The Journal of Asian Studies (2022), **81**, 707–725
doi:10.1017/S0021911822001188

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Reimagining the Public Sphere: Commensurability and Communicative Rationality under Colonialism

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Abstract

This article discusses the Habermasian public sphere as a realm constructed through communication and offers a critique of Jürgen Habermas's concept of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld among the participants as a fundamental prerequisite for communicative rationality in the discursive field. The article contends that the emergence of communicative rationality in the public sphere is unlikely to be facilitated by a singular and unitary modern public whose participants have commensurable languages and worlds. This argument is elaborated through an analysis of a public debate that occurred on August 10, 1888, between the Mahajan (headman) of the Modh Baniya caste council and Mohandas K. Gandhi, a Modh Baniya himself. Even though the discussion involved two people with an intersubjectively shared lifeworld, who were engaged in the deliberation as equals, the dialogue broke down, deepening divides. This article argues that the need to protect the spiritual domain from the polluting touch of the material domain led to the breakdown of communicative rationality.

Keywords: caste; commensurability; communicative rationality; material domain; public sphere; religion; spiritual domain

Introduction

The term "public," which was once considered vague and ambiguous and viewed with skepticism by historians, has now gained widespread acceptance. The English translation of Jürgen Habermas's 1962 German publication *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* did not appear until 1989. Over the following decades, the term "public sphere" entered the lexicon of historians in India, just as it did in different parts of the globe, resulting in a variety of fascinating studies on cultural history. Even though there is ample research on the creation of a "modern public sphere" in colonial and postcolonial India, which was made possible by "print capitalism," shaped by the framework of British colonial rule and the national movement that grew in response to it, and deeply divided by community competition and conflict (Freitag 1991; Ingram, Scott, and Tareen 2015), there are still crucial gaps that need to be filled.

Habermas (1989, 27) describes the public sphere as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" in order to generate public opinion, promote generalized interests, and legitimize and challenge authority. Communication gives rise to, and shapes, the public sphere. It is both the means by which the public sphere is maintained and the source of its power. Habermas's (1990, 87–89) concept of the public sphere requires a shared language and shared cognitive, normative, objective, and subjective worlds (which he calls an *intersubjectively shared lifeworld*) among participants for communicative rationality. According to Habermas (1987, 124), the "lifeworld" is "a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns." This highlights its role as a "reservoir of simple interactions" (Habermas 1996, 360) and beliefs, or as a social worldview (Habermas 1984, xxvi) employed by interlocutors in communication aimed at achieving understanding. In this context, communicative rationality refers to the competence to engage in rational arguments under circumstances that come close to an "ideal speech situation," with the end goal of reaching agreement as a result of deliberations (Habermas 1996, 315). The "ideal speech situation" presupposes that all interlocutors in the

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conversation have "equal chances to assume dialogue roles" (McCarthy 1978, 325) and that communication must eliminate any external or internal force other than the "force of the better argument" (Habermas 1984, 25). To put it differently, the incommensurability of languages and worlds is likely to hinder the emergence of communicative rationality in the discursive field (Chandhoke 2005, 333–34). When people with different ideas meet, they do not always see things the same way, and they do not always agree on things (Bhattacharya 2005, 144).

If the public sphere is to be applied as a theoretical concept within the framework of India's colonial modernity, then the premises that underpinned Habermas's original conceptualization need to be re-examined and revised. Was the public sphere that developed in India one that was characterized as a consensual space? Was commensurability a fundamental prerequisite for communicative rationality when the circumstances of the public sphere were obtained? Was the public sphere a forum for rational discourse characterized by the application of critical reasoning and populated by rational, independent people using critical judgment? How did the people of India reconcile the public and private spheres of their lives? How did these reconciliations influence the idiosyncrasies of their personal identities as well as the character of the public sphere? Are the teleologies, which form the basis of the Habermasian narrative, something that one can continue to work with?

This article takes another look at the Habermasian public sphere as a communicatively constructed realm in the context of India's colonial modernity and provides an analysis that challenges Habermas's theory of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld among participants as a fundamental prerequisite for communicative rationality in the discursive field. The article asserts that the emergence of communicative rationality in the public sphere is unlikely to be facilitated by a singular and unitary modern public with commensurable languages and worlds among participants. It develops this assertion through an analysis of an episode that unfolded on August 10, 1888, when Mohandas K. Gandhi engaged in a public debate with the Mahajan (headman) of the Modh Baniya caste council. This particular illustration was selected for analysis because Gandhi himself was a Modh Baniya, and the conversation thus seemed to be taking place between two people who intersubjectively shared the same lifeworld. However, the public dialogue, as it developed, highlighted the challenges of having a conversation even across worlds and languages that are commensurable. This article argues that the breakdown of communicative rationality, which led to Gandhi's excommunication, was the result of strong resistance against the forces of the material domain intervening in the spiritual domain of the people. Gandhi's readmission to the caste after a public purification ceremony meant not only that the corrupting effects of the material domain were kept out of the spiritual domain, but also that any reforms or interventions in the spiritual domain would be in the hands of the colonial people.

Lifeworld and Practical Consciousness of Baniyas and Gandhis

Members of the Baniya community had a strong sense of self-identity, rooted in a distinct way of life. The community had emerged in the early medieval period out of a process of state formation in the Gujarat-Rajasthan region in which merchants were accorded a subordinate yet privileged position. In the process, they coalesced into a *jati* that was considered to be within the twice-born Vaishya *varna*. They were subordinate to the Rajput rulers—who in this hierarchy were considered to be Kshatriyas. In this respect, the later Turkish and Mughal rulers merely replaced the Rajputs without upsetting this particular hierarchy in a major way. Within this polity, the Baniyas exemplified a distinct way of being that involved trade, banking, brokerage, usury, and a certain pragmatic approach to worldly affairs that made them preferred as administrators. Their code of morality and their evident devotion to their gods helped legitimize their privileged position within the social order.

Members of this caste were in all cases Vaishnavite Hindus or Jains. Vaishnasvism is a very popular form of Hinduism. The Baniya caste was divided into a number of subcastes, such as the Oswals, Agarwals, Maheshris, Nagars, Nimas, Srirnalis, Modhs, Lads, Khadayaw, Porvads, and so on. Most of these subcastes were further divided into groups known as *visa*, *dasa*, and *pancha* (Shah 1982, 7). Whereas it was not uncommon for Jain Baniyas to marry Vaishnavite Baniyas, it was unusual for marriages to take place outside these subgroups. As an example, whereas a Nima Visa Jain Baniya

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might marry a Nima Visa Vaishnava Baniya, neither would want to marry outside the group of Nima Visas (Enthoven 1922, 3:414, 436). The Baniya caste was thus a congeries of endogamous subcastes, which were known collectively as "Baniya." Although members of Baniya subcastes would in many cases not eat with members of other subcastes, and certainly would not intermarry, there was little sense of rank among them. All were considered of comparable status (Shah 1982, 21–22). This helped maintain a sense of Baniya identity. This identity was further strengthened by their caste *panchayats* or Mahajans. Each of the subcastes had its own town-based or regional body that enforced rules of endogamy and customary practices within the group. These caste *panchayats* and Mahajans had the power to outcaste members who broke their social rules (Hardiman 1996, 64).

Moreover, Baniyas had a strong sense of honor, expressed in the concept of *abru*. *Abru* meant both "credit" and "honor," which implied that the honor of the businessman rested above all on his creditworthiness. Baniyas were also expected to act with social and religious rectitude. Children had to be married within the community according to community customs. Failure to do so meant a loss of *abru* (Haynes 1991, 56). The Baniya family had to operate according to strict patriarchal principles, with deference being shown to the head of the household and the women of the house acting in a submissive and modest way. *Abru* was compromised if a Baniya was seen to be overly familiar with a person of low caste. Baniyas were expected to practice their religion in a scrupulous manner. *Abru* was also maintained by regular attendance at temples and the correct celebration of festivals. Baniyas were strict vegetarians. No Baniya who ate meat, fish, or other forbidden foods, or who drank liquor, could be considered to have any *abru* (Hardiman 1996, 76). All this was tied up with religious beliefs and practices inculcated from a very early age. Children were raised by their mothers in an atmosphere of strong religiosity. They were told religious stories and precepts and taught to value their ceremonies and festivals. Children were also taken along when their mothers visited the local temples (Hardiman 1996, 79).

The Gandhi family belonged to the Baniya caste. They were members of the Modh Baniya subcaste. It seems that the Gandhi family was initially a family of "grocers." However, over three generations, starting with Gandhi's grandfather, they were *diwans* in several Kathiawad states (Gandhi 1927, 1:15). Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in the city of Porbandar in Kathiawad (Gandhi 1927, 1:20). His mother, Putlibai, was a homemaker, and his father, Karamchand Gandhi, was the *diwan* of the Princely State of Porbandar and later of Rajkot (Gandhi 1927, 1:16). Gandhi attended elementary school in Porbandar, where he spent his childhood. When he was just seven years old, his father was forced to abandon his post in Porbandar. Karamchand took his family and relocated to Rajkot, where he rose quickly through the ranks to become the *diwan*. There, Gandhi was enrolled in the primary school (Tendulkar 1951, 1:29). Gandhi married Kastur Makanji Kapadia when they were both thirteen years old. She was the daughter of a rich merchant of Porbandar, Sheth Gokuldas Makanji Kapadia. Sometime in 1876, when Gandhi and Kastur were both seven years old, their fathers had reached an agreement for their betrothal in accordance with the old-time orthodox practice (Desai 2009, 1:24–25). After their marriage, Gandhi did not waste any time in asserting his authority as a husband over Kastur. He made efforts to dictate how Kastur should behave (Gandhi 1927, 1:35).

The ancestral faith of the Gandhis was Vaishnavism (Nayar 1965, 1:178). Karamchand Gandhi had a deep religious yearning, cultivated the company of *sadhus* and holy men, and had memorized portions of the *Gita* by heart, which he recited regularly at the time of worship. In Gandhi's (1927, 1:18) words, "He had the kind of religious culture which visits to the temples and listening to religious discourses make available to many Hindus." Putlibai was deeply religious. She would undertake the most arduous oaths without hesitation. Putlibai took only one meal each day and kept a fast on every other day throughout the period of Chaturmas, which lasted for four months. Not a single day went by that she did not worship at the *haveli*, which was a Vaishnava shrine (Gandhi 1927, 1:18–19). Gandhi often accompanied her to the shrine, but he never found its glitz and grandeur appealing (Gandhi 1927, 1:80).

Putlibai's influence shaped Gandhi's character more than anybody else. Gandhi's mother was the source of his profound religious worldview (Tendulkar 1951, 1:28). Gandhi was a strict vegetarian. There was a firm injunction against touching or eating meat in the Gandhi family. It was made very clear by Karamchand that a profession in medicine was not an option for Gandhi, since it

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would entail the dissection of deceased animals (Gandhi 1927, 1:92). In addition, Gandhi knotted his hair in a *shikha* behind his head, much like the other boys of high-caste birth (Gandhi 2006, 6).

Therefore, the structural aspects of the Baniya lifeworld—personality, society, and culture—were intricately woven into the Gandhis' "practical consciousness," which was mirrored in their practices. This was because they had inherited certain ways of thinking as well as behaving from their ancestors, which had a significant impact on the way they thought and behaved. These activities are carried out for the most part at the level of "practical consciousness," which involves modes of thinking that are accepted without question or reflection. However, people are not completely stuck in the past. When they interact and talk to each other, they not only repeat what has been done before, but also change it, whether on purpose or by accident (Giddens 1984).

Structure, Agency, and Discursive Consciousness

Gandhi was born into an orthodox Vaishnava family that practiced untouchability. On one occasion, when Gandhi had the intention of pursuing a career in medicine, Lakshmidas, Gandhi's elder brother, discouraged him: "Father never liked it. He had you in mind when he said that we Vaishnavas should have nothing to do with the dissection of dead bodies" (Gandhi 1927, 1:92). The handling of dead bodies was considered physically and ritually "polluting" among the Vaishnavite Hindus. But Gandhi questioned untouchability within very confines of his home, where the environment for such views was by no means favorable or conducive. Gandhi "was hardly twelve when the idea" of questioning untouchability germinated in him. A scavenger by the name of Uka, who was considered to be an "Untouchable," used to come to his house to clean the latrines. Gandhi was always asked to perform ablutions even if he accidently touched Uka, and though he obeyed, it was not without protest. Gandhi often questioned his mother, "Why was it wrong to touch Uka and why was he forbidden to touch" the young boy? Gandhi often disregarded his mother's warnings not to touch Uka. As a child, he wanted to make his mother aware that the Hindu religion did not sanction untouchability, and he had the boldness to respond to her with tremendous adeptness that "she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful" (Gandhi 1956–94, 19:570).

Gandhi's other childhood experiences are equally noteworthy. He posed daring questions when reading from the Hindu epics, such as the Ramayana, at Gandhi family gatherings. "Can the Ramayana countenance the idea of any human beings" as "Untouchables on the ground that they are polluted souls?" He queried the episode of "an Untouchable" taking "Rama across the Ganges in his boat." Gandhi also recalled that he often happened to touch the "Untouchable" children while at school in Rajkot, but he never concealed this fact from his parents, and "out of reverence and regard" for his mother, he followed his mother's advice "to purification after the unholy touch." Gandhi was required to touch any Muslim boy who passed by, not "as a religious obligation," but to cancel the pollution caused by coming into contact with an 'Untouchable' boy (Gandhi 1956–94, 19:570).

The household that Putlibai ran was vegetarian in its eating habits. The Gandhis abstained from eating meat or eggs in the same manner as other people of their caste. But Gandhi (1927, 1:59) writes in his autobiography that in his childhood, he had at least "more than a half a dozen meat-feasts" in the company of his Muslim friend, Sheikh Mehtab. Since Gandhi's family had a staunch aversion to the consumption of meat, the "experiment" had to take place at a "secret" location. Gandhi accomplished this with the assistance of his close friend (Tendulkar 1951, 1:30–31).

Gandhi opposed other codes of the caste system at a very young age. In Gandhi's own telling, he was confronted with the caste question when he decided to go to England to study law in 1888. Gandhi says that his caste was prohibited from traveling abroad and that to the orthodox Hindus, like his Vaishnava family, travel abroad was a horror, as crossing the "polluted" seas resulted in a loss of caste. The news that Gandhi had decided to cross the seas brought disrepute to his family. He was often pestered by many deputations from his Modh Baniya caste-fellows:

> In the . . . city of Bombay, . . . I was hemmed in by all sides. I could not go out without being pointed and stared at by someone or other. At one time, while I was walking near the Town

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> Hall, I was surrounded and hooted by them, and my poor brother had to look at the scene in silence. (Gandhi 1956–94, 1:45)

Such reactions did not deter Gandhi's resolve to go to England. When his caste-fellows realized that they had failed to make an impression on Gandhi, they convened a meeting of all the members of their caste. "No Modh Baniya had been to England up to now, and if I dared to do so, I ought to be brought to book!" (Gandhi 1927, 1:100). Gandhi was virtually dragged out of his house and forced to sit in the center of the gathering. Finding that their remonstrations were to no avail, the Mahajan of the Modh Baniya caste council, who was "a distant relative of the Gandhis" (Gandhi, Gandhi, and Yellin 1998, 38), harangued Gandhi that he would be "excommunicated" from the caste if he traveled overseas (Nayar 1965, 1:223). When threatened like this, Gandhi (1956–94, 28:410) replied that the Mahajan "was welcome to do so, but I would certainly go to England." Gandhi (1956–94, 1:46) held his ground in front of the Mahajan and told him to do whatever he wanted, without caring for "the strength of tradition within the caste for maintaining ritual purity" (Brown 1990, 17). The Mahajan, livid with anger, boomed (Nayar 1965, 1:223),

> Very well, then. This boy shall be treated as an outcaste from today. We command everyone not to have anything to do with him. He who will support him must be treated as an outcaste. Whoever helps him or goes to see him off at the dock shall be punishable with a fine of one rupee four annas.

Judith Brown (1990, 17) argues that the fact that Gandhi was outcasted when he decided to study in England "on the grounds that such an enterprise would inevitably result in ritual pollution" demonstrates "the strength of tradition within the caste for maintaining ritual purity." However, Gandhi "remained unperturbed" (Tendulkar 1951, 1:41). The caste order showed no effect on him, and his resolve to go to England remained as strong as ever. In fact, Gandhi (1927, 1:102) replied, "I think the caste should not interfere in the matter." On September 4, 1888, he sailed for England. Gandhi (1956–94, 28:410) later recalled, "my satyagraha was born on that day. The satyagraha with the government is only a part of my satyagraha; my first satyagraha was directed against the Mahajan." Gandhi practiced two types of satyagraha: (1) civil disobedience, which entailed breaking an unjust law and accepting punishment, and (2) noncooperation, which included refusing to cooperate with the adversary and acquiesce to the wrong being opposed (Shepard 2004, 20, 25). The Mahajan prohibited Gandhi from crossing the *kālā pānī* (black waters). Gandhi refused to cooperate with the Mahajan and acquiesce to the unjust caste rules. He broke the caste rules and accepted the penalty for its breach—excommunication. Here, Gandhi (1910, 75–76) practiced satyagraha using "soul force," which involved "sacrifice of self." Gandhi's orthodox mother and elder brother supported him (Lelyveld 2011, 34). Before he went to England, Gandhi's mother took three promises from him—"not to touch wine, women and meat" (Gandhi 1927, 1:102). But she never asked him to "adhere to untouchability as a religious duty" (Gandhi 1956–94, 25:566). In his childhood, Gandhi had his hair tied in a *shikha* and wore the sacred thread considered obligatory for his caste. However, he got rid of the *shikha* and gave up wearing the sacred thread on the eve of his travel to England (Gandhi 1929, 2:328–29).

While Gandhi began to question at age twelve the validity of certain Hindu practices, starting with the rigidities of the caste system, he vowed not to touch meat and wine in England, which were associated with "caste defilement" (Bates and Carter 2021). The nature of Gandhi's social praxis can be explained using Anthony Giddens's (1984) notion of the duality of social structures. Duality implies that human agency is necessary for the formation of social structures (traditions, institutions, moral codes, and other sets of expectations), but at the same time, these structures are necessary for the formation of human agency (Werlen and Lippuner 2009, 40–41). Challenging his mother that Hinduism did not sanction untouchability, eating meat, and defying caste restrictions to go abroad all reflected Gandhi's ability to "have acted differently." Giddens (1984, 9) associates this capability with the act of exercising agency: "Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently." Giddens also

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thinks of agents as beings who are capable of reflexive action rather than as "cultural dopes" that "ensue from strong forms of structuralism" (Mutch 2014, 588). In this sense, Gandhi's reflexivity allowed him to continuously revise the direction of his social conduct. As a result, he showed a remarkable irreverence toward caste orthodoxy. This was done at the level of "discursive consciousness," which is the ability to "reflect on actions and describe, monitor, and give rational accounts of [such actions]" (Craib 1992, 25).

Defining agency as reflective thus emphasizes the liberty of human praxis. However, this liberty of action is restricted. Since agency also entails obeying rules, it possesses both a transformational and a normative aspect. Rules and rule following are present only in social action, which "instantiates" structures. In other words, structures are solely realized in social action. Giddens describes structures as a set of rules and resources that engage human actions. He explains that rules restrict human actions, but resources facilitate them (Lamsal 2012, 113). He also argues that rules always come in sets: on the one hand, they relate to the constitution of meaning, while on the other hand, they relate to the sanctioning of conduct. The rule not to touch meat, wine, and women, which meant caste defilement, governed Gandhi's conduct, prompting him to abstain from these three things. It did not mean that Gandhi believed that crossing the seas would lead to a loss of caste. Rajmohan Gandhi (2006, 21) contends that Gandhi's experience of making this promise might not have been a happy one. At this time, it looked as if Gandhi's own mind had been made up on the advantages of eating meat. He had not yet reached the point that he felt an overwhelming sense of shame over going to the brothel. Moreover, in spite of his early endorsement of the concept of "lifelong faithfulness to the wife," it is possible that Gandhi would have been interested in the allure that England had to offer. But Gandhi was aware of the fact that the undesired pledge had a binding effect on him. In this case, structures such as rules and norms limited Gandhi's ability to act freely.

However, structures as resources enhanced Gandhi's agency; they made it possible for him to defy the caste restrictions and go abroad. Joseph Lelyveld (2011, 34) argues that the Mahajan of the Modh Baniya caste council was "already fairly toothless, for Gandhi's orthodox mother and elder brother Lakshmidas supported him." Their "authoritative" permission provided the conditions and possibilities for Gandhi "to muster up courage" to face the Mahajan. "Nothing daunted, and without the slightest hesitation," Gandhi (1927, 1:100–101) came before the meeting and said, "My mother and brother have . . . given me their permission." When Gandhi was excommunicated, he wondered how his brother would take it. "Fortunately," Gandhi (1927, 1:102) writes, Lakshmidas "remained firm and wrote to assure me that I had his permission to go, the Mahajan's order notwithstanding." Moreover, Lakshmidas's "allocative" resources in the form of money made Gandhi's travel to England possible. Thus, Gandhi's "power" to defy the caste restrictions was influenced both by his ability to act "differently" with respect to the rigidities of the caste system and the resources he had at his disposal, and the skillful manner in which he used them.

Commensurable Languages and Worlds of Gandhi and the Mahajan

The idea of the public sphere in the Habermasian sense is that it may be thought of as a stage on which the act of participation is performed through the medium of "speaking." The public sphere is the location where people debate matters that affect all of them, and as such, it is an institutionalized sphere of interaction that emphasizes discursive thought. Now, talking through a problem or identifying a problem in the first place is critically dependent on the participants' conceptual repertoire: their worldviews, understandings of the world, beliefs about how the world works in terms of causes and consequences, and ideas about what constitutes a good and reasonable argument. Communication, in other words, depends on language as a medium not only of conversation between the participants but as the means by which particular and specific understandings are both expressed as well as constituted. Therefore, language presupposes a shared understanding. In other words, interlocutors in the public sphere can understand a proposal when they tie it to specific assumptions that are implied but not explicitly stated alongside the narration of a statement. To be able to use a language is, consequently, to share the world of common values and beliefs, which are inevitably mediated by

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people's common experiences of that language. This is made explicit by Habermas (1990, 87–89) in his essay "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," in which he stipulates that the participants must speak the same natural language according to the same general conventions in order to carry on normal, undistorted communication.

Moreover, in any given public sphere, there exist a number of inequalities, such as the structural unevenness in society, which are likely to hamper communicative rationality. It is for this reason that Nancy Fraser condemns Habermas's theory of the "public sphere" because it demands that the participants "bracket" inequalities. Communicating as if the participants were all equal when, in fact, they are not, Fraser (1990, 63-65) argues, is not enough to immunize the public discourse from the distorting effects of economic inequality. The meeting of the Modh Baniya caste was a public sphere activity of the Modh Baniyas, by the Modh Baniyas, and for the Modh Baniyas. There were no social inequalities among them. The public sphere discourse was also immune from the distorting effects of economic inequality. As such, the public sphere was an arena in which the Modh Baniyas did not need to "set aside such characteristics as differences in birth and fortune and speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers" (Fraser 1990, 63). The Modh Baniya public sphere thus seemed to meet the conditions of Fraser's (1990, 77) conception of an adequate public sphere, which required "not merely the bracketing, but rather the elimination, of social inequality," so that interlocutors could deliberate among them as equals.

Even when these conditions were present in the dialogue between Gandhi and the Modh Baniya Mahajan, the communication between them became impossible because understanding became impossible. On August 10, 1888, the Mahajan forbade Gandhi from crossing the *kālā pānī*. Upon this, the following dialogue ensued (Gandhi 1927, 1:99–104; Gandhi 1956–94, 1:45–47; Nayar 1965, 1:223):

The Mahajan: In the opinion of the [Modh Baniya] caste, your proposal to go to England is not proper. Our religion forbids voyages abroad. You have to cross the waters; all this you must know is against our caste rules. We have also heard that it is not possible to live there without compromising our religion. One is obliged to eat and drink with the Europeans! We are positively informed that you will have to eat flesh and drink wine in England.

Gandhi: I thank you for your warnings. I do not think it is at all against our religion to go to England. I intend going there for further studies. What I have heard about England is quite different from what you say; one need not take meat and wine there. And I have already solemnly promised to my mother to abstain from three things you fear most. I am sure the vow will keep me safe.

The Mahajan: But we tell you that it is not possible to keep our religion there. You know my relations with your father and you ought to listen to my advice. We were your father's friends, and, therefore, we feel for you.

Gandhi: I know those relations. But I am helpless in this matter. I cannot alter my resolve to go to England. My father's friend and adviser, who is a learned Brahmin, sees no objection to my going to England, and my mother and brother have also given me their permission. As for crossing the waters, if our brethren can go as far as Aden, why could not I go to England? I am deeply convinced that malice is at the root of all these objections.

The Mahajan: But will you disregard the orders of the caste? As heads of the caste, you know our power. Therefore, we command you to reconsider your decision, or else the heaviest punishment will be meted out to you.

Gandhi: I am really helpless. I think caste should not interfere in the matter.

The Mahajan: This boy shall be treated as an outcaste from today. We command everyone not to have anything to do with him. He who will support him must be treated as an outcaste. Whoever helps him or goes to see him off at the dock shall be punishable with a fine of one rupee four annas.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Significantly, the conversation moves from talking about "religion" to "caste," which shows that Hinduism is being spoken of as a caste-religion. For instance, when the Mahajan of the Modh Baniya caste council pointed out that "our religion forbids voyages abroad. You have to cross the waters; all this you must know is against our caste rules," Gandhi replied, "I do not think it is at all against our religion to go to England. . . . I think the caste should not interfere in the matter." Both Gandhi and the Mahajan articulated the same understanding of "our religion" as a caste-based religion. Therefore, their understanding was based on the same conceptual language. Nicholas B. Dirks (2001, 13) argues that under colonialism, caste was defined as "a fundamentally religious social order." Gandhi and the Mahajan, therefore, spoke a commensurable language. Speaking the same language indicates the presence not only of commensurable tongues but also of commensurable beliefs. In this context, commensurability can be conceptualized in at least three ways. In the first sense, it indicates that different people interpret concepts and phenomenon similarly. The meaning that keeping "our religion" held was the same for the Mahajan and for Gandhi. According to the Mahajan, eating "flesh" and drinking "wine" would mean "compromising our religion." Gandhi was of the same opinion. He had "solemnly promised" his mother to "abstain" from meat, wine, and women.

In the second sense, the idea of commensurability indicates that the same concept and phenomenon hold the same significance for different people. For the Mahajan, abstaining from meat and wine was central to his conception of religion. In England, Gandhi (1956–94, 1:93) led "a purely Hindu life." He almost starved to death because he refused to consume nonvegetarian food (Tendulkar 1951, 1:35). Upon learning that Gandhi ate only vegetarian food, an English physician exclaimed, "You must either take beef-tea or die!" Gandhi answered, "If it were God's will that I should die, I must die, but I was sure it could not be God's will that I should break the oath that I made on my mother's knee before I left India" (Shukla 1951, 187–88). Therefore, not "compromising our religion" ranked high on the conceptual list of both the Mahajan and Gandhi.

In the third and stronger sense, commensurability means that participants in a given forum speak the same language, which expectably articulates the same understanding of the world. The public discussion, as it unfolded, revealed that Gandhi spoke the same language as the Mahajan: that of keeping "our religion" by abstaining from meat, wine, and women. Gandhi's understanding of not "compromising our religion," which meant consuming only vegetarian food, was the same for the Mahajan as it was for him. So, Gandhi's language was comprehensible to the Mahajan, who was also located in the same language. The languages and worlds of the Mahajan and Gandhi were therefore commensurable in all three senses. Both of them applied the same interpretations, evaluation criteria, and rankings to keeping "our religion." In the public forum, they spoke the same language, which articulated the same understanding of the world. In effect, they held the same ontological assumptions about not "compromising our religion."

The orthodox Hindus had a fear of traveling abroad because of the possibility of losing caste upon crossing the *kālā pānī* (Carroll 1979). The Baniyas were very strict in their observance of rituals and caste rules. They would not eat anything unless they had cooked it themselves. As a result, foreign travel was taboo among the Baniyas (Akhtar 2010–11, 409–10) because "sharing of cooking pots, water pumps, and latrines compromised their caste" (Anderson 2016, 23). There were two putative justifications for this prohibition on crossing the *kālā pānī*: first, there was the likelihood that the Hindu traveler's faith would be defiled by the influence of a non-Hindu culture; second, it would have been very difficult to maintain ritual purity on a lengthy sea trip or extended residence in a foreign country without a certain amount of ritual laxity. Members of the higher castes of the Hindu religion have always placed a high priority on cleanliness as well as the need to be untouched by any and all types of pollution. They thought that one might become polluted by either direct physical contact with someone who was regarded as impure or through the failure to obey any one of the many norms that Hinduism provides for maintaining one's cleanliness (Bindra 2002, 38). As Joel Larus (1979, 67–68) aptly notes,

> . . . To appreciate how an observant Hindu's personal determination to remain unsullied could have possibly inhibited marine development, it is necessary to understand the extent and

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> complexity of their rules and regulations. . . . Intricate instructions on eating, drinking, and bathing practices are given to each of the principal castes. The complexity and nuances of what was permitted and was not authorised is exceeded only by the concern for minutiae.

On September 4, 1888, Gandhi sailed for England by the *SS Clyde*. On the voyage, Gandhi ate nothing except the sweets and fruits that he had packed with him and abstained from drinking alcohol. He also did not consume any meat (Tendulkar 1951, 1:34). Being "a strict Hindu," Gandhi cooked his "own food" during his stay in England. He purchased a portable stove so he could cook in his room. A convenient breakfast meal was oats, which Gandhi prepared by boiling them in water and then consuming them with either milk or fruit. In England, he ate lunch in restaurants that only served vegetarian food. Gandhi also prepared himself a meal consisting of soup and rice for dinner (Gandhi 1956–94, 1:93–94). Since the languages and worlds of Gandhi and the Mahajan shared allegiance to a common norm, it should have helped arbitrate the clash between them. However, there could be no deliberation, even though their languages and worlds were commensurable. The public dialogue between Gandhi and the Mahajan did not end in a consensus.

Language, Commensurability, and Power

The idea of communication only makes sense when a discursive community possesses a shared understanding. In the public debate, when the Modh Baniya Mahajan put forth the proposition that "it is not possible to live there without compromising our religion" because "you will have to eat flesh and drink wine in England," Gandhi was able to comprehend what the Mahajan meant. Gandhi's ability to comprehend the significance of the proposition is exemplified by his prompt reply, "I have already solemnly promised to my mother to abstain from the three things you fear most. I am sure the vow will keep me safe," therefore constituting a shared understanding. This did not imply that Gandhi would have to agree with the Mahajan's proposition. Before agreeing, disagreeing, subtracting, or adding to it, it was crucial that Gandhi was able to grasp the proposition being presented here. For, unless Gandhi could have understood what the Mahajan meant when he put forth the proposition, the deliberation would not have taken place in the first instance.

Moreover, to utter a language is to engage in an activity. According to Habermas, when a speaker utters a speech act, he or she presents an offer that the listener might accept or reject. When the Modh Baniya Mahajan asserted that "in the opinion of the caste, your proposal to go to England is not proper. Our religion forbids voyages abroad. You have to cross the waters; all this you must know is against our caste rules," he was making an offer—or, as Habermas prefers to say, raising a validity claim, which Gandhi rejected. He said, "I do not think it is at all against our religion to go to England. I intend going there for further studies." On hearing this, the Mahajan provided support for the validity claim made in the first speech act by noting that "it is not possible to live there without compromising our religion. One is obliged to eat and drink with the Europeans! We are positively informed that you will have to eat flesh and drink wine in England." To this, Gandhi replied, "What I have heard about England is quite different from what you say; one need not take meat and wine there. And I have already solemnly promised to my mother to abstain from three things you fear most."

On Gandhi's rejoinder, the Mahajan, however, turned "deaf to argument" and averred, "but we tell you that it is not possible to keep our religion there." It was impossible for the Mahajan, who was "deaf to argument" in this communication situation, to continue the reasoning reflectively. The Mahajan was unable to make a counterargument based on Gandhi's reasoning, and as a result, it was impossible for them to come to an agreement or establish a consensus. This dialogue, in which the Mahajan and Gandhi spoke commensurable languages, may have evolved into a deliberation characterized by the exchange of ideas, openness, and reciprocity—all the staples of "communicative rationality" to resolve the stand-off—proved in effect a nonstarter. In fact, Gandhi's repeated pleas, "I am helpless," reflect the lack of commensurate communication involved in the conversation.

There are three distinct strategies for responding to an argument: elucidate the internal inconsistencies of the opponent's argument, make an argument for different readings of the parameters of the discourse,

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and build a criticism by drawing from another discourse's structure. Gandhi used all three approaches during his public dialogue with the Modh Baniya Mahajan. Gandhi maintained that Hinduism did not have a single canonical text, nor did it have a single, definitive interpretation of its scriptures ("My father's friend and adviser, [Mavji Dave,] who is a learned Brahmin, sees no objection to my going to England"), that tradition took many different forms ("As for crossing the waters, if our brethren can go as far as Aden, why could not I go to England?"), and that tradition required a new reading, a new interpretation, and a new evaluation in the light of "reason" ("I intend going there for further studies. . . . I think the caste should not interfere in the matter."). Significantly, Gandhi used two conflicting frameworks of discourse in this dialogue. In his own mind, he was a believer and a Hindu, but at the same time, he considered himself to be a man of "reason," and someone who had a firm belief in the fundamental principles of "humanism" and "justice." Even though he attempted to portray himself as a devoted Hindu, he found it impossible to criticize tradition without appealing to "reason." Gandhi was unable to provide the Mahajan with the foundations of a different style of thinking since he had already acknowledged the validity of the Hindu tradition as a framework for discussion. Gandhi was of the opinion that the foundational pillars of a tradition should always be distinguished from the beliefs and practices that emerged organically out of that tradition through time. He believed that tradition might be changed by challenging its inadmissible, unfair, and irrational aspects. However, Gandhi discovered from his dialogue with the Mahajan that not everybody could be convinced by the persuasive force of criticism and pleas to reason. The discussion that Gandhi had with the Mahajan was illustrative of a more systemic issue that the reformers faced while trying to reconcile the discourse of tradition with that of the discourse of "reason." The public dialogue between Gandhi and the Mahajan broke down, deepening divides, even though they shared similar frameworks of thought.

Since the Modh Baniya Mahajan and Gandhi could not communicate with each other, even though they spoke similar languages and participated in the discussion as equals, they should have gone their separate ways. However, the dimension of power interceded and disrupted this stalemate, resolving it on the side of the Mahajan. Faced with a breakdown in reaching a consensus, the Mahajan took recourse to violence by making threatening statements against Gandhi: "Will you disregard the orders of the caste? As heads of the caste, you know our power. Therefore, we command you to reconsider your decision, or else the heaviest punishment will be meted out to you." Gandhi had no choice other than to accept the Mahajan's decision; he had no right to leave the conversation and go his separate way. Gandhi was excommunicated even though his language was commensurable with the language of the Mahajan. "This boy shall be treated as an outcaste from today," the Mahajan said. Gandhi was unsuccessful in his endeavors, despite the fact that he and the Mahajan shared a common language and that Gandhi's language of "keeping religion" was understandable to the Mahajan. To put it differently, the public sphere reflected Gandhi's language, recognized it, and even demonstrated an understanding of what he had to say. However, the commensurability of languages and worlds did not facilitate the emergence of communicative rationality between Gandhi and the Mahajan.

Moreover, the public sphere of the Modh Baniyas was not only a place where private people came together to be the public by overcoming their autonomy and individuality in order to recognize their commonality and thinking on and discussing matters of common public interest. It was also a venue where members of the Modh Baniya caste were compelled to come together to reassemble themselves as a public. "Every member of the caste was called upon to attend the meeting, under pain of forfeiting a fine of five annas" (Gandhi 1956–94, 1:45–46). This required them to overcome their insularity and exclusivity as well as to recognize the need to connect with one another. The public meeting made it possible for the Modh Baniyas to turn a private affair into a public one, contributing to the formation of a distinct caste public in the process. Gandhi's crossing of the *kālā pānī* was the subject of public debate. The defining characteristics of the Modh Baniya caste were reexamined, and a new understanding was established based on that examination. The community of the Modh Baniyas was reconstituted through a public discussion that took place in the public sphere. The community's borders were defined publicly. The identifiers of the Modh Baniya identity were made public, which meant that the public was involved in making new borders and describing how the public saw the caste community.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Market as a Metaphor of Rationality

According to Habermas, the public sphere is a forum for rational conversation and dialogue. It is a consensual space for reaching agreement through the use of rational argumentation. The persuasive force of reason allows disputes in arguments to be addressed, and also allows for the discursive formation of a rational will. On the one hand, this entails the progression of critical reasoning in a linear fashion, and on the other hand, it involves the strengthening of the market and private property. Thus, the rationality of the market in conditions of rough-and-ready competition is reflected in the idea of the public sphere as the location for the project of communicative rationality. In fact, the market is a precondition for the emergence of the public sphere because it is only the discourse of a free market that allows the idea that a rational, critical, and free debate can transcend power structures and consolidate the general interest of society. Just as the notion of commodity signifying voluntary exchanges does not carry on its surface the marks of exploitation, the public sphere is unconnected to either exploitation or power. Habermas thus uses a twofold teleology in his analysis of the historical development of the public sphere. The histories of reason and the market are entwined, mutually sustaining one another, and together they make their way steadily ahead through a period of constraints and into a period of freedom. The success of the free market and the protection of individual property rights is also the success of reason. Moreover, Habermas (1984, 15) says,

> In the contexts of communicative action, we call someone rational not only if he is able to put forward an assertion and, when criticised, to provide grounds for it by pointing to appropriate evidence, but also if he is following an established norm and is able, when criticised, to justify his actions by explicating the given situation in the light of legitimate expectations.

According to Habermas's (1984, 25) line of reasoning, the interlocutors are rational if they are receptive to argument, but they are not rational if they are "deaf to argument." He also states that "a person is rational . . . if he can adopt a reflective attitude to the value standards through which desires and feelings are interpreted" (Habermas 1984, 20). It should also be made clear that in Habermasian language, the phrase "public use of reason" (Habermas 1989, 27) means the public use of argumentation and reasoning skills, not the use of reason based on logic.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Bombay experienced a significant period of industrial development and growth. A booming textile industry was the driving force behind this industrial growth. The advantageous geographical position of Bombay, which included both an extensive cotton-growing hinterland as well as easy access to domestic and global markets, was the driving force behind the city's industrial boom. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a more diverse structure of industrial activity had been established as a result of the development of a consumer sector as well as a sophisticated system of communications (Kumar 1969, 366). However, the Modh Baniya public sphere in Bombay was not a sphere where reason emerged in a linear fashion. The Mahajan was incapable of letting himself be enlightened about his irrationality when Gandhi pleaded that "one need not take meat and wine" in England. The Mahajan lacked the capacity to act reflectively with respect to his subjectivity.

Hannah Arendt, whose idea of publicness also informs Habermas's theory, contends that a rational public individual must possess the quality of having a reflecting attitude toward one's own conduct. Arendt (1998, 27) is of the opinion that "not logos but *nous*"—"the capacity of contemplation, whose chief characteristic is that its content cannot be rendered in speech"—is necessary to the functioning of rational thought. It is this notion of *nous* that is more pertinent to the critical aspect of Habermas's idea of communicative rationality (as well as for its expression as "rational-critical debate" in the public arena). The triumph of the market and private property did not teleologically lead to a triumph of reason, as the Mahajan engaged in irrational forms of deliberation. This was because during the period of British colonial rule, the course of development of the independent reason-bearing person was hampered by the presence of religious and caste hierarchies. The language of tradition and reason, as well as those of the common good and community interests, were interwoven within the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

public discourse. In the same way that reason was found inside tradition and expressed through the language of tradition, reason was the lens through which tradition was understood and appropriated in the public sphere.

The Modh Baniya public sphere can then be characterized as operating around "distorted communication" (Habermas 1970). This means that the norms of "the ideal speech situation" were breached, and the Modh Baniya Mahajan was able to force his viewpoint on everyone else. Language was used not for the purpose of reaching a reasonable agreement, but rather for the purpose of intimidating members of the Modh Baniya caste into submission: "This boy shall be treated as an outcaste from today. We command everyone not to have anything to do with him. He who will support him must be treated as an outcaste." However, this understanding reached through communicative rationality on Gandhi's voyage was "hybrid" in nature.

Education in England was expensive. It is said that Gandhi's travel abroad cost an incredible amount of money at the time, close to 13,000 rupees (Weber 2012, 465). Since the possibility of finding someone to lend money was better in Bombay, Lakshmidas and Gandhi decided to go there. Lakshmidas borrowed whatever money was necessary to fund Gandhi's travel and stay in England. The shortfall was made up by pawning the family jewelry. Since he could not remain away from his work, Lakshmidas left Gandhi in Bombay with Raliatben, their sister, and her husband Vrandavandas, to whom he also entrusted the passage money (Gandhi, Gandhi, and Yellin 1998, 38). No sooner had Lakshmidas departed from Bombay than word came that for defying the Modh Baniya Mahajan, who had forbidden the trip across the *kālā pānī*, Gandhi was outcasted, in effect making him an "Untouchable" in a very hierarchical and closely ordered society. The most immediate effect was on Vrandavandas. He would not give Gandhi the money for the trip because he was afraid he would lose his caste, even though Lakshmidas had given him permission to do so in a letter (Nayar 1965, 1:224). In the end, Gandhi had to borrow from Ranchhodlal Patwari, who was not a Modh Baniya and hence did not face the prohibitions of the Mahajan (Desai 2009, 1:39–40). Ranchhodlal was later repaid by Vrandavandas. Since Vrandavandas did not directly help Gandhi monetarily, he did not break the caste rules. Instead, he merely gave Ranchhodlal the money that was entrusted to him for safekeeping.

When Gandhi first went to England, he made an effort to live like a proper English gentleman by checking into a first-class hotel and dressing in elegant, well-tailored clothing. However, his spending was more than his finances could handle at the time. Although he was constantly adjusting his way of life in an effort to make it more compatible with the resources at his disposal, Gandhi was forced to make repeated requests for financial assistance from his family in India. Once again, the majority of the financial burden was shouldered by Lakshmidas, who raised funds within the Modh Baniya caste to help cover Gandhi's costs while in England. Similarly, these Modh Baniyas lent the money to Lakshmidas and not to Gandhi directly, thereby honoring the caste injunctions of the Modh Baniya Mahajan. In fact, they were not excommunicated afterward (Nayar 1965, 1:223). The understanding reached through communicative rationality was therefore dichotomized: an understanding of "conformity" and an understanding of "subversion." Faced with excommunication, Vrandavandas and the Modh Baniyas publicly conformed to the caste injunctions of the Modh Baniya Mahajan by refusing to directly lend money to Gandhi, while Vrandavandas subverted it by repaying the money to Ranchhodlal Patwari, from whom Gandhi had borrowed the money, and the Modh Baniyas by lending the money to Lakshmidas, who sent it to Gandhi. Communicative rationality therefore generated a "hybrid" understanding inscribed with the dual marks of conformity, but not quite, and subversion, but not quite.

The Private and the Public within Colonial Society

In his book *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, published in 1993, Partha Chatterjee constructs a compelling case for the development of the public and the private in the context of colonial India. Chatterjee contends that nationalism fought back against colonialism by establishing its own sphere of sovereignty inside the society of the colonized. To achieve this, the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

colonized divided the universe of social structures and practices into two distinct domains: the spiritual and the material. The spiritual realm was an "inner" domain that was engraved with the fundamental characteristics that defined the national cultural identity. The realm of the material, which included statecraft and the economy as well as science and technology, was the "outer" domain in which the West maintained its preeminent position. The dichotomy between the two spheres was rearticulated as an opposition between the outer and the inner, the public and the private, the Western and the Indian, modernity and tradition, male and female, and, to a certain extent, the political and the cultural (Bhattacharya 2005). In the material realm, the supremacy of the West was recognized, and the principles of modernity, together with its organizational forms as well as practices, were adopted. In this public domain, which was produced by the processes of colonization, nationalism worked via the concepts of Western modernity, which asserted its claim to universality. The goal of the nationalist movement in the material sphere was not to compete with the West using Indian culture, but rather to broaden and realize the underlying fundamentals of Western statecraft as well as eliminate the signs of colonial difference—those factors that prevented those who had been colonized from participating in the political domain. It was in the realm of the spiritual, the inner domain, that the autonomy of the country, the uniqueness of its culture, was to be protected and resistance to the interference of the colonial authorities was to be offered. This was where nationalism tried to launch its most ambitious goal, which was "to make a modern national culture that is not western" (Chatterjee 1993, 6).

Caste, as a marker of traditional society in India, represented hierarchy, rigidity, and backwardness, which threatened to deny the country the opportunities of modern self-governance. This was a widely held belief of the colonizers, on the basis of which they justified their hold over colonial India. For the nationalists, it was only proper to deny that caste was a core feature of Indian society. However, it was the institution of caste that made Indian society essentially different from the West, and in such a perception, caste as an ideal system based on the functional division of labor that brought order and stability in society was stressed. According to Chatterjee, both positions of the nationalists concerning the caste question were well placed within the framework of modernity. Liberal equality entrenched within bourgeois modernity called for a condemnation of oppressive caste practices, while the latter position maintained that caste in its ideal form was not incompatible with the principles of universal modernity. The institution of caste as contributing to maintaining unity and stability in social order was, in the words of Chatterjee, a synthetic theory of caste. Synthetic theories of caste naturalized the condition of the relation of dominance and subordination that constituted the principle of hierarchy between numerous castes. By stressing instead on the ideology of dharma, which determined the unity of mutual separateness and mutual dependence between *jati*s, such theories enabled the continued reproduction of the caste system (Chatterjee 1993, 173–99). In this context, Dirks (2001, 12–13) argues that in India, "caste was understood always to have resisted political intrusion; it was already a kind of civil society in that it regulated and mediated the private domain, such as it was." He suggests that caste "became the colonial form of civil society" (16). For the nationalists, therefore, caste was firmly positioned within the autonomous spiritual domain, which was the basis of self-identity of the nation. This source of self-identity needed to be preserved against the encroachments of modernity.

The Modh Baniya caste public gathering, while clearly not nationalism, was a public sphere activity inasmuch as it made very identical types of demands for "the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture," functioned in the exact same public arena, used the very same methods of publicity, and communicated through the very same venues as the nationalist movement in India. The Modh Baniyas came to think of "caste" as belonging to the spiritual domain and bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity, which had to be protected from the "polluting" touch of the material domain. Since talking about caste as caste in the modern public sphere would incarcerate one into a premodern realm, caste was transcoded into something else. Throughout the conversation between the Modh Baniya Mahajan and Gandhi, caste masqueraded as consuming vegetarian food, while pointing out that crossing the *kālā pānī* was against caste rules because, as the Mahajan said, "one is obliged to eat and drink with the Europeans! We are positively informed that you will have to eat flesh and drink wine in England." In a similar manner, Gandhi made a solemn commitment to refrain from the three things that the Mahajan dreaded the most. "I am sure the vow will keep me

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

safe," Gandhi said. Abstaining from meat and wine in England was caste by other means. In this way, caste was located in the inner spiritual domain, while meat and wine were the corrupting agents of the material domain. Caste was consequently a realm over which the country had to assert its authority, and so refused to allow the material domain to intervene in that domain.

Gandhi may have never considered traveling to England if his father had still been alive. Even if Gandhi's father had been presented with the possibility of Gandhi going to England, he would have scoffed at the idea without even giving it a second thought. Outside India, it was difficult for the Modh Baniyas to adhere to the severe dietary taboos that governed their way of life. Consequently, prejudice against crossing the *kālā pānī* was much more pronounced among them (Guha 2014, 33). Gandhi's mother was initially opposed to the notion of her son traveling to England because she wanted him to remain closer to home. She advised that he first discuss the matter with his uncle, Tulsidas, in an effort to dissuade him. "Uncle," she said, "is now the eldest member of the family. He should first be consulted. If he consents, we will consider the matter" (Gandhi 1927, 1:93). Tulsidas expressed his apprehensions about food and clothing habits in England. The utmost that Tulsidas could be made to concede was that if Gandhi's mother did not mind his going to England, he had no right to interfere. "It is your mother's permission that really matters," said Tulsidas, to avoid directly helping Gandhi in the "irreligious act" of traveling to England (Gandhi 1927, 1:95). He was afraid that if he did so, he might be outcasted for cooperating directly with Gandhi's going to England (Nayar 1965, 1:220–21).

Moreover, anticipating Putlibai's objection on the grounds of religion to her son going abroad, where, she had heard, one could not live without eating meat, Mavji Dave, a friend and adviser of the Gandhi family, said: "Let him [Gandhi] take with him some *udad dal*, and cook for himself. There will (then) be no objection on the score of religion" (Nayar 1965, 1:218–19). Finally, however, Putlibai said she would consult Becharji Maharaj, a Jaina monk who had originally belonged to the Modh Baniya caste. The monk told her that he would administer to her son the three vows that Gandhi should "not touch wine, women, or meat," and then he could safely be allowed to go abroad. This being done, Putlibai gave her consent (Gandhi 1927, 1:97). Such concerns regarding the consumption of only vegetarian food reinforce Chatterjee's (1993, 6) point that "the greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain" by means of access to English education, learning and participating in the language of English law, etc., "the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture." If the Modh Baniyas could not escape being hegemonized by the modernity of the West in the material domain, they had to do so without compromising on their true, autonomous identity in the spiritual domain. This meant that they would not let the corrupting effects of meat and wine affect them in the spiritual realm of caste.

To put it differently, if the material sphere represented the superiority of the colonial rulers, it was the spiritual domain that was the main source of strength and autonomy of the colonized. The spiritual domain represented the true sovereignty of the nationalists. Hence, it needed to be preserved that way. It was in the inner spiritual realm that the colonized assumed sovereignty from any external domination, and this was precisely because the East was considered superior to the West in spiritual terms. Gandhi's decision to go to England meant losing the cultural distinctness and, hence, the superiority of the colonized people over the colonizers, because the Modh Baniyas were of the opinion that Gandhi "will have to eat flesh and drink wine in England." Tulsidas, Gandhi's uncle, had similar doubts about whether he could live in England and still follow the Hindu norms regarding food and drink. "When I meet these big barristers, I see no difference between their life and that of the Europeans. They know no scruples regarding food," he said (Gandhi 1927, 1:95). Tulsidas therefore dared not give permission to Gandhi to go to England. The inner spiritual domain was one that needed to be preserved from all the corrupting material encroachments. The Modh Baniyas performed the historic task of preserving the sovereignty of the spiritual domain by becoming a public and enforcing domination over those who threatened to pollute the spiritual domain with material forces.

Moreover, this process was at the same time an act of self-discipline. Following Michel Foucault's (1982) reading of the modern concept of power, the Modh Baniya Mahajan's authority and decision-making can be seen as aimed at normalizing social regulations to guide or enable self-disciplining

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among the Modh Baniyas. The power of self-discipline with regard to social conventions reconfigured the social environment in order to guide and affect the conduct of the Modh Baniyas. Not only was Gandhi excommunicated from the caste, but others of his caste, including his whole family, were liable to a monetary penalty as a kind of punishment if they so much as saw him depart from the dock. Gandhi's fellow caste members were ordered to have nothing to do with him, and his parents-in-law seemed to have taken this injunction to heart. Even the chosen few who had supported Gandhi through thick and thin left him alone (Gandhi 1956–94, 1:46). Gandhi was outcasted because his crossing the *kālā pānī* was tantamount to contaminating the inner spiritual domain with the polluting touch of modernity.

The Private as Public and Political

The separation of the public and the private spheres is an essential component of Habermas's public sphere, which serves to guarantee the objective rationality of the public sphere. The private is viewed as the domain of interests like "normative opinions" and "collective prejudices," to use Habermas's terminology (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974, 50). However, many activities that are ostensibly done in private have important implications for the public in India: the covering of a woman's face with her headscarf to preserve her modesty; the practice of tying a *dhoti* and wrapping a turban to identify one's position, caste, or community; having meals with certain people while avoiding others to denote purity and pollution barriers or their violation; the practice of donning a holy thread to denote one's position as a twice-born member of the higher caste; mounting or not mounting a horse in a bridal procession to indicate one's social standing; getting married to a widow; traveling across the polluted ocean; and so on (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006, 153–54). If emulating the Western society was the realm of the material world, then caste was a component of the spiritual domain, which indicated autonomy against the invasion of modernity inside colonial society. The concern of the Modh Baniya caste council to preserve the distinctness of the spiritual domain of caste caused them to violate the divide between the "public" and the "private" spheres, which is a foundational dichotomy for Habermas. Even though the decision to educate Gandhi in England was a private family matter, the Modh Baniyas raised the cry of the spiritual domain in danger, that is, "caste" was beyond the reach of the material domain.

A farewell ceremony was held on August 9, 1888, for Gandhi at the high school he attended in Rajkot. The event was covered by a regional newspaper, which stated that "Gandhi is the first Baniya from Kathiawar who proceeds to England to prosecute his studies for the Barrister's Examination" (Gandhi 1965, 83). This enraged the Modh Baniyas. Gandhi was given a stern warning by the Mahajan of the Modh Baniya caste council that if he went to England, he would be banished from the community. The warning that the Mahajan issued spread across the community. A massive gathering of the Modh Baniyas was convened at the center of Bombay's commercial hub in order to solve the issue. The Modh Baniyas gathered as a singular and unitary modern public, constituted of individuals whose social moorings were not irrelevant. A "private" matter was put on the public agenda. The negotiations entailed in forbidding Gandhi's decision to travel overseas as against the norms and rules of the Modh Baniya community were discussed publicly. As Gandhi sat in the center, the Modh Baniya Mahajan got into a heated argument with him. It was explained to him that if he went, he would become the first person from the Modh Baniya caste to disobey the rule prohibiting members of their caste from traveling beyond the *kālā pānī*. Gandhi answered that he was going to England to study law. The Mahajan was unmoved. Nonetheless, Gandhi sailed for England, for which he was outcasted. Therefore, Habermas's insistence that there must be a clear demarcation between the private and the public domains in order for there to be a public sphere was unsustainable in the context of India's colonial modernity.

After successfully completing his legal studies and examinations, Gandhi was licensed to practice law on June 10, 1891, and he was registered at the High Court the following day. On June 12, he went aboard the *Oceana*, the vessel that was going to transport him home to India. This brought him to Yemen, where he changed ships and continued his journey to Bombay on the *SS Assam*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Gandhi 1927, 1:196, 202). During the journey, two questions troubled him: "How would his caste receive him (he had heard in letters of continuing objections), and how would he begin a career?" (Gandhi 2006, 48). "The storm in my caste over my foreign voyage was still brewing," Gandhi (1927, 1:213) writes in his autobiography.

Lelyveld (2011, 35) contends that Gandhi did have significant pragmatic motivations for restoring his relationship with his caste in order to regain their favor. Gandhi thought that most of his clients would be from the Modh Baniya caste. This meant that Gandhi's reputation with the Modh Baniyas would affect his chances of becoming a successful lawyer in India. Karamchand Gandhi's pension had stopped after his death. He had not accumulated much wealth during his years as the *diwan* and had spent most of his money on the education and marriages of his sons. Shortly after the death of the head of the household, the family found itself in a dire financial situation. Gandhi, out of Karamchand's three sons and one daughter, was considered to have the most potential in terms of his intelligence. So, he was the one who was sent to England to study law and ensure the family's financial stability in the years to come. Lakshmidas had to bear a large part of the cost of Gandhi's overseas travel, stay, and education in England. He was also aware of the many reasons why it was essential for Gandhi to travel to England for the family, and he never wavered in his support of Gandhi's decision, even when he was excommunicated. This contributed significantly to the expectations and responsibility that the lawyer, who had received his education in England, would indeed start fulfilling his obligations and also share his earnings with the members of the "joint family" when he returned to India. Lakshmidas was only a locally trained law clerk and Karsandas was a sub-inspector of the royal Rajkot police. As Arun Gandhi writes, "neither position commanded a large income or much prestige" and, therefore, "all the family's expectations for the future were now concentrated on Gandhi" (Gandhi, Gandhi, and Yellin 1998, 33).

In the conventional Indian worldview, a person is seen as being entangled in a complex network of social relationships. These comprise the caste, the family and kinship network, but most importantly, the family, which is here understood in its broadest sense to encompass not just the father and mother but also the children as well as siblings. The person grows all through his childhood in the middle of these relationships, experiences various levels of connection and devotion to the people involved, and therefore inherits a variety of social and prudential responsibilities to them as a result. The duties result from a number of different sources, including the bonds of family, mutual interests, favors done in the past either for oneself or for one's parents, and the anticipated or hoped-for assistance in the future. If he is unfortunate to fall on hard times, the people who are most likely to assist him are his relatives or members of the welfare groups associated with his caste. This is especially the case due because the social services provided by the government continue to be burdensome, bureaucratic, and often tainted with corruption. The family is important to the Indian way of life. A person feels like an integral member of the family and is tied to his parents and, to a lesser degree, his siblings by the strongest connections of affection and loyalty. They also often make significant sacrifices to raise him and provide him with the best possible start in life, putting him in debt (Parekh 2009).

When Gandhi reached Bombay on July 5, 1891, he was informed by Lakshmidas that their mother Putlibai had passed away a few months before. She wanted him to undergo purification and atonement (Gandhi 1927, 1:206). This was her dying wish. "If I am not alive when he returns," she had told Lakshmidas, "do get him to undergo the purification ceremony at Nasik and give a caste dinner to all the members of the caste in Rajkot" (Nayar 1965, 1:273). This was what his brother also desired. Gandhi considered Putlibai's dying wish and his brother's expectations to be no less than a scriptural prescription. He obliged and complied with his mother's wish out of reverence and with his brother's expectation out of a sense of brotherly obligation. Moreover, it was important for Gandhi's elder brother, Lakshmidas, to maintain cordial relations with his caste. He had made many sacrifices for Gandhi's education (Desai 2009, 1:72). Gandhi was committed to respecting his brother's wish when he suggested that Gandhi should undergo purification. In this context, structures in the form of expectations constrained Gandhi's ability to act "otherwise." As Gandhi (1927, 1:214) writes in his autobiography, "I did not like all this. But my brother's love for me was boundless, and my devotion to him was in proportion to it, and so I mechanically acted as he wished, taking his will to be law."

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Together with Lakshmidas, Gandhi went to Nasik to take part in a "purification" ceremony that required him to be immersed in the River Godavari while a priest was there to oversee the process. Thereafter, the priest presented Gandhi with certificates attesting to the fact that he had successfully completed his ablutions. Following this, the Gandhi family hosted a feast in Rajkot for the members of the caste (Gandhi 1927, 1:214). The dinner was a ritual of expiation. Gandhi stripped to the waist and served all the guests personally. The majority of the members of the Modh Baniya caste were placated as a result of this action. The historic task before the Modh Baniyas was to preserve the sovereignty of the spiritual domain while at the same time refashion it to fit the changing times. Their decision to revoke Gandhi's excommunication after his public expiatory ceremony and the caste dinner showed that they were trying to change and rebuild the spiritual domain to make it more "modern" in all respects.

Moreover, Gandhi's purification ceremony for readmission to the caste reinforces the fact that he and the Modh Baniyas shared the same commensurable languages and worlds. This meant that Gandhi could perform particular purification ceremonies to cleanse himself of the polluting touch of modernity. However, in defiance of the custom, Gandhi refused to pay the fine that was demanded of him by the Modh Baniyas in Bombay and Porbandar, which reflected his ability to "have acted differently." He never made any attempt to seek admission to the faction that had persisted with the boycott (Gandhi 1927, 1:214). The elders of the family also assured him that they, too, were equally firm on that point and would back him through thick and thin (Nayar 1965, 1:281). Rather than getting back on good terms with his caste, Gandhi (1956–94, 1:56–57) thought it was better to renounce his sheep-like caste-fellows. Brown (1990, 27) argues that Gandhi "disliked" undergoing purification, and "never thereafter tried to placate the diehards in the community who refused to forgive his disobedience in going abroad." Thus, Gandhi's actual practice in real life constantly challenged the caste system (Biswas 2018).

Eleanor Zelliot (1996, 152) states that the Modh Baniyas in Bombay and Porbandar who outcasted Gandhi "evidently never rescinded the proscription." The result was that Gandhi's sister Raliat and her husband, and the parents of Kasturba, who belonged to the minority group, were forbidden from giving even a drink of water to Gandhi when he visited their houses (Gandhi 1927, 1:214–15). Gandhi fully respected the caste regulations on excommunication. He would also not even accept water from their homes, despite their willingness to surreptitiously circumvent caste rules (Gandhi 1927, 1:215). In this context, Gandhi's complete adherence to the caste laws can be seen as Gandhi and the Modh Baniyas in Bombay and Porbandar sharing the same commensurable languages and worlds. Moreover, Gandhi's in-laws' actions convey a narrative about their free will and desires, and the formation of a subjectivity that challenged and navigated the constraints that were placed on them by the community in a variety of different ways. In this way, the private sphere was itself divided into two distinct domains: one that encouraged compliance, and the other that encouraged rebellion. As a result of being subjected to the demands of the community, Gandhi's in-laws publicly adhered to the expectations of the societal norms, while in private, away from the prying eyes of the community people, they worked covertly to fulfill their particular aspirations. Underneath the public script that encouraged compliance, there existed a hidden script that encouraged defiance.

Conclusion: Reimagining the Public Sphere

In colonial India, the Modh Baniya public gathering and its discussion suggest a reconsideration of the public sphere. It was a public sphere that was unilingual, with Gandhi and the Modh Baniya Mahajan speaking the same language. This indicated the presence not only of commensurable tongues but also of commensurable beliefs between them. This was conducive to the possibility of an agreement as well as to communication itself. Gandhi also did not have any historically handed-down deprivations, either in material or in caste terms. Thus, the dialogue between Gandhi and the Mahajan took place under conditions approximating an ideal speech situation.

However, the public debate between Gandhi and the Mahajan demonstrated that the development of communicative rationality in the public sphere is unlikely to be facilitated by the existence of a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188 Published online by Cambridge University Press

singular and homogeneous modern public with its members speaking languages and inhabiting worlds that are commensurable. Even when Gandhi and the Mahajan shared similar frameworks of thought, their horizons did not fuse and consensus did not emerge between them. Gandhi was excommunicated to keep the spiritual domain out of the reach of any kind of material intervention. Moreover, the Modh Baniyas, except for those in Bombay and Porbandar, decided to give Gandhi back his social privileges, after his completion of a sacramental rite of cleansing, in order to reform and modernize the spiritual domain and make it fit for modern times. Modernity was made admissible by portraying it as traditional, while tradition was adopted within the framework of rationality. Thus, under colonialism, the private sphere was neither the exclusive province of tradition nor was the public sphere only under the influence of modernity. Both the private and the public spheres bore the twin signs of tradition and modernity simultaneously.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to the Editorial Board of *The Journal of Asian Studies* for their initial comments on this article. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their rigorous critiques of the article. The critical reviews and detailed feedback provided by the reviewers helped develop and sharpen the article's argument.

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Cite this article: Biswas, Sujay (2022). Reimagining the Public Sphere: Commensurability and Communicative Rationality under Colonialism. *The Journal of Asian Studies* **81**, 707–725. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911822001188

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