

Barnett Newman, Gandhi, and the Aesthetics of Nonviolence

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Abstract

Taking the painting *Be I* by famous American Abstract Expressionist painter Barnett Newman as a starting point, this paper explores relationships between Mohandas K. Gandhi's aesthetic life and an emerging aesthetic of nonviolence in the post WWII era. A nonviolent aesthetic is considered in the painting and in relation to two key photographs featured in the exhibition "Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence" at the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas from October 3, 2014 – February 1, 2015: Margaret Bourke-White's now iconic photograph of *Gandhi Spinning* and an anonymous photograph of *Gandhi's Earthly Belongings* published in a 1954 book by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1954.

Keywords: Gandhi, Newman, Bourke-White, aesthetics, asceticism, nonviolence

1. Introduction

In October 2014 the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas exhibited an eclectic array of art from a diverse range of cultures and periods in its "Experiments with Truth: Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence" exhibition (on view from October 3, 2014 – February 1, 2015). Along with Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain devotional art, the exhibition featured the art of world religions promoting peace; a selection of texts by the activists for tolerance and social reform who inspired Gandhi, or were inspired by him; and a profusion of poignant photographs of Gandhi's life. The inclusion of modern and contemporary works might have seemed puzzling to some, but Amar Kanwar's film *A Season Outside*, which documents the daily military rituals on the Indian/Pakistan border, and "The Sovereign Forest," which combines video, photography, historical documents, and a stunning collection of rice grains calling attention to contested land and cultivation rights in Odhisha examine the kinds of issues Gandhi sought to ameliorate in his activism. ("Experiments with Truth," 2014).

One of the most enigmatic inclusions was Barnett Newman's 1949 *Be I*, an example of his brand of American Abstract Expressionism that featured a radically reduced visual vocabulary. This pared down composition, in fact, inspired its inclusion in the show, demonstrating an aesthetic of nonviolence made palpable in the postwar period even in ostensibly apolitical art.



Fig. 1. Barnett Newman, *Be I*, oil on canvas, 1949, 93-1/8x75-1/8x1-3/8, Menil Collection, Houston, Texas.

2. Barnett Newman and *Be I*

Situated in a gallery housing medieval Buddhist sculpture, fragments of the Quran, and white paintings by Agnes Martin, Newman's 94 x 76 inch red canvas commended the viewer's attention. Its striking composition, which at first glance appears reliant upon two roughly equivalent rectangular red fields reveals itself, upon closer inspection, to be a single red field nearly divided down the middle by a thin, off white line – a trademark stripe, later termed “zip,” with which Newman began marking his canvases in 1948. “Splitting a radiant field of cadmium red,” according to *The American Art Book*, “a stark white stripe creates tension and balance between the two mirror image blocks of color” (1999). The vertical line may indeed add a sense of tension, but balance seems the overarching compositional effect. And only from a distance does the line appear to be ‘stark’ or to ‘split’ the canvas.

In *The American Art Book*, the term ‘stark’ denotes the work's blunt, austere, and powerful presence but connotes a harshness the off white line—or indeed the painting as a whole—does not possess. It may appear so on first entering the gallery, but as one approaches the painting the zip comes into clearer focus, revealing traces of the hand and allowing signs of human endeavor to replace stern first impressions. Perhaps the zip's blade-like thinness in *Be I* gives the impression that it cuts through the work, splitting the red field in two. This narrowness, more than its crispness or color, fosters the sense of starkness at the moment of first viewing. When one looks the line up and down it appears differently – as simple maybe, but not stark. And if the line seems

severe in relation to the red fields, their subtly mottled paint and visible brush strokes add warmth to a compositional strategy often discussed as prompting confrontation with ‘the void.’

Yet *Be I* is an imposing piece. Abrupt in its initial proclamation, as Yve-Alain Bois notes in “Newman’s Laterality,” the painting declares itself to the viewer (Bois, 2005). It does this by sheer size and pictorial austerity. Then, as one stands facing the canvas, its subtleties come into focus – that is, the nuances one can take in viewing the painting in sections. Only during this extended course of patient looking—a process in which the painting’s form guides the eyes—do its minute elements come into play with its monumental scale and proclamation. The absence of figural representation allows the eyes to roam freely—within limits. For the borders of the red fields, and even the zip, serve as boundaries. The eyes tend to veer to one side of the zip or the other, jumping over it in the process. Sometimes the zip interrupts this lateral scanning to draw the eyes up and down its axis. As the eyes play across the canvas, taking in both its large scale and its small, subtle details, Newman’s message begins to impress itself. One senses his desire to convey macrocosmic themes in a microcosmically interactive way.

The zip may seem to divide the canvas, but in an odd way it also unifies it. Indeed, Newman valued pictorial unity for both formal and thematic reasons. In *The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art* (1992), April Kingsley argues that the zip divides *Be I* but does not separate it. Rather, as she aptly notes, the zip fuses the fields into a unified whole – like a zipper (p. 80-81). Yet, in writing that “no frames bound the canvas to trap the red expanses or the white line” Kingsley (1992) overstates the line’s freedom and separateness from the red fields (p. 80-81). The white line is not free, despite its interaction with the gallery wall. Held in check by the wire thin application of red paint remaining at its upper and lower edges, the stripe stops short of escaping the pictorial bounds. It functions, then, as a unifying form around which the composition coheres.

Newman posed the zip as more than a stripe, arguing for its place as a color field in its own right (1965). And just as the zip’s nuances as a narrow, vertical band of color take time to come into focus, the painting as a whole requires the eyes to adjust. One needs time to take it in. Newman wanted his painting to give the viewer this experience, this *sensation* of time. Although many scholars, and Newman himself, wrote of this painting as giving the viewer a sense of place, Richard Shiff argues that time is a key factor. According to Shiff (2002), “Newman sought to investigate a set of non-picturesque places as opposed to formalist spaces” (p. 166). Shiff refers, of course, to Newman’s discussion of this thematic in his essay on Native American burial mounds titled “Ohio, 1949” (1949). In it, Newman wrote: “Only time is personal. . . . a private experience. . . . Each person must feel it for himself” (p. 114-115). Reinforcing this emphasis on the temporality of viewing, Newman later wrote: “My paintings are concerned neither with the manipulation of space nor with the image, but with the sensation of time” (qtd. in Shiff, 2002, p. 166). In altering pictorial space by reducing his pictorial language to simple color fields Newman found he could emphasize being in front of the canvas and thus, simply being. He shaped a gallery space that heightens awareness of one’s time there. In fact, this exploration of time, or that which at least depends upon time, is an essential part of the work – the part that also gives the viewer a sense of place.

Newman’s reduced pictorial language and activation of *the viewer’s experience* in the gallery appealed to the later Minimalists.¹ In orienting the zip with the viewer’s verticality,

¹ For more on Newman and the development of a Minimalist aesthetic see *Art in Theory; Art Since 1900; Artforum*, 1967 on Minimalism; *ABC Art*, Barbara Rose, 1965. The Minimalist aesthetic centers on unity

Newman indeed called attention to the activity of viewing. Bois notes that the zip helps one orient oneself relative to the canvas. According to Bois (2005), the zip mimics the structure of the human body and guides the viewer to stand near the canvas's vertical center, placing the zip in the central visual field. Thus, as Bois (2005) argues, the bilateral symmetry shapes a viewing experience of painting that mirrors the way visual perception is organized (p. 33). According to Newman (1948), he wanted such spatiotemporal engagement with the work to serve as profound subject matter—he wanted his canvas to move the viewer to consider human experience as epic drama (p. 96-100; 110-113).

The zip in *Be I* commands equal attention to the red color fields, drawing our eyes at least as much and sometimes more. According to Newman (1965), he thought of his zip “as a field that brings to life the other fields, just as the other fields bring life to this so-called line” (p. 117). As Kingsley (1992) notes, the thin, erect, vertical, zip has an anthropomorphic quality with which we identify (p. 80-81). Newman surely played with this identification in his title *Be*, and in re-titling it *Be I* after producing his 1961 *Be II*. ‘*Be*’ calls attention to the viewer’s spatiotemporal perspective – or being. ‘*Be One*’ suggests a drive toward unity. And the Roman numeral ‘I’ in *Be I* also suggests the pronoun ‘I’, referring the viewer back to him- or herself in a manner akin to Newman’s ideal viewing process. By making the zip the focus—by placing its thin verticality directly in the viewer’s space—Newman invited identification, or at least serious engagement, with the zip. The thin zip in *Be I* is more quietly stated, yet still makes a powerful impact.

But *how* do these relationship between this zip and color fields fit the Menil’s exhibition “Art and Truth: Gandhi and the Aesthetics of Nonviolence”? The quick answer is that the painting’s radical economy of means renders it appropriate to a show on Mohandas K. Gandhi’s exemplary ascetic life. After all, asceticism springs from the idea that one can enhance one’s quality of life, reduce exploitive practices, and foster peaceful coexistence by reducing material dependency. Analysis of Newman’s painting thus far has already shown how its form functions within the exhibition. *Be I* speaks to the theme of the show, as will be discussed. But its incongruity, its seeming lack of precise fit, is equally important. Indeed, *Be I* features in a show representing the diverse artistic interests and humanitarian goals that inform the Menil Collection and that shape the exhibition. Celebrating Gandhi’s ascetic example, the show, as noted, includes a wide array of objects that represent diverse approaches to spirituality, peaceful coexistence, and nonviolent resistance. Also featured in the exhibition are Henri Cartier-Bresson’s poignant photographs of Gandhi’s last days and Margaret Bourke-White’s now iconic photograph of Gandhi at his spinning wheel (Fig. 2), originally published in *Life Magazine* (Time, “Gandhi and His Spinning Wheel,” 2014). Of the many black and white photographs of Gandhi by these renowned photographers, however, an anonymous photograph of *Gandhi’s Possessions* (Fig. 3) stands out. Its striking minimalist simplicity testifies to Gandhi’s asceticism and suggests its aesthetic dimensions. Like the zip in Newman’s painting, this photograph serves as the unifying form around which the exhibition coheres. The photograph also suggests a kind of unity in

achieved through reduction of superfluous constituent parts, which is clearly evident in Newman’s work. Key aspects of the Minimalist movement both emerge from Newman’s production and differ from it. They are: anti-illusionist, nonfigurative production; unity or “unitariness” (Judd, “Notes on Sculpture, 1966); radical reduction of constitutive elements; context –viewer, setting, and temporal elements activate the work; impersonal or depersonalized art – often through serial or industrial production; emphasis on materiality and the art as object; erasure of distinctions between painting and sculpture; and emphasis on process. The Minimalists did not embrace Newman’s engagement with epic themes or the Absolute, working instead from an anti-aura, anti-transcendent perspective even in terms of the prior idea or intent of the author.

diversity that Gandhi sought in Independence-era India that appears in each of the three key pieces of the show considered here: Newman's painting *Be I*, the photographs of *Gandhi's Possessions*, and the photograph of *Gandhi spinning*.

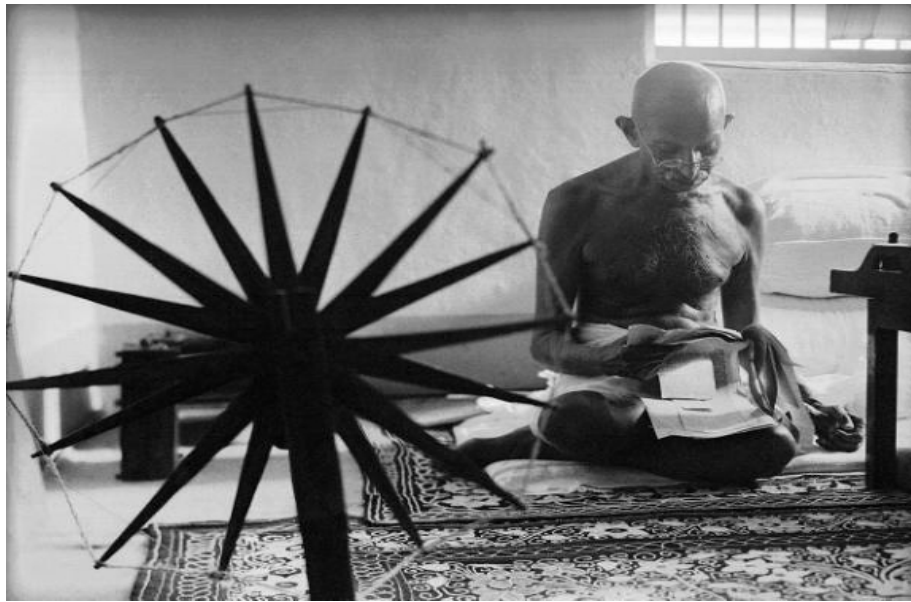


Fig. 2. Margaret Bourke-White, *Gandhi Spinning*, 1946, Gelatin Silver. Time.com.

We noted that in Newman's painting the absence of figural representation encourages the eyes to roam freely within the limits of the canvas, the color fields, and the zip. We also noted that the composition guides the eyes, prompting them to cross the zip's boundary at times. These elements are equally germane to discussion of Gandhi, a man who practiced law and respected social and religious restrictions, yet transgressed them if they threatened human dignity. Although he sought social harmony, he challenged social control. He did so carefully and methodically, however, always advocating *peaceful* resistance. Seeking social justice and equality, his asceticism reinforced a nonviolent approach. Although Gandhi's political views vastly differed from Newman's individualist anarchism, both men sought to shape spaces for personal freedom. And, despite Newman's anarchist rhetoric, he structured his canvas as a unity that shapes the viewing experience, in part by guiding and containing it. We can think of this as analogous to the boundaries Gandhi set for shaping social space.

We noted that the painting's large scale and economy of means impacts the viewer immediately while subtle variations in paint application invite close viewing and encourage prolonged engagement. This mode of viewing, taking in nuanced details over time, shows us that there is more to the work than we thought at first glance. We noticed that small details in the painting contrast with the painting's large scale. We considered the zip as a color field in its own right, noting that its verticality has an anthropomorphic quality with which we identify. And we can view these elements also in relation to the Gandhi exhibition.

When Gandhi visited England in 1931 Paramount Sound News described him as the "Little man' who may free India!" (Paramount, 1931). Thin and frail, he wore only the traditional Indian garb of draped, white, homespun cloth. It might have seemed easy for the colonialists with whom Gandhi met to underestimate his potential. Yet this 'little man' knew how to make big statements by saying very little. And by saying much of that *visually* rather than verbally, he led by example.

It took time for people to absorb the significance of his subtle statements, such as adopting simple clothing of homespun cloth. Gandhi knew the art of making humble gestures into grand statements as well. He believed that adopting traditional Indian clothing sent a moral, spiritual, and political message that transcended cultural barriers. Some viewed his spinning cloth and gathering salt from the sea, rather than purchasing these necessities from British vendors, to be humble, even futile acts. But his example led the way for others, promoted self-reliance, and ultimately fostered Indian independence from British hegemony (Tarlo, 1996). These gestures had both a sudden impact and more nuanced significance that only became clear with time. Gandhi was no individualist but, like Newman, valued individual life, freedom, and dignity. Gandhi showed the world that one small man can make a great impact, making small waves that eventually wore down Britain's tenacious hold on India. In his dedication to Indian Independence Gandhi also challenged outdated and discriminatory Indian structures such as the caste system – showing the world the value of each and all human life. Unity was important to Gandhi, but a unity in which all persons, regardless of race, religion, or class, could live freely together.



Fig. 3. Anonymous photograph, *Gandhi's Possessions*, 1948, Menil Collection, Houston, Texas.

Although Gandhi rejected the Hindu caste system as dehumanizing and wrong, he looked to traditional Hindu values to unify the Indian resistance. Although his efforts to unite the peoples of India sometimes placed him at odds with Hindu religious culture, Anthony Parel argues convincingly in his book *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (2006) that Gandhi looked to Indian religion to reconcile old and new ways of life. According to Parel, Gandhi looked to the *Purusharthas* or Hindu 'aims of life' in formulating his religious, political, and aesthetic ideals. Parel argues that Gandhi sought to reintegrate secular and spiritual life and to harmonize traditional religious and contemporary values with modern life and social needs (p. ix-x; 5). At about the same time in the United States (though with decidedly less socially motivated aims) Newman worked to reconcile opposing artistic and cultural forces. Indeed, he worked to synthesize modern abstract art, spirituality, and monumental subject matter. His unification of these formal and thematic elements in his painting thus had spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions.

We noted that *Be I* engages the viewer visually, spatially, and temporally, calling attention to the experience of being by way of contact with the work. Further, we saw that Newman wanted the formal elements of his painting, and the process of viewing they encouraged, to convey

macrocosmic themes in a microcosmically interactive way. And, as Bois (1999) argues, as color fields in their own right, Newman's zips break down the opposition between line and color, and between figure and ground (p. 35). As mentioned, Newman himself (1949) thought of his zip "as a field that brings to life the other fields, just as the other fields bring life to this so-called line" (p. 117). Thus, it is the relationship between the zip and the color fields that is important. This break down of figure-ground differentiation calls attention to one's spatiotemporal relationship with the work, with oneself, and even, as Newman asserted, with the Absolute. Once again Newman's painting intersects with Gandhi's asceticism. Newman's ideas about painting were not so different, ultimately, from Hindu texts on the plastic arts, which hold the meditative spaces of certain paintings as conducive to microcosmic-macrocosmic communion (Fic, 2003). As Newman (1949) wrote in his essay on Native American mounds: "I was confounded by the absoluteness of the sensation, [the mounds'] self-evident simplicity . . . a sense of place, a holy place" (qtd. in Kingsley, 1992, p. 80). It is this relation between the viewer and the absolute in Newman's painting that make it germane to the Gandhi exhibition. For in looking to Hindu tradition Gandhi sought to not only unite a diverse Indian populace into a coherent Independence movement but also to reconcile modern life and traditional spirituality. Gandhi believed that life structured by ascetic principles (reduced economy of means, rejection of superfluous ornament, awareness of one's spatiotemporal relation to the absolute and one's political place in the world) necessarily curbs exploitive practices.²

The spiritual, theoretical, and political grounding of Newman's work provides other reasons for the painting's inclusion in the exhibition. As noted, Newman was a self-proclaimed anarchist with radically different social views from Gandhi. But Newman had strong civic ideals. He believed that artists create reality and have a civic responsibility to speak out on important issues (Shiff, 2002, p. 163). In Newman's (1948) essay "The First Man Was an Artist" Newman claimed that the original act was aesthetic not pragmatic, and that "the meaning of the world cannot be found in the social act" (p. 108-109). Although these views seem antithetical to Gandhi's struggles to improve society there are parallels. Both men sought to shape a reality conducive to human exploration of self, spirituality, and place (in the world and in relation to the absolute). Both viewed this mission as a moral imperative with aesthetic dimensions –evident in Newman's reduced pictorial language and Gandhi's adoption of plain dress and the media images he shaped of austere living. Further, both men strived to make socially significant statements using a radical economy of means. Although Newman did this more successfully in the aesthetic realm than in his writing or often heated public statements, scholars agree that he took civic duty seriously (Ho, 2005, p. 2). And this play between declaration and silence, between reduced means of expression and their communicative power, and between aesthetics and ethics suggests the painting's significance to the exhibition.

3. Gandhi's Last Possessions

The photograph of *Gandhi's Possessions* (Fig. 3) titled *Gandhi's Earthly Belongings* in a 1954 Indian government publication, foregrounds the ideals of spirituality, self sacrifice, and rejection of material gain for which Gandhi is remembered. It exhibits affinities with Newman's work and, indeed, serves as the organizing image of the exhibition. The photograph shows two dinner bowls, a wooden fork and spoon, a diary, a watch, a prayer book, a spittoon, letter openers, a pair of

² For more on Gandhi's asceticism see Mohandas K. Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi* (Paris: Unesco, 1958).

spectacles, two pair of sandals, and three small porcelain monkeys. This might seem like a lot of objects to include in one shot. They seem very few, however, when one realizes these were the only objects Gandhi owned at the time of his death. The photograph, possibly taken by a friend or government official, epitomizes the asceticism for which Gandhi is remembered.

Yet, it is not merely the image of these few belongings that represents Gandhi's asceticism. Their aesthetic arrangement heightens their ascetic symbolism, highlighting also the moral and aesthetic ideals of the show. That this aesthetic signifies in the photograph is evident when comparing it with another, less composed, shot of Gandhi's few belongings, in which only some of these objects are arranged in a flat, roughly circular group on a patterned carpet in a way that appears somewhat jumbled and less effectively represents streamlined living. The exhibition photograph, on the other hand, shows the objects composed to form a unity. The anonymous photographer has arranged them in tiers on a shallow stone stairway, likely in Gandhi's simple home. Only two steps are shown but they section the picture plane into three lateral bands. The sandals, the largest of the items, are set at forty-five degree angles against the lower stair and occupy the entire lower register of the frame. The diary, watch, prayer book, spittoon, spectacles, and letter openers rest atop this stair in the middle register. These items form a small, triangular, still life with the diary occupying the apex and focal point. Above these items, in the third and upper register, the two dinner bowls, one dark and one light, sit side by side. They are framed by the wooden fork and spoon, set against the sides of each to form diagonals that echo the composition of the middle register. The white porcelain monkeys, a gift from Chinese visitors, rest in front of the darker of the two bowls, providing visual contrast and rhythm. Together these items form a cohesive image of unity and simplicity of form – the aesthetic translation of Gandhi's asceticism. Thus, both the forms *in* the photograph and the form *of* the photograph resonate with the exhibition's theme.

4. *Gandhi Spinning*

Margaret Bourke-White's photograph of Gandhi spinning (Fig. 2) also makes a large statement in a succinct way. As mentioned, this 1946 photograph of Gandhi spinning has become an iconic image of both his ascetic life and struggle for Indian independence. In the photograph Gandhi sits cross-legged on a patterned rug, the only sign of ornament in the simply furnished room. Wearing only his loin cloth, he sits at the far right of the picture plane in front of an outward-projecting corner where the room forms an L shaped bend. His body forms a vertical axis with this line in the two-dimensional photographic image. Although there is no overt connection between this image and Newman's painting, the white walls of the room and the composition of the photograph call to mind more than a streamlined way of life. Both the painting and the photograph use minimal forms to full impact. Both formally convey a sense of quiet contemplation. And each piece, in its way, suggests personal action – and interaction with the Absolute.

This photograph highlights an iconic image in its own right – Gandhi's spinning wheel. In the photograph, the simple, star-shaped wheel or *Charkha* appears in silhouette against the stark white walls of the room. A diagonal recession forms from the wheel to Gandhi (who sits just behind it and to its side) and to the recessed area flooded with light at the far corner of the home. The wheel occupies the entire left side of the photograph, its prominence foregrounding its political significance. The traditional *Chakra* (*samsara*) or wheel of life has long been a sign of karmic law in India. Gandhi adapted its symbolism, during the Independence era, in the form of the spinning wheel. This became a symbol of revitalized Indian cloth making and austerity in the

service of Indian independence. Gandhi encouraged the people of India to wear Indian cloth or *khadi* and to adopt it as a sign of dignity, equality, and peace, arguing that spinning “represented a way of life based on nonviolence (Talo, 1996, P. 90-91). Gandhi advocated spinning as an economic and political activity that could assert Indian independence from British hegemony. This was an act of resistance – and no small feat considering that it cost more to produce homespun cloth than to purchase cheap British imports (Brown, 2010, p. 71-72). According to Rebecca Brown (2010) in *Gandhi's Spinning Wheel and the Making of India*, Gandhi's wheel was one of the most unifying symbols of the Indian nationalist movement (p. 71-72). The wheel also helped reconcile modern and traditional values. Brown notes that the signs of spinning allowed anti-colonial organizers to unite a broader Indian populace with what was formerly an elitist movement. The wheel thus became a symbol for spinning as a performative ritual with the potential to overcome class, religious, and even gender differences, unifying India, if briefly, in the cause of independence. The Indian National Conference abstracted the spinning wheel, using its powerful symbol on the resistance flag. They abstracted the form further upon gaining independence from England in 1947. Reducing extraneous elements and merging its form with the traditional *Chakra*, they featured it on the new national flag. A pan-Indian symbol of cycles of earthly and spiritual life, the *Chakra* is a unifying form.

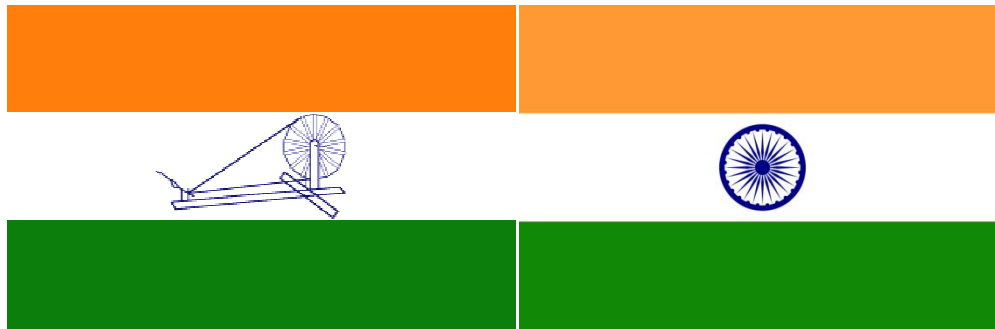


Fig. 4. (left) Dylan Crawfoot, *Rendering of the Indian National Conference flag of 1931*, April 1999. From the cover of the August 1997 issue of 'History Today.' Fig. 5 (right), *rendering of the Indian National Flag today*.

5. Conclusion

The photographs considered here signify Gandhi's asceticism along with the politics and spirituality that informed it. As mentioned, Gandhi looked to Indian religion, specifically the *purusharthas* or Hindu 'aims of life,' in formulating his religious, political, and aesthetic ideals. Parel (2006) argues that Gandhi did this in order to reintegrate secular and spiritual life and to harmonize traditional values with modern life and social needs (p. ix-x; 5). Thus, Gandhi wrote: "I believe it is our duty to augment the legacy of our ancestors and to change it into current coin and make it acceptable to the present age (Qtd, in Parel, 2006, p. 14).

Gandhi most wanted a unified India, working always toward this unification of diverse Indian peoples for the betterment of each and all. He was tragically assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu nationalist who advocated extremism and violence during the Hindu-Muslim conflict and Partition (Majmudas, 2005). Gandhi was unable to craft the unified India he so wanted, instead seeing it split in two – into the states of predominately Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947. If one wants to view Newman's zip as divisive, one may see *Be I* as sadly analogous to this struggle for unity marked by religious, regional, and cultural divisions. Viewed in this way, the zip seems a lonely figure longing for a utopian unity not possible in the real world. Yet, despite the split

between India and Pakistan, Gandhi, and all the people who helped him enact a passive, and highly symbolic, resistance, shaped a new and better social space.

Newman produced *Be I* only one year after the photograph of Gandhi's belongings—and Gandhi's assassination. Although not likely intended by Newman, who wrote of no relation between the painting and the Indian conflict, *Be I* can be viewed as an aesthetic counterpart to Gandhi's ascetic life. Its reduced economy of means makes a profound statement. It draws attention to experience free from excess, shaping instead a space of quiet contemplation. This painting exemplifies Newman's post 1948 work, which, according to him, embodied his art theory. It demonstrates his desire to promote contemplation of spatiotemporal relations in front of the canvas. This minimalist aesthetic played out also as an ethic – a moral imperative. Like the photograph of Gandhi's few belongings, Newman's painting provides a spiritual, political, and aesthetic lens with which to view an exhibition on Gandhi and the aesthetics of nonviolence.

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