

On Hind Swaraj Discourse on Institutions and Technology¹

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A significant part of Gandhiji's seminal work *Hind Swaraj*³, containing definitive and foundational formulations of his thinking on questions of civilizational import, pertains to institutions and technology. Gandhiji's views on technology were much discussed in his life-time; and mostly critically. Even among his close followers they did not find much support. Because of the unprecedented ecological and environmental crisis that the modernity has given rise to, in recent years among some non-mainstream groups there has been some kindling of interest in the Gandhian view of technology. The Gandhian viewpoint regarding institutions articulated in *Hind Swaraj* did not, however, at any stage receive the commensurate attention. It will be argued in this paper that the *Hind Swaraj* viewpoints regarding institutions and technology emanate from a unitary idea or insight; and therefore are organically linked with each other. It is also contended in the paper that the Gandhian position on technology has largely been misunderstood.

The modern institutions which have been discussed in considerable detail in *Hind Swaraj* and scathingly criticized are the legal and parliamentary ones. The institution of market is also disparagingly mentioned.⁴ A careful reading of the relevant chapters makes it clear that Gandhiji is making an extremely non-trivial point regarding institutions. When an individual acts within the framework of an institution, his behaviour gets moulded by it. Failure to adapt the behaviour in accordance with the requirements of

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³Gandhi, Mohandas K., *Indian Home Rule or Hind Swaraj*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1938; Translation of 'Hind Swaraj', published in the Gujarat columns of *Indian Opinion*, 11th and 18th December, 1909; Published by Yann FORGET on 20th July 2003, with LATEX 2_ε. (Hereinafter referred to as *Hind Swaraj*.)

⁴'They wish to convert the whole world into a vast market for their goods. That they cannot do so is true, but the blame will not be theirs. They will leave no stone unturned to reach the goal.' *Hind Swaraj*, p. 32.

the institution can be quite problematic for the individual concerned. The legal system is so structured that every lawyer is expected to advance arguments in furtherance of his client's interests, regardless of the merits of the case. If a lawyer fails to act in a manner expected of him because of, say, his adherence to some higher principle like truth or justice, then such behaviour in all likelihood will earn him disapprobation from his peers.⁵ The failure to do one's utmost for one's clients will of course result in loss of practice. Thus any lawyer who does not conform to the behavioral pattern as required by the legal institutions is likely to end up as a failure in his profession.

What is true of legal institutions is true of any institution. When individuals function within the framework of an institution, their behaviour gets moulded in the light of the rules, regulations and mores of that institution. This naturally will have implications of a normative character. If an individual feels drawn towards a particular ethical principle, and acting in accordance with that principle is not conducive for success within the framework of an institution, then the individual must either forsake the ethical principle or must resign himself to not succeeding in that institutional context. Advancing a client's interests is often not consistent with upholding of justice. Adoption of the aim of becoming successful as a lawyer is likely in general to result in relegation of the objective of upholding of justice to a lower level, if not in its abandonment altogether. In this connection, it is important to note that what Gandhiji is talking about in relation to lawyers is the incompatibility of an individual acting as a lawyer is supposed to and at the same time upholding certain ethical principles; and not what a lawyer will opt to do in this or that specific instance. He readily acknowledges the possibility of individuals who happen to be lawyers acting in ethically appropriate ways but asserts that such actions must be attributed to these individuals qua individuals and not qua lawyers.⁶

Gandhiji's criticism of modern social institutions, whether legal or some other institutions, is essentially based on this idea that the requirements of these institutions are such that they are incompatible with the upholding of certain fundamental ethical principles. In this connection, it is important to note the following two points. One, it is never the

⁵The latter's duty is to side with their clients and to find out ways and arguments in favour of the clients to which they (the clients) are often strangers. If they do not do so they will be considered to have degraded their profession. Hind Swaraj, p. 41.

⁶'Whenever instances of lawyers having done good can be brought forward, it will be found that the good is due to them as men rather than as lawyers.' Hind Swaraj, p. 41.

case that the nature of the individuals comprising the society and the nature of their actions are irrelevant for determining the character of social institutions. What is being discussed here are the implications of social institutions for the behavior of a given set of individuals. Two, the incompatibility that Gandhiji is talking about should not be confused with imperfections. In the context of discourses on institutions it is taken for granted that no institution can be expected to work in practice in its idealized form; and that a certain degree of imperfection in the functioning of any institution is to be expected as a matter of course. What Gandhiji is drawing attention to are the structural characteristics of modern institutions which have implications with respect to certain ethical principles. In Gandhiji's view the inimical implications of modern institutions for upholding of certain cherished values are not incidental; but inherent in their very nature.

Gandhiji's viewpoint regarding modern institutions can be decomposed into two parts. One, the implicit assertion that the choices with respect to institutions are in general normatively significant. One reason for this, namely the possible incompatibility of behaviour in accordance with the requirements of the institution in question and certain desirable values, has already been discussed above. Another reason for the normative significance arises from the possibility of behaviour in accordance with the institutional requirements giving rise to certain undesirable values and consequences. This aspect has also been discussed by Gandhiji. In connection with the profession of lawyers he discusses how, while social discord is in lawyers' interests, social harmony is not.⁷ It is immediate that the assertion of institutional choices being normatively significant is both valid and applicable to all institutions, whether modern or not. The second part of the viewpoint pertains to the assertion of modern institutions being evil. While Gandhiji does present a detailed argument showing how legal institutions can be expected to lead to, from an ethical perspective, undesirable consequences, and a similar, though less detailed, demonstration regarding parliamentary institutions; there is no general demonstration regarding all modern institutions. It will clearly be correct to argue that even if it can be shown that some modern institutions have a tendency to give rise to ethically undesirable situations, it will not imply that all modern institutions have this characteristic. In order to show that all modern institutions are undesirable either one has to provide a general argument

⁷'It is within my knowledge that they are glad when men have disputes. Petty pleaders actually manufacture them. Their touts, like so many leeches, suck the blood of the poor people.' Hind Swaraj, p. 41

to that effect; or make such a demonstration for each modern institution. Although from a literal reading of Hind Swaraj one might conclude that Gandhiji does neither, it will be argued in the sequel that once Gandhiji's views regarding institutions and technology are considered in the light of the Gandhian discourse on civilization, a general argument does appear to be implicit.

Gandhiji's almost total opposition to modern technology also stemmed from normative considerations. Introduction of new technology of any kind in general can be expected to impact on various social structures including institutions. Even if it is granted that a particular technology can coexist with several different kinds of social structures, there can be no question of any non-trivial technology being such that it can coexist with any kind of social structures. Once it is accepted that technologies in general have implications for social structures in the sense that adoption of a particular technology will imply that in due course of time all those social structures incompatible with the adopted technology will either cease to exist or alternatively will get modified in such manner as to be no longer incompatible with the adopted technology, it immediately follows, in view of the discussion relating to the normative significance of institutional choices, that no non-trivial technology can be expected to be normatively neutral.

From the above it follows that the Gandhian viewpoint on technology, as was the case with the Gandhian viewpoint on institutions, can be decomposed in two assertions. One, technological choices in general are normatively significant; two, modern technology is inimical to desirable values and conducive to undesirable values. As was the case with similar assertions with respect to institutions, the first assertion is immediate; it is the second one which will require demonstration. The Gandhian position on technology can be legitimately criticized: (i) By pointing out that no demonstration has been constructed to establish the second assertion; or (ii) By showing that the modern technology, or at least a significant part of it, does not have the alleged character. But if we look at the criticisms of the Gandhian position, one finds that they were not made on these grounds; rather they were almost invariably made by putting forward arguments which were essentially tantamount to saying that the assertion of non-neutrality of technology is a false one. Some of the criticisms of the Gandhian position on modern technology contained in the articles published in the Hind Swaraj Special Number of Aryan Path⁸ and reprinted

⁸No. 9, Vol. 9, September 1938 (Hereinafter referred to as Aryan Path Special Number).

in a compilation by National Gandhi Museum⁹ provide excellent examples of it. Consider for instance criticisms by Rathbone, Fausset, Murray and Burns:

‘There are views held by this great man and teacher - with regard, for instance, to machinery, with regard to bodily chastity - which many of us find distorted and fantastic. Machinery *need* not be the curse Gandhi declares it is; in a world where the money-changers had been rendered powerless it would be used for the release of man, not, as now, for his degradation.’¹⁰

*‘Machinery, we may admit, represents a great sin, is in fact the outward embodiment of the split in man’s being, which at present it deepens, tending everywhere to deaden his creative spirit. Yet the machine, if once it ceases to be an instrument of private power and greed might, one imagines, be employed to liberate man in some ways from a merely creative servitude to matter for creative service and expression on a more spiritual plane.’*¹¹

‘And another more obvious distinction is that, whereas Gandhi has made up his mind that the technical ‘civilization’ of Europe is altogether evil and is to be wholly rejected, the European Christian thinker is compelled to ask himself whether it is not absolutely necessary to preserve some basic elements of the mechanical technique: first, ... ; and secondly, because the same spiritual imagination which can conceive as a reality a society based on Love (which is Gandhi’s real Swaraj) can also conceive that such a society could just as well make true and humane use of the machine. For although the machine - or power production - has so disastrously become the master instead of the slave of European ‘civilisation’, it does nevertheless offer an immense and universal liberation from human drudgery. Simply to reject it, as Gandhi, following Tolstoy, does, is to declare that mankind is inherently incapable of using the most tremendous and therefore the most ambiguous gift of God except to its own damnation. ... To put it otherwise, does not Gandhi’s own belief in ‘the gospel of love’ compel him also to believe that Love can

⁹Gandhiji on Hind Swaraj and Select Views of Others, National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi, 2009 (Hereinafter referred to as Gandhi Museum Compilation).

¹⁰Irene Rathbone, ‘What about the Children?’, Aryan Path Special Number. See pp. 297-298 of Gandhi Museum Compilation.

¹¹Hugh I’A. Fausset, ‘A Revolutionary Message: One of the Best Handbooks’, Aryan Path Special Number. See pp. 281-282 of Gandhi Museum Compilation.

control even the Machine to the purposes of love?¹²

‘Another mistake in Gandhi’s teaching is his condemnation of machinery as evil. ... But Gandhi goes so far as to say that railways spread epidemic disease, and that ‘railways can become a disturbing agency for the evil one only.’ Presumably aeroplanes, radio and cinemas and other mechanisms that are yet to come, would be thought by Gandhi to be still worse. This is a fundamental philosophical error. It implies that we are to regard as morally evil any instrument which may be misused. ... Any mechanism may be misused; but if it is, the moral evil is in the man who misuses it, not in the mechanism.’¹³

There is a common thread in all the four criticisms, namely, that it is erroneous to think that it is impossible to make use of machines and at the same time remain faithful to the higher ethical principles. Whether machines are going to be used for good or evil depends on human beings; directly or indirectly. Machines are merely empowering; whether for good or evil depends on those who are empowered by them. Now, it is certainly true that, as in the case of institutions, the nature of the individuals comprising the society and the nature of the uses to which technology is put can never be irrelevant for the consequences which flow from the use of technology. Furthermore, the various facets of the social organization, including property relations, are also relevant from the perspective of the nature of the consequences which flow from the use of technology. The difficulty arises when it is claimed that the entire variation in consequences of technology is explainable in these terms. In view of the earlier discussion regarding the interconnections between institutions and values, and between technology and social structures, it is clear that the assertions regarding value-neutrality of technology cannot really be maintained. If a particular technology is polluting, it is not clear how its polluting character is going to be affected either by changing the property relations or by the character of those controlling and making use of it. In fact, using Gandhian insights regarding technology in the context of this example, one can say that the values which assign rights to non-human life-forms cannot be sustained if such a technology is adopted.

¹²John Middleton Murray, ‘A Spiritual Classic’, Aryan Path Special Number. See pp. 271-272 of Gandhi Museum Compilation.

¹³C. Delisle Burns, ‘The Teaching of Gandhi’, Aryan Path Special Number. See pp. 267-268 of Gandhi Museum Compilation.

In this context, Gandhiji's discourse on medicine is rather instructive. He says that if a person suffers because of overindulgence then in the absence of medicine he will learn not to overindulge; but if there exists medicine through use of which he can escape the consequences of overindulgence without giving up overindulgence itself then the lesson of self-discipline is unlikely to be learnt.¹⁴ In the context of this example the critics of the Gandhian viewpoint might say that whether the medicine is going to be used for facilitating indulgence or for curing afflictions which occur in spite of discipline entirely depends on the persons concerned. Simply because something can be misused cannot be an argument for giving up the thing altogether because almost anything that one can think of, not just medicine, can be misused. In order to evaluate this kind of argument against the Gandhian position it would be helpful to consider the point made in connection with medicine under different scenarios. To begin with, two polar cases can be considered. First consider the case when a particular affliction is caused only by overindulgence. In this case it is immediate that the only possible use of medicine is going to be as facilitator of overindulgence. It is of course true that if everyone in the society is highly disciplined then no one will be using the medicine for the indulgence purpose. But then, whether the medicine exists or not is a matter of complete indifference and irrelevance. On the other hand, if not everyone is highly disciplined, then the existence of medicine can only lead to a state of sustainable overindulgence for those lacking the required discipline. If we consider the other polar case of the affliction being entirely a random phenomenon and having nothing to do with indulgence then it is clear that the existence of medicine is not going to have any adverse implications with respect to self-discipline trait of the individuals. It may have implications for other aspects depending on how the medical system is organized in the society. As diseases in general have multiple causes and any normal society consists of individuals differing in various traits, existence of medicine is bound to have multifarious implications including that of encouraging indulgence. Regardless of whether on balance the existence of medicine turns out to be beneficial or harmful, there can be no doubt that any normal society will have greater indulgence with medicine than without it; and consequently the normative significance of medicine is not in doubt.

¹⁴I overeat, I have indigestion. I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine, I am cured. I overeat again, I take his pills again. Had I not taken the pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishments deserved by me and I would not have overeaten again. The doctor intervened and helped me to indulge myself. My body thereby certainly felt more at ease; but my mind became weakened. A continuance of a course of medicine must, therefore, result in loss of control over the mind. Hind Swaraj, p. 43.

To sum up, with respect to both institutions and technology the correct position is that the values which materialize through them partly depend on their nature and partly on the individuals comprising the society. Consequently choices which are made with respect to institutions and technology have normative significance. For determining whether a particular choice of institutional structure or technology can be expected to have desirable or undesirable consequences normally a theoretical or empirical investigation will be necessary; unless one is thinking in civilizational terms. If one takes it as an axiom that the spirit of a civilization is of the essence and that it is bound to be reflected in social structures as well as in technology, and also finds fault with the spirit of the civilization in question on ethical grounds; then one will be justified in rejecting the institutions and technology associated with that civilization on the ground that their adoption can only be inimical to the ethical principles because of which one finds fault with the very spirit of that civilization. This is essentially the approach that Gandhiji adopted in *Hind Swaraj*. Although he does analyze the nature of some modern institutions and their normative implications, as has already been discussed in this paper, the main reason why he rejects modern civilization in its entirety, inclusive of institutions and technology, is because of his conviction that a civilization which makes the attainment of material pleasures as one of the central objects of life and sanctions extreme violence against nature, non-human life-forms and sections of humanity for achieving material ends is not a civilization which can be conducive for the upholding of higher ethical principles.¹⁵ Indeed, he even doubted

¹⁵‘Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life.’ *Hind Swaraj* p. 29.

‘By Western civilization I mean the ideals which people in the West have embraced in modern times and the pursuits based on these ideals. The supremacy of brute force, worshipping money as God, spending most of ones time in seeking worldly happiness, breath-taking risks in pursuit of worldly enjoyments of all kinds, the expenditure of limitless mental energy on efforts to multiply the power of machinery, the expenditure of crores on the invention of means of destruction, the moral righteousness which looks down upon people outside Europe, - this civilization, in my view, deserves to be altogether rejected.’ Letter to the Learned Narasinhrao dated 29-12-1920, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes, volume 22, p. 158.

In response to Wybergh’s statement that ‘While I recognise that the highest ideals of India (and Europe too) are in advance of this civilisation, yet I think also, with all modesty, that the bulk of the Indian population require to be roused by the lash of competition and the other material and sensuous as well as

whether such a civilization was sustainable in the long-run.¹⁶

One very important implication of the Gandhian position is that the social structures and technology developed by a civilization, if adopted by another civilization without any modifications, in general can be expected to create distortions in the recipient society and undermine its core ideas.

intellectual stimuli which ‘civilisation’ supplies.’ (W.J. Wybergh’s Letter to Gandhiji, May 3, 1910, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes, volume 11, p. 468.), Gandhiji wrote:

‘I have ventured utterly to condemn modern civilisation because I hold that the spirit of it is evil. It is possible to show that some of its incidents are good, but I have examined its tendency in the scale of ethics. I distinguish between the ideals of individuals who have risen superior to their environment, as also between Christianity and modern civilisation. ... I claim to have tested the life which modern civilisation has to give, as also that of the ancient civilisation, and I cannot help most strongly contesting the idea that the Indian population requires to be roused by ‘the lash of competition and the other material and sensuous, as well as intellectual, stimuli’; I cannot admit that these will add a single inch to its moral stature. Letter to W.J. Wybergh dated May 10, 1910, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes, volume 11, pp. 38-39.

¹⁶This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed. Hind Swaraj, p. 30.