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The Politics of Transformative Harmony

Elaine Desmond

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of transformative harmony as a concern of the political. It proposes that the cultivation of harmony as a project of the Self is closely related to the political project of democracy as a quest for social harmony. This is in light of the view that social conflict can be seen as a collective manifestation of individual struggles to establish inner harmony.

The paper, firstly, explores the idea that the quest for harmony is an inter-subjective, as well as an intra-subjective, undertaking. This is in line with the Gandhian principle that societies ultimately reflect the level of enlightenment of the actors who form them. It also critiques the use of violence as a means of securing transformative harmony and social change. Finally, the paper discusses the way in which transformative harmony, in terms of its focus on the Self as the site for attaining the type of altered consciousness required to bring about social change, shares a philosophical basis with both ideas of 'deep democracy' and Habermasian discourse ethics. It is proposed that the project of transformative harmony represents, by default, a project to transform democratic praxis.

Keywords: *Harmony, politics, ethics, rights, duties, Gandhi, democracy, risk.*

'Life is a quest for truth, which in turn is a quest for harmony.'[1]

The search for harmony as a concern of the political

THE SEARCH FOR HARMONY as an intra-subjective project, where the Self is engaged in a search for liberation (*moksha*) and truth (*satya*), is a prominent theme of Indian philosophy. The idea that the quest for harmony has also an inter-subjective dimension, however, was

recognised by Gandhi who claimed that harmony could not be achieved 'without a conducive socio-political environment'.[2] This paper proposes that the quest for harmony is both determined by, and determines, ethical positions which are formed as a result of the interaction between (intra-subjective) reflexivity and (inter-subjective) social interaction.

The complex interplay between ethics, politics and the search for truth as a precursor to harmonious living is one which is well illustrated in the epic Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is recognised that there is debate as to whether the battle at Kurukshetra, which is central to the work, was actually an allegory for a cosmic struggle between good and evil and so represented a spiritual, as opposed to a material, conflict.[3] However, this dispute itself is enlightening given the suggestion here that struggles of the Self manifest as social concerns. In other words, social conflict mirrors the internal ethical struggles of individuals.

The ongoing attempts to differentiate right from wrong, truth from untruth, good from evil, in which the Self is engaged are informed by the social context and, in turn, have social implications. Truth and harmony result from congruence between the ethical, spiritual Self and the social context in which that Self is embedded. Absolute congruence between these aspects can only ever be partially realised, however, given the changing nature of ethics and society and the complexity of the human condition. Hence, struggle is unavoidable. However, this paper suggests that the terms by which that struggle is undertaken represents an ethical choice and, as such, has political repercussions.

An important point here is the recognition that a social context is only partially created by a political system. Instead, social actors themselves create the conditions of the society in which they are embedded. This, in turn, determines the type of political system which will be deemed legitimate within it. The ethical positioning of actors and the decisions they take as to the means by which their particular quest for harmony will be conducted have a direct impact upon the boundaries of legitimacy of the political system. As Gandhi observed, '[t]he political form is but a concrete expression of … soul-force. … I believe that after all a people has the government which it deserves'.[4]

This idea of the significance of ethics in setting boundaries on political legitimacy is also highlighted by Norval.[5] She argues that, '[a]t some time, my sense of society's distance from the reign of perfect justice and my implication in its distance may become intolerable.' Similarly, she claims that the social actor is 'not only responsible to [the government], but for it.'[6] This, then, highlights the inter-

dependence between the quest for harmony of the Self as an ethical spiritual enterprise, and the social and political sphere. This paper now turns to an exploration of the rights and duties of the Self as the locus of a search for harmony within a disharmonious social context.

The Self in Chaos

As Giri notes, the Self as a seeker of harmony must struggle with a reality of conflict, domination, risk and chaos. In contemporary society, the complexity of the social interactions resulting from a highly inter-connected globalised world and the resulting expansion of ethical concerns have rendered the quest for harmony both as an inter- and intra-subjective concern increasingly fraught. Fears for ontological security given growing inequality, resource shortage and awareness of existential risk have been exacerbated by a pervasive climate of contingency as the very foundations of epistemic certainty themselves have become increasingly undermined.[7] This has created an atmosphere of fear and hostility, and a social context in which the possibility of grasping a sense of the truth or of harmony seems to become ever more elusive.

Such a context has profound implications for the project of the cultivation of the Self. The search for truth as a precursor to forming an ethical position which can serve as a guide to defining a harmonious way of life becomes relativised and indistinct, and the actor becomes subject to varying degrees of ideological manipulation. Green highlights the 'existential nihilism and ontological rootlessness' of contemporary society.[8] This loss of direction of the Self is increasingly leading to an ethical vacuum. This is a view supported by Kothari who argues that large sections of people in contemporary society are coming to be regarded as 'dispensable.' He claims, '[s]ometimes there may be pangs of conscience or embarrassment … [b]ut the pangs quieten down soon.'[9] Habermas, too, notes a 'dwindling sensitivity to social pathologies.'[10] The question then becomes what can ideas of transformative harmony offer in such a context?

Rights, dharma and violence

As Giri notes, transformative harmony involves both compassion and confrontation. As a political concern, the idea of social action which is informed by values involves recognition of the complex interaction between ethics, duty (*dharma*) and rights. The impact of the ethical positioning of actors on the social and political spheres has previously been discussed. Given this, the idea of the cultivation of the Self as an instrument of transformative harmony *as a political concern* becomes increasingly important.

Because the actor is embedded in a social world, it is suggested that inner harmony is possible only when actions taken in the world are in line with the ethical position of the social actor. Similarly, the actor has an ethical duty to take whatever action is possible where the rights of others are being adversely impacted. As well as representing a central aspect of Gandhi's philosophy[11], the idea that rights and duties cannot be separated but, together, form the basis of ethics is also the central tenet of the Kantian ethics of duty.[12]

The significance of this inter-connection implies that, as well as having a duty to take any action possible to address aspects of the social which are ethically incongruent, actions taken in defence of rights must themselves be irreproachable from an ethical standpoint. This can be seen as a duty to the Self. In such a way, the struggle itself becomes an 'exemplar' of an ethical position and 'facilitates the glimpsing of … another way of doing things'.[13] It also ensures that there is no basis for incongruence between the ethical position and actions taken in the social context. In this way, the inter-subjective struggle for harmony is guided by the intra-subjective ethical position which one wishes to see reflected in the social context.

The question of whether the assertion of an ethical position should involve the use of violence as a moral duty has been a central concern throughout human existence. Indeed, the historical use of violence as a means of establishing the social conditions for transformative harmony is noted by Giri. Norval, too, notes how 'antagonism [as opposed to agonism] is one possible response to the dislocation of the subject.'[14]

This paper takes the view, however, that the use of violence as a means of promoting harmony is problematic. This is given the previous argument that society reflects the ethical positions of those actors who form it. The performance of *dharma* (or duty) can be seen as an outer manifestation of an ethical position. Parel similarly suggests that *dharma* 'is the means by which we can know ourselves.'[15] Therefore, to be in harmony, actions taken should not be in conflict with the ethical position which one is seeking to promote as the basis for harmonious living.

In other words, the use of violence to promote peace, for instance, is a contradiction given that the action taken to promote peace is not in harmony with the ethical position which regards peace as desirable. This means that the actors who are charged with undertaking the violence are involved in a contradiction.[16] Indeed, given that action is a manifestation of an ethical position, the use of violence implies that the actor ethically condones a violent society. Quite apart from the implications of this for the rights of others, a society in which

violence is deemed permissible as a means of resolving social conflict is not one which represents the best opportunity for the type of learning which is beneficial to the long-term development of society or the Self. It also implies a loss of equilibrium given that the social context is incongruent with ethical positions which regard the use of violence is abhorrent.

This paper proposes, therefore, that rather than the end justifying the means, the end should itself *define* the means. This is due to the recognition that the agonistic struggle for harmony, both as a project of the Self and of society, is ongoing. This idea of the significance of the *means* of the struggle and the opportunities which this presents for learning on the part of the individual and of society is a central aspect of democratic theory, and it is to an exploration of democracy which this paper now turns.

Democracy at a turning point

The recognition that the political process must retain an openness which allows for social disharmony is a central theme of radical democracy theorists.[17] Such agonistic struggle results from attempts by actors to establish their own ethical truths, even as they are simultaneously informed by, and may seek to challenge, the values manifesting in society. This struggle is seen as vital to the development of the Self and society given that it creates conditions for learning and non-violent social and personal change.

Such struggle is also seen as vitally significant to the development of democracy itself. This is in view of ongoing attempts to realise the principles under-pinning the democratic ideal – namely, liberty, equality and fraternity[18] - in praxis. Because democratic principles are seen to represent values which serve as a basis for ethical positions, democracy can be seen as both a means *and* an end. This is given the view that, as an aesthetic and an ideal, democracy seeks, as its purpose or 'end', to establish harmony between the ethical positions of actors and their wider social context. This is undertaken through means which themselves uphold the values which are the goal of the struggle.

In this regard, deliberation and political will formation as the basis of decision-making and social justice are generally viewed as central.[19] This recognises the need for social harmonisation with ethical positions, even as it accepts that those ethical positions are themselves conflicting and subject to change. This is the very essence of non-violent, democratic self-rule and allows social (and personal) change to occur as a result of debates around the ethical positions of social actors.

It is also recognised, however, that the potential for democratic

praxis, as an institutionalised political process aimed at bringing the social context into an approximation of a harmonious relation with ethical positions, is coming increasingly into question in contemporary society.[20] This 'legitimation crisis' of contemporary democracies is signified by a recognised gap between democracy as a normative ideal and as an empirical praxis.[21] This gap appears to widen as the complexity of societies increases.[22] The dissolution of certainty associated with modern society,[23] as well as the recognised heterogeneity and diversity of conceptions around the common good[24] have served to undermine the epistemic basis of democratic decision-making as a collective response to global risks. Here, the connection between the ethical and the social becomes confused, and the ability of the political sphere to facilitate a consensus on ethical issues becomes increasingly difficult.

This situation has been further exacerbated by the view of radical democracy theorists that consensus represents a 'provisional hegemony' and that any 'stabilization of power entails exclusion'.[25] The contemporary realisation of the tenuousness of social facts, and the resulting reluctance to take decisions, has seen an increasing role for ideological manipulation as opposed to reasoned debate.[26] Similarly, growing inequality has become problematic, not simply due to concerns for social justice, but also due to disparity in the capabilities of social actors to exercise effective influence in the deliberative process and so establish the social conditions in which they can have their ethical positions represented.[27]

It is suggested, therefore, that contemporary society has become caught between the desire for a democratic praxis which is capable of establishing some degree of epistemic certainty, and the simultaneous concern that decisions will be ideologically swayed and serve simply to reinforce hegemonic power interests, rather than truly representing a consensus of the ethical positions in a given society. Given this situation, the potential for democratic deliberation to promote the conditions for a harmonisation of ethical positions with the social context has been severely curtailed. This paper argues that this potential for a legitimation crisis in contemporary society can be managed only through a re-emphasis on the Self and the fostering of a heightened state of consciousness. This is a concern of political praxis itself and will now be explored.

Consciousness and Democracy

The states of consciousness described by the *gunas* and discussed in the *Bhagavad Gita* have particular relevance in contemporary society. The over-riding sense of uncertainty and risk which has been

described previously has, this paper argues, seen humanity alternating between the uncontrolled *raja guna* of 'desiring, worrying, resenting, scheming, competing' and the *tamas guna* of ignorant unawareness.[28] Such lower levels of consciousness are recognised as deleterious to democracy. This is given the obstacles they present to the type of deliberation required to make a clear, unbiased assessment of available knowledge through which decisions, though recognised as contingent, can be taken in the absence of ideological manipulation or special interests.

The impact of the state of consciousness of actors within a given society upon the political system has previously been highlighted. In many ways, deliberation requires humanity to have already attained the higher *sattva* state of consciousness which is associated with a natural harmony and 'unity of purpose, character and desire'.[29] This is also recognised by Beck who observes the need for a 'revolution of consciousness.' [30] The question then becomes how can such a revolution of consciousness be attained through a democratic political process which presupposes its attainment in order to properly function?

The answer to this lies, it is suggested, in the project of the cultivation of the Self as a site of altered consciousness and, hence, social change. Thus, while radical democracy theorists such as Mouffe argue that disharmony is an essential aspect of democratic society,[31] it is proposed here that this disharmony must involve openness to learning as an ethical concern, as well as a recognition of the need to engage in reasonable decision-making with others as a means of securing harmony of the Self. Such collective efforts at understanding will, it is argued, permit the development of an altered state of consciousness which identifies similarity as much as difference and, as such, permits trust, epistemic and ethical agreement, and legitimate decision-making to emerge.

Mouffe observes that democracy is 'not a quest for certainty but for responsibility.'[32] However, this paper proposes that responsibility is strongly dependent upon the establishment of a truthful assessment of a social situation as a basis for making ethical judgements on the way in which responsibility should be allocated. As we have seen, however, the epistemic basis for democratic praxis as a means of agreeing upon ethical and social truths is currently under threat. This difficulty in establishing truth as a basis for collective decision-making leads to the potential for a general denial of responsibility and for the social actor to resort to the lower states of consciousness associated with the *tamas* and *raja gunas.* This is particularly evident in areas associated with a risk to humanity, such as climate change.

This paper proposes that this is where Gandhi's idea of *swaraj,* as self-rule, and the concept of transformative harmony, have much to offer. Gandhi recognised that self-rule must always be a personal, as well as a political, project. Here, the social actor must cultivate herself/himself to take responsibility for the formation of the social context in which she/he is immersed, and to establish the best epistemic truth which is possible in a given situation through whatever means are available. Hence, for Gandhi, *swaraj* became a movement for 'self-purification', as well as a quest for independence from British rule.[33]

The idea of the cultivation of the state of consciousness of the Self as a means of bringing about political change is also gaining prominence in Western democratic theory. This has seen an increased emphasis on the ideal of democracy as a set of values, rather than an institutionalised political process. As Norval observes, '[i]f we dissociate democracy from the name of a regime, we can then give this name 'democracy' to any kind of experience in which there is equality, justice, … and respect for the singularity of the other at work.'[34] This has led to calls for a democratic ethos which recognises the relevance of democracy to value formation as an ethical concern of the Self, as a precursor to the democratic function of legitimate decision-making.[35]

The focus on the Self as a means of rejuvenating the democratic project has been most fully developed in the tenet of 'deep democracy'.[36] Here, democracy is seen as incorporating the development of a 'cultivated pluralism'[37] and a 'diversity-respecting unity in habits of the heart that are shaped and corrected by reflective inquiry'.[38] Green takes a broadly Habermasian approach to emphasise democracy as a lived practice which, in turn, has political implications. This centres on 'transformative communication'[39] and prioritises respectful encounters with others. Here, the idea of *dharma* becomes translated into the duties associated with discourse ethics and the Habermasian validity claims of a speech act as being true, right or sincere.[40] The project of the Self is thus defined in terms of seeking to speak truthfully, responsibly and sincerely in interactions with others, and of attempting to uncover ideology in the perhaps unwitting rhetoric of oneself and others. This can be considered as an epistemic responsibility which recognises the need to establish the best available truth through engaging in social interaction which is informed by the ethical concern to cultivate a higher state of (self- and social) consciousness.

The restoration of democracy as a decision-making mechanism

Through emphasising validity claims and discourse ethics, words, deeds and thoughts are brought into harmonious interaction as a political project. This allows deliberation to again present opportunities for providing solutions to the most pressing risks of our time. Deliberation undertaken with such intentions would mean that ideology could not help but expose itself as a discourse.[41] This would therefore provide opportunities for the Self to gain in awareness and lead to a greater ethical and epistemic basis for society as a whole.

The general emphasis on cultivating a *sattva* consciousness would enhance the ability of democracy to promote reasonable solutions through the restoration of its 'truth-tracking potential'.[42] While such solutions would be recognised as temporary given the contingency of knowledge and the need for openness to changing ethical positions and epistemic discoveries, the means by which solutions were arrived at would enhance their legitimacy, as well as the individual and social learning made possible through the deliberation which preceded them. The enhanced legitimacy of such a consensus would arise from the elevation of truth as a *means* (through validity claims) as well as an *end* (as an ethical judgement which allows responsibilities to become clarified) as a basis for enabling a higher state of consciousness of the Self. This would recognise that the cultivation of the Self, both as a speaker of truth and as a searcher for it, is a political, as much as an ethical, project.

Finally, given the increasing inter-connectivity of contemporary society, it is clear that this conception of democracy as a project which relies upon and seeks to facilitate a heightened state of consciousness among social actors will need to be a global project. The idiom 'unity in diversity',[43] used by deep democracy theorists, is a phrase which is also strongly associated with Hinduism.[44] Such a blending of discourses between East and West suggests the beginning of a globally informed change of consciousness in which cosmopolitanism is an ethical, as well as political, project.

While Inden observes that India 'may provide western man [*sic*] with that part of himself which he has lost',[45] it is here suggested that the attainment of a true *sattva* consciousness lies in cross-cultural exchanges based upon principles of transformative harmony and communication. This can lead to mutual enlightenment where insights are blended in order to form new ways of connecting which have as their basis the desire for a cultivation of the Self as a means of social transformation. This connection would be based upon democratic

principles which eschew the domination or exploitation of others. Thus, it is suggested that transformative harmony has the potential to form the basis of a future imaginary shaped by a global shift in consciousness and ethical understanding. This focus on the cultivation of the Self as the instrument of transformative harmony promotes a focus on the ethical as the source of stability within a highly complex and confused social context. This has, it is suggested, significant political, as well as personal, ramifications.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the way in which transformative harmony, as a project of the Self, has significant implications for democratic praxis. While radical democracy theorists increasingly argue that disharmony is an essential feature of democratic society, deep democracy theorists also highlight the need for a shift in consciousness as a project of the Self in terms of defining the way in which the social actor engages with such disharmony and social uncertainty. This increasingly emphasises that democratic principles and discourse ethics are cultivated as 'habits of the heart'[46] in everyday practice.

It is here suggested that a transformative harmony which emphasises the significance of discourse ethics and harmony in thought, word and deed has the potential to restore an epistemic dimension to democracy, permitting discussions which involve ethical learning on areas which currently represent social risk and uncertainty. Decisions could then be taken which are not seen as a means of blocking agonistic struggle but, instead, are viewed as necessary ethical steps to defining responsibilities and decisions which must be taken in order to protect global society from risk. This includes an ethical responsibility on the Self to cultivate a higher state of consciousness in which the Self is seen as a speaker (the means of a democratic process as outlined in the Habermasian emphasis on validity claims and discourse ethics) and seeker of the truth (the goal of democratically informed deliberation), in which truth is seen as an amalgamation of the best available perspectives which fellow seekers and speakers of truth can offer.

The need for a *sattva* consciousness as a basis for an ethical relation to social interaction is also highlighted by Norval who argues: '[g]iven that society is ours, we are always already implicated and compromised by the actions perpetrated in our names.'[47] This paper proposes, however, that the actions which we take in response to this realisation are also of vital significance. As a project of the Self which emphasises the attainment of a heightened state of

consciousness, it is suggested that transformative harmony can be viewed as a political, as well as an ethical, project.

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3. E Easwaran, *The Bhagavad Gita,* (Canada: Nilgiri Press, 2007), p.75.
4. cited in J. M Brown (ed.). *Mahatma Gandhi: The Essential Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008), p.17.
5. A. J Norval, , *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 182.
6. ibid., p. 172.
7. A K Giri and van Ufford " A Moral Critique of Development: Ethics, Aesthetics and Responsibility" *Review of Development and Change,* IX**,** 1, January - June 2004, pp. 17-18**;** U. Beck, *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).
8. J. M Green, *Deep Democracy: community, diversity and transformation* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. xiv
9. R Kothari, *Rethinking Democracy* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2005), p.169.
10. J Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), p.239.
11. A. J Parel (ed.) *Gandhi, Freedom and Self-Rule* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2000), p.19.
12. Kant's ([1797], 1996: 22) argument that there are 'external duties in ethics, as well as in rights' is a central theory of The *Metaphysics of Morals*.
13. Norval, op.cit., p.193.
14. Ibid., p. 162.
15. Parel, 2000, op.cit., p. 9.
16. It is presumed that, unless the actor is pathologically committed to an ethics of violence as an end in itself, violence is generally undertaken in light of the need to assert a certain ethical position as an end goal. The ethical position which is the end of such violence often paradoxically precludes the use of violence. Such a contradiction is a prominent feature of religious wars, for instance. Similarly, however, ongoing violence conducted by the United States in the name of freedom and rights involve the illegal detainment of individuals and the curtailment of rights. Such contradictions

between means and ends cannot but be ethically questionable and, as a result, have subsequent negative social and political ramifications, adding to the uncertainty and confusion associated with the ethical struggle of the Self in contemporary society. The significance of means which were congruent with the desired end was a principle assertion of Gandhi's philosophy of passive resistance or *satyagraha*. See T Pantham, , "'Habermas' Practical Discourse and Gandhi's *Satyagraha*" In B Parekh and T.Pantham (eds.), *Political Discourse: Explorations in Indian and Western Political Thought* (London: Sage Publications, 1987), pp. 299-306.

17. C Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000); Also see Norval, op.cit.
18. And, increasingly, tolerance, inclusion and justice. See S Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: Sage, 1996); I. M Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*(New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); A Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).
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22. J.Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research", *Communication Theory*, 16, 2006, **pp.** 411-426. There is also the potential for ethical positions to be formulated in which the principles of the democratic ideal are no longer deemed valid. This would suggest the emergence of a society in which equality, liberty and fraternity are no longer judged as relevant in the search for truth and harmony. Growing calls for democratic governance worldwide, however, suggest that the ethos of democracy still holds significant resonance.
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25. Ibid., 104.
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27. J Bohman and W Rehg(ed.), *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), p.331.
28. The *Bhagavad Gita* suggests that there are three *gunas* – *Tamas*, the lowest level is a vast unconscious, and repository of past experiences and evolutionary heritage. At its deepest level, *Tamas* is universal. Secondly, the *Rajas*, are described as 'power released, but uncontrolled and egocentric' See Easwaran, op.cit., p. 45. Finally, *sattva* consciousness is described as the higher mind – 'self-controlled [and] unruffled' (ibid.)

29. Ibid.
30. U Beck, *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk* (Cambridge: Polity Press Beck,1995), p. 103.
31. Lacan, too, observes the need for 'ethics of disharmony' in democracy. For details see Y Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.139.
32. Mouffe op.cit., p. 76.
33. Brown, op.cit., p. 13.
34. Norval, p. 149.
35. Mouffe, op.cit., pp.23-76.
36. Green, op.cit., p. 50.
37. Ibid., p.15.
38. Ibid., p. ix.
39. Ibid., pp. 14-53.
40. Habermas, 2006, op.cit., p. 413. Pantham, op.cit., pp. 292-310 provides an interesting analysis of the parallels between Habermasian validity claims and Gandhi's *satyagraha.* This highlights the concern of both of these thinkers with the attempt to establish 'truth' and the avoidance of ideological self-deception (ibid., p. 295).
41. Norval, op.cit., p. 40.
42. Habermas, 2006, op.cit., pp. 411.
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44. R Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.86.
45. ibid., p.127
46. Green, op.cit., p.ix.
47. Norval, op.cit., p. 209.

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