Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*: Retrieving the Sacred in the Time of Modernity

MAHESH GAVASKAR

Gandhi’s approach to history is civilisational – normative and value-centric. It is a blend of cosmological and historical time, which strongly resists the full-fledged secularising tendencies within historical interpretations. This essay revisits Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, which depicts a “clash of civilisations” between values and since it deals with normative systems it maps the political terrain differently. The attempt here is to reinterpret Gandhi in the time of modernity.

Speaking about Gandhi raises two kinds of predicaments at least. One, Gandhi being first and foremost a practitioner, and not a mere preacher, fills one, who is neither a Gandhian in thought nor in practice, with a sense of discomfort and unease while speaking about him. But given the deep respect one has for Gandhi, I attempt here to defend and reassert Gandhi’s core concerns, quintessentially articulated in *Hind Swaraj* (1998, hereafter HS), even in our times.

The second predicament is more of an intellectual nature. Gandhi, in spite of his active socio-political life, was a copious writer, and moreover, a lot has been written on him. Among the huge corpus of literature available on him, some insightful writings exploring his political philosophy (Parekh 1991), his ethics (Dalton 1998; Parel 2007), writings analysing him from a socio-psychological angle (Erickson 1993; Nandy 1987, 1988; Kakar 1990), and the ones not only defending, but championing the ahistoricity of Gandhian hermeneutics (Lal 2005) have already shed light on different aspects of his persona. The recent, one of the most imaginative readings of Gandhi’s HS (Nigam 2009) in *Economic & Political Weekly* (EPW), attempts to reiterate its significance in an existentialist frame. Hence, given the richness of all such previous reflections, it will not be easy to stumble upon something new and enlightening regarding Gandhi, though Gandhi himself does provide an unending canvas to reinterpret him.

1 Clash of Civilisations

I begin my exposition with another article (Gupta 2009) on Gandhi that recently appeared in EPW, not because I agree with its core contention, but because I disagree with it. Dipankar Gupta of course lauds Gandhi and attempts to re-evaluate his legacy, especially his central creed of non-violence, for our liberal democratic constitutional discourse. In doing so, he presents us with a truncated Gandhi: a politico-historical Gandhi divorced from the religio-spiritual one, wherein the latter is considered redundant and anachronistic to our present concerns. Strangely, while reacting to other one-sided readings of Gandhi stressing his religio-spiritual dimension, Gupta himself produces a diametrically opposite but equally one-sided reading of Gandhi. Both above-mentioned aspects of Gandhi are interwoven, and in fact, the politico-historical Gandhi owes a lot to the religio-spiritual one, or rather, it is the religio-spiritual Gandhi that constitutes the radical other to our times.

Even a cursory reading of HS in comparison with other four foundational texts (Jotirao Phule’s *Gulamgiri*, B R Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* and V D Savarkar’s *Hindutva*) that have influenced contemporary socio-political engagements in India clearly brings out Gandhi’s distinctive stance vis-à-vis modernity. While the other four approach history as history per se, i.e., narrating historical transformations along the axes of state, or productive forces, or cognitive changes wrought by science and the resultant upheavals in the phenomenal world by technology, or individual freedom, and thereby, accepting and legitimising the secularising undercurrents shaping history, Gandhi’s approach to history, on the other hand, is civilisational, i.e., normative and value-centric, a blend of cosmological time and historical time, which strongly resists the full-fledged secularising tendencies within historical interpretations.

To borrow a recent, controversial term, but something which aptly suits my concern, I would say that Gandhi’s HS depicts a “clash of civilisations”. It is a clash between values and since it deals with normative systems, it maps the political terrain differently: Gandhi is not so much interested in expostulating upon events happening in the outer world, but in reading its meanings for the normative constitution of individual and collective psyche, its downfall and its rejuvenation.

It foregrounds the perennial conflict that surfaces in man’s interior, wherein the self...
is the battleground between the spirit and the flesh, the conscience and the instincts, the sublime and the gross. It exhorts us to undertake an inward journey to retrieve the kingdom of god within. And in doing so, it crafts a new continent of the interior, fashions a new language of interiority. In short, Gandhi presents a moral map of history.

But while underlining this need, he does not bypass historical events; in fact, he is crucially pegged onto historical events. The structure of his is circuitous. He begins with the concrete, the then current political ferment: the formation of the Indian National Congress (inc), the partition of Bengal and the split between the moderates and the extremists, and ends with Gandhi’s advice to the extremists, the moderates, the Britishers. Within these two poles hangs the tale, wherein arguments are forcefully mobilised to rubbish the mystique of modernity and to uphold the multireligious ancestral wisdom of Indian civilisation.

The mode of engagement deployed in his is also interesting. Nigam finds it an ontological drama; my reading is more straightforward. I see Gandhi employing a popular pedagogical tool of religious instruction: catechism, a dialogue between the novice and the guru, involving the dispelling of doubts, misconceptions, prejudices of the former and gradual unveiling of the truth by the latter; the Christian missionary tracts of the 19th century often take recourse to this mode and even Phule’s Gulamgiri is conducted in this very form. The Krishna-Arjun dialogue on the battlefield of Kurukshetra is also a form of catechism. The reader-editor dialogue in his also takes place against the backdrop of a battlefield: the national freedom struggle.

This dialogic nature of his underlines a principal tenet of Gandhian praxis: Gandhi is ever open to enter into dialogue with his adversary; for his enemy is not a particular individual, a group or a nation but a normative system; individuals, groups, nations are carriers of those normative system and can undergo change. Gupta is right in drawing attention to the fact that Gandhi engaged in “communicative action” even before and ahead of Habermas (2009:29) and realised that mere reason is not enough to bring about transformation. But Gupta largely confines himself to narrating the importance of Gandhian notion of non-violence in maintaining coexistence of incompatible claims and only mentions in passing the notion of “soul force” (2009: 30), which, otherwise, is very crucial to a Gandhian discourse for altering civilisational norms.

2 Gandhi’s Nomos

And herein lies the clue to Gandhi’s extreme scepticism towards modernity. As Gandhi makes it patent clear in his statement in his, “Religion is dear to me and my first complaint is that India is becoming irreligious” (1998: 38), Gandhi is voicing his strong reservations towards the cognitive shift that accompanies the advent of modernity. Of all the four modes – mythology, theology, philosophy and science – of comprehending reality, science marks an epic shift with the sacred (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 128-31). The gradual move from mythology to philosophy already entails an increasing shrinkage of the notion of the sacred. But with science, given its specific validity structures, the sacred is finally expelled from the human habitat. With the advent of scientific reasoning the long-drawn process of historicisation, secularisation and rationalisation of meaning-making systems reaches its culmination, whereby the measurable, the tangible and the sensory gets enthroned as the ultimate validity norm of reality, and that which is non-empirical, non-sensory gets delegitimised in valuation terms.

Gandhi’s is a revolt against these engulfing tendencies. Where spiritualism becomes a marginal concern of modern existence, the stranglehold of the external world increases manifold. Gandhi inveighs against the rampant hedonism (“bodily welfare”, p 32) that accompanies modernity. As a result, while the needs of the body are taken care of, the mind becomes indolent, lazy, slothful, pampered and slave to “bodily comforts” (p 33). In such a state of “disease” (p 34) and “affliction” (p 34), the increased play of senses results in amnesia of one’s true self. Hence, for Gandhi, modern civilisation is a false consciousness, which entraps man in wrong priorities.

If such is the case, then how does one rescue the true self? And what is this “true self”?

Gandhi is of the firm belief that man by nature is good, but is fatally prone to err, i.e., to forget his/her true self. He gets ensnared by sensual pleasures, which make him self-centric and egoistic. And so long as he does not make any conscious efforts to reverse this spiritual denudation, it perpetuates the cycle of karmic conditions.

Gandhi was not a theologian and never showed great interest in theological matters. But his religious mental make-up operated on certain theological assumptions, which had distinctive Hindu roots. Unlike the religions belonging to the Judeo-Christian pantheon, Hindu belief system considers the sacred to be transcendent as well as immanent at the same time. Moreover, it conceives the sacred to be immanent in a radical way: the sacred resides in the animate and the inanimate world as well. It is for this reason that idol worship never got effaced and polytheism thrived in India. Moreover, unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition, man is not ontologically privileged over the animal world in the Hindu worldview. In Hindu cosmology, man and animal worlds are not only not distinct, but interpenetrate. Man is trapped along with all other living beings in an unending cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Man, at the most, is epistemologically privileged to encounter the divine; but that too in a negative sense: it is only after she/he sheds the additional fat accumulated from previous births, including the present, that she/he is able to realise the union with the absolute (for a similar argument see Parekh 1991: 93).

On the other hand, such pantheistic belief stalls the process of secularisation of this world, preventing historical time from assuming an ultimate say in worldly affairs. In fact, empirical history, in such an understanding, lacks redemptive significance unless it is impregnated with some element of the sacred. Thus, in a world denuded of the notion of the sacred, as the condition of modernity implies for Gandhi, chronologically time is nothing but wallowing in sensual pleasures, deporting oneself to the farthest extreme from one’s true self. Such awareness, even in other times, is inevitably accompanied by a deep sense of remorse.
Then, on what terms does Gandhi engage with the material world? Does he advocate us to shun the material so that the spiritual remains uncorrupted?

Given Gandhi's active socio-political life, it would be foolish to deduce from his spiritual leanings that he espoused such a position. Nevertheless, there is a distinctive way by which Gandhi establishes a spiritual rapport with the events happening in the material world. Gandhi, like John Calvin before him, makes allegorical readings of reality. If for Calvin, the journey to spiritual redemption is to be measured by the extent of material well-being an individual has achieved through his hard labour, for Gandhi, the success in achieving his cherished socio-political goals signified his spiritual advancement. They were to be the empirical proofs, the corresponding markers of his spiritual merit in the material world. Thus, Gandhi historically positioned himself such that his personal narrative blended with the political narrative of the nation-information. In other words, the socio-political terrain for Gandhi was the litmus test of his spiritual endeavours.

Two socio-political objectives were dear to Gandhi: one, the removal of untouchability, and two, Hindu-Muslim unity. In case of the former, Gandhi achieved partial success, and in the latter case, he failed. Partition, in this sense, was not just a politico-historical tragedy for Gandhi, but a rude blow to his religio-spiritual convictions.

What were the conclusions that Gandhi drew from such eventualities? Besides the socio-political factors responsible for the calamity, Gandhi interpreted the events as signalling his failure to inculcate requisite spiritual training amongst his followers, but also a failure on his part for not having become desireless enough. Such interpretations made Gandhi's colleagues, including Jawaharlal Nehru, grow impatient with him as they found Gandhi incomprehensible beyond a point. But that was the way Gandhi read reality and one needs to account for it.

Strangely, in an otherwise engrossing engagement with Gandhi, Nigam does not mention chastity, which happens to be one of the cardinal principles of Gandhian way of life. Gandhi in his lists it as the foremost requirement of a passive resister: “To observe perfect chastity, adopt poverty, follow truth and cultivate fearlessness” (p 75).

To get a sense of the centrality that Gandhi attributes to sexual abstinence in his socio-political practice, one needs to go back to his interpretation of the Gita’s message of nishkama karma. Lokmanya Tilak, through his karma yogic interpretation of the Gita, had already made the message popular by unravelling its relevance to the prevailing political atmosphere. Gandhi singularly departs from such interpretations by laying more stress on the nishkama aspect of one’s karma. Gandhi raises a far more psychologically probing question as to how does one achieve the state of desirelessness. For desirelessness embodies a state of mind and obviously cannot be achieved by mere recitation of the dictum, but by undertaking an arduous inward journey, whereby the bonds of attachment finally grow ethereal. Achieving the state of selflessness thus becomes the precondition for becoming desireless, and senses being primarily the seat of selfishness, it is only by surrendering one’s ties with the world of senses that one can advance on the path towards selflessness.

But while advocating a retreat from the world of senses, Gandhi does not endorse a monastic life. But then on what grounds, once the world of senses stands abrogated, does Gandhi sustain his relationship with the world? Gandhi seeks to sustain the state of selflessness by making the welfare of others his prime duty, a dictate of conscience. In fact, as Gandhi traversed from the realm of domesticity to the realm of politics, from being a householder to a public figure, the stress on cultivating selflessness sharpened.

More importantly, Gandhi’s creed of non-violence is also deeply enmeshed with his urge to become desireless. Normally, a socio-psychological reaction to an imagined or real loss, deprivation, dispossession results in aggression. In Gandhi it does not. As noted above, Gandhi read the Gita in normative terms and found in it an affirmation that mere killing the enemy does not expunge the evil. In fact, it is the inability to achieve the state of non-attachment that results in violence, for violence springs from a sense of negative attachment to one’s object of hate.

3 Technologies of Self

But then how is this self to maintain its sense of non-attachment in day to day life? Each day is not going to test the passive resister’s commitment to his/her cardinal principles. Nevertheless, a sense of communitarian belonging among the satyagrahis has to be nurtured if their energies are not to be dissipated, their vigour not to slacken. Here Gandhi emerges at his innovative best. Gandhi conceives of a daily regimen that will provide nourishment to the “soul force”. Through daily prayer meetings, the charkha, the ashram life, the satyagrahas and the fasts amidst the hurly-burly of politics, and sanitation, healing lepers and nature cure in the later part of his life, Gandhi fashioned diverse technologies of self that would go to sustain the tempo of a satyagrahi’s life.

What has surprised many is Gandhi’s ability to find time to attend in minutest detail to each individual from the vast multitude of following that he generated. As science scrutinises the happenings in nature, Gandhi turns the lens inwards and applies it to the workings of the mind. No wonder, Gandhi called his endeavours as “experiments”, very much in the empirical mode as a scientist would conduct his research. It is in this sense that all varieties – diaries, notebooks, letters, confessional literature, autobiographies – wherein the self unveils itself, assume significance for Gandhi over and above historical narratives and public documents.

Gandhi’s correspondence provides us a glimpse of intimacy that he sought to establish with his fellow human beings. Gandhi is not so much concerned about biological death, which each one of us will
one day or the other eventually succumb to. Gandhi is concerned about the subjective deaths that silently occur within us even when we are bodily hale and hearty. Gandhi’s concern for subjective selves arises from his desire to steel them so that they overcome the fear of death. And it is not just the fear of death that the satyagrahis have to transcend, but also inculcate in themselves a readiness to die without indulging in the reciprocal act of killing others.

(a) Nation as Awakened Soul: It is such souls that Gandhi applauds when against the backdrop of swadeshi movement, he utters in a ringing voice, “the nation is being forged” (p 24). Gandhi is thrilled that the nation has moved beyond the mere stage of petitioning and has shown preparedness to go on the streets, suffer the beatings, to undertake trails and yet not to break or bend.

In fact, the ability to willingly endure suffering signals a spiritual metamorphosis on the part of the satyagrahi. It signals that the satyagrahi has graduated to a stage wherein her/his bodily decomposition hardly matters so long as she/he does not relinquish the realm of spirit that has been dedicated to a greater cause, to a superior law.

Gandhi sensed this awakening in the days of Swadeshi movement as much as he had experienced it in his own struggles that he carried out against the racist regime in South Africa. Gandhi’s notion of the nation did not coalesce in India, but in South Africa, where people from diverse religious/linguistic backgrounds were identified by their places of origin. Gandhi carried this notion along with him when he returned to India. The united resistance of the Hindus and the Muslims to the Partition of Bengal confirmed his conception. Thus, for Gandhi, nation was never an ethnic unit, but civilisationally defined multi-religious composite unit. In fact, the civilisational notion of the nation as conceived by Gandhi enabled him to imagine a formation that would be in contradistinction to the European notion of nationhood, wherein a particular cultural trait becomes the defining feature homogenising its populace. Gandhi interpreted the clash of normative systems operating through the current, historical stage of nations as if India’s ancient civilisation was announcing its rebirth to an irreverential, modern west.

Given Gandhi’s ahistoricity in conceptualising the nation in civilisational terms, it does not come as a surprise that nation state, as a concrete manifestation of historicised human consciousness, with its unrelenting demand that political boundaries be coterminous with ethnic boundaries, should ultimately rupture Gandhian vision of a civilisational whole. The very Gandhi who wrote in 1909, “In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India” (p 45), had to bear witness in 1947 to India being partitioned on those very lines.

(b) Charkha and the Meaning of Labour: Lot of ink has been shed arguing the outdatedness of charkha in face of technological advancement. True, charkha, which was once hoisted as a symbol of self-reliance against the mills of Manchester, no more relishes the same aura. Yet, charkha’s obsolescence does not signal the demise of the meaning of labour Gandhi attached to it.

Rationalising the need to labour has been a perennial problem facing mankind since time immemorial. The Biblical religions conceived labour as a divine punishment meted out to man for his original sin. The negative value attached to labour, conveying the fallen status of man, was only overcome when Calvin, in a post-Reformation Europe, associated hard work with spiritual worth signifying reception of god’s grace. In India, on the other hand, largely through divine justification of caste system, menial work was allocated to certain groups on basis of birth. Otherwise, in face of weak enforcement of religious sanctions or state power, physical labour remained a personal property of landowning classes, which could be put to use under the threat of corporal punishment. While industrialism with its dependence on non-animal power obliterated the need of keeping physical labour under tight leash, and released it in the form of commodified labour for the operation of gigantic machines, the state, by monopolising the means of coercion, took on the role of maintaining the contract between the capital and labour. While technology’s promise to emancipate mankind from drudgery and making it awash with surplus spawned a host of modern visionaries, Gandhi remained sceptical of such technological adventurism.

The main valutational norm of Gandhian ethics assesses any non-human configuration, whether technology or state, in terms of its potential to make man accountable to himself. Gandhi notices that technology, on the one hand, eases man’s bodily travails, but on the other, can induce a mentality that altogether abhors manual labour, thereby depriving man of diverse learning experiences. In the latter case, technology, rather than being a boon, increases our dependency, cripples our mind and thus hinders self-actualisation. Gandhi’s emphasis on vocationalisation in his educational programme, nai talim, was essentially born out of his understanding that true self is moulded out of intensive practice, and that education, which prevents the self from undergoing trial and error, may cater knowledge but not learning. By granting leeway to err, but at the same time, making the individual accountable to it, is the best way to make man learn and unlearn. Such an experiential self is a learned self, and charkha, at a minuscule level, with purposeful use of hands and feet, was an attempt to inculcate these values.

4 Self as Site of Moral Power

The same sceptical stance towards any new-fangled solution that in the name of problem-solving instils dependency in man is seen to be at work in Gandhi’s concern of modern professions. Anthony Giddens (1991: 5) conceives of modernity as a stage wherein self-reflexivity increasingly characterises daily activities at personal and institutional levels. On the one hand, man’s dependence on external systems of expertise grows, while on the other, continuous inflow of new knowledge and new choices accompanying it provide the individual as well as the external systems means to readjust their narratives in accordance with the new demands.

But Gandhi, in his characteristic verve, relates commonplace examples where such logic does not seem to be functioning and instead an unterminating cycle of
dependency grows: “I overeat, I have indigestion, I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine, I am cured. I overeat again, I take his pills again” (p 53). This cycle repeats itself because while the bodily dysfunction is taken care of by the expert, the mind does not undergo any rigorous soul-searching as to why the derangement took place in the first place. The mind does not learn. Gandhi concludes, “Had I not taken the pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishment 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” (p 53). It is this same therapy of self-cure that Gandhi applies to the larger political plot of his times. India, having lost "freedom", should cure herself to regain it.

At the core of various Gandhian interventions lies the unremitting concern of making the self accountable to itself. Gandhi’s habit of voluntarily implicating himself in happenings, which to a secularised consciousness would appear to be none of his making, only go to highlight his yearning to render himself accountable to that of the others, and more significantly, to that of the past. Gandhi’s fasts were often pilloried as “acts of blackmailing” by as diverse a constituency as the Britishers, the Ambedkarites (during the Poona Pact) and the Hindus (post-Partition riots). That itself goes to show that fasts for Gandhi were not merely a tactic to extract desired results from his opponents, but were an act of mortification, a way of conveying repentance for wrongdoing.

It is this concern for self-accountability that makes Gandhi most sceptical of supra-local agencies, whether it is the state, the law, technology or any other external agency, for it is not their built-in purpose to make individual self-dependent. This concern persuades Gandhi to look for alternative structures (such as village-level commonwealtshes) that will keep alive man’s obligation to his surroundings. This search to instal a self-regulatory mechanism within each individual is characteristic of Gandhi’s radical democratic belief that conceives each individual to be capable of managing herself if imbued with necessary moral power.

Gandhi’s nomos questions the very foundations of happiness as imprinted upon us by forces of modernity. Happiness certainly does not lie in the external trappings of pelf, power and glory for Gandhi. To a man, whose religious convictions had led him to believe that his life can become worthy only by the touch of the transcendent or in search of it, historical stages of evolution would be of temporary relief. Rather, to open up within each one the path to the sacred was Gandhi’s lifelong struggle. Modernity, through a thoroughly secularised time, tantalisingly holds forth a different version of liberation and in the process excommunicates all experiences of the sacred that aim to instil goodness in man. This remained Gandhi’s indictment of modernity till his last.

NOTES
1. More evident in the Judeo-Christian tradition, wherein, except for Catholicism, the world was considered to be completely devoid of the sacred, thus opening up the way for historical, secular time to operate and for apprehension of events in rational terms (Berger 1967: 113-25).
2. On the other hand, the rise of Judaism, the first centralised religion of the west, was an assertion of a transcendent god against the numerous divinities worshipped in Egypt and Mesopotamia of those times. According to Judaism, idols born out of human labour reflected false consciousness as there can be no images of a transcendent god in the phenomenal world (Berger 1967: 115).
3. The nearest conceptualisation of this sort in western theology is evident in form of the Great Chain of Being as conceived by medieval Catholicism, but here too, man is the uppermost rung of the ladder, and thus privileged.

REFERENCES