

# Self-Rule and the Problem of Peoplehood in Colonial India

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**T**his article theorizes the colonial problem of peoplehood that Indian anticolonial thinkers grappled with in their attempts to conceptualize self-rule, or *swaraj*. British colonial rule drew its legitimacy from a developmentalist conception of the colonized people as backward and disunited. The discourse of “underdeveloped” colonial peoplehood rendered the Indian people “unfit” for self-government, suspending their sovereignty to an indefinite future. The concept of *swaraj* would be born with the rejection of deferred colonial self-government. Yet the persistence of the developmentalist figuration of the people generated a crisis of sovereign authorization. The pre-Gandhian *swaraj* theorists would be faced with the not-yet claimable figure of the people at the very moment of disavowing the British claim to rule. Recovering this underappreciated pre-Gandhian history of the concept of *swaraj* and reinterpreting its Gandhian moment, this article offers a new reading of Gandhi’s theory of moral self-rule. In so doing, it demonstrates how the history of *swaraj* helps trace the colonial career of popular sovereignty.


## INTRODUCTION

In his presidential speech at the Calcutta Congress Session of 1906, Dadabhai Naoroji—at the twilight of a half-a-century-long political career—deployed the word “*swaraj*” in passing to describe the demand for immediate self-government: “We do not ask any favors... Instead of going into any further divisions or details of our rights as British citizens, the whole matter can be comprised in one word—“self-government” or *swaraj* like that of the United Kingdom or the Colonies” (1917 [1906], 73). The “Grand Old Man of India” Naoroji, delivered the speech at the height of the *Swadeshi* movement, an event that inaugurated the era of mass protests and raised new questions about the terms of anticolonial politics in colonial India. For much of the speech, Naoroji painstakingly elaborated on the institutional nature of his rather minimalistic, and already familiar, account of Indian self-government. Still, his public disavowal of the temporal order of anticolonial politics (what he characterized as the necessity to wait “till all the people [were] ready” for self-government) sent seismic waves through the bustling political scene of colonial India (Naoroji 1917 [1906], 79). An intense interpretative debate soon broke out over the meaning and political implications of the “dubious word” *swaraj* (Mazumdar 1915, 89), ultimately leading to the splitting of the Congress in 1907.

In rejecting the deferral of self-government, Indian anticolonial thinkers found themselves faced with the prior question regarding the “*swa*” (self) of *swaraj*: the

figure of the colonized people. Since the nineteenth century, the justification of British rule over India had been predicated on a discourse of “underdeveloped” colonial peoplehood. As has been widely noted, the self-understanding and justification of colonialism were marked by an overarching discourse of development in nineteenth-century political thought (Anghie 2004; Chakrabarty 2000; McCarthy 2009; Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005). Colonialism rooted its legitimation in constructing India as a “living museum of the European past” and rendered the future a foreknown reality in the image of Europe, a temporal structure imbricated in a hierarchy of the advanced metropolitan and backward colonial times (Cohn 1996, 78). The idea that native societies are backward in time and must be developed under the tutelage of the colonial state before the institution of self-government, defined the institutional and ideological career of British rule in nineteenth-century India (Stokes 1959, 25–47; Metcalf 1995, 66–113; Guha 1997, 30–3). As we shall see, the figure of the colonized people came to descriptively embody the historical backwardness ascribed to the colonies. Normatively, the perceived inadequacy of colonial peoplehood helped legitimate the suspension of Indian sovereignty. By the mid-nineteenth century, the promise of transforming the colonial masses into the people emerged as the main British claim to legitimacy in India. The concept of *swaraj* would, thus, quickly become absorbed in questions of foundational political-theoretic import: what constituted the peoplehood of the colonized and what would their *own* rule mean? It is against this backdrop that a group of anticolonial political thinkers—Dadabhai Naoroji, Bipin Chandra Pal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and M.K. Gandhi, among others—would strive to theorize self-rule for India amid the developmental deferral of colonial peoplehood.

This article serves two purposes. The first, and more general aim of this article is to theoretically examine the problem of peoplehood under colonialism. Engaging with an underappreciated body of pre-Gandhian political thought, the first section traces how early *swaraj* theorists struggled to posit a sovereign people that could authorize the founding of self-rule. Insofar as the people were taken to be the object of development and, thus,

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were yet to become *the* people, they could not simultaneously be summoned as the authorizing power underlying the claim to self-rule. Conversely, the act of appealing to empire for self-rule immediately undermined the very abstraction of sovereign peoplehood that was posited as the ultimate goal. Reckoning with the conflicted history of modern popular sovereignty, democratic theorists have stressed the point that the problem of authorization is ultimately rooted in the essential contestability of the concept of the people (Frank 2010, 4–39; Bernal 2017, 5–15; see also Derrida 1986). As Jason Frank argues, claims to speak in the name of the people—whether by underauthorized groups or by instituted authorities—are always marked by “never fully realized reference to the sovereign people” (2010, 3). The project of anticolonial founding, too, grappled with a dilemma of authorization; the colonial dilemma followed not so much from the contesting claims of being authorized by the people, but rather from the paradigmatic presupposition that the people—because of their developmental lack—had not yet become *claimable*. What Naoroji’s declaration of Indian self-government immediately disclosed is a distinctly colonial predicament: a government of Indians that could not be authorized in the name of the people themselves. Registering the split between Indian government and British sovereignty, Naoroji conceded that leaving sovereign authority vested in the British people was a necessary condition for attaining self-government. On the other hand, as Tilak and Pal illustrate, the turn to the “underdeveloped”—and unclaimable—figure of the people unwittingly reinforced a further deferral of the arrival of self-rule proper. This is precisely the paradox that would shape the struggle to found swaraj. Instead of approaching anticolonial founding as a search for unity on pre- or extra-colonial grounds such as land, religion, and culture (Kohn and McBride 2011, 3–13), I, thus, locate the problem squarely in the dilemmas intrinsic to the developmentalist figuration of colonial peoplehood.

The concept of swaraj is now most famously associated with M.K. Gandhi who led the Indian anticolonial movement in its name and whose influential text *Hind Swaraj* bears the term in its title. This Gandhian account of swaraj is generally contrasted with the instrumentalist approach of his predecessors in the anticolonial movement (Dallmayr 2000, 105; Iyer 1973, 347; Parel 1997, xxx). However, such a framing of Gandhi’s concept of swaraj both obscures the central theoretical tension that constituted its pre-Gandhian career and elides the theoretical innovation underlying Gandhi’s reinvention of the concept. Recovering his disputes with the developmental—as well as instrumental—visions of self-rule in *Hind Swaraj*, this article offers a reinterpretation of the political import of Gandhi’s ethical turn to the self. Gandhi’s theory of action has been interpreted as an “escape” from or “an indifference” to politics (Chatterjee 1986, 110; Mehta 2010, 371; Parekh 1989, 203–5). Though it is evident that Gandhi largely avoided the institutional terms of modern politics, I suggest that his rejection of the developmental ideals of collective peoplehood—political fitness and unity, in

particular—offered an innovative answer to the crisis of popular authorization that plagued early twentieth-century colonial Indian politics. The Gandhian recasting of the concept of swaraj displaced the mantle of authorization from the collective to the self, emphasizing the immediate possibility of self-rule if anticolonial actors took their own moral authority as the source of political action. Even Gandhi’s most sustained attempt at articulating an alternative vision of self-ruling community—i.e., the village republic—was driven by self-conscious efforts to eschew collective authority. Gandhi instead turned to the cooperative power generated from individual self-sacrifice to ground an alternative collectivity. Gandhi’s repudiation of the co-constituted ideals of development and peoplehood helped anticolonial politics break free of the crisis encountered by early swaraj theorists, yet the same principle would also resist institutional consolidation of the Gandhian vision of swaraj. Read in the context of his predecessors’ struggle to authorize swaraj in the name of the people, Gandhi’s moral theory of self-rule emerges as an attempt to displace, if not to resolve, the terms of the colonial problem of peoplehood.

## DEVELOPMENTALISM AND THE COLONIAL PARADOX OF PEOPLEHOOD

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Indian political thinkers organized around the newly founded Indian National Congress began to self-consciously ground their political project around the problem of peoplehood. This entity called the people—Bipin Chandra Pal argued in 1887—was a new political concept for India: “The glorious annals of the Hindoo and Mahomedan periods of Indian history have recorded the achievements of priests and princes, of skillful generals and wise statesmen... but the name of the *people* is nowhere to be found in them. It is the British Government who are calling the *Indian people* into existence. It is they who are breathing life and energy into the inert masses of the country” (original emphasis). What makes the masses a people is their participation in popular government, the idea that “every person should... be entitled to have a voice in the management of his country” (1887, 7). But masses, Pal averred, would not transform into the people instantly, necessitating long tutelage under imperial rule. Paradoxically then, Pal claimed it was his desire for democracy that made him loyal to the British Empire.

This argument was not unique to Pal. As Naoroji noted in 1867, the long experience of “despotic” rule had left India a “degraded nation”: the “mass of the people,” lacking the “political aid which is so vital to the growth and welfare of any nation,” were in a static state (1887 [1867], 26). Insofar as the lack of Indian peoplehood was a result of the long history of subjection, Naoroji argued, its resolution too should take place slowly, through a process of gradual reform. The lack of unity among the Indian masses—i.e., the absence of a determinate boundary of Indian peoplehood—was also signified as a developmental problem. Addressing

this point, Surendranath Banerjea claimed that the mission of British rule in India is to “save, regenerate, emancipate from the chains of ignorance, error, and superstition... 150 million of human beings... to reconcile the jarring conflicts of diverse Indian nationalities, to bring them together... into a compact and homogeneous mass” (Banerjea 1970 [1878], 36–7). Thus, to avoid the “disastrous consequence” of the French Revolution where self-government was “given” all at once to the French people, Pal concluded, Indians must let themselves be “grown” before taking the mantle of self-rule (Pal 1954a [1889], 14, 19).

Indeed, the characterization of Indian peoplehood as underdeveloped—socioeconomically as well as moral-politically—was commonplace among pre-Gandhian thinkers across the political spectrum. In colonial India, the socioeconomic lack attributed to the people—the “sociological” image of the people—directly undermined the figure of the people as a “political abstraction” (on the two images of the people, see Rosanvallon 2006, 79–97; Wolin 1981). If, in the modern Western history of popular sovereignty, sociological deprivation and historical subjection of the people bolstered the argument concerning their unrealized sovereignty (for a classic statement, see Sieyès 2003, 94–144; also, Arendt 1963, 53–110), these same phenomena would be deployed to disqualify the sovereign claim of the people in the colonial context. Throughout the nineteenth century, representations of mass underdevelopment pervaded colonial Indian political thought: expressions such as “the starving millions” or “ignorant” masses bled into the characterization of the colonized people as politically unfit. As a result, the identifiable markers of popular sovereignty—the people as the ultimate authority, the source of law, the unified will and so on—are relatively absent in the archive of nineteenth-century Indian political thought. The Congress’ demand for limited participation in the colonial government self-consciously avoided any invocation of popular authority, emphasizing instead on the developmental benefits of integrating the “advanced” sections of the Indian society in the administration. When Surendranath Banerjea declared in his presidential speech at the 1895 Congress Session that “[no] responsible Congressman had ever asked for representative institutions... for the masses of our people,” he was articulating a position largely taken for granted by Indian political thinkers of the age (Banerjea 1917 [1895], 12–3).

This signification of colonial peoplehood as the bearer of historical backwardness and the normative marker of the incapacity for sovereignty shared much with liberal-imperialist political thought. Although the British justifications of colonial rule began to be centered around the question of civilizational backwardness at least since James Mill, the liberal imperialists of the next generation—most notably, T.B. Macaulay and John Stuart Mill—specifically put forward the cultivation of a capacity for self-government among the colonized people as the telos of imperial rule (see especially Macaulay 1970 [1833]). The positing of native

self-government as the end of colonial rule meant that the category of the people came to be at the heart of the developmental discourse. As J.S. Mill argued in *Considerations on Representative Government*, the “social conditions” pertaining to the state of civilizational “advancement” reflect on the people as a collective entity (1977b, 413–21). The specific location of a people in the scale of civilizational progress relates directly to their political “will” and “capacity”. For a people to be able to will self-government, it must first learn to appreciate its value through certain external—unwilled—means. The question of “capacity” too is inseparable from a people’s “stage of civilization.” For Mill, the capacity for representative government is unlikely to be present in the “savage” stage of civilization where struggle with nature and neighbors is the main preoccupation (1977b, 415). Furthermore, the political cohesion and sense of belonging among a people (“a multitude of insignificant political units... welded into a people”) emerge properly only after a people have traveled through the “necessary stage of improvement” (1977b, 417–18; on this point, see Mehta 2012). In other words, the political qualities that constitute the people—will, capacity, belonging, obedience, participation, etc.—are ultimately rooted in their state of civilizational advancement.

For Mill, as for other liberal-imperialists of the time, the backward, not-yet, people require an external intervention to evolve into the people. The rule of an “advanced” British administration over the historically backward colonies was claimed to be generative of the capacity for self-government. Although Mill occasionally showed willingness to analytically separate the question of civilization from the capacity for self-government (see, for example, 1977b, 413), he continued to prioritize the former over the latter with regard to the colonies (see Pitts 2005, 133–62). While speaking of white colonies, Mill questioned whether “social” progress necessarily generates moral improvement (Bell 2010). However, for the colonies “at a great distance [such as India]” from the civilizational state befitting representative government, Mill maintained that they would first need to be rendered “capable of a higher civilization” (1977b, 562–7). Mill’s understanding of the term civilization, as he clarified in an earlier work, comprised both “property” and “power and acquirements of mind” (1977a, 121). Collapsing the “moral” and “material” forms of development into the overarching category of civilization, Mill found the advancement of the “general degree” of civilization in India to be the necessary precondition for self-government.

Indian political thinkers of the period questioned the civilizational language of their metropolitan counterparts, although the underlying framework of development would remain unchallenged. With the turn to indirect rule in the late 1850s, the liberal justification of imperial rule began to wane, casting new doubts on the universalist project of development that marked the first half of the century (Mantena 2010, 1–16). However, as liberal imperialism was rapidly declining in the metropolis, the generation of political thinkers who would go on to found the Indian National Congress gave a new



(and modified) Indian life to its signature characteristic: the discourse of progressive development (Mantena 2016, 304–5). In the final three decades of the nineteenth century, the growth of interest in the “riches of ancient Hindu civilization” (Koditschek 2011, 297) was accompanied by an attempt by Indian thinkers to articulate a noncivilizational explanation of India’s backwardness. As Naoroji argued, if modern Europeans are developmentally advanced, it is because of their political history, material progress, and advancement in the physical sciences. Europe’s progress over all those domains is the product of contingent and fortuitous reasons, not essentially related to its civilizational qualities (see Naoroji 1887 [1866], 1–25). Naoroji and his Congress colleagues also emphasized the interdependence between the moral and materials aspects of development, albeit with a different aim in mind. Foregrounding the economic exploitation of British rule (on this point, see Chandra 1966), Naoroji contended that the necessary byproduct of the “drain of wealth” is a “moral drain” of the people (Naoroji 1901 [1880], 56–8; see also Banerjee 2010, 42). The exclusion of Indians from economic and administrative aspects of the colonial state impeded the process of moral growth and even caused a “moral loss” among the people. Naoroji warned that the simultaneous “material” and “moral” impoverishment of the people would ultimately make it difficult for them to recognize the promise of development embodied in the imperial project (see also Dutt 1901). In the same vein, the political demands that the Congress put forward were generally articulated in developmentalist terms, often stressing how the integration of Indians in the administration could advance the material and moral development of the backward masses. If the will and efficiency of the colonial administration were widely questioned, the developmentalist premise itself was not. The invocation of the imperial promise of development to ground the demand for Indian participation in the administration marked the political program of the Indian National Congress in the late nineteenth century.

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The politics of deferral encountered a powerful political challenge in the Swadeshi movement in 1905. Triggered by the partition of Bengal into two separate administrative units, the Swadeshi movement mobilized urban masses in major colonial provinces such as Bengal and Bombay, foregrounding the principles of the economic boycott of British goods and the attendant development of indigenous industries and institutions (Sarkar 2010; Goswami 2004, 242–85). The newfound political agency of the masses emboldened the critics of imperial sovereignty who began to characterize the Congress’ invocations of imperial norms as a form of self-deprecating “mendicancy” (Ghose 2002 [1906], 173–5).<sup>1</sup> Amid the unfolding political unrest, the

<sup>1</sup> There were only a handful of open-air public meetings in Kolkata, the capital of British India, in the nineteenth century (Sarkar 2010, 216). The practice of public protests would dramatically proliferate with the rise of the mass anticolonial movement in the early twentieth century, beginning with the Swadeshi movement.

“Grand Old Man of India” was summoned from virtual retirement to preside over the yearly session of the Congress after the moderate and extremist wings of the platform failed to agree on other options (Ghose 2002 [1906], 150). To the surprise of his younger colleagues, Naoroji would explicitly distance himself from the politics of deferral associated with nineteenth-century Indian “liberal” thinkers.

The critical element in Naoroji’s presidential speech resided in two aspects. First, the imperial discourse of gradual progression to self-government—a discourse that Naoroji once accepted more faithfully—was emphatically rejected: “It is futile to tell me that we must wait till all the people are ready. The British people did not so wait for their parliament. We are not allowed to be fit for 150 years. We can never be fit till we actually undertake the work and the responsibility” (Naoroji 1917 [1906], 79). The time of self-government, therefore, could no longer be suspended. A people, Naoroji argued, become ready for self-government by way of practicing it. The second decisive element in Naoroji’s speech was the establishment of a mutual reinforcement between self-government and the development of the people. The author of *Poverty and the Un-British Rule* responded positively to Swadeshi demands by linking up the lack of economic development in India with the absence of self-government: “Once self-government is attained, then will there be prosperity enough for all, but not till then” (93). Naoroji concluded his speech with a passionate plea reiterating the developmental urgency of self-government: Indians must achieve the right of self-government to save the “millions now perishing by poverty, famine, and plague, and the scores of millions that are starving on scanty subsistence” (96).

The speech itself registered an unsustainable dual commitment. Whereas the demand of self-government was untethered from an indefinite preparatory phase, the political strategy he defended reaffirmed the importance of appealing to imperial authority and the British people. Echoing the project of “Greater Britain” (1917 [1886], 201; see Bell 2007), he argued that by birth, Indians should be considered British citizens, and therefore, they also should enjoy the right to self-government like other colonies of the empire. Naoroji backed up this claim by meticulously reproducing the pledges of future self-government made by the Queen and colonial administrators. The first half of the speech, reproducing the summaries of his political and scholarly work over the previous few decades, elaborated an interpretation of imperial sovereignty that stressed the fairness and justness of the British imperial norms. The much-derided “mendicant” method of politics was duly defended as an important strategy to convince the British of the justness of Indian demands: “I am not ashamed of being a mendicant... I appeal to the Indian people for this [political union], because it is in their own hands... just as I appeal to the British people for things that are entirely in their hands” (92). It was up to Indians to overcome their differences, to peacefully agitate, and to raise funds for the political agenda. The sovereign authority nonetheless remained in the hands of the British people, and there was no alternative to convince

them of the rightness of Indian demands. Naoroji's demand of immediate self-government consciously steered clear of invoking the sovereign authority of the Indian people. Just as parliamentary government existed in England before the voting rights of the masses, "a good beginning" could be made without waiting for the full development of the Indian people (78). In other words, Naoroji's figuration of the people as a developmentally incomplete entity enabled the demand for Indian self-government, while simultaneously affirming the positing of sovereignty in the British.

Naoroji has lately been identified as an exemplary nineteenth-century Indian "liberal" thinker for his commitment to the norms of representation and citizenship (see Bayly 2012; Visana 2016), but his account of swaraj brings forth the tension at the heart of colonial liberalism. Unlike nineteenth-century metropolitan liberals, such as J.S. Mill, Naoroji was left with a problem unique to colonial "liberals": reconciling foreign sovereignty with local self-government.<sup>2</sup> As we have seen, Naoroji's conception of imperial sovereignty was not just marked by an abstract notion of imperial sovereignty. He specifically invoked the sovereign authority of the "superior" British people while seeking to authorize the demands of Indian self-government (see also Naoroji 1901 [1880], 219). Against Mill's suggestion (1977b, 562–78), Naoroji defended direct appeal to the English people—and just not the colonial administration—for grounding the legitimacy of Indian political demands. As a result, Naoroji's call for swaraj essentially amounted to a proposal for splitting the question of (British) sovereignty from that of (Indian) self-government.

The immediate reception of Naoroji's speech reflected this tension over self-government without sovereignty. Moderates and extremists alike initially welcomed the invocation of swaraj. The Calcutta-based weekly *The Bengalee*, edited by Surendranath Banerjea, lauded Naoroji's deployment of the term, saying that it has a "fullness of meaning, a reality about it, which is denied to words drawn from an alien language" (quoted in IS 3.3, 11).<sup>3</sup> At the opposite (so-called extremist) end of the spectrum of Congress politics, Aurobindo Ghose's *Bande Mataram*, despite its persistent criticism of Naoroji's moderate politics, called his turn to swaraj the product of "an inspired moment" (Ghose 2002 [1906], 208). Moderates within the Congress, such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale, found common ground with specific strategies such as the Indianization of the civil services. But Naoroji's suspension of gradualist reformism caught them by surprise. They soon began to push back against the extremist characterization of Naoroji's speech as a resolution for swaraj. Endorsing gradual reformism, Gokhale interpreted

Naoroji's declaration of "self-government as in the colonies" as a mere preamble to his concrete institutional demands such as the Indianization of the civil services (quoted in Mazumdar 1915, 355). The moderates found no merit in the arguments for immediate self-government owing to the practical political problems that an "underdeveloped" Indian people would encounter were it given the right to form its own government.

For the "extremists," the "politics of petition" endorsed by Naoroji was no match for the urgency he freshly attributed to the demand for swaraj. Although "extremist" political thinkers, such as Bipin Chandra Pal (who disavowed his earlier proimperial politics and reinvented himself as a leading voice of the extremist faction) and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, would eventually—and without qualification—identify Naoroji as the originator of the "political idea" of swaraj, their initial reaction was rather mixed. Speaking a few days after the conclusion of the Calcutta Congress Session, Tilak offered an immediate appraisal of Naoroji's presidential speech. After spending a quarter century "trying to convince the English people of the injustice that is being done to us," Naoroji's retraction exemplifies the end of the mode of politics that appealed to the "benevolence" and moral norms of the British (Tilak 1922 [1907], 57). Naoroji's account of swaraj, therefore, was incomplete, and his reliance on pledged rights and on the Queen's proclamation politically naïve and unhelpful to the cause of swaraj (Tilak 1922 [1907], 61–3). The critical ire of the extremist group was directed primarily at the faith in imperial sovereignty, especially questioning the assumption that the British would provide meaningful rights and opportunities of self-rule (see Ghose 2002 [1906], 139).

Following from this debate, one of the earliest and most influential elaborations of the swaraj concept was offered by Bipin Chandra Pal. Subjecting Naoroji's speech to close reading, Pal found irresolvable ambiguity in the former's statement that Indians want "self-government, as in the United Kingdom or the Colonies, i.e., Swaraj." Swaraj in the fashion of the United Kingdom would mean complete independence, including the rights of self-legislation and autonomy over foreign relations. If conceived in the form of the white British colonies, i.e., Australia and Canada, the extent of swaraj would be limited but still quite meaningful. The racism underlying British imperialism, Pal argued, would make a political arrangement in the form of Canada or Australia impossible (Pal 1954b [1907], 150–4). The major "revelation" of swaraj was instead that "there is a natural, a fundamental conflict between the self and the not-self in the political affairs of the country" (Pal 1954b [1907], 193). The trouble with imperial sovereignty lay precisely in its obfuscation of the self-other distinction. As long as the imperial sovereign was taken as the source of "wealth," "honor," and "strength" Indians would fail to cultivate an autonomous sense of the self (Pal 1954b [1906], 69–70). Nevertheless, Pal's critique of the prevailing understanding of swaraj as self-government within empire did not amount to an outright call for independence.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Mill was critical of the prospect of a shared and united political sovereignty for Britain and its distant colonies, because the latter are "separated by half the globe" and lack a common "public" (1977b, 564; see also Bell 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *The Indian Sociologist* ed. Shyamji Krishnavarma (1905–14; 1920–22), abbreviated as IS and cited by volume, issue, and page numbers.

Pal's account of swaraj was rather suggestive of what the historian Sumit Sarkar termed as "constructive Swadeshi"—an approach marked by its emphasis on self-development as opposed to the reliance on British help (2010, 39–53). The intellectual, physical, and economic "degenerations" of Indians under colonial rule had made self-rule in the form of an independent state an unfeasible immediate goal. The historical lack of nationhood in India would further make it difficult to sustain a sovereign polity (on this point, see Pal 1964, 212–33). To be fit for swaraj, Indians must first register organic growth and internal development (Pal 1954b [1907], 198). Although Pal polemically characterized "underdevelopment" as "degradation," the larger problem of deferral remained unresolved.

Pal specified two forms of "training" essential for the development process. "Subjective training" would consist in directing the sources of honor and strength to the self, while cultivating an aversion to all that emanates from the empire. In contrast, "objective training" would be based on the founding of "civic organization" outside of the machinery of the colonial government. These self-governing institutions would work as a "school of civic duties for the people" (Pal 1954b [1907], 217). In the period of training, the "longing for emancipation"—as manifested in calls for complete severance of the British connection—would play a heuristic role: it would remind Indians of "the existence of bondage and a keen sense of it" (Pal 1954b [1906], 64). Interestingly, this commitment to the primacy of organic growth of the Indian people—as I noted earlier—had helped Pal support his defense of colonial government in the 1880s. After his turnaround, the possibility of organic growth, now dissociated from the empire, was linked inextricably to the practices of self-rule outside of the colonial state. In any case, Pal's account of self-rule—out of its simultaneous aversion to imperial sovereignty and acceptance of the underdevelopment ("degeneration") of the people—ended up reinstating a politics of deferral. Before the full formation of the sovereign people, swaraj would mean extracolonial political training, aiming to generate peoplehood without relying on British help.

Unlike Pal, Bal Gangadhar Tilak refused to fully externalize the pursuit of swaraj from the colonial state. If the "old party" sought to achieve self-government through petitioning and appealing to the English people, the "new party," Tilak asserted, would do it through boycott (1922 [1907], 61–5). Through the democratic pressure of boycott, Indians who worked as "useful lubricants" in the operation of the bureaucratic machinery should try to take control of the government itself: "I want to have the key of my house and not merely one stranger turned out of it. Self-government is our goal; we want a [sic] control over our administrative machinery" (ibid., 64). This otherwise instrumental account of self-rule was undergirded by a rejection of the notion that development is a politically neutral issue. The objects of development—education, for example—were not a neutral enterprise that could be separated from the identity of rulers. Because of the fundamental conflict

of interest between India and its colonial rulers, the kind of education required to develop Indians as "good citizens" and to facilitate "scientific" and "industrial" development could never be imparted by the latter (1922 [1908], 82–3.). That the state of the Indian people needed to be developed was central to Tilak's argument, but the nature of that development could no longer be an objective question of good government. The promise of the British rulers to extend the right of self-government once "the people" overcame their "social inferiority" previously legitimated imperial rule (1922 [1906], 43). Therefore, Tilak argued, the failure of the British to advance Indian development, despite a century and half long period of rule, should invalidate the deferral of self-government on the same ground.

Having simultaneously defined swaraj as the Indian control of the government and rejected the sovereign authority of the empire, Tilak encountered a dilemma. Much like Pal, Tilak's argument for self-rule retained the primacy of developmentalism, offering no immediate alternative to imperial sovereignty. At the same time, Tilak's preference for boycott as a way of forcing the British to accede to the demand of self-rule meant that the appeal to the norms of imperial sovereignty was firmly rejected. He attempted to resolve the dilemma explicitly at the level of political sovereignty, although it would prove to be a rather difficult endeavor. Singling out contemporary efforts to characterize colonial rule as a form of contract, Tilak argued that the sovereignty of the emperor was not discernible through the framework of the social contract because "the word 'contract' cannot be made applicable to relations existing [between] unequals". The "English idea" of sovereignty understood popular agitation as an attempt to "enforce the terms of... an agreement." The "Eastern idea," in contrast, took both the king and the subjects as part of "the Godhead." If the king strays from the principles of justice, the subjects have a duty to "control the power of the king" (1922 [1907], 74.). The abuse of the divine power given to the king transforms him into an evil force, legitimating his replacement with a "new deity." Tilak, however, did not elaborate on the "new deity," required for the age of swaraj. Rendering both the people and the king as part of the godhead, Tilak, at that point, worked around, instead of directly addressing, the dilemma.

On his return from exile, almost a decade later, Tilak attempted another, less ambitious, response to this problem. He suggested an analytical distinction between "invisible" and "visible" government to better define the elusive concept of swaraj. The emperor pertained to the invisible government, a political entity separated from the problems of administration and management. The advisory role of the invisible sovereign is needed because "what [Indians] have to do [they] must do with the help of some one or another, since [they] are in such a helpless condition" (1922 [1916], 108). It is the absence of the people's full self-dependence that necessitated the guidance of the British sovereign. The question of swaraj, in contrast, pertained to the visible government. Although the invisible government could work as a trustee of the



“house,” the people who lived there must control its administrative aspects. Pushing the question of sovereignty into the invisible realm, Tilak elaborated on the house metaphor:

Whatever you have to do, whatever you want—if you want to dig a well in your house—you have to petition to the Collector... When a boy is young he knows nothing. When he grows up he begins to know and then begins to think it would be very good if the management of the household was carried on at least to some extent according to his opinion. Just so it is with a nation... Let us give up the thought about invisible government, let us come within the limits of the visible government... This is the principle of *swarajya* (113–4).

Much like Naoroji, Tilak, in his second attempt at defining *swaraj*, sought to analytically separate the concept from sovereignty, circumscribing it to the realm of government. Nevertheless, given his non-neutral understanding of development, the claim of self-government acquired a deeper, noninstrumental, significance. For Tilak, the Indian people were ready to run their own government with the “aid” and “help” of the “invisible” English sovereign. *Swaraj*, thus, would not immediately mean a replacement of the “sovereign authority” of the British, which is at the “root” of the power of visible government (1922 [1916], 185). Tilak’s account of *swaraj* too ultimately fell back into the vicious cycle of appealing to imperial authority for the immediate right of self-government, pushing the possibility of popular sovereignty further into time.

Although evocative of what contemporary democratic theorists study under the framework of the paradox of founding, the Indian attempts to institute *swaraj* against the developmental deferral of peoplehood show the limits of universalizing the terms of founding from European political thought (on this point, see Jenco 2010, 12–5, 45–71). The question of founding itself, since Rousseau, has been entangled in a paradox of the people. In Rousseau’s famous formulation, the “effect” of the founding by a “nascent people”—i.e., “social spirit” generated by good “laws”—would ideally have to be the “cause” itself for the process to be successful (1997, 71). Although Rousseau’s attempt to resolve the dilemma by introducing the figure of the lawgiver found few takers, the larger implication of the paradox continues to resonate in democratic theory—including the problems of democratic legitimation (popular will versus collective good), constitutional democracy (constitutional versus popular sovereignty), and, to an extent, popular authorization (Connolly 1988, 53–7; Benhabib 1994; Mouffe 2000; Keenan 2003; Honig 2007; Frank 2007; Olson 2007; Espejo 2011). As these early theories of *swaraj* illustrate, the overarching nature of colonial subjection meant that the questions of constitutionalism and democratic legitimation were not as central as the prior problem of grounding the claim of self-rule in the authorizing figure of the people. However, the developmental deferral of peoplehood generated an uncertainty over the presence of popular authority itself. It was precisely the not-yet claimable

authority of the people that rendered the *swaraj* project caught in a cycle of deferral and suspension. Although the turning of developmentalism against colonial rule enabled the Indian demand for government, the very premise also reinforced the deferral of popular sovereignty (for Pal and Tilak) and even reconsolidated imperial sovereignty (for Naoroji). Marked by this debate over the meaning of *swaraj*, the Congress-led anticolonial movement eventually descended into a crisis with the fading of *Swadeshi* mass mobilization. By the end of the decade, Tilak was exiled, Pal and Ghose retired from active politics prematurely, and the moderates found themselves consigned to political irrelevance. The story of how an expatriate from South Africa, M.K. Gandhi, took Indian politics by storm a few years later and transformed the anticolonial movement into one of the largest mass movements of the last century is well known (see, for example, Brown 1972). Gandhi’s political rise, however, was preceded by an act of genuine theoretical innovation.

### THE GANDHIAN TURN: THE SELF, THE COLLECTIVE, AND THE TIME OF SELF-RULE

Although Gandhi was based at the time on the distant shores of South Africa, Naoroji’s call for *swaraj* at the Calcutta Congress Session captured his attention almost instantly. Writing in the locally based periodical *Indian Opinion*, less than two weeks after the Calcutta Session, Gandhi noted the immense publicity that Naoroji’s “forceful and effective” speech had received. In his brief review of the address, Gandhi put the word *swaraj* at the forefront: “The substance of the address is that India will not prosper until we wake up and become united. To put it differently, it means that it lies in our hands to achieve *swaraj*, to prosper, and to preserve the rights we value” (CWMG 6.208; original emphasis).<sup>4</sup> In this earliest iteration of Gandhi’s account of *swaraj*, the term was used without registering any meaningful opposition to the instrumentalist approach to self-government. Crucially, though, Gandhi stressed that it was up to Indians to achieve *swaraj*, diverging from Naoroji’s affirmation of the necessity of appealing to the English people as a legitimate means of acquiring the rights of self-government. The most striking aspect of Gandhi’s first—and brief—reflection on the question of self-rule was the dramatic assertion that *swaraj* could be achieved “this day” if Indians showed the strength of unity regardless of the fears of retribution, ostensibly breaking away from the long-drawn process of institutional training presupposed by his predecessors. Although the familiar Gandhian account of *swaraj* was yet to be articulated, this earliest commentary on the topic instantiates one continuous thread of his argument: the power to establish *swaraj* lies in the immediate moral authority of Indians.

<sup>4</sup> Excluding citations to *Hind Swaraj* (1997), all references to Gandhi’s works are abbreviated as follows: CWMG for Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Gandhi 1999), volume number precedes page number.

While imprisoned in South Africa, Gandhi offered an embryonic version of the reworked concept of swaraj in the conclusion to an article accompanying his translation of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. Addressing what by then had become a “cry for swarajya” in India, Gandhi argued that the meaning of swaraj is hardly understood (CMWG 8.457). If swaraj were understood as a means to secure self-interest *a la* the Natal whites, it would be “no better than hell” (CMWG 8.458). The two existing approaches to swaraj—the instrumentalist project of the physical expulsion of the British and the developmentalist project predicated on a faith in the politically transformative power of “big industries”—were both misleading: “Just as we cannot achieve real swarajya... by killing the British—so also will it not be possible for us to achieve it by establishing big factories in India” (ibid.). “Real” swaraj could neither be achieved through mere Indian control of the government nor through the means of developmental activities. Its meaning instead consisted in moral restraint. The agent of moral action was the individual human being, and “a nation that has many such men always enjoys swarajya” (ibid.).

Gandhi's intervention in the swaraj literature is often posited against the backdrop of a stereotyped extremist account. Anthony Parel has summarized the pre-Gandhian extremist accounts of swaraj “as complete sovereignty achieved through constitutional means if possible, but through other means if necessary” (1997, xxx). Similarly, the comparative political theorist Fred Dallmayr casts the pre-Gandhian career of swaraj as that of a “narrowly” strategic concept, denoting “nothing more than the expulsion of the British from India” (2000, 105).<sup>5</sup> Yet neither Naoroji nor Tilak—two of Dallmayr's examples—fits well with this characterization. Rather, as the first section of this article has showed, the relationship between sovereignty and government had by no means been an easily resolved issue for Gandhi's predecessors. The developmental imperative generated a theoretical dilemma where the problem of peoplehood contradicted the project of political sovereignty. Gandhi himself, as I note in the previous paragraph, separately underscored these two—instrumental and developmentalist—approaches to the question of swaraj.

The archival source of such interpretations of the pre-Gandhian accounts of swaraj lies in the writings of the expatriate group associated with *The Indian Sociologist*. Edited by Shyamji Krishnavarma, *The Indian Sociologist* was an influential London-based periodical that also seized on the word swaraj following Naoroji's speech. For *The Indian Sociologist*, the question of self-rule amounted to the physical expulsion of the British from India. Gandhi came in contentious contact with the members of the India House—Krishnavarma, Savarkar, Har Dayal et al.—during his two visits to London in 1906 and 1909 (see Hyslop 2011). Krishnavarma's journal was also in circulation among the Indian community in South Africa (IS 6.12, 47–8). In January 1908,

*The Indian Sociologist* publicly announced their disapproval of Gandhi's activism in South Africa and branded him as an ideologue of empire (IS 4.1, 1).

An ardent follower of Herbert Spencer, Shyamji Krishnavarma's political trajectory was not quite representative of the swaraj movement that was flourishing within the Congress during the same period (see Marwah 2017). The main difference consisted in Krishnavarma's foregrounding of an instrumental conception of political power. Unlike the swaraj thinkers of the Congress concerned about laying the groundwork for a democratic government before instituting sovereignty, Krishnavarma defended the demand for complete independence with the claim that “given [independence], the future form of government will take care of itself” (IS 1.10, 38). One central register of developmentalist politics—education—was regularly taken up by *The Indian Sociologist* to show the folly of the Congress. Dismissing any relationship between education and politics, they argued, on several occasions, that what mattered was the “possession of a stake in the country,” not literacy (IS 2.9, 34). When a young India House associate assassinated the British official Curzon Wylie in London, Krishnavarma's journal found itself in the midst of political controversy (IS 5.9, 37). Amid the chaos generated by the assassination, Gandhi landed in London to negotiate with British officials as a civil rights activist in South Africa. *Hind Swaraj* would be written on the return voyage to South Africa. This historical context of *Hind Swaraj* partly explains why the pre-Gandhian history of swaraj in Gandhi scholarship has often been reductive, focusing primarily on his disagreement with Krishnavarma's instrumentalist account of swaraj. The critical wager of the text, as we shall see, was no less directed at the developmentalist project and its constitutive crisis of authorization.

Written in the form of a dialogue between an editor and a reader, the opening chapters of *Hind Swaraj* briefly revisited the moderate–extremist divide of the Congress. Distancing himself from the extremist critique of the moderates (without identifying with the latter), Gandhi turned to the question that would pervade the rest of the text: What is swaraj? Swaraj understood as mere expulsion of colonizers from India, Gandhi famously argued, would amount to nothing more than a form of “English rule without the Englishman” (1997, 28). This indeed was the crux of Gandhi's dispute with *The Indian Sociologist*. For Gandhi, their imitative understanding of self-government—exhibited in the desire to “copy” English institutions—dovetailed with the instrumental method through which they sought to acquire swaraj. The extremist demand for swaraj thus boiled down to this:

Just as they do not allow others to obtain a footing in their country, so should we not allow them or others to obtain it in ours. What they have done in their own country has not been done in any other country. It is, therefore, proper for us to import their institutions (Gandhi 1997, 29).

Gandhi's reading of the “extremist” account of swaraj brought forth the underlying imitative and

<sup>5</sup> The notable exception is Dalton (2012). Dalton acknowledges the influence of Pal, Ghose et al. on Gandhi's theory of swaraj, although his focus is primarily on their efforts to reconcile between “spiritual” (positive) and “political” (negative) meanings of swaraj (2–7).



instrumentalist notions of rule. The argument centered on the expulsion of the colonizer was turned upside down as Gandhi located the source of such opposition to the “Englishman” in the uncritical faith that English political institutions are India’s developmental destiny. He followed up this ingenious diagnosis of the “extremist” project with a dramatic, and wholesale, denunciation of the idealized British parliamentary system. Gandhi characterized the English parliament as an infantile institution devoid of any substance. The English people—the benchmark by which the developmentalist discourse measured colonial subjects—were claimed to be fickle and zealous, and thus deserving of their political institutions.

The problem of developmentalism took the center stage of the text as Gandhi turned from surveying the condition of England to that of India. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi’s reflections on development were tied up with his critique of civilization. The Congress swaraj thinkers imperiled by the problem of developmentalism—specifically Tilak and Pal—did not appear directly in the text. Gandhi was personally familiar with Tilak (Wolpert 2001, 43) and was certainly also aware of their writings in this period. It was, in all likelihood, a deliberate choice. In any case, the hallmark of the Congress extremist account of swaraj—development through Indian-led political institutions—did not fall out of the scope of Gandhi’s critique. Modern civilization, understood as material “progress,” undercuts the importance of moral self-rule. Having explained India’s colonial subjection as a result of the weakness of Indians rather than the strength of the British, Gandhi announced his rejection of all the products and agents of colonial modernity: railways and rail travelers, medicine and doctors, the legal system and lawyers, and so on. (35–8) These indubitable markers of the developmentalist paradigm, Gandhi argued, were implicated in the logic of subjection. The dependence on institutions such as the railways or modern medicine enabled further attrition of the individual’s capacity to rule over itself. The ideals of progress, in other words, directly erode the capacity for, and defer the arrival of, self-rule (1997, 67).<sup>6</sup> The deeper import of this claim consists in reversing the necessary connection established between material and moral development, as evident in the pre-Gandhian theories of swaraj. In addition, whereas early swaraj thinkers traced the source of India’s disunity in its material deprivation, Gandhi found sociological conflict to be no hindrance to the project of swaraj. It was the ability to accommodate difference—as opposed to an overarching political unity—that defined the political “fitness” of a nation (1997, 51–7). Building on this argument, Gandhi ultimately indicted the developmental project with the charge of strengthening

the hold of extraneous forces on the sources of self-rule.

Gandhi’s account of swaraj, rejecting the developmental paradigm *in toto*, shifted the emphasis to the self-authorizing individual. The first definition of swaraj he offered appeared to be straightforward enough: “It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves.” This definition was followed by a more ambiguous claim: “It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands” (Gandhi 1997, 73). Gandhi then sharpened its critical implication for the developmentalist paradigm by arguing that swaraj was not a distant utopia, and hence, there was no need to be “sitting still” and waiting for it (*ibid.*). What Indians needed to acquire swaraj was not a temporally drawn-out process of institutional training. The politics of deferral, in other words, was explicitly rejected. Famously, while speaking at a special session of the Congress in 1920, Gandhi promised the attainment of swaraj in one year if his programs of non-cooperation were properly adopted. This sudden declaration struck contemporary political observers as unrealistic and irresponsible. Responding to “much laughter [that] has been indulged in at [his] expense,” Gandhi wrote that his “proposition” had a “mathematical” certainty. If individual Indians took themselves to be their own authority and act accordingly, the “time” of swaraj would be solely dependent on them (CWMG 21.280). Gandhi expanded on the claim that swaraj is immediately available with one pivotal move: “[it] has to be experienced by each one for himself” (1997, 73). To be able to rule over oneself, however, one must be able to exercise self-control. Gandhi’s advocacy of certain practices—chastity, spinning, and fearlessness, among others—is related to the cultivation of self-control (see Godrej 2017). To this extent, self-rule and self-control are inseparable (1997, 118). Critical of the defense of impatience as a political virtue (see Livingston 2018; Mehta 2011), Gandhi affirmed the possibility of immediately authorizing oneself to enact swaraj, while emphasizing the patient work on the self needed to cultivate self-control and to avoid the temptations of instrumental action.

Crucial to Gandhi’s turn to the self in *Hind Swaraj* is a disavowal of the problem of collective authorization. For Gandhi, swaraj constituted not only a rejection of appeal to imperial sovereignty but also a critique of the alternative, if deferred, ideal of popular sovereignty. As he put it later: “Swaraj will not be a gift from anyone. It will not fall from above, nor will it be thrown up from below” (CWMG 23.71–72). The problem with the framework of rights lies in its dependence on a higher authority (1997, 82). In contrast, if individuals approach their actions as a form of self-enacted “duty,” then the necessity of being authorized by a higher agent can be bypassed.<sup>7</sup> It is from the “want of faith in duty” that actors “wait” for the “majority” before engaging in action (CWMG 21.101). Gandhi’s critique of

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi’s polemical defense of Indian “civilization” against Western “civilization” should be understood in this context. As he argues, India’s “immovable” state—generally seen as the marker of “uncivilized” backwardness—is a manifestation of its rejection of the primacy of material progress (1997, 66–70). The rejection of the ideology of progress, for Gandhi, enables self-rule, leading him to the claim that Indian “civilization” is truer than its modern “progressive” European counterpart.

<sup>7</sup> Complementary to this argument is Gandhi’s claim that action must be indifferent to its “fruits” (see Gandhi 1946, 132). Taken together, they instantiate the extent to which Gandhi was willing to go to liberate moral action from its reliance on external authority or incentive.

developmentalist and instrumentalist accounts of swaraj, thus, also entailed a rejection of appealing to—and waiting for the arrival of—the people. In the conclusion to *Hind Swaraj*, following a list of programs that Gandhi offered, the reader asked: “This is a larger order. When will all carry it out?” Gandhi answered: “You make a mistake. You and I have nothing to do with the others. Let each do his duty. If I do my duty, that is, serve myself, I shall be able to serve others” (1997, 118). Just as “one drowning man will never save another,” swaraj, too, must be acquired by individuals before they can hope to impart it to others (1997, 73). As Gandhi would note some three decades later: “Swaraj of a people means the sum total of the swaraj (self-rule) of individuals” (CWMG 75, 178–9).

In the span of a few years, the author of *Hind Swaraj* emerged as the undisputed leader of the Congress, which continued to frame its political objectives in terms of institutional reforms. This tension surfaced in Gandhi’s 1921 preface to *Hind Swaraj* where he made a distinction between “parliamentary” and “individual” swaraj. His use of the phrase—parliamentary swaraj—has prompted Anthony Parel to resolve the tension between the self and the collective in Gandhi’s work by specifying two distinctive kinds of swaraj: individual and political (Parel 2016, 73–93; Parel 2006, 57; see also Dalton 2012, 21). This interpretative attempt, however, is undercut by the absence of any corresponding account of institutional politics in Gandhi’s work. While it is true that Gandhi uses the term “parliamentary swaraj” in the new preface, he also distinguished between the demand of the movement he was leading “in accordance to the wishes of the people of India” and what he himself had envisioned in *Hind Swaraj* and still continued to “individually” work toward (CWMG 22.260; on this point, see also Chakrabarty and Majumdar 2010). Furthermore, speaking in 1918, Gandhi noted that having a parliament meant having the right to err. The place of the parliament, if India were to have one, would be no greater than its “cottages” (CWMG 16.117). Such deflationary views of the parliament—and modern representative institutions—persisted in Gandhi’s work throughout the long period he led the Congress (see especially CWMG 81.355–357).

That Gandhi likened the parliament to Indian cottages helps reveal a fundamental refusal to take the political as a distinct or privileged site of action. Gandhi’s moral philosophy shares little with traditional moral idealism (Mantena 2012b), and it generally challenges moral evasions of political conflicts (Devji 2012; Kapila 2007). Since his rise in the anticolonial movement, Gandhi would be frequently critiqued for conflating politics with morality and spirituality. As Tilak argued contra Gandhi in 1920: “politics is a game of worldly people, not of sadhus [saints],” and thus requires norms and practices specific to the political domain (1920, 3). Gandhi, in his reply, resisted the separation between the moral and the political: “it betrays mental laziness to think that the [political] world is not for sadhus” (CWMG 19.331; see also CWMG 11, 38–42). Gandhi’s theory of action, then, was not so much

a withdrawal from politics, but rather a refusal to accept that the political domain requires a form of action different from that of moral self-rule.

This struggle to reconcile “individual” and “parliamentary” visions of swaraj is illustrative of a recurring question in Gandhi scholarship: what is political about Gandhi’s turn to the self? For all his dramatic influence over anticolonial politics, Gandhi has long been interpreted as a moral thinker whose politics was a “consequence of his view of morality” (Iyer 1973, 48). Gandhi’s well-documented aversion to institutional politics, of course, easily lends itself to such interpretation. Attempts to salvage an institutional vision of politics, as in Parel’s, struggle to find an appreciation of the autonomy of the political in Gandhi. Attending closely to the “disjuncture between morality and politics” in Gandhi’s thought, Partha Chatterjee attributes Gandhi’s political success to the mobilization of “collective moral will” (1986, 92, 108). Others focus on how Gandhi’s moral theory played a transformative role in democratizing the public sphere (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006, 152). However, as we have seen, Gandhi’s reconfiguration of the problem of authorization in *Hind Swaraj* brings a different political dimension of his theory of self-rule to the fore. Gandhi’s turn to the moral authority of the self was a simultaneous refusal of developmentalist and institutional constraints on anticolonial action. Once extricated from these constraints, anticolonial action would not need to wait for the arrival of a people developed enough to be sovereign. It is this intrinsic transformation of the temporality of anticolonial action that generated the political character of Gandhi’s ethical turn. To this extent, Gandhi’s invention of the concept of swaraj, notwithstanding its ethical form, immanently addressed the pervasive colonial problem of collective authorization.

Given the primacy of self-authorized moral action, what then explains Gandhi’s idealization of the village as a collective political form? Gandhi’s reflections on the village republic have led to different interpretations. On the one hand, Uday Mehta interprets Gandhi’s turn to the village as an exemplar of the “ethics of everyday life,” indifferent to the collective terms of modern politics (Mehta 2010). Karuna Mantena, on the other hand, builds a case for positing the village republic as the institutional actualization of Gandhi’s vision of swaraj: “voluntary,” “antistatist,” and grounded in a “non-hierarchical form of authority” (2012a, 559). Mantena’s argument that Gandhi developed his institutional alternative to the state-form through a voluntary and individual actor-centered rethinking of political association captures the animating concerns of his account of the village republic. However, insofar as the question of political authority is concerned, I suggest that Gandhi’s quest for a nondevelopmental and nonhierarchical source of action led him to break fundamentally from any extraindividual notion of authority. Moving away from collective authority, Gandhi turned to the power of individual self-sacrifice to theorize the possibility of a collective bond in his ideal political community. Bridging the individual satyagrahi to the wider collectivity, the cooperative power of self-sacrifice is what allows Gandhi to make space for collectivity without undermining his

individual-oriented theory of swaraj. To be clear, Gandhi's notion of selfhood is not a possessive theory of individualism; it is rather the power of "nonpossession" that marks the Gandhian individual actor (Skaria 2016, 13). Gandhi theorizes the village—the site proper of his constructive program (CWMG 88.325)—as a political collectivity which is ultimately authorized and sustained by the self-sacrificing power of individual actors. He however, was acutely aware of how the practices of sacrifice can facilitate sovereignty over others (Skaria 2016, 91–3). The challenge for him, then, was to articulate an account of self-sacrifice that is not generative of the sovereign–subject relationship.

What binds the individual with greater entities is their willingness to "perish for the village." Indeed, the "law" that would govern "every villager is that he will suffer death in the defense of his and his village's honor" (CWMG 83.113). As Gandhi would later elaborate, the relationship of the individual to the collective is more like an "oceanic circle" than a pyramidal structure (CWMG 91.326). Gandhi's elaboration of the nature of the village community in the 1940s—a theme already present in *Hind Swaraj*—further emphasized the horizontal and seamless relationship between the individual and the collective. The village community

will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. (CWMG 91.326)

The authority of the self is neither undermined nor delegated to a higher level for the purpose of holding together the collective. It is instead the self-authorized sacrifice of the self that binds the collective. Although the individual actor retains sovereignty insofar as their sacrifice is willed and sustained by continuous self-discipline, the containment of sacrifice within the self is meant to resist its transformation into sovereignty over others. For Gandhi, between the singular (individual) and the universal (collective), as the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami argues, the only link is the power of setting up examples (2003, 4,162). To return to Gandhi's metaphor, because one drowning person cannot save another, the best one can do is to learn how to swim and set an example for others. When anticolonial actors enact self-rule on themselves, they neither act for an already existing collective nor rationalize their action as the part of a gradual development. This is also the presupposition that leads Gandhi to repeatedly claim that his project of swaraj requires no waiting.

This was a resolution that generated its own contradiction. With Gandhi, the anticolonial movement acquired a popular character, opening up what had hitherto been a relatively limited terrain of high politics. The theoretical source of Gandhi's politically transformative effect, I argued, lay in displacing anticolonial politics from its incapacitating entanglement in a dilemma of collective authorization. Instead of negotiating the problem from within, Gandhi rejected the

developmental vision of politics in its entirety, abandoning the ideal of collective peoplehood in the process. In a way, then, Gandhi's theory of self-rule was an attempt to break free of both the (collective) self and (developmentalist) rule. This feature of Gandhi's account of swaraj would become concretely enacted with his emergence as the main leader of the Congress in the late 1910s. As Jawaharlal Nehru recounted later, Gandhi, even at the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement, remained "delightfully vague" regarding the institutional form of swaraj (1936, 76). Maintaining ambiguity on the nature of postimperial polity, Gandhi began to deploy the language of swaraj to address issues ranging from timeliness to religious tolerance. What remained consistent in his indiscriminate uses of the word, however, is the point that the enactment of self-rule lies in the moral authority of individual actors.

What made his account of swaraj so generative for anticolonial political action was also what resisted its consolidation in programmatic or institutional terms (on Gandhi's "failure" to influence the formation of the postcolonial project, see Dasgupta 2017). Consider, for example, this well-known series of exchanges between Gandhi and Nehru (the soon-to-be first prime minister of independent India). Writing to Nehru in 1945, Gandhi affirmed the vision of *Hind Swaraj*, particularly the ideal of the village republic, and suggested a Congress Working Committee meeting to discuss the topic. Nehru expressed disbelief in response to his mentor's continued faith in the vision of *Hind Swaraj*, which he described as "unreal" and discordant with the times: "As you know, the Congress has never considered that picture [of village republic]... You yourself have never asked it to adopt it except for certain relatively minor aspects of it" (1988, 509). Nehru, accordingly, defended the importance of developmental programs to sustain and uplift the masses of the people, vetoing the proposal to initiate a conversation in the Congress around the topic of the village community.

Historically speaking, Nehru was not incorrect in reminding that neither the Congress nor Gandhi himself, had pushed their political movement toward the direction of the village republic. Gandhi's theory of self-rule was predicated on a disavowal of the logic of collective authorization presupposed by modern political institutions and movements. Although, as the leader of the anticolonial movement for nearly three decades, Gandhi encouraged individual actors to adopt the life of a satyagrahi, he consistently refrained from invoking the collective authority of the anticolonial movement to advance the project of the village republic. Gandhi's profound rejection of collective authority took shape during the political crisis that marked the era of Pal and Tilak. And he remained faithful to this principle up to the end of his long political career (of note here is his abstinence from the Constituent Assembly in the 1940s).

The swaraj discourse began to lose traction by the end of the 1920s. Given the ubiquitous uncertainty around the political form that swaraj would take (Nehru 1942 [1928], 426), the concept would become suspect to the next generation of political actors in the age of self-determination in the 1920s (Nehru 1972 [1928], 371).



The Congress ultimately adopted *Purna Swaraj* in 1929 (officially translated as “complete independence”), where the adjective “purna” stood for the severance of “the British connection.” The resolution of the problem of political sovereignty in the form of the nation-state (see Manela 2007) partially neutralized the uncertainty over sovereignty that helped the swaraj literature thrive. Still, the problem of peoplehood that marked the early theories of swaraj continued to persist. In the postcolonial period, Nehru would repeatedly stress on the distinction between political (i.e., constitutional) and economic democracy, prioritizing the latter for its people-developing capacity in the postcolonial context. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the self-understanding of the postcolonial state was marked by the imperative of “economic development on behalf of the nation” (1993, 203). The postcolonial developmental project—in which the people continued to be an object, and not so much an agent, of development (on this point, see Fanon 2004, 97–144)—would thus devolve into technocratic planning and hierarchical pedagogy in its aspiration to institutionalize the indefinite project of transforming the masses into the people.

## CONCLUSION

These Indian reflections on the meaning of self-rule help reveal the conceptual foundation of modern colonialism as a form of rule: the construction of colonial peoplehood as underdeveloped and, therefore, unfit for sovereignty. In nineteenth-century India, the poverty or illiteracy of the people was not merely understood as a moral or sociological lack—it redoubled as a developmental incapacity for political sovereignty. This picture of the people was, of course, central to the British claim to rule. What is more, the pursuit of self-rule against this backdrop of the problem of peoplehood would make the anticolonial democratic project a simultaneous exercise in overcoming imperial rule and bringing into being a people “fit” to be sovereign.

As this article has argued, the swaraj theorists’ attempts to overcome the problem of peoplehood—from Naoroji’s to Gandhi’s—offer a rich resource for articulating the distinctive trajectory of popular sovereignty in the colonial world. The people, of course, is never a prepolitical entity; its meaning is articulated by contesting acts of claiming and speaking in the name of the people during the course of political struggle (Laclau 2005; Morgan 1988). And, as Enrique Dussel notes, “the people is that strictly political category (because it is not properly sociological or economic) that appears as absolutely essential, despite its ambiguity” (2008, 73).

The wager for self-rule in early twentieth-century India unfolded in the midst of the anticolonial struggle and was faced with the necessity to conceptualize the people beyond its colonial signification. However, the developmentalist conception of colonial peoplehood constituted a political background where claims had to be made while awaiting the arrival of a “fit” people. The dilemma of working between the “not-yet” popular sovereignty and the existing (and unacceptable)

imperial sovereignty meant that the early swaraj thinkers were caught in a crisis. That this crisis of anticolonial politics was only sidestepped (though not quite resolved) after Gandhi’s sweeping disavowal of the co-constituted ideals of development and peoplehood is not a historical anomaly. The source of the crisis lies in how modern colonialism—both in its discursive and institutional dimensions—rendered colonial peoplehood a perennially deferred object of development. This dilemma-ridden search for popular authorization, thus, also shows the limits of interpreting the problem of anticolonial sovereignty—either as a teleological progression to political sovereignty having been “schooled” in democracy (see Emerson 1967), or as equal citizenship within the divided sovereignty of a federated empire (see Cooper 2014).

The significance of the developmentalist figuration of the people extends well beyond the colonial period. The postcolonial states that were born in the ruins of empire across Asia and Africa have predominantly understood themselves in developmentalist terms. As Arturo Escobar puts it, the postcolonial “reality” itself has been “colonized” by the “development discourse,” cutting across economic planning to techniques of governance (Escobar 1995, 5; see also Kaviraj 1995). This intellectual history of the concept of swaraj shows that the developmentalist project was neither merely a product of the post-War reordering of the world (Escobar 1995) nor simply an institutional inheritance of colonial ideologies of governance. Its roots lie deeper, in the very ways in which the germinal concepts of sovereignty, government, and peoplehood were internalized and articulated in colonial India and beyond. Attending to the dilemmas of anticolonial self-rule that swaraj thinkers grappled with will be crucial to understanding how democracy emerged and acquired a life of its own in the colonial world—what is now most of the world.

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