
**Gandhi's Agrarian Legacy:
Practicing Food, Justice, and Sustainability in India**

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Abstract

M.K. Gandhi's social and environmental thought continues to shape the contemporary practices of Brahma Vidya Mandir, an intentional community in Paunar, Maharashtra. Since its founding in 1959, members have wrestled with the practical implications of translating Gandhian values such as self-sufficiency, non-violence, voluntary simplicity, and public service into specific practices of food production and consumption. Members of Brahma Vidya Mandir and associated farmers imagine and enact their responses to contemporary agrarian failures in religiously inflected language drawn from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a central Hindu text, and they use this text as a guide to develop agricultural practices that they deem non-violent. Brahma Vidya Mandir's existence and the counter-narrative prompt our imaginings of what it means to enact alternative agricultural and social practices and help us envision new possibilities of adapting and applying these ideas to other social and geographic contexts.

Keywords

Gandhi, India, intentional community, agriculture, Hinduism, non-violence, food

Introduction

Since 1959, members of Brahma Vidya Mandir (BVM), an intentional community for women in Paunar, Maharashtra, situated deep in the heart of the Indian sub-continent, have wrestled with the practical

implications of translating Gandhian values such as self-sufficiency, non-violence, and public service into specific practices of food production and consumption. Almost a century ago, Mohandas K. Gandhi offered a paradigm for food democracy that emphasized sustainability, equity, and social justice regarding natural resources. Today, members of BVM and associated farmers illustrate how Gandhi's thought shapes a religious response to the environmental and socio-economic problems wrought by globalized large-scale agricultural systems (Amin 1984: 25; Parajuli 2004).¹ They articulate their responses to contemporary agrarian failures in religiously inflected language drawn from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a central Hindu text, and they use this text as a guide to develop agricultural practices that they deem non-violent. Like Gandhi and BVM founder Vinoba Bhave, the members of the Brahma Vidya Mandir question the dominant narrative of what constitutes the public good and, in terms of food and agriculture, what constitutes good food.

Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982), a contemporary follower of Gandhi and considered Gandhi's spiritual successor, established BVM and five other ashrams (spiritual retreats or communities) throughout India to ensure the continuation of his life's work on non-violence and justice for the poor. A Brahman from Maharashtra, Bhave began following Gandhi in 1916 at age twenty-one and worked to implement and practice Gandhi's social thought throughout his life. Although Bhave founded six ashrams, he spent much of his life focused on the two ashrams in Paunar, Maharashtra—Paramdham Ashram for men (est. 1938) and BVM for women (est. 1959). He established these 'experimental laboratories' in remote sites but intended them to be socially relevant, showcasing a non-violent community that was self-reliant and cooperative. Residents would engage in productive labor, not relying solely on gifts (as is the case with many ashrams), and their existence would demonstrate the possibility of new, more egalitarian social structures. Ashrams, or religiously oriented intentional communities, are a common feature of the Hindu landscape, and these ashrams founded by Bhave bear structural similarities with other Hindu ashrams, for example, vows, separation of sexes, and devotional practices. Nonetheless, few ashrams emphasize social change, thus BVM and Bhave's other ashrams are highly idiosyncratic.

While the women of BVM have removed themselves from mainstream society both geographically and psychologically, they continue Gandhi's and Bhave's work both through the examples of their own lives and by educating and training short- and long-term BVM visitors. Nilayam

1. The gender implications are fascinating and critical, but are the subject of a separate work.

Nivedita and Samvad Farm, two nearby agricultural ashrams, for example, have adopted and enacted practices learned at BVM. The women of BVM and the farmers who work with them enact a counter-narrative to the prevalent narrative that large-scale agriculture is inevitable, necessary, and the sole possibility for feeding the world. They consciously reject a narrative of progress that privileges centralization of knowledge and power and increases reliance on expensive technologies. The narrative of contemporary agriculture, for example, emphasizes productivity, that is, high yields (an arbitrary standard), as the sole measure of value, and progress in the form of improved seeds and inputs such as fertilizers that are priced beyond the range of most farmers.

Members of BVM were well aware of the farmer suicides attributed to the conventional (i.e. non-organic) cotton industry in the states of Maharashtra and neighboring Andhra Pradesh (Burcher 2006). Gandhi had resisted industrial agriculture because he feared the social and environmental consequences of depleted soils and reliance on expensive technologies. Physicist-activist Vandana Shiva has argued that industrial agriculture represents a 'monoculture of the mind' that is embodied by monoculture cropping systems that stifle biodiversity as well as cultural diversity. In contrast, BVM members grow a diversity of foods and crops that reflect traditional systems of inter-cropping and small-farm diversity. The women of BVM consciously live out ideals of self-rule, non-violence, and local economies through their methods of farming and food distribution. Their choices of low-input technologies echo Gandhi's call for appropriate technologies. Their lives and language reflect a Gandhian critique of the paradigms of agricultural modernity.

Gandhi's attention to agricultural conditions and distribution of natural resources reflects a form of environmentalism that incorporates equity concerns, what today is typically considered the three-legged stool of sustainability, which incorporates equity, economy, and ecology.² Ramachandra Guha has called Gandhi the 'father of Indian environmentalism', and scholars such as Vinay Lal, Larry Shinn, and David Haberman have explored Gandhi's contribution to environmental thought. Arne Naess, the founder of deep ecology, also cited Gandhi as an inspiration, particularly in the development of his 'ecosophy' as he adopted Gandhi's linkage of 'self-realization, non-violence and... biological egalitarianism' (cited in Weber 1999: 351-52).

2. Readers interested in a more comprehensive discussion of Gandhi's environmental and agricultural thought are directed to Gandhi 1927, 1962; Guha 2006; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Haberman 2006; Hardiman 2003; Lal 2000; Mukherjee 1993; and Shinn 2000.

Environmental movements in the global South tend to pair ecological and equity issues and the environmentalism of the poor, noting that the latter has not always been recognized as environmental due to its emphasis on social concerns. Gandhi's environmental thought addressed agrarian and environmental issues in the context of the social needs of village India (Hardiman 2003: 75-76; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). Freedom lay in democratic and broad access to the means of production and survival, for example, access to forests, water, and healthy soils. His environmental thought is inseparable from his social thought and has offered a paradigm to evaluate the intimate—and frequently overlooked—ties between the environmental degradation and social inequities that inform contemporary concerns about sustainability and the food we eat.

Although communities such as BVM contribute to a growing chorus in India and abroad of those questioning the existing industrialized food system, they are by no means a large and powerful movement. Today, India proudly proclaims its large and growing middle class, but although many Indians revere Gandhi as a national hero, they have also, en masse, rejected Gandhian austerity in favor of US-style consumerism. Nonetheless, these communities prompt us to imagine what it means to enact alternative agricultural and social practices, and they help us envision how we might adapt and apply Gandhian ideas in other social and geographic contexts.

BVM's existence and the counter-narrative its residents practice demonstrate how one community negotiates the practicalities and trade-offs in their application of self-sufficiency, non-violence, and radical democracy to their own social and geographic context. Few visitors are likely to join small communities such as BVM, and many features of these communities, such as consensus-style governance, are not scalable for larger social networks or communities. Even so, small communities such as BVM are necessary for the process of social change—they demonstrate alternate frames of reference. What if values championed by Gandhi, such as non-violence (*ahimsa*), commitment to the public good (*sarvodaya*), and the Jain concept of non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*), replaced profit and efficiency as indicators of success in food production?

Gandhi's Thought and the Bhagavad-Gita

In developing his moral philosophy, Gandhi drew both on the Hindu and Jain traditions. Gandhi's home state of Gujarat, while predominantly Hindu, housed significant populations of Jains, from whom he imbibed an ethos that emphasized non-violence and non-possessiveness.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* provides the religious framework for understanding Gandhi's views on sacrifice, duty, and non-violence. Indeed, the contemporary Gandhi-focused agriculturalists I interviewed stressed the importance of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a moral framework. The *Bhagavad-Gita* (*The Song of the Lord*) is a central Hindu text, composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is particularly important for Vaishnavas, the religious denomination with which Gandhi's family was affiliated, although Gandhi did not read the *Bhagavad-Gita* until he went to London for his legal training. This text deeply influenced his thought and practices, and he frequently cited the importance of this text and its teachings on *karma-yoga*, the path of action to spiritual liberation. For Gandhi, the *Bhagavad-Gita's* teachings regarding selflessness and reducing ego attachments complemented Jain values such as non-possessiveness and non-violence.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* recounts the dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer, the deity Krishna, on the eve of the great battle between cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Arjuna asks how it could possibly be right to fight his family members on the battlefield, and Krishna offers a discourse about duty, selfless action, and devotion to god. This massive war ushered the earth into the *Kaliyug*, the era of immorality and decay, and, illustrated in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, the bloodied fields of Kurukshetra lay testament to its devastation. Gandhi interpreted the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a paean to non-violence, an idiosyncratic reading at odds with historical Hindu understandings of the text (Clough 2002: 61).

For Gandhi, Bhave, and countless Hindus, Krishna's discourse offers a guide to transform one's actions in the world into devotion to the divine. Bhave also considered the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a guide in philosophical and practical matters, and he communicated these insights in his *Gita Pravachan*, or *Talks on the Gita*. For the *karmayogi*, one following the path of selfless action, all actions are motivated by love and service first and only then by the practical result; the *karmayogi* farmer, for example, works to feed society and to establish a basis of love with all beings, not simply for wages. Work and labor become a prayer, and compassion and love render service a joy rather than drudgery (Bhave 2007 [1940]: 48-50, 58).

[The Gita] will come to the lowliest of the low, to the poor and the weak and the ignorant, not to keep them in that state, but to grasp them by their hands and lift them up. Its only desire is that man should purify his daily life and reach the ultimate state, the final destination. In fact, this is the very aim and object of the Gita (Bhave 2007 [1940]: 82).

For both Gandhi and Bhave, the *Bhagavad-Gita* provided the frame and authority to restructure society to benefit the poor and oppressed.

Though Gandhi drew upon traditional Indic concepts that would resonate in India, he also drew heavily upon Western thinkers, including Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy, and emphasized Western ideas and modern concepts, particularly the scientific tradition and individual responsibility. His social thought—forged in a colonial and transnational context—has been equally informed by and responsive to Indian and Western influences and speaks to those grappling to find a balance between community responsibility and personal autonomy (Alter 2000; Roy 2010).

Practicing a Gandhian Agriculture

Both Gandhi and Bhave established ashram-agricultural communities, such as Phoenix in South Africa and Sevagram in Wardha, Maharashtra, that elevate 'agriculture and artisanry [to] a spiritual dimension'. Ashram residents, for example, gather for religious services either daily or weekly (Gandhi 1962: 94-96; Hardiman 2003: 76). These utopian farm-ashrams have emphasized the dignity of human labor and promoted 'bread labor', that each person should contribute their own labor for goods consumed. He borrowed the concept of bread labor from Tolstoy, but stated that the third chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita* reflects this principle; that is, food eaten without sacrifice or bread labor, is stolen (Gandhi 1962: 43). These communities—and others—have inspired the formation of more recent agricultural communities and activism based on Gandhi's comprehensive thought, although many involved in them would not label themselves Gandhian.³

Vandana Shiva, founder of the Delhi-based Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology (RFSTE), has become a prominent voice in food sovereignty movements in India and abroad. Her thought, rhetoric, and activism draw significantly on Gandhian ideals and symbolism. The 1998 'Monsanto Quit India' campaign against Monsanto's Terminator technology, for example, echoed Gandhi's 'Quit India' rhetoric of independence, and Shiva has framed her continued resistance to GMOs in India as *seed democracy*, a trope that circulates globally as *food democracy* (Scoones 2005: 305-306).

While Shiva is perhaps the best-known agricultural activist, less familiar farmers and activists also frame their responses in Gandhian terms. Gujarati farmer Bhaskar Save, named 'the Gandhi of Organic Farming', has become a spokesman and an early adopter of organic, or natural,

3. Personal communication, Mr Anupam Mishra, Gandhi Peace Foundation, June 2008.

farming based on Gandhian principles and has inspired countless others in this endeavor.⁴ 'Non-violence, the essential mark of cultural and spiritual evolution', he has contended, 'is only possible through natural farming' (cited in Mansata 2010: 235). In 2006, in a series of public letters to M.S. Swaminathan as the Chair of the National Commission on Farmers, Save promoted the benefits of natural and organic farming. Specifically, he cited Gandhi and Bhave to argue that science cannot be divorced from non-violence and compassion, and that the marriage of commerce and technology has produced poisonous soils.⁵ Kalpavriksha, his fourteen-acre farm, lies just north of the Gujarat–Maharashtra border and yields a variety of fruits, vegetables, and rice, out-producing many chemically based farms.

Save was influenced by the writings of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave as he developed his agricultural methods, particularly Bhave's work on Adivasi (indigenous or tribal) agriculture. He adopted traditional Adivasi intercropping techniques that rely on symbiotic plant relationships, which then out-produced conventional farms. Kalpavriksha produced enough for his immediate family of ten and two guests, and Save offered the remainder to relatives and friends. He, like other farmers who embrace Gandhi's concept of local economies, has not entered the export market and has chosen to trade or sell his food nearby. This farm is open to visitors and has received notable guests including Japanese natural farmer Masanobu Fukuoka, the author of *One Straw Revolution* (1998), who gave an enthusiastic endorsement (Khor and Lin 2001: 190).

In addition to Gandhi and Bhave, these farms also draw upon Fukuoka and like him, they prefer the term 'natural farming' to 'organic farming'. Although he has been named a 'Gandhian farmer', Fukuoka notes that although he agrees with Gandhi's philosophy, he has not read much of his work and thus has not been directly influenced by his thought (Nadkarni 1997: 1). Save distinguishes his methods (organic farming), which include limited tillage, from the no-tillage method of Fukuoka (natural farming) (Khor and Lin 2001: 179–80). Other farmers seem to use the terms interchangeably with a marked preference for what they call natural farming.

Bhaskar Save's work at Kalpavriksha has proven inspirational for others who integrate Gandhian philosophy, religious practice, and natural farming. A.V. Sanghavi of Sanghavi Farms, for example, worked

4. This information is compiled from the following sources: Khor and Lin 2001; Mansata 2010; and Mukherji 2006.

5. In a rather tepid response, in a letter dated 31 July 2006, Swaminathan thanked Save for his contribution and offered to consider his suggestions.

for many years with Save to turn what was rocky wasteland into the highly productive Sanghavi Farm and received numerous awards for his organic farming methods and service to society (Malik 2001). Similarly, Cherkady Ramachandra Rao of the Udipi District, Karnataka drew inspiration from Gandhi, Fukuoka, and Bhava with his 'Sarvodaya Paddy cultivation', a no-till/no irrigation method appropriate for his hilly and dry land. In addition to rice, he grows a variety of trees and vegetables. He began farming in 1948–49 when Gandhi suggested that in response to grain shortage, people produce their own rice. Cherkady stated that through his farming he demonstrates—and enacts—the 'relevance of Gandhian ideology' (Pailoor 2001).

Brahma Vidya Mandir

In the context of this work, in 2008 and 2009 I visited BVM and two agriculturally focused ashrams, Nilayam Nivedita and Samvad Farm, and spoke with Gandhi-focused farmers who visited BVM. These farmer-activists are located in rural Maharashtra, far west of the urban center of Mumbai, and are proximate to Wardha, where Gandhi established his own ashram, Sevagram. Gandhi chose Wardha because it represented geographically and symbolically the heart of India. Today, this agricultural region hosts a growing community of farmers who have established farms based on Gandhian social thought and Hindu practice. BVM and Nilayam Nivedita are in Paunur, ten kilometers from Wardha, and Samvad Farm is approximately two hours by bus north, creating a triangle with Nagpur, the largest urban center in eastern Maharashtra.

These farmers and activists articulated their concerns regarding industrial agriculture, the global financial system, and the overwhelming power of multi-national corporations, and consistently framed their own actions in terms of engaged critiques of big agriculture, big business, and greed. The women in the ashram are well-educated and informed and have dedicated their lives to service. They represent a small demographic of India's population—the subset who have sought to practice Gandhian values. A parallel in the United States might be the small population of college-educated middle-class Americans who have chosen to populate agrarian-focused intentional communities. In short, I interacted with a set of farmers and activists who have had the power, education, and means to focus their energies on their social and environmental concerns, so when I use the word farmer it refers to these farmer/activists, not to the social groups to whom the term is usually applied.

Vinoba Bhava established BVM for women to achieve spiritual liberation and to practice ideals of self-sufficiency, non-violence, and

self-discipline in a community setting. He thought that India needed a class of what he called 'social workers' whose work and lives would demonstrate by example how to build a new form of society, in part by living together without regard to caste, language, religion, or nationality (Brahma Vidya Mandir pamphlet, n.d.; Sykes 2006: 119). As stated in a pamphlet produced by the ashram:

The ashram is not only a spiritual laboratory; it is also a social laboratory where critical issues are faced with a spiritual outlook, the only outlook that can lead to lasting peaceful solutions.

Bhave realized that India had a long tradition of Brahma Vidya, the search for knowledge of the divine, but that few of India's philosophers had reflected on community life. So, BVM would maintain India's long, philosophical tradition but would do so communally—a collective spiritual liberation in the hands of women (Sykes 2006: 222-24). Approximately 25 women resided there, most had taken vows of celibacy (*brahmacarya*), and thus had the status of religious sisters. Men participated in programs and conferences organized by BVM, and several of them resided as brothers at BVM on a permanent basis.

The community emphasized performing one's duty, practicing non-violence, and reducing ego to decrease greed and attachment to consumer goods, and their practices illustrated the complicated and messy processes by which members translate these abstract ideals into specific agricultural and religious practices (Peterson 2005). They were primarily self-reliant in terms of food and water; they spun daily, although not enough to make their own clothes. When I visited, I participated in daily activities, including gardening and food preparation, and observed outreach activities in the form of a conference of Gandhian activists. They had no designated leader, and all decisions were made by consensus. This cohesive, bounded community, with its emphasis on participatory decision-making, exemplified to me the critical role of small grassroots organizations in social change (Esteva and Prakash 1998; Peterson 2005). For example, Bhave believed that BVM reflected a microcosm of the world's social problems and that their experiments would point the way to solving problems on a larger scale (Sykes 2006: 225). This ashram has become a hub of agricultural resistance to large-scale industrial agriculture, and the women have trained a number of farmer-activists, men and women, who themselves train others. They stress their role as demonstration sites and view outreach and service to the larger community as vital.

BVM sits along the Dham River, which narrows to a trickle in the hot months before the summer monsoon. Upon arriving at the ashram from

the main road from Nagpur, one must cross the bridge over the river, then double back onto a smaller access road and cross the river again. To me, this configuration made the ashram feel even more removed, which is, after all, the point of the ashram. Beyond the entrance gates (which are closed for several hours in the afternoon), a short stretch of road, approximately 100 yards, continues up a small hill to the ashram's buildings. Visitors first see a fenced-in garden on the right side of the road, then a set of one-storey buildings, including rooms which house male visitors and guests during ashram events and a kitchen that can handle large numbers of people. When my husband Kevin visited, he stayed in this outer ring of rooms, while I shared a room with several other women in the center of the ashram.

Most of the ashram's residents and female guests lived in the buildings that form a quadrangle around the central courtyard. The garden, worked by members and guests, covered approximately one half of the courtyard. The other half held long-buried statues of deities discovered by Bhave when he established the ashram as well as several large sundials that Bhave liked. These buildings also housed the ashram bookstore, featuring publications by Gandhi, Bhave, and others; the temple; the kitchen and dining area; and a conference room. Many of the buildings featured covered walkways, sitting areas, and a platform for prayers and spinning. The covered areas provided both protection from the sun and rain and places for visitors and residents to sit outside and visit.

The residents of BVM performed communal prayers reciting from the *Ishavasya Upanishad* at dawn, the *Vishnu-Sahasranama* (*One Thousand Names of Vishnu*) at mid-morning, and the *Bhagavad-Gita* in the evening. The *Ishavasya Upanishad* presented the necessary discipline for spiritual seekers, and so Bhave considered it an appropriate way to start the day (Sykes 2007: 203). The evening prayers centered on the verses from the *Bhagavad-Gita* that describe the 'man of steadfast wisdom', one who is the 'embodiment of restraint' and united with the divine (Bhave 2007 [1940]: 40-41). Bhave wrote commentaries on these texts entitled, respectively, *Ishavasya Vritti* and *Sthitiprajna Darshan*.

During mid-morning prayers, they made homespun cloth. For Gandhi, spinning was a dense and critical symbol that encapsulated his views on the multiple facets of independence, self-sufficiency, and inner control. Gandhi believed home-based work such as spinning offered women unprecedented autonomy over their economic lives. As a political symbol, the spinning wheel, or *charkha*, represented freedom from Great Britain's cotton industry that had blocked India's attempts to develop their own manufacturing base. Wearing home-spun clothes, or *khadi*, became for Gandhi and many Indians a means to demonstrate their

allegiance to the incipient Indian state and to related Gandhian ideals such as local economies. Even today, virtually every village in India holds a Khadi Emporium that sells clothes and other village-produced items.

For Gandhi, Bhave, and contemporary spinners, spinning functions as a means of self-transformation and mindfulness, a means to develop the inner transformation necessary for changed practices and the work of taming self-indulgence with self-control (Sykes 2006: 184). While many Indians and Europeans saw technology, urbanization, and industrialization as forms of progress, Gandhi critiqued these trends because he believed that an over-reliance on these ideologies and the accompanying technologies enslaved people, both rich and poor, as the need for goods became the driving force of society (Mukherjee 1993: 16-18). His emphasis on self-discipline provided a counter-force to consumerism—then and now.

Gandhi considered personal transformation necessary for meaningful social change, and BVM community members stressed mindfulness and a disciplined self as critical for the practice of non-violence. This disciplined self is able to control desires that lead to greed and violence and places service over one's self. As people adopted the discipline and practice of spinning, reciprocally their identities changed, and this practice changed their ideas of what constituted appropriate clothing—from British to local homespun. Similarly, food, like clothing, is central to our identities, individual and social, and our intimacy with food and clothing offers possibilities to enact choices that are socially and environmentally sustainable on the personal, community, and political scales.

While the women did not make their own clothes, they wore *khadi*, either saris or *salwar-khameez* (a long tunic with baggy pajama-like pants). Wearing these clothes maintained and enlivened the symbolic nexus popularized by Gandhi, but it also integrated contemporary controversies surrounding cotton production. Today the seeds and necessary technological packets (e.g., herbicides and pesticides) incur both massive debt and high ecological costs, and many cite the nutritional deficits that resulted when monoculture cotton crops replaced traditional systems of inter-cropping of food and cotton. The journalist Aparna Pallava (2008), for example, has described efforts in rural Maharashtra to reintroduce traditional (and nearly extinct) inter-cropping methods in which women planted vegetables and pulses amidst rows of cotton. BVM was able to source some of their cotton locally from an ashram between Wardha and Paunar, thus supporting regional self-sufficiency and local economies, and this cotton was organic. The remainder of their cotton was local but not organic, so the members of BVM, perhaps not consciously, have had

to choose between the violence of a globalized distribution system to obtain organic cotton and the violence of conventional agriculture. Like Arjuna, they must re-evaluate what constitutes violence and appropriate responses.

In the morning after prayers, residents and visitors worked, performing such tasks as sweeping, food preparation, and gardening. Visitors generally did approximately 30 minutes of sweeping and 30 minutes in the garden in addition to food preparation. Equitable distribution of agricultural and other tasks meant that those who might otherwise romanticize this labor actually performed it. Performing labor such as tilling soil ensured that all members recognized the value and difficulties of agricultural work, echoing Gandhi's and Bhave's insistence on 'bread labor'. Bhave believed that three to three-and-a-half hours of productive and well-planned labor, which is also considered a form of worship, would be sufficient to support the ashram and that all labor should be considered equal (Sykes 2006: 225). Several sisters emphasized to me that this practice reflected Bhave's philosophy of voluntary labor—that work, especially agricultural work, was better than meditation for spiritual development because it helped to open up the mind.

Bhave considered physical labor, including cleaning, a form of 'faith in action', and bodily labor must be undertaken with love and voluntarily (Sykes 2006: 218-21, 246-47). In recounting his first meeting with Gandhi, Bhave noted that his 'initiation' into service and ashram life was peeling vegetables, a task that he had never before performed. Seeing Gandhi himself, a national leader, preparing food taught him a lesson about bodily labor and illustrated the meaning of *karma-yoga*, which, in Bhave's eyes, was embodied by Gandhi (Sykes 2006: 71, 73). BVM's food practices, consensus-style decision-making, and shared labor practices helped the sisters reduce ego attachments and personal inclinations that would otherwise disrupt the community.

Consensus-style decision-making is a means to reduce the human ego and the 'will to power' and reflects Gandhi's broad understanding of *swaraj*. 'The word *swaraj* is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not restraint from all restraint which freedom often means' (Gandhi 1962: 3). BVM's consensus-based governance reflects Gandhi's goals for *swaraj*—that every individual will have a 'direct voice in the government'—and presumes self-discipline (Gandhi 1962: xv). The sisters explained that democracy, with its one-person, one-vote system, could become adversarial, and the majority could obscure the voices of the minority, a form of violence.

Nonetheless, Gandhi recognized the tension between individual autonomy and the needs of society that emerge in this concept of *swaraj*.

'I value individual freedom', Gandhi remarked, 'but you must not forget that man is essentially a social being', and 'unrestricted individualism must be curtailed by social conscience to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint' (Dalton 1999: 198).

Thus, for Gandhi, the challenge and goal of both *swaraj* and *sarvodaya* was balancing personal autonomy with community needs to the benefit of both (Dalton 1999: 198). For Bhave and the sisters, consensus meant that all opinions must be heard and acknowledged, yet each person should focus on the needs of the group, not solely her own needs. The community should then attempt to address the dissenter's concerns, and the dissenter should not remain obstinate 'at the cost of village unity'. When these conditions are met through love and not fear, then the group will achieve consensus (Hiralal 1984: 28).

The *Bhagavad-Gita's* discussion of sacrificing the fruits of one's labor to the divine provided philosophical and practical resources for the difficult task of subverting one's own ego and needs to that of the larger group, never an easy process. Decisions about what vegetables should be grown and under what conditions were made by consensus so that all residents had a voice in the process; however, the trade-off is that this process diminishes the influence of those who might have the most agricultural experience. So, in one case, one sister with strong gardening skills wanted to mulch, but others objected, concerned that mulching would lead to increased mosquito populations, a significant concern in a region where malaria is prevalent. This instance of competing values, consensus vs. self-sufficiency through agriculture skill, demonstrated the difficulties of actually living a set of values.

The sisters ate a vegetarian diet and generally avoided addictive substances, including tea and coffee, although they served tea during conferences. The food was pure and *sattvik*, a category describing light foods that do not arouse the passions. Their food reflected a traditional simple Indian meal based on rice and dal, vegetables, chapattis (unleavened wheat flat bread), yogurt, and milk. When I visited in December 2009, we prepared and ate seasonal vegetables such as radish, eggplant, and lauki, a mild gourd. When cutting these vegetables, I was admonished to do so with '*ahimsa*', that is, to avoid harming the worms that inevitably appear in organic produce. Their food was locally sourced: the milk, *ghee* (clarified butter), and yogurt came from their own cows, and the remaining milk was made into *pedas*, a popular dessert. The cow manure was used for fertilizer, and the ashram has a bio-gas digester for the cow manure which provided for some of their energy needs.

The bio-gas digester illustrates what we now think of as an 'appropriate technology' (a term coined by E.F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful*

[1973]). Gandhi emphasized the development of human-scale, village-based technologies that enhanced agricultural productivity and returned the benefits to village populations (Gandhi 1962: 26-27). To evaluate appropriate technologies he simply asked, 'who benefits'? This question was rooted in neither an anti-science nor an anti-technology view; its point was that appropriate technologies diffused knowledge, fit local conditions, and benefited local economies and so represented alternative and more equitable paradigms for development.

The sisters grew their own vegetables without inputs such as herbicides and pesticides. Water from the kitchen's grey-water system provided some fertilizer; the sisters used ash to first wash the pots and dishes, and the ash-water then fertilized the garden. The sisters used only hand-tools in the garden, a practice established by Bhave. Wheat and pulses grew in the fields surrounding the ashram, and villagers provided this labor (along with the labor for the bio-gas), using teams of oxen. As Bhave did in his own experiments with food (e.g. giving up milk), the sisters had to balance competing principles when considering food: spiritual health, bodily health, *swadeshi*, or local, and cost (Sykes 2006: 244). Reflecting Gandhi's emphasis on experimentation, their grappling with translating broad principles such as non-violence into the realities of everyday life demonstrated that their chosen practices were not inevitable or singular solutions but the result of consciously evaluating the trade-offs and benefits within their specific contexts. Their chosen practices illustrated one particular instantiation of Gandhian values—these practices were not necessarily generalizable or scalable, but they encouraged visitors to consider how these values might be translated to their own circumstances.

Nilayam Nivedita and Samvad Farm

The farmers of BVM, along with those of Samvad Farm and Nilayam Nivedita, drew significantly on a set of inter-related Gandhian ideals, for example, regional self-sufficiency, non-violence, and appropriate technologies to rethink food and food production in the context of contemporary agrarian challenges. Residents at these agricultural ashrams who have learned the philosophical approaches in tandem with agricultural techniques have established their own farm-ashrams and train students there. They embody Gandhi's emphasis on praxis over theory. Non-violence, for example, is a call to action, not simply a lack of action or withdrawal, and these farms were actively rethinking and consciously approaching all aspects of food production, including distribution, using the rubric of non-violence.

A BVM student founded Nilayam Nivedita 25 years ago. The farm relied on animal traction and grew bananas, pulses, barley, and wheat. Only four acres were suitable for farming, and this soil had been heavily amended. The local soil, heavy with red clay, is poor, and the amended soil in the four acres under production is visibly distinct. This farm-ashram primarily trained students who leave to start their own farms after approximately six years.

After a two-hour bus ride in May 2008, I arrived at Samvad Farm in Amarvati, Maharashtra, a ten-acre farm with six acres of orchard. Samvad Farm's bioregion is wetter than that of BVM and Nilayam Nivedita, and during the bus ride I was struck by the difference in fertility and vegetation. Karuna and Vasant Funtane founded the farm in approximately 1984, and now run the farm with their two adult sons. Karuna Futane lived at BVM from the age of four and has maintained close ties with the BVM. Samvad Farm also had an active educational and outreach component, hosting local school children, foreign students, and others who wish to learn about their farming, water, and building practices. As stated on their brochure, Samvad Farm is a 'group of volunteers working in the Gandhian way for *sarvodaya*, the "upliftment of all"', and is open to visitors and volunteers.

Samvad Farm practiced what they described as a 'needs-based' approach, and they cultivated plants and trees to fill their food and shelter needs. When Vasant showed me around the farm, he pointed out how the bulk of their needs, including medicinal, were fulfilled by materials from the farm. In addition to crops and orchards, their two-acre 'food forest' provided plants for food, medicinal needs, and building. The buildings, including the house, a cow stall, and a hostel for visitors, were all built from local mud and materials. The term 'needs-based' reflects Gandhi's statement that 'the world has enough for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed' and Gandhi's idea of 'trusteeship': that it is their duty and service to nurture the land. Today these farmers and others have argued that agriculture and the contemporary consumer-driven society have moved from 'need-based to greed-based' lifeways, confirming Gandhi's fears (Agrawal 2011).

Using only what one needs and being self-sufficient offered them a freedom not enjoyed by farms trapped by debt. Instead, Bhave argued that restoring the land and soil fertility should be considered a ritual sacrifice (*yajna*); all production, including that of food and clothing, should function as a ritual sacrifice to replenish what has been taken from nature (Bhave 2007 [1940]: 245-46). These farmers drew upon the *Bhagavad-Gita's* emphasis on performing one's duty and reducing ego to reduce greed and attachment to consumer goods. Individuals at both

BVM and Samvad Farm emphasized that Arjuna's struggle teaches us to sublimate our own egos to the broader needs of society.

Both Samvad Farm and Nilayam Nivedita have developed and re-introduced local varieties of crops such as mangos and sorghum (*jowar*) to ensure the continuation of local knowledge and control of agricultural techniques. Those at Samvad Farm, for example, developed new varieties of mangos appropriate for the particular soil and weather conditions and maintained varieties in danger of being lost. In line with Gandhian ideals, however, they only sold and traded them locally even though they had the opportunity to export their mangos to urban markets. In choosing to serve their immediate vicinities, these farmers consciously rejected the neoliberal model proposed (and sometimes mandated) by international trade organizations that sees export-driven trade as the best means to global food security.

These sites of agricultural activism maintained non-violent farming practices, broadly extending the reach of what might be defined as non-violent. It is not a stretch to consider toxic pesticides and herbicides as violence, given their harm to human and non-human communities. Yet the violence of institutionalized inequity, unjust economic relations, and food systems designed around the needs of the wealthy, are less obvious. Cultivating inner non-violence through attention to the *Bhagavad-Gita* and using a consensus-based decision-making process to establish non-violence is an interior practice related deeply to personal transformation. The focus on personal transformation reflected Gandhi's insistence that self-control and self-discipline were a *sine qua non* for independence. Frequently, at both Samvad Farm and BVM, residents cited to me Bhave's statement that 'religion is out-dated, we need spirituality' to make the point that larger social changes must stem from individual transformation, and that change at the collective level that comes by coercion engenders violence.

Their practices reflected Gandhi's broad understanding of violence and non-violence and that self-reliance and self-rule are intimately linked with—and rely upon—concepts of non-violence and decentralization. Centralization and the resulting need to enforce laws and regulations was a form of violence (Gandhi 1962: 34, 39). Moreover, what many deem 'progress' might inflict violence on marginalized populations. Gandhi implicated the railway system, which has often been lauded as Britain's great contribution to India, in famines because the trains transported grains from rural areas to cities and markets. Producing food locally reduced food waste and enhanced diversified agricultural knowledge of local seeds, landraces, and soils (Gandhi 1962: 125; Mukherjee 1993: 23).

In this vein, BVM, Samvad Farm, and Nilayam Nivedita maintained seed banks of local varieties that protected indigenous agrarian knowledge and were adapted to local drought conditions. Echoing activist Vandana Shiva's condemnation of the violence of the green revolution and the promised 'gene' revolution, these farmers considered genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as violence toward nature and human communities. Although none of these farms were of a size or scale to use these seeds and their associated technologies, they have witnessed the social and economic consequences to farmers in Maharashtra and nearby Andhra Pradesh.

As a result, Samvad Farm and Nilayam Nivedita have crafted their market practices in accord with Gandhi's call for *swadeshi*—localized economics. According to Gandhian Satish Kumar, the village-based approach is inherently environmentally sustainable and community enhancing.

A locally based economy enhances community spirit, community relationships, and community well-being. Such an economy encourages mutual aid. Members of the village take care of themselves, their families, their neighbours, their animals, lands, forestry, and all the natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations (Kumar 1997: 420).

Gandhi argued that villages should be self-sufficient and self-reliant and only exchange commodities that are not locally producible (Bose 1972: 15, 27). Trade and exchange then benefit local economies and neighbors rather than those in remote locations (Gandhi 1962: 40-41, 54-61, 63). Today these concepts generally fall under discussions of bioregionalism (e.g. McGinnis 1998; Parajuli 2004).

Swadeshi, Gandhi argued, cannot be legislated or enforced with violence. Violence, he believed, only begets further violence and tyranny. Instead, the transition to a local economy, Gandhi thought, lay in a personal cultivation of non-violence and *sarvodaya* (benefits for the many); moreover, persuasion and education encouraged peaceful transition (Gandhi 1962: 35, 58; Mukherjee 1993: 41-46). Unlike his Marxist contemporaries, Gandhi did not advocate class conflict or violence in land reform. Instead, he called for large landowners, or zamindars, to become 'model landowners' and use property for the good of the peasants (Gandhi 1962: 47, 53, 98-99; Hardiman 2003: 83-84; Mukherjee 1993: 34-38).

Gandhi's associates, such as Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–1979), enacted ideals of *ahimsa*, *swaraj*, and *sarvodaya* in their post-Independence work in the Sarvodaya movement; they were most active in the 1950s. Their program of *bhoodan* (gift of land) and *gramdan* (gift of

village) prevailed upon landholders to gift land and villages to those who were cultivating this land (Hardiman 2003: 202-207). The 'spirit of the land-gift movement', according to Bhave, relied on the landowners' desire to 'right a wrong', and the gift was an 'offering to god'. It was not charity but rather a social restructuring that offered the poor dignity and the ability to earn a livelihood, Bhave believed, and this social restructuring illustrated the practice of non-violence (Sykes 2006: 137, 140, 158-59).

What BVM, Samvad Farm, and Nilayam Nivedita Can Teach Us

These farm-ashrams applied a Gandhian framework—not a dogma—to fashion equitable alternatives to existing narratives about food, agriculture, and society. Gandhi referred to his own work as a series of experiments and rejected the term 'Gandhism', a term that would imply a particular ideology, although many have continued to use the term (Tendulkar 1960: 4). Gandhi's social thought offers a flexible framework that can be adapted to a variety of conditions and used in ways that even Gandhi himself might not have wanted. Rebecca Klenk's research in the Himalayan Lakshmi Ashram, a Gandhian ashram dedicated to educating girls to be Gandhian, revealed that ashram's selectivity and innovation in interpreting Gandhi's ideals. Whereas Gandhi sought to empower women in traditionally female roles, the teachers and students at this ashram assumed roles more politically and socially engaged than Gandhi had intended (Klenk 2010: 40). What, then, does it mean to follow Gandhi?

BVM, Samvad Farm, and Nilayam Nivedita enacted their values in food production and consumption and demonstrated a balance of reflection and practice. Their focus on practice, as well as consensus decision-making, places these communities in a context of process and experimentation, rather than adherence to fixed dogma. The reflexivity of engagement and assessment ensures that this process is not a simple application of a Gandhian platform or an ideological absorption in which theory is divorced from practice, a persistent problem for intentional communities seeking social change. Communally and individually, community members actively promoted abstract values such as non-violence in performing daily work and assessed the process and consequences on themselves and others that followed their efforts to translate Gandhian values into practice.

I intended to explore how farmer-activists were reframing and enacting Gandhian ideals in response to contemporary agrarian and other crises and to see if these groups might provide a window on larger processes of social change. I saw an experiment in a radical, values-based

democracy that created alternative models of selfhood and relationality (vis-à-vis other people and the environment itself), which in turn challenged and transcended models that are based on profit as the sole criteria for valuation, on centralized control of resources, and on an uncritical faith in the power to produce unlimited crops. To me, the focus on process and experiment at these farms echoed the on-going 'quest for democracy', as described by sociologist Catriona Sandilands in her study of ecofeminism and radical democracy, in which we are obligated continually to consider what parties, human and non-human, might not yet have a voice. Further, as Sandilands argued, this quest must be an on-going process, not a one-time action lest the act of demarcating who or what is not at the table itself closes the door to (as yet) unrecognized or emergent parties (Sandilands 1999: 202).

Like Gandhi, these communities were not nostalgic for a premodern utopia, nor did they seek to reclaim a romanticized past, concerns raised by Mawdsley (2006) and Nanda (2003) among others. Although Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* lauded India's traditional values and villages, he did not advocate a nostalgic return to feudal or pre-modern styles of living in which decision-making was limited to very few people. Instead, he proposed novel forms of village development and participatory democracy based on his concept of *swaraj* that offered unprecedented levels of autonomy to populations such as women and the poor (Gandhi 1997). Similarly, the members of BVM have sought new ways to promote democracy and to avoid replicating existing repressive hierarchies in their own community. In experimenting with innovative and integrated forms of governance, sustainable agriculture, and religious practice, members re-envisioned concepts of and relations between self, nature, and community. In these ways they demonstrated how relations within small communities can contribute to broader and positive social and environmental change.

These practical and religious responses are situated in a holistic paradigm that integrates material, economic, social, and religious realms. These holistic worldviews reflect a new agrarianism that rejects reductionist, scientific agriculture with its modern separation of religious, economic, and scientific realms (Kirschenmann 2010; Wirzba 2004). Instead, this new agrarianism privileges a holistic understanding that integrates sustainable agriculture and religion and firmly acknowledges the material dimensions of agriculture and social equity, including health and nutritional benefits. Similarly, BVM, Samvad Farm, and Nilayam Nivedita were not anti-science, but explicitly considered the financial and social dimensions of agriculture.

Conclusion

Since Independence, India has steadily retreated from a rural, agrarian-based society and moved toward an urban-focused, consumer-based society. To some, a Gandhian platform emphasizing agrarian values, non-violence, and regional self-sufficiency appears quaint and a step in the wrong direction. One might reasonably wonder what small, intentional communities such as BVM can contribute to an increasingly corporate, violent, and unsustainable world: their agricultural production will not feed a hungry world, nor can more than seven billion of us engage in consensus-style governance. Vinobe Bhave predicted that the world would face two competing narratives: commitment to the public good, or what Gandhi warned of, corporate tyranny and the seductive lure of consumer goods (Sykes 2006: 123-24). The intentional communities I analyze in the present study provide counter-narratives and lived counter-examples of radical democracy to the tyranny Gandhi warned of and resisted. They provide a test-lab for new and alternative ideas and demonstrate that other frameworks for food and community exist and are possible. While most people will never consider joining an intentional community, those who visit such communities, whether for an afternoon or a month, can adapt these ideas to their own circumstances. BVM, Nilayam Nivedita, and Samvad Farm, for example, all draw many visitors, including Indian students and pilgrims, US college students, and city-dwellers. These visitors will likely apply these ideas differently, both in content and in scale. Some may plant a kitchen garden, and a small percentage may well also join or found an intentional community.

BVM offers Gandhi as a frame to redirect our thoughts about food and community and, in focusing visitors' attention on food and its production, offers a new awareness about food for many who have not questioned the source of their food or its means of production. In 2011, for example, an episode of 'Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution' demonstrated that the composition of 70% of the ground beef in the United States contained leftover cow parts tainted with salmonella and e-coli bacteria, washed with ammonia and water, which became known as 'pink slime'. By the spring of 2012, the American public reacted in horror when the story about pink slime became widely known, leading to a clamor for its removal from school lunchrooms (Boffey 2012). Although the hysteria may wane, consciousness about pink slime will linger, and in many other ways concerns about food sources and safety are growing.

Our food choices would look significantly different if we grounded our decisions about food in a Gandhian framework. BVM offers the framework and demonstrates one possible application of Gandhian

values in the context of a Hindu-oriented intentional community. Bhave himself used the example of yogurt, stating that the ashram's work, like yogurt, could be mixed with milk to make more yogurt and spread to other villages (Sykes 2006: 125). Visitors, then, can make changes appropriate to their own situations, as did the founders of Nilayam Nivedita and Samvad Farm, and then demonstrate specific applications of Gandhian values to ever-widening circles.

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