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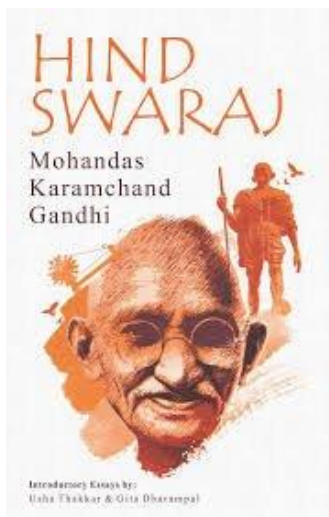
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Gandhi's Hind Swaraj (1909): A Historical Text with Contemporary Relevance?

– by Prof. Gita Dharampal



Introduction

Composed originally in Gujarati, Gandhi's opus magnum (comprising 271 handwritten pages and divided into twenty chapters), albeit completed within ten days in liminal nautical space, contains the essence of his views that he had developed in the preceding decade or so. More significantly, once formulated, these views were to influence his strivings during the rest of his life. Hence, *Hind Swaraj*, constituting as it does Gandhi's political manifesto par excellence, deserves to be studied again, to gauge Gandhi's and his manifesto's continued relevance for the 21st century. This paper, therefore, focuses on some seminal issues that Gandhi considered intrinsic to his conception of *Swaraj* for whose achievement he strove with unstinting relentlessness. The extent to which Gandhi's 'arguments' were shared by his contemporary luminaries and could function as 'lodestars' to help us navigate the turbulent waters of the present will be interrogated, so that the reader can decide on their continued relevance for India (and indeed the world) of the 21st century.

The Genealogy and Teleology of Swaraj

Swaraj, a hallowed multivalent concept – with moral and spiritual connotations – signifies (in particular, from the political science perspective) 'self-governing' or 'people's democracy' in the truest sense of the term; as a 'signifier' *Swaraj* is integral to the foundation of Indian polity, her praxis and ethos. As such the concept can be traced back genealogically to Vedic antiquity.²

The time is ripe to revisit this indigenous conceptualization of Indian socio-political thought and practice, to underscore its logic and to apply it to contemporary Indian socio-political realities. Thus, in "Rethinking *Swaraj*" we would above all be called upon to redirect our attention towards an epistemological enquiry, signalling a decolonisation of the mind. Thereby we should trace not just the genealogy of the term, but also its teleology, in

other words, we should endeavour to explain the purpose the concept *Swaraj* serves, rather than just spell out the cause by which it arises.

In this exercise dealing with the normative idea of *Swaraj*, Mahatma Gandhi figures prominently, as evidenced by *Hind Swaraj* composed in 1909, which subsequently became known as his political manifesto. Interestingly, the title's formulation had precedents:

To cite just a couple of concrete instances, *Hindavi Swaraj* was employed as a cardinal emblem of political resurgence under Shivaji in the 17th century, to be precise in 1645; and two and half centuries later, notably an Anglo-Gujarati Journal called *Hind Swarajya* was published in the first decade of the 20th century. But this pedigree does not diminish the unique importance of Gandhi's manifesto. To give added weight to this, it is appropriate to quote T.K. Mahadevan's invocation:

*“Read Hind Swaraj if you love the human family and this earth which is our home. Read it if you wish to do your little bit to halt man's mad race towards self-extinction.”*³

In this eminent critique's view, *Hind Swaraj* is a work of greater significance than Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. For, unlike these two books, it did not mark the end of an age, but instead “the beginning of a new order.”⁴

Revolutionizing Perspectives: *Hind Swaraj*'s Radical Journey Begins

But why is this so? In a nutshell: as a compelling and unsettling treatise, albeit not providing a rigorous social analysis, *Hind Swaraj* comprises a moral condemnation of modern civilization which, for Gandhi, constituted an epistemic break with the sacred. Crucially, the violence he rejects as a method for attaining *Swaraj* is rooted in modern civilization. Representing

'false consciousness' entrapping its victims in wrong priorities such as material benefits and self-interest, modernity, according to him, encouraged a 'life-corroding competition' which led to inequality, oppression and deprivation. In the process, not only was human dignity mutilated, but discontent, unrest and conflict became endemic in modern society. This is exemplified most tangibly by his laying bare the pitiable condition of England, otherwise considered the paragon and harbinger of modern industrialisation, especially by the westernized elite of India who were the addressees of his dialogic treatise.

More centrally, in rejecting the 'trappings' of modernity, with discerning logic, Gandhi's objective is to counteract British colonialism's hegemonic influence by subverting the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise at its core, namely, by deconstructing its professed 'civilising mission' (epitomized by the Indian railways, law courts, modern medicine and English education). Then, taking a first cognitive step on the road towards 'liberation', he proclaims with astute discernment:

*"India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilisation." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter VII, p. 31)*⁵

Further, calling modern civilisation a 'disease' to which, according to him, the English had fallen victim, Gandhi rhetorically turned the tables on colonial discourse which branded Indian society and environment as being 'diseased'. However, realising that through colonial indoctrination, the lure of modernity (what he terms a "nine-day wonder", *Hind Swaraj*, Chapter XX, p. 90) exercised its firm hold, in particular, on the westernised elite, Gandhi saw the urgent need to defame it even more radically, first and foremost at its source of origin. Thus, by attacking the central attributes of modern Britain, hitherto held in high esteem by India's westernised status quo, he again lands a tactical coup, for his intention is to remove the latter's mental mesmerisation vis-à-vis the British colonial metropolis. The vituperative offensive launched by Gandhi against the 'holy cow' of the political establishment, the British Parliament, needs to be understood from this perspective.

All the same, that the British Parliament, for Gandhi a century ago, represented neither the will of the people nor was it effective – does seem to be very prescient, especially when viewed from today’s perspective of all-pervasive disenchantment with the so-called democratic systems.

Likewise, his doubts about the integrity of the modern press, which he upbraids for being dishonest and politically opportunist, though formulated in 1909, could well apply to the contemporary predicament of the media, and could perhaps exhort us to ensure that ‘freedom of the press’ (provided its probity is upheld) does constitute a true ‘pillar of democracy’ for us today.

However, that may be, in 1909, at least, Gandhi’s pugnacious stance was meant as a wake-up call to the western-educated Indians. Above all, he was intent on foregrounding independence of thought and action among the Indian political strata, reinforced by integrity and commitment, qualities that are certainly in short supply in the present.

Ethical Revolution: Gandhi’s Transformative Call to India

Gandhi’s exhortation was tantamount to bringing about an ethically grounded cognitive transformation in the Indian status quo – a metamorphosis that should, according to Gandhi, be galvanised by the patriotic conviction of India’s civilizational pre-eminence. Thus, after rubbishing the mystique of modernity, he upholds the multi-religious ancestral wisdom of India by tracing the following moral map of history:

“The condition of India is unique. Its strength is immeasurable. We need not, therefore, refer to the history of other countries. I have drawn attention to the fact that, when other civilizations have succumbed, the Indian has survived many a shock.” (Hind Swaraj, Chapter XIV, p. 56 f).

In today's ideologically weighted discourse, this declaration may be considered dangerously akin to rightist tendencies, but perhaps this is our problem and not Gandhi's. Whatever the case may be, at least we should reflect seriously on the validity of his statement. For Gandhi, embracing whole-heartedly one's civilization (by employing the primordial metaphor of the mother's breast) was the first step towards attaining *swaraj*. Yet this affirmation of one's own culture, which for him constituted part and parcel of the process of self-realization, had perforce to be accompanied by societal reform and correspondingly self-purification, – before real *swaraj*, or self-transformation could be achieved:

"It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter XIV, p. 56)

This will-to-selfhood involved a renovation and equipment of the self, whereby, in Gandhi's mental landscape, mastery and freedom of the self are the same, namely *swaraj*. Extended to the societal level, through selfless service, the welfare and empowerment of the masses, i.e. *purna swaraj* was to be attained.

And if there were to be any rulers in this envisioned *swaraj*, they would have to function as servants of the people, literally and not just rhetorically! This is articulated with sharp clarity by Gandhi as follows:

"It is not we who have to do as you wish, but it is you who have to do as we wish." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter XX, p. 88)

A supremely apt enunciation of people's power that could conceivably inspire us today!

Deconstructing Clichés: Rethinking History and Beliefs

However empowerment, be it collective or about the self, to Gandhi's defiant spirit, also necessitated a radical deconstruction of stereotypical beliefs, to initiate a much-needed 'swaraj in ideas'. Thus he expounded:

"The English have taught us that we were not one nation before, and that it will require centuries before we become one nation. This is without foundation. We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently, they divided us."
(*Hind Swaraj, Chapter IX, p.35 f*)

Contesting, in this lucid manner, a 'categorical imperative' of colonial discourse, namely that Indian disunity facilitated the establishment as well as the perpetuation of British rule, Gandhi aims to nullify the latter's impact with compelling cogency. Affirming unity in diversity, Gandhi underscores the vernacular pluralistic conception of an Indian nation, as a civilizational entity, ideally integrating a myriad variety of languages, religions and ethnic groups. In doing this, he implicitly challenged the late 19th/early 20th century European concept of nationhood that was mono-cultural and homogenously uniform. Contrastively, Gandhi's understanding of India as a 'civilisation of communities' is more akin to the contemporary 21st century political discourse of communitarianism and multi-culturalism. This just underscores how avant-garde Gandhi was; however, we shouldn't fall into the trap of categorizing him as 'postmodern', for he eluded any kind of labelling.

Spearheading the attainment of *Swaraj*

Perception of
Gandhi in
Germany
(*Kladderadatsch*,
Berlin 1921)



Hind Swaraj (1909),
Gandhi's political
manifesto:

- India, a civilisation
of communities;
- plurality of ethnic, religious
and social identities;
- layered sovereignty.

1920, new people's
Constitution of the Indian
National Congress (INC)

To elucidate his understanding of India's demographic civilizational nationhood, in succinct words, he propounded:

"India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. 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; India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter X, p. 39)

These words ring so true, and pre-eminently so, against the backdrop and in the thick of our present cantankerously divisive discourse.

In an energizing restorative way, Gandhi is lauding India's integrative faculty which, according to him, represents a seminal characteristic of a nation. Hence, the Indian civilizational ability to assimilate other cultures, religions and ethnicities is considered by him to be a strikingly positive feature. Thereby he implicitly counters the colonial-orientalist denigration

of Indian culture as representing a 'sponge', indiscriminately absorbing all alien influences. Furthermore, with shrewd effectiveness, he eschews any hegemonic role that Hindu culture may be imputed to exercise, for, as he sagaciously states:

"[...] 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 the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter X, p. 39)

Gandhi's prescient diagnosis is quite portentous! Indeed, it is this humanistic secular ethos that we need to uphold and stand by in contemporary times for the realisation of true *swaraj*.

Moreover, it is insightful to discern how Gandhi sought historical confirmation of the relatively harmonious Hindu-Muslim interaction before the dissensions which, according to his understanding, set in after colonial intervention:

"[...] Hindus flourished under Muslim sovereigns and Muslims under the Hindu. Each party recognized that mutual fighting was suicidal, and that neither party would abandon its religion by force of arms. Both parties, therefore, decided to live in peace. With the English advent quarrels recommenced." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter X, p. 39)

Though simplistically formulated, this interpretation, which contrasted with the hegemonic colonial historiographical narrative of the late 19th century, can be equated, in some measure, to the conclusions of recent research, as instantiated by the following brief quote:

“The picture of medieval India, especially under Muslim rulers, as a brutal, barbarous, dark age was assiduously built by the British as one of the strategies for the legitimization of colonial rule in India, portrayed as meant for liberating and civilising the Hindus.”⁶

Gandhi, in the first decade of the 20th century, based in South Africa, was able to deconstruct and contest this influential *divide et impera* (or ‘divide and rule’) discourse, perhaps also thanks to the congenial relations he enjoyed with his Muslim friends. Yet, despite his idealist bent of mind, as a well-informed ‘patriot’, he was astutely aware that the communal tensions — either created or aggravated by colonial rule — constituted dangerous fault-lines which urgently needed to be healed, if India was to attain *Swaraj* and emerge as a viable independent nation. Hence, evoking a shared patrimony, he endeavoured to discursively mitigate religious antagonism:

“Should we not remember that many Hindus and Mahomedans⁷ [sic] own the same ancestors and the same blood runs through their veins? Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mahomedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?” (*Hind Swaraj, Chapter X, p. 40*)

Arguing that past religious conversion should not engender enmity in the present, Gandhi’s emphasis here is on inter-religious understanding rather than implying inclusive assimilation.

Furthermore, he did not shy away from addressing sensitive issues such as the Hindus’ anxiety about cow-protection which at the turn of the century was a source of intense animosity. With utmost clarity and sincerity, he proffers his opinion on this much-debated topic which continues to concern us today; the following quote may serve as an example:

“... just as I respect the cow, so do I respect my fellow men. A man is just as useful as a cow no matter whether he is a Mohammedan or a Hindu. Am I, then, to fight with or kill a Mohammedan to save a cow? In doing so, I would become an enemy of the Mohammedan as well as of the cow. Therefore, the only method I know of protecting the cow is that I should approach my Mohammedan brother and urge him for the sake of the country to join me in protecting her.”

(Hind Swaraj, Chapter X, p. 40)

By prioritising humanitarian concerns and the need for a nonviolent approach, Gandhi, by no means, belittles the Hindu belief in the sacredness of the cow, but, on the contrary, transforms its protection into a common national cause to be supported by both Hindus and Muslims in a spirit of fraternity, a *modus vivendi* that would be salutary if followed to mitigate the contemporary heated issue of *gau-raksha*.

An attitude of self-righteous insistence on the part of ideologically motivated so-called ‘cow-protectors’, according to Gandhi, only engenders a climate of inter-communal conflict and violence. He proffers that Hindus, rather than being sanctimoniously vindictive and eschewing forbearance towards our countrymen, should instead foster goodwill towards Muslims, and by their exemplary nurturing conduct vis-à-vis the cow provide her real sanctuary—a counsel that is valid more than ever in our times.

Likewise, magnanimity constitutes an essential ingredient in constructing the edifice of *swaraj*, as epitomised at the outset by Gandhi’s generously recognising the patriotic deeds of the ‘old guard’ (such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopalkrishna Gokhale, et al), often branded as the ‘Empire loyalist’ foundational fathers of the Congress:

“It is a mark of wisdom not to kick away the very step from which we have risen higher. The removal of a step from a staircase brings down the whole of it.”

(Hind Swaraj, Chapter I, p. 8)

Judiciously aware that *Swaraj* can only be achieved by persevering 'step-by-step', building on (rather than dismantling) the accomplishments of one's predecessors, he goes on to castigate the then prevalent detrimental in-fighting between the Moderate and Extremist factions of the Congress, which was threatening to tear asunder the newly founded organisation:

"It is a bad habit to say that another man's thoughts are bad and ours only are good and that those holding different views from ours are the enemies of the country."

(Hind Swaraj, Chapter I, p. 9)



R.K. Laxman, *Times of India*, 2005

This admonishment is indeed something that should be seriously heeded in today's belligerent political arena. To be sure, Gandhi's forthright appreciation for the contribution of diverse persons holding views at variance with one's own is constitutive of true democracy and fundamental to endorsing the freedom of opinion and expression. Today, in upholding this exemplary mind-set we can pay our tribute to the 'Father of the Nation'.

Needless to say, Gandhi, in 1909, realised that India's need for attaining *Swaraj* was urgent; nonetheless, abjuring all haste, he stressed the necessity for first understanding the cause of India's subjugation. And in doing so, he overturns the conventionally held conviction that India was conquered by British military strength, by stating incisively:

"The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter VII, p. 28)

Hence, according to his analysis, we Indians are to be viewed as active agents in our subjugation. This allocation of responsibility in the camp of the colonised is startling, to say the least:

"[...] we keep the English in India for our base self-interest. We like their commerce; they please us by their subtle methods and get what they want from us. To blame them for this is to perpetuate their power. We further strengthen their hold by quarrelling amongst ourselves." (Hind Swaraj, Chapter VII, p. 30)

Gandhi intends to shake us Indians out of our cloak of victimhood so that instead of wallowing in self-pity, we should realise that we are to blame for our plight.

In short: India, having lost freedom, has to cure herself to regain it, by making the self 'accountable to itself'. And this can be extended to our present predicament, as well, albeit in a modified fashion.

According to Gandhi's understanding of the historical narrative, enticed by the material gains of British trade, we Indians (or rather our ancestors!) became complicit partners in our own enslavement. Consequently, rather than castigating the British, Gandhi identifies that the need of the hour for Indians is to 'get our own house in order', so-to-speak. In other words, to

attain true *Swaraj*, according to him, a comprehensive overhaul of the colonial system was a prerequisite. It was indeed this radical perspective that set him apart from the then prevailing Indian status-quo who, in striving for independence, was aiming at a mere take-over of the state and its allied institutions that the British had established on the subcontinent. Thus, to strike home his point, employing a compelling analogy, Gandhi arraigns his westernised readership as follows:

“[...] we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English, and, when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englستان. This is not the Swaraj that I want.”

(Hind Swaraj, Chapter IV, p. 18 f)

Swaraj, Swadeshi, Swadharma: Unveiling the Essence of Self-Governance, Self-Reliance, and Personal/Moral Destiny

For Gandhi, who was propagating a distinctly contrastive scenario, the attainment of *Swaraj* meant bringing about a regeneration of Indian society through her own indigenous resources and in tune with her *swabhava*, that is, her people’s cultural ethos. Yet the means envisaged by Gandhi for achieving *Swaraj* were astonishingly simple: As he emphasises, *Swaraj* can be realised at the individual level: Completely in line with its etymological origin, he declares: “Real *swaraj* is self-rule or self-control”, and as such its attainment lies “in the palm of our hands” (*Hind Swaraj*, Chapter XIV, p.56) which precludes being enslaved to desires.

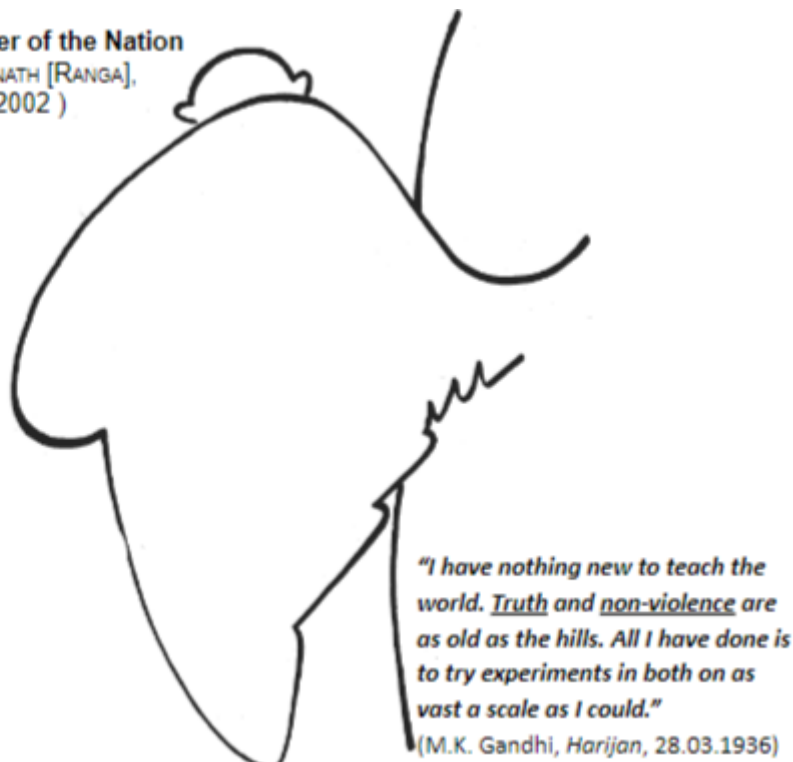
In logical consequence, Gandhian *Swaraj* has to be accompanied by *Swadeshi*, or the practice of cultural and economic independence (with the artisan’s *charkha* serving as the ‘insignia’ and tool for attaining *Swaraj*). What’s more, Gandhi elucidates with lucid simplicity that the realisation of

Swaraj and *Swadeshi* is defined by our *Swadharma*, our sense of moral duty, and is not to be practised merely to oppose British rule.

The importance of this categorical imperative, namely of being true to ourselves, is equally relevant in our present day and age, and needs to be fully realised (cognitively and through our habitus) in order to bring about a fundamental economic and political regeneration in tune with our cultural ethos, albeit eschewing chauvinistic politicking.

Satyagraha & Ahimsa: Upholding Truth & Nonviolence in the Tapestry of Indian Heritage

Gandhi as Father of the Nation
(N.K. RANGANATH [RANGA],
1925-2002)



In particular, Gandhi's emphasis on nonviolence and truth-force (*Satyagraha*) as instruments of political change constituted – in historical retrospect – beacons of hope amidst decades dominated by world wars, genocide, and imperialism, and this holds true in the present scenario, perhaps even more so. Moreover, by highlighting that *Satyagraha* was not

only a moral right, but also a moral duty of citizens, Gandhi by no means wanted to give vent to license or anarchy, but rather to emphasise that the exercise of *Satyagraha*, as the hallmark of Indian polity, was integral to the proper functioning of a democratic polity, – a substantiation that needs to be fully acknowledged in today’s conflictual scenario. The historical Indian praxis was explicated to him as follows:

“I remember an instance when, in a small principality, the villagers were offended by some command issued by the prince. The former immediately began vacating the village. The prince became nervous, apologized to his subjects and withdrew his command. Many such instances can be found in India. Real home rule is possible only where passive resistance is the guiding force of the people. Any other rule is foreign rule.” (Hind Swaraj, Chapter XVII, p. 74)

To elucidate briefly: Resisting injustice was considered traditionally not only as a citizen’s moral right, but even more so as a moral duty that Gandhi wanted to reinvigorate and transform into a modern political strategy, for this tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience had become almost paralyzed during British colonial rule. Secondly, from his ethically humanistic perspective, Gandhi considered resorting to violence both an affront to human dignity as well as indicative of a failure of one’s moral and political imagination – a penetrating diagnosis that we are called upon to heed today, more than ever.

To sum up, Gandhi’s lifelong endeavour was, above all, to reinvigorate Indian self-identity and self-respect and thereby to reinstate the traditional Indian habitus of living a life of dignity and freedom, whereby the material foundation for a viable *swaraj* was to be brought about by his Constructive Program, focusing on regenerating the social, economic and cultural welfare in India’s seven lakh villages. Thereby it was the individual in the community who was to be boosted as a site of moral power to attain *swaraj*.

Sevagram Ashram, Wardha,
Gandhi's headquarters,
1936-1948, Bapu Kuti

Gandhi Seva Sangh, founded
in 1923: Social research forum for
the regeneration of Indian polity



On the way
to attend the
Gandhi
Seva Sangh
Conference,
Malikanda,
Feb. 1940

4

Gandhi's vision for independent India's polity was evocatively conjured forth in 1946 as follows:

"In this structure, composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual...."
Harijan, 27.08.1946



5

Yet, since Gandhi was also fully aware of the constraints during the 'End Game' of the British *Raj*, and being a pragmatist, whilst still upholding his ideal goal, he stated that if India was unable to fashion an alternative to the modern nation-state, it should at least try to work out an alternative model of it. And this he urged even after India had achieved formal Independence on 15th August 1947 (about which he observed tersely: "Why so jubilant? *Purna Swaraj* is far off".)

And then, as a concrete measure to bring about *Swaraj* for the whole nation, on the eve of his assassination (in what was to be known as Gandhi's "last will and testament"), he proposed that the Indian National Congress be dissolved, since as he explained, it had outlived its use:

*"India has still to attain social, moral and economic independence in terms of its seven hundred thousand villages as distinguished from its cities and towns."*⁸

To achieve this goal, Gandhi proposed that the Congress be disbanded and turned into a *lok sevak sangh*, a national organization of *samagra gramsevaks*; these voluntary rural workers should then fan out all over the country, so that, as resourceful local leaders, they might help reconstruct local communities and build up "people's power", with the aim of transforming the passively acquiescent colonial subject into an actively 'engaged' citizen, who would then develop his/her capacity for public involvement and active political participation; for according to Gandhi, once the individual recognized his/her political power and used it constructively, the monopolistic effectiveness of State power would be reduced, and its coercive authority would be morally and materially undermined.

Above all, social reform was to remain the major responsibility of self-governing communities at the local level. The central government should do little more than facilitate and coordinate their work.

As we know only too well, Gandhi was not heeded, the reasons for which are complex. But rather than elucidating these here,⁹ I would like to emphasise the urgent contemporary need to seriously take forward Gandhi's vision for realising India's *gram swaraj* which should be high on our political agenda today.

So, *in nuce*, this paper has presented an exploration of Gandhi's seminal work "Hind Swaraj" and its contemporary relevance. It delved into Gandhi's critique of modern civilization, his vision of Swaraj (self-rule), and his strategies for achieving it, emphasizing the importance of moral and spiritual values, nonviolence, and grassroots empowerment.

Gandhi's insights into the root causes of India's subjugation, his call for self-accountability, and his advocacy for Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) resonate with contemporary issues such as economic independence, cultural preservation, and social justice. His emphasis on nonviolent resistance, communal harmony, and inclusive nationalism offers valuable lessons for addressing present-day challenges.

Furthermore, Gandhi's proposal to dissolve the Indian National Congress and empower grassroots movements reflects a vision of decentralized governance and community-led development, relevant in today's context of participatory democracy and sustainable development.

Overall, this short article has underscored Gandhi's enduring relevance as a source of inspiration for addressing contemporary issues and advancing the ideals of justice, equality, and self-determination. It invites readers to re-examine Gandhi's ideas and incorporate them into current efforts towards societal transformation and collective well-being.

Two Resolute Icons of *Swaraj*: Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gandhi

In the concluding part of my paper, I would like to briefly juxtapose and contrast Gandhi's contribution as a pre-eminent ethical thinker with that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) who is considered the arch-theorist of politics in India. Famous for his proclamation "*Swarajya* is my birth-right, and I shall have it", the *Lokmanya* was declared by Lenin himself to be the revolutionary figurehead of Asia. Indeed, Tilak was a personality who loomed large on the Indian political horizon. Hence, it is not surprising that there was a notable symmetry between many of Tilak's and Gandhi's concerns, pre-eminently in their underscoring the spiritual and moral connotation of *Swaraj*, but also in their both turning away from the fundamental epistemology of colonialism. Since Gandhi's perspective in this regard has been iterated sufficiently, I shall cite just one concrete instance exemplifying Tilak's position: addressing the Shivaji Coronation festival, on 25 June 1907, Tilak upbraided his audience for its complicity in the colonial apparatus, as follows:

*"You are yourself the useful lubricants which enable the gigantic machinery (i.e. of the British Raj) to work so smoothly."*¹⁰

This was two and a half years before Gandhi expressed similar sentiments in *Hind Swaraj*.

On a lighter note, Christopher Pinney¹¹ has highlighted a striking numerological coincidence between the writing of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* aboard the *Kildonan Castle* (from November 13-22, 1909) and, sixteen months earlier, with Tilak's trial for sedition (July 13-22 1908) held at the Bombay High Court which sentenced him to six years' imprisonment. Numerologists among us will be able to reveal the deeper significance underlying this coincidence!

Yet the crucial differences between these two stalwarts should not be glossed over either: Whereas both shared the basic premise that political action ought to be shaped by an ascetic and spiritual impulse, in contrast to Gandhi's adamant rejection of violence, Tilak believed in an 'alternative' practice of violence. More concretely, whereas for Gandhi "To arm India" would be "to Europeanise it" (*Hind Swaraj*, Chapter XV, p. 59), for Tilak, the alternative bomb-making technology proffered an 'escape' from the "gigantic machinery" of colonialism, constituting as bombs did a portable form of 'knowledge' or *jadu* (magic) through which Indians could also liberate their selves.¹²

Elaborating on this important difference, after the Amritsar Congress in December 1919, Gandhi stated tersely:

*"Lokmanya Tilak represents a definite school of thought of which he makes no secret. He considers that everything is fair in politics. We have joined issue with him in that conception of political life. We consider that the political life of the country will become thoroughly corrupt if we import Western tactics and methods."*¹³

To which Tilak responded even more pithily: "Politics is a game of worldly people and not of Sadhus"¹⁴ – implying that the sadhu-like Gandhi, who wanted to 'purify politics', should refrain from 'sully' himself.

Gandhi's delayed riposte was as follows:

*"(...) if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics today encircles us like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake (...) by introducing religion into politics."*¹⁵

Though this statement about 'wrestling with the snake' was made by Gandhi in 1920 to explain and justify his intense involvement in the

movement for *Swaraj*, however, even today, we can tangibly sense its forceful message, when the grip of politics is more insidious (snake-like) than ever! But what's so amazing is that Gandhi's antidote to the political serpent's venom and his means to extract himself from being uncoiled by it, was to adamantly practise the religion of 'nonviolence and truth'; to be sure, his was not a religion defined by any single dogma or fundamentalist creed.

Certainly, this exchange between our two indomitable icons of *Swaraj*, Tilak and Gandhi, which highlights their divergences (despite their shared concerns) needs to be elucidated further, as also the revolutionary and intellectual interpretations of Gandhian *Swaraj* propounded by Acharya Javdekar (1894-1955) and Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982), respectively whose contributions to taking it further are well known.

Hence, in conclusion, I restrict myself to (and indeed take the liberty of) positing that all four luminaries – Gandhi, Tilak, Javdekar and Vinoba – each in their own unique way, with differences of degree rather than of kind, traced for us a road map towards *Swaraj* by showing us Indians, how to be modern without denying our traditions, how to be an inclusive and non-hierarchical nation, how to be nonviolently resilient, politically ethical and fully responsible citizens, how to flower as individuals without abandoning our collective way of living, how to be secular and deeply religious at the same time, and last but not least, how to be Indian, underscoring the need for true *swaraj* without opting out of universal world culture.¹⁶

References

1. This is the revised version of a keynote address held at a seminar entitled "Rethinking Swaraj", organised by the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Pune, in January 2020. The talk's subject matter is closely related to the topic of a Major Research Project, directed by me and funded generously by the ICSSR, which focuses on an innovative analysis of Gandhi's Constructive Programme.

2. On a more mundane level: Being so umbilically entwined with Indian culture, *Swaraj* figures as a common name – even among NRIs living in the US where 3,000 census records and 1,000 military files are available for persons bearing the last name *Swaraj*!

3. T.K. Mahadevan, *Divja: A Prophet Unheard*, Import 1977, p. 8.

4. Ibid, p. 143.

5. Citations from *Hind Swaraj* are being taken from a recent edition of the first English translation (undertaken by Gandhi himself in 1910): *Hind Swaraj, Indian Home Rule*, Indus Source Books 2019 (with introductory essays by Usha Thakkar & Gita Dharampal). My introductory essay has served as a reference for this paper.

6. Raziuddin Aquil (Professor of Medieval History, Delhi University), “There is nothing shameful about being a medieval Indian”, *The Wire*, 29.08.2015.

7. Gandhi uses this 19th/ early 20th century term to designate ‘Muslim’ without any pejorative implications.

8. Extract from the Draft Constitution of Congress, New Delhi, 29.01.1948, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [CWMG], vol. XC, p. 526-528.

9. For a detailed discussion, see Gita Dharampal, Das unabhängige Indien. Visionen und Realitäten. In: Reinhard, W. (ed.), *Verstaatlichung der Welt? Europäische Staatsmodelle und außereuropäische Machtprozesse (Schriften der Historischen Kollegskolloquien, 47)*. München: Oldenbourg, pp. 91–155; & Sudhir Chandra, “The Language of Modern Ideas”: Reflections on an Ethnological Parable, in *Thesis Eleven* 39 (1994) 39-51.

10. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, *Bal Gangadhar Tilak: His Writings and His Speeches*. Madras 1919, p. 77.

11. Christopher Pinney, “The Tiger’s Nature, but not the Tiger: Bal Gangadhar Tilak as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s Counter-Guru”, *Public Culture* 23:2 (2011), pp. 395-416, in particular, p. 395.

12. Cf. also Pinney, *ibid*, p. 402.

13. Cited by Dhananjay Keer, *Lokmanya Tilak: Father of Our Freedom Struggle*, Bombay 1959, p. 413.

14. *Ibid*, p.414. Cited also by Dipesh Chakrabarty and Rochana Majumdar, “Gandhi’s Gita and Politics as Such”, in Shruti Kapila & Faisal Devji, *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India*, Cambridge University Press 2019, p. 67.

15. “Neither a saint nor a politician”, *Young India*, 12.05.1920.

16. This is a short paraphrase of the concluding lines in Makarand Paranjape, *The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi*, Routledge 2014, p. 202.

About the Author

Gita Dharampal was appointed Dean of Research at the Gandhi Research Foundation (GRF), Jalgaon, in November 2018. As a retired Professor and Head, Department of History, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, she acquired an interdisciplinary academic training in literature, philosophy (Manchester, England and Leipzig, East Germany, 1970-74), social anthropology (Cambridge, England, 1975-76) and Indian cultural history (1976- 1980, SOAS, London and Sorbonne, Paris, Doctorate), with a dissertation on early modern French proto-ethnography of South India, and completed her Habilitation (German professorial dissertation) in early modern history (Freiburg, Germany, 1992).