

## Nationalism, Religion, and the Critique of Modernity: *Gandhi's Hind Swaraj*

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MS Received October, 2013; Reviewed November, 2013; Accepted November, 2013

I have chosen to write primarily on nationalism which figures as a key concept in *Hind Swaraj*, which I think is the most profound text Gandhi wrote at a moment in Indian history when the country needed a proper direction for its onward journey. This text in a way tried to provide that direction. Is nationalism a Western construct, or an idea that is also relevant to a non-Western, non-nation-state context? Many scholars have written about its genesis and development, and have connected it with the emergence of industrial culture in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), for example, Ernest Gellner has stated that nationalism developed as a distinctively European idea after Europe made a conscious decision to reject its agrarianism and religious orientation in favor of industrialism and a secular ideology. These epistemic developments within European culture led to the emergence of modernity as Europe's identity marker. Gandhi's rethinking of the entire *topos* of nationalism needs to be placed against this European context. *Hind Swaraj* seems to be proposing a radical theory of the nation to counter the conventional theories disseminated by the Western scholars. He was evidently disturbed in 1909 by the way the spirit of nationalism was being expressed by some of the Indian freedom fighters, mostly operating from foreign soil, whose proposed modes of action were unacceptable to him. Therefore he felt that it was his duty to his country to speak out against the dangers of these modes of action for the long-term durability of the emergent nation. It was as if he was driven by an "inner voice" to take such a step, which he did in a forceful manner by using the method of a dialogue to vindicate in a step-by-step logical way the efficacy of his argument. He did not substantially retract from his views expressed in *Hind Swaraj* despite criticism of some of his ideas from many of his friends and followers. This is also a point to keep in mind. Why did he continue to maintain his so-called recalcitrance so far as his idea of nationalism is concerned? I would like to address some of the issues in this paper.

As we know, Gandhi's immediate intentions were to challenge and to thwart the methods adopted by some Indian revolutionaries to make India free from the British rule. One group was tempted to use violence for achieving the result; another group, which was influenced by Western modernity, was in favor of retaining some of the institutions established by the colonial regime even after the overthrow of that regime. Gandhi was opposed to both the groups. He was clear in his view that neither a turn to violence nor an adaptation of Western modernity would be beneficial to India. India, he suggests, needs to follow a different route, a route which India had taken for a long time but that route was temporarily suspended during the period of its colonial subjugation. That route

needs to be revived and made ready for use in the changed context. In other words, in order to build a new nation on a ground which is already saturated by a rich sedimentation of its past one must utilize the material that is already available on the soil itself rather than going after imported material. Both revolutionary violence and modernity of the Western type are imported methods and hence not suitable to Indian culture; they will not strike root naturally on its soil. Care and caution, he felt, are needed in formulating ideals for a new nation. He tries to re-define nationalism in an astonishingly fresh way by taking into account the rich legacy of Indian culture. His concept of nationalism, as outlined in *Hind Swaraj*, is carefully orchestrated to counter the encroachment of certain European ideologies on the Indian consciousness meant to perpetuate in India their legacies.

*Hind Swaraj* is meant to provide first of all a direction to the Indian freedom fighters at the beginning of the twentieth century to facilitate the success of their journey to arrive at its destination, and secondly, to theorize in a new way the concept of a nation, which would be the benchmark for the future. In a subtle way, Gandhi is also critiquing the whole notion of theory as an abstract speculative idea having little bearing on everyday life. He takes advantage of a specific political ferment of the time, which is also the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to formulate a new vision, which is forged symbolically as an inevitable destiny that results from a creative transformation of a historical contingency. Benedict Anderson's eloquent words in his *Imagined Communities*, "It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny," (12) through their somewhat analeptical re-figuration corroborate what Gandhi was trying to achieve way back in 1909. The force of this radical re-formulation is as valid today as it was in 1909.

The chance that Gandhi envisaged was the impending freedom of India, to achieve which all freedom fighters, irrespective of their modes of action, were unanimous in their view, but if that magical moment of struggle is not transformed into the efficacy of a destiny (a proper destination), India would miss a unique opportunity for realizing its goals. How would one then characterize the new nation that is to be forged out of the exit of colonial power? What would be the guiding spirit of nationalism that would keep the country intact? Gandhi is concerned with these and many other related questions, and tries to build a context for turning a chance into destiny. That chance was not merely to fight for political independence, but more importantly to assert India's unique identity in the world and to account for its prevalence, while Greek and Roman civilizations, which gave modern Europe its guiding principles, have perished on the way. Gandhi felt that the time had come at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to carefully reflect upon these questions and to build a new India on the solid foundation laid by its ancestors and to look ahead of its time by reclaiming its rich legacy and facilitating its smooth passage to the present time so that a chasm between its past and future is not created. Colonial powers have always tried to create such a chasm so that the subjugated country develops a dependency syndrome and loses its ability to stand on its own. Gandhi felt that a nation must transcend itself in order to justify itself as a nation. This is not a paradox; its meaning lies in the implication that as long as a nation continues to remain fixated on its

narrow contingencies alone without moving beyond its manifest insularity it will not endure as a nation. This vision of transcendence derives from the strength of its foundation, its received wisdom from the past. *Hind Swaraj* is an attempt to conceptualize such a nation for India.

I would like to return to this conceptualization after an engagement with Ernest Renan's 1882 classic essay "What is a Nation?" Renan's essay is an attempt to define what a nation is by identifying first what it is not. With the decline of religion as a prime force in life in Europe around the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of a nation became a new factor for defining the contours of European identity. Thus the concept of the "nation" replaced that of religion. The French Revolution seems to have inaugurated such a shift in attitude. The Enlightenment thought accelerated that shift, and it was Immanuel Kant who brought together such filiative notions as liberalism, democracy, and cosmopolitanism under the rubric of the nation. Renan had this context in mind in his definition.

First, let us mention what the nation is not, according to Renan. The nation, to him, is not a geographical concept, which means that it is not defined by a territorial enclosure or any other geographical conditions. However, a nation has to be distinguished from a nation-state, which is defined in terms of its territorial integrity. However, it does not mean that geography does not have anything to do with the development of a national spirit; what it means is that a nation always transcends its geography. The nation is also not a biological or a racial concept. A group of people, who are biologically and racially similar, do not constitute a nation, whatever other affinities they might have with each other. The nation is also not a linguistic concept. People speaking the same language may share their experience together in many interesting ways, but cannot build a nation only through linguistic affinities. By highlighting what the nation is not, Renan seems to suggest that there is something uncanny and inscrutable in the idea of a nation that cannot be captured in tangible terms but can only be felt and experienced in spiritual terms. Renan calls it a "spiritual principle," which is the "outcome of profound complications of history" (18). He also says that the nation is a "soul." Two things, Renan says, constitute this "spiritual principle": "One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (19). The "profound complications of history" provide the condition for conceptualizing the idea of a nation. The "spiritual principle" seems to antedate a nation, in the sense that it is in the spirit of the nation that a nation is engendered, not the vice versa.

Where from does that spirit come? Renan seems to think that such spirit gets reawakened by memories and epiphanies through which heritage is preserved and taken forward. Benedict Anderson has a more evocative way of articulating this notion. By borrowing the concept of "simultaneity" from Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and "homogeneous empty time" from Walter Benjamin, he says that a nation created from a "homogeneous empty time" "in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and marked by clock and calendar." (24). He says

again, a nation is “always loom[s] out of an immemorial past, and still more important, glide[s] into a limitless future.” (11).

Stathis Gourgouris says even more eloquently in his work *Dream-Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (1996): “[Any nation] cannot be reduced to or contained in its history. It is something more, something else. Or, simultaneously with its being *there* (in history, in geography – in a narrative, it is elsewhere” (31). Gourgouris’s notion that a nation is present simultaneously “here” and “elsewhere” evokes Moby Dick’s omnipresence, as it is reported in Melville’s novel, that the white whale is seen in many places at “the same instant of time.” Gourgouris also employs the term *mythistory* to endorse Anderson’s notion of nation as an “imagined community” which blurs the boundary between history and myth. This definition implies that nation is an allegory which is always energized by the combined pull of memory and prophecy. Renan’s view of the spiritual constitution of nation, which is corroborated by both Anderson and Gourgouris, is close to what Gandhi had in mind.

At a crucial time in India’s history when attempts were being made by some misdirected revolutionaries to bring Indians together under the urgency of leading an agitation against the British, Gandhi came on the scene as if to direct the course of events. During his stay in England he had met several such revolutionary leaders and discussed ideas with them, and read many books, both Indian and Western, and had already made up his mind about what role he had to play to turn that chance into a destiny. By rejecting both the extremists and moderates from the Indian National Congress, he opted for a “golden mean” which has both Buddhist and Aristotelian connotations. *Hind Swaraj* in a way brought Gandhi onto the national arena and propelled him into an action which would inevitably lead him to his fateful destiny.

Gandhi must have been familiar with the prevailing discourses on nation and nationalism both in India and abroad when he started writing *Hind Swaraj* as an answer to many questions he was troubled with. Although his idea of a nation seems close to Renan’s in so far as it is embedded in a spiritual principle, he was somewhat skeptical about nationalism because he was afraid that it might slip into parochialism and xenophobia if it is not carefully nurtured and directed. In *Hind Swaraj* he avoids to take an extreme position with regard to the cultivation of English language. While he makes a bold assertion in support of education in a vernacular language he does not denigrate English as a mode of knowledge, particularly for secular education. What he is opposed to is what he calls a “fetish” of it (103). He suggests that both English and the vernacular should be used for forging a balance between “secular” education and “ethical education” respectively. This clever strategy of forging a productive alliance between two modes of knowledge has prevented him from being appropriated by either of the two groups: the extremists and moderates.

In a profound way, *Hind Swaraj* makes a trenchant critique of the Enlightenment ideology of nation, premised on the philosophy of progress through instrumental modernity without appearing to do so. This “instrumental modernity” is laden with a “value” with so much certainty that appears to offer a panacea to those



countries who have yet to become nations in the Western sense. Gandhi is opposed to most of what this philosophy stood for, and in a systematic way while answering the questions of the "Reader" he demolished the myth of the Western civilization and its various agencies. First, he questions the tenor of the word "civilization," which is opposed to "savagery" and deployed as a mode of self-valorization. He calls "civilization" a "disease," a word he borrowed from the English writer Edward Carpenter's work, "Civilization: Its Cause and Cure," to suggest that it needs a "cure." This a brilliant move of critiquing the other in its own rhetoric, which also serves the purpose of absolving the transmitter of that rhetoric of any intentional ill-will for the other. "Health" and "disease" are, in a way, master tropes which Gandhi utilized in many ways to underscore his seminal ideas. His critique of modernity is in fact a critique of "body-politic" which is infected by a disease. This disease is caused by the industrial culture's obsessive celebration of bodily pleasure directly or through its metonymic or metaphoric substitutions.

An important facet of the new nation engendered on the principles of industrialism is its faith in a progressive ideology which believes in forward movement by turning the artifacts of the past into their obsolescence. The Enlightenment envisioned the new nation in Europe in terms of a historical rupture. The new nation was born in specific time, and even in a specific place, it was assumed. So there was no question of continuity of time in terms of its cumulative effect. In order to progress, one has to bury the past.

Gandhi is opposed to this epistemology. One of his major tasks as a political reformer has been to resuscitate the past in all its "pristine condition" and bring it face to face with the present and to place both in their dynamic relationship. So as an act of such resuscitation he revived the Charkha (the spinning wheel), which had been made obsolete under the impact of new technology, an act which was not merely a symbolic gesture of cultural revival but an audacious act of self-assertion through a strategy of saving indigenous technology from a threat of extinction by the new technology. A nation that prides itself in its legacy of a rich heritage, he implies, could not afford any disruption of its cultural continuity. So by these so-called small gestures Gandhi was trying to re-connect himself to his nation that, he felt, was slowly drifting away from its moorings. It does not mean that he was fascinated by an attitude of longing for a return to Nature as an escape from urban squalor; it has a more profound meaning implying that he was able to recognize in Nature and other objects connected with it their intrinsic value, and not for their utility only.

In a similar way, Gandhi suggests that a nation is a valuable concept, not because it makes us aware of our "rights," but because its intrinsic value makes a spiritual claim on our "duties" toward it in an imperceptible way. So the onus is on us to conceptualize the nation in whatever way we want, as long as this basic premise is kept in mind. So Gandhi wanted every Indian to be proud of his/her national duty without becoming a narrow-minded promoter of ethnic nationalism derived from a perverse sense of the superiority of the Aryans over the other indigenous communities. If nationalism promotes racial and ethnic superiority, it poses a danger to the idea of a nation.

But a healthy nationalism grown from one's inherent love for one's nation and its presence in narratives, both oral and written, is a desirable impulse to be cultivated among those who are ignorant about the wisdom of his/her country. This cultivation, however, needs to be undertaken in a spirit of detachment allowing maximum freedom to the uninitiated to probe the mystery of his heritage and to feel proud of its spiritual content. The question regarding whether nationalism is healthy or perverse need not be pushed too far to complicate its intentionality, but should be tackled within the framework of one's duties to his country with which he has entered into an emotional contract which cannot be defined in merely linguistic, religious, or territorial terms. The genuine spirit of nationalism transcends these terms and is more than the combination of all its manifest expressions. It stems from a profound faith in oneself, capable of perceiving beneath the surface of things the values that sustain the spirit of the nation through its period of stress and strain. That is perhaps the reason why Renan says that a "nation is a soul" (19), whereas race is a "chimera." Therefore one is not ready to accept the radical liberal view that nationalism as an offshoot of religion is a perversion. Gandhi subscribes to a large extent to this view.

Gandhi is inclined to accept the so-called conservative view that the core principle of nationalism derives from its religious source. This source, however, should not be confused with the doctrinaire position of a religion, which leads to a dogma. The source we are talking about is saturated with certain perennial values that continue to nourish one's faith in the humanity and to keep the dialogue with nations alive. This religious spirit is what makes nationalism a genuine feeling to imbibe, preventing it from slipping into a frenzy of self-obsession. The idea that the nation in Europe emerged from a decline of religious spirit is not what Gandhi would subscribe to. He would rather be happy to endorse T. S. Eliot's unconventional endorsement of Baudelaire's faith in Satanism as akin to such a religious faith: "His [Baudelaire's] business is not to practice Christianity, but – what was more important for his time – to assert its *necessity*" (422). What Eliot meant here was that even though Baudelaire was not a practicing Christian, he had a Christian spirit which was evident in his attachment to the deviant characters he depicted in his work. One could say a similar thing about Shakespeare.

Gandhi had this kind of religious faith in mind when he talked about the primacy of a religious point of view in the development of a national spirit. Although he derived most of his ideas from the core principles of Hinduism, he was well-versed in other religions too. He extracted the essences from all the religions he was familiar with and utilized them in large measure to develop many of his seminal ideas. But he continued to remain profoundly attached to Hinduism, which he did not consider as a religion, but a way of life, a vestigial spirit that pervades the spirit of the nation. Like Annie Besant, who thought that the spirit of Indian literature came from Hinduism, Gandhi felt that a creative engagement with Hinduism would provide the necessary strength for an Indian to confront the challenges of Western modernity. He returns to religion from time to time in his political writings to underscore the point that a strong religious conviction is needed to counter Western civilization which has drifted away from its

religious origins. His principle of “passive resistance” (a sort of oxymoron) is a combination of the quintessential principles of several religions put to political use. This principle, which is also an effective political strategy, will remain with him for the rest of his life.

I would like to return to the questions of nationalism and religion and the critique of modernity via the detour of the episteme of passivity. *Hind Swaraj* is a text about “home rule,” a phrase that gives a fresh twist to the concept of freedom as an essential attribute of nationalism. According to Gandhi, freedom is something one is endowed with, and to get back to it one must need to search within to discover the “pristine condition” of his self, hidden behind the cloud of ignorance. I think Gandhi’s notion of freedom provides a corrective to the Enlightenment notion predicated on the thesis that freedom is always from something, and not to something. The Enlightenment notion takes an escape route, and is thus a retreat from a condition; Gandhi’s notion, on the other hand, is based upon a proactive move, a return to the past, to a condition of its subliminal presence. Therefore Gandhi anchors his nationalism more on the strength of inner freedom than on the external need to overthrow the British from the Indian soil. By merely overthrowing the British but continuing to retain the institutions they had set up is not enough to vindicate one’s nationalism. Gandhi prefers a passive acceptance of suffering to an active struggle for freedom: “Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering” (90). For him, suffering that is caused by passive resistance strengthens one’s spirit and prepares one to face the colonial power with courage and conviction. He emphasizes the need for abjuring the pleasure of the body and other types of material pleasure in order to build an inner strength needed to pursue higher goals. He calls the Western civilization a “disease” for its obsessive preoccupation with materialism and hedonism, which were spurred by the success of Industrial Revolution. That is why he does not favor the continuance of Western institutions in India after the British have left.

The spirit of nationalism, according to him, lies in the accumulated wisdom of its religions founded on ethical principles of harmony and good conduct. The religions may have taken different roads, but they have eventually “converg[ing] to the same point” (51-52). Therefore, it’s the “duty” of every Indian to appreciate this aspect of nationalism and to work toward achieving this goal. The goal can be achieved only by an act of living the truth, not through professing it. Gandhi’s experiments with “truth” are aimed at showing to the world that truth is not a matter of theoretical speculation but a livable force that enables one to live a life of peace and harmony in the company of others, despite their different religious persuasions. If India has acquired a special status as a nation with varieties of religious attitudes available to her, it is because of its inherent capacity for openness to accept those who have knocked at its door from time to time. This history and tradition must be kept in mind while thinking of national imperatives. The facility that India has offered to many communities and religious groups to blend with each other culturally while maintaining their otherwise unique distinctions is a sign of its largeness of spirit, which has been denuded under the impact of Western imperialism and its various instruments

of power. Gandhi wants that denuded spirit be recharged so that whatever was considered obsolete and un-useable could be recycled and become part of the process of self-renewal.

Religion is one such idea that still persists in our time, despite the skewed epistemological assertion of some scholars that it belonged to a bygone era. Gandhi brings religion back to the center stage of his philosophical thought and accords it a new dimension. However, his notion of religion has nothing to do with its institutional or ceremonial aspect; he views religion for its entrenched ethical values and practical lessons for living through good conduct. That is why he thinks the strength of nationalism lies in its religious spirit. One cannot have that spirit without having lived in a religious atmosphere at home. One needs to have a strong religious grounding to think of religious transcendence. That is why Gandhi returns to Hinduism again and again for sustaining his grand edifice of the nation. He believes strongly that a person imbued with religious spirit coming out of his specific religious environment can appreciate others from different persuasions. Dialogue is possible only when such a situation prevails. But under the impact of industrial modernity the British have lost their religious moorings, and therefore, Gandhi thinks, that a proper dialogue with them is not possible in such a situation. He is not against the British choosing to stay on in India even after the end of their rule, but in order to make their stay meaningful they must return to their religious fold. He tells them, "...we shall learn several things from you, and you will learn many from us. So doing, we shall benefit each other and the world. But that will happen only when the root of our relationship is sunk in a religious soil" (115).

This may sound somewhat obscurantist to a liberal intellectual brought up on the Western tradition of modernity, but by close scrutiny one will certainly find in it a philosophical position which is not only germane to Gandhi's overall vision as a political philosopher engaged in an arduous task of nation-building while working toward the political liberation of India, but more importantly a strategy for re-defining the nature of a nationalist ideology for India that would not alienate any group including the colonial power from being associated with it. An important aspect of that ideology is its inclusiveness and "hospitality," to use a Derridean word, which create a congenial environment for integration of divergent cultural and religious groups into its fold. Gandhi cautions the Hindu zealots against dreaming to establish a pure Hindu Rashtra: "...the introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation...those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation. If Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland" (52). This is by far the most clear definition of what the Indian nation ought to be, and a proleptic advice to those in the future whose politics is likely to be influenced by fundamentalism and xenophobia.

As is made clear from the above statements, Gandhi's concept of nationalism is neither based upon religion in the fundamentalist sense nor on secularism in the

modernist sense. The kind of secularism which Western modernity promotes views a religious sense of life as detrimental to the spirit of the nation. Gandhi is opposed to a sanitized version of secularism bereft of any traces of quintessential religiosity; he would rather prefer a religious attitude tempered by a gentle mix of some secular elements. He is opposed to modern Western civilization not only because it has replaced religion with secularism, but has also valorized the primacy of individualism. Under the impact of individualism community life has disintegrated. The most baneful aspect of individualism is the pursuit of bodily pleasure, which Gandhi thinks, is the root of all kinds of degeneration.

Why does Gandhi oppose modern Western civilization so forcefully? To answer this question one needs to carefully examine the essence of his philosophical vision from which his political ideas have emanated. This vision is tempered with a rich ingredient of romantic thought, which is basically earth-bound. It is a romanticism that opposes technology as a controlling force in life and supports a way of life that is oriented toward community and agrarianism. His oft-quoted statement, "India lives in the villages" aptly sums up his nationalist *oeuvre*. Those who champion the case of the progressive ideology of modernity for its possible transplantation into India after the end of colonial rule are misdirected, according to Gandhi. The most of *Hind Swaraj* is in fact directed against them and their agents like doctors and lawyers. The railways, by facilitating migration of people from the villages to cities, have contributed to the breakdown of community living and to overcrowding of cities. The speed of technology has disrupted the leisurely pace of life and its capacity for reflection. Gandhi wants people of India to be aware of all these evils coming from Western modernity so that they will not fall prey to its allurements. In other words, he cautions Indians against falling into the imminent danger of cognitive enslavement under the impact of technology.

Reading *Hind Swaraj* after a century year of its publication, one is still amazed how contemporary Gandhi sounds in the overall tenor of his thesis, although one may like to differ with him with regard to certain specifics. Today when there is a worldwide movement against industrial pollution, global warming, environmental depredation and urban overcrowding and other such issues, Gandhi's call for a return to nature and to the economy of simple village community provides a possible answer to the myriad challenges that humanity has been facing. His vision is like Thoreau's; he admired Thoreau's concept of "civil disobedience" which he transformed into the political praxis of *satyagraha* (truth-force). As I have implied above, for him truth is not only a laudable idea; it is performative, and an exemplary model to follow. Truth, to him, is what is true to one's heart, which cannot be corrupted by the false trappings of civilization. His concept of freedom is a return to truth. Civilization, particularly Western civilization, is for him a false consciousness. His opposition to such a civilization is made from a strong conviction that it needs to be cured of its disease. One way of curing it is to return it to its earlier Christian roots. Gandhi does not therefore speak against the British as such for colonizing India; he rather pities them for their distressing condition.



In a profoundly philosophical way Gandhi provides a radical alternative to Western modernity spawned by the Enlightenment by proposing a return to rural technology which was in use for a long time but was subsequently discarded as a result of the impact of scientifically-advanced technology, imported from the West. Modernity brings with it an attitude of disenchantment with the world having an intrinsic value in it, and proclaims that only when an external agent acts upon the world it is invested with a value, a thesis which finds eloquent expression in Newton's first law of motion which states that "a body continues to be in the state of rest or of uniform motion as long as it is impressed upon by an external force to change that state."

Gandhi should not be judged for only his disparagement of the Western modernity, but more importantly for his subtle move to provide a different blueprint of a nation to India in a new century which will see its independence. That blueprint is devoid of Western trappings; it is conceived not as an alternative to Western nationalism, because an alternative picture always carries its affiliation with the original it has deviated from, but as coeval with its adversary. In other words Gandhi is not averse to modernity *per se*, but the form it has taken in its trajectory in the West. I would say by way of conclusion Gandhi too is modern in a new way, and that modernity has to be understood in a different register.

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