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# **Constitutional State, Civilizational State, and the Gandhian Invocation**

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## **Introduction**

While it is not uncommon to see Gandhian ideas peppering political rhetoric to accord lucidity to the narrative and gain traction among international audiences, what was noteworthy in the speeches at the

*pran-pratishtha* ceremony in Ayodhya on 22 January 2024 was the invoking of expressions, elucidating concepts, and indicating trajectories transitioning India from a Constitutional to a Civilizational State. Repeated references to self-restraint in consumption (in light of the Gandhian maxim about Nature having enough for our needs, but not for our greed), the moral transformation of the individual as the springboard of national transformation, besides others, will serve as coordinates in this presentation regarding the constitutional versus civilizational state debate. The fact that post-Independence India saw the Nehruvian paradigm triumph over Gandhian methods and outlook<sup>1</sup>, the civilizational state imagery wrapped in Gandhian vocabulary comes as a captivating alternative to everything that plagues India's working as a constitutional state. While in functional terms, it might be cathartic for the social constituency, which saw itself as having got a raw deal at the ushering in of the constitutional state post-Indian Independence, the narrative of the civilizational state only superficially alludes to Gandhian ideas and ideals. The coherent and interconnected nature of Gandhian ideas are not intended to be plumbed and explored as providing an alternative to the existing paradigm of politics and development in the suggested narrative; instead, they are only used as a gloss to make the narrative palatable and anchored not only in the deep past<sup>2</sup> of India but also in the period of struggle for the country's independence in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After discussing the broad contours of a constitutional and civilizational state conceptualization, the ensuing pages will pick up some of the assertions made in the speeches, which are evocative of the Gandhian thrust, to embellish the imagery of India as a civilizational state. Be it the imagery of *ramarajya*, *swaraj*, trusteeship, congruity of religion and religiosity with civic nationalism – the ideas and ideals that Gandhi understood as civilizational bestowed – or beyond, the paper will discuss these Gandhian conceptualizations with regard to their wholesomeness, rigor, and historicity. This will allow a critical appraisal of the invocation of these ideas in tincturing civilizational state imagery in the recent political rhetoric and parlance<sup>3</sup>.

## **Indian National Movement: Contextualizing Constitutionalism and Gandhian Ideas**

Gathering threads from varied social and economic segments, the Indian national movement against the British grew over a span of several decades. While the 1857 revolt dramatically – though unsuccessfully – tried to galvanize several native rulers against the rule of the East India Company, in the period succeeding the British takeover of the Indian administration in 1858, it grew with the professional middle class learning to petition the government for increased participation of Indians in the local and provincial administration till the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This narrow social base of the movement was spectacularly widened with the arrival of Gandhi in 1915, catapulting it into a mass movement against the British. While the piecemeal, incremental concessions from the British continued being extracted through legislative means at the colonial master's behest, the movement simultaneously reached out to the countryside by taking up farmers' issues under Gandhi's stewardship. The compulsion of making the movement all-inclusive to posit a united front against the British was realized, very early on, by Gandhi and, therefore, his proverbial techniques and ideas of resistance grew in sync with the historical opportunities – though they came couched in civilizational idioms of universal human appeal. The strong moral overtone of Gandhi's ideology, his distinctive attire as an ascetic, all-inclusive nature and personal charisma struck an immediate chord with the saintly tradition of Hinduism<sup>4</sup>. Also contributing to his popular appeal among the masses was his constant invocation of religious idioms like *Ram*, *ramarajya*, *prarthana* (prayer meetings) and *anshan* (fasting). Immersed as they were in the civilizational past of India, scholars have argued that Gandhi's affinities – as opposed to the classical and scriptural traditions of Hinduism – lay more with its folk versions<sup>5</sup> instead. It is important to mention here that Gandhi's idioms, which were usually drawn from traditions and practices (say *dharma* and *varna* referrals), drew from those intellectual tools of a civilizational past, like the epic *Mahabharata*, where the depiction of discrimination based on gender, *varna*, and other social categories are normative but they simultaneously equip characters within the text with, “intellectual tools to dismantle conventional ideas of difference.”<sup>6</sup> It is sufficient to mention here that these traditions – though not beamed as mainstream in the epics, were always there as counter-arguments and even embodied through important characters belonging to lower and depreciated social orders and positions. It wasn't only Gandhi, therefore, but several others in the past as well – say, the bhakti poets and other nationalists like Rajagopalacharis – who drew

from these traditions as they reverberated simultaneously in folk traditions and several retellings of the epics”.<sup>7</sup>

For the peasantry – weighed down by the twin pressures of the state and the *zamindars* – gravitating towards Gandhi’s challenge to the British meant “an opportunity to recover its lost autonomy.”<sup>8</sup> Gandhi’s emphasis on the revival of the organic village communities, as they existed in the pre-colonial and pre-industrial past, or *Gram Swaraj*, had its historical anchorage here. Thus, besides its moral trappings, the idealization of village life and integration of the craft community within it were central to Gandhi’s strategy of catapulting the ongoing struggle against the British from its elitist confines to mass nationalism. The political ‘appropriation’ of the peasantry for the movement, therefore, was an essential element at work beneath the projection of the same being civilization ally consistent and organic.

It appears somewhat paradoxical, but there is simultaneity in the inclusion of both the Indian peasantry and Indian capitalists into the Gandhi-led movement against the British. It has even been argued that while the peasantry always got ‘theoretical primacy’ in the movement under Gandhi, the industrial class leveraged the rising nationalism to win concessions from the British<sup>9</sup>. The First World War induced seclusion of the economy and the reluctantly-granted protective tariffs had led to a spike in indigenous manufacturing, particularly in products like sugar, paper, and cement. While the *Swadeshi* Movement call by the nationalists was one factor in the fillip registered by Indian industries, no less important was the conducive climate created by the Gandhi-led mass national movement during these decades which allowed industrialists like G.D. Birla to be a part of the nationalist story – and even fund the Congress. The all-inclusive approach of Gandhi with an objective to create a bulwark against the British – indigenous industrialists and landlords included – saw him navigate neither in favour of, nor against, either of the two available ideologies: capitalism and communism/socialism. Again, drawing from the oneness-of-things tradition of an Indian civilizational past, as articulated in the moral and spiritual traditions of the *Upanishads* and Epics, Gandhi proposed the Trusteeship model for capitalists with relation to their

workers. Moral ingredients of the Trusteeship model<sup>10</sup> apart, the ambiguities associated with the model were good enough to camouflage, “the shrewdly tactical support extended by industrialists to the Congress by protestations of good faith.”<sup>11</sup> This model and effort by Gandhi to simultaneously mobilize social groups like landlords and capitalists, alongside the peasantry, against the British went a great way in allaying their initial fears and reluctance in joining the Congress. Doctrinal insistence by Gandhi on nonviolence, and his philosophy of interconnectedness between means and ends – thereby, treating nonviolence as a means which is non-negotiable – could be seen as efforts towards avoiding any chaotic upheaval, which additionally paved the way for the propertied groups to join the movement against the British.

This idealization of the organic way of bringing about changes as opposed to any violent severance with past practices, was made redundant in the immediate aftermath of the path charted by India after Independence, in terms of the economic development model adopted and social fabric. While in Gandhian ideas one can clearly see a distaste for industrialization and westernization, the same historical phenomenon and agency namely, colonialism, which served as the interface of the twin phenomena for Gandhi, elicited a different response from other nationalists. Broadly termed as Nehruvian, this viewpoint held that the colonial subjugation of India was a result of its intellectual and economic backwardness and that its revitalization required that the stagnating dead weight of tradition should first be done away with. Emulation of the West, adoption of modern science, large-scale manufacturing through industrialization were seen by adherents of this perspective as the panacea for the ailing Indian economy and society on the eve of Independence. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, along with a battery of nationalists favoured rapid industrialization and urbanization<sup>12</sup>. At that time, examples of “a radically compressed process of state-induced industrialization” in the form of Bismarckian Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Meiji Japan served the cause well for a newly independent country to decisively embark on a Westernized trajectory of economic growth<sup>13</sup>. In fact, the blueprint of the same could be visible even prior to Independence – viz., the Bombay Plan of 1944, which had virtually seen leading Indian industrialists agreeing to the need for a strong and centralized state to vitalize economic investments and growth. Once

operationalized in independent India through the Five-Year Plans, the tendency of imitative industrialization was so strong that little regard was paid to its social consequences and the cultural disconnect that it marked with traditional processes and means of production.

Needless to iterate, it was the Nehruvian model of development which was privileged at the behest of the state in the decades following Independence, thereby, reducing the Gandhian model to insignificance. Even the operationalization of this model in a sharply stratified society like India, hinged on powerful interest groups: “capitalist merchants and industrialists, the technical and administrative bureaucracy, and rich farmers.”<sup>14</sup> While capitalists’ influence could be seen in the huge state investments in infrastructure for the industries, thereby, subsidizing input cost for their production, most noticeably through power, minerals/metals, and communications, the big landowners benefitted by cheap and adequate water, power, and fertilizer supply for agricultural yield, and bureaucrat-politician nexus controlled resource generation and its deployment through its proverbial red tape tactics. What we see, therefore, in the immediate aftermath of Independence is a coalescence of interest groups at play comprising of the more consolidated dominant social classes. Advertently or inadvertently, this strategy alienated the bulk of the rural population, which was the centerpiece of the Gandhian developmental paradigm. It is these sections of small and marginal farmers, artisans, landless labourers, and other aboriginal communities, who constitute the social constituency for the reception of the civilizational state chimera that comes laced with Gandhian vocabulary and ideas which, probably, the constitutional state mechanism failed to realize.

## **Constitutional and Civilizational State Stipulation**

The past couple of decades have seen several modern constitutional polities across the globe vying to embellish their civilizational identity and values, in order to embark on their transnational projects, or even redirect the imagery towards domestic audiences, “affirming certain political presuppositions or ideological tendencies.”<sup>15</sup> China leverages this imagery

to provide traction to its BELT Road initiative outside its state territory citing the *'Silk Route'* civilizational heritage, while Vladimir Putin's Russia has joined the bandwagon by declaring that it was Russia's status as a civilization-state which prevented it, "from dissolving in this diverse world."<sup>16</sup> Besides India, the United States, Turkey, and even the European Union are being spoken of by commentators as being the other potential candidates to don this status. While non-Western countries like China, Russia and India may differ in terms of their civilizational-state specifics and definition, what is common among this sought/invoked identity is their sense of unease with imposition of Enlightenment inspired "universality" of notions like liberalism, democracy, justice, etc., to constitutionally identify, and thereby, get a ticket to meddle in their internal affairs. Further, with the resented unipolar hegemony of Washington being on the wane, "it's only natural for non-Western countries to draw inspiration from their own cultures and civilizations as a way to distinguish themselves from the discredited American model."<sup>17</sup>

At one level of connotation, India's self-reference as a civilizational state can stand for the empire-like vastness of the modern Republic that encompasses historically staggered and culturally diverse communities, the anteriority of which – in cultural lineage terms – can be stretched as far back as the Harappan period, with the Vedic culture following it and having an influence till present times. At this level of conceptualization, its consonance with the constitutional state concept is not that problematic. Given its modern birth, constitutionalism itself is a "living cultural commitment and, in the Indian setting, the ideals and modes of agency sponsored by the constitution interweave with the textures of ordinary life, becoming a source of cultural formation."<sup>18</sup> However, this consonance of the two conceptualisations is not what gets invoked when the two categories are employed and received by contemporary domestic politics in India. Civilizational state imagery indexes Indian statehood to "a static and unitary civilizational formation," best articulated currently through the idealized notions of a "Hindu Rashtra" or "Ramarajya." The civilizational state framework, therefore, compresses this tangled web of plurality, "into a simple narrative vehicle for chauvinistic identity consolidation."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while the modern constitutions seek to integrate by agreed-upon principle rather than "uniformity of cultural self-understanding", its

civilizational state invocation in the present political discourse in India, “weds state cohesion to an ideologically simplified portrait of Indian ethical culture and historical experience before which many, particularly India’s large Muslim minority, may pause warily.”<sup>20</sup>

Though the lure and the ideal of civilizational state reverberates even in some European countries – say, France, which fancies itself as a country historically destined to guide Europe into a civilizational renewal – it is primarily the non-Western rising powers, like China and India, where this identity is scaffolding the new narrative of ideas and ideals – long cherished and enduring in the country’s civilizational past, rather than artificially embellished into non-Western communities through post-Enlightenment colonialism, or otherwise – that they claim to be organically their own. Post-colonial constitutional states, therefore, are increasingly seen as woven around Enlightenment-inspired ideas, definitions, parameters, and ideals, and thus, not germane to their long civilizational past. Propelled by embedded weaknesses of the Western model of constitutional states, the narrative of the civilizational state desperately seeks and latches on to the organically developed nodes in terms of ideas, ideals, methods of sustenance, and institutions that can provide succor and inspiration to the populace as a possible alternative – or, in more precise terms – to help reset a moral compass for a sustainable future. In this context, the *pran-pratishtha* ceremony was spoken of as the beginning of a new *kaal-chakra* (time period). It’s here that we must pause and take stock of the actual content of the Gandhian ideas invoked in the narrative and the different historical circumstances to which Gandhi was responding through his ideas and methods when they were actually articulated.

## **Content of Gandhian Ideas and the Present Political Expediency of their Invocation**

It has been stated elsewhere in the article that Gandhian ideas – be it their anti-Western overtones, anti-industrialization pitch, or the moral-content driven notions of nonviolence (*ahimsa*), insistence on truth (*satyagraha*), trusteeship and conceptualization of self-rule/quest for self-improvement



(*swaraj*) – spring from inherently human sensibilities, and connected to each other, since they are all premised on the “oneness -of things” approach<sup>21</sup>. Needless to say, the fountainhead of even aspirational changes is moral and spiritual and, therefore, organic to the civilizational matrix rather than an episodic and disjointed set of rights and duties encapsulated in modern state constitutions. It is pertinent to mention here that even on the eve of the iconic French Revolution in Europe, this issue was debated between the legendary Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke. In contrast to Paine’s defense of ‘The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens’, Burke had argued that man could not be reduced to an abstract set of Rights and Duties – as is usually done in cases of written constitutions of newly emerging nation-states. Though shorn of morally dense ideas – as preached and lived by Gandhi centuries later –, even Burke<sup>22</sup> is rooting for a civilizational and organic foundation of human creativity rather than its constitutional adherence or compliance.

The current political regime in India and in several other parts of the globe, discussed elsewhere in the article, finds it convenient in this age of communicative expediency to leverage the evident disillusionment of the masses with the promises with which the Enlightenment-inspired big and booming ideas of, Rationality, Liberty, Civic Nationalism, etc., had heralded ‘Modernity’. The modern democratic compulsion of mass mobilization to wrest power in constitutional Republics even latches on to these disillusioned social constituencies, which had received a raw deal in terms of their ideological adherence to developmental narratives, and which the operationalization of constitutional states did not give a chance. We have alluded to these social segments harbouring the Gandhian paradigm of development on the eve of Indian Independence earlier in the write-up. Politically expedient allusions to the nodes of civilizational state lingering – in the Indian case, say Gandhian ideas and principles – are therefore, at best, only putative, and certainly not substantial exhortations. For instance, a speaker at the *pran-pratishtha* ceremony said that those who earn well should distribute their resources among the needy rather than heaping them up for themselves<sup>23</sup>. The specific reference to the famous quote of Gandhi in the context, and the subsequent repeated emphasis on exhibiting the expanse (*vistaar*) of *Ram* to state (*rajya*) and God (*deva*) to nation (*desh*), were clearly an attempt to reset the narrative compass away from

constitutional hinges to civilizational connotation. Drenched as the Gandhian ideas are in the civilizational ethos of the country and also the fact that they come cloaked in religious folk vocabulary (we have alluded to the examples elsewhere in the piece), they become susceptible to be seamlessly woven into a narrative that privileges civilizational over the constitutional state imagery for the masses. Civilizational anchorage and organic growth of the otherwise very thoughtful, morally demanding, and interconnected set of the Gandhian ideas gets rather casually ‘integrated’ into a political narrative that does not quite do justice to the specifics and moral sophistication of their content.

For instance, let’s examine the Gandhian concept of *swaraj*. In fact, clarifying the meaning of *swaraj* is one of the prime objectives with which Gandhi undertook in writing his famous tract *Hind Swaraj* – of which the concept provides the theoretical framework. A careful analysis of the concept reveals that in contrast to the general understanding of *swaraj* in contemporary discourse of the early decades of the past century – viz. home rule or good state or self-government – Gandhi premised the concept on the individual quest for self-improvement, or self-rule and self-discipline<sup>24</sup>. Gandhi’s further distaste for a muscular and all-powerful federal government at the Centre is well articulated by him. when criticizing the violence inherent to the state apparatus; in particular, he uses the metaphor of “oceanic circles” (comprised of self-sufficient/reliant village communities) in opposition to the pyramid construction of the centralized state. Thus Gandhi’s focus on *gram sabhas* and *sarvodaya* can serve as critical links to visualize his preference for a decentralized government at the federal level. Self-emancipation and self-determination – the two objectives that are so connected to Gandhian thought – after all, could have only been attained with a ‘bottom-up’ approach and not vice versa! Similarly, the critical requirement of self-protection, which is so crucial for a nation, is answered by Gandhi through what he termed, “the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection”<sup>25</sup>: say the idea of *satyagraha* (insistence on Truth), with nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as being inseparably embedded to it. The moral dimension of Gandhian ideas, techniques, and institutions can never be separated from them because of his firm conviction, “(to think) that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake”. This level of Gandhi’s commitment to

nonviolence as the means to achieve any objective is central to all his postulations. To use these concepts as political rhetoric to ‘pepper’ the civilizational state narrative – with little regard to their content, substance, ethics, and interconnectedness with other ideas that resist their usage in parts or fragments – can at best be putative, certainly not substantial and truthful.

What, therefore, emerges from our discussion is the need to move away from the habit of stylized usage of Gandhian ideas, particularly in rhetorical political speeches. Politicians use Gandhian ideas, ideals, and methods in fragments, thereby robbing them of their assiduously-built interconnectedness and organic nature. Cloaked in the Indian civilizational essence and vocabulary of religiosity of the folk, Gandhian ideas and methods emerged in the spatiotemporal realities of colonialism – be it South Africa or India – and, therefore, they cull out idioms, practices, and traditions, besides a very strong moral and ethical force, from the indigenous civilizational past that could resist and win over the opponents without compromising with the moral force contained in the means adopted. The Gandhian paradigm of love and care for the ‘otherness of the other’ – which goes beyond humans to take even non-humans into its ambit and thereby casts, “a new gaze on the definition of rationality, and its economic and ecological expressions”<sup>27</sup> – cannot be tossed in cavalier political exhortations, marked by the intended dominance of one social/religious constituency over the other or, for that matter, the Orient over the Occident. As an assumed fit into the narrative of civilizational force rather than its constitutional counterpart of the Gandhian ideas notwithstanding, the exercise significantly misrepresents the nuances – which should never be lost sight of – in understanding the profundity of Gandhian ideas. Further, embroiling the Gandhian paradigm with the politics of privileging a civilizational state imagery over that of a constitutional state is also fraught with another danger: it reduces Gandhian ideas and objectives, shorn of any progressivism, while the reality is quite the contrary. One of the major objectives with which Gandhi wrote his *Hind Swaraj*, almost as a man possessed, was also, “to give Indians a practical philosophy, an updated conception of *dharma* that would equip them for life in the modern world”<sup>28</sup>. His progressivism is evident in his attempt to “redefine the scope of *dharma* to include notions of citizenship,

equality, liberty, fraternity and mutual assistance”<sup>29</sup>. Having presented his notion of such a redefined *dharma*, he saw his book *Hind Swaraj* as having made a conscious attempt to actualize what the *Gita* and the *Ramayana* had always contained *in potentia*, namely, “the vision of a new Indian or Gandhian civic humanism.”<sup>30</sup>

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12. One such unabashed proponent of 'industrialize or perish' model of economic development for Independent India was the famous engineer Sir M. Visveswaraya. For his unequivocal prescription for India's economic progress, see Visveswaraya, M. *Reconstructing India*, ed. P.S. King, London, 1920, pp. 273-74.

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15. Coleridge, Benedict. op. cit.

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17. Ibid.

18. Coleridge, Benedict, op. cit.

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20. Ibid.

21. Gandhi believed "All men are brothers and no human being should be a stranger to another. The welfare of all, *sarvodaya*, should be our aim. God is the common bond that unites all human beings. To break this bond even with our greatest enemy is to tear God Himself to pieces. There is humanity even in

the most wicked." See, Kripalani, K. ed., *All Men are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi As Told in His Own Words*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1960, p. viii.

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