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The Gandhian Ashram and its Contemporaries

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The Gandhian Ashram and its Contemporaries:
A Global Study of the Communal Reaction to Modernity
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Gandhian Ashram as a reaction to the forces of modernity in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Its deviation from the existing historiography is primarily in its exploration of the Ashram as one of many incidents of communal experiments at the time, which have an interesting geographic connection in London. I note Gandhi’s readings of John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy, his interactions with dietetic and communal experiments in London, and some of the local precedents for the Ashram in arguing that these communal living experiments can be seen as a reaction to the forces of modern nation-building, especially as an anticolonial reaction.
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INTRODUCTION

Gandhi’s ashram, or his moral village, changed the world and helped to define nations. History tends to misunderstand or fail to thoroughly define Gandhi’s role in India, and the global impact of his spirituality. Understanding his core goals of religious and spiritual foundations for society are vitally important to understanding the deep influence he had on the nationalist movement in India and beyond. The core of this philosophy can be found in his ashram. This exploration of Gandhi’s motivation, intent, influencers and thinkers who developed similar views at the time he was developing his ashram are important not only to a deeper understanding of the historic forces that forged India, but they reveal a spiritual theme that has not been fully understood or explored. His legacy, in this spiritual regard, impacted how nations in the post-colonial period were founded and how they are held together today.

In conducting this research, it became clear to me that Gandhi’s role as spiritual leader, philosopher and ascetic may be more important than his more well-known role as nationalist leader. The spiritual, not political, underpinnings of Gandhi’s beliefs so clearly manifested in his ashram, were a necessary ingredient in forging a national identity out of a wildly diverse group of tribes governed through force and cynical division in British India. Gandhian tenets of selflessness, love, and anti-materialism were forged out of the times—a reaction to the ever faster pace of modernity, manifested so profoundly in industrialization and urbanization.

Gandhi’s beliefs were foundational to India’s hard but ultimately successful campaign for independence. People identified at some core spiritual level with Gandhi’s humanity, his existential menu of morality, and this appeal was the foundation required to give them the courage to fight for their separate identity as a new nation.
That foundational religious and spiritual contribution, centered in Gandhi’s ashram, fueled nationalist movements that resulted in world-changing wave of newly independent nations throughout Asia and Africa, and Southeast Asia in particular. Indonesia, Burma, Malaya and later Malaysia and Singapore all were deeply influenced by Gandhi’s spirituality as well as Nehru’s political discourse as they threw off colonial masters and the Japanese during and after World War II.

Gandhi’s influence was largely overtaken after the heady success of independence movements in India and other parts of the developing world as the Cold War dominated geopolitics in from the 1960’s through the 1980’s. Strong central leaders dominated their countries, eschewing Gandhi’s concepts of morality and spirituality and enabled by superpowers fighting an ideological war. It is fascinating to understand that Gandhi’s core rejection of the moral ills accompanying what he and his contemporaries viewed as modernity encroaching upon humanity became a foundational thread in the developing world’s nation building efforts.

Today, we can see a new political milieu in which the strong, centralized governments of the post-colonial and Cold War periods are struggling to identify unifying themes amidst the advent of a new modernity, specifically the rise of the middle class. The OECD predicts the middle class in the IndoPacific (India, Southeast and East Asia) will be 2.1 billion people by 2030.1 These more educated and empowered people are seeking a new morality in governance – they want fairness, transparency, clean environment and a morality based implementation of rule of law. In many ways, this new demand pull from the emerging middle class contains elements of Gandhi’s spiritual ideals, and his influence may be seen from India under its new Prime

Minister Narendra Modi to the rise of politicians from outside of the traditional ruling and business elite such as Indonesia’s new president Joko Widodo or “Jokowi,” a furniture entrepreneur from the city of Solo on Java.

This study explores Gandhi’s path to establishing his ashram, and the intellectual interlocutors he met and who influenced his thinking. It is a story that tells us much about India’s development as well as its future. It also reminds historians to look closely at the motivations and philosophy of prime actors, such as Gandhi. History has tended to define him as a nationalist leader, but a closer examination suggests he was more powerful as a spiritual force, a philosopher whose experience shaped a compelling redefinition of humanity, which in turn provided a cohesive force that was necessary for the formation of new nations.

Gandhi’s influences may be stronger today than they were during the Cold War. We should be informed by his role as a defining influencer at a time of great social and geopolitical change. In many ways, with today’s advent of the rising middle class and the technology revolution connecting the world at an ever increasing rate, we should be looking for the new Gandhi’s who will define our age, our response to the “new” modernity, and the spiritual foundations that will provide social and political connectedness throughout the next century.

Historiography

The ashram was the foundation for Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement and the application of his intellectual program, but the work devoted to it by scholars is surprisingly limited. Those scholars who have directed their attention to the ashram have explored Gandhi’s unconventional interpretation of nationalism, the function of individual relationships in forming
Gandhi’s intellectual framework, and a broad, biographical approach to exploring the ashram from its inception to Gandhi’s death. The themes covered by these works are also important to my own, but there is room for further exploration along the lines of a few questions, including understanding the ashram as an intellectual versus physical space and its place in a global trend toward communal living as national exercises in the early 20th century. In turn, how did this principles impact the politics of Gandhi’s time and future generations?

Gandhi’s assertion that “politics, divorced of religion, has absolutely no meaning” is crucial to comprehending the rigid hierarchy that ordered his political and social priorities. Laypersons commonly commit the error of viewing Gandhi as a revolutionary political actor whose primary goal was the overthrow of British colonial administration in favor of Indian independence. It was with noteworthy reluctance that Gandhi accepted the political role he was inevitably thrust into. In fact, he advocated only for “home rule” until 1919, when the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre at Amritsar convinced him British rule was evil and inherently opposed to India’s best interests. However, religion generally and more specifically religious morality as a foundation for society and governance was (and remained) Gandhi’s primary concern from the outset, and other campaigns he was ascribed to or adopted as his own were means to his religion-motivated ends. For Gandhi, this did not mean proselytizing Hinduism or casting out members of opposing faiths; to the contrary, he welcomed followers of all faiths. He was fascinated with and studied other religions rigorously. He had respect for other schools of religious thought. The only requirement for his ashram was belief in god, as defined in the vows that bound each member, which he referred to as “inmates” in Gujartai, to a strict set of social rules set firmly in a foundation of religious discourse.
These assumptions give important context to the understanding of Ajay Skaria’s work, which seeks to understand the politics of the Gandhian ashram. The aim of his paper is to set Gandhi apart from his liberal nationalist counterparts, including Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru and others, who advocated a program of secular transcendence that relegated religious beliefs to the private sphere in order to create a nation (as a political entity) with shared a history and national values:

When faced with difference, liberal thought has, at its finest, responded by producing a neutral shared space—civil society, the public sphere, or secularism—where differences can be transcended. But … there is an abiding paradox to this process. Briefly put, such transcendence operates by a process of partition that separates the particular only by denying it any political salience and rendering it subordinate. At its most tolerant, liberal thought converts this particular into an object of knowledge … But there can be no serious conversation with it. There can only be knowledge of it. And when, as is necessarily the case, this particular refuses to accept its subordination and seriously threatens society, it is recast as an Other that needs to be violently suppressed.

The objective justification for this approach was expediency—Gandhi had become the popular face of the movement for Indian independence, but his stubborn and unflinching adherence to his principles severely restrained the pace of action and sorely tested the patience of contemporaries who were more motivated by strict nationalism than Gandhi’s ideal of governance as a sort of “moral village.” To Gandhi, the methods adopted by his liberal and nationalist counterparts only put a bandage on the deeply-rooted social divisions among the Indian populace. Gandhi felt that to earn self governance without a moral foundation or imperative was an insufficient and unacceptable goal, not worthy in itself of the sacrifice and struggle. On the other hand, to mainstream nationalists, self determination alone could satisfy the need for a cosmopolitan

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3 Ibid., 956.
society: dangerous (religious) divisions would be suppressed, and differences reconciled through generalized identities formed by things like shared history.⁴

For these nationalists, any political “truth” realized absent the role of religion might be a quicker solution in the short-term, but in Gandhi’s estimation, the long-term solution was to recognize differences as absolute. Skaria calls Gandhi’s alternative “neighborly nationalism,” and frames it as a reaction to the attempt to create generalized unifying characteristics over existing societal divisions. Instead, Gandhi’s proposed to confront them with tapasya (“suffering”):

The tapasya of neighborliness differed depending on the kind of absolute difference being addressed: the equal was met with mitrata (“friendship”), the subordinate with seva (“service”), and the superior with satyagraha (“civil disobedience”). These practices … sought to sustain a friendship with the world based on distinctive Gandhian notions of justice and equality.⁵

These ideas are central to the intellectual foundation of Gandhi’s ashram, and more specifically to the vows that governed communal life within it. In this sense, according to Skaria, Gandhi became diametrically opposed to the modern civilization that seemed to carry with it the liberal ideas of secularism. The ashram’s place in this discourse is cemented when Gandhi claims that it “owes its existence to the desire of truth” and that “truth is perhaps the most important name of God.”⁶ This underscores Gandhi’s departure from conventional politics, as well as the ashram’s over-arching purpose: to seek truth through god.

An equally interesting revelation Skaria brings to attention is that Gandhi was neither the only nor the first Indian thinker to conceptualize the rebirth of the ashram as an institution to

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⁴ Ibid., 962.
⁵ Ibid., 957.
⁶ Ibid., 959.
promote their ideas. He details two major examples of attempts to “rejuvenate” the ashram system, which proponents believed was a great example of the spirituality of ancient Hindu tradition.

The Arya Samaj was a Hindu reformist organization that set up *gurukuls* (an ashram designed to educate students) around the country and attempted to “convert Hinduism into a modern religion by making it congruent with science … through a process of transcendence” thereby rendering India’s civilization worthy of respect and admiration. As Skaria explains, “the *gurukul* was in the forefront of efforts to create a nationalist religion, to produce a national identity as Hindus.”

Another example was Rabindranath Tagore, who attempted to make Indians more self-aware of the popular culture that constituted their nation.

Although their ideas differed methods differed in substance, both used the ashram as an organic, shared civilizational creation that proselytized the Hindu identity. Gandhi’s critiqued both Tagore and the Arya Samaj for their inherent acceptance of the tenets of modern civilization that, in their attempt to reconcile them with Indian civilization, they inherently accepted. The ashram vows he required of his followers were specifically designed to counter the indulgencies of the modern world and to promote principles of selflessness, communalism and transcendental awareness.7

Like Skaria, Thomas Weber8 finds fault in the tendency to document Gandhi’s life and work through political constructs; a more holistic approach is required to gain a comprehensive

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7 Ibid., 964-65.
and accurate understanding of his aims, which go far beyond politics:

Gandhi held before himself, and attempted to place before the masses, a picture of an ideal society that was to be the goal for the individual. This vision was summed up in the work ‘Ramrajya’, the ‘Kingdom of God’ … political independence for the country may have been a step towards Ramrajya, but was certainly no guarantee of it.\(^9\)

It is important to note here that Weber begins his discussion of the ashram by reiterating that Gandhi cannot be forced into the common framework of western political revolution. One can assume that Weber would agree with Mithi Mukherjee’s assessment of Gandhi’s vision of freedom, moksha, and a spiritual liberation of the self through renunciation that is incompatible with the western concept of political independence.\(^10\)

The contextual framework Weber constructs is only the beginning of his article. He adopts an intuitive approach to understanding the ashram by exploring the personal relationships between Gandhi and four individuals: Henry Polak, Hermann Kallenbach, Maganlal Gandhi and Jamnalal Bajaj. What is particularly interesting in the context of this thesis is the interaction between Gandhi and the two westerners, Polak and Kallenbach, who were instrumental in the formation of the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm, respectively.

Gandhi met Henry Polak in 1904 at a vegetarian restaurant in South Africa. It was Polak who catalyzed Gandhi’s connection with the ideas of John Ruskin’s Unto This Last, which Gandhi credited with the transformation of his life that put him on the trajectory to the leader he became. In the decade following, the two men lived together and were each others’ closest confidants. Weber argues that their collaboration in creating the Phoenix Settlement, Gandhi’s

\(^9\) Ibid., 84.
first commune, was merely the pair’s largest physical achievement. The intellectual exchange
that occurred between the two men on ideas like renunciation, vegetarianism, and justice, as well
as their discussions on Tolstoy and Ruskin, were pivotal in this formative period of Gandhi’s
career.\(^\text{11}\)

The Kallenbach-Gandhi relationship was even tighter, and its longevity is important to
understand when conceptualizing how deeply Kallenbach influenced his friend Gandhi. The two
“soulmates,” as they have been called by Weber and others, met in 1903, and their deep
connection was forged over their shared reverence for Russian novelist and philosopher Leo
Tolstoy. Their collaboration in founding Tolstoy Farm (which was bankrolled by Kallenbach, the
German architect) was the foundational model from which the Gandhian ashram grew. Although
the Phoenix Settlement is remembered as the first Gandhian community, it was mainly
established for the publication of *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi’s newspaper.\(^\text{12}\)

The Tolstoy Farm was where the real social experimentation began, and where it began
to be clear the ashram would be central to Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, or his foundational search for
truth campaign. Gandhi and Kallenbach adopted a shared sense of self-discipline through diet
and other observances where form contributed to and led substance. Weber aptly points out that
there was also a financial rationale: poor *satyagrahis* became more abundant, and communal
living that practiced an ascetic lifestyle was both a pragmatic and practical solution.\(^\text{13}\) But the
legacy of Tolstoy Farm was that it became a launching point for Gandhi’s non-cooperation
movement by cementing its intellectual foundations in a physical space that “served as a training

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 87.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 90.
ground for spiritual matters that would also give the residents strength needed for the political campaign.” In short, spiritual commitment was the foundation of political activity. Without a religious and spiritual basis, political activities were without existential merit.

In 1993, Mark Thomson’s *Gandhi and His Ashrams* broke ground on the previously unstudied Gandhian ashram, taking a biographical approach that provided a comprehensive survey of the ashram from its inception until Gandhi’s demise. Gandhi as an experimental social reformist is a theme that reverberates throughout the book, as Thomson traces what is essentially the Mahatma’s (or father’s) intellectual trajectory as it developed throughout his life. In doing so, Thomson essentially set the precedent for future study of the ashram as a social laboratory (as I have called it); ideas are not trapped in the mind or in writings, but are actually tested by the ashramites. This idea is similar, to Mukherjee’s assessment of Gandhi as a *samnyasin*; that is, a renunciative political actor. Instead of withdrawing from the world, as did Brahmins practicing in the ancient ashram, he took on a lifestyle that was highly public in the interests of identifying with the suffering of the lowest strata of society. Gandhi was in fact championing ideas of fairness, transparency, equal rights which still resonate in the most important political movements across Asia today.

The scope Thomson covers in his work offers the student of the Gandhian ashram a fairly broad overview of its intellectual history, but I believe some of the work’s focus is detracted by the biographical approach, which has been well-established by decades of scholarship. Thomson should be commended for the niche he has created in the Gandhian historiography.

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14 Ibid., 91.
The ashram is, of course, mentioned in many works on the life of the Mahatma, but apart from Skaria, Weber and Thomson, none have devoted their full attention to the institution as a field of study. My paper does not seek to detract or alter the established historiography, but rather to expand on it by discussing it in a broader, global discourse of communal living as nation-building, and what that meant to Gandhi and his contemporaries. Historians focus on Gandhi’s role as a political revolutionary and a strong nationalist leader. His influence over Indian independence and the post colonial nationalist movements around Southeast Asia and Africa is vitally important. However, many misunderstand or minimalize the religious and moral aspect of his conceptualization of governance and society. The objective of this paper is to explore this concept more deeply.

In this context, I found it useful to study the kibbutz, a Zionist movement toward communal living that had at its heart the aim of organically developing a nation on shared values and histories. The similarities between the Zionist moral foundation and Gandhi’s conceptualizations of religious underpinnings to a just society are striking. But it is in the differences between these two constructs where one can find a better understanding of Gandhi, and his unconventional methods toward social change.
I. Local Precedents

The purpose of this section is to give a brief and, admittedly, selective, sense that Gandhi was neither the inventor, nor the first of his time to use the ashram. It is important to make this clear—even though the purpose of the paper is to establish a global sense of the institution. My hope is that the reader will use the information that follows in the first chapter as context for understanding Gandhi’s peculiarity even among his countrymen: as much as his ideas were the same, even the smallest differences must be understood as major departures from the intellectual framework of his Indian contemporaries.

The Ancient Ashram

In the present study of the Gandhian Ashram as the product of both local and global intellectual discourses, it is important to understand the institution at its conception in ancient Hinduism. The name “ashram” comes from the Sanskrit root word *srama*, which integrates two definitions: “to become weary, tired, or exhausted” (which may be either physical or mental) and “to labor, toil, or exert oneself” with the intent of achieving some positive result. *Srama* connotes the Vedic terms *yajna* (or “sacrifice”) and *tapas* (“religious austerity”), which are integral to the understanding of both ancient and modern ashram. Taken together, these form the framework for understanding spiritual liberation as a religious goal; and by associating them with a sense of “toil” as a prerequisite to this freedom, the ashram is seen as a place where constructive work is an avenue for achieving an idealized religious end.\(^\text{17}\)

Importantly, however, not all were welcome to pursue this religious exertion within the

ashram: in fact, the institution was highly exclusive in its ancient form. The caste system, a Hindu social hierarchy that has been made illegal but persists and pervades modern Indian society, set strict roles for tiers of people. The caste system places Brahmins, who dominated the religious elite, at the top of Hindu society. It follows, then, that the ashram—which we have come to understand as a place where religious people seek religious liberation—was restricted to the Brahmin caste; and among Brahmins, an even more distinguished group were those who devoted themselves to religious practice in the ashram:

the term did not refer to simply any householder but to exceptional Brahmins who dedicated their lives in an extraordinary manner to religious exercise, living, in all likelihood, in areas somewhat removed from villages and towns.18

As previously mentioned, this point is crucial to a comparison of Gandhi’s ashram—which was a highly cosmopolitan and inclusive space—and the strictly orthodox, exclusive religious space of ancient Hindus.

Here, too, is an opportunity to comment on the important distinction between the ashram as a physical space (or social institution) and as a religious or theological construct. Of course, nearly all organized religions have some structure—a church, mosque, temple—that are crucial to the pursuit of their respective beliefs and for religious socialization with others who subscribe to the same. But the Hindu tradition, perhaps more than others, has a strong tendency to associate physical spaces for religious practice (i.e., the ashram) with the lifestyle adopted by its inhabitants. This holds true for the ancient ashram; indeed, scholarship on the subject has noted that even drawing this distinction may be problematic.19 As I will argue, however, distinguishing between the two conceptualizations bears significance when trying to fully understand the impact

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18 Ibid., 19.
19 Ibid., 16.
and historical significance of the Gandhian ashram.

The information presented here is only a selective overview of the ashram’s ancient construction, and there are many features I haven’t discussed. But for the purposes of this paper, these are the features that are contextually significant to understanding Gandhi’s departures from the ashram tradition. Some characteristics, like the observance of constructive work as a means for achieving higher spiritual goals, were kept. But as he built the institution to fit the demands of the temporal, political and social landscape he faced in the early 20th Century, Gandhi made radical changes that set his apart from not only the ancient ashram, but also those adopted by his Hindu nationalist contemporaries. To be sure, they too afforded themselves substantial latitude in reforming the organization to suit their desired political and societal ends, but the contrasts that can be drawn between theirs and the Gandhian model are valuable evidence of Gandhi’s uniqueness as both a spiritual and a national leader, and a transnational inspirational figure.

_Gandhi’s Contemporaries: Ashram and Hindu Nationalism_

As the British grip on its imperial subjects was progressively slipping away in the late 19th and early 20th Century, Indian intellectuals and politicians grew increasingly vocal in their advocacy of the country’s independence from the foreign power that had prospered at the cost of their oppression. Many of these leaders came from elite backgrounds that, in addition to a high socioeconomic standing, presupposed some degree of western education and elevated socialization in the western tradition. These men dressed, acted and in many ways thought like Europeans. They were steeped in the realities of modern industrialized civilization, and despite their disillusionment with British colonial rule held their economic and political systems and
institutions in high regard. Unsurprisingly, their demands for India’s freedom centered on political freedom, or the individual freedoms which are taken for granted in liberal democracies.\textsuperscript{20}

These mainstream nationalists were thinking inside a bubble. Their ideas resonated among their peers, but they remained distinctly aloof from the rest of their countrymen: “reality” defined by the average, poor villager and that of his elite counterpart were difficult—impossible, even—to reconcile. It would be easy to call for criticism of the political elite in this instance, but doing so fails to account for the intricate minutiae of the society they hoped to mold into a nation.

Before the British East India Company consolidated the Queen’s dominion over its governance in the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century, India (or the Indian Subcontinent, to distinguish between nation and geographical location) never cultivated a consensus on what it meant to “be” Indian. The people of the Indian subcontinent were divided along geographic, religious, ethnic and linguistic lines; each of these characteristics would rank higher than nationality in terms of self-identification. Even Hinduism, the overwhelming majority religion, was less than effective in fostering a sense of national identity. Unlike most Western organized religions, Hindus vary widely in their beliefs, deities, and religious observances. The British ascendance to power was made possible by this fact: recognizing the strong divisions in society, British colonialists ingeniously seized upon them, playing ethnic and religious groups off of one another. Even contemporary India, over half a century since it won independence, still struggles with these deeply-seeded divisions. One need look no further than the sheer number of regional political

\textsuperscript{20} Skaria, \textit{Gandhi’s Politics}, 956-957.
parties and their dominance in respective state legislatures as proof. And it directly affects governance: even after the BJP swept to power in May 2014 elections under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it is still struggling to get the regional support it needs to pass reforms on a national level.

As India’s nationalists rose to the occasion at the turn of the 20th century, Hinduism became an obvious channel for pursuing nationalist goals. Over three quarters of India’s population is Hindu, and though its organization is highly decentralized and individually determined, the shared history and traditions could be the social glue need to form a cohesive national body politic. By no means, however, was Hinduism an attractive candidate for national cohesion. The phrase “highly decentralized and individually determined” should be underscored: Hindus did not maintain any generalized identity as such, and unlike most Western religions, not all Hindus pursued religious observance in a uniform way. Furthermore, the relatively small yet quantitatively large Muslim minority population was justifiably hesitant to accept calls for Hindu nation-building, fearing marginalization by a government at odds with their beliefs. This issue proved fatal to the prospect of unity under Indian independence; even Gandhi’s legacy, which focused on religious spirituality and not a specific religion per se, was not enough to overshadow the Hindu-Muslim rift.

In the elite’s attempt to project the concept of this Hindu identity as a national organizing principle, it is unsurprising that some groups looked to the ashram: they “were seen as an ancient representation of spirituality—[and] by rejuvenating them, they could rejuvenate India.”21 One of these was the Arya Samaj, a Hindu nationalist organization established in 1875. Looking to

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Christian missionaries and Islamic scripture as guides, the group set out on its \textit{shuddhi} movement, which sought to win Muslim converts in the first attempt at Hinduism as an organized missionary enterprise in history. In order to do so, Arya Samaj followers opened the Vedic tradition, which had until then been an area of religious piety restricted to the elite Brahmin caste.\textsuperscript{22} This was a monumental development for Hinduism, which had existed for thousands of years without offering its sacred texts to a majority of its believers or engaging in any concentrated effort to swell its size with converts.

They called their ashrams \textit{gurukuls}, and designed them as institutions or settlements that were, in practice, educational, aiming to indoctrinate recruits in their philosophy. Of these, Swami Shraddhanand’s Gurukul Kangri was perhaps the most famous example of using the ashram to consolidate Hinduism as a nationalist organizing principle. At Kangri and other \textit{gurukuls}, the Arya Samaj required adherence to strict vows that governed the behavior of its inhabitants, including \textit{brahmacharya} (chastity), \textit{seva} (service), and a commitment to pursuing a simplified life free of the entanglements of private property, a clear anti-materialist thrust.\textsuperscript{23} The ashram served the organizations interests because it offered an institution grounded in ancient Indian civilization, lending credibility by showing it was organized on the shared traditions of their religious belief. Students were taught the Vedas in Hindi and Sanskrit; the underlying theme was precisely that which Skaria called “rejuvenation” of the ashram—and as follows logically, the renewal of ancient Hindu society, but in a format complicit with the forces of modernity that obviated a return to the same practices used by their ancestors. Implicit in this

\textsuperscript{23} Skaria, \textit{Gandhi’s Politics}, 965.
logic was that alien religions—i.e., Islam—had negatively impacted the civilization of their ancestors.24

As Skaria argued, the gurukul is best seen as an example of mainstream, secular nationalism, which aimed to use Hinduism as a prime prospect for cultivating a sense of nationality: “The local is already in India; it is already national; it is the fact that makes India possible … [But] a gap exists between this local and [nationally shared identity]; the two have to be constantly brought together in a fusion.”25 Hindu nationalists believed that the local-national fusion could be realized by transcending the former:

This logic of transcendence does not reject or disregard the local. Rather, it affirms the centrality of the local. At the same time, the focus is on how the local is historically transcended into higher levels of generality and abstraction; the insistence is that it is only through attention to these higher levels that the meanings of the local become clear. Premised on a unity of historical process, space, and time, this logic of transcendence assumes that as the scale of observation grows larger, so does the explanatory significance. It is in this fairly precise sense of transcendence that mainstream nationalist thought is cosmopolitan. This is not so in the sense that nationalist thought seeks to embrace or subsume humanity within it … [but] that it is constituted by a logic that subsumes identities designated as local, contingent, or particular within more general identities.26

In sum, the goal was to overcome the barriers to social cohesion presented by India’s diverse society by eroding a strong historical tendency toward fragmented and localized self-identification in order to arrive at a national consensus on what it was to “be” Indian. The Hindu nationalists found this answer in their religion.

Rabindranath Tagore can also be understood in this context, but the nuances between the gurukuls and Santiniketan, the ashram he established in Bengal, are important to understand.

24 Ibid., 963.
25 Ibid., 961.
26 Ibid., 962.
Like Gandhi and other nationalists, he came from an elite background, and had been educated in England. By the time Gandhi was introduced by mutual friend C. F. Andrews at the Santiniketan settlement in March 1915, Tagore had already cemented his place in the Indian historical record, and was well recognized both nationally and internationally (particularly after being awarded the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature). Founded in 1901, Santiniketan was established to educate students and compelling them to embrace a simplistic lifestyle through communal living and spiritual freedom.

[Tagore] had repeatedly argued that the heart of India lay not in its cities and towns but in its neglected villages, that the nationalist movement should give its first priority to rural reconstruction through agricultural improvement, cottage industries and cooperatives, that power-oriented politics was sterile and had to be replaced by patient community endeavor to service, reform and education. He had urged Congress leaders to come out of their elitist exclusiveness … and to take up instead the much more challenging task of preparing the common people to run their affairs themselves. He had found much to appreciate in England but had opposed British rule because it emasculated the Indian people, exploited their divisions, and ruined the countryside. He had advocated swadeshi … national education, and Hindu-Muslim reconciliation, and raised his voice against religious bigotry, social taboos, and in particular, untouchability.

As I will show, this perception of Tagore is very much aligned with that of Gandhi; yet, the two repeatedly clashed with one another, mostly over what Tagore defined as Gandhi’s “uncompromisingly radical” critique of modern civil society.

It is on the basis of this latter point that Skaria classifies Tagore in the same mainstream nationalist camp occupied by the Arya Samaj and its gurukuls. Recall his estimation of the local

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29 Ibid., 121.
30 Ibid., 123.
vs. natural as applied to Mahatma Munshiram, which defines mainstream nationalism as “logic of transcendence.” What drove Tagore was to dispel the supremacy complex that was implied by European civilization was that he, like Gandhi, was open to borrowing from other civilizations. Hence, the educational arm of Santiniketan was pointedly focused on finding the universalism of Indian civilization—a concept that was bigger than Hinduism.\(^{31}\) He too implied a critique of modern civilization, but fell short of the rejection that characterized Gandhi’s staunchly anti-Western bent. Popular culture defined the “local” in each Indian village, which was firmly associated with the primitive—a key to Tagore’s decision to use the ashram.

Transcendence, as Tagore would have it, could be achieved by searching for a “redemptive moment” through creativity, imagination, and poetry. This allowed one to discern what is universal about civilization, while removing the constraining features of historicism. Whereas the Western tradition of liberal nationalism centered on a discourse of development that embraced the various aspects of building a society, economy and national identity, and thus affirmed the nationalist was in some sense a more advanced, modern thinker:

> the redemptive work of the poetic created the space of the nation by allowing the nationalist to have with popular culture a relationship of [sic] coevalness and even togetherness outside of historicist time. Through the redemptive work of poetry, the nationalist left the time of historicism and came together with the primitive.\(^{32}\)

Along these lines, Tagore and the students of Santiniketan pursued national identity through a methodology of devotion—called *darshan*, or “divine sight”. The primitive local, it was assumed, was predisposed to accepting this approach because he did not have discipline, one of Gandhi’s major critiques of the “licenses” enjoyed by individual in Tagore’s ashram. But, if this

\(^{31}\) Skaria, *Gandhi’s Politics*, 964.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 966.
is taken as a critique of modern civilization, Skaria points out this is a contradiction that traps Santiniketan and its respective discourse in the liberal tradition, short of the religious theme implied by his divine sight:

For Tagore, after all, *history* and *culture*—categories produced by the discipline of modern civilization—could never quite be rejected: they had to be in place for redemption to occur through them, for the primitive to be affirmed. Having initiated a rigorous interrogation of liberal nationalism, Tagore nevertheless could not abandon its concept of civilization … *darshan* here was of the liberal nation.33

It is here, on the subject of self-discipline, that Gandhi takes issue with his nationalist counterparts. Gandhi’s concern with finding true civilization (*sudharo*) prescribed strict observance of India’s civilizational morality through duty and service (*seva*), which permeate his ashram vows. Appraising the *gurukul* and Santiniketan, Gandhi faulted both on their attempt to make the Indian nation compatible and congruent with the discourse of modern civilization. The Arya Samaj observed *seva* and many of the mores Gandhi adopted, but its scientific approach to the Vedas that sought to legitimize Hinduism as a modern nationalist religion and civilizational discourse was a perversion in Gandhi’s eyes. Tagore’s *darshan* was perhaps more “Indian,” but it too embraced modern civilization, mainly by its failure to reject individual liberty in the way Gandhi did. The constant between the various constructs is the shared object: India as a modern nation. This is crucial to understanding Gandhi, who was not, as some perceive, interested in independence so much as creating a just Indian society. The ashram was the ideal model: in it Gandhi saw India—not as a nation, but as a civilization with its foundation in truth.

33 Ibid., 967.
II. THE GLOBAL DISCOURSE ON COMMUNAL LIVING

In the latter half of the 19th century, the West was embroiled in a conflict between modernity and tradition precipitated by industrialization and urbanization. These new developments challenged the status quo forged by centuries of persistence. Before trains, factories and market economies irreversibly transformed humanity into its modern inception, Europeans lived and socialized in the community format, proximate villages, where individuals governed themselves through tradition-honed standards, and interactions underscored by a sense of intimate interaction, mutual respect, warmth and kinship. But with the advent of industrial nations came massive urbanization, the proliferation of the free market, and the overall “massification” of the social landscape. The preexisting dominant sense of community was displaced in large part by society, or modern civilization. And with community went its best features, like altruism, social bonds based on love, and an overall sense of neighborliness. These beneficent tenets were replaced by self-interest, rationality, and transactional relationships. The impact was an aggregate degrading effect on the human condition. People found themselves in closer proximity to one another, but more alone and less supported than ever before. Rising to the occasion, governments became exponentially larger, bureaucratic monoliths, replacing traditions and customs with the faceless and impersonal rule of law in the best instances, and vast corruption and graft as the norm.

As the realities of modernity settled into dominance at an unprecedented rate they were accepted wholesale by a rising middle class, and new norms were defined as virtuosity by progress. But the forces of industrialization also fostered a new breed of social critic that stood in vehement opposition to the individualism and indulgence that their opponents were normalizing.
For these conscientious dissenters, religion became a crucial foundation of their counter proposition to the trends dominating society at the time. For them, religious norms were a dominant indicator of social justice, and a moral response or cure for the social dislocation that had, in their view, overtaken contemporary society.

Studying law in London from 1888-1891, Gandhi was exposed to the social tension brought on by mass culture and industrialization. So too was he made aware of the great theosophists—like Ruskin and Tolstoy, among others—who looked past the superficial values of modern society and perceived a devastating retreat from morality. As the son of a distinctively “bourgeois” Indian family, Gandhi was conditioned to observe Western civilization through the lens of its inherent superiority; but ironically, his experience as a student in the center of the industrial world incited ideas that he used to fortify his appraisal of Indian civilization.34

In the pages that follow, I explore some of the foreigners and their ideas that helped shape Gandhi’s discourse on the ashram. By demonstrating the weight they carried in his intellectual calculus, my hope is to strengthen the sense of the ashram as the product of both local and global thought.

Riches to Rags: Tolstoy’s Spiritual Transformation

Leo Tolstoy was a Russian novelist and one of the great theosophists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Best known for pioneering a unique brand of Christian asceticism, Tolstoy’s literature sparked a global discussion on renunciation, communalism, universal love and other spiritual themes, which peaked in London from 1890-1910. His ideas inspired other visionaries

to undertake various social experiments, particularly in communal living, but also diet, non-
possession, and spiritual exploration.\textsuperscript{35} Part of Tolstoy’s attraction was his sharp criticism of modernity, particularly in terms of materialism, the misgivings of organized religion, and his advocacy of non-violent civil disobedience against the injustice of the modern nation-state, which reinforced the degraded values adopted in society. His ideas form a critical link between Gandhi and the Zionists who conceptualized the Kibbutz, and are thus imperative to the present analysis of the global precedent in the case of the Gandhian ashram.

Tolstoy described his struggle with questions of religion as lifelong, but his ideas didn’t coalesce into the hardened philosophy that precipitated his international following until the mid-1870s, when a period of deep introspection about faith yielded a spiritual transformation. His parents were wealthy members of the Russian nobility (he is often referred to by his official name, “Count” Tolstoy) who raised him as an Orthodox Christian, but as a youth and adolescent, he was not a particularly spiritual individual. Before his transformative experience, he had committed many of the moral crimes he would later denounce:

Like most others he knew, he regarded those who publicly professed their faith as typically dully, self-important and worthy of mockery. Honesty, ability, good nature and good conduct were characteristics he associated with non-believers. He replaced religious belief with a belief in perfecting himself—morally, mentally, and physically—and with a need to become richer, more famous and more important than others. He killed men in war, gambled, lied and profited from the labor of others.\textsuperscript{36}

Like many of his contemporaries, Tolstoy was a critic of the same society that he had been indoctrinated in himself and knew well — indeed, he sat at the pinnacle of that social hierarchy.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 14.
Writing the final chapters of the novel widely considered his pièce de résistance, *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy found himself puzzled by the meaning of his life, and the materialistic benchmarks of success held up as the ideal by his aristocratic peers. He quickly realized the question was inescapable, and that it debilitated his demeanor by robbing him of his sense of self-worth and happiness. Frantic search yielded no obvious answer in the world he knew from birth. Neither philosophy nor science revealed a rational answer. Scanning the society he had known his entire life he could find no individual who could fulfill his need for a moral guide.\(^{37}\) Only when he looked outside the elitist bubble that had enclosed him did Tolstoy observe that the solution was the simplistic, impoverished lifestyle of the peasantry and the poor working class. He had been unable to find a rational answer because reason and rationality were incompatible with self-realization through religious faith. Reason suggested that the individual who is wealthy and materially secure would be happier than the peasant who struggles to feed his family, yet he had observed the opposite as truth first-hand. The accumulation of private property, fame, and merely going through the motions expected by organized religion that he had been taught to celebrate were not a means to achieving any sense of self-worth, but as a shallow and artificial end. On the other hand, the poor had little more than their faith and dedication to God, and despite their meager existence—toiling hours every day as a means of survival—they found a sense of meaning in a higher religious truth.\(^{38}\)

Armed with his new religious convictions, and a newfound confirmation that his wealth and luxurious lifestyle had only clouded his understanding of existential value, Tolstoy renounced his property and adopted an existence of non-possession in order to realize his

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\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 15
spiritual goals. In his writing, there is a clear sense of his disillusionment with his surroundings, and evidence that his thoughts were by and large the product of reaction to the world as he knew it:

Some guests assembled at a wealthy house one day happened to start a serious conversation about life. They spoke of people present and absent, but failed to find anyone who was satisfied with his life. Not only could no one boast of happiness, but not a single person considered that he was living as a Christian should do. All confessed that they were living worldly lives concerned only for themselves and their families, none of them thinking of their neighbors, still less of God.³⁹

A young man responds with an obvious question: if we all consider this way of life contrary to our beliefs, why aren’t we doing something about it? He finds the answer in renunciation:

I will renounce my property and go to the country and live among the poor. I will work with them, will learn to labor with my hands, and if my educations is of any use to the poor I will share it with them, not through institutions and books but directly by living with them in a brotherly way.⁴⁰

His father, with the silent acquiescence of many of the older generation in the room, refuted the youth’s ideas as “worthy … but thoughtless and ill-considered.” But one man seemed to agree with both: yes, the young man should know he is not infallible and that his decision must not be taken lightly; but, even as an experienced adult, he recognized the merits of finding happiness in a society that had long proselytized a synthetic version of it in material possession.

The man’s comments were met with a sharp rebuke from his wife: reminding him of his sins and adolescent indulgencies, she denounced his sudden radical revelation of religious austerity—and the implicit imposition of such a lifestyle on his family—as hypocrisy. The last

⁴⁰ Ibid.
paragraph of the short story ties all of these together, and comments on society’s apparent refusal to address what it knows is a gap in religious morality:

We all say that it would be good to live as God bids us and that we are living badly and suffer in body and soul, but as soon as it comes to practice it turns out that the children must not be upset and must be brought up not in godly fashion but in the old way. Young folk must not run counter to their parents’ will and must live not in godly fashion but in the old way. A married man must not upset his wife and children and must live not in a godly way but as of old. And there is no need for old men to begin anything: they are not accustomed to it and have only a couple of days left to live. So it seems that none of us may live rightly: we may only talk about it.\(^\text{41}\)

The undercurrent is clear: people know that their hollow values and material lifestyles are at odds with the life they want, yet they coldly turn against anyone who is courageous enough to confront the problem—and the obvious solution. Afraid of turning from their comfortable lives, people simply ignore the inconvenient truths that are placed before them, and knowing well that they have done so, make the decision that they are willing to continue their unhappy existence. Here, the religious reformer takes on a radical bent, but so too does society appear radically conservative in its unwillingness to accept what it knows is true.

The story paraphrased above is autobiographical. A major part of his disdain for modern civilization was the memory of his life as a youth, and the traditional, quasi–romantic lifestyle of the nobility his parents had espoused. Tolstoy’s bride, Sonia, was sixteen years his junior; but her high regard for the traditional family and domesticity, a value she shared with her husband, made her seem an ideal partner. Experience revealed this was one of the few issues on which the couple found common ground. Though his ideas hadn’t quite manifested themselves in the radical form they would take later on, Tolstoy had already begun to cultivate disdain for the

\(^{41}\) Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, 142.
debonair (but artificial) extravagance of the latter 19th Century Russian aristocracy. Sonia came from a family elite in its own right, but hers was the aristocracy of the urban metropolis: she “belonged to Moscow, to upper-class social life, and to the world of arts.”

After they married in 1862, Tolstoy whisked Sonia to the countryside, and for nearly two decades they lived at Yasnaya Polyana, the beloved estate he inherited from his parents. In the first two decades of marriage, Sonia was consumed by her maternal duties (she gave birth thirteen times, though not all made it to adulthood), but as their children grew up and Tolstoy increasingly pursued seditious and radical political activity, she could no longer quietly endure the separation she felt from the privileged society in which she belonged. In 1881—fearing any further embarrassment among her peers—Sonia vociferously demanded that the family abandon their isolation in the countryside and move to Moscow, “where the children could take part in the social life of their class.”

The children sided with their mother, embracing their new lifestyle and relishing their privileged position; but the move did nothing to reverse Tolstoy’s growing distaste for the luxuries of upper-class life; in fact, moving into the urban environment only hardened his resolve. Observing the masses from his lofty social position, he was acutely disturbed by the condition of the poor, who’s grim and desolate realities were so distant from those he had known his whole life. His interest in the poor became tantamount to obsession, and he attempted anything he could conceive would help him interact with these forgotten segments of society. Realizing that poverty kept the poor from education, he founded a publishing firm which printed and disseminated work that he had written or adapted from others, allowing them to learn of

43 Ibid., 172-173.
moral and religious values in terms they could understand.\textsuperscript{44} And wherever he went, he donned the basic costume of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{45} For the rest of his life, Tolstoy was committed to a radical critique of the religious and social values erased by the conquest of modernity.

Throughout the 1880s, Tolstoy published books on his newfound religious convictions, and began correspondence with foreigners who he had inspired to engage in a similar regimen of societal scrutiny. Once celebrated by his countrymen for his grand novels, however, his criticism of compulsory military service, Russian foreign policy, and other perceived immoralities of the modern state made sure the government banned his new work—which implicitly incited resistance to the status quo.\textsuperscript{46} The repercussions of association with such a radical reformist led his family, too, to take strong measures to tamp down his political activity.\textsuperscript{47} Sonia tried relentlessly to convince her husband of his “duty” to observe and practice the lifestyle expected of a man of his stature, but her efforts were in vain. Both he and his counterparts attempted to keep the family together, but their unshakeable preconditions counteracted one another: whereas Tolstoy saw the ideal family as one that lived simply and free of superfluous possession, Sonia and the children refused to renounce what they had. Abandoned and repulsed by his family’s pursuit of the valueless materialism of the elite, Tolstoy was forced either to capitulate or vacate his marriage. Given his druthers, Tolstoy would have, by all accounts, preferred the latter. But his longstanding regard for the sanctity of the family and domesticity, taken together with his wife’s threat of protest by suicide, precluded any such decision.

\textsuperscript{45} Green, \textit{Tolstoy as Believer}, 173.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
Tolstoy had become a prisoner, held against his will in the hollow framework characterized by the elite Muscovite aristocracy. His condition did not, however, challenge his steadfast commitment to social reform—his condition only hardened his anti-establishment angle. To his wife’s chagrin, he left behind the identity that won him domestic prestige—and with it much of his public profile in the eyes of his countrymen. He endured his captivity for over a decade, but when he observed the absolute lack of human sympathy on behalf of the moneyed elite toward the starving victims of an 1891 famine, the transformation became complete. In a decidedly permanent move, Tolstoy signed all rights to his estate and the copyrights on his renowned early novels over to his wife.  

*Christian Asceticism: A Spiritual Approach to Social Reform*

When Tolstoy set out to confront the flaws he perceived in modern society, he did so by inciting a religious discourse on the merits of asceticism and rejecting the artificial values of modernity as a prerequisite to finding happiness. Tolstoy was especially contemptuous toward the Russian Orthodox tradition—he was not a non-believer, but was at odds with the shortfalls of organized religion, which he thought only existed to affirm modernity. Among the established belief systems he found none that fulfilled his spiritual needs, and thus the compilation of his own religion, a sort of foundational spirituality, became a major part of his self-realization. What he found was, taken together, an amalgamation of religious observances of diverse origin centered on the concept of universal love and Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, but marked with important streaks of ideas adopted from outside his birth religion. In other words, Tolstoy’s

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religion, his own brand of “ascetic Christianity,” transcended national boundaries, which is interesting given the historical context. As the forces of modernity assailed the social status quo, they introduced the notion of otherness associated with nationalism. In turn, the majority of society bought in, and implicitly self-identified with the nation. That a religious discourse like Tolstoy’s, which had no obvious place for such divisions, arose out of the same conditions is the interest of this paper. What was so attractive about Tolstoy that thrust him into the central role his ideas played in the global reaction against modernity?

Eager to share his newly acquired religious convictions, for the three decades that spanned his transformative self-realization to his death, Tolstoy employed his literary magnificence exclusively to introduce them to the society he was committed to change. He abandoned the complex prose of his earlier novels like War and Peace and Anna Karenina, and wrote much shorter books and treatises on religion, as well as a number of letters from his correspondence with like-minded social critics. He lost interest in the prestige his countrymen—that is, the elite minority afforded the educational prerequisites to read—showered on those early masterpieces, and found a new audience. Precisely because he had this transformative realization of truth, he believed he had an obligation to present his findings to the rest of the Christian world. He placed the highest value on engagement with the poor, long kept in the dominion of the wealthy for want of education and access to channels of upward social and financial mobility. To address this problem, Tolstoy adopted a more simplified style, and drew on the history and traditions shared among Russians—which served dually to promote unity (by religious, not national identity).  

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49 Green, “Tolstoy as Believer,” 174.
Tolstoy’s attempt to inspire social change among his countrymen had marginal success: when it came time to report for their compulsory military service, many young men refused to report; urbanites moved to agricultural communes; even some priests were inspired to part ways with the Orthodox Church. His intended audience was the peasantry and lower working class. Tolstoy believed he had a duty to spread his truths to the illiterate poor so that they, too, could self-realize the condition of their society. His success in Russia was limited. Ever-covetous of their social reputation, Tolstoy’s family kept a tight grip on his short leash, refusing to allow their father to become the face of reform of the society that put them in a position of prestige.

This paper has been structured on the concept of a global discourse on communal living that was taking place especially in the two decades surrounding 1900. The writing of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and most importantly for this paper, John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy inspired readers to conduct their own social experiments, and what resulted was a multiethnic, global discussion with historic implications, and, perhaps reverberations impacting geopolitical and national political discourse to this day, especially in countries so fundamentally influenced by Gandhi and Nehru in their independence struggles. Geographically, this intellectual influence centered, perhaps ironically, in London, the center of the British Empire, the world’s most prolific colonizer. London was the center of the burgeoning globalized world, where intellectuals, businesspeople and others gathered and shared ideas. Tolstoy denied any international “Tolstoyan” movement was going on.\(^50\) This was somewhat false, but to see the entire intellectual framework around these reactions to the conditions of modernity as entirely

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\(^50\) Alston, *Tolstoy and his Disciples*, 87.
Tolstoy’s *influence* is flawed; instead, there were a number of people whose ideas aligned with one another. Reading their contemporaries often hardened their views on their own society—and this is exactly what happened to Gandhi.

In the late 1880s, a number of Brits began to experiment with communities—inspired by the works of Ruskin, Tolstoy and others who had written on the subject. They began as cooperative industries focused on socialist labor models, and quickly turned toward vegetarian diet experiments, subsidized communal living, and an economic model based on moral practices—a reaction to the rising industry and inequality that followed it. And from here, the heady milieu of ideas grew with periodicals devoted to vegetarianism, various societies who focused on different experiments in communal living, dietetics, and spiritual religious practices; all had the same ideas and social forces driving them, but the role of self-realization and the experimental approach was crucial. This allowed each to adapt to its immediate surroundings, and each individual group was pragmatic—addressing the most pressing needs of the time.

It goes without saying that these social scientists were not of the “dominant type,” and their presence was very much on the periphery of London. But that is not to say they were invisible, and their ideas were no doubt inspiration to some of the more successful utopian communes that arose in the 20th Century: The Gandhian Ashram and the Zionist Kibbutz.

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51 Ibid., 90-92
III. THE SOCIAL LABORATORY

In this section, I briefly lay out the development of the ashram as an intellectual construct. I explain his reasoning for choosing such an institution, its practices, and its pragmatism as an institution for projecting the image of the “moral village” onto the rest of India.

In London

When Gandhi set out for London, he had mixed support from his family. He was a young, aspiring lawyer who was very much interested in the Western style—he was, by no means, of the highest strata of Indian society, but unlike many of his poverty-stricken countrymen, he had the means to strive for a higher education. He remembered, however, the misgivings expressed by his family members, like his uncle, who warned him against falling into the trap of the English gentleman’s model (especially that of the lawyer), and likened his plans to study in England to an irreligious act. He explains the agitation of his caste members, but he was able to calm them with the explanation that he would observe Hindu piety with a number of vows. There was much economic opportunity and personal prestige in studying the law, which was enough to guide him away from his wife and young child and toward the homeland of India’s foreign rulers.52

Arriving in London, Gandhi realized that his was perhaps not going to be as glamorous a life as he may have expected. Room and board were expensive, and in a culture which ate meat as a dietary staple, he found it difficult even to find nourishment whilst observing his vow to

remain vegetarian. Shortly after arriving in England, he discovered that there was a vibrant vegetarian subculture, and he immediately became interested. The attractiveness was not only in abstaining from meat—as he had vowed—but also in the expense of eating any other diet, which he could scarcely afford. He also became increasingly aware of people writing on the ideas of simple living, which also were attractive for a man in his situation. He moved from single room to single room, looking for ever-cheaper rent, and in his shyness and scarce knowledge of English culture, began a period of self-realization and introspection brought on by his surroundings. The London years were a very formative time for Gandhi as an intellectual.

The vegetarians of London were active in producing periodicals that proselytized their ideas to outsiders, and Gandhi was quickly attracted to them. Their rationale for their diet was mixed, and followed “religious, scientific, practical and medical” discourses, as well as economic ones. He quickly joined the Vegetarian Society, and soon after that joined the executive committee. His writings show how quickly their effect took hold on him—he was quickly indoctrinated into the counter-cultural movement that had taken hold in the city. His first institution was a vegetarian club he founded in Bayswater, where he learned some organizational skills in his few months as its administrator. He wrote for vegetarian periodicals. And he learned the moral methods for forming a group cause—the ashram, whether he knew it or not, was beginning to take shape in his unconscious.

Moving constantly from place to place also gave Gandhi the chance to meet a diverse array of people, and from these he was further driven into his own religious beliefs. He joined the Theosophist society, and read the Bhagavad Gita for the first time two years into his journey

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53 Ibid., 67-69
54 Ibid., 72-74.
to London. He was then beseeched by a fellow boarder to read the bible, and he immediately fell in love with the Sermon on the Mount (the exact same aspect of the scripture that had transformed Tolstoy’s religious convictions).\textsuperscript{55} He was becoming more attuned with his own culture looking at it from the outside, in a new social scene, constantly inspired by like-minded people who also learned from him. And quickly, he found that the proper religiosity was pursued through the heart\textsuperscript{56} and by the observance of a simple life, which could not be reconciled with the conditions of modern civilization.\textsuperscript{57}

London was but the beginning of what would become a life-long journey towards religious purification and the search of truth that characterized the Gandhi remembered today. He had become aware of the philosophy of the counter-culture, and would continue his search for religious truth in South Africa, where he met some of his most influential friends, and began his own true experiments in the ashram as the home-base of the satyagrahi.

\textit{South Africa}

Gandhi’s experience in South Africa was his transformative period. I need not recount the exact moment—being thrown off the train for his refusal to vacate his first class seat for a white man; this was his religious awakening as well. The people he met were crucial. The ideas they shared from their own religious and philosophical libraries helped him harden his views into the social reformer he became.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 82-84.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 92.
One of Gandhi’s immediate observations was that the Indian expatriate community (a strong one—the British exported Indian labor into many areas of its empire, including Southeast Asia) was strongly divided among ethno-religious lines so strong that South Asian Muslims identified as Arabs, Parses as Persians, and Hindus, characteristically, did not identify much with their religion, but saw themselves apart from their brothers of other faiths.\(^b\) His first religious studies were in Christianity, taken under the Attorney A. W. Baker, who inspired him to take a dispassionate study of all religions.\(^59\) In Jesus, Gandhi found a sacrificial martyr and divine teacher, but not the “most perfect man ever born;”\(^60\) perfection, of course, was unattainable—the closest one could get is to devote themselves completely to the search for it, as Jesus had done.

Tolstoy entered Gandhi’s intellectual framework at this time. He read *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and was profoundly affected—it was the most profound treatise on “independent thinking, profound morality, [and] truthfulness” he had ever read. This led him to a more intensive study of Tolstoy, which was assisted by his friendships with Hermann Kallenbach and Henry Polak, two instrumental westerners who were with Gandhi at the beginning of his experiments in the ashram.

*The Ashram’s Development*

Gandhi’s first proto-commune, the Phoenix Settlement, was originally purposed for the writing of *Indian Opinion*, a periodical Gandhi and his fellow social reformists began publishing to express their misgivings with the status quo in South Africa. This first settlement was built in

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 127-128.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 142-45.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 164.
close conjunction with Henry Polak, an Englishman who Gandhi met in a vegetarian restaurant, and with whom he undertook a study of morality, through Tolstoy and other writers, but most importantly John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*. Ruskin’s preface to the book (which was actually a series of essays published in *Cornhill* magazine, compiled and published in 1862) tells the reader that his purpose is to define wealth (as he saw it in his own time) in what amounts to a moral critique of the “science” of modern economics.\(^{61}\) Essentially, he went against the grain of capitalism and the global economy by suggesting that all wealth should be amassed morally. He posited that wealth was a purely relative thing—a game of have’s and have not’s—which created fallacious hierarchies between laborer and employer, and immoral treatment by the latter on the former in the “mercantile” economy, which “signifies the accumulation, in the hands of individuals, of legal and moral claim upon, or power over, the labor of others; every such claim implying precisely as much poverty or debt on one side, as it implies riches or right on the other.”\(^{62}\) This commercial wealth, where people value themselves based on their monetary worth, instead of calculating their value in terms of service to society, is immoral, but is the direct consequence of accepting the modern state of life. Instead of working to advance himself, the worker should labor for the welfare of his entire nation or people; any other end is simply the lust for power over others.\(^{63}\)

Gandhi’s acceptance of Ruskin and Tolstoy’s concepts of the modern economy can be seen powerfully through the ashram vows, particularly those that deal with the idea of the village economy. The first is non-possession (poverty), which banned an inmate from any property

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\(^{62}\) Ibid., 42.

\(^{63}\) Ibid., 45.
beyond his most primary needs; this extended even to the body as a possession, and is as much a spiritual vow as it is a practice of a communal economy. The ashramites accepted that “civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants.”64 This is important to our understanding of Gandhi’s departure from the ancient ashram tradition. Instead of retracting into hermitage, the ashramites became renunciates in the world, because the ordinary person could only seek mental detachment as a means of perfection.65 And in this way, the ashram became a training ground for truth-seekers, satyagrahis, who would then share their ideas with the world around them.

Unsurprisingly, the vow immediately following non-possession is that of bread labor, which required each ashram inmate work to live. Gandhi cited Tolstoy as a major believer and influencer in this way, but the ideas he shared with Ruskin are also clear. This was the idea that God only gave so much each day that each man could have what he wanted to survive: to take anything more was to starve another (i.e., the relativity of wealth suggested by Unto This Last). This was crucial to the idea of seva, service, to which all satyagrahis devoted themselves.66

Gandhi’s ashrams also cultivated a culture of tolerance that manifested itself both in the vows “removal of untouchability” and “tolerance.” This is the key to Gandhi’s cosmopolitanism. Here, Gandhi’s argument is that no one belief set holds a monopoly on the truth; instead, each represents a personal decision on the methods for attaining truth.

Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one perfect Religion, but it becomes many, as it passes through the human medium … everybody is right from his own standpoint, but it is not impossible that

everybody is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean indifference towards one’s own faith, but a more intelligent and purer love for it.\textsuperscript{67} This is almost exactly Tolstoy’s point in \textit{Kingdom of God}, when he suggests that the truth is not mutually exclusive; but his is more a critique of organized religion.\textsuperscript{68} Gandhi instead accepts that each person has their own religion—whether Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, or other—but all seek the same purification by truth. That is to say, each can keep his distinctive religion, but all participate and learn from each other, and through this amalgam get closer to the truth, by accepting the best parts of each and forming them into a whole. But the two agreed that the coexistence of religions is positive in that they act as competitive beliefs, a “marketplace of ideas” that helps form a more pure pursuit of the truth.

Though brief, this section gives the reader a sense of Gandhi’s purposes and the intellectual calculus that were behind his ashram. His aim was, through vows, to inculcate in his followers a uniform set of beliefs that governed their conduct, and thus would be preached more widely to the society around them. The aim, like in Tolstoy and Ruskin, was to create a better society where people loved each other, and worked for each other’s benefit—a sharp turn from the mainstream capitalism that dominated their age, and created the exact opposite effect, an ever-growing crystallization of the richest strata of society at the expense of the poor. The ashram served a pragmatic cause: it was a part of the framework of ancient Hinduism (and of religious practice in general) that was held common in Indian civilization. It put all of his followers on the same level of the poor, who lived in similar villages, and strived to create a

\textsuperscript{67} Gandhi, \textit{From Yeravda Mandir}, 24-25.  
\textsuperscript{68} Leo Tolstoy, \textit{The Kingdom of God is Within You}, trans. by Constance Garnett (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984): 55-57.
more just existence for all based on service of truth. The ashram was Gandhi’s moral village, a small scale model of the ideal society he wished to see in Modern India; he could not accept another British government on the auspices of its administration by Indians: character-building was vital to nation-building, and if there was no justice, India had not satisfied its requisite duties to justice.

The Zionist Kibbutz: A Comparative Study

In the formative paces of my research, I was guided to the Kibbutz—the communes set up by Zionists that maintained their presence well after the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948 (and still exist today)—perhaps the most successful 20th Century utopian experiment, as a subject for comparison. Temporal constraints have limited my ability to comprehensively understand the aims that these communes hoped to achieve, and I have limited myself mostly to the intellectual framework behind the institution, which came directly from the founders of Zionism, who largely came out of the same London Gandhi did. What I have studied, however, has revealed a number of interesting similarities, particularly in the values, activities and aims of those who operated on the kibbutz, and their attempt to change society through it. But it has also occurred to me that the two are fundamentally different: while Gandhi’s ashram was essentially a base for a religious critique of the modern nation-state, the Kibbutz was far more secular. It was not the cosmopolitan truth-seeking institution of Gandhi, but rather an attempt to modernize Orthodox Judaism in the interests of creating a modern nation-state.69

I think this difference is shadowed, however, by the fact that each turned to communal living as a means to their desired end: to influence and change the rest of society. Like the Gandhian ashram (albeit without the central cosmopolitanism it espoused), the kibbutz was “open to all who were prepared to accept the principles of Zionism and adopt the Kibbutz way of life,” and aimed to engulf the entirety of the Zionist movement and guide it toward a socialist Jewish economy at the founding of the nation.\textsuperscript{70} From its outset, the Kibbutz was aimed at creating an exemplary society, by perfecting the economy and culture, and leading by example for the rest of the society to follow. They valued labor, the agricultural economy, equality, and responsibility to nation just as Gandhi did; and their aims were similar too: by indoctrinating their political and cultural views into their members, they trained them for future nation-building—which could take place only after the exemplary society was established.\textsuperscript{71} Importantly, the members of the kibbutz felt a great sense of moral superiority, as the ashramites would have; imbued with the values of love, physical labor of the land, they saw themselves as the leaders of a movement to create a just, modern existence for their planned state.\textsuperscript{72} Each individual member, while performing their service to society, was also engaged in finding the meaning of his existence “in the service of national revival;” by practicing self-discipline and observing the Kibbutz values, and rejecting his individual interests in service of the commune, a member was also on the path to self-realization.\textsuperscript{73} Here, the Kibbutz seems to mirror the ashram well.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 191-194.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 197.
\textsuperscript{73} Fishman, \textit{Judaism and Modernization}, 19.
But looked at from Gandhi’s perspective, the Kibbutz digressed into an institution that was far off from what he aimed to achieve in the ashram. As a nation-building exercise, its members were encouraged to engage in sexual activity (a nation needs citizens), and because it was under constant existential threat, the Kibbutz became an active player in the security of the modern Israeli state—obviating any nonviolent approach (which, of course, was a crucial underpinning of the Gandhian methodology). Of course, each commune was required to conform to its own pragmatic needs, and though the Kibbutz may depart from the ashram, it comes from, I believe, a similar intellectual milieu of ideas which centered geographically in London at the end of the 19th and beginning of the early 20th Century.
CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to explain how utopian communes—primarily the Gandhian ashram—were such an attractive antithesis to the problems each of their creators perceived in the social status quo around them. When Gandhi revisited the concept of ashram, he was drawing on an aspect of ancient Hindu civilization, a shared value that could be recognized by all, and in his format, removed all distinctions between members to create a thriving, cosmopolitan model of a moral village that he hoped would catch on with the rest of society. His rationale was solid: “politics, divorced of religion, has no meaning” is a quote which captures the religious critique of society well. Indians could not merely shirk British rule only to reestablish the same unjust methods of their imperial masters—it first had to undergo character building exercises to ensure that it was morally ready for independence. Every part of the ashram life: the vows, the village economy, service, nonviolence—were part of this moral purification. The Kibbutz in its conceptualization, and in early practice, did the exact same thing: its members cherished their sense of moral superiority, and hoped their piety would be projected on the rest of society around them.

The success of the Gandhian ashram was impressive in its political impact during his life and its continuing influence. This scale of historical relevance could only be achieved by a leader with the charismatic and universal spiritual truth that Gandhi embodied. His ashram was his manifestation of the philosophy he constructed with inputs from his key influencers such as Kallenbach and Tolstoy, but these ideas were fired in the kiln of his time – the fear of encroaching modernity, dislocation of humanity found in industrialization and urbanization, and the moral corruptness of colonialism. His methods were often painfully opposed to political
expediency, a hard truth to swallow for many of the nationalists who were active in building the independent Indian state. And indeed, after his assassination, these people returned to the spotlight—the result was the partitioning of India—an act that opposed all that Gandhi worked for as a visionary social leader. Even if his was not the “path of least resistance” (indeed, it was perhaps the opposite), Gandhi’s intellectual rationale was a noble one, and was in its purest sense a nation-building exercise that, unlike the rest of society, observed moral truths as the paramount value of all human life.

The ashram also was a pragmatic approach: in it, Gandhi found a place where he could recreate India’s most pressing human needs and show to the rest of the country that his model of justice could be recreated, and that its end benefitted all of society. His reactions were very much a critique of modernity, and though Tolstoy and Ruskin and other western friends were influential, I have tried to prove here that their ideas were organic, and merely confirmed what Gandhi the social reformer saw as the right path to reforming his country and creating a haven of morality among the seemingly unstoppable forces of modernity.

This paper reveals the core spiritual foundation of Gandhi’s influence, not only on emerging nationalism in the developed world, but political trends and themes that appear to be eminently relevant today. The Gandhian ashram, his moral village, provided a foundation for understanding some existential truths of humanity that have had a strong influence on political development and the history of great nations. The themes discussed in this paper could be a historical framework for understanding the social trends not just of modern India, but across a number of developing nations, particularly in Asia.
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