

# Habermas and Gandhi: Religion, Caste, Family and the Breakdown of the Public Sphere in Colonial India

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## Introduction

In the past three decades, the 'public sphere' as a theoretical concept has moved from the periphery into the centre of inquiry in the scholarship on South Asia. References to public culture, public space, public opinion and other related terms have become ubiquitous. The publication of a special issue of the *Journal of South Asian Studies* on 'Aspect of the 'Public' in Colonial South Asia' in 1991, provides the starting point for the discussion.<sup>1</sup> It marks a watershed moment in the debate because it was the first systematic attempt at applying the concept of the public sphere to South Asia. When the articles were written, debates around Jürgen Habermas's study had just begun to take off in the Anglophone world. The authors of the volume were critical of it, and pointed out its Eurocentric bias. They argued that the categories of 'public' and 'private' were not applicable to the South Asian context because they could not adequately reflect its cultural and historical traditions. Instead, they suggested use of 'inside' and 'outside,' or 'particular' and 'public' ('amm' and 'khass') as terms to describe similar phenomena in South Asia. A number of articles emphasised that not only rationalised debate, but also processions, the staging of rituals, and other devotional activities could express public interest, lead to the formation of a public opinion, and create indigenous platforms of protest.

In order to better reflect the local and enacted nature of public space, Sandria B. Freitag suggested replacing the term 'public sphere' with 'public arenas.' Her intervention not only tried to make room to accommodate specific South Asian histories, but also attacked the singularity of the public sphere as a concept. Other contributions to the 1991 volume explored how colonial

administrative measures, particularly the restructuring of cities into 'native' and 'British' towns, the construction of civil and military settlements, the regulation of procession routes, and the allocation of space to certain groups, all shaped the imagination and use of public space in South Asian cities even beyond the partition of British India. In sum, the 1991 special issue suggested an alternative terminology, emphasised different avenues for the crystallisation of public opinion, underlined the transformation of public space in the modern period, and pointed to the importance of the imperial and colonial framework for the development of a public sphere in South Asia. This paper takes another look at the notion, investigates its conceptual power and limits, and specifies the peculiarities of its history in the context of India's colonial modernity.

## Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas discusses the emergence of the public sphere in eighteenth century France as a realm of critical public discussion on matters of general interest, removed from the regulating control of the state. Located between the state and civil society, between public authority (the court) and the people (who had no access to critical debate), it became a space that nurtured critical opinion and questioned the premises of public authority and power, replacing a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented before the people, with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed discourses by the people. With the expansion of capitalism, social relations assumed the form of exchange relations; commodity owners gained private autonomy; the realm of the 'private' was emancipated from the controls of the state; property turned into a fixed and individuated right expressing the true meaning of the private; and law became a guarantee of the legal status of a person no longer defined by estate and birth. As civil

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society became the space of private autonomy, the public sphere emerged as an organ of 'the self-articulation of civil society,' as a space where 'private people come together as a public.'<sup>2</sup> Critical judgement was now constituted and exercised through the institutions that made up the public sphere — the salons, the cafes, the clubs and the periodicals. The new bourgeois public sphere, in fact, provided the organising principle of constitutional states that feature parliamentary democracy.

For Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is a dialogic space of rational debate. It is a consensual space where consensus is arrived at through reasoned argument. It is through the persuasive power of reason that conflicts of arguments are resolved and a collective rational will is discursively forged. The public space for Habermas is also an emancipated space, liberated from the constraints of absolutism and unrestrained by controls on freedom of expression. As the bearer of reason, and possessing the power of critique, the individual is not fashioned by the power of spectacle, not manipulated and swayed by the language of propaganda. In tracing the history of the public sphere, Habermas operates with a double teleology: a linear unfolding of critical reason on the one hand, and market and private property on the other. The history of reason and market are intertwined, each feeding on the other, and together they march irresistibly forward from a time of constraints to a time of freedom.

Was the public sphere as it emerged in India such a consensual space? Was it a space for rational debate defined by the use of critical reason, a space peopled by rational, autonomous individuals exercising their critical judgement? How did Indians negotiate the private (religion, caste and family) and the public, and how did these negotiations shape the peculiarities and the nature of the public sphere? Can we continue to operate with the teleologies that underlie the Habermasian narrative? And, finally, how do we reframe the terms through which we think about the public sphere? This paper tries to answer these questions through a discussion of two events that took place in Gandhi's life: one, on the eve of Gandhi's departure for London, England, when the Modh Bania caste council outcasted him, as he defied it to go abroad to study law in August 1888; and the other, when Gandhi returned to Bombay, India, in July 1891, he was required to perform purificatory rituals to re-enter the caste. I have chosen these examples deliberately, for Gandhi himself was a Modh Bania, and the discussions were therefore seemingly between people with compatible ideals.

### **Gandhi: Religion, Caste and Family**

The Gandhis belonged to the Bania caste and seemed to have been originally grocers. But for three generations,

starting with Mohandas's grandfather, they had been Dewans (Prime Ministers) in several Kathiawad States.<sup>3</sup> Mohandas was born on 2nd October 1869, at Porbandar, a coastal town in Gujarat.<sup>4</sup> His mother, Putlibai, was a homemaker, and his father, Karamchand Uttamchand Gandhi, was the Dewan of the Princely State of Porbandar and later of Rajkot State,<sup>5</sup> where Mohandas went to school.<sup>6</sup> He passed the matriculation examination of Bombay University in 1887.<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi belonged to an orthodox Vaishnava family, which practised untouchability. His first lessons of anti-untouchability thought started when he was about twelve years of age. Gandhi narrated an incident from his childhood at a conference held at Ahmedabad in April 1921, that he 'was hardly twelve when the idea' to question untouchability germinated in him. He recounted the story of a scavenger named Uka, an 'Untouchable', who used to attend his home for cleaning latrines, and Gandhi was always asked to perform ablutions even if he accidentally 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 to not touch Uka. As a child, he wanted to make his mother aware that the Hindu religion did not sanction untouchability and had the boldness to respond to her with tremendous adeptness that 'she was entirely wrong in considering physical contact with Uka as sinful.'<sup>8</sup> Although 'at the age of twelve, he did not think of helping Uka empty the Gandhi family's latrine' pot,<sup>9</sup> Pyarelal writes that the experience planted in Gandhi's soul a seed of rebellion against the institution of untouchability.<sup>10</sup> With time, such an experience helped develop a passion in Gandhi to see the evil abolished. Even Gandhi's staunchest critic, Ambedkar, had acknowledged that Gandhi's awareness 'in that age of blind orthodoxy,' that 'untouchability was a sin, at so early an age as twelve,' was indeed exceptional.<sup>11</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi is of the view that the 'story of Uka explains Gandhi's lifelong tendency to focus more on the scavengers.'<sup>12</sup>

Gandhi's other childhood experiences are equally noteworthy. He posed daring questions to his family when reading the Hindu epics, which were occasions for family gatherings. 'Can the Ramayana countenance the idea of any human beings' as "'Untouchables'" on the ground that they were polluted souls?' He would query on the episode of 'an Untouchable' taking 'Rama across the Ganges in his boat.' Gandhi also recalled that he often happened to touch the 'Untouchables' while at school, but 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.' For that, he was required to touch any Muslim passing by,

not 'as a religious obligation,' but to cancel the pollution on coming in contact with an 'Untouchable'.<sup>13</sup>

The household that Putlibai, Gandhi's mother, ran in Rajkot was vegetarian in eating habits. Like other members of their caste, the Gandhis never cooked meat or eggs. However, Gandhi writes in his autobiography that in his childhood, he had at least 'more than a half a dozen meat-feasts'<sup>14</sup> in the company of Shiekh Mehtab, his Muslim friend.<sup>15</sup> But because Gandhi's family was stoutly opposed to meat-eating, Gandhi, in the company of his friend, chose a 'secret' place for the experiment.<sup>16</sup>

### Eve of Gandhi's Departure to London, 1888

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 London to study law in 1888. Gandhi says that his caste was prohibited from travelling abroad and that to the orthodox Hindus, like his Vaishnava family, travel abroad was a horror, as it meant losing caste by crossing the polluting ocean. The news that Gandhi had decided to cross the very seas, brought disrepute to his family. He was often pestered by many deputations from his Modh Bania caste-fellows:<sup>17</sup>

'In the heart of 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 Hall, I was surrounded and hooted by them, and my poor brother had to look at the scene in silence.'<sup>18</sup>

Such reactions did not deter Gandhi's resolve to go to England. When his caste-fellows realised that they have failed to make an impression on Gandhi, they summoned a huge meeting of all the members of their caste. Gandhi was virtually dragged out of his house, and, forced to sit in the centre of the gathering. Finding that their remonstrations were of no avail, the Sheth/Head Patel – the headman of the Modh Bania caste community – harangued Gandhi that he would be 'excommunicated' from the caste if he travelled overseas.<sup>19</sup> When threatened like this, Gandhi replied that the Head Patel 'was welcome to do so, but I would certainly go to England.'<sup>20</sup> Then only nineteen, Gandhi stood up to the Head Patel, telling him that he could do his worst,<sup>21</sup> without caring for 'the strength of tradition within the caste for maintaining ritual purity.'<sup>22</sup> The Head Patel, livid with anger, boomed:

'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.'<sup>23</sup>

But Gandhi 'remained unperturbed.'<sup>24</sup> The caste order showed no effect on him, and his resolve to go to England

remained as strong as ever. In fact, he had replied, 'I think the caste should not interfere in the matter.'<sup>25</sup> Gandhi's satyagraha was born on that day. On 4<sup>th</sup> September 1888, Gandhi sailed for London, England, to study law. His orthodox mother and elder brother, Lakshmidas, had supported him,<sup>26</sup> Gandhi recounts in his autobiography. Before he went to England, Gandhi's mother took three promises from him – 'not to touch wine, woman and meat.'<sup>27</sup> But, she never asked him 'to adhere to untouchability as a religious duty abroad.'<sup>28</sup>

### Religion, Caste and Incommensurable Publics

Neera Chandhoke argues that the logic of power and domination is never absent from the public domain and, therefore, that violence is endemic in civil societies. The Habermasian public sphere signifies the anti-thesis of the use of any kind of force in the discursive field, and is, therefore, unlikely to offset historically handed down deprivations caused by the structural unevenness in society. She begins with the uncontroversial point that to speak a language is to inherit a world, to have a shared understanding. She then makes the point that in an unrestricted public sphere there are bound to be more than one language embedding different understandings of the world. Incommensurability of languages and worlds are likely to hinder, however, the emergence of communicative rationality in the discursive field.<sup>29</sup> This is illustrated by the discussion that took place between Gandhi and the Head Patel on the eve of his departure to London. Let us deal with the discussion in some detail.<sup>30</sup>

**Sheth/Head Patel:** In the opinion of the caste, your proposal to go to London, England, is not proper. Our [Hindu] religion forbids voyages abroad. We have also heard that it is not possible to live there without compromising our religion. One is obliged to eat [flesh] and drink [wine] with the Europeans!

**Gandhi:** I do not think it is at all against our [Hindu] religion to go to [London], England. I intend going there for further studies. One need not take meat and wine there. And I have already solemnly promised to my mother to abstain from three things – [wine, woman and meat] – you fear most.

**Sheth/Head Patel:** 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. And you are as an elder to me. But I am helpless in this matter. I cannot alter my resolve to go to England. My father's friend and adviser, [Mavji Dave], who is a learned Brahman, sees no objection to my going to [London], England, and my mother and brother have also given me their permission. As for crossing the waters, if our [Modh Bania] brethren can go as far as Aden, [Yemen] why could not I go to [London], England?

**Sheth/Head Patel:** 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.

**Sheth/Head Patel:** Very well, then. You are not the son of your father. This boy shall be treated as an outcaste from today. Whoever helps him or goes to see him off at the dock shall be punishable with a fine of one rupee four annas.

In countering an argument, it is possible to proceed in three different ways: demonstrate the inner contradictions of the other's argument, appeal to alternative interpretations of the terms of discourse, and develop a critique by borrowing from the framework of another discourse. In the discussion with the Sheth/Head Patel, Gandhi deployed all the three strategies. Gandhi argued that there was no one master text of Hinduism nor any single, fixed interpretation of the texts ('My father's friend and adviser, [Mavji Dave], who is a learned Brahman, sees no objection to my going to England'), that custom was various ('As for crossing the waters, if our [Modh Bania] brethren can go as far as Aden [Colony, Yemen], why could not I go to England?'), and that tradition had to be re-read, reinterpreted and judged in the light of 'reason' ('I do not think it is at all against our religion to go to England. I intend going there for further studies. I think caste should not interfere in the matter').

Gandhi drew upon two contrary frameworks of discourse. In his self-perception he was a believer, a Hindu, but simultaneously a man of 'reason', and someone who believed in the universal ideals of 'humanism' and 'justice'. He found it difficult to critique tradition without an appeal to 'reason', even as he sought to project himself as a devout Hindu. Having accepted the framework of a Hindu argument, Gandhi could not demonstrate to his Modh Bania caste-fellow adversaries the premises of an alternative way of thinking. Gandhi felt that the organising principles of a tradition could be separated from its contingent beliefs and practices, and tradition could be reformed by critiquing all that was unacceptable, unjust and unreasonable in it. As he found in his discussions with the Modh Banias, not everyone could be persuaded by the power of his critique, his appeals to 'reason'. In this public debate, Gandhi realised the problems of incommensurable paradigms.

### **Gandhi Back in India, 1891**

When Gandhi returned home from London on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1891, he was informed by his elder brother, Lakshmidas, that their mother Putlibai had died a few months

previously. She wanted Gandhi to undergo purification and atonement.<sup>31</sup> 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, Maharashtra, and give a caste dinner to all the members of the caste in Rajkot, Gujarat.'<sup>32</sup> This was what his brother Lakshmidas also desired. Gandhi's mother's dying wish and his brother's expectations, Gandhi considered to be no less than a scriptural prescription. Gandhi obliged and complied with his mother's wish out of reverence and with his brother's expectation out of a sense of brotherly obligation. Gandhi writes in his autobiography, '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.'<sup>33</sup>

Both Judith Brown and Joseph Lelyveld show a superficial understanding of the action in which Gandhi had indulged in 1891. Lelyveld sees a 'docile' Gandhi 'submit[ing]' to the purification ritual by immersing in the Godavari River under the supervision of a priest, followed by a banquet for their caste members in Rajkot, seeing all the guests personally, stripped 'to the waist.' This, to Lelyveld, shows a Gandhi far from being a 'rebel against the strictures of caste,' even after becoming a barrister, his stand is viewed as 'conformist.' Lelyveld delineates Gandhi's public stand differently from his private views.<sup>34</sup> Brown seems to concur, but with a different emphasis. She states that it was 'to please his brother' that 'he underwent a ritual purification in order to placate a section of the Modh Banias.'<sup>35</sup> It is true, that Gandhi obliged his brother, but it is equally true that he did not do so believing his act to be a religious obligation. Gandhi was aware that his in-laws were also willing, secretly, to evade caste prohibitions, but he did not relent to their offer. He felt it was a violation of truth to secretly accept hospitality. He did not entertain such arrangements.<sup>36</sup>

Joseph Lelyveld goes on to argue that 'the Bania in Gandhi' had strong practical reasons for getting back on good terms with his caste, as it 'was bound to have a bearing on his prospects as a lawyer, for it was among them that he would expect to find most of his clients.'<sup>37</sup> Gandhi, however, did not view professional prospects so narrowly. He was not willing to pay the purification fine when his caste faction in Bombay and Porbandar insisted that he pay the fine to the caste council.<sup>38</sup> The Rajkot Modh Bania faction was ready to re-admit the Gandhis after a simple purification ritual.<sup>39</sup> Gandhi never made any efforts to seek re-admission to the faction that had persisted with the boycott: 'I never tried to seek admission to the section that had refused it.'<sup>40</sup> Writing about the 'caste opposition,' Gandhi had noted that religion found 'no place in their arguments.' They just followed 'the authority of [the

Head Patel] like sheep. [...] Is it not almost better not to have anything to do with such fellows than to fawn upon them and wheedle their fame so that I might be considered one of them?'<sup>41</sup> According to Judith Brown, Gandhi 'disliked' undergoing the purification ceremony, and 'never thereafter tried to placate the diehards in the community who refused to forgive his disobedience in going abroad.'<sup>42</sup>

### **Making the Private Public and Segmented Publics**

Gandhi's farewell and homecoming events shed a significant light on the meaning and modify and challenge the concept that Jürgen Habermas has given to the public sphere. A crucial feature for ensuring the disinterested rationality of Habermas's public sphere is the insulation of the public from the private. The private is seen as the realm of interests such as, in Habermas's words, 'normative opinions' and 'collective prejudices.' However, many nominal private practices in India have public meaning: the drawing of the dupatta (woman's head scarf) over the face to protect her modesty; the tying of a dhoti and the winding of a turban to signal place, caste or community; inter-dining with some and not others and not crossing the ocean to mark purity and pollution boundaries or their transgression; wearing of a sacred thread to signal upper-caste twice-born status; riding or not riding a horse in a wedding procession to mark status. The unfolding of Gandhi's farewell and homecoming events transgressed the boundary between the public and the private, what was, for Habermas, a foundational dichotomy. As mentioned earlier, on the eve of Gandhi's departure to London, a huge meeting of the caste fellows was summoned by the caste representatives. 'Every member of the caste was called upon [by the Modh Bania caste council] to attend the meeting, under pain of forfeiting a fine of five annas.'<sup>43</sup> Gandhi was summoned to appear before it. He went. But Gandhi defied the caste council to go abroad. He was outcasted,

'We command everyone not to have anything to do with him. He who will support him in any way or go to see him off will be treated as an outcaste, and if the boy ever returns, [...] he shall never be taken into the caste.'<sup>44</sup>

The storm in Gandhi's caste over his foreign voyage to London kept brewing. It had divided the Modh Bania caste into two camps. After he returned to India, one of them immediately readmitted him to the caste, while the other was bent on keeping him out. To please the former, Gandhi's elder brother, Lakshmidas, took him to Nasik before going to Rajkot, gave him a bath in the sacred Godavari River, and on reaching Rajkot, gave a caste-dinner. However, the Modh Bania faction in Bombay

and Porbandar, who outcasted Gandhi, 'evidently never rescinded the proscription.'<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, both the events show that the public sphere is not just a space where private individuals appear as public, transcending their individuality and autonomy to acknowledge their commonality, reflecting and debating issues of common public concern. It is also a space where communities are forced to come together — overcoming their insularity and exclusivity and recognising the need to connect to reconstitute themselves as a public. If the logic of capital and the centralising and inclusive thrust of modernity make it impossible not to come together, this logic never dissolves bounded communities into an amorphous public. The emergence of the public sphere allowed communities to transform private and community matters into public issues and inner community debates into public battles, forming in that very process specific community publics. Questions of caste, custom and purificatory rituals were all issues to be publicly debated: the defining markers of the community were to be rethought and a new consensus built around them. Reconstitution of the community therefore occurred through a debate that was public. The boundaries of the community were defined publicly; the signs of identity were marked publicly, implicating the public in the constitution of new boundaries and in the definition of the public perceptions of these communities.

### **Caste, Family and Individual Autonomy**

Jürgen Habermas observes that the critical institution that makes individual autonomy possible and prevents the dissolution of individuality, is the family. For Habermas, without the care and emotional stability provided by the family the individual fails to develop the capacity for autonomy. The story of individuation and freedom in the West, Rajeev Bhargava argues, cannot be replicated in India.<sup>46</sup> To him, 'the particular set of relations in India between the family and the individual is not conducive to the development of the modern autonomous individual.'<sup>47</sup> However, Gandhi's family provided both the possibility of development of the modern autonomous individual, as on the eve of his departure to England, and, once the capacity for autonomy was realised, its eventual victim after he returned to India.

The idea of going to London might never have occurred to Gandhi had his father still been alive. Even if it had, his father would have dismissed the idea out of hand. There existed, among the orthodox Hindus, a fear of travel overseas, of losing caste by journeying across the kala pani. Among the 'Banias', the prejudice was even more intense, since outside India, they found it hard to maintain the strict food taboos that regulated their lives.

Mohandas's uncle, Tulsidas, hearing of his desire to travel abroad, sought to dissuade him. Mohandas's father had similar views; had he been alive, he would have imposed them more vigorously. But with Karamchand Gandhi dead, it was his wife Putlibai who would have the final say. Mohandas pressed her to agree. She consulted a holy man she trusted: a Modh Bania-turned-Jain monk named Becharji Swami. The Swami said the boy could proceed to London, so long as he promised that he would not eat meat or drink wine, or be unfaithful to his wife. After an oath to this effect was administered, Putlibai gave her consent.<sup>48</sup> There was, however, a further problem – the fact that education in London was expensive. Mohandas's elder brother, Laxmidas, offered to help raise the money. The shortfall was made up by pawning the family jewellery. So, with the money in hand and his mother's blessing, Mohandas prepared to go to London. The support of his family helped Gandhi 'to muster up courage' to face the Modh Bania caste council. 'Nothing daunted, and without the slightest hesitation, I came before the meeting.'<sup>49</sup> When Gandhi was excommunicated for his caste transgression, he 'wondered how my brother would take it.' Fortunately, Gandhi writes, 'he remained firm and wrote to assure me that I had his permission to go, the Sheth's order notwithstanding.'<sup>50</sup> Gandhi's family support thus prevented the dissolution of his individuality.

While Gandhi's family made individual autonomy possible for him, it also made him its eventual victim once he was back in India. On the eve of Gandhi's return, a 'Brahman' had gone around on behalf of the orthodox Modh Banias to warn all their caste-fellows against having any social relations with Gandhi, not even accepting water from their household, if he did not re-enter the caste by undergoing the purification rituals.<sup>51</sup> This was tantamount to social ostracism of Gandhi's family. Gandhi's elder brother, Lakshmidas, had made many sacrifices for the sake of his education. Gandhi was aware that Lakshmidas wanted to maintain relations with his caste. He was committed to respecting his elder brother's wishes. Gandhi also knew that his mother would have liked him to undergo purification and atonement. Lakshmidas told him that this was her last wish. Thus, Gandhi 'was ready to compromise if his insistence was likely to lead to a conflict within the family.'<sup>52</sup>

### The Market and the Literate Bourgeois Public

For Jürgen Habermas, the market (where agents exchange commodities untrammelled either by the power of monopolies or that of the state) is a pre-condition for the emergence of the public sphere (where free and ostensibly equal agents give and receive uncoerced,

rational arguments) because it is only the discourse of the market that allows the idea that a rational, critical and free debate can transcend power structures and consolidate the general interest of society. Moreover, Habermas's public sphere featured and was skewed toward the literate disinterested ('the bourgeois public') who could engage in what he called rational deliberation.

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the city of Bombay went through a great phase of industrial expansion, the core of which was provided by a flourishing textile industry.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, dotted with towns small and large, sited on the coast as well as inland, Gandhi's native region of Kathiawar in the late nineteenth century, had an urban population of well over twenty per cent.<sup>54</sup> The 'Banias' of Kathiawar were not confined to their traditional occupation as merchants, shopkeepers and moneylenders. They also worked for the state, as revenue collectors and civil servants.<sup>55</sup> However, the triumph of the market did not lead to a triumph of reason, and the literate bourgeoisie in the public sphere often engaged in irrational deliberations. On 9th August 1888, Gandhi's old high school in Rajkot had organised a farewell for him. The function was reported in a local newspaper, which noted that 'Gandhi is the first Bania from Kathiawar who proceeds to England to prosecute his study for the Barrister's Examination.'<sup>56</sup> As indicated earlier, this attracted the ire of the Modh Banias of Bombay. The head of the community in Bombay warned Gandhi that he would be excommunicated if he travelled to London, England. Word of the warning got around. To settle the matter, a 'huge meeting' of the Modh Banias – Habermas's literate bourgeois public – was called. Gandhi was seated in the middle, while community leaders remonstrated with him very strongly. Gandhi answered that he was going overseas to study. The elders were unmoved. Nonetheless, he sailed for London. For his transgression, Gandhi was treated as an outcaste. Moreover, the Modh Bania caste faction in Bombay and Porbandar persisted with the boycott even after Gandhi performed the purification rituals once he returned to India.

### Conclusion

The public sphere as it emerged in colonial India can be conceptualised usefully as a heterogeneous, non-consensual, divided space. It was deeply segmented. Dialogues in the public sphere did not necessarily end in consensus; they often reaffirmed or redefined differences. The process of the emergence of the autonomous, reason-bearing individual was cross-cut by religion, caste and family. The family made both individual autonomy possible and also dissolved that individuality. The public

sphere was not explicitly separate from the private sphere; it was unmarked by an opposition between private and public that impugns the private as the realm of personal interests, disruptive to the public interest. It was marked by religious and caste identities, which are seen to live in the arena of divisive and debilitating private interest. The triumph of the market and private property also did not result in the triumph of reason. Communicating with each other through conversation and print, the literate bourgeois public came to share information, ideas and attitudes, practiced irrationality and were discriminatory, and did not transcend the relevance of inherited identities. Thus, the public sphere breached the private realm to create a hybrid space that was, at the same time, inscribed with the dual marks of modernity and tradition.

## Notes

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
8. 'Speech at Suppressed Classes Conference, Ahmedabad,' 13th April 1921, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (CWMG), Vol. 19, New Delhi, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1956-94, pp. 569-75.
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17. Pyarelal, *Early Phase*, p. 223.
18. 'Interview to "The Vegetarian" – I,' 13th June 1891, CWMG, Vol. 1, p. 45.
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