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Decolonizing Panchayats in India: Exploring Gandhian decentralization as a mechanism for grassroots involvement

Intersections. EEJSP
12(1): 71–90. (2026)
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v12i1.1409
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

This paper explores why, despite having a long tradition of grassroots-level institutions like Panchayats, Indian democracy remains centralized. Second, this paper explores the possibilities associated with the application of a Gandhian model of decentralization and whether it could decolonize Panchayats and regenerate participative mechanisms rooted in Indian society. Postcolonial theory, especially Dipesh Chakrabarty's concept of the heterogeneity of the historical timelines of colonial societies and Bourdieu's concepts of field, 'practice', and habitus, is used to explain the colonization of Panchayats. Colonization is a process that is different from mere conquest, and one of the essential elements of this process is the destitution of indigenous institutions. Colonization transplanted modern fields of production into colonized Indian society, and native agents in these new fields lost agency because they were unfamiliar with the 'practice' in these fields. When Panchayats were revived in post-independence India, the structural corruptions of the colonial political, juridical, and bureaucratic fields were inherited by these new Panchayats. Gandhi suggested a solidarity-based conciliatory framework with a very limited state, where the individual is at the center, and power radiates outward.

Keywords: *decolonization, Panchayat, participation, decentralized democracy, Gandhian philosophy*

1 Introduction

Of all the ideas that came to the fore during the time of Enlightenment in Europe, none has had a more telling impact on the lives of the people across the globe than democracy. Even in the regions where oppressive dictatorial regimes or despotic kingdoms exist, the ideals of democracy still have a large impact on the power struggles and exercise of authority within state infrastructure. Modern[1] democracy as it is, is riddled with paradoxes of its own; however, colonial democracy in India is not only riddled with democratic paradoxes like Rousseau's paradox of politics and the paradox of democratic legitimacy (Kumar, 2026b), but it is also a structurally corrupted version of modern democracy itself. Two centuries of colonization of India had the effect of destituting indigenous institutions, including the *Panchayats*, which had the potential to evolve into direct democracies.

[1] It is important to mention here that coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin, and, according to Mignolo (2009), both go hand in hand. The process of colonization was also a process of modernization, and the only reason coloniality is challenged in late modern times is that modernity itself is also challenged in the postmodern episteme.

As far as modern democracies go, India is the largest of them all; it has a population which is more than the entire population of Europe, North America and Australia combined, a large proportion of which still lives below the poverty line. It has almost a billion registered voters and more than two thousand political parties; twenty-two different languages are recognized by its constitution; there are multiple religions, and it is more culturally diverse than any other region of the world, and yet it has consistently remained a democracy (Guha, 2017). One of the reasons behind this is the social embeddedness of democracy in India. The *Panchayat* is an indigenous institution that has not only existed in India for more than three thousand years but was also the most influential institution of governance until British colonial rule destroyed it (Mathew, 1995).

Panchayats are the oldest form of local self-government, having existed on the Indian subcontinent for almost three millennia. However, the moment I refer to this as an institution, or a direct democracy, a form of government, I destitute it at an epistemic level. Bhabha (1984) calls this the *mimicry* of the colonizer; as a native (subaltern), I am incapable of speaking (Spivak, 1996), and I can only be spoken for or spoken of. I can only *mimic* the colonizer because every word that comes out of my mouth is in the language of the colonizer, and I am incapable of describing *Panchayats* using any category other than the categories of modern science, namely: direct democracy, self-government and institution. *Panchayats,* in fact, could have been anything, but we, or indeed any colonized native, cannot imagine, think, or sense them using any other categories than the categories of the colonizer. This is how destitution is realized at an epistemic level. The original Sanskrit word literally means an assembly of five, and in the past, *Panchayats* consisted of respected and wise elders of the village community, either nominated, chosen, or drawn through lots. Their main function was to settle disputes between individuals and neighboring villages (Mathew, 1995).

Regarding the decolonization of *Panchayats*, it is not necessary to create a new epistemology or construct new indigenous categories to explain it. In fact, even if we did that, (1) it is highly unlikely that it would be accepted in the West, because of the existing geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2009); and, (2) as Spivak (1996) points out, if the subaltern acquires speech, they will disappear, which means that the subaltern will no longer remain subaltern, but their disappearance also means that the colonizer would become incapable of understanding the speech of the native. Therefore, Mignolo (2009) contends that decolonization can be achieved at an epistemic level only, and it does not require the creation of a new epistemology to challenge modern epistemology, but rather a kind of civil disobedience at the epistemic level that exposes the hidden geopolitical hierarchies of knowledge production. Decolonization does not require the construction of new categories, for in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 2013), that would only create new hierarchies; instead, it merely entails the critical exposure of the existing categorization of *Panchayats* as an institution of self-governance or direct democracy. The fact is that it will always remain an institution of self-governance or direct democracy, because when William Bentinck revived it, he was not really reviving the *Panchayats* of ancient times; rather, he was transplanting the British political field into colonial India (Singh, 2006). Exposing this destitution of the institution of *Panchayats* in the British political field is the purpose of decolonization, and to achieve this at the epistemic level, I use Gandhi's criticism of modern politics.

Gandhi suggested *Panchayats* as the basis of the Indian political system; his

vision has been collectively termed '*Gram Swaraj*' (Village Republics or Village Self-Government). Gandhi (2017) believed that the concentration of economic and political power restricts participation. He viewed *Panchayats* as institutions of both parallel politics and economic autonomy, and as the basic unit of participatory democracy. His view of India was that of a federation of small village republics (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959).

In 1793, with the enactment of the 'Permanent Settlement', the British comprehensively restructured village society in India. The *Panchayats* were sidelined, and a kind of feudal structure was established which, on the one hand, facilitated the exploitation of India's vast natural resources, and on the other, took the administration of the villages out of the hands of the *Panchayats* and vested it in the hands of landlords. For example, even before the colonization of Bengal began, in Madras (one of the British trading ports in India) they had already established what was called the *Choultry Court* (or the 'black court') to adjudicate disputes among natives (Singh, 2006). These courts were headed by a person called an *adigar*, which usually referred to the head of the *Panchayat* in the Tamil language. However, the structure of these *Panchayats* was reduced to something similar to a court of chancery in England, and the procedure changed from conciliatory to adjudicative. The *adigar* was now appointed rather than chosen by the villagers and, in most cases, became the landlord after the enactment of the Permanent Settlement. This meant that the *Panchayats* lost their transient and participatory character and became bureaucratic organizations established by law. Guha (1982, p. 6) says, '*Physiocratic thought, the precursor of Political Economy, was an implacable critique of feudalism in its native habitat and proved to be a real force in undermining the* ancien régime*. Ironically, however, while being grafted to India by the most advanced capitalist power of that age, it became instrumental in building a neo-feudal organisation of landed property and in the absorption and reproduction of pre-capitalist elements in a colonial regime.*' Two centuries later, in 1993, *Panchayats* were re-established as the unit of local governance in the villages of India through the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India. The break in organizational continuity, and the colonial destitution of Panchayats restructured around representation rather than participation, made them another instrument of power concentrated in the hands of a few. Gandhi believed that democracy becomes impossible unless power is shared by all, and Panchayats ideally should create a form of parallel politics in which people's power is institutionalized to counter the centralizing and alienating forces of the modern state (Sharma, 1987).

As explained earlier, decolonization can only be achieved at an epistemic level, and it does not require a new epistemology to be created; rather, it requires epistemic disobedience, which can be achieved through border thinking, sensing, and feeling (Mignolo, 2009). What this requires is critical thinking about the field boundaries of the subject matters of modernity like history, anthropology, linguistics, politics, economy, and sociology. These subjects are the ones that construct the discourse that dehumanizes the 'native' and destitute their indigenous institutions, and it is the boundaries of these subjects of modernity that need to be exposed for decolonization to be achieved. In this essay, I attempt to deconstruct the English political field that was transplanted to India through colonization and resulted (among other things) in the destitution of *Panchayats*.

2 Colonizing deficit

The main focus of post-colonial theories is to criticize dominant modern discourses on colonialism[2] and how colonization was responsible for the destitution of indigenous socio-cultural institutions. The pre-colonial political geography of India can be easily compared to that of Europe; it was constituted by small kingdoms which were interspersed with large empires at certain times during its past. However, the political character of these kingdoms and empires in the period preceding colonization was very different from that of the European monarchies. The Kings in India were not concerned with the day-to-day functioning of the kingdom, maintaining law and order, or ensuring justice like in Europe. Instead, they only concerned themselves with collecting taxes and expanding their kingdoms to collect more and more revenue. Before the arrival of the British, one of the major reasons for the decline and disintegration of the Mughal Empire in India was its excessive dependence on high taxes. Most of this was spent on suppressing revolts, which were a direct consequence of the excessive tax burden (Leonard, 1979).

Pre-colonial India did not have a political system like that of Europe, or, as Bourdieu (2004) would have rightly pointed out, a bureaucratic field had not developed in India, as in the case of French society. It was highly unlikely that a bureaucratic or juridical field like the one that developed in Europe would ever have developed in Indian society because, as pointed out earlier, the Kings of India were not interested in the micromanagement of their subjects. For example (even if we accept the colonial version of Indian history), during ancient times, the Nanda dynasty in Pataliputra (the ancient capital of India) was replaced by Chandragupta Maurya, who belonged to the lowest of the castes (Shudra). There was no link to any bloodline, and in fact, when the Mauryans were replaced, it was a Brahmin (the highest of the castes) who replaced them. Neither of these dynasties belonged to the warrior caste of Kshatriyas, who were apparently by profession the ruling caste in India (Majumdar, 2016). The political field in pre-colonial India was therefore quite differentiated, both geographically as well as on the basis of caste (a solidarity-based division of labor; Durkheim, 2023). It was constituted by the institution of *Panchayats,* and the scope of its operation was quite limited to individual villages or small collections of villages where the laws, rules, and regulations were not codified or written down (not even in the form of judicial precedents) in the same way as in Europe, and procedures were not adjudicative in character; rather, they were consultative (Menon, 2019).

Post-colonial theory is a sister branch of postmodernism, and for some critics of postmodernism the only possible alternative that post-colonialism has to offer is anarchy (Atkinson, 2002). This may be true within a Eurocentric epistemology, which Chakrabarty (2008) refers to as 'provincial' in relation to the understanding of the social world. Anarchy itself is a Eurocentric construct, and categorizing pre-colonial society as anarchic, or anything else that is a European construct, leads to the destitution of indigenous institutions. Those institutions should be placed in their own categories. However, as Mignolo (2009) says, we can take an epistemically disobedient route towards decoloniality. This does not mean creating a whole new epistemic tradition in itself; it simply means setting aside the knowledge produced by the colonizer for the natives and applying scientific rigor to indigenous forms of knowledge production. What Mignolo (2009) describes is nothing new; this is exactly what post-modern sci-

[2] Albeit impossible; at least in theory, they are not intended to construct any other dominating discourse.

entists do. What they do not do, and where he differentiates himself from the rest is apply native knowledge to criticize Eurocentric knowledge production. Epistemic violence sits at the core of postcolonial critical theory, and to that extent it seems to be perfectly able to explain the individual as well as the institutional destitutions of colonialism (Spivak, 1996). However, it seems impossible to decolonize the minds of individuals as well as restitute indigenous institutions through any kind of epistemically violent route. The idea that *Panchayats* are an institution of self-governance, a direct democratic institution, is ingrained in the psyche of the colonized native and reproduced through the colonized education system. Native minds have been permanently conditioned, set on a modernizing path; decolonizing them violently would require the 'revival' of pre-colonial institutions, which would lead to the further exploitation of colonized peoples. This is not to say that pre-colonial institutions were exploitative by themselves; however, those institutions belong to a different time, and what may not have been exploitative two or three centuries ago could definitely be considered exploitative in contemporary times.[3]

Gandhi was very critical (not scientifically) of modernity and its by-products like capitalism, socialism, and even modern democracy; however, he was not critical of the scientific attitude that developed during modern times with the Enlightenment in Western Europe (Gandhi, 1997). Since Gandhi had no training in Western epistemological traditions, his writings do not follow the same patterns as those of Hegel, Hobbes, Locke, or Descartes; they are more like the preachings of an enlightened holy man from India.[4] Gandhi does not talk about postcolonialism (as a subject matter of science, it developed in the 1980s and 1990s) or present any systematic critique of colonial democracy; he died before the colonial version of democracy was established in India in 1950. However, we can apply his thought to even those concepts that have been developed after his death, provided we can apply the three basic themes of his philosophy; *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-violence), and *Sarvodaya* (Universal Empowerment) to them (Parekh, 2001). The influence the state (if we can even consider it a state) had on the individual lives of its peoples was far less in pre-colonial India than in Europe at the same time. Therefore, the ideas of individual freedoms, liberty, and universal human rights had little meaning in pre-colonial India because the state was not involved in the disciplining of the lives of its peoples, nor was it involved much in punishing deviance (Foucault, 2012). Much Gandhian thought is sourced from the social lives of Indian peoples of the pre-colonial 'time' ('time' that could yet be felt in the villages of India[5]) and hence, the difference in his conceptions of rights and equality compared to modern definitions. His philosophy is deeply influenced by various Indian philosophies (religious and atheistic), but it is also very rationally (instrumentally) critical of these philosophies. In this sense, it is probably the most prominent non-Western philosophy that is available to us to apply critically to modern colonial ideas and institutions in the Indian context. Some Western scholars believe that Gandhi was a post-modernist because he criticized modernity (Rudolph &

[3] For example, witch-burning was normal in pre-modern times; it is not in modern times.

[4] Most of his writings are in the form of a dialogue between two or more people, similar to that of the ancient Indian texts like the Bhagavad Gita. The entire works of Gandhi can be accessed free of charge at https://www.mkgandhi.org/

[5] In order to understand the concept of 'time' in this context, it is recommended to read Ranajit Guha's 'A Colonial City and its time(s)', where he differentiates between festive time and official time, and how the distinction in these times affects the social practices of the people of Calcutta during the start of the colonial regime in India (Guha, 2008).

Rudolph, 2010), while others believe that he was a traditionalist (Friedman, 2008); however, it seems like he was none of the above, but rather just a *native* who was able to think beyond the accepted forms of colonial knowledge production during colonial times (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2010). According to Gandhi (1997), modern democracy (the Westminster model) established in India after independence was rooted in political competition and therefore inherently violent. According to him, periodic elections and the election of representatives made modern English society political, and thus divided into members of political parties. This form of political division was paradoxical to the nature of democracy, as the latter was claimed to be. This political competition meant power was concentrated in Parliament, which almost always represented only an electoral minority, leaving the rest of the citizens feeling they had lost representation. This made the political process inherently violent, according to him, as citizens were not directly involved in the decision-making process and therefore always felt cheated through representation. He therefore preferred the direct, conciliatory process of the *Panchayats* to the English model of democracy. Gandhi and Prabhu (1959) favored the decentralization of state power and advocated a democratic model based on village republics. He said, '*Panchayat… represents the system* […] *by which the innumerable village republics of India were governed. But the British Government, by its ruthlessly thorough method of revenue collection, almost destroyed these ancient republics, which could not stand the shock of this revenue collection.*' (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959, p. 6) This does not mean that Gandhi's ideas were not *mimetic,* as claimed by post-colonial scholars like Bhabha and Chakrabarty; the mere fact that, while criticizing some of the archaic decisions of the *Panchayats,* he referred to them as illegal meant that he was also using the same colonized categories to destitute an indigenous institution (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959). However, despite *mimicry,* Gandhi was still able to critically analyze the paradoxical character of European democracies within the same Eurocentric frameworks.

On the one hand, Gandhi attempted to understand the nature of European society and how it differed from Indian society; on the other, mimetic Indian scholars merely apply findings from Eurocentric societies to study and understand colonial societies. This is what Said (2014), Guha (1997), Spivak (1996), and Mignolo (2009) term 'epistemic violence.' When Foucault (1982) describes the historical development of French society, he elucidates a certain type of power relationship that determines the character of that society. However, if he were to apply the same epistemological rules to the historical development of Indian society, the results would not be the same. Epistemic violence does not just end at the stage of studying or describing colonial societies; it then goes on to colonize the minds of natives by conditioning them to accept the colonized version of their own histories. In other words, the kind of Foucauldian biopolitical power that develops in European societies is then superimposed upon the colonized societies, completely disrupting their natural development. It is impossible to claim with any level of certainty whether Indian society would have developed into a more exploitative society or a less exploitative society than it is today had its natural course not been disrupted through colonization. Colonization without any doubt had the effect of creating new exploitative mechanisms which to this day continue to be the cause of deep-rooted challenges in Indian society (Tharoor, 2018).

From Figure 1, it becomes clear that Indian society followed a certain path that it could not sustain because it was colonized and therefore, instead of arriving at the destination it should have, it arrived at a different place, creating what I call a colonizing deficit.

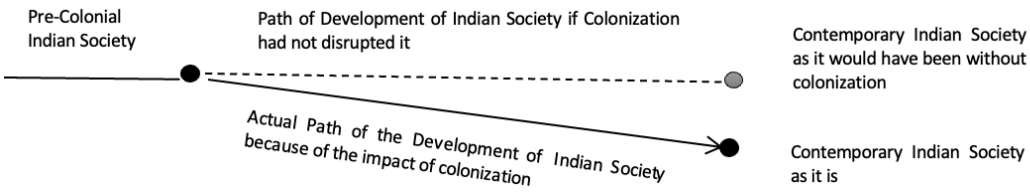

Figure 1 Colonizing Deficit.

The figure explains how colonization took India on a modernizing path. The presumption that pre-colonial India was pre-modern is challenged by post-colonial theory because it results in the categorization of India as uncivilized and the subsequent destitution of Indian forms of knowledge. Source: Author's own elaboration.

However, there are two very important questions that must be considered in this context: (i) would Indian society be completely free of the modernizing influences of Europe had it not been colonized, and (ii) would it be a better society without these modernizing influences? Decolonization, according to the current state of post-colonial theory, would entail what Fanon (2007) calls 'reactionary violence of the natives,' leading to the destruction of colonial institutions. However, if colonial institutions are destroyed, how do we know whether we arrive at a decolonized state of society or a pre-colonial state? This is impossible to determine, and neither would it serve the purpose of decolonization through epistemic disobedience. As noted earlier, epistemic disobedience requires critical thinking about the borders of colonial fields of production (Mignolo, 2009). In this case, what we can do is understand the colonizing deficit by applying Bourdieu's post-structuralist field theory to deconstruct the colonial political field in India.

3 The colonized political field

Bourdieu's description of modernity follows the same mainstream sociological approach of increasing differentiation within the social field. The emergence of the political field during modern times, according to Bourdieu, is a natural consequence of this process of differentiation. For example, the house of the monarch (*maison du roi*) differentiates into the political field, bureaucratic field, and the juridical field, among others (Bourdieu, 2004). Bourdieu's approach to these fields of forces gives us an opportunity to understand the interactions of these social forces and how they influence social behavior. He develops three main ideas: 'practice', *habitus,* and symbolic capital in order to explain the workings of these social fields. The clearly identified rules, or 'practice' in a modern political field could include free and fair elections, campaigning and garnering support to increase the membership of political parties, or implementing the political ideology that has majority support in the legislature (Wacquant, 2004). *Habitus,* on the other hand, is when an agent strategically manipulates the 'rules of the game' and potentially transforms the field. Politicians who make behind-the-scenes deals with other politicians or spend their family fortune to improve their chances of electoral victory are examples of how agents within the modern political field introduce structural corruption into the field itself (Shusterman, 1999).

The modern political field is not just a field of forces; it is also a field of struggles. This is where Bourdieu's conception of symbolic capital comes in handy to explain

these struggles within the field (Jenkins, 2002). In the Marxist conceptualization of capital, it is an essential ingredient in the production and reproduction of capital itself (Marx, 2019). Bourdieu calls this kind of capital 'economic' or 'material' capital. He expands the concept of capital itself to include other forms of capital that can be used not in material production but instead in the production and reproduction of symbolic capital. In the political field, which is also a field of forces and a field of struggle, there is a perpetual struggle that is going on amongst agents; this struggle is determined by access to political capital. Those agents who have access to a sufficient amount of political capital gain a position of dominance within this field, while those who do not have sufficient access to this form of capital are relegated to the dominated part of the field (Wacquant, 2004).[6]

This form of symbolic capital (political capital) is based on the idea of representative power or delegation. Agents (those who lack sufficient political capital) within the field either delegate their symbolic power (political power) to a representative, while those who hold political capital acquire symbolic power through the representation of their constituents. This form of representative power is not only acquired through voluntary mechanisms, but also through *dispossession* and *usurpation* (Wacquant, 2004). The political field, like any other social field, functions in such a way that the production and reproduction of symbolic capital is always concentrated at the dominant end of the field. The political field is a field of struggle, and the struggle is for access to political capital. What would happen to an agent who may or may not have access to some political capital, but refuses to partake in this struggle? Is it even possible for agents to refuse to partake in these struggles? Can the political field exist in the absence of representation and delegation? If this is the character of the modern political field, which differentiates itself from the house of the monarch, what could have been the character of a hypothetical field that had differentiated from something which did not resemble the house of the monarch?

In pre-modern Europe, the character of the house of the monarch was determined by access to what Bourdieu (2004) calls 'dynastic capital.' This is a form of symbolic capital, but one that could not be produced or reproduced publicly; it was privately owned and held by the monarch. The only way it could be reproduced was either through heredity or through the largesse of the king (Bourdieu, 2004). In pre-colonial India, however, the house of the monarch did not exist. Indian kingdoms did not have the same character as European kingdoms. Since it was not a feudal society, people in India did not have the same sense of fealty towards their kings. Dynastic capital, even if it did exist in India, did not have the same value as it had in pre-modern Europe. This, however, does not preclude the existence of other forms of symbolic capitals in pre-colonial India. One of the symbolic capitals that could have been produced and reproduced hereditarily in India was caste capital. Caste in pre-colonial India was a form of Durkheimian social solidarity-based division of labor (Durkheim, 2023). Since it was a form of division of labor, caste capital was not as concentrated as 'dynastic capital' (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994); there was already a certain level of differentiation, and some differentiated fields had already started to emerge.[7] As pointed out earlier,

[6] For clarification, this is a simplified explanation of the production and reproduction of capital in any field. For the purpose of this research, it is not important how it is produced or acquired; however, what is important is that the production and acquisition of capital determine the relative position of dominance within the field.

[7] Something that could resemble a religious field was dominated by the Brahmin caste, while something that could resemble the commercial field was dominated by the Vaishya caste. These differentiations in the social fields could be the topic of another paper.

according to Gandhi and Prabhu (1959) it was the documentation of the Indian condition for the purposes of revenue collection that resulted in the destitution of *Panchayats* but this can also be seen in the argument that Bourdieu and Farage (1994) make about the concentration of the various forms of symbolic capital into what is called 'statist capital' which develops along with the meta-field of power and leads to the genesis of state. The problem with India was that it was not Europe, and the concentration of the various forms of symbolic capital in Europe was a natural process of social development from the pre-modern to the modern, whereas in the case of India it was an outside process of the transplantation of modernity that entrenched the social structures through documentation and absolutely restricted social mobility. Access to caste capital could not have been limited absolutely to heredity because it was a form of division of labor, and the division of labor requires specialized forms of knowledge and skill. This means that even if an agent acquired some form of symbolic capital (any differentiated form of caste capital) due to birth, they could not gain full agency within that field without the acquisition of the skill and knowledge of that field. Access to these specialized forms of knowledge and skills was restricted through birth; if these specialized skills and knowledge could not be acquired by an agent, the agent could lose its agency in the field. This dependence on specialized forms of knowledge also means that there could not have been a single form of caste capital.

There were two major differences in the character of these fields in comparison to the fields that emerged in modern Europe. 1) These fields were hardly fields of struggle; they were fields of forces, but they were not fields of struggle. And 2) the differentiation that was happening in India was not the same as in Europe. In Europe, the differentiation of the house of the monarch culminated in the modern state (Bourdieu, 2004). First, dynastic capital disintegrated into various forms of symbolic capital, like bureaucratic capital, juridical capital, and political capital, and then these became concentrated in the hands of a few, leading to the homology of these fields and the construction of the meta-field of power and simultaneously what may be called statist capital. Since the house of the monarch did not exist in India in the same way it did in Europe, its differentiation could not produce the same type of state that exists in Europe. In modern fields, the struggle is to acquire more and more symbolic power through representation or delegation, which in turn gives the agent access to symbolic capital to achieve a dominant position in the field (Wacquant, 2004). Similar or identical institutional structures to those in Europe at the time may or may not have existed in pre-colonial India, but indigenous institutional structures developed over centuries. Furthermore, India was a more culturally diverse society than Europe of that time, not just in terms of geography or religious practices, but also in terms of racial diversity. Despite all this diversity, the institutional structures that we have been able to identify were mostly homogeneous in character, with local specificities throughout the Indian subcontinent. One such institution that transcended cultural, religious, racial, and geographical diversity in pre-colonial India was the *Panchayat*. This institution has existed throughout Indian history and across India's geography without interruption, even during colonial times (Muhlberger & Paine, 1993).

The existence of this institution is clearly the result of the interaction of social forces in India; however, it is not a field of struggle for two reasons. Its functioning is not determined by representation or delegation of symbolic power and, even more importantly, it is not permanent in character. It only appears when its need arises. Even if we can consider it a field, the agents within this field of forces are not involved in a

struggle but only in conciliation (Mahendran, 2012). It needs to be clarified that Bourdieusian fields are structured by the individual *habitus,* and the structuring structures of the *habitus* are what determines the character of the symbolic capitals that develop with the corresponding fields; therefore, these structured and structuring structures of fields, capital and *habitus* all have a cultural context and the native Indian fields may or may not have the same or similar structures as those of European fields (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994). Access to certain forms of symbolic capital based on skill, knowledge, experience, and some form of social capital acquired through heredity is required to obtain a position of dominance within this transient field; however, like the field itself, this position of dominance is not permanent either. Indian society institutionally avoids situations of conflict (Luhmann, 1988) and, in order to do this, the *Panchayats* function on the basis of a conciliatory framework where a certain form of symbolic capital that determines the structure of the transient *Panchayat* is produced and reproduced until a condition of balance is achieved amongst the agents within the field. If a situation of balance is not arrived at, conflict arises, and then the character of the field changes to one where those agents who are responsible for the existence of conflict are deprived of all agency and excommunicated from the field (Hayden, 1983). The deprivation of agency in this situation is not dependent on any idea of justice itself, but rather on the relative positions of dominance of the various agents in conflict within this field. However, this relative position of dominance within the field can only be maintained if justice is achieved. If justice is not achieved, the transient structure of the field of the *Panchayat* itself relieves the dominant agents of their position of dominance. Once either of these situations of balance or excommunication is achieved, the *Panchayat* ceases to exist until such time that it is needed again.[8] The fact that in pre-colonial India *Panchayats* were not a permanent institution (Kumar, 2022) clearly points towards the possibility that the differentiation in the social fields that was under process in pre-colonial Indian times could have resulted in a *transient state* or a *contingent state* or a *situational state* and definitely not a modern state such as that which developed in Europe (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu & Farage, 1994).

At the time of India's colonization, France was undergoing revolutionary change, American colonies were fighting for independence, and Charles I had been executed; Europe was in transition. In Bourdieu (2004)'s terms, the house of the king was differentiating into the modern fields of politics, bureaucracy, and law; however, these fields had not completely differentiated, and what was extended to colonial India through the extension of the empire was partly the house of the king and partly these partially differentiated modern fields. When Guha (1982) says that the colonization of India led to the 'production and reproduction of pre-capitalist elements' in Indian society, what this really means is that the social fields of pre-colonial India fused together into what would have been the house of the king and led to the deindustrialization and feudalization of Indian society. One reason for a state, according to Bourdieu (2004), is the king's fear of his brothers, which forces him to distribute dynastic capital outside of the house in order to keep his brothers under control. This dynastic capital changes its symbolic character and leads to the disintegration of the house, giving birth to new fields. The same thing happened in India; the British could not rule India without the cooperation of at least some Indians, so they created a new land-owning

[8] Some of the best examples of this kind of conciliatory mechanism can be traced in the celebrated Hindi novel Godaan (the gift of a cow), written by the greatest of Hindi litterateurs, Munshi Premchand. It is considered the most accurate description of Indian society during the pre-colonial/colonial period (Premchand, 2020).

class and passed on some of their dynastic capital to this new class to ensure their fealty to the king (Guha, 1997). The *maison du roi* in England was already differentiating, and those in India who acquired a portion of the dynastic capital were able to progressively convert it into other forms of symbolic capital, including political capital. It was this land-owning class that created the first political organizations in India (Chandra et al., 2016).

However, more important was the impact that this had on the indigenous fields. For example, in pre-colonial India, land was not owned; neither the *Jagirdari* system introduced in northern India by the Muslim rulers before colonization nor the *Tamrapatra* of the Cholas in the south granted ownership rights over land like those of the noblemen in Europe. These instruments were merely used to define tax-collection rights on behalf of the king, and it would be a *mimetic* misinterpretation to assume the existence of land rights in India. Mukhia (1981) claims that the peasants in Europe were totally dependent on their landlords, whereas in pre-colonial India, the farmers were free and independent producers. And therefore, who cultivated what and how much was communally decided; there was no delegation or representation of symbolic power. With colonization, the colonial power was represented through the landlord (*zamindar*), who decided what could be cultivated, how, and by whom (Prasad, 1928); the rightful place of a *Panchayat* was lost. In pre-colonial India, if there was a dispute regarding the payment of a promissory note or a bill of exchange (Hundi) or a debt, a *Panchayat* would be constituted to balance the field of forces (Singh & Yadav, 2022), while in colonial times the symbolic power was represented through agents of the East India Company and later through the colonial courts that applied English common law to India (Singh, 2006).

Indigenous fields started to disappear, and the indigenous agents started to lose agency along with them. Various forms of symbolic capital lost their relevance in the new colonial fields. The new forms of symbolic capital that were introduced were not accessible to the native population: the latter were never in a position to produce and reproduce them. The only access that natives had to these forms of symbolic capital was through the King's largesse or through the conversion of material capital into these new symbolic capitals. In either case, as Bourdieu (2004) points out, structural corruption enters the field. The structure of the Bourdieusian political field is determined either by representation of political power (democratic) or through the usurpation and dispossession of political power (authoritarian), but a paradoxical situation is created through colonization: in England, the field is structured by the representation of political power, but the same field, when extended to India, is structured by usurpation (Wacquant, 2004). However, this structural corruption means that the agents in the colonized field cannot reproduce political capital (1) because they do not have access to this form of symbolic capital and it is an essential ingredient in the production of capital itself, and (2) because the native agents are not aware of the 'practice' in this new transplanted field and therefore do not know the rules of the game. The only option available to them is to convert other forms of capital into political capital. Even those symbolic capitals that structured the transient field of *Panchayats* get converted into political capital in the new field, and destituted the *Panchayats*.

The 'practice' and *habitus* of the natives that developed with the old indigenous fields are out of place in the new colonial political field, one which functions through the representation and delegation of political power, while the new indigenous agents in this field do not know how to represent and delegate. The new field is not just a field

of forces, but also a field of struggles, and it turns disputes into conflicts that can no longer be balanced out but only adjudicated. In Gandhian terms, the colonial political field turned into a violent site of the representation of political power; the modern English political field works through the representation of political power, whereas the colonial political field works through the violent usurpation and dispossession of political power. The only way for indigenous natives to regain agency in such a field is by converting material capital into political capital. Since the colonial political field is not indigenous, the agency that the native Indian acquires in this field is also '*mimetic*,' and the native can only act by *mimicking* the colonizer (Bhabha, 1984). As pointed out earlier, since the indigenous agents are unaware of the 'practice' in the new colonial political field, the only option they are left with is copying the 'practice' of the colonizer. This *mimicry* of colonial 'practice' is the reason for what Fanon (2007) terms the native's desire to humanize, and it is this *mimicry* that puts the native on a modernizing path, destituting his pre-colonial past into the category of pre-modern history.

After India's independence, the new political field *mimicked* the modern democratic political field that had emerged in Western Europe and North America by then. More than three-quarters of the Constitution of India that came into force in 1950 was copied verbatim from the Government of India Act, 1935, passed by the British Parliament (Basu et al., 2015). However, this field is a continuation of the corrupted colonial political field, which does not work through the representation of political power. As pointed out earlier, Bourdieu recognizes the possibility of dispossession and usurpation even in modern democratic political fields; this possibility in a structurally corrupt colonial political field characterized solely by the violent usurpation of political power is even greater (Wacquant, 2004). Another layer of destitution of the indigenous institutions is caused by the fact that even though the native can *mimic* the 'practice' of the colonizer in the *mimetic* political field, the *habitus* of the native has developed in the pre-colonial indigenous fields, and so even *mimetic* struggles in the colonized political field are manipulated by the natives' pre-colonial predispositions, introducing further structural corruption in these fields.

4 Decolonizing the field

Gandhi had what Mignolo (2009) would later describe as an epistemically disobedient approach to understanding his social world. Furthermore, he did not have access to scientific data on traditional or modern society when he criticized modernity. As pointed out earlier, his views were partly influenced by some of the outliers in the modern social world, like Tolstoy or Ruskin, and partly grounded in his typically Hindu religious upbringing; truth, non-violence, and empowerment are the three essential elements of his philosophy (Parekh, 2001). Gandhi equates truth with God and states that seeking truth is the ultimate goal of human existence; however, like God, absolute truth is unreachable, so all anyone can really achieve is relational truth. Seeking truth within oneself purifies one's spirit, and only when one's spirit is pure can one seek truth outside in the social world (Gandhi & Desai, 1928). The method of seeking truth in the social world is *Satyagraha* (which literally translates to 'seeking truth'). The path to truth is always non-violent. Like God, truth may not be sought through violence. In order to seek truth, first of all one should become non-violent from within. Renunciation of the 'fruits of action' is the only purely non-violent method of seeking

God and therefore truth. Finally, the empowerment of all is a direct consequence of *Satyagraha*. This does not mean the 'equality of all' or 'upliftment of all.' *Satyagraha* requires everyone to seek truth within themselves; as a social movement, it is nothing more than a polite request to do so, and when one seeks truth within oneself, it automatically empowers one (Parekh, 2001).

Modern civilization, according to Gandhi, is a degenerate form of civilization, and in fact he refused to accept it as civilization at all. It is rooted in materialism, self-interest, and consumption, the natural consequence of all of which is violence (Gandhi, 1997). In direct opposition to Weber's views, Gandhi (1997) believed that if there must be politicians, they must always be ethical and work in society's interest rather than their own selfish interest.[9] At the same time, he was not unaware of the pitfalls of representation. He happened to equate modern parliament to a prostitute[10] falling into the arms of a new cabinet every few years (Gandhi, 1997). According to Gandhi, the character of representation itself makes politics violent. Representation makes a politician powerful, and the politician's purpose is no longer the welfare of society but retaining that position of power (Parekh, 2001). Gandhi (1997) says that representation gives a monkey the power to negotiate a dispute between cats.[11] Seemingly, it is not in the politician's interest if the dispute is resolved; rather, it is in the politician's interest if it becomes a conflict and some form of violence is introduced. He therefore suggested the revival of the ancient *Panchayats* as the basis of the decentralized state, which are limited in their scope of representative power (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959).

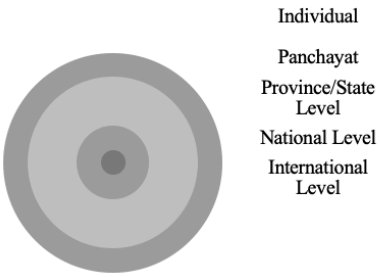

Figure 2 Gandhian Concentric Circles of Governance.

The figure explains how, in Gandhian philosophy, the very imited state is organized in the form of concentric circles designed around the individual, and how power radiates outwards from the individual to the outer co-equal circles of governance. Source: Author's own elaboration.

Panchayats do not function through representation but through direct participation; therefore, their mechanisms are conciliatory rather than adversarial or political. Furthermore, *Panchayats* are transient in character, so they only appear if a dispute arises somewhere (Kumar, 2022). In pre-colonial times, the *Panchayats* did not exist in the absence of the *Gram Sabha*, and if a matter is brought before a *Panchayat*, to this day, it

[9] In some ways, he sees himself as a politician who is ethical and concerned about society rather than himself (Gandhi, 1997).

[10] Gandhi was criticized for this comparison by the then president of the Indian National Congress, Annie Besant; not because it was derogatory to parliament, but because it was considered derogatory to prostitutes (Gandhi, 1997).

[11] This refers to a story from the ancient Panchatantra (moral fables for kids written in Sanskrit around 200 BCE) where a monkey negotiates a dispute over a loaf of bread between two cats and ends up eating the bread.

is seen as a matter of dishonor for the parties to the dispute; it means that there is a claim that at least one of the parties has not performed their duties towards others or society in general. The Gandhian model of governance is a system of concentric circles with the individual at the center and with co-equal circles of governance around the individual denoting the scope and extent of conciliation that may be required in each case of potential dispute. Only when a matter cannot be resolved at the individual level or when a dispute turns into a conflict does a representative outer co-equal circle become involved. As noted earlier, even *Panchayats* are involved only if individuals cannot resolve the matter themselves. The extent and scope of representative mechanisms is limited exclusively to those cases where direct participation is not possible, for example, the international arena, which may not have the same form of direct participatory governance mechanisms (Nadkarni et al., 2017). The delegation of power can only happen from the center towards the circumference and not the other way round. Minimal hierarchy is intended in this case, and only matters that cannot be resolved at the individual level get passed on to the level of *Panchayat*; then only those that cannot be resolved at the level of *Panchayat* get passed on to the next level, and so on.

The colonial destitution of *Panchayats* meant that conciliatory mechanisms were replaced by adjudicative mechanisms (Kumar, 2025). The passing of judgments created winners and losers in disputes and was an inherently violent process, as the loser would never feel satisfied and would always be ready to take retribution for the loss. This, according to Gandhi, creates a 'cycle of violence' which is very difficult to break. The old method of *Panchayats* was non-violent, through which individuals arrived at what Gandhi called 'relational truth,' which all parties to the dispute accepted as just. This method did not create any winners or losers and therefore could not lead to violence (Parekh, 2001). Again, as pointed out earlier, the *Gram Sabha* was an essential part of the old *Panchayats*, which meant that the village participated in the deliberations of the *Panchayat* even after the *Panch* had been named. The job of the *Panch* (as it remains to this day when they are chosen in the old way instead of elections) was to suggest alternative solutions that the parties could accept or reject, rather than to adjudicate.

Since the formation of the Indian republic in 1950, *Panchayats* have gradually been destituted into modern democratic institutions in almost every part of India.[12] Elections are held every five years to elect the members of each village Panchayat; they are now permanent political bodies which perform functions that have been partly devolved upon them from the higher levels of the state. The kind of democracies that exist around the world today are all liberal and procedural in character and are essentially based on political (electoral) competition (Diamond, 1990). A Gandhian state is based on the idea that all humans may not be equal, and it may not be possible to achieve absolute equality. However, it also clearly accepts the idea that there are some areas of law and governance where, no matter what, every human is to be treated equally (this includes the unequal treatment of unequals in order to achieve overall nominal equality). This idea also acknowledges the fact that there are other areas of law and governance where citizens may not choose to be treated equally.[13] The fact

[12] There still remain Panchayats that are not organized and bureaucratically controlled by the state, and there is always the possibility of indigenous Panchayats emerging out of necessity, but essentially the politico-legal establishment of Panchayats as the unit of local governance has resulted in their overall destitution (Kumar, 2022).

[13] Even in the present context, different personal laws (laws relating to inheritance, succession, marriages, divorce

that most citizens in India vote for a different political party at every election and furthermore, that politicians keep changing political parties even more frequently, points towards the apolitical character of most citizens and suggests that it is highly unlikely that political competition is a necessary and essential pre-condition for the existence of democracy in India (Kashyap, 1970; Page, 1994). Gandhi (1997) believed that party politics is inherently violent and cannot therefore be reconciled with democracy. As a matter of fact, in what was published as *His Last Will and Testament*, he suggested the dissolution of the Indian National Congress after India achieved independence because he believed that political parties would only result in the substitution of English exploitative mechanisms with Indian exploitative mechanisms if the state remained a *mimicry* of the English state based on political competition (Prabhu & Rao, 1960).

The original *Panchayats* formed a unique institution, where the entire village community existed as the *Gram Sabha* (village assembly), which named a group of five that formed a *Panchayat* (five-member council), and this council carried out all communal functions, including those comparable to those of an undifferentiated legislature and judiciary, and even bureaucratic tax collection at the village level. One of the reasons why the decisions of *Panchayats* in Indian villages were self-executing is because they were made by the *Panchayats* in consultation with the entire village community, whereas the constitution or law in India is imposed upon people from the top (of the colonial state) and therefore needs machinery to execute (Kumar, 2026a). In contemporary times, when Indians have assimilated/*mimicked* most modern Enlightenment ideas, the sole reason democracy has not just survived but thrived is the existence of a 'living memory' of *Panchayats* (Confino, 1997; Nora, 1989).

For Gandhi (1997), the individual is at the center, and all the other institutions that are needed to constitute the state form co-equal concentric circles around the individual. He describes independent, self-reliant village republics that come together to form a new type of state not based on political competition for power, but on solidarity and respect for fellow humans (Gandhi & Prabhu, 1959). The institution that was supposed to form the basis of governance in these village republics was the *Panchayat*, but the fact remains that modernity has penetrated almost every aspect of Indian social life, and it is no longer possible to separate it from the *Panchayat*. However, this does not preclude small communities from being governed by a *Panchayat*. As a matter of fact, this is already happening in India, with elections being held every five years to elect *Panchayats*. This clearly means the character of *Panchayats* has shifted from transient to permanent and based on representation. This is a top-down structure in which the state devolves authority to govern the *Panchayats*.

Nevertheless, this political competition has resulted in the declining participation of people. In a 2001 study, almost 65 per cent of respondents said they had never attended a *Panchayat* meeting. Only about 20-40 per cent were actively involved in the decision-making process. In spite of the reservation provisions, the involvement of women and backward classes was still recorded to be low (Alsop et al., 2001). Even when women participated, male-dominated village society sabotaged their work, or male family members made decisions on their behalf (Jain, 1996). Some of the deviant and discriminatory social practices that have continued in modern times in India, which are very clearly demonstrated by the actions of *Khap Panchayats* leading to

and the like...) as they apply to different religious communities in India serve as good examples of when citizens choose not to be equals and consciously choose to be governed by different laws. Special laws apply only to certain communities, and regional or local laws may apply to specific regions only (Menon, 2014).

honor killings and excommunications from social life, also indicate the serious limitations of this institution, which needs to be dealt with not just from the politico-legal angle but also from a social reformist perspective (Bharadwaj, 2012).

On the one hand, this means that decolonizing institutions that function through the representation of power does not require replacing them with indigenous institutions; at the same time, it also means that indigenous institutions can be restituted within the frameworks of these modern institutions. Gandhi and Desai (1928) believed that the only truly non-violent method is that of *Satyagraha,* and it works both at the individual level and the communal level. However, it is not easy to practice, requiring a lot of tolerance and self-sacrifice.

Indigenous institutions can only be restituted non-violently at the individual level because any change instituted by the state can only be a violent change; the shift must start at the level of the individual and flow radially outwards towards the 'circumference' of the state for it to be truly non-violent; that is, both empowering and emotionally harmless. However, the structure of the colonial institutions that exist in India does not allow that to happen, because power is still concentrated at the top and not with the individual. The individual cannot delegate power that he or she does not have. Colonization violently supplanted modern Eurocentric fields of production in India, and decolonization must not mean a similarly violent revival of indigenous institutions. Indigenous natives, however, can manipulate the *field,* and the only non-violent method of such manipulation is *Satyagraha.* Culturally, Indians prefer deliberation to decisions and therefore institutionally avoid conflicts (Luhmann, 1988). The reason behind this is that, as a society, India customarily has not been focused on the enforcement of rights but on the performance of duties, relationships, and solidarity in society, taking precedence over personal desires (Austin, 2003). The only way for this kind of social solidarity to survive in colonized Indian society, where Eurocentric influences have taken root, is through the harmonization of modern institutions with traditional institutions.

5 Conclusions

A lot of research has already been conducted on the problems of political institutions in India, some of which concludes that these problems may be directly linked to India's colonial past. However, where my research differs from the rest is in identifying the structural corruptions of the colonial political field that were transplanted into India. As explained in the section on the transplantation of the colonial political field into India, the problem cannot be resolved at the institutional level because colonization not only corrupted these modern institutions by transplanting them into a society which was neither pre-modern nor European. It also, at the same time, destituted the indigenous institutions, which resulted in Indian society becoming stuck somewhere between a pre-colonial society and a corrupted version of a modern society, existing in a perpetual state of conflict. At this stage, it cannot go back to the pre-colonial version, as this would definitely lead to unprecedented violence (both physical and epistemic), and because the modern version is corrupted and out of time and place in the Indian context, it cannot modernize either. One of the most important findings of this research is that it was not the modern political field that was extended into India through the extension of the British Empire; rather, it was what Bourdieu (2004) calls the *dynastic field*, still in the process of differentiating in England and retaining its orig-

inal structure. Through a critical analysis of the natives' colonial struggles in this field, I concluded, with the help of Guha (1982), that this led to the feudalization of Indian society. The consequence of this finding was that colonization did not just set India on a path to modernization but also on a path to conditions of pre-modernity. The modernization of Indian society is a consequence of colonization, but colonization is not the cause of its modernization.

In fact, it is the reason why modern solutions to the problems of a modern democracy do not seem to work in India. The structuring structures of the corrupted colonial political field keep preventing it from fully differentiating into a modern field as it did in England; rather, its feudal structure, where various forms of symbolic capital are repeatedly converted into political capital, is preserved through the *mimetic* 'practice' of the dominant native agents who want to preserve their dominant status by preserving the feudal character of the colonial field itself.

It was also clearly established in the preceding discussion that it was this extension of the colonial political field through colonization that led to the destitution of the indigenous institution of *Panchayats*. Colonization resulted in the construction of the Indian state and the concentration of what Bourdieu calls 'statist capital' at the top of this colonial state machinery. However, this also meant that symbolic power in a largely differentiated Indian society became concentrated among a few dominant agents within the new colonial meta-field of power (Bourdieu & Farage, 1994). As pointed out earlier, coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin (Mignolo, 2009), but decoloniality cannot mean de-modernization. Even at the level of discourse, it is impossible to de-modernize the colonial political field without epistemic violence, and furthermore, it will not serve the purpose of decolonization; all it will achieve is further destitution of Indian society into the pre-modern.

Decolonization, therefore, can be achieved only within a Gandhian framework of the non-violent decentralization of the colonial state. The symbolic power that was concentrated at the dominant end of the colonial political field through the process of colonization that constructed India needs to be deconstructed at an epistemic level through the Gandhian empowerment of individual citizens. This cannot be achieved through the devolution of power by the state, as paradoxically such devolution would also mean that the symbolic power of individual agents is still represented by the dominant agents in the field. At an epistemic level, it requires *Satyagraha* to be part of every individual agent within the colonial political field, which would mean the empowerment of all citizens. *Panchayats* cannot be revived, but they may be restituted within the colonized political field if, through *Satyagraha,* individual agents are able to manipulate the field boundaries of the colonial political field in such a way that 'structural corruption' is introduced into it. Such structural corruption may change the character of this colonial field into something that is no longer political but instead based on the solidarity Gandhi imagined.

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