His clients were mostly Muslims and Tamils, thus further expanding his social horizons. Professional success was accompanied by a rising public profile. Living in Durban between 1893 and 1901, Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress, wrote countless petitions to the government, and established himself as the leader of the Indian diaspora.

In 1901, Gandhi came back to India, and sought anew to establish a legal practice in Bombay. He failed once more. In December 1902, he sailed back to South Africa. In this, his second stint in the continent, he was largely based in Johannesburg, a city deep in the interior. In a decade spent in this city of gold and greed, Gandhi started his own newspaper, conceived of the idea of satyagraha, and put it into practice. It was in Johannesburg that he served his first jail terms, one of them in a prison where Nelson Mandela was to be incarcerated many years later.

Cities were vital to Gandhi's work in England and South Africa. So they were in India too. His first all-India satyagraha, against the Rowlatt Act in 1919, was funded and directed from Bombay. His last countrywide struggle, the Quit India movement, was also launched from Bombay. And more action in cities was to come. Arguably the highest point of a life filled with incident and achievement were his fasts in Calcutta in September 1947 and in Delhi in January 1948, when he almost single-handedly succeeded in stopping communal violence in previously strife-torn cities.

Historians and biographers have written of Gandhi's life in, and relationship with, the cities of London, Durban, Johannesburg, Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta. In this essay, I wish to focus on his encounters with a city far older and much more storied than any of the others. This is Banaras, a place honoured and memorialised in song, folklore, art and cinema. But, alas, not yet in studies of Gandhi and Gandhism. This is a pity, for if Banaras is the first city of Hinduism, Gandhi was the greatest modern Hindu. As I hope to show, through his many and complex encounters with the city, we can throw a sharp spotlight on the theory and practice of India's major religion, with uncanny resonances for life in India today.

II

Gandhi came back to India exactly 100 years ago this month. He returned home with the manifest desire to build a public career for himself. In South Africa, his work had been confined to the 1,50,000 Indians who lived in that country. Being a community leader was no longer commensurate with his ambitions; he now wished to stake a claim to lead the hundreds of millions in the motherland itself.

En route to India, Gandhi had stopped at London, to consult with his mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Gokhale advised him to spend the first year getting to know a country he had been away from so long. He should travel widely, meet people of different backgrounds, but not make any speeches on Indian politics.

Gokhale himself died in February 1915, a mere month after Gandhi returned to India. But the protege kept his word. Through 1915, Gandhi was continually on the move, visiting places as far apart as Calcutta and Bombay, Delhi and Madras, as well as many smaller towns in the interior. Everywhere, he listened more than he spoke. His public statements were confined to his experiences in South Africa.

In January 1916, when Gandhi's year of 'probation' had just come to an end, he received an invitation to the founding ceremonies of the Banaras Hindu University, whose prime movers were Annie Besant and the Allahabad scholar Madan Mohan Malaviya. The creation of a centre of modern education in an ancient town had originally been Mrs Besant's idea. Malaviya was instrumental in raising the money and in supervising the construction of an impressive campus. Among the patrons were influential maharajas. They would be in attendance at the ceremony, which was to be inaugurated by the viceroy, Lord Hardinge.

Gandhi had been to Banaras once before, as a tourist. This was in 1902, when he was relatively unknown. As a Hindu, Gandhi naturally wanted to visit the most celebrated of the city's shrines, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. He was unimpressed by what he saw. "The swarming flies and the noise made by the shopkeepers and pilgrims were insufferable," he recalled. "Where one expected an atmosphere of meditation and communion, it was conspicuous by its absence."

When Gandhi finally reached the temple, he “was greeted at the entrance by a stinking mass of rotten flowers”. The marble floor had been “broken by some devotee innocent of aesthetic taste, who had set it with rupees serving as an excellent receptacle for dirt”. He walked all around the temple precincts, “search(ing) for god but fail(ing) to find him” in the dirt and the filth.

Ganga at Varanasi A river desecrated. (Photograph by Jitender Gupta)

Fourteen years later, Gandhi was back in Banaras, for the inauguration of BHU. A massive amphitheatre had been constructed for the opening of the university. The spectators were distributed across 15 different stands, their cards of admissions issued in five colours to help them find their seats. The band struck up God Save the King as the viceroy came and took his place. Around him sat sundry maharajas, lieutenant-governors, and Knights of the Realm.

The ceremony began at noon on February 4, with a speech by the viceroy. In the afternoon, he laid the foundation stone, to the chanting of Sanskrit hymns. He was then driven off to the railway station, on a shining metalled road specially built for the occasion. In his memoirs, the chief guest wrote of how it had been “a very big function and a very successful one.... The Durbar at Benares was extraordinarily picturesque with the Ruling Chiefs and all the Indians in their smartest clothes, in bright colours and parti-coloured turbans.... There were 6,000 people present and all very enthusiastic”.

The viceroy stayed only for the first day, February 4. From the 5th to the 8th, the ceremonies carried on, featuring dances, plays, cricket matches and lectures. Among the speakers were the scientists J.C. Bose and C.V. Raman, the economist Harold Mann, the sociologist Patrick Geddes, the musicologist V.N. Bhatkhande and the Sanskritist Hara Prasad Shastri. The idea was to expose the students, faculty and (not least) patrons to the range of classical and contemporary subjects that would be taught and learnt.

Apart from the scholars, some public figures had also been asked to lecture. On the evening of the 6th, Annie Besant spoke on 'The University as a Builder of Character'. Immediately after her, Gandhi was due to speak. The title of his talk was not listed on the programme; but it was assumed that he would speak mostly about his work among the Indian community in South Africa.

Gandhi's autobiography does not mention this particular visit to Banaras. Whether the omission was deliberate one cannot say, yet it is striking. For Gandhi's speech in Banaras represents the real moment of his arrival in Indian politics. Freed from the year-long vow of silence that Gokhale had imposed on him, Gandhi chose Banaras to make his first properly public statement after his return to the homeland. Gandhi chose the inauguration of Banaras Hindu University to make his first public statement after returning from England.

The most powerful part of Gandhi's speech consisted of a direct attack on the dignitaries who were also the new university's main patrons. This, he said, was "certainly a most gorgeous show". But he worried about the contrast between the bejewelled benefactors present and "millions of the poor" Indians who were absent. Was it necessary, asked Gandhi, "that in order to show the truest loyalty to our King-Emperor, it is necessary for us to ransack our jewellery-boxes and to appear bedecked from head to toe"? Gandhi told the privileged invitees that "there is no salvation for India unless you strip yourself of this jewellery and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India". "There can be no spirit of self-government about us," he went on, "if we take away or allow others to take away from the peasants almost the whole of the results of their labour."

Gandhi worried that the new university was in danger of isolating itself from the masses. The salvation of the country, he told the students, "is only going to come when the agriculturist, when the artisan of India is educated up to his sense of responsibility, when he finds that he has at least enough to feed himself on, to clothe himself. And you are not going to learn all these things in the university...."

Gandhi had visited the Kashi Vishwanath Temple the day before he spoke at the BHU inauguration. He found it as filthy as in 1902. He saw the state of the temple as symptomatic of the state of Indian society. As he told his audience at BHU, "If a stranger dropped from above on to this great temple and he had to consider what we as Hindus were, would he not be justified in condemning us? Is not this great temple a reflection of our own character? I speak feelingly as a Hindu. Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The houses round about are built anyhow. The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be? Shall our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as soon as the English have retired from India, either of their own pleasure or by compulsion, bag and baggage?"

Hearing Gandhi's strictures against princely excess and Hindu custom were the chiefs sitting on the stage. One, the Maharaja of Alwar, left the podium in protest. As he walked away, he passed the Commissioner of Banaras, and said, "I am simply disgusted, the man must be mad." The Commissioner replied: "Well Maharaja Sahib, this is no place for us."

Unconcerned, Gandhi carried on. He now asked why, when the viceroy came to Banaras, there were so many detectives on the streets and on rooftops. Was this a sign of fear? He then spoke of the anarchists of Bengal, who sought to throw bombs at high officials in the hope that they would be terrorised into fleeing India. He knew some people admired these terrorists, and even claimed that the government

had annulled the Partition of Bengal because of them. Gandhi, however, called their zeal “misdirected”, and wondered why they were so “afraid to come into the open”.

At this stage, Annie Besant, sitting behind Gandhi, said: “Stop! Please stop!” More princes began leaving the stage. The students in the audience, on the other hand, shouted: “Go on! Go on!” Gandhi asked the chairman (the Maharaja of Darbhanga) what he should do. The chairman answered: “Please explain your object.” Gandhi said that “there is no room for anarchism in India”. He himself wished “to purge India of the atmosphere of suspicion on either side”, so as to create an empire “based on mutual love and mutual trust”.

The caveat entered, Gandhi returned to the polemical mode. He deplored “the atmosphere of sycophancy and falsity” that surrounded the high officials of the Raj. He characterised their behaviour as “overbearing” and “tyrannical”. He then said that Indians would never be granted self-government; they had to take it for themselves, as the Boers had done in South Africa. The suggestion of a rebellion against the Raj led to more agitation on the stage. Mrs Besant asked Gandhi once more to stop; the chairman, an arch-loyalist like the rest of his ilk, declared the meeting closed.

As the princes got off the stage, Madan Mohan Malaviya walked on and addressed the crowd. He was sorry that Gandhi’s speech had “given offence in high quarters”. The references to anarchists had alarmed the chiefs; had they waited, they would have seen that Gandhi was in fact deploring their methods. What Gandhi wanted to do, said Malaviya, was “to wean from all time our students from the evil influences of those who themselves, hiding behind the screen, turn young men into the wrong part”.

III

The day after his speech at BHU, Gandhi wrote a letter to the Maharaja of Darbhanga, clarifying that he held “very strong views against all acts of violence and anarchy”. His mission was “securing the utmost freedom for my country but never by violence”. The maharaja was unpersuaded. He was angry that Gandhi had commented on the viceroy’s visit in a less than respectful manner. On the 7th, when presiding over another public lecture, the Maharaja of Darbhanga said “they had heard with grief and pain the remarks of Mr Gandhi (the previous day)” and he was sure they all “disapproved the attitude Mr Gandhi had taken up.”

Gandhi had meanwhile left Banaras for Bombay, the news of the incident following him by bush telegraph. On February 9, a correspondent from the Associated Press asked why his speech had become so controversial. Gandhi clarified that while he thought the anarchists had “patriotic motives”, their methods did great damage in the long run. He had never endorsed violence; indeed, it was his “firm belief that, but for Mrs Besant’s hasty and ill-conceived interruption, nothing would have happened and my speech in its completed state would have left no room for any doubt as to its meaning”.

When this interview was read by Mrs Besant in Madras, she hastened to defend herself. She had, she said, heard a police officer sitting behind her say, “Everything he says is being taken down, and will be sent to the commissioner.” Since Gandhi’s remarks were “capable of a construction” contrary to what he intended, she told the chairman that “politics is out of place in that meeting”. She did not ask the princes to leave. “If the meeting had been called by Mr Gandhi,” said Mrs Besant, “it would have been no one’s business but his own what he chose to say.” But as a member of the university committee, she was responsible to the invitees, to whom Gandhi’s remarks did seem an unnecessary provocation.

Do we need to ransack our jewelry boxes, Gandhi asked the bedecked invitees, to show loyalty to the King?

Mrs. Besant was correct on one count; the government was keenly following what Gandhi had to say. The Superintendent of Police in Banaras wired his bosses in Lucknow about the visitor's "objectionable speech". The transcript of the speech prepared by The Leader was obtained; the newspaper prohibited from publishing it. In a long report on the incident, the Commissioner of Banaras grimly noted that "the reception by the students of Gandhi's address indicated the spirit which permeates them. The remarks they cheered were those which referred to the giving up of English and the turning of the English—bag and baggage—out of the country".

The police and the Legal Remembrancer to the United Provinces (UP) government both thought Gandhi's remarks "seditious and disloyal", and recommended that he be arrested and prosecuted under the Indian Penal Code. The chief secretary disagreed; Gandhi, he noted, "is already a popular hero, and prosecution will only madden him still further and increase his influence with the students. Cold water seems better than the martyr's stake".

Meanwhile, the editor of the Leader asked for permission to print Gandhi's speech in full. There had been much speculation about its contents. The Madras Mail, a paper extremely loyal to the Raj, had written: "No man who has spoken the vile things attributed to Mr Gandhi has the right to say another syllable on public affairs. Did he say them?" In order to avoid misunderstanding, said the Leader's editor, "it appears desirable, in fairness to all parties, that the speech be published". Permission was not forthcoming; the verbatim record prepared by the newspaper was retained in the Secretariat (eventually finding its way to the archives).

The notes and opinions went back and forth between the different departments of the UP government. On March 17—a full five weeks after the speech—the lieutenant-governor summed up the debate in magisterial tones: "My own impression is that Gandhi started with the intention of talking against the use of violence in the nationalist campaign and the importance of cultivating higher qualities than brute force....But however well-designed the outlines of his address might have been, Gandhi clearly got carried away by his own rhetoric and by the applause with which the students received some unguarded expressions which he used. In his growing excitement, he lost control of himself, and let out his real sentiments. Part of his speech was admirable; part was in thoroughly bad taste; the rest, though not a deliberate or intentional incitement to sedition, was in effect seditious and open to grave objection."

The lieutenant-governor also advised against prosecution, since "influential men in his own community" had distanced themselves from Gandhi's views, while action against him would spoil the success of the university's inauguration as a whole. The "wisest course" therefore would be for the government to let the matter drop, and allow the incident caused by Gandhi's speech to "slip into obscurity and oblivion".

IV

In official and loyalist circles, Gandhi's Banaras speech became controversial because of its references to anarchism. Although he intended to dissociate himself from their methods, his suggestion that their motives were patriotic caused disquiet. No one was more loyal to the Empire than the maharajas. Malaviya himself was a moderate, who believed in slow, incremental gains for Indians granted by Britons from above.

The princes and the moderates both had a horror of violent protest. That the viceroy had inaugurated the university was further evidence that this was an Establishment affair. Gandhi's mere mention of terror and assassination muddied the waters, not least because Lord Hardinge had himself narrowly escaped an attempt on his life in December 1912, when a bomb was thrown at him while he was on an elephant in a grand public procession in Delhi. The detectives who shadowed the viceroy as he drove through the streets of Banaras were there in part to forestall a second attack.

In 1920, Gandhi was telling BHU students, "If your soul isn't on fire, listen to Panditji (Malaviya) rather than to me."

The official commentary on Gandhi's speech focused on whether the references to anarchism were 'seditious'. But in fact, the speech of 1916 was—and is—notable for far more than its treatment of violence and non-violence. In Banaras, Gandhi made three fundamental claims about how Indians should conduct their affairs: First, he pointed to the sharp inequalities between different groups in India. He contrasted the luxuriant lifestyles of the maharajas on stage in Banaras with the desperate poverty of the majority of Indians. He thus demanded of the wealthy a more caring and responsible attitude towards the poor. He asked the princes to cast off their jewels, and told the students to acquaint themselves with the living conditions of peasants, artisans and labourers. Second, he asked that officials of the State identify more closely with those they governed over. He deplored the arrogance of Indian Civil Service officers, who saw themselves as a ruling caste rather than as servants of the people. Finally, Gandhi asked for a more critical attitude towards the present state of Hinduism. The Kashi Vishwanath was claimed to be the holiest temple in the holiest city of the Hindus. Why then was it so filthy? If Indians were incapable of maintaining even their places of worship, how could they justify their claim for self-rule?

Gandhi's speech was an act of courage. For in February 1916 he was altogether without any influence or power in his homeland. Yet he made direct and telling criticisms of wealthy princes, important officials and the guardians of religious orthodoxy. In India's holiest city, at a function inaugurated by the viceroy and patronised by his leading collaborators, a lawyer lately returned from a long exile abroad had served notice of his intentions to transform his faith and country.

V

Gandhi's longest visit to Banaras was in July-August 1934, when he spent a whole week in the city. The previous winter and spring, he had been on his Harijan Tour through southern and eastern India, seeking to persuade his fellow Hindus to rid themselves of the "sin" of untouchability.

In recent years, left-wing ideologues have, by selectively quoting Gandhi out of context, charged him with being an apologist for the caste system. However, as careful scholars like Denis Dalton and Anil Nauriya have demonstrated, Gandhi steadily became more direct in his critique of caste. To begin with, he attacked untouchability, leaving the other rules of caste intact. Then, through the temple entry movement, he began advocating intermingling and interdining as well. Finally, he insisted that the only marriage he would solemnise in his ashram was one between a Dalit and a Savarna, thus calling into question the very basis of the caste system.

Swachh Ganga Will need more than mere arati

Gandhi's campaign to abolish untouchability may seem timid to the radicals of today, but it was regarded as extremely daring at the time. It struck at the very core of Hindu orthodoxy. The Shankaracharyas were enraged that a mere Bania who knew little Sanskrit dare challenge scriptural injunctions that mandated untouchability. In a petition to the colonial authorities, they demanded that Gandhi be ostracised from the Hindu fold. During Gandhi's anti-untouchability tour of 1933-34, Hindu Mahasabha activists showed him black flags, threw faeces at him, and in Pune in June 1934 even attempted to assassinate him.

The topic of untouchability was therefore very much on Gandhi's mind when he arrived in Banaras in the last week of July 1934. He gave two speeches on successive days on the Harijan question, or what we would now call the Dalit question. On July 29, speaking to the Central Board of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, he complained about the quality and quantity of those social workers who had joined his anti-untouchability campaign. "They have not given their whole time to their work," he said, "they do it in a leisurely fashion." What he wanted, and the country needed, were individuals "whose sole ambition is to devote themselves body, mind and soul to the Harijan cause. If we had ten thousand such workers—I make bold to say even if we had a thousand, we should have startling results".

The next day, he addressed a public meeting, in which the conservative element was significant, if not preponderant. A locally respected priest, one Pandit Devanayakacharya, speaking before Gandhi, had insisted that untouchability was sanctioned by the shastras and thus part and parcel of the sanatana dharma. Gandhi, however, described the practice of untouchability as "a blot on Hinduism". He noted that in Banaras and elsewhere in India "a dog can drink from a reservoir, but a thirsty Harijan boy may not. If he goes, he cannot escape being beaten. Untouchability as practised today considers man worse than a dog".

Gandhi dealt with the problem of untouchability on several other occasions during this trip. Speaking to a Dalit audience on August 1, he chastised the Banaras municipality for making them live in the dirtiest and most disease-prone parts of the city, "in a place unfit even for cattle". Speaking at a women's meeting the next day, he deplored the restrictions on interdining and intermingling so prevalent in Hindu society. He categorically stated that "birth and observance of form cannot determine one's superiority or inferiority. Character is the only determining factor". He went on: "God did not create men with the badge of superiority or inferiority, and no scripture which labels a human being as inferior or untouchable because of his birth can command our allegiance...."

Let's consider these sentences again. Birth cannot determine one's superiority or inferiority. Character is the only determining factor. Thus Gandhi in 1934, 80 years ago, the words blowing into bits the tendentious allegation that he defended any form of birth-based discrimination.

VI

I have thus far dealt with the first, the longest, and the most memorable of Gandhi's visits to Banaras. Let me now offer snippets from other occasions on which he came to the city. Gandhi's second-longest visit was in February 1920, when he spent six days in Madan Mohan Malaviya's house. He had spent the past three months in the Punjab, gathering testimonies about the horrors of the Martial Law Administration and the impact of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. A Congress committee had been set up to write a report on the Punjab troubles, and Gandhi was assigned the responsibility of preparing the first draft. For this he required peace and quiet, which Pandit Malaviya's house provided him.

On this visit in February 1920, Gandhi took long walks in the morning and evening, working during the day on the report. This is how he described what he saw on his walks: *"Dawn and sunrise are impressive everywhere, but from the banks the sight was simply sublime. As the clouds brightened with the light of dawn, a golden sheen would appear on the waters of the Ganga and, when the sun had come into view over the horizon, there seemed to stand in the water of the river a great pillar of gold.... After witnessing this magnificent sight, I felt I understood a little better the worship of the sun, the adoration of the rivers and the significance of the gayatri hymn."*

Then Gandhi continued, in a shift of register: *"Walking on that spot, I was filled with pride for our country and our traditions but at the same time, as I thought of the present conditions, I felt sad. I observed people defecating on the very banks of the river.... In this holy spot, it should be possible for us to walk barefoot with our eyes closed, whereas one has to walk here with the greatest caution. One also feels disgust to sip Ganga water at this spot. Before I had finished thinking of the filth of this spot, I was reminded of the Kashi Vishwanath temple. The narrow lane leading to the temple, the stink, the heap of rotting flowers which I had seen there, the harshness and the lack of cleanliness of the Brahmin priests—as I thought of all these, I heaved a sigh and remembered the cause of degradation of the Hindus."*

On BHU's 25th year, he asked, "Have you been able to attract youth from Aligarh? That could be your special contribution."

Gandhi was back in Banaras towards the end of 1920, seeking volunteers for the non-cooperation movement. On the 26th, he spoke to students at the Banaras Hindu University. Malaviya, BHU's founder and moving spirit, had publicly distanced himself from Gandhi's call for students to boycott colleges. Gandhi told the students that while it is said that "the university is Panditji's (Malaviya's) life", it is "truer to say that India is his life". Then he continued: "If your soul, however, is not on fire, listen to Panditji rather than to me." (One of those who listened to Gandhi rather than the BHU's founder was Malaviya's son Govind, who went to jail during the movement.)

The next day, Gandhi spoke to a large meeting outside the Town Hall. The meeting was chaired by the philosopher Bhagwan Das, and both Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru were in attendance. Here, to a mixed adult audience, he spoke about the importance of religious harmony in a region and time that was witnessing periodic Hindu-Muslim violence. "Do not draw the sword," he implored his audience, "sheathe it. The sword will only cut our own throats. The unity of Hindus and Muslims should not be the unity of lips; it should be the unity of hearts."

In October 1925, Gandhi was back in Banaras. Speaking at the Kashi Vidyapeeth, he remarked: “Our old civilisation has become soiled. It will become cleansed by our removing untouchability.” His next visit was in January 1927. Speaking at BHU, he went back to one of the themes of his famous/notorious speech of February 1916. Pandit Malaviya had just collected a fresh round of funds from rajas and maharajas. “The money apparently comes from these wealthy princes,” remarked Gandhi, “but in reality it comes from the millions of our poor. For unlike in Europe the rich of our land grow rich at the expense of our villagers, the bulk of whom have to go without a square meal a day. The education that you receive today is thus paid for by the starving villages who will never have the chance of such an education.”

VII

Gandhi’s last visit to Banaras occurred a full 40 years after the first. It was at the invitation of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who was then the vice-chancellor of the Banaras Hindu University. Radhakrishnan was a long-time admirer of Gandhi, and in 1939, to mark the Mahatma’s 70th birthday, had put together a volume of tributes in his honour, with a glittering galaxy of contributors from all over the world, among them the novelist Pearl S. Buck, the philosopher Gilbert Murray, the scientist Albert Einstein, the art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, and the politician Jan Christian Smuts.

Gandhi came to Banaras in January 1942 to deliver the BHU’s convocation address. This was the silver jubilee year of the university; and both Radhakrishnan and bhu founder Madan Mohan Malaviya, were keen that he come to preside over the celebrations. Gandhi was not in the best of health, and it took much persuading by both men to finally get him to agree to come.

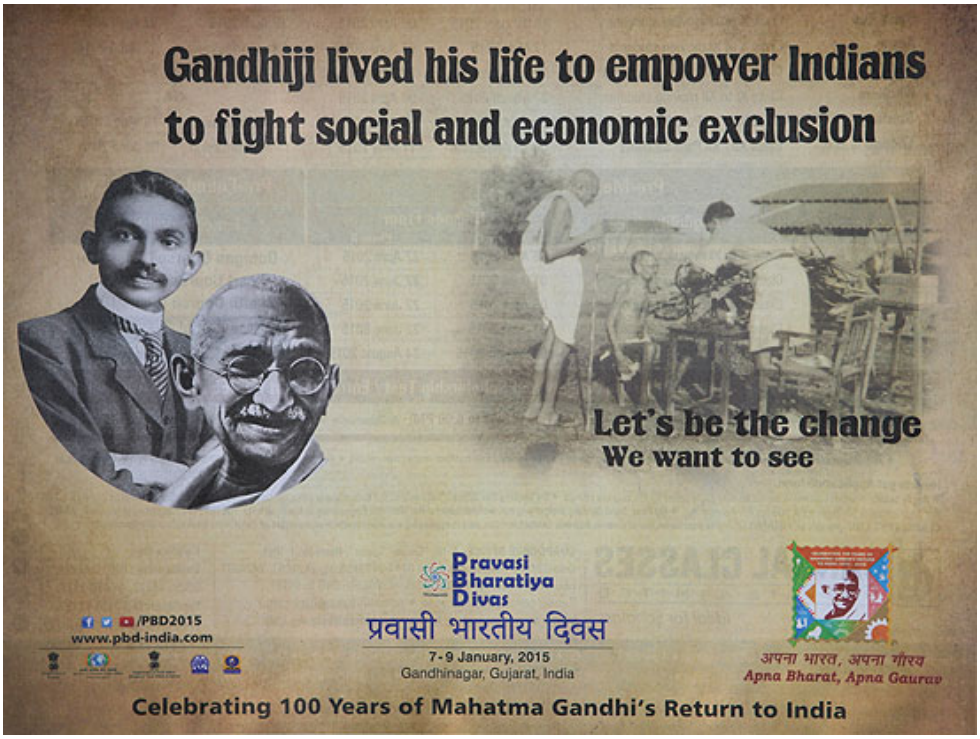
Gandhi’s silver jubilee convocation address was given extempore. The first part of the lecture was about the importance of the mother tongue. Gandhi was unhappy that all those who had spoken before him had chosen to do so in English. “As speaker after speaker spoke and left the dais,” he remarked, “I longed for someone who would address the audience in Hindi or Urdu, or Hindustani, aye, even in Sanskrit—even in Marathi, or for that matter in any of the Indian languages.”

Gandhi himself chose to speak in Hindustani. The languages he knew best were Gujarati and English, but here, in north India, he wisely spoke in the region’s lingua franca (even though it was his own third best language). One previous speaker had boasted that the university’s new engineering faculties were its pride and joy. Gandhi, characteristically, said that this did not, and would not, distinguish BHU from universities in the West. But BHU could make a special, indeed unique, contribution if it actively fostered regular and mutually beneficial relations between India’s two major religious communities. A good way to begin would be to have regular interactions with another great university which carried ‘Muslim’ rather than ‘Hindu’ in its name. And so Gandhi pointedly asked his audience: *“Have you been able to attract to your university youths from Aligarh? Have you been able to identify with them? That, I think, should be your special work, the special contribution of your university. Money has come in, and more will come in if god keeps Malaviyaji in our midst for a few more years. But no amount of money will achieve the miracle I want—I mean a heart-unity between Hindus and Muslims.”*

VIII

Four striking themes emerge from Gandhi's Banaras speeches. His talk of 1916 had focused on, among things, the divide between the rich and the poor, and the lack of cleanliness of our places of worship. Gandhi was appalled at the exhibitionism of the maharajas, who paraded their fabulous jewels in a society marked by pervasive inequality and mass poverty. And he was dismayed that the holiest temple in the holiest city of Hinduism should be kept in such a filthy state.

Gandhi returned to these themes on later visits to Banaras. However, from the 1920s, two other themes began to feature more strongly in his talks. These were the need for Hindu-Muslim harmony and the ending of untouchability. From his South African days, Gandhi had recognised the vital importance of cordial relations between India's two great religious communities. After his return to India, he made this a core part of his political programme. Some of his most memorable fasts were undertaken in the cause of Hindu-Muslim harmony. Naturally, on his visits to the holy Hindu city of Banaras, he reminded his audiences of the importance—the moral and political importance—of reaching out to Indians who did not belong to the majority community.



Gandhi appropriated Pravasi Bharatiya Divas ad

The last theme that recurs in Gandhi's Banaras conversations was the abolition of untouchability.

In the citadel of Hindu orthodoxy, Banaras, Gandhi chastised priests for keeping their shrines so unclean. He repeatedly attacked untouchability, telling pandits that their scriptures were worthless if they sanctioned such a practice. In thus speaking moral truth to theological power, the Bania who knew no Sanskrit was being very brave indeed.

IX

Banaras, always central to Indian civilisation's religious imagination, dramatically entered the Indian nation's political imagination during the general election of 2014. In the middle of March, two months before the polling began, Narendra Modi—already the clear leader in the prime ministerial sweepstakes—announced his decision to contest from Banaras. Ten days later, Arvind Kejriwal said he would run against Modi.

The prospect of David slaying Goliath in the holy city was unlikely—the question was, how much would he wound him? The race in Banaras quickly became the most avidly covered contest of the election. Television anchors set up camp along the Ganga. Volunteers of the Aam Aadmi Party descended in the hundreds; volunteers of the BJP in the thousands.

Watching the tamasha, I wondered if either Narendra Modi or Arvind Kejriwal knew anything about Gandhi's own visits to the city. Kejriwal had long identified himself as a 'Gandhian'. He had often said that the Mahatma was the person he most admired. In July 2012, he released a book called 'Swaraj', its title and charter a direct echo of Gandhi's own 'Hind Swaraj', published a century previously.

On the other hand, Modi had come to Gandhi rather late in his political career. He had been raised in the harsh, unforgiving school of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. For many years, the RSS had a harsh, unforgiving attitude to Gandhi, claiming he was too soft on Muslims and that he was responsible for the partition of the country. From the 1980s, their tone softened. Gandhi was now acknowledged as a patriot, albeit a flawed one. When I visited Gujarat shortly after the 2002 riots, a veteran Gandhian in Ahmedabad characterised what had happened as akin to "the second assassination of Mahatma Gandhi". In his first few years as chief minister, Modi himself kept well away from the Sabarmati Ashram, and did not mention Gandhi at all.

As the years passed, and as Modi rebranded himself as a warrior for development rather than for religion, he began to invoke Gandhi on occasion, recognising perhaps the wide national (and wider international) appeal of a man with whom he shared a mother tongue. The appropriation of Gandhi was formalised in the cold hard concrete of a convention centre called the 'Mahatma Mandir', built by the government of Gujarat and inaugurated in 2011. At the annual 'Vibrant Gujarat' summits now held here, sycophantic businessmen had begun speaking of Narendra Modi as the "greatest Gujarati since Mahatma Gandhi".

So in March 2014, both Kejriwal and Modi came to Banaras as self-proclaimed admirers of Gandhi. But, unlike the Mahatma, both were careful to pay formal obeisance to Hindu orthodoxy. Both took a ritual dip in the Ganga; both visited the Kashi Vishwanath Mandir to seek the deity's blessings, neither commenting on the dirt and the filth that still—a hundred and more years after Gandhi had visited it—is so manifest in the temple and its surroundings.

One can understand the need to be respectful of local traditions while running an electoral race. But now that the election has been won, it would be interesting to see whether Modi's understanding of Gandhi goes beyond ritual invocation, beyond gifting Gandhi's books to foreign dignitaries and starting sarkari programmes on Gandhi's birthday.

There is little chance that the prime minister will read this essay, but one hopes some of his advisors and well-wishers do. For the core themes of the speeches that Gandhi gave between 1916 and 1942 remain compellingly relevant. The rich remain as exhibitionist as ever, as indifferent to the fate of the poor. As I speak, a Mumbai industrialist plans to build a thirty-storey residence, thereby trumping his nearest challenger, whose own home is a modest twenty-seven storeys. Meanwhile, our places of worship remain unclean and unkempt; the Kashi Vishwanath Temple being very representative in this regard. (And the Ganges itself is far more polluted than it was in Gandhi's day.) In many parts of India (not least Uttar Pradesh) there is periodic violence between Hindus and Muslims, these stoked by sectarian politicians whose method of working is utterly opposed to Gandhi's own. Finally, in many parts of India (not least Uttar Pradesh) discrimination against Dalits continues.

Most Hindus venerate Banaras as a place of worship and learning. Its sanctity is said to be so complete that a Hindu who dies there goes to heaven. One Banarasi who did not subscribe to this legend was the weaver-poet Kabir; it is said that when he knew that he was dying, he deliberately shifted out of the city to offend the priests. Gandhi shared several things with Kabir; he adopted the poet's ancestral profession as his own (famously describing himself in court as "a farmer and weaver") and he was likewise sceptical of orthodoxy. In the categories made famous by Albert Hirschman, Kabir's response in his last days was to "exit" Banaras. Gandhi's response on all his trips to Banaras was to "voice" his opposition to an unthinking adherence to tradition and scripture. This marked them out from the majority of Hindus, who show their "loyalty" to their faith without interrogating its practice.

Long after Gandhi's death, Banaras retains its central place in Hindu culture and society. Millions of pilgrims and tourists visit it every year. The place of the city in the popular imagination has been further magnified by the fact that our prime minister is the sitting member of Parliament from the city. There is thus even more reason to revisit what the greatest modern Hindu had to say on his own visits to the city. India is no longer a colony; it is a functioning electoral democracy. Yet the four fundamental tasks identified by Gandhi all those years ago remain unfulfilled. There is much work ahead for the MP from Banaras—and, dare one add, for the rest of us.

(Ramachandra Guha's books include '*Gandhi Before India*')