

On the Normative Structure of Gandhian Thought

With Special Reference to Hind Swaraj*

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Gandhi was a prolific writer; his writings, speeches, letters and notes run into thousands of pages. He wrote and spoke on a large number of subjects; which is not surprising in view of the fact that for the greater part of his public life of more than half a century he was the supreme leader of the Indian people struggling for independence. In addition to political and social matters, throughout his life he gave considerable thought to civilizational matters as for him the possibilities of reconstruction of the Indian society were linked with the choices that the country made with respect to them.

If one considers Gandhi's writings in their entirety, one would expect inconsistencies on at least two counts. Given the fact that the writings span several decades, it is almost inevitable that inter-temporal inconsistencies would be there as ideas tend to evolve over time. Furthermore, the requirements for advancing the goal of Indian independence and the exigencies of circumstances were not always consistent with his considered views. And indeed there are inconsistencies. But what is remarkable is that there are so few of them. The substantive part of the Gandhian thought is not only internally consistent but has organic unity as well. One important feature of Gandhian thought is the predominance in it of the normative element. In this paper an attempt will be made to look at the normative structure underlying the Gandhian thought. In this context Gandhi's Hind Swaraj¹ will be taken to be the most authoritative of his writings. This is not only in

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¹In this paper all references to Hind Swaraj are for: Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule or Hind Swaraj*, edited and published by Jitendra T. Desai, Navajivan Publishing House (Navajivan Mudranalaya), Ahmedabad; 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. Throughout this paper the work will be referred to as Hind Swaraj (1938).

conformity with the general view as to the status of Hind Swaraj but also with Gandhi's continued adherence and subscription throughout life to the views contained in the text.² For the purpose of delineating the normative structure underlying the Gandhian thought we first look at its core ideas relating to institutions, technology, and the relationship between ends and means; and then see how these core ideas fit into a unified framework.

Normative analysis of institutions can be done from two different vantage points; from that of the society or from that of the individual. One important question that one can ask about any institution is regarding the nature of outcomes which result under it. In particular, one can ask which values are upheld by the institution in question and which are not. When individuals act within the framework of an institution, their actions partly depend on their own goals and values and partly on the nature of the institution. An institution sets the rules of the game within which individuals are required and expected to act. As different sets of rules in general can be expected to elicit different responses from individuals, it is clear that the values which will materialize at the social level will be different under different institutions even when individuals comprising the society are the same. It is of course also true that under the same institution outcomes in general will be different with different individual goals and values.

The idea that different rules of the game elicit different responses from individuals can be expressed in another way to highlight an important role that institutions play. One reason why individual behaviour varies with institutions is because the attainment of desired goals and values requires differential behaviour under different institutions. But more importantly, why individual response is dependent on the nature of the institution is that not every individual value can be properly articulated and every goal attained just under any institution. Different institutions are required for articulation of different individual values and for attaining different goals. This means that the choice of an institution determines to a great extent which values can be articulated and which goals attained. If some individual values do not get articulated or get articulated only weakly because of the institutional structure of the society then one can expect in most instances such values to fade away sooner or later. Individual values also get affected by the dominant social values. Thus individual values are partly determined by social values; and we saw earlier that the social values are partly determined by individual values. Thus, given the institutional structure, in general, one can expect an equilibrium to emerge of individual and social values. It is the characteristics of the equilibrium which need to be looked at for analyzing the normative implications of having a particular institutional structure.

²29 years after publication of Hind Swaraj, Gandhi, referring to its contents, says: 'I withdraw nothing except one word of it, and that in deference to a lady friend.' See Hind Swaraj (1938), p. 15.

Thus we see that from a normative perspective an institution may be found wanting because of any of the following reasons: (i) The institution in question results in undesirable social outcomes; or fails to facilitate materialization of those outcomes which embody the desired social values. (ii) The institution does not enable articulation of appropriate individual values; or is conducive for attaining goals embodying undesirable values. A close reading of Gandhi's criticism in *Hind Swaraj* of the legal system instituted by the British makes it clear that Gandhi is faulting the system along the lines discussed above. Gandhi points out that the legal system is so constituted that it is the duty of the lawyer to side with his clients and to find out ways and arguments in his favour; and that if he does not do so he will be considered to have degraded his profession. He also says that people who opt to become lawyers do so to enrich themselves, and not for helping others. Consequently, their interest lies in multiplying disputes.³

The legal system is faulted by Gandhi because the social outcomes which result under it as a consequence of individual actions are not desirable. The system instead of minimizing and settling quarrels tends to increase and advance them. The system is also to be faulted because instead of being conducive to articulation of appropriate values like justice, it on the contrary induces individuals to enrich themselves, and in the process tempts them to commit acts which result in social discord. From an analytical point of view Gandhi makes an important distinction between acts induced by an institution and acts undertaken because of one's inclinations. Making this analytical distinction in the context of acts of lawyers he says:⁴

‘Lawyers are also men, and there is something good in every man. 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. All I am concerned with is to show you that the profession teaches immorality; it is exposed to temptation from which few are saved.’

The legal institutions were not the only modern institutions that Gandhi was critical of; he was critical of almost all modern institutions. And the reasons for disapproval were similar to the ones because of which he disapproved of the modern legal institutions. The twin characteristics of most modern institutions of resulting in ethically undesirable social

³He says [*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 41]:

‘It is within my knowledge that they are glad when men have disputes. Petty pleaders actually manufacture them. Their toots, like so many leeches, suck the blood of the poor people.’

⁴*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 41.

outcomes and of inducing individuals to behave in ethically questionable ways constituted the reasons for disapproval.⁵ Gandhi's harsh criticism of the institution of parliament in Hind Swaraj parallels his criticism of the legal institutions. While in theory modern legal institutions might exist for the realization of values like justice, in reality they are not able to perform this role because of the reasons discussed above. Similarly, the institution of parliament in theory might find its justification in terms of various ideals including that of as a locator of social good; in practice none of these ideals is likely to materialize. If everyone transcends one's narrow interests and thinks of various alternatives facing the society solely from the perspective of common good, then it makes perfect sense to argue that, more often than not, what the majority will decide after debate and discussion will be the correct decision from the perspective of social good. But Gandhi realized that given the institutional structure of parliament there was no possibility of such a scenario ever materializing.⁶

Gandhi's almost total opposition to modern technology stemmed from several sets of reasons. One set of reasons were clearly instrumental in nature. From Gandhi's numerous writings on cottage industries it is clear that he considered their revival essential if all in the country were to be assured of at least a minimum livelihood. He saw a link between

⁵For instance, regarding the medical profession Gandhi makes a similar point as about the legal profession [Hind Swaraj (1938), p. 44]:

‘It is worth considering why we take up the profession of medicine. It is certainly not taken up for the purpose of serving humanity. We become doctors so that we may obtain honours and riches. I have endeavoured to show that there is no real service of humanity in the profession, and that it is injurious to mankind.’

⁶On parliament Gandhi writes [Hind Swaraj (1938), p. 27]:

‘Let us examine it a little more closely. The best men are supposed to be elected by the people. The members serve without pay and therefore, it must be assumed, only for the public weal. The electors are considered to be educated and therefore we should assume that they would not generally make mistakes in their choice. Such a Parliament should not need the spur of petitions or any other pressure. Its work should be so smooth that its effects would be more apparent day by day. But, as a matter of fact, it is generally acknowledged that the members are hypocritical and selfish.’

And further:

‘When the greatest questions are debated, its members have been seen to stretch themselves and to doze. Sometimes the members talk away until the listeners are disgusted. Carlyle has called it the ‘talking shop of the world’. Members vote for their party without a thought. Their so-called discipline binds them to it. If any member, by way of exception, gives an independent vote, he is considered a renegade.’

the poverty of Indian masses and the spread of industries based on modern technology. Another set of reasons for the anti-technology viewpoint were strategic. Gandhi in some respects had greater awareness of the economics underlying the British imperialism than many of his contemporaries. He understood that if Indians instead of using the products of the British industries started using Indian products the lucrativeness of the Indian occupation for the British was bound to diminish.

Gandhi's opposition to modern technology however went beyond these strategic and instrumental considerations. Strategic reasons by their very nature are transient and instrumental reasons in principle can be so. There was however nothing transient in Gandhi's opposition to modern technology. Gandhi's understanding of technology was not only original but in some ways extremely insightful. Among the insights there are three which are particularly important for understanding Gandhian viewpoint regarding technology. The first and without any doubt the foremost of these insights relates to the realization that choice of technology is invariably normatively significant. Consider for instance his views on medicine in *Hind Swaraj*.⁷ Talking of diseases caused by negligence or indulgence, he says that in the absence of medicine one would have suffered the deserved punishments and therefore would have learnt not to be negligent or indulgent in future. But the intervention of medicine helps one to indulge without any physical suffering; but at the cost of resultant weakening of mind. From the perspective of the question of normative significance of technology this argument is particularly important. The crucial point that is made by Gandhi is that a person may have preference for indulgence over discipline, but such a preference is non-realizable in the absence of medicine. It is the medicine which makes indulgence possible on a sustainable basis. His unfavourable opinion of the medical profession stems from this consideration. He writes:⁸

‘I was at one time a great lover of the medical profession. It was my intention to become a doctor for the sake of the country. I no longer hold that opinion. I now understand why the medicine men (the *vaid*s) among us have not occupied a very honourable status.’

The important point to note is the non-neutrality of technology with respect to values. A particular technology may facilitate realization of certain values and at the same time make adherence to certain other values difficult or even impossible.

⁷‘I have indulged in vice, I contract a disease, a doctor cures me, the odds are that I shall repeat the vice. Had the doctor not intervened, nature would have done its work, and I would have acquired mastery over myself, would have been freed from vice and would have become happy.’ [*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 43.]

⁸*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 43.

The second Gandhian insight regarding technology relates to the fact that the choice of technology in general has unintended consequences, some of which of course can be normatively significant. In *Hind Swaraj*, in the context of railways, apart from drawing the normative implications as he does in the context of medicine, he also talks of the unintended consequences.⁹ He points out the role played by the railways in spreading the bubonic plague; in the absence of railways there would have been natural segregation which would have arrested the spread of the scourge. He also attributes the increased frequency of famines to railways.

One of the most interesting insights developed by Gandhi, although in all likelihood of marginal importance in his own times, but of the greatest importance and relevance for contemporary times, establishes a connection between the technology and the nature of products it makes possible. The common understanding about technology in this respect is quite at variance from the facts. While in the general perception modern techniques of production are associated with increased productivity, it is not often that one differentiates between the product manufactured with the traditional technique and the product made possible with the modern technique. The occasions when one does differentiate, it is because one wants to draw attention to the superior quality of the product manufactured by the modern technique compared to that of the product made using the traditional technique. It is never really the case that the product made using the modern technique is compared unfavourably with the product manufactured using the traditional technique. Gandhi, unlike his contemporaries, was convinced that most of the products manufactured using modern techniques were inferior to their traditional counterparts. He devoted a lot of thought and wrote and spoke extensively on the problem of comparative qualities of modern and traditional variants of some of the products, particularly rice, wheat and gur. The following is a summing up of his views in the matter:¹⁰

‘Thus, in my campaign for unpolished rice, hand-ground flour and village made gur, I am simply asking people not to pay for undermining their health. For that is what they are at present doing, and I am thankful to say that I am supported in my view by the highest experts in the land.’

Considering various aspects of Gandhi’s views on the question of technology it seems that the following two propositions underlie his thinking in the matter: (i) Although there is no deterministic relationship between technology and values in the sense of technology determining values or values determining technology, the two are related. Given

⁹*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 35.

¹⁰Interview to the Press, January 10, 1935, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Delhi, 1958-1982, volume 66, p. 74.

a particularly technology not every value-system will be consistent with it; and given a particular value-system not every technological structure can coexist with it. (ii) Modern technology is essentially inconsistent with some of the most cherished values, particularly non-violence.

More than anyone else Gandhi believed in the necessity of purity of means. For him the ends and means constituted an indivisible whole. If one changed the means then he believed that the ends would change as well. In *Hind Swaraj* he says:¹¹

‘Your belief that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake. ... If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay you for it; and if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and, according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?’

If we interpret the above passage literally, it would seem that Gandhi is implying that given any ends, the means are uniquely determined. But such an interpretation is not warranted. If ends embody a particular value and the means employed repudiate that value then in such a case it should be immediate that the means in question, if employed, will defeat the very purpose at least partially, if not fully. What will be attained will be quite different from what was originally envisaged. But even if there is no value embodied in the ends which is directly repudiated by the means there can still be tension between means and ends. Simply because there is no direct contradiction between the values embodied in the ends and those embodied in the means, it does not mean that the means employed cannot corrode the ends. A value without contradicting another value directly nevertheless can be such as to weaken it in the long-run. For given ends, while in general it will be true that there will be more than one means of attaining it, it will certainly be not the case that any means whatsoever can be employed for their attainment and with no change in their character.

We see that Gandhi’s opposition to modern institutions and modern technology was rooted in his disapproval of values which in his understanding they tend to promote. He found their normative implications unpalatable. Although civilization is much more than mere sum of institutions and technology, they do constitute important elements of it. Consequently, it is not surprising that Gandhi was extremely critical of modern

¹¹*Hind Swaraj* (1938), pp. 51-52.

civilization. In *Hind Swaraj* on the one hand he condemns modern civilization in extremely harsh language;¹² and on the other praises Indian civilization in superlative terms.¹³

Because Gandhi's commitment to non-violence was of a very high order, at one level one can understand his condemnation of European civilization and adulation of Indian civilization, as, like many others, he must have found the modern civilization rather violent, and certainly more violent than the Indian civilization. But adopting this approach makes rejection of modern civilization contingent on one's commitment to a value which is by and large violated by it. If the modern civilization is found wanting only from the perspective of some normative value or the other then someone who is not particularly enamoured of that value will have no reason to disapprove of or reject it. Thus understanding Gandhian criticism solely in terms of a value or a set of values will rob it of general applicability. While there is no denying that part of the reason why Gandhi was critical of modern civilization was because of its violent character, the point that is being attempted here is that this was not the only reason.

There is another reason why it will be a mistake to think that Gandhi's criticism of the modern civilization can be entirely explained in terms of this or that value. The reason lies in the fact that whether we consider an individual or a society there is bound to be multiplicity of values. And wherever there is a multiplicity of values, conflicts of values are inevitable. When values are in conflict, choice in favour of one or other value will have to be made. Thus if we want to characterize an individual normatively, to speak in terms of his or her commitment to this or that set of values does not really describe the individual precisely. What is required for a correct and complete normative descrip-

¹²Of *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi himself says [*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 15]:

The booklet is a severe condemnation of 'modern civilization'. It was written in 1908. My conviction is deeper today than ever. I feel that if India will discard 'modern civilization', she can only gain by doing so.

The strength of his negative feelings regarding modern civilization can be gauged by the following statement on p. 68:

Like others, he will understand that deportation for life to the Andamans is not enough expiation for the sin of encouraging European civilization.

¹³'I believe that the civilization India evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors, Rome went, Greece shared the same fate; the might of the Pharaohs was broken; Japan has become Westernized; of China nothing can be said; but India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation. ... What we have tested and found true on the anvil of experience, we dare not change. Many thrust their advice upon India, and she remains steady. This is her beauty: it is the sheet-anchor of our hope.' [*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 15.]

And that (p. 48):

'The condition of India is unique. Its strength is immeasurable.'

tion of an individual is to specify the domain and sub-domains of each and every value. Individuals differ not so much in terms of sets of values they subscribe to as they do in terms of extents of domains and sub-domains they assign to different values.

Similarly, if we abstract from material aspects of civilizations, then they differ from each other not so much with respect to presence or absence of this or that value, but with respect to domains and sub-domains which they assign to different values. To put the same thing somewhat differently, the normative aspect of a civilization can be described in terms of a meta-principle which determines for every context which value must have precedence over which other values. Gandhi's definition of a civilization namely 'Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty'¹⁴ is quite close to identifying it with the normative meta-principle discussed here.

In the context of comparative normative analysis of civilizations one major difficulty arises because of apparent absence of any objective desiderata in terms of which meta-principles embodied in civilizations could be compared. It is only natural that an individual belonging to or shaped by a particular civilization will internalize, at least to a certain extent, the normative meta-principle embodied in that civilization. From the vantage point of the internalized meta-principle any civilization with a radically different meta-principle will appear flawed. If comparative analysis of civilizations is to have general applicability then objective criteria, criteria independent of meta principles, are absolutely necessary.

A close reading of *Hind Swaraj* indicates that Gandhi in all likelihood did have such an objective criterion in mind, even if only intuitively. This is of course not to say that some of his criticism is not based on looking at the modern civilization from the vantage point of the meta-principle embodied in the Indian civilization. One of the central points in Gandhi's criticism of modern civilization was that it places too high an importance on bodily comforts.¹⁵ Not only that, the achievements in this respect are regarded very highly. It was obvious to him that any civilization which placed such great importance on good things of life was bound to assign a large domain to self-interest. Gandhi believed, and in all likelihood correctly, that any normative structure which assigned such large domain to self-interest could not be sustainable in the long run. This of course implies that any societal structure which rests on a non-sustainable normative structure also cannot be sustainable. Gandhi's statements as to the transient nature of modern civilization in

¹⁴*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 45.

¹⁵'Let us first consider what state of things is described by the word 'civilization'. Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life.' [*Hind Swaraj* (1938), p. 29.]

all probability are premised on this logic.¹⁶

To sum up, in this paper it has been argued that the Gandhian thought from a normative perspective is not only internally consistent but also has an organic unity. Gandhi's rejection of modern civilization, among other reasons, is based on his understanding that any normative structure which gives so much importance to indulgence and self-regardingness as does the normative structure underlying the modern civilization cannot be sustainable in the long run. In other words, a prerequisite for societal sustainability is that the domain of self-interest and the so called good things of life must not be allowed to exceed certain limits; and that the social institutions must not be such as to frustrate this basic requirement. His disapproval of the institutions of modernity stemmed from his belief that they were not capable of fulfilling this basic requirement.

¹⁶'Indian civilization is the best and that the European is a nine days' wonder.' [Hind Swaraj (1938), p. 67.]

'This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed.' [Hind Swaraj (1938), p. 30.]