

GANDHI AND BANARAS

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was a writer, teacher, diplomat and statesman. He made notable contributions in each of these fields. But surely his most generous act was to gift the President's summer palace to the scholars of the nation. The act, remarkable in its own time, seems even more astonishing in retrospect, for we now live in a society where using public office for private gain has become depressingly common.

For this lecture in Radhakrishnan's memory, I have chosen to speak on 'Gandhi and Banaras'. Gandhi was the greatest modern Hindu; Banaras is the oldest and certainly the most storied of cities associated with the Hindu faith. Now Radhakrishnan was himself a Hindu by upbringing, and an interpreter of Hindu philosophy by vocation. Besides, he lived for many years in Banaras, serving as Vice Chancellor of the Banaras Hindu University in what may be reckoned (again, in retrospect) its days of glory.

Some of the questions that interested and intrigued me as I prepared this talk were: What did Gandhi make of Banaras? What kind of things did he do and say on his visits to the city? What do his statements in Banaras tell us about him, or about the city, or about Hinduism itself? And, finally, are there any contemporary resonances of what Gandhi said or did in Banaras?



By my calculations—and my source here is the detailed chronology of his life prepared by Chandubhai Dalal—Gandhi came to Banaras on fourteen separate occasions. The visits were all short, often lasting just a day or two, and oriented towards a particular public event or function.

The first time Gandhi came to Banaras, however, was merely as a tourist. This was in 1902, when he was relatively unknown. He was then briefly back in India from South Africa. As a devout Hindu, Gandhi naturally wanted to visit the most celebrated of the city's shrines, the Kashi Viswanath temple. He was unimpressed by what he saw. 'The swarming flies and the noise made by the shopkeepers and pilgrims were perfectly insufferable', he wrote, adding: 'Where one expected an atmosphere of meditation and communion, it was conspicuous by its absence'.

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

Gandhi's next, and most famous, visit to Banaras occurred in February 1916. He had been invited to the founding ceremonies of the Banaras Hindu University, whose prime movers were Annie Besant and the Allahabad scholar Madan Mohan Malaviya. The creation of a centre of modern education in an ancient town had originally been Mrs Besant's idea. Malaviya was instrumental in raising the money and in supervising the construction of an impressive campus. Among the patrons were influential Maharajas. They would be in

attendance at the ceremony, which was to be inaugurated by the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge.

A massive amphitheatre had been constructed for the opening of the University. The spectators were distributed across fifteen different stands, their cards of admissions issued in five colours to help them find their seats. The band struck up 'God Save the King' as the Viceroy came and took his place. Around him sat sundry Maharajas, Lieutenant Governors, and Knights of the Realm.

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

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



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

Gandhi's autobiography does not mention this particular visit to Banaras. Whether the omission was deliberate one cannot say. (The book was written as a series of articles, and in any case memoirists have the freedom to include, or exclude, memories as they please.) Yet the omission is striking nonetheless. For Gandhi's speech in Banaras represents the real moment of his arrival in Indian politics. What he said created a stir, with some members of the audience walking out in protest.

When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, his mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, had advised him to travel for a year and refrain from speaking. He had to know India before he could judge it. Gandhi spent the whole of 1915 travelling to different parts of the country, seeing, thinking, observing. The period of probation now over, he was free to speak his mind. This speech at Banaras was the first properly *public* statement he made after his return to the homeland.

The most powerful part of Gandhi's speech consisted of a direct attack on the dignitaries who were also the new university's main patrons. This, he said, was 'certainly a most gorgeous show'. But he worried about the contrast between the bejewelled benefactors present and 'millions of the poor' Indians who were absent. Was it necessary, asked Gandhi,

‘that in order to show the truest loyalty to our King-Emperor, it is necessary for us to ransack our jewellery-boxes and to appear bedecked from head to toe?’ Gandhi told the privileged invitees that ‘there is no salvation for India unless you strip yourself of this jewelry and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India (“Hear, hear” and applause)’. ‘There can be no spirit of self-government about us,’ he went on, ‘if we take away or allow others to take away from the peasants almost the whole of the results of their labour.’

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

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



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

Unconcerned, Gandhi carried on. He now asked why, when the Viceroy came to Banaras, there were so many detectives on the streets and on rooftops. Was this a sign of fear? He then spoke of the anarchists of Bengal, who sought to throw bombs at high officials in the hope that they would be terrorized into fleeing India. He knew some people admired these terrorists, and even claimed that the Government had annulled the Partition of Bengal because of them. Gandhi, however, called their zeal 'misdirected, and wondered why they were so afraid to come into the open'.

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

The caveat entered, Gandhi returned to the polemical mode. He deplored 'the atmosphere of sycophancy and falsity' that surrounded the high officials of the Raj. He characterized their behaviour as 'overbearing' and 'tyrannical'. He then said that Indians would never be granted

self-government; they had to take it for themselves, as the Boers had done in South Africa. The suggestion of a rebellion against the Raj led to more agitation on the stage. Mrs Besant asked Gandhi once more to stop; the Chairman, an arch loyalist like the rest of his ilk, declared the meeting closed.

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

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

Gandhi had meanwhile left Banaras for Bombay, the news of the incident following him by bush telegraph. On the 9th of February, a correspondent from the Associated Press asked why his speech had become so controversial. Gandhi clarified that while he thought the anarchists had 'patriotic motives', their



methods did great damage in the long run. He had never endorsed violence; indeed, it was his 'firm belief that, but for Mrs. Besant's hasty and ill-conceived interruption, nothing would have happened and my speech in its completed state would have left no room for any doubt as to its meaning'.

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

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

The police and the Legal Remembrancer to the United Provinces (UP) Government both thought Gandhi's remarks

‘seditious and disloyal’, and recommended that he be arrested and prosecuted under the Indian Penal Code. The Chief Secretary disagreed; Gandhi, he noted, ‘is already a popular hero, and prosecution will only madden him still further and increase his influence with the students. Cold water seems better than the martyr’s stake’.

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

The notes and opinions went back and forth between the different departments of the UP Government. On the 17th of March—a full five weeks after the speech—the Lieutenant-Governor summed up the debate in a characteristically magisterial tone:

My own impression is that Gandhi started with the intention of talking against the use of violence in the nationalist campaign and the importance of cultivating higher qualities than brute force. . . . But however well designed the outlines of his address might have been, Gandhi clearly got carried away by his own rhetoric and by the applause with which the students received some unguarded expressions which he used.



In his growing excitement, he lost control of himself, and let out his real sentiments. Part of his speech was admirable; part was in thoroughly bad taste; the rest, though not a deliberate or intentional incitement to sedition, was in effect seditious and open to grave objection.

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

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

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

Banaras were there in part to forestall a second attack.

In 1912 Gandhi was in South Africa. The attack on the Viceroy may not have registered on his consciousness; or perhaps he must simply have forgotten about it. For him, the overwhelming presence of policemen was proof of the suspicion that the rulers had towards their subjects. On the other side, the bomb-throwers, too, were fearful and paranoid—otherwise why didn't they state their arguments openly and non-violently?

The official commentary on Gandhi's speech focused on whether the references to anarchism were 'seditious'. But in fact, the speech of 1916 was—and is—notable for far more than its treatment of violence and non-violence. In Banaras, Gandhi made three fundamental claims about how Indians should conduct their affairs:

First, Gandhi pointed to the sharp inequalities between different groups in India. He contrasted the luxuriant lifestyles of the Maharajas on stage in Banaras with the desperate poverty of the majority of Indians. He thus demanded of the wealthy a more caring and responsible attitude towards the poor. Thus he asked the princes to cast off their jewels, and told the students that they must acquaint themselves with the living conditions of peasants, artisans, and labourers;

Second, he asked that officials of the State identify more closely with those they governed over. He deplored the arrogance of the officers of the Indian Civil Service, who saw themselves as a ruling caste rather than as servants of the people;



Finally, Gandhi asked for a more critical attitude towards the present state of Hinduism. The Kashi Vishwanath was claimed to be the holiest temple in the holiest city of the Hindus. Why then was it so filthy? If Indians were incapable of maintaining even their places of worship, how then could they justify their claim for self-rule?

I now come to Gandhi's longest visit to Banaras.

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

The next day, he addressed a public meeting, in which the conservative element was significant, if not preponderant. A locally respected priest, one Pandit Devanayakcharya, speaking before Gandhi, had insisted that untouchability was sanctioned by the Shastras and thus part and parcel of the *sanatana dharma*. Gandhi, however, described the practice of

Untouchability as 'a blot on Hinduism'. He noted that in Banaras and elsewhere in India 'a dog can drink from a reservoir, but a thirsty Harijan boy may not. If he goes, he cannot escape being beaten. Untouchability as practised today considers man worse than a dog'.

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

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



On this visit in February 1920, Gandhi took long walks in the morning and evening, working during the day on the report. This is how he described what he saw on his walks:

Dawn and sunrise are impressive everywhere, but from the banks the sight was simply sublime. As the clouds brightened with the light of dawn, a golden sheen would appear on the waters of the Ganga and, when the sun had come into view over the horizon, there seemed to stand in the water of the river a great pillar of gold. ... After witnessing this magnificent sight, I felt I understood a little better the worship of the sun, the adoration of the rivers and the significance of the gayatri hymn.

Then Gandhi continued, in a shift of register:

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

Gandhi was back in Banaras towards the end of 1920, seeking

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

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

In October 1925, Gandhi was back in Banaras. Speaking at the Kashi Vidyapith, he remarked: 'Our old civilization has become soiled. It will become cleansed by our removing untouchability'. His next visit was in January 1927. Speaking at the BHU, he went back to one of the themes of his famous/notorious speech of February 1916. Pandit Malaviya had just collected a fresh round of funds from Rajas and Maharajas. 'The money apparently comes from these wealthy princes', remarked Gandhi, 'but in reality it comes from the millions of our poor. For unlike in Europe the rich of our land grow rich at the expense of our villagers the bulk of whom have to go



without a square meal a day. The education that you receive today is thus paid for by the starving villages who will never have the chance of such an education’.

Let me come, in the end, to Gandhi’s last visit to Banaras. This occurred a full forty years after the first. And it was at the invitation of the scholar in whose memory and honour I am now speaking. In January 1942 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was the Vice Chancellor of the Banaras Hindu University. Radhakrishnan was a long-time admirer of Gandhi, and in 1939, to mark the Mahatma’s 70th birthday, had put together a volume of tributes in his honour, with a glittering galaxy of contributors from all over the world, among them the novelist Pearl S. Buck, the philosopher Gilbert Murray, the scientist Albert Einstein, the art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, and the politician Jan Christian Smuts.

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

Gandhi’s Silver Jubilee Convocation address was given extempore. The first part of the lecture was about the importance of the mother tongue. Gandhi was unhappy that all those who had spoken before him had chosen to do so in English. ‘As speaker after speaker spoke and left the dais’, he remarked, ‘I longed for someone who would address the audience in Hindi or Urdu, or Hindustani, aye, even in

Sanskrit—even in Marathi, or for that matter in any of the Indian languages’.

Gandhi himself chose to speak in Hindustani. The languages he knew best were Gujarati and English, but here, in North India, he wisely spoke in the region’s lingua franca (even though it was his own third best language). One previous speaker had boasted that the university’s new engineering faculties were its pride and joy. Gandhi, characteristically, said that this did not, and would not, distinguish BHU from universities in the West. But the BHU could make a special, indeed unique, contribution if it actively fostered regular and mutually beneficial relations between India’s two major religious communities. A good way to begin would be have regular interactions with another great university which carried ‘Muslim’ rather than ‘Hindu’ in its name. And so Gandhi pointedly asked his audience:

Have you been able to attract to your University youths from Aligarh? Have you been able to identify with them? That, I think, should be your special work, the special contribution of your University. Money has come in, and more will come in if God keeps Malaviya ji in our midst for a few more years. But no amount of money will achieve the miracle I want—I mean a heart-unity between Hindus and Muslims.

Four striking themes emerge from Gandhi’s Banaras speeches. His talk of 1916 had focused on, among things, the divide between the rich and the poor, and the lack of cleanliness of our places of worship. Gandhi was appalled at the exhibitionism of the Maharajas, who paraded their fabulous jewels in a society marked by pervasive inequality and mass poverty. And he was



dismayed that the holiest temple in the holiest city of Hinduism should be kept in such a filthy state.

Gandhi returned to these two themes on later visits to Banaras. However, from the 1920s, two other themes began to feature more strongly in his talks. These were the need for Hindu-Muslim harmony and the ending of untouchability. From his South African days, Gandhi had recognised the vital importance of cordial relations between India's two great religious communities. After his return to India he made this a core part of his political programme. Some of his most memorable fasts—in Delhi in 1924, in Calcutta in 1947, in Delhi again in 1948—were undertaken in the cause of Hindu-Muslim harmony. Naturally, on his visits to the holy Hindu city of Banaras, he reminded his audiences of the importance—the moral and political importance—of reaching out to Indians who did not belong to the majority community.

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

In the very citadel of Hindu orthodoxy, Banaras, Gandhi chastised priests for keeping their shrines so filthy, repeatedly attacked untouchability, telling *pandits* that their scriptures were worthless if they sanctioned such a practice.

In speaking moral truth to theological power, Gandhi showed extraordinary courage indeed. The Hindu priesthood exactly knew how dangerous his challenge was. In the 1930s, Sankaracharyas and Sants sent a collective petition to the colonial government demanding that Gandhi and his followers be classified as 'non-Hindus' because they did not believe in Untouchability. On every stop in his Harijan tour of 1933-4,

Gandhi was shown black flags by Hindu Mahasabha activists. In some places faeces was thrown on him. In one place, Poona, extremist Hindus tried to kill him—they failed, although fourteen years later, another Poona Hindu succeeded.

The core themes of the speeches that Gandhi gave between 1916 and 1942 remain compellingly relevant. The rich remain as exhibitionist as ever, as indifferent to the fate of the poor. As I speak, a Mumbai industrialist plans to build a thirty storey residence, thereby trumping his nearest challenger, whose own home is a modest twenty seven stories. Meanwhile, our places of worship remain dirty and unkempt; the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and its surroundings are no cleaner than they were in Gandhi's day. (And the Ganges itself is far more polluted than it was in Gandhi's day.) In many parts of India (not least Uttar Pradesh) there is periodic violence between Hindus and Muslims, these stoked by sectarian politicians whose method of working is utterly opposed to Gandhi's own. Finally, in many parts of India (not least Uttar Pradesh) discrimination against Dalits continues.

Most Hindus venerate Banaras as a place of worship and learning. Its sanctity is said to be so complete that a Hindu who dies there goes to Heaven. One Banarasi who did not subscribe to this legend was the weaver-poet Kabir; it is said that when he knew that he was dying, he deliberately shifted out of the city to offend the priests. Gandhi shared several things with Kabir; he adopted the poet's ancestral profession as his own (famously describing himself in court as 'a farmer and weaver') and he was likewise sceptical of orthodoxy. In the categories made famous by Albert Hirschman, Kabir's response in his last days was to 'exit' Banaras. Gandhi's response



on all his trips to Banaras was to ‘voice’ his opposition to an unthinking adherence to tradition and scripture. This marked them out from the majority of Hindus, who show their ‘loyalty’ to their faith without interrogating its practice.

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