ABSTRACT

Gandhi’s political, social and spiritual development were honed through his South African experiences, and it found expression in his book, Hind Swaraj. In this paper I critically consider the main tenets of Hind Swaraj in the context of emerging thought in the 20th Century. I include a reflection on Gandhi’s style of presentation and conclude by pondering over a few aspects of the relevance of Hind Swaraj to present day challenges.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Gandhi’s political, social and spiritual development were honed through his South African experiences, and it found expression in his book, Hind Swaraj. On the ship, s.s. Kildonan Castle, returning to South Africa from London in 1908, Gandhi penned Hind Swaraj, or Indian self-Rule, and it was published in serial form in Indian Opinion, Gandhi’s South African newspaper, based in Durban. Gandhi translated it from Gujarati, his linguistic home, and made the English version widely available in 1910. Although it is a slender volume, it is a work that is considered a definitive text of Gandhian beliefs and principles. Its timing – after the first phase of the Satyagraha struggle in South Africa - shows that it was directly influenced by Gandhi’s South African experiences. Describing Hind Swaraj in 1921, Gandhi observed that it “teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate. It replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It pits soul force against brute force” [In Preface, Hind Swaraj: 1921 Edition].
We do well to remember that South African context at this time that bore heavily on Gandhi. Hind Swaraj shows that Gandhi’s views on self-rule were a comprehensive intertwining of the personal and political. It went beyond a political call for “home rule” or independence. Gandhi expressed this unequivocally when he stated simply, “It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves” [Hind Swaraj 1921:47]. Parel states that it is in Hind Swaraj that Gandhi “pointed out for the first time that a dynamic relationship ought to exist between the pursuit of swaraj as political freedom and swaraj as spiritual freedom, for the pursuit of the one assisted the pursuit of the other” [Parel 2006:18].

In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi appealed to the inherent dharma, a quality of the soul, that is in every human being. This was a benevolent capacity in each person to do good, and was present in people of all religions. Different religions turned this into a specific code of behaviour, but dharma was quite distinct from “religious charlatanism” [see Parel 1996:50].

Gandhi advocated the realization of the values of hind swaraj through non-violence. Satyagraha was the means to hind swaraj. In hind swaraj Gandhi was looking for an alternative locus of transformation and agency. Opposing the force and power of imperialist values, Gandhi posited the force of Truth or soul-force. He was anxious to address his adversaries, many of whom were revolutionaries, who did not see any merit in the non-violent, Satyagraha route. For Gandhi the “theory of satyagraha ‘seeks to rejoin politics and religion [dharma] and to test every one of our actions in the light of ethical principles’” [Parel 1996:62].

MODERN CIVILISATION
In Hind Swaraj Gandhi mounted a critique against modern civilization or modernity. He made a distinction between western and modern civilization, and was careful not to brand all of western civilization as deficient. In fact, he extolled the historical wellsprings of western civilization, arguing that it had deviated from its original values, especially since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. He drew from great western thinkers such as Plato, Ruskin and Tolstoy, who were all adamant that moral law should be re-instituted in society.

His experiences in South Africa showed him the hegemony of modern civilization, which pitted itself as superior to traditional Indian and African civilizations. This view is similar to the thesis that Dipesh Chakrabarty has outlined in his book, Provincializing Europe - Postcolonial Thought and historical difference [2000], where Europe is accepted unquestioningly as a legitimizing force. In India, Gandhi saw the willing submission of Indians to colonialism, where imperial ideology was supported by an orientalising project [Edward Said was to later argue at length in his ground-breaking work, Orientalism, that western constructions of the East were devised to control it. See Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999:8]. He criticizes the seductions of colonial imperialism, articulated in terms of “a civilizing mission” [Heredia 1999]. The colonized became willing slaves, who obeyed might and power, and were complicit in their own enslavement. Gramsci was to echo Gandhi’s views, defining this as “hegemony”, where there is “dominance by consent” [see Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999:42]. This “intimate enemy”, as Ashis Nandy [1994] termed it, bolstered by asymmetry in power relations, had to be exorcised. In Black Skins, White Masks, Franz Fanon also drew attention to the racialising of the colonized, and Aime Cesaire exposed the wanton expropriation of the colonised’s life, work and symbols.

Critiquing the power of the oppressor, Gandhi did not remain at the level of a “politics of blame”; he wrenched a counter-authority based on an alternative set of values, and showed its far-reaching humanizing and transformative possibilities. Gandhi urged that both India and the West reach back to its fundamental, traditional cultures, which were undergirded by moral and ethical values, but which they had turned their back on. Judith Brown observes that it was Gandhi’s position as “critical outsider” in South Africa that made him see the weaknesses of western rule in both South Africa and in India [see Brown 1996]. His diasporic dislocation was one aspect of this – his own troubling rejection, and of his fellow compatriots, heightened this condition of being an “outsider” in South Africa. Of course Gandhi turned this in-between, interstitial position on it head, by insisting that he was a legitimate son of the Empire.
ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

A distinctive element of Hind Swaraj was the economic critique that Gandhi mounted. Gandhi criticized the economic devastation wrought on India by colonialism. He proposed an alternative programme of economic nationalism, marked by a nationalist militancy. It is not surprising that the British in India banned Hind Swaraj as soon as it was published, seeing it as seditious [Hardiman 2003:14-15].

Gandhi was unequivocal in his denunciation of unethical principles at the core of modern civilization, which he described as “ephemeral” [Hind Swaraj 1921:67]. The use of force, where might is right, and the practice of the survival of the fittest, underlined much of contemporary western culture, which created poverty at both the micro and macro levels. Exalting the politics of power and the economics of self-interest, which increased consumerist values and exploitation showed the extent of western decadence. Gandhi argued that cultural imperialism was bolstered by economic exploitation through the ideology and practices of industrial capitalism. As he stated in Hind Swaraj, “Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin” [Hind Swaraj, Chapter 19]. Gandhi was opposed to the dehumanizing and alienating effects of modern technology. In this respect, Parekh points out:

For Gandhi, mechanization or the fetishism of technology was closely tied up with the larger phenomenon or industrialism, another apparently self-propelling and endless process of creating larger and larger industries with no other purpose than to produce cheap consumer goods and maximize profit. Since modern economic life followed an inexorable momentum of its own without being in charge of it, it reduced human beings to helpless and passive spectators and represented a new form of slavery, more comfortable and invidious and hence more dangerous than the earlier ones. [Parekh 1997:80]
On Gandhi’s views here, Arnold points out: “Essentially, he viewed civilisation as that which assists in the development of moral excellence and advances individuals and society towards the goals of non-violence and truth. True civilization, for him, was thus an aid to self-realisation and universal brotherhood, not a set of material or technological achievements, like railway trains or factory industries” [Arnold 2001:68]. Gandhi criticizes the way life-enhancing, humanist and religious values are displaced and supplanted by a flawed and sterile rationalist materialism. A narrow extolling of scientific rationality foreclosed possibilities for transcendence, and relegated human beings to a deterministic plane. This was a travesty of true human freedom and hope.

Gandhi was not opposed to reason per se. In fact, he harnessed it in developing a critique of the west, but he criticised a recourse to reason that was devoid of its ethical weight. He distinguished between reason and rationality. Reason, after all, formed the buttress of Satyagraha. As Parekh notes: “Gandhi’s satyagraha was an ingenious combination of reason, morality and politics; it appealed to the opponent’s head, heart and interests” [Parekh 1997:156]. But Gandhi criticized the tendency to define reason in largely positivist terms and to make it the sole source of knowledge and action [Parekh 1997: 83]. Gandhi was opposed to reason that is uniform and static, that did not engender dialogue or debate. He encouraged, rather, an “epistemological pluralism” [Parekh 1997:93]. Albeit, Gandhi guarded against excesses in any direction. “He wanted to contain excessive rationality within reasonable bounds without an irrational revolt against reason itself, but he would emphatically reject any forced choice between totalizing rationalism and relativising subjectivism” [Heredia 1999: 5].

He wished to reclaim a unity between reason and morality. He saw both reason alone and rationality as falling short of faith, intuition and morality. Gandhi criticized modern civilization for its neglect of such a holistic dimension. Critiquing “the object of life” which made materialist values supercede spiritual ones and produce a truncated living, Gandhi wished to restore a much-needed balance, where the pursuit of bodily welfare could be harmonized with the pursuit of spiritual welfare [Parel 2006:19]. Gandhi was positing a new epistemology, that was not buttressed by narrow scientism but morality. This was a novel critique to the post-colonial interrogation of western epistemologies that would follow him, shaking its very foundations and critiquing it discourses based on power and knowledge and enacted in and through violence.
and force. In critiquing the relationship between culture and power, and knowledge and power, he was part of a constellation of important 20th Century intellectuals that included Fanon, Foucault, and Gramsci, and was a forerunner of the development of “subaltern studies” on the subcontinent.

Hind Swaraj thus enjoined Self rule and Self government, in both its political, moral and cultural dimensions. It is through the reinstitution of self-respect that foreign domination would be dislodged. Personal freedom led to political freedom. Seeking political freedom was to be coupled with cultural and economic freedom. “The term thus comes to signify not just ‘self-government’ in the political sense but also, for Gandhi, taking control of one’s moral and physical being, learning to rule one’s self. Conversely, imperialism means not merely the loss of the nation, but also, more intimately, the loss of control over one’s physical and spiritual identity or selfhood” [Arnold 2001:67].

Parekh states that “since human beings are spiritual in nature, the good society should help them develop their moral and spiritual powers and create the conditions for swaraj [self-rule or autonomy]. For Gandhi swaraj referred to a state of affairs in which individuals were morally in control of themselves, did what was right, resolved their differences and conflicts themselves, and dispensed with external coercion. They possessed an uncompromising sense of independence and self-respect” [Parekh 1997: 93]. Similarly, Amartya Sen in recent years has urged that there is a “compelling need in the contemporary world to ask questions not only about the economics and politics of globalization, but also about the values, ethics, and sense of belonging that shape our conception of the global world” [Sen 2006:185].
For Gandhi this was best achieved not in the macro spaces of the state but in the micro space of the village community or ashram. This was Gandhi’s principle of Swadeshi, where the local was seen as the epicentre of change. Gandhi was not advocating a narrow parochialism or individualism but rather self-reliance, as well as mutuality and interdependence. The Swadeshi movement [1905-8] outlined Gandhi’s economic nationalism.

Gandhi was opposed to the trappings of the state, which ruled though power, triumphalism and rhetoric, and engendered a bland homogenization, for the purposes of control. He saw the new postcolonial state, with its vagaries of justice, as prone to replicating the power, hierarchy and domination of the colonizer, and he wished to warn against these pitfalls [see Mbembe 2001] - what Walter Benjamin would later call the “law-giving violence” of the state. He was keen to encourage a decentralized, communitarian democracy, where hierarchies of different kinds, including economic, are dissipated. The attainment of sarvodaya, the welfare of all, was the goal of swaraj. But it was only though a moral regeneration that political freedom would have any meaning. Gandhi spoke of the difference between constitutional swaraj and organic swaraj where the latter involved the masses and was from the bottom up [Parel 2006: 57]. In this Gandhi is close to Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual, who is actively involved in societal transformation at the grassroots.

While Gandhi was committed to the political struggle, he was wary of imbuing the new state with inordinate power. In Hind Swaraj he is under no illusions, and sees the state as a “soulless machine” rather than an infallible god. His misgivings are in keeping with the views of contemporary critics, who draw attention to the corrupting, centralising influences of power. Among them, Hardt and Negri argue:

The very concept of a liberatory national sovereignty is ambiguous if not completely contradictory. While this nationalism seeks to liberate the multitudes from foreign domination, it erects domestic structures of domination that are equally severe…the postcolonial nation-state function as an essential and subordinated element in the global organization of the capitalist market…From India to Algeria and Cuba to Vietnam, the state is the poisoned gift of national liberation. [Hardt and Negri 2000:133-4]
Strategically, Gandhi encouraged every individual to embark on spinning, either out of necessity or for aesthetic reasons. This promoted a variety of skills and capabilities which could be transferred to other spheres. This is how true swaraj is attained. The spinning wheel, or charkha, served a powerful symbolic purpose. “It was a way of gently rebelling against modern technological civilization and affirming the dignity of India’s rural way of life. It united the cities and the villages and the westernized elite and the masses, and was an “emblem of their fellowship” [Parekh 1997:12]. The making of homespun cloth, khadi, dignified manual labour and promoted self-sufficiency. “A plea for the spinning wheel is a plea for recognizing the dignity of labour”, Gandhi argued with conviction [In Arnold 2001:127].

This approach melded his revulsion towards imperialism with the economic nationalism of the Swadeshi Movement, where traditional, indigenous craft was favoured to foreign technology and foreign-made cloth. This leveled society as well, away from class and caste distinctions. Parel [2000] sums up the comprehensiveness of swaraj as articulated by Gandhi, and identifies its four modes – political independence of the country from foreign domination or hegemony, the political liberties of citizens, the economic liberty of citizens, and the pursuit of spiritual liberty or self-realisation. Gandhi understood the imperatives for a holistic freedom, and this is encapsulated in Hind Swaraj. Edward Said rightly points out that “freedom must include the right to a whole range of choices affording cultural, political, intellectual, and economic development…” [Said 2004: 134].

Gandhi was unique among anti-colonial leaders in positing a moral universe, where political independence was not the linchpin, but liberation in its widest and all-encompassing sense. In some sense Gandhi might be termed a border intellectual, in that he was not tied to a dogmatic ideology and posited a universalist, humanist agenda for integrated transformation. As Fatima Meer has stated: “His crucial contribution was his exhortation to sacralise society at a time when capitalism, science and technology were casting aside the ethical and the moral as not only redundant, but obstacles to progress” [Meer 1997:3]. Gandhi imaginatively straddled the
line between secular and sacred concerns.

THE GANDHIAN DIALOGIC

Parel points out that in Hind Swaraj Gandhi advocated “that a moral link ought to exist between the arts and the political life” [2006:18]. Gandhi included Tolstoy’s “What is Art” and Ruskin’s “A Joy for Ever” in the Appendix of Hind Swaraj, showing the interconnectedness between politics and aesthetics. That Tolstoy and Ruskin, among others, were an important part of his intellectual lineage and archives shows his eclecticism.

Gandhi’s very style of writing was, similarly, dialogic rather than monologic. Rather than providing statements in a linear or rational dogmatic – a style seen most strongly during the period of the European Enlightenment – Gandhi presented both sides of the case, and in a non-prescriptive manner, leading both himself and his interlocutor or adversary towards a resolution, which he considers the ‘truth’. In this Gandhi was presenting a writerly [as opposed to a readerly] text, where the reader is able to make judgements, construct meaning, and interact with the text.

Hind Swaraj is set in the form of a debate between an Editor [Gandhi] and a Reader [Gandhi’s adversary], based on actual conversations Gandhi had with many persons, especially revolutionaries who questioned the efficacy of Satyagraha. Some critics have pointed to the fact that its dialogic, discursive, polyphonic form is Socratic. Hardiman points out that Gandhi appears also to have been guided by the debate between Krishna and Arjun as set out in the Bhagavad Gita. Here a mortal debates with a deity and, as might be expected, is made to accept an unpalatable higher Truth [Hardiman 2003:6].
The dialogues cover complex historical and philosophical issues, and questions of violence, non-violence and Satyagraha. For all their loose and open style, they are far from indeterminate; they proceed with conviction, but not in a dogmatic, doctrinaire or calcified way. It is in keeping with Gandhi’s approach that Truth is arrived at, not in an abstract and detached way, but in an immanent, material way - on the ground, and in community. It was his firm belief in the true democratic principle of empowering the common people that, in 1919, Gandhi founded the Navajivan Trust, where the principles of hind swaraj could be disseminated through publications.

CONCLUSION

In the current new world disorder, governed by a secular logic that permits globalisation and neo-liberalism to hold sway, Gandhi’s views are particularly relevant. The chief tenet of Hind Swaraj was self-rule and self-reliance in all spheres of life which would lead to sustainable development, but the 20th Century has a dismal record here. In recent years, seeing the failure of development aid in Africa, for one, there has been a call to encourage developing countries to be less reliant on western aid. Among the foremost critics of aid dependency is Dambisa Moya, whose book, Dead Aid Why Aid is not working and How there is a better way for Africa [2008], has been an indictment of the ‘development industry’ [Wolfowitz 2009]. In his book, Ashwin Desai, We are the Poors – Community Struggles in post-apartheid South Africa, writes of the “lived experiences” of many in the new South Africa suffering the cost of capitulation to domestic and international capital [2002:12].
While Gandhi extolled the role of the local, we have to be circumspect of the extent to which the local, particularly in recent decades, has become entrammelled in the global. Setting up binary, polar distinctions between the two ignores the complex configurations of the contemporary world. Devon Campbell-Hall draws attention to the work of two UK literary writers, Monica Ali [Brick Lane, 2003] and Zadie Smith [White Teeth, 2001], who “confront disempowering trends within contemporary manufacturing in our rapidly globalizing world, by highlighting the unstable employment conditions of pieceworkers in post-industrial Britain. The unskilled and semi-skilled labourers represented in their novels offer a tragic contrast to Gandhi’s Ruskin-inspired desire for all Indians to master the manual skills leading to self-sufficiency as a political statement of non-violent resistance to colonial dominance” [2007:230]. Confined to localized labour, often in the domestic context, many workers have no organized labour structure, and hence lack of job security and employment rights. Campbell-Hall has rightly drawn attention to the anti-globalisation protests in Davos and Seattle which have brought attention to the plight of vulnerable sweatshop labourers in low-wage areas of the developing world" [2007:232]. And, of course, Raja Rao had pointed out much earlier, in his novel, Kanthapura [1938], how charkas were mass-produced! [See Sharrad 2007].

In criticizing cultural hegemony of modern civilization as well as political and economic domination Gandhi was echoing the anti-colonial critique of critics such as Fanon [though the latter, of course, felt that the violence of the colonial state could only be eradicated by recourse to revolutionary violence]. Gandhi was responding to the historical presence of colonialism and its effects in India. His critique of modern civilization and his invoking of the riches of the ancient Indian civilization must be seen in this light, rather than as an attempt to present Indian civilization in one-dimensional or unilateral terms.

More broadly, Amartya Sen criticizes the tendency to engage in “civilisational partitioning” [Sen 2006: 42], where civilizations are seen as separate and are pitted against one another. Similarly, Sen argues that Samuel Huntington’s thesis of “the clash of civilizations” points to “civilisational incarceration”, when the reality is quite different. He points to the arbitrariness of “western science”, for example, rightly arguing that it has drawn from a world heritage. As he elaborates:
The Occident, must get full credit for the major achievements that occurred in the Western world during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, which have transformed the nature of human civilization. But the presumption that all this is the result of the flowering of an entirely sequestered “Western civilization,” developed in splendid isolation, would be a serious illusion. [Sen 2006:57]

In describing Indian civilization, Sen criticizes the tendency towards “miniaturization” and shows that it comprises more than just a “Hindu” civilization, being made up substantially up of the Muslim presence in India, as well as that of Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians [Sen 2006:47-48]. In invoking the idea of civilization, rather than nation, Gandhi was opposing a narrow chauvinism and was encouraging a broad congruence of cultures and influences – an alternative universalism to that one posited by the colonizer - on the sub-continent. Martin Bernal [1987] is among those who have argued for a broad genealogy of thought and intellectual history, where the influence, fusion and interdependence of civilizations is foregrounded. Edward Said is another postcolonial critic who has gone beyond the constructions of east/west, of Orientalist/Occidentalist, dichotomies. As Aluska points out, “westernism and anti-westernism are distorted mirror images of each other, despite the historically shaped hierarchy between what is designated as East and West” [see Aluska 2008:139].

In this year of the 100th anniversary of the publication of Hind Swaraj it is good to take stock of its contemporary relevance, and ponder how far we are from Gandhi’s dream of a global democratic society. Extolling Gandhi’s teachings, Makarand Paranjape [2006] rightly urges a “neo-Gandhian praxis” for our present time, where there is a consonance between “spiritual questing and social responsibility”. He urges us to resist a “Gandhism”, where the study of Gandhi is professionalized, and to seek ways of becoming more “Gandhi-like” in word and deed. Hind Swaraj presents an inescapable personal and public challenge in our time and place.
We inherit the cosmos,

sky, sea and

hallowed earth

to hold in sacred trust.
It is not in the state machine

but in self-rule

that true swaraj is found.

Not in the gilded wealth of hoard houses

but in the scattering

of grain on tilled soil.

You and I are

stewards of creation

threaded through with love.
We find our calling

in the dignity of nature

and the manifold of work.

2.

The bonds are lifted,

the pall of violence

over each village
dissipates. The air is suffused

with reverential sighs,

imbuing new destiny

to the mundane.

The state of livelihood

is elevated

to the stature of holiness.

And Truth is the force

for the good of all.
From prison houses,

degraded and coarsened,

the human soul arises

to seek justice without faltering,

refusing the sacrilege

of silence.
Post blood on the lintels.

Mark the foreheads for peace.

Stave off the anarchy

Loosened on the world.

And nurture a planet

For bounty and bread.

4.
As you ply the thread on the

spinning wheel,

wrapped in contemplation -

hands and mind in placable unison -

you come to a hospitality of the heart

towards yourself and your neighbour.
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