‘Holding out to the public gaze’¹: Mohandas Gandhi & the Public Sphere

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Given its multiple meanings the precise use of the word publics is contingent on the circumstances within which it is evoked. The modern use of the term public ordinarily assumes the inclusion of all people. In everyday discourse there is seldom any recognition that the public being referred to is bounded. However on closer inspection the inherent exclusivity of the way the term is often used becomes apparent. For this reason the multiplicity of meaning imposed onto the idea of the public, and therefore the public sphere, requires deeper interrogation of the numerous meanings and uses of the term. It is therefore vital that any project that engages matters relating to the idea of the public sphere considers the question posed by Warner “What is a public sphere?” (Warner: 2002, p. 49).

Although the idea of the public sphere is often assumed to include all people closer examination reveals that there are several different types of publics, and that all of these different types of publics are bounded. Therefore regardless of whether the idea of a public is as broadly defined as an entire nation, or as confined as an audience watching a play in a theatre, or even a family watching television from within the four walls of their living room, it still sets up an implicit or explicit framework of inclusion and exclusion (Warner: 2002, p. 49).

Considering the variety of publics there has to be an overt understanding of the type of public that was central to Gandhi's writing practices. Hofmeyr's recent work begins to ask the important questions about Gandhi's readership (Hofmeyr: 2011): Was it a counter or sub-public? Was it anyone who was literate? Was the public bounded by a set of political or social

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¹ This is the second chapter from the manuscript for my book provisionally titled From South Africa to the World: The politics of writing and the making of the Mahatma.
ideals? Or was it just the readership of a particular newspaper? In addition to all these questions, I also want to consider how Gandhi began to develop an audience. How did he think about his public? How did he develop this public? Or was it an already fully formed public waiting to engage with his writings?

In order to engage fruitfully with these questions there has to be an examination of what type of writing Gandhi was publishing and which public sphere he first situated himself within and then sought to influence. From a reading of Gandhi’s various dairies and public and private letters it becomes apparent that, very early on in his career in South Africa, he understood the importance of the public sphere. He also understood that he needed to gain prominence within the colonial public sphere in order to gain negotiating power with the powerful colonial state. This technique of engaging a more politically powerful opponent via a public platform first gained popularity in Europe, as Habermas famously showed, in the 17th century after the end of the English Civil War in 1660 (Hill: 2002).

By the time James II retook the throne of England under a constitutional monarchy there had been enough of a power shift in society to place significant limits on the power of the aristocracy and the monarchy. The rise of the mercantile classes, and their increased political power in society, meant that the dark, narrow corridors of Tudor power had to be opened up to make space for this new class of people with the result that political debates moved into a new public sphere (Habermas: 1991, p. 58). This new and growing public sphere was still a sphere for the exercise of elite power, but it was also a bourgeois sphere, and, for old and new elites alike, a public sphere in which contestation included the writing and publishing of pamphlets, letters and proclamations in order to make and debate political arguments. Under these circumstances it was, Habermas, notes, “an obvious step for the weaker party to carry the political conflict into the public sphere,” (Habermas: 1991, 58) and to try and garner support or
publicity around an issue. Over the next century the importance of public debate became deeply established in British society amongst the literate classes and became an important means of controlling and shaping political debates (Habermas: 1991, p. 59). It was Habermas who demonstrated how:

…this new public sphere political discourse could be separated both from the state and from civil society, the realm of private life (including economic life). It could therefore regulate or criticize both (Warner: 1991, p. x).

In India the development of a public sphere largely constituted by writing was both similar to Europe’s relationship to the written public sphere, and at the same time somewhat different. Although the Mughal court, reigned over by one of history’s most enlightened monarchs Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar, was exposed to the printing press, the Mughals did not pursue the mechanisation of writing. The indifference towards the printing press within this otherwise progressive court was due to the pre-existing well-developed system and tradition of the scribe who, according to Miles Ogborn, had “well-developed procedures for the collection, transmission, and storage of information in the service of Indo-Muslim ideals of kingship” (2007, p. 17). Scribes were constantly employed within the large civil service to run the empire, as well as to document and archive the political intrigue of courtly politics. In addition to the development of the documentation required to run the empire, courtly scribes were employed to provide accounts of the daily life at the Mughal court, with the Shahenshah as the central character. Aware of the historical weight of writing the Mughal emperors understood all too well the power of writing in affirming their legacy. These written accounts of the Mughal sultanate, such as the Akbarnāma, still influence contemporary academic and popular histories of the period, including popular films with mass audiences.
Besides using writing to run their large civil service, Mughal rulers had a passion for books and other manuscripts. They developed and supported extensive libraries and financially supported scribes, as well as bookbinders (Ogborn: 2007, p. 17). In fact emperor Humayuan, father of Akbar the Great, met his death with his arms full of books as tumbled down the stairs of his library. Although illiterate Akbar continued the Timurid love affair with books and the courtly tradition of supporting artists, scribes and other intellectual and religious debates (Dasgupta: 1975, 243–246).

The courtly fascination with writing in Mughal India was not limited to collecting beautiful books and developing massive libraries but extended to an appreciation of the written word in all forms including letters of business and court. Letters were passed around, admired, observed and reflected on in a similar fashion to seventeenth century Europe. Letters of the emperor were most revered and his writing was admired and studied (Ogborn, 2007, p. 17). The letter was not only used as a tool of communication but a well-written letter was admired, read and reproduced in a manner similar to medieval Europe (Habermas: 1991, p. 49). The art of letter-writing or insha was revered and different types of literary styles flourished and also functioned “as a form of regulating proper social relations” (Ogborn: 2007, p. 17).

The art of reading and writing was not limited to the enlightened courts of Akbar and his descendants. Calligraphers and scribes also operated at every level of medieval Mughal society. As a result illiterate subjects of the empire were not cut off from the world of writing and could engage a variety of different public spheres, including the public political sphere. The understanding of the importance of writing to many people who could not read or write is demonstrated by their frequent use of scribes. In addition to writing there were several other public forums such as the:
Kathakatas, open–air “collective narrative sessions” where Brahmin narrators (kathaks) read, or rather performed, religious texts based on the Hindu epics from manuscripts or wooden tablets to active and involved audiences (Ogborn: 2007, p. 18).

Despite the absence of the printing press, 18th century India managed to develop a public sphere of rational debate over interlocking concerns of politics, religion, and aesthetics” (Ogborn: 2007, p. 18). Therefore medieval India was able to develop a thriving public political sphere despite the absence of what Habermas had argued were the basic conditions necessary for the rise of the public sphere in Europe – including a bourgeoisie, capital and mass print media.

Habermas famously argues that from the mid-nineteenth century the public sphere in Europe became co-opted and turned into a commodity whose value arose, and continues to arise, out of its monetary value rather than any political value. The public sphere that once involved a world of critical letters and writing promoting debate over political, religious, aesthetic and social concern, …has turned into a conduit for social forces channelled into the conjugal family's inner space by way of a public sphere that the mass media have transmogrified into a sphere of culture consumption (Habermas: 1991, 162).

While Habermas’s analysis of the commercialisation of the public sphere in Europe was to a large extent valid the commodification of the public was not universal and there were attempts to form alternative publics not linked to the markets throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. It is apparent from Hofmeyr's work on the circulation of Indian Opinion, the newspaper founded by Gandhi in South Africa, that Gandhi tried to disrupt the pattern of consumption that had, by the turn of the twentieth century, become the model for the public sphere. In fact Gandhi’s commitment to decommodify the Indian Opinion went as far as not
accepting advertisement shortly after establishment (Fischer: 1983, p. 58), Gandhi’s aspirations for his printing press and newspaper sought

… to move beyond the marketplace entirely. Gandhi pursued an avowedly utopian cosmopolitan idea of printing, publishing, and reading that took shape in the Indian Ocean region. For him the production and consumption of books should not be separated but should form part of a continuous ethical community in which printers, authors and readers become comrades (Hofmeyr: 2011, p. 293).

It could be argued that Gandhi may, in some way, have been drawing inspiration from the pre-colonial forms of the public sphere instituted by the Mughal Empire – a public sphere that might have to some extent still operated in Kathiawad despite the presence of colonialism. However, Gandhi himself stated that his inspiration of running *Indian Opinion* in what he views as the “ethical” way was taken from Ruskin.\(^{ii}\)

Gandhi’s commitment to separate the public sphere from a culture of consumption was part and parcel of his commitment to opposing the colonial apparatus. The control and depoliticization of the public sphere in India can be traced back to the arrival of the British East India Company. With company controlled technology India’s relationship with the written word underwent a radical change. The shift was signalled by the use of printing presses, controlled initially by the Company. The Company understood all too well the radicalising effects mass print media may have on a society, considering the shifts in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but they thought that, properly controlled, a well-controlled mass print industry in the colonies could work in their favour (Ogborn: 2007, p. 105).

The usefulness of print media was not lost on the Christian missionaries either. They
understood the impact of distributing a book widely. As pointed out by Barber it was well understood that the “printed texts were agents of proselytization which could go further and last longer than the spoken word of the preacher” (Barber: 2007, p. 150). With this in mind it is no surprise that, as in colonial Africa (Hofmeyr: 2008), one of the earliest books that was translated into Bengali and circulated in India, was *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Das & Akademi: 1991, p. 109).

The mass print media in India quickly developed and by “the mid-nineteenth century, a substantial publishing industry had grown up in urban centres of the British Raj” (Walsh: 2004, p. 20). The rise of the printing press in India did not necessarily create a public sphere, which according to Ogborn was already in existence, but transformed it by mechanizing the tools of writing. Although public writing was an integral part of the Mughal political scene, its importance to the colonizing British was not lost on the colonized Indian subjects (2007, p. 18).

According to Habermas the use of print media in shaping political debates in a public arena was well-established in Europe and more precisely England (Habermas: 1991, p. 57) by the eighteenth century, soon spread to the colonies and by 1765 became indispensable to political life in the United States (Warner: 1991, p. 32). According to Warner open letters, or pamphlets, were often very successful in setting the agenda in local discussions in the United States (Warner: 1991, p. 60). Just as in America it soon became apparent to many colonial subjects around the world that if they wanted to engage the colonial state effectively that engagement needed to occur on the terrain of words, written words in the public domain. Thus many colonial subjects, whether working for or against the state, quickly developed the technological skills to mass produce print media. The presence of the colonial subject was not just restricted to the cities of the colonies but also made a mark on the public life of the Victorians at home. As Burton has pointed out:
narratives of colonial travellers in Victorian Britain remind Westerners that the flow of ideas, commerce, and people was not just from Britain to the colonies. Either because they were part of permanent communities with long histories and traditions in the British Isles, or because they were travellers or temporary residents in various metropoles and regions throughout the United Kingdom, a variety of colonial “Others” circulated at the very heart of the British Empire before the twentieth century (Burton: 1998, p. 8).

Gandhi, being a temporary resident in the London during the late nineteenth century, became one such “Other” who became a conduit for information about India for an almost exclusive English audience. His first publications were essays in the Vegetarian Society pamphlets. These essays were published weekly from 7 February 1891 to 14 March 1891. These essays were followed by a piece on Indian Festivals. The first part of this essay was published on 28 March 1891 with the two other sections published on the 4 April and 25 April respectively. The final essay of a set of essays on Indian Foods was published on the 2 of June 1891. This was not the only writing that Gandhi published while in London. On his return trip to India, Gandhi also wrote a travel diary published in The Vegetarian on the 9th of April 1892 under the title On the Way Home to India. Gandhi was not the first person to write an account of his travels. Almost nine years earlier in 1883, Pandita Ramabai wrote a travelogue in English and Marathi (Burton: 1998, p. 13). In writing these sets of essays and a travel diary Gandhi became part of the select group of travellers to England who shaped the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser (Burton: 1998, p. 13).

By the time Gandhi had entered the political scene at the turn of the nineteenth century getting public opinion on one's side via written interventions in the public sphere was a firmly established practice. This was not just the case in Britain but also in the many parts of the colonial world (Hofmeyr: 2008, p. 12). As pointed out by Hofmeyr recent scholarship on the
Indian Ocean demonstrates “that the imperial cities of the Indian Ocean sustained a distinctive public sphere that flourished from the 1880s until the First World War (Hofmeyr: 2008, p. 12). The establishment of the Indian Opinion in 1903 effectively became a means for Gandhi to concretely engage with and shape the public sphere in southern Africa. Years later, in My Experiments with Truth, Gandhi recalled:

> But after all these years I feel that the journal has served the community well. It was never intended to be a commercial concern. So long as it was under my control, the changes in the journal were indicative of changes in my life. Indian Opinion in those days, like Young India and Navajivan today was a mirror of part of my life.

**Letters**

Although the Indian Opinion was a successful tool to cement Gandhi’s space within the southern African public sphere it certainly was not the only, or first, public intervention in the written world made by Gandhi. Another important form of writing that Gandhi used was letter-writing. Gandhi wrote letters almost daily, both public and private letters. The first task of this section is to establish what it is that I mean by public letters or rather those I have defined as Gandhi’s public letters. By public letters I refer to all the letters that Gandhi wrote to be read either by a wide audience, a letter that was written for an individual but was widely distributed or published. The public letter has been a key feature of political communications, even if at first it was a restricted to the upper echelons of governance from the medieval Florentine courts (Witt: 1976, p. 1) to the Mughal Empire on the subcontinent. (Ogborn: 2007, p. 17)

The shift in the use of letters as a means to sway opinion and enter into public debate occurred, according to Habermas, in the 17th century with the rise of the bourgeois classes in Europe. The technologies of printing combined with the increased commercialisation and mass
production of goods meant that print media, coffee shops, and the greater economic independence of individuals created a public sphere that shaped and contested the political machinations of the day (Barber, 2007, p. 143). These new institutions provided the basis to form a critical public sphere (Habermas: 1991, p. 58).

Given the combined importance of public letter writing in pre-colonial India and colonial India, it was only a natural extension for anti-colonial thinkers to take up the practice of writing. An excellent example of this was the young anti-colonial thinker Bhaskar Tarkhadkar, who wrote “a series of long letters which he wrote to the Bombay Gazette, under the pseudonym of 'A Hindoo'. Through his well-reasoned and hard hitting letters, Bhaskar struck at the very root of the myth that British rule was 'Divine Providence’” (Naik: 2001, p. 4429).

The young Gandhi would have understood the power of public letter-writing very well. His experience in England led him to understand the crucial role print media played in shaping public discourse. His London experience would have confirmed insights he must have had about the power of letters and petitions given that he grew up close to governmental power. His father was a diwan, a top bureaucratic post in the princely state of Kathiawad (Lelyveld: 2011, p. 5).

Although Gandhi published articles and extracts of diaries for the Vegetarian Society whilst in England it was only when he arrived in South Africa that he began to write letters to newspaper editors. Although Gandhi’s first letter to the editor dealt with a misunderstanding in court, Gandhi was soon writing letters explaining the action of others to the local newspapers. This practice grew with Gandhi’s stature and Gandhi not only used the newspaper as a tool to express his own ideas but also began to publish the responses to his letters to colonial officials. As Hofmeyer notes this is a practice that would continue with the establishment of the Indian
Opinion. In this way Gandhi was able, like many people before him – from Benjamin Franklin to Bashkar Tarkhadkar, - to, firstly, gain a stake in the public sphere and, secondly, to shape and influence the South African print media. Finally he was able to gradually develop a global audience ranging from gay civil rights leader Bayard Rustin in the United States, (Levine: 1991, p. 61) to Romain Rolland in France (Rolland: 2000) and Gopal Krishna Gokhale in India.

Gandhi did not only write letters which, from the outset, were intended for publication. Often many of Gandhi’s private letters would be made available to particular groups of people. In these cases a much more nuanced understanding of a public is needed. It is here that a further distinction needs to be made, as Warner does, between “the public and a public” (Warner: 1991, p. 49). “The” public usually refers to

…a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general. It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community. It might be very general, as in Christendom or humanity.

In contrast a public

…can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer on stage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. A crowd at a sports event, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges, but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action. (Warner: 1991, p. 50)

However, Gandhi’s private letters often made it into “the public sphere.” Examples of this were his early private correspondence with members of the Vegetarian Society. These letters were usually addressed to a single addressee. However when the recipient published the content of
the letter in the Vegetarian Society newsletter with a disclaimer reading, “Mr. M. K. Gandhi, in a private letter from Pretoria, writes…” the audience shifted from the private sphere, [the recipient of the letter] to the public sphere [a more general public]. Once the material has been published and put out into the public, all kinds of people beyond the originally intended audience will have access to the writing if it is adequately distributed and preserved.

The second way in which Gandhi's private letters were not rendered private was when read aloud. This act of reading his letters out loud was usually undertaken when Gandhi was away from his family. For example he would often get his nephew Chhaganlal to read letters or explain the content of his letters to his wife Kasturba, or to pass on the already read letter to his sons.

I do not like the idea of her staying there for the sake of the jewellery or any such temptation. If she wishes to stay there, she should live contented and without being a burden to others. But if she cannot do that she has my permission to come over. Read this to her. Pass on the letters I am writing to Chi. Harilal and Gokaldas.

The act of reading out letters to a public became common practice in Gandhi's life, especially after he became more involved in both politics and the formation of the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy farm. When Gandhi was away for long periods from either or both places he would often write letters to one person, such as Chhaganlal or Kallenbach, and ask them to either read the entire letter, or a second enclosed letter, or extracts from one letter to other people living at either farm or his family members. This form of private public letter further blurs the lines of the private and public in Gandhi's life, so much so that Markovits has suggested that for Gandhi his private life and his public life were one and the same (Markovits: 2004, p. 77).
Over and above these two forms of private public letters Gandhi also published several private correspondences with various individuals. At first these letters would be published in local newspapers ranging from the *Natal Advertiser*, the *Natal Mercury* and then internationally in the *Englishman in India* and later in the *Indian Opinion*. As Hofmeyr has pointed out:

One strategy was to reprint verbatim an entire correspondence. In most instances, these letters were exchanges with colonial authorities. The correspondence demonstrated the rigidity of the colonial bureaucrat and satirised his absurd devotion to rules and regulations. (Hofmeyr: 2008, p. 18)

The publication of personal correspondence was not unique to Gandhi. In fact Barber points out that:

In many places, including Africa, new personal genres were produced and circulated not just by and among highly-educated and publicly visible figures that dominate political histories, but also by people excluded from the elite or obscure aspirants to elite status clerks, village headmasters, traders, wage-labourer and artisans. (Barber: 2007, p. 175)

Therefore we can conclude that Gandhi's practice of publishing personal correspondence was not viewed as unusual in the colonial world. Just as the less powerful politicians in eighteenth century England seized upon the use of the newspaper to garner public support, so too did many colonial subjects. The shifting of the debate from the private to the public broadened the audience and changed the recipient from a public to the public. Additionally as Chatterjee has pointed out Gandhi was not:

...seriously troubled by the problems of reconciling individuality with universalism, of being oneself and at the same time feeling at one with the infinite
variety of the world. Nor was his solution one in which the individual, without merging into the world, would want to embrace the rich diversity of the world in himself. (Chatterjee: 1993, p. 90)

This lack of concern with defining individuality (private) and universalism (public) allowed Gandhi to move easily between the two spaces. It also meant that Gandhi could, at the same time as developing, reforming and disciplining himself, engage in a very public life. Often he would also live out these processes of self-disciplining and reformation, usually the preserve of an individual concern, very publicly.

Diary Writing

Diary writing dates back almost 1000 years in the Islamic tradition – the earliest surviving examples are from Baghdad (Makdisi: 1986, 173). From available evidence it seems that diary writing remained largely a practice of elite men through most of that millennium, in Baghdad as much as in Britain. However, by the eighteenth century the recording of everyday activities of one's life became a widespread activity. The shift towards the interior that began with the gentry in Europe in the seventeenth century and then spread to the bourgeois by the eighteenth century meant that the diary as a form of writing became very popular. (Habermas: 1991, p. 58)

The use of the diary as an important tool of self-reflection was not lost in an age where individuality and the cultivation of the self were paramount in certain elite and bourgeois sectors of society. In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century the diary writing style was widespread and was even used as an educational tool where students were encouraged to keep a record of their daily activities and note completion of homework:
The child's exercise book becomes the equivalent of the widely admired, 19th century diary, in which the 'gentleman of leisure' kept records of his daily occupations. The other important function of the exercise book-record is to act as proof of work done (Hebrard: 1997, p. 185).

Nineteenth century Gujarat also witnessed the practice of diary writing amongst men of a particular class interested in keeping a record of their daily activities. These diaries were written in either Gujarati or Persian or both (Datta: 1995, p. 1015). Writing in Persian signifies that the diarists were educated men, probably in the employ of the state, as Persian was, until the mid-nineteenth century, the language of the state, and probably continued to operate in some official capacity until the end of the nineteenth century considering the opposition to the replacement of the language with English (Bose & Jalal: 1998, p. 58 & 67).

Durgaram Mehtaji, considered an early Gujarati pioneer in social reform, kept a regular account of his social activity, including the formation of the Dharma Sabha in Surat. In addition to accounting for his daily activities there is also evidence of the recording of the various lectures and observations on religion (Datta: 1995, p. 1015). For Durgaram Mehtaji his diary-writing was not just an account of his day, it was also a tool for him to reflect on his social and religious observations.

By the end of the nineteenth century diary writing was commonly practised by people across the globe, including literate colonial subjects of a particular class. As with other forms of writing many colonised subjects took on diary-writing in order to demonstrate a literate lifestyle (Watson: 2006, p. 72).

As the next chapter will demonstrate Gandhi's diary writing starts out as an account of his first voyage. It was written for two reasons. Firstly, to account for the new experiences so he could
reflect and remember the novelty of his new adventure later on in his life. Secondly, it was meant to be read by other young Indian men of a similar background to him, who were travelling to England for the first time. This diary would be a guide to prepare them for the journey. Gandhi's diary-writing did not remain at the level of recording daily events and observations. Over the years Gandhi began to use the diary much more as a tool of self-reflection. The next chapter will argue that writing and diary writing became fundamental to Gandhi's political, philosophical and spiritual practices. It will also show that diary-writing, like letter-writing, also became an important practice of Satyagrahis.


Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi., Vol. 3 (1 August, 1902-21 May, 1904), 28.

Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi., Vol. 1 (1884 -30 November 1896), 64.

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Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi., Vol. 3 (1 August, 1902-21 May, 1904), 327.
