
Dalit and Adivasi Assertion

The period of British colonial rule saw the forging of a series of wholly novel all-India collectivities, two of which in time came to be described as the 'Dalits' and the 'Adivasis'.¹ In the past, the groups that were later slotted into these categories occupied a series of positions in hierarchies that were relatively local in form. Those who now regard themselves to be Dalits (or 'the oppressed') were members of particular *jatis*, or sub-castes, who were considered to be at the lowest ends of the social scale. They themselves had their own internal hierarchies. In Gujarat, for example, a Dhed or Wankar regarded a Bhangi as of lower standing and ritually polluting.² The colonial state lumped all of these diverse *jatis* into a single monolithic all-India category. Groups that were seen to lie below a particular threshold of pollutability in caste terms were defined initially as the 'depressed classes' and, from 1909, the 'Untouchables'.³ The process was often arbitrary at the margins—in Gujarat, for example, the Vagharis, who were considered generally to be a low and polluting caste, were not classed as Untouchables, while the Dheds, Bhangis, Garudias, Khalpas and Sindhvas were.⁴ Similar boundaries were established between Adivasis—the so-called 'tribals'— and

non-Adivasis, with various communities being lumped together under the category of 'early tribes', in a manner that was again arbitrary at the margins.⁵ As a whole, both the 'depressed classes' and 'early tribes' were placed in the category of 'Hindu', as opposed to Muslim, Christian or Parsi. This implied that a Dalit or Adivasi was not a Muslim, Christian, etc. by origin or nature.

From 1909 onwards, the British treated these various imagined collectivities as political constituencies that were expected to represent their particular interests in a unified way, becoming a congeries of lobbies within the liberal polity. This gave rise to a form of politics in which certain politicians sought to build careers by claiming to speak for these collectivities. This process meshed in complex ways with another very different development, that of new forms of self-assertion arising from within these most subaltern of communities. From the late nineteenth century onwards, there were a series of local movements that took the form of self-cleansing. Often they were initiated and led by inspired leaders who claimed to be in touch with God. In many cases, they involved a process of spiritual renewal, in which old beliefs were discarded and new values and deities embraced. The characteristic response of the local élites was to repress such strivings in an often brutal manner. In some cases, however, the subaltern groups sought and gained support from powerful sympathisers. Most notable in this respect were Christian missionaries, who suddenly found themselves—to their astonishment—being asked to provide guidance and leadership in movements of mass conversion to Christianity. From the second decade of the twentieth century onwards, leaders of the Indian nationalist struggle became increasingly called on to play such a role. Eager to build their constituencies as 'representatives' of the newly defined subaltern collectivities, these leaders seized the opportunity and claimed to speak for the 'depressed classes' or 'tribals'.

Of all the nationalist leaders, the one who became the foremost embodiment of such popular hopes and desires was Gandhi. Through his

life and personal struggles, Gandhi forged a persona that resonated among the Indian masses in a manner that was unprecedented. Often, he himself was taken by surprise by the forms that this popular adulation took. He sought to distance himself, at times through denials of popular beliefs which circulated about his supposed miraculous powers;⁶ at times through an irritated scolding of the tumultuous crowds which pressed about him eager for his darshan. Yet, still the people were drawn to him, bearing out V.N. Volosinov's maxim—'if a thought is powerful, convincing, significant, then obviously it has succeeded in contacting *essential* aspects in the life of the social group in question, succeeding in making a connection between itself and the basic position of that group in the *class struggle*, despite the fact that the creator of that thought might himself be wholly unaware of having done so.'⁷ Gandhi sought to channel the hopes and dreams that he had aroused in this way into an orderly programme of constructive work that would integrate these communities within the nationalist movement. In doing so, he adopted the language of the all-India collectivity, claiming in particular to be the spokesman for 'Untouchables' throughout India. The history which ensued, and which is the subject of this chapter, involved a dialogue between Gandhi and the Dalits and Adivasis that in part voiced common desires, but which also became grounded at times on the emancipatory limitations of Gandhi's own programme, the elitism of many of his followers, and opposition to his message from within these very communities.

Dalits

Gandhi had from the earliest years in South Africa strongly opposed the practice of treating certain communities as being ritually polluting. In this, he was in line with several Indian social reformers and religious leaders of the late nineteenth century, such as Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and B.G. Tilak. He saw the practice as a corruption of Hinduism. It also, he believed, revealed the hypocrisy of demands by high-

caste Hindus for Indian self-determination, for they were not themselves prepared to offer the same to these lowest of subaltern communities.⁸ By taking such a stand, Gandhi involved himself in a long and often acrimonious debate with orthodox Hindus on the one hand and, from the early 1930s onwards, with self-assertive leaders of the Dalits themselves on the other.

Although the institution of untouchability was inseparable from the caste system, Gandhi did not during his early years as a nationalist leader in India push his condemnation of the latter towards a critique of caste in general. Later, he was to be severely criticised for this by many Dalit activists. During the South African years, however, Gandhi had appeared to have little time for the caste system. He had been expelled from his own Baniya sub-caste for travelling overseas—considered a 'polluting' act at that time—and had never sought to gain readmission to the caste. In 1909, he condemned the caste system and 'caste tyranny'.⁹ On his return to India he adopted a much softer line on the question. He denied that the caste system had harmed India, arguing that it was no more than a form of labour division, similar to occupational divisions all over the world.¹⁰ It was in fact superior to class divisions, which were based on wealth primarily.¹¹ He also believed that reform could be brought about through caste organisations.¹² He was influenced in this by his admiration at that time for caste associations such as the Patidar Yuvak Mandal, in which young Arya Samajist social reformers had sought to reform the Patidar caste and promote self-help educational activities.¹³ He believed that marriage should be within caste.¹⁴ In 1918 he clarified that by this he meant *varna*, rather than narrow *jati*.¹⁵ In 1925 he was talking of the need for *jatis* to merge into *varnas* based on occupation.¹⁶ In 1931 he condemned the *jati* system, but praised a fourfold *varna* system consisting of (1) imparters of knowledge, (2) defenders of the defenceless, (3) farmers or traders, (4) labourers. He believed now that there should be intermarriage.¹⁷ He also endorsed interdining, including with Dalits.¹⁸ In

the mid-1930s, Gandhi moved towards a more radical critique of caste. This was largely in response to Ambedkar, as we shall see below. In 1935 he thus argued that *varnashram* no longer existed in practice and that: 'The present caste system is the very antithesis of varnashram. The sooner public opinion abolishes it the better.'¹⁹ In 1936 he stated that the dowry system was an evil propped up by caste, and that if removing it meant breaking the bonds of the caste system, then he would endorse such a move.²⁰ By 1946 he was urging caste Hindu girls to marry Dalits.²¹

In all of this, Gandhi never compromised over the issue of untouchability, which he always regarded as an out-and-out perversion. He fought hard against the practice after his return to India in 1915- In the ashram that he established in Ahmedabad in 1915 he banned any observation of untouchability. However, he refused to force any inmate to eat with a Dalit against their will, arguing that he had no reason to believe that eating in company promoted brotherhood in any way whatsoever.²² In September 1915 Gandhi admitted a member of the Dhed (a Dalit) community to the ashram, causing great hostility within and outside the institution. Kasturba Gandhi was particularly upset.²³ During the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921-2 he called on Hindus to 'remove the sin of untouchability', otherwise there would be no swaraj, even in a hundred years.²⁴

After his release from jail in 1924, with the political struggle in the doldrums, Gandhi took up the issue of untouchability as a central concern. He debated the matter with orthodox Sanatanist Hindus. They provided textual evidence that justified the practice. He argued that what was at stake was morality, and he refused to accept the moral validity of such texts, arguing that they were no longer appropriate for the present times. Such an argument merely riled the orthodox; they accused Gandhi of being corrupted by Christian propaganda. Gandhi countered by arguing that Hinduism was not a text-based religion, but one that was rooted in moral

precepts, and texts that conflicted with morality could be discounted. Neither side was prepared to yield any ground on the matter.²⁵

During 1924—5 there was a protest by an Untouchable community of Kerala, the Iravas, against a ban on their using a street in front of a temple at Vaikam that was controlled by Nambudiri Brahmans. This was described as a 'satyagraha', and it in fact popularised the use of the term in Kerala, along with 'khadi' and 'ahimsa'.²⁶ Gandhi took up the issue, travelling to Kerala to negotiate with the Brahmans who controlled the temple. During the debate, one of them stated that the Iravas had been born as Untouchables because of their karma, for example because of their misdeeds in past lives, and that it was therefore God's will that they be excluded from the precincts of the temple. Gandhi took a soft line on this, accepting that the Iravas were indeed victims of karma, but he added that humans had no right to add to the punishment awarded by God. He thus refrained from condemning the whole baggage of beliefs that justified such discrimination.²⁷

In this, Gandhi was adopting a position of seeking to reform Hindu practice from within, rather than attack it from the outside. His aim was to bring about a gradual delegitimisation of the practices of such Brahman priests. In Vaikam, the latter had showed themselves up when their representative had pleaded before him pathetically: 'Mahatmaji, we beseech you to prevent Avarnas [Untouchables] from depriving us of our old privileges.'²⁸ The heart of the matter thus stood revealed— theology provided no more than a cover for social privilege.

Gandhi was reluctant to involve the state in this process of soul-searching from within, as he felt that this would not bring about any profound change of heart among the orthodox. Persuasion was the best method. Educated leaders of the Dalits saw this approach as too gradualist. They saw that the Vaikam Satyagraha had achieved only limited results—the road past the temple was shifted, so although Iravas could now use it, they did so at a distance from the holy place. They were certainly not allowed entry into the

temple. B.R. Ambedkar, who was emerging in the 1920s as a powerful young leader of the Dalits of Maharashtra, praised Gandhi for his work for Untouchables—far surpassing that of any other major Indian nationalist leader—but felt that he needed to take a far more radical stance. He noted that the Brahmans at Vaikam had used the Hindu scriptures to justify their position, and regretted that Gandhi had not subjected these pernicious texts to a rigorous criticism.²⁹

Ambedkar then extended the Gandhian approach into a new area, that of highlighting the civil rather than religious discrimination suffered by Untouchables. He launched a satyagraha at Mahad in the Konkan in 1927 in which Dalits asserted their right to use a public tank in the Brahman quarter of the town. The protesters invoked the name of Gandhi, displaying his portrait. Around ten thousand Dalits came from all over Maharashtra to participate, and Ambedkar led a procession to the tank and drank water from it. The Brahmans ceremoniously repurified the tank after they had gone, and then secured a court injunction that temporarily banned Ambedkar and three of his colleagues from using the tank. Another meeting was held at Mahad at which Ambedkar staged a public burning of the *Manusmṛti*—the text *par excellence* of Brahmanical privilege. He did not however defy the injunction by drinking from the tank. He preferred to fight the matter out in court, a long-drawn-out process that went eventually in his favour after three years.³⁰

In 1929 Ambedkar took the fight to the heart of Brahmanical power in Maharashtra, launching a satyagraha in Pune city to gain entry to the Parvati temple. Gandhi did not approve of this, believing it to be too confrontational a move. The right-wing Congressmen M.M. Malaviya and Jamnalal Bajaj were sent to investigate; they reported that the affair was causing great resentment in Maharashtra, and they condemned it. Without Congress support, the satyagraha failed, leaving Ambedkar and his followers bitter. The same happened with a further satyagraha which began in 1930 in

the pilgrimage town of Nasik. The Dalits of Maharashtra began to doubt Gandhi's commitment to their cause as well as the efficacy of satyagraha.³¹

This distrust was compounded by the way in which Gandhi related to Ambedkar during these years. On their first meeting in Bombay in August 1931, Gandhi treated Ambedkar in a brusque manner, believing that he was a Brahman who was claiming to speak for Untouchables in a questionable manner.³² They were in contact with each other again across the negotiating table at the Second Round Table Conference in London in late 1931. Although Gandhi now knew that he was an Untouchable, he continued to question his status as a spokesman for the community. When Ambedkar argued that Untouchables should be granted separate seats in the proposed constitutional reforms—something Muslims had already been granted—Gandhi asserted: 'I say that it is not a proper claim which is registered by Dr Ambedkar when he seeks to speak for the whole of the Untouchables of India... I myself in my own person claim to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables.'³³ When in 1932 the British announced that they accepted Ambedkar's demand, and that there would be separate electorates for Untouchables, Gandhi launched a fast to death in opposition. He had a strong case—distinct electorates for Muslims had undoubtedly been divisive, creating as they did a class of politicians whose basis was that of a separatist politics. Ambedkar's own position also had a strong justification: the interests of Dalits, who were in a minority everywhere, would be submerged in the politics of the majority. These substantial points of difference were however overlain by much personal rancour. Gandhi appears to have resented Ambedkar as an upstart. In an aside to Vallabhbhai Patel that was overheard by his secretary, Mahadev Desai, he voiced right-wing Hindu prejudices in a most shabby manner, stating that if Untouchables had separate electorates they would make common cause with 'Muslim hooligans and kill caste Hindus'.³⁴ In the end, it was Ambedkar who bowed to the pressure, agreeing to abandon separate electorates in favour of

reserved seats for Untouchables within a general electorate. This system has continued in India to this day.

Gandhi and Ambedkar tried to work together in the All-India Untouchability League, formed immediately after the conclusion of the fast. With Gandhi then propagating a new term for Untouchables— that of Harijans or 'People of God'—the body was soon renamed the Harijan Sevak Sangh.³⁵ Gandhi launched a major campaign in 1933— 4 against the practice of untouchability, touring India in person to put pressure on caste Hindus to open up access for Untouchables to public wells, tanks, roads, schools, temples and cremation grounds. In response to Ambedkar, Gandhi had extended his battle for the Untouchables into the civil sphere. Previously, his challenge had been restricted to temple entry. However, Ambedkar soon left the organisation, for the differences between the two were profound. Gandhi insisted that the organisation was to be run primarily by caste Hindus as a means for their self-purification, whereas Ambedkar demanded that the leadership be by the Dalits themselves. He found Gandhi's approach to be tainted with an insufferable paternalism, of a sort that he himself had experienced in a humiliating way throughout his life in his dealings with high-caste people. Ambedkar condemned the caste system in its entirety, whereas Gandhi continued for the moment to cling onto a belief that it was possible to return to an idealised four-caste system of social organisation. Ambedkar rejected Gandhi's belief that there could be any meaningful dialogue with Brahmans and the high castes over the matter of untouchability, and he saw the idea of them undergoing a voluntary 'change of heart' as a chimera. In addition, Ambedkar could see that Gandhi was out on a limb, being opposed in his Harijan work by large numbers of caste Hindus, many of whom were Congress members, as well as by members of the socialist and communist left, who dismissed such work as a culturalist and superstructural distraction from the struggle against imperialism and capitalism.³⁶

Once this break from Gandhi had been made, Ambedkar went in yet more radical directions. He stopped fighting for temple-entry, stating that Untouchables should no longer aspire for a place in the Hindu fold. However, he implicitly accepted the emphasis that Gandhi had all along placed on religion by mapping out a radical new religious agenda for Dalits.³⁷ In 1935 he advised them to convert to other religions, such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, even though he had misgivings about Islam and Christianity, as they were 'foreign religions. He also saw that in practice non-Dalit Sikhs discriminated against their Dalit co-religionists. It was at this time that he began his move towards Buddhism.³⁸

Gandhi, meanwhile, was extending his own Harijan movement all over India, in what was known as the 'Harijan Yatra', with considerable success in some regions. For example, after he had toured Mysore State in January 1934 the authorities responded by agreeing to fund the improvement of facilities for Untouchables. Branches of the Harijan Sevak Sangh were established all over the state, and its workers were encouraged to open schools for Harijans. In 1936, Untouchables were invited for the first time by the maharaja to participate in the annual Dashera Darbar. The state also supported temple entry in principle, though it proved hard to implement in practice.³⁹

The campaign not only put caste Hindus throughout India on the defensive, but enraged many Brahmans. Notable among the latter were some Hindu nationalists of Pune. On 25 June 1934 they even attempted to assassinate Gandhi by throwing a bomb at a car in which he was believed to be travelling. They had in fact mistakenly attacked the car of the chief officer of the municipal corporation, who was severely injured by the blast along with nine other bystanders. Gandhi, in the following car, escaped unharmed. The attackers escaped and no arrests were made.

Despite all these efforts, the majority of Dalits throughout India remained unaware of these campaigns, whether by Gandhi or Ambedkar. Ambedkarite radicalism had the greatest impact amongst the Mahar

community of Maharashtra, and with educated Dalits and industrial workers in some of the larger cities. Gandhi and his Harijan Sevak Sangh had a greater sway in the city of Ahmedabad, where members of the Vankar community were his strong supporters, and among the Valmiki of Delhi. In rural areas in general, Gandhian anti-untouchability work had the higher profile. Often, the only voices to be heard speaking up for Dalit rights were those of Congress activists aligned to the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Few Dalits, however, took these injunctions very seriously, for they knew too well from bitter experience the likely reactions of the village élites if they did indeed try to assert their rights.⁴⁰

By the 1940s, seeing the slow progress of his Harijan work, Gandhi became more open to the idea of a direct state-led assault on the practice of untouchability. In this, he became more in tune with Ambedkar. He thus supported the banning of the practice of untouchability by law, and gave his full support to a policy of reservation of seats for Dalits in elections (in 1932 he had conceded this point to Ambedkar with great reluctance, as the lesser of two evils). He also insisted that Nehru appoint Ambedkar as Law Minister in the new government, even though he was not a member of the Congress. Many Congress members resented this move, but it followed on from Gandhi's belief that one should always reach out to and try to incorporate an opponent. Ambedkar was to become the leading figure in the drafting of a new constitution for India.⁴¹ Gandhi had at last accepted that Dalits had to exercise power themselves if they were to better their position in any meaningful way. When the Indian Constituent Assembly formally abolished untouchability on 29 November 1948, the house resounded with cries of 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!'⁴² The law was seen to be a particularly moving tribute to the memory of Gandhi, who had been assassinated ten months earlier.

D.R. Nagaraj has argued that although Gandhi and Ambedkar were in sharp conflict in the 1930s and their differences of that time continue to provide a reference point for the modern Dalit movement, they had in many

respects moved towards each other implicitly, if not explicitly, by the end of that decade. He states that 'having jumped into action they cured each other's excesses; they emerged as transformed persons at the end of a very intense encounter.'⁴³ He goes on to argue that there was in fact always a lot of common ground between them. For example, they both took up the issue of untouchability as a primarily political one, in contrast to those—such as the bhakti sants—who had previously fought the battle largely in the religious sphere. Also, both emphasised the centrality of this issue for Indian society as a whole.⁴⁴ Nagaraj regrets the hardening of position on both sides of the divide today, arguing that the need now is for a synthesis of the two approaches. He accepts that this cannot be done at a strictly logical level, as there are profound theoretical differences between the two approaches, but feels that it can be done if we seek for a deeper underlying truth.⁴⁵

Is this hope an over-optimistic one? In contemporary India, the reality for most Dalits is a continuing routine discrimination in their daily life, with acts of assertion being met by beatings, rape and murder. Although parliamentary and legislative assembly seats are reserved for Dalits, and they are given scholarships and reserved places in schools and colleges, only a small minority benefit from this, and even those who manage against the odds to obtain high qualifications are often denied employment. The large majority of Dalits continue to live in great poverty. The local police often fail to prevent attacks on Dalits, while covering up for the violence of the dominant classes.⁴⁶ Politicians seek to win the Dalit vote by claiming to abhor the practice of untouchability, but move to crush any acts that challenge Hinduism itself. In 2001, for example, some Dalits planned to stage a mass conversion to Buddhism in Delhi. Hindutva activists promptly issued a threat that Dalits who attended would be attacked. Others who were not associated with the Hindu right added their voice to the anti-Dalit clamour, arguing that conversion would 'provoke communal tension'. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government used its power of office to prevent

many Dalits from entering Delhi, so that the event turned out to be a damp squib.⁴⁷

In such a climate, it is understandable that few Dalit activists believe that the system will be reformed by caste Hindus from within. They have good reason to question the efficacy of dialogue and compromise. Dalits have however deployed satyagraha to good effect on many occasions, and there is no reason to believe that it is any less efficacious as a means for struggle today. Not only does it continue to provide a powerful means for applying pressure, but it also serves to remind caste Hindus that their continuing maltreatment of Gandhi's 'children of God' represents an enduring insult to his name. In this respect the legacy of both Gandhi and Ambedkar continues to be of crucial importance for the Dalits of modern India.

Adivasis

The Adivasis, or so-called 'tribals', were a disparate group of jatis that had been defined by the British as 'early tribes'. It was argued that these jatis could be characterised, among other things, by their clan-based systems of kinship and their 'primitive' animistic religiosity. In some cases they were defined in terms of their habitat, as 'jungle tribes'. In the twentieth century they were given the bureaucratic label of 'Scheduled Tribes'. In reaction to all of this, many of them claimed, assertively, to be Adivasis, or 'original inhabitants'. In India, the largest concentrations of the people so described were found in the north-east. Elsewhere, many were found in the central-eastern region, in what is now the state of Jharkhand and areas adjoining to it in Bengal, Orissa and Bastar, and in a belt of western India running over the four modern Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.⁴⁸

Although there were many jatis that had been classed by the British as 'early' or 'jungle tribes' in Gandhi's own Gujarat, he does not appear to have

been conscious of them in any important respect before 1921. He had been brought up in Saurashtra, and had then based himself in Ahmedabad city, neither of which had any significant population of these jatis, and his work in South Africa had not brought him into contact with them, unlike Dalits, some of whom had migrated there. In this, there was a marked contrast to his concern about the discriminations faced by the Untouchables and the need to incorporate them within the movement—something which had for many years been a central question both for him and other nationalists. Gandhi's attention was drawn to the matter of the 'tribals' of Gujarat for the first time during the Non-cooperation movement. There were two groups concerned—the Bhils and the so-called 'Kaliparaj'.

The Bhils were the largest of the so-called 'tribal' communities of the western Indian region. In the past they had been organised in warlike clans that prevented outside rulers from extending their control over the mountains. The British had subjugated them—with considerable difficulty—during the first half of the nineteenth century. Even afterwards, there were several Bhil revolts. The 'Kaliparaj' were found only in South Gujarat. The term, which meant 'the black people' was a derogatory one used by non-Adivasis to describe members of a variety of local Adivasijatis, such as the Chodhris, Dhodiyas and Gamits. These jatis were considered to be less warlike than the Bhils. These communities had lived in the past from shifting cultivation, hunting and gathering, and they were encouraged by the British to practice a more settled and intensive agriculture. In many cases, they were excluded from large tracts of forest that they had previously controlled, so that state foresters could exploit the timber wealth of the woodlands.⁴⁹ Landlords, usurers and liquor dealers who were protected by the colonial and princely states ruthlessly exploited those who became settled.⁵⁰ This frequently created a crisis of confidence among these people in their own cultures, leading them to look for alternative and more efficacious cultural models. Most notable in this respect was a powerful movement among the Bhils of the Gujarat—Rajasthan border region in 1913

that was led by a charismatic leader called Govind, who was believed to have miraculous powers. The British eventually suppressed this movement by force as it was seen to challenge the hegemony of the local princely rulers.

Nationalists of Gujarat began to reach out to the Adivasis from 1918. During the great influenza epidemic of that year some young activists of the Patidar Yuvak Mandal distributed medicine to the 'Kaliparaj' in an attempt to gain their sympathy.⁵¹ In the Panchmahals, where the Adivasis were all Bhils, some local nationalist workers took up their grievances after the monsoon had failed in the same year. Even though many of the Bhils were starving, government officials were confiscating their meagre possessions—even stripping the tiles from their roofs—to realise land-tax demands. In 1919 Gandhi's prominent lieutenant, Indulal Yagnik, and a leading member of Gokhale's Servants of India Society, Amritlal Thakkar, raised funds from capitalists in Bombay to buy food that was then distributed among the Bhils.⁵²

This initial work in the Panchmahals was consolidated during the period of the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920–2, when meetings were organised by nationalists to encourage the Bhils to give up drinking liquor. Some took avow to abjure spirits while bowing to a portrait of Gandhi.⁵³ Food was again in short supply among the Bhils in 1921, and Yagnik once more raised funds to purchase food for them. In this, he encountered considerable opposition from other leading nationalists of Gujarat, such as Vallabhbhai Patel and G.V. Mavalankar, who did not feel that such work was a priority at that time. Gandhi, however, supported this work.⁵⁴ Yagnik also established a National Bhil Hostel that was modelled on similar hostels run by the government and Christian missionaries.⁵⁵ Amritlal Thakkar joined him in this work in early 1922 and put the project on a much firmer footing. Another hostel was opened, called 'the Bhil Ashram'.⁵⁶ Soon after, Thakkar established the Bhil Seva Mandal, which was in overall control of work

amongst the Bhils. This organisation laid the foundations for his life's work amongst the Adivasis of India.⁵⁷

It was at this juncture that Gandhi himself took up the problem of assimilating the Adivasis of the region into the movement. The immediate context was provided by the proposal to launch civil disobedience against the British in one taluka, that of Bardoli in South Gujarat. Although Gandhi had been informed that the people of this area were wholly behind the struggle, he soon discovered that about half the population consisted of 'Kaliparaj' who had not been mobilised at all. He demanded that this be rectified. The Congress activists then started going to the Adivasi villages, but with minimal success initially. Meanwhile, a powerful protest movement had developed among the Bhils in the border region between Gujarat and Rajasthan. They were led by a Baniya of Mewar State called Motilal Tejawat, who had once worked for a Rajput lord, but who had resigned in disgust at the way such people treated the Bhils. Tejawat saw the protest as being a part of the wider movement for independence led by Gandhi, then in a most active phase. In speeches he stated that once 'Gandhi raj' was established they would only have to pay one anna in the rupee to their rulers. Some of his followers took to wearing white caps. He clearly believed that in trying to wean the Bhils away from violence he was following the programme of the Gandhian movement closely. As yet, however, Gandhi knew nothing of him or his movement.⁵⁸

In early 1922, Tejawat and several thousand Bhils armed with bows and arrows went on a progress around the villages of the region. There were some minor clashes, with aggressive policemen and officials being beaten. There is no record of anyone being killed by the Bhils—by their standards they were protesting in a remarkably non-violent manner. When however Gandhi heard of this, he wrote an article in *Young India* disowning the Bhils and their leader: 'none has authority to use my name save under my own writing... nobody has any authority from me to use any arms, even sticks, against any person.' He warned them that if continued in such an aggressive

manner, 'they will find everything and everybody arrayed against them and they will find themselves heavy losers in the end.'⁵⁹ Gandhi was not however satisfied that he had heard all he needed to know about this movement, and he sent a leading nationalist worker, Manilal Kothari, to investigate. Motilal and the Bhils were then in Sirohi state, and Kothari managed to meet up with them there and take a promise from Tejawat that he would avoid violence. Kothari was impressed by the power of the movement and sent back favourable reports to Gandhi.

Motilal had been both upset and disheartened when he had learnt of Gandhi's disavowal of his activities in the *Young India* article of 2 February, for he saw himself as a faithful disciple. As he stated, however, in a letter to Gandhi of 11 February, he knew he could not prevent his own followers from carrying arms—with all the possible dangers that that entailed. He argued that despite this, Gandhi should view them favourably as an intrinsically peaceful and religious-minded people who were suffering oppression by autocratic and corrupt rulers.⁶⁰ Gandhi gave a rather lukewarm response on 26 February, in which he accepted that Tejawat was doing some excellent work among the Bhils, but pointed out that he had failed to grasp his philosophy in certain important respects.⁶¹ Although his tone was more sympathetic, he was still not very welcoming towards his self-avowed disciple. It was at this juncture that the British moved against the protesters, sending the Mewar Bhil Corps to crush the movement. They surprised a meeting of Motilal and his followers on the morning of 7 March, opening fire on the peaceful crowd from a nearby hill. The commander of the Bhil Corps, Major Sutton, claimed that twenty-two Bhils were killed in what he described as a skirmish.⁶² Against this, an oral tradition of the Bhils claims that between 1,000 and 1,500 were killed.⁶³

It is almost certainly the case that Sutton's figure of twenty-two was an understatement, and probably a large one at that. A local missionary who treated the wounded stated that 'there were a hundred casualties; dead and

wounded were lying all around, some with fearful wounds. Our little hospital was filled and we were bringing in stretcher cases until 10 p.m.⁶⁴ For Sutton, twenty-two was a politic figure—not representing a denial that a serious incident had occurred, but not an indicator, either, that the carnage had been out of all proportion to the seriousness of the situation. Sutton claimed that the Bhils had started firing and that he had ordered a counter-firing in self-defence. As a British official, G.D. Ogilvie, stated a few days later, little more could be expected in a case involving a 'people little removed from savagery ... childishly ignorant and inflammable ...'.⁶⁵

The nationalist press, when it took any notice at all,⁶⁶ satisfied itself by merely regurgitating the government communiqué.⁶⁷ There was no suggestion that the shooting was in any way a cause for outrage. Even the most obvious questions were not posed; for example, if the Bhils had, as alleged, made a violent attack on Sutton and his men, why had the latter not suffered a single injury? No attempts were made by the Gujarat Congress to investigate the matter any further, even though it had the potential to be 'Gujarat's Amritsar'. Bhil lives, it seems, were of minor matter.⁶⁸ Motilal himself had managed to escape after the firing started, and the movement continued strongly for two more months. There were further shootings and atrocities, though not of the magnitude of that of 7 March. British officials captured Bhil headmen and forced them to break *Eki* (unity) oath in public.⁶⁹ By May 1922 the movement had all but collapsed, leaving Motilal a fugitive.

Gandhi and his followers' response to this Bhil movement left a lot to be desired. The situation was not much better in the Panchmahals, where the single most important leader of the Bhils of that area, Govind, became an implacable opponent of the Gandhians during the Non-Cooperation movement. Govind, who had led the Bhil movement of 1913, had been jailed until 1919, when he was released on condition that he take no part in any 'political' activities. In 1921, the Gandhians had persuaded him to attend

their Bhil conference in Dahod, which he had agreed to do, as he did not see it as being 'political'. The British thought otherwise and arrested him before he could reach Dahod. He realised that he had been tricked, and as he was led away he showered abuse on the nationalists.⁷⁰ Thereafter, the Gandhians had great difficulty in winning any mass support from the Bhils of the region, though the Bhil Seva Mandal itself continued to operate with impressive efficiency.

In South Gujarat, the Gandhians managed eventually to win much wider support among the Adivasis. In a powerful movement for self-assertion that was launched in 1922, Gandhi was projected by the Adivasis as a divine being who was somehow working to ameliorate their condition. Vows were taken in his name, and miracles expected from him.⁷¹ Gandhians sought to channel these hopes in different directions by organising meetings for the Adivasis from 1923 onwards, at which they were encouraged to abjure liquor and meat, to spin khadi, and live a clean, simple and diligent life. This was characterised in high Hindu terms as *atmashuddhi*, or self-purification. Through such a cleansing the Adivasis would, it was believed, become worthy citizens of the Indian nation. They also campaigned to replace the demeaning term 'Kaliparaj' with that of 'Raniparaj', or 'people of the forest'. The leading figure in this initiative was Dr Sumant Mehta, who recalled how humiliated he had been when he was called a 'blackey' while undergoing medical training in England.⁷² At the same time, the Gandhians discouraged Adivasis from continuing the labour boycott that they had been waging against local landlords. They were advised to go back to work.⁷³ In 1924, an ashram was established in the heart of the Adivasi area at Vedchhi to carry on Gandhian work.

Many high-caste supporters of the Gandhian Congress opposed this activity. In early 1924, for example, the Gandhian Narhari Parikh started a night school for Dubla labourers in an area dominated by Anavil and Patidar peasants. The Dublas were a 'Kaliparaj' community who were mostly

bonded agricultural labourers working for the two dominant castes. During the Non-Cooperation Movement the Patidars had given strong support to the Gandhian Congress. However, they felt very threatened by the night school, believing that their hegemony over the Dublas would be jeopardised if they became literate. They informed the Dublas that if they wanted to continue in employment they should stop attending the school. Many Patidars returned their spinning wheels to the local ashram at Sarbhan in protest. When the Dublas defied them, they went to the school and drove them out. Parikh launched a fast in protest, sending a message to Gandhi that he was doing this to bring about a change of heart, not because he bore any grudge against the Patidars. Gandhi gave his blessings, and Vallabhbhai Patel travelled down from Ahmedabad to try to persuade the Patidars to withdraw their opposition to the school. The initial response of the Patidars was aggressive—they stated that they did not care if Parikh died. Eventually, Patel persuaded them to accept the school, and Parikh called off his fast. Despite this, individual Patidars made it clear to the Dublas that if they attended the class they would remain unemployed. Intimidated, the Dublas stopped going to the class, and it had to be closed down.⁷⁴

In following Gandhi's injunction to carry out social and political work among the poor and marginalized, people such as Amritlal Thakkar and Narhari Parikh demonstrated considerable moral courage. They often had to fight the local elites who profited by exploiting the Adivasis and who considered them troublemakers. There were however limits to their radicalism. They tended to have a superior attitude towards the Adivasis, seeing them as 'primitives' who required to be 'civilised'. For example, Amritlal Thakkar considered that the Bhils were 'hardly conscious of being human. He saw his task as being that of winning the community 'back to the country and to humanity'.⁷⁵ Within the ashrams, the Gandhians never considered putting Adivasis into positions of responsibility, even though there were educated Adivasis who were capable of carrying out such work on equal terms with the caste Hindus. The Gandhians expended a lot of

energy attacking aspects of Adivasi culture that were seen to violate upper-caste notions of decency, such as dances in which men and women held each other around the waist. More pressing concerns were ignored, such as the exploitation of the Adivasis by usurers, landlords and rich peasants.⁷⁶

The situation was worse elsewhere, for many high-caste members of the Gandhian Congress became actively hostile when certain Adivasis claimed to be followers of Gandhi. This was apparent in the revolt of the Gond Adivasis of the Rampa and Gudem hill tracts of the Andhra-Orissa border region led by Alluri Sita Rama Raju in 1922–4. There were certain parallels between Sita Rama Raju and Motilal Tejawat, though there were also important differences. Sita Rama Raju was a high-caste Telugu who became a sanyasi and who was believed by the Gonds to have supernatural powers. He appears to have come into contact with the Gandhian movement while on a pilgrimage to Nasik in 1921. He began to wear khadi, and on his return, preached temperance and the need to resolve disputes locally rather than through the British courts. He launched a rebellion in September 1922 that was sustained for nearly two years. In contrast to Tejawat, Sita Rama Raju encouraged his followers to arm themselves with guns and fight the British using guerrilla tactics. He himself dyed his khadi shirt red, and wore a military-style leather belt with a captured police pistol tucked into it. He tried to gain support for his revolt from Congress nationalists in the plains, but they not only refused to support him, but actively opposed his movement on the grounds that it violated Gandhis principles of non-violence. A more important reason for their hostility was perhaps that they tended to be of the same class as the traders, usurers, contractors, immigrant cultivators and lawyers whom the Gonds were resisting as their exploiters. Sita Rama Raju was eventually captured and summarily executed by the police in May 1924, bringing the revolt to an end.⁷⁷

Another powerful Adivasi movement that claimed to be inspired by Gandhi was that of the Oraons of the Jharkhand region. This movement had begun during the First World War, when large numbers of Oraons had

resolved to reform their lives. They became known as Tana Bhagats. Besides giving up liquor, meat eating and their fear of ghosts and evil spirits, they also stopped paying their rents to high-caste landlords. Seeing this as a threat to law and order, the British authorities tried to suppress this non-violent movement, with little success.⁷⁸ During the Non-Cooperation movement, the Tana Bhagats became strong supporters of Gandhi and the Congress. About 20,000 of them refused to pay their taxes to the state, believing that '*Gandhi raj*' had arrived. Many had their land confiscated as a result. Despite this they remained firm, courting jail and travelling long distances to attend Congress meetings. They had faith that once swaraj was won they would regain all the land that they had lost over the course of the past century.⁷⁹ On a tour of Bihar in 1925, Gandhi met some Tana Bhagats who wore khadi. He was very impressed when they demonstrated their skills in spinning in his presence.⁸⁰

Despite the obvious success of his movement among many Adivasis, Gandhi did not devote any great intellectual or political energy to them and their problems. He knew that work was being done in this respect by his followers in various parts of India, such as Amritlal Thakkar in the Panchmahals and Jugatram Dave in South Gujarat, and he was content to let them carry on. He did, however, try to discourage them from proselytising their own values in a heavy-handed manner. As he stated in 1928: As regards taking our message to the aborigines, I do not think I should go and give my message out of my own wisdom. Do it in all humility ... What have I to take to the aborigines and the Assamese hillmen except to go in my nakedness to them? Rather than ask them to join my prayer, I would join their prayer.⁸¹

During the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–1, many Adivasis participated by disobeying the forest laws—an action which became classed as '*forest satyagraha*'. Gandhi himself had refused to sanction such action, on the grounds that he was ignorant of forest regulations.⁸² Once he had

been jailed, local Congress leaders went ahead and launched the satyagrahas. In central India, Gond and Korku Adivasis were led by khadi-clad Congress nationalists in invasions of government forests, where they cut and removed grass in violation of the law. When the police tried to intervene, there were in some cases violent clashes. By August 1930, the nationalists were no longer in control of the protest in many areas, and the government was becoming seriously alarmed. Police reinforcements were sent, and the Adivasis were repressed in a heavy-handed manner. By October the protests had died down in most areas, though not all.⁸³ At the same time, there were forest satyagrahas in the Sahyadri Mountains in Maharashtra, which were generally nonviolent. There was also an upsurge in movements of Adivasi assertion that were linked with Gandhi's name, such as the Haribaba movement in Jharkhand of 1931–2.⁸⁴

Despite this widespread Adivasi support for the Congress, Gandhi himself continued to treat Adivasi issues as marginal to the movement as a whole. For example, he insisted that Amritlal Thakkar expend his chief energies on Harijan work, as Secretary of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, rather than on the Bhils and other Adivasis, which was where Thakkar's heart really lay. He also showed little interest in Verrier Elwin's work among the Gonds. Elwin had come to India as a Christian missionary in 1927 and become close to Gandhi during the period of the Civil Disobedience Movement. He came to see Gandhi as a surrogate father, a role Gandhi accepted.⁸⁵ Elwin abandoned his missionary work, and in 1932—inspired by the example of Amritlal Thakkar and the Bhil Seva Mandal—decided to establish a Gandhian-style ashram among the Gonds of Mandla District in the Central Provinces, which he named the Gond Seva Mandal.⁸⁶

In 1932 and 1933 Gandhi sent at least fourteen letters to Elwin. These letters were however of a very personal nature—Gandhi showed almost no interest in the Gonds. When Elwin fell ill, he even advised him to give up his work and return to England.⁸⁷ Elwin did not follow this suggestion and

continued in Mandla. The work was nevertheless raising difficult questions for him. Initially—as a lapsed missionary— Elwin had appreciated the Gandhian principle that it was wrong to seek to convert people to a faith different to the one in which they had been raised.⁸⁸ He came to see, however, that the Gandhians who were working among the Adivasis were involved in a conversion of a more subtle sort, namely that of inculcating their own cultural values. Most of these were, Elwin felt, irrelevant to the Adivasis. Khadi-spinning— a major feature of Gandhian constructive work amongst Adivasis— was for example of no use to the Gonds, for cotton was not grown in their tract. Elwin considered the Gandhian condemnation of liquor to be out of touch with Gond beliefs, for they loved their liquor, made from the mahua flower, and in fact they saw this as central to their identity as a community. Mahua grew freely in the area, and the liquor was, Elwin felt, a far more genuinely swadeshi product for Adivasis than khadi. He also found that the Gonds did not respect him for the strict celibacy that he observed in accordance with Gandhi's advice. They saw it, rather, as a perversion. He was attracted by the way that the Gonds expressed their sexuality in an open and uninhibited way, and began to feel that they acted with greater honesty than the uptight and narrow-minded Gandhians who made a great show of repressing their desires in an often hypocritical manner. He soon abandoned his vow and began to have sexual relationships with Gond women.⁸⁹ Towards the end of 1933 he came out with a public critique of the nationalists in the *Modern Review*: 'Indian national workers and reformers—with the exception of the heroic little band associated with the Bhil Seva Mandal—have neglected the tribes shamefully. The Congress has neglected them. The Liberals have neglected them. The Khadi workers have neglected them.'⁹⁰ Elwin decided to publicise the plight of the Adivasis in a series of articles, pamphlets and books.⁹¹

In these writings Elwin celebrated a culture which was as yet uncontaminated by 'civilisation'. At the very time he was writing, however, a movement was sweeping through the Gond community in which the people

abandoned liquor-drinking, meat-eating, dancing and singing. This was exactly the sort of movement that Gandhian workers had both encouraged and sought to build on elsewhere in India, and Elwin suspected that in this case the Adivasis were being manipulated.⁹² This is unlikely, for—going by all of the detailed studies we have of such movements—the chief initiative almost certainly came from the Adivasis. Elwin also believed that Adivasis who changed their way of life in this respect went 'flat, like stale beer: there was no more kick in them'.⁹³ He failed to see that considerable moral courage was required to sustain such a reformed way of life. Not only did reformed Adivasis bring themselves into conflict with members of their own community, but their initiative was often resented very strongly by local landlords, rich peasants, liquor dealers and usurers, who saw it as a case of Adivasis getting ideas above their station. As a rule, they reacted with harsh repression. This was not an act of mere unthinking imitation, but rather a form of proud self-assertion with strong political dimensions.⁹⁴ In this respect, the Gandhians were more in tune with the sentiments of the Adivasis who participated in such movements. Elwin's own work among the Gonds was soon jeopardised by the strength of the reformist movement, and in 1938 he even had to move his headquarters to a place where it was less pervasive.⁹⁵

In the new Indian constitution of 1935, many Adivasi areas were designated as 'excluded' or 'partially excluded', which meant in effect that the Adivasis were considered too politically 'immature' to deserve any electoral representation. There was an important issue to be fought over here, but Gandhi and the Congress kept silent on the matter. Some Gandhians even agreed with the policy. Amritlal Thakkar's second-in-command at the Bhil Seva Mandal, Lakshmidas Shrikant, wrote an article in *The Times of India* in 1938 in which he argued that the Bhils had no social cohesion or any sense of social responsibility, and were not suited for democratic forms of local government.⁹⁶ Elwin was in broad agreement with the policy as well, as he had by then come to the conclusion that

paternalistic Britishers were likely to protect the interests of the Adivasis better than the high-caste Hindu Congressmen who would claim to represent them in the legislative councils. He argued that: 'This company of vegetarians and teetotallers would like to force their own bourgeois and Puritan doctrines on the free and wild people of the forests.'⁹⁷

In 1938 Elwin went to meet Gandhi at Wardha to try to persuade him to take a more active interest in Adivasi issues, but found that for 'all his desire for Home Rule Mahatma Gandhi did not appear to think that the original inhabitants of India deserved any special consideration'.⁹⁸ Gandhi was however soon pushed towards a more active engagement with the issue through fear that the Adivasis might develop their own separatist sentiments. In 1938 an Adivasi Mahasabha was formed in Jharkhand to press for constitutional rights for the Adivasis of the region. Many of the Adivasis who were involved in this organisation were Christian converts. It developed links with the Muslim League, which saw the party as a possible ally in its struggle against the Congress.⁹⁹ Gandhi was worried that under Christian mission influence, the Adivasis would become 'delndianized'—as he put it—and that the Congress needed to provide a strongly Indian counter. He encouraged his followers to work amongst the Adivasis: 'They provide a vast field of service for Congressmen.'¹⁰⁰ An Adivasi Seva Mandal was established as a counter to the Adivasi Mahasabha; the president of this body was B.G. Kher, who had been Prime Minister of Bombay in the Congress ministry of 1937—9. Gandhi also added the topic of 'service of Adivasis' to a manifesto for the constructive programme—it had previously been absent.¹⁰¹

From this time on, Gandhi began to use the term 'Adivasi' consistently when talking about this section of the population. He had always disliked colonial terms such as 'animist' or 'aboriginal', stating: 'We were strangers to this sort of classification—"animists", "aborigines", etc.,—but we have learnt it from English rulers.'¹⁰² In deference to his followers who had coined

alternatives such as 'Raniparaj' or 'Girijan', he used these terms in the late 1920s and 1930s. Elwin had in 1938 changed the name of his organisation to the Bhumijan Seva Mandal.¹⁰³ 'Bhumijan' meant people of the soil', and he seems to have preferred it to the Gandhian terms, which defined Adivasis in terms of their place of residence rather than in terms of their attachment to the earth. Elwin saw these people as the 'original inhabitants', and 'Bhumijan' came closer to this than the Gandhian terms. This did not, however, catch on. The term 'Adivasi' was coined in Jharkhand and popularised by the Adivasi Mahasabha. Amritlal Thakkar seized on it and became a major advocate of its use. Gandhi, who then began to apply the term himself, even believed that Thakkar had coined it.¹⁰⁴ The term was disputed strongly by many Hindu nationalists, who saw its acceptance as a tacit acknowledgement that these supposed 'original inhabitants' had been displaced from their land by Hindu invaders. They preferred to think of these people as 'the imperfectly integrated classes of Hindu society or 'backward Hindus' who had to be integrated fully into the Hindu mainstream.¹⁰⁵ Gandhi clearly rejected this argument, for he continued to deploy the term 'Adivasi' up until his death.

He feared, however, that the Adivasis might follow the example of the Muslim League and launch a series of campaigns for separate states. He anticipated that this would happen if the caste Hindus continued to grind the Adivasis under their heels.¹⁰⁶ The only way to prevent this, so far as he was concerned, was for nationalists to work amongst them in a selfless manner. If the government tried to ban them from Adivasi areas, they should court arrest and be prepared to go to jail.¹⁰⁷ In an address to the Congress workers of Midnapore district in Bengal—an area with a large Adivasi population—he stated: 'The 1935 Act had separated them [the Adivasis] from the rest of the inhabitants of India and had placed the "excluded areas" under the Governor's direct administration. It was a shame that they had allowed them to be treated like that. It was up to them to make the Adivasis feel at one with them.'¹⁰⁸ In the final three years of his life, he

emphasised the need for such work in a way he had never done before, and he made a point of channelling Congress funds in that direction.¹⁰⁹

This strategy succeeded in a broad way, for such separatist sentiments never became popular among the Adivasis of India in general, though they did in important parts of the northeast. In Jharkhand, for example, the Adivasi Mahasabha was routed by the Congress in the elections of 1946, putting paid to any further separatist moves at that juncture.¹¹⁰ Many Gandhians went to work in Adivasi areas in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in some cases as a reaction to the successful Communist Party mobilisation of particular Adivasi communities.¹¹¹ Ashrams were established with hostels and schools for Adivasi children. In this way, a generation of Adivasis was giving a training that allowed them to represent their own communities within the liberal polity. In time, this led, inevitably, to them having to challenge the Gandhian paternalists who had nurtured them in the first place.

The Gandhian approach to Adivasis tended to focus on their education into citizenship. There was much less emphasis on the need to struggle for their rights within the polity through satyagraha. The process of education brought limited gains for a few Adivasis, but it failed to bring the more general emancipation that was hoped for. For most Adivasis, their experience since Indian independence was one of displacement, marginalisation and exploitation. British officials, foresters and policemen were replaced by Indians who treated them just as badly, if not worse. They have had their lands seized from them by high-caste farmers, by bureaucrats who want to build large dams or mine valuable minerals or establish tourist resorts and wildlife reserves in their forests and hills. Their villages have not only been starved of state funding, but their lands have suffered severe ecological damage from rampant cutting of the forests by corrupt contractors and foresters and their political backers. Their agriculture has in consequence deteriorated to the extent that many Adivasis can no longer make a living from the land. They have been often forced to migrate out in

search of work, in the process becoming victims of the harshest forms of exploitation.¹¹² Although nominally citizens of India, the majority continue in practice to be a colonised people. This state of affairs can only be resisted through struggle. This has led some Adivasis towards violent resistance, as for example within the Naxalite movement. Others, however, have resisted non-violently under a leadership that is inspired, broadly, by the Gandhian tradition, as in the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

Dalits, Adivasis, and the Indian Nation

Though his approach towards the Dalit and Adivasi questions had many limitations, Gandhi situated the fraught issue of the position of these two groups within the emerging nation-state squarely on the political agenda. His approach proved to be in tune with certain strands of self-assertion within these communities that stressed cultural and religious reforms that brought them more in line with high-caste Hindu practice. Not all Dalits and Adivasis were comfortable with this development. B.R. Ambedkar, in particular, felt that such a programme would merely lead to the consolidation of their existing social inferiority. He did not believe that the large majority of high-caste Hindus could be trusted to act with benevolence and compassion towards people whom they had exploited to so much advantage for so long. He thus rejected an approach that stressed the reconciling of differences and the forging of a politics of mutual trust and neighbourliness.

Gandhi was not helped in his task by many of his high-caste followers, who were often hostile towards his efforts in this direction. The reaction by Gandhi's Patidar and Anavil Brahman supporters in Bardoli to Narhari Parikh's attempts to run literacy classes for Adivasis has already been discussed. In Kheda, many peasant nationalists of the Patidar caste were similarly opposed towards attempts to integrate the local Dalits within the struggle. When Gandhi toured the area in 1925 he was deeply upset to see

that in a meeting at Bhadran—a leading Patidar village—a bamboo fence had been erected to keep the Dalits apart from the high castes. He insisted that the fence be removed. At nearby Sunav, his foremost Patidar supporters were reluctant to hold a meeting in his honour as they anticipated that some of their caste-fellows would insult their leader to his face by openly condemning his work for the Dalits.¹¹³ These were villages that had supported Gandhi strongly in other respects. The prevalence of such attitudes in what was considered to be the Gandhian heartland shows that Ambedkar's fears were well justified.

Gandhi also made mistakes. His initial dismissive attitude towards Ambedkar created a tension between the two that was to continue even after Gandhi was forced to acknowledge that the Dalit was an outstanding leader of his community. Ambedkar tried hard to reach out to Gandhi during the mid-1930s, but Gandhi did not respond with any great generosity of spirit. Though their mutual debate encouraged both to modify their approaches in significant respects—so that by the 1940s there was less of an ideological gap between them—the bitterness of their encounter in the 1930s continues to inform the Dalit movement in India to this day.

Gandhi devoted an immense amount of his energy to the Dalit issue, for he saw it as a crucial index of the commitment of the Indian people in the building of a nation informed by principles of egalitarianism and democracy. The urgency of his commitment stemmed from his realisation that if he did not provide a viable solution, the Dalits might be alienated from the nationalist project as a whole. This urgency was lacking in the case of the Adivasis up until the end of the 1930s, when some of their leaders began to shift towards the Muslim League. It was only after this that Gandhi moved the Adivasi question up the nationalist agenda. Following this, there was an intense discussion in the early 1940s over the place of these peoples within the emerging nation. On one side there were those who argued that the Adivasis should be given legal protection against non-Adivasis, so that they would have space to work through their own destinies within the

nation-state; on the other those who believed that the faster the Adivasis were integrated within the wider society, the sooner they would be able to hold their own. Gandhians were mainly in the latter camp. Once again, the parameters were being drawn up for a debate that would be destined to persist, as the quality of life of the large majority of Adivasis continued to deteriorate in post-independence India.