



Indian Nationalism through the Gandhian Prism

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ABSTRACT:

Writer-philosopher Akeel Bilgrami once said, "It is generally foolhardy to write about Gandhi...not only because you are never certain you've got him right, but because you are almost sure to have him wrong." [1] It is a sheer foolish enterprise to venture into a journey to study and understand a man who said and did things in a single lifetime with no parallels that are still open to endless interpretations. 75 years ago Mahatma Gandhi fell to the bullets of an assassin on 30 January 1948. The 20th century's most famous apostle of non-violence himself met a violent end. We still speculate what he might have made of key events since, and what he would have thought of today's India, had he been alive. Gandhiji's dream was to make India not only politically independent but also economically and socially independent, and spiritually liberated. But the colonial legacy of administrative machinery has continued. The style and structure of the government and polity has remained the same. Ministers and administrators have increasingly distanced themselves from the common man. [2]

GyanPrakash of Princeton University says that if Gandhi were alive today, he would be working towards healing the divisions, as well as eliminating inequality and the caste system, both of which still hamper India. And, Gandhi would be doing it the same way he always pursued justice: through dialogue and love, rather than us-versus-them-struggle." [3] If Gandhi were alive today, he might have a difficult time recognizing the country he helped win freedom for, 75 years ago. For not only have his ideals been forgotten, India has chosen to go in quite the opposite direction, especially in this millennium. Gandhi's nationalism was both broad and catholic. He didn't consider India as a nation in the narrow sense of the term. Nor did he condemn Europe in any blanket fashion. This was in contrast to many demagogic nationalists who whipped up support by playing on ethnic and racial antagonisms. Gandhi's nationalism was simple and straightforward: he wanted an independent Indian

nation-state and freedom from British colonial rule. But in reality his nationalism rested on complex and sophisticated moral philosophy. This paper attempts to understand the concept of Indian nationalism through Gandhi's lens.

KEY WORDS: Territorial Nationalism, Nation-state, Swaraj, Satyagraha, Lathi-charge, PoornaSwaraj, Tapas, Internationalism, Moral depth.

Full Paper:

Indian nationalism developed as a concept during the Indian independence movement fought against the colonial British Raj. It is an instance of territorial nationalism, inclusive of all Indians, despite their diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Gandhi's nationalism was simple and straightforward: he wanted an independent Indian nation-state and freedom from British colonial rule. But in reality his nationalism rested on complex and sophisticated moral philosophy. His Indian state and nation were not based on shallow ethnic or religious communalism, despite his claim to be Hindu to his very core, but were grounded on his concept of *swaraj* - enlightened self-control and self-development leading to harmony and tolerance among all communities in the new India. Gandhi's nationalism thus went much beyond the struggle for independence. He sought a tolerant and unified state that included all communities within a 'Mother India'.

Gandhi's personal experiences of the underside of the colonial rule forged his ideas about nationalism. As told and re-told in the popular narratives about his life experiences, his series of humiliating episodes began with the indignity of being ejected from the office of the political agent in Rajkot when he had gone there to put in a word for his brother. [4] His epic journey from Durban to Pretoria which transformed his views about the colonial administration only strengthened his resolve to confront racial abuse head on. [5] As a coolie barrister he continued to fight for equal



citizenship, at times forcing the colonial administration to stage a strategic withdrawal providing him an uneasy equality with the Englishman. His experiences, in a way, cleared his mind of the delusions he had about British Imperialism. The circumstances also taught him to become an out-and-out opponent of British Rule, in India and in the Empire at large.^[6]

Before one starts discussing Gandhi's views on nation, nationhood, or nationalism it is absolutely necessary to have a brief overview of the Gandhian era when Gandhi remained (virtually) the undisputed leader of the Indian freedom movement.^[7] It goes without saying that it is because of his programme of struggle that Indian national movement became a multi-class nationalist movement and that masses willingly came out in large numbers to brave *lathi*-charge, court arrest, suffer various terms of imprisonment and face police excesses.

More than anything else, Gandhi emphatically rejected the brand of nationalism that sought freedom through violence and forged a type of nationalism of a very different sort to the violent and aggressive form found in the west. He believed that violence not only had a tendency to escalate, but also precluded dialogue. He argued that terrorist methods were of foreign import and alien to the nature of Indian religion, which was suffused with the principle of *ahimsa*.^[8] He said, "The force of arms is powerless against the force of love or the soul."^[9] The aim was to persuade the British of their wrongness of ways and bring a change of heart through *satyagraha*. Gandhi's nationalism was thus broad and catholic. He didn't regard India as a nation in the narrow sense of the term. Nor did he condemn Europe in any blanket fashion. This was in contrast to many demagogic nationalists who whipped up support by playing on ethnic and racial antagonisms.

However, his support for violence was also qualified. In 1920 young India he wrote, "Non-violence is the law of our species, as violence is the law of the brute," but that "where there is a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence....I would rather have India resort to arms to defend her honour than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour"^[10]

Commenting on Gandhi's ideas about the harmful impact of the British imperialism, Bhikhu Parekh has written that 'For Gandhi British imperialism dominated India at three related but different levels. At the political level the arrogant colonial government oppressed the Indian people

and denied their right to run their affairs themselves. At the economic level it exploited and impoverished them, destroyed their indigenous industries and subordinated their interests to those of the British economy. In Gandhi's view this was far more disturbing than political oppression and could continue even if India became independent. At the most disturbing moral and cultural level, British imperialism destroyed the identity and integrity of Indian civilisation and turned the Indians into brown Englishmen."^[11]

Gandhi was convinced that the rule of British civilisation could continue even if the British government were to stop ruling over India and British capital to cease exploiting it. British imperialism was unacceptable not only because of its political and even economic but moral and cultural consequences. The struggle against it had therefore to be mounted and independence obtained at all three levels, especially the last. At the cultural level the anti-imperialist struggle had to be fought on two fronts simultaneously. First, British civilisation, which so infatuated and blinded the Indians to the moral enormity of foreign rule and legitimised their economic and political domination must be subjected to a thorough-going critique. Second, the basic structure of Indian civilisation, which they largely saw through the biased British perspective, must be sensitively teased out and defended.^[12]

In interpreting British imperialism in this way, Gandhi integrated and went beyond the three different types of critique advanced by his predecessors. Broadly speaking Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Gokhale and the so-called liberals had welcomed the political and cultural advantages of British rule but attacked it on the grounds that it had drained India's wealth, ruined its industries, imposed unfair trading arrangements and subordinated its economic development to British colonial interests. Although mindful of its economic and cultural consequences, the leaders of the terrorist movements in Bengal and Maharashtra attacked it on political grounds and were the first to develop a distinctive theory of political as distinct from cultural nationalism. They argued that the Indians have as much right to run their affairs as the British had to run theirs, that colonialism was a form of slavery and outrage to Indian dignity and self-respect, and that the 'honour' of 'mother India' demanded that she should be freed of the 'foreign yoke'.

In a culture which conceptualises energy in feminine terms and associates activity and restlessness with woman and passivity and



detachment with *ma*, it was not at all surprising that the votaries of violence should have idealised 'mother' India and drawn inspiration from the Goddess Kali. Finally Vivekananda, B.C. Pal, Tilak and the so-called conservative leaders concentrated on the need to preserve the integrity of traditional ways of life and thought. They introduced the concept of Indian civilisation to match the one championed by the British, sharply distinguished the two and attacked foreign rule not so much because it involved economic exploitation and violated Indian pride as because it imposed an alien materialist civilisation on India's essentially spiritual one.

Gandhi's critique of British rule encompassed all three. He was even more sensitive to the integrity of Indian civilisation than were the conservative leaders. Indeed he argued that most of them were even more interested in the 'synthesis' of the two civilisations than in the integrity of their own, had unwittingly reinterpreted and anglicised it far more than they realised or cared to admit, and that their critique of British imperialism was half-hearted and lacked moral depth. Gandhi's critique not only included but also related and integrated the three earlier critiques into a comprehensive theoretical framework. He argued that political independence was important not only as an expression of India's pride and a necessary means to stop its economic exploitation but also to preserve its civilisation, without which political independence remained fragile. The economic exploitation had to be ended not only to sustain Indian independence and improve the living conditions of its people but also to preserve the social and economic basis of its civilisation.' [13]

He opposed the 'nationalists' who propagated hatred of the coloniser and who advocated more 'masculine' individual acts of terror and assassinations. In responding to Rabindranath Tagore's worry that non-co-operation movement could foster unreasoning hostility against foreigners and foreign culture, Gandhi wrote, "The nation's non-co-operation is an invitation to the government to co-operate with it on its own terms as is every nation's right and every good government's duty. Non-co-operation is the nation's notice that it is no longer satisfied to be in tutelage.....An India prostrate at the feet of Europe can give no hope to humanity. An India awakened and free has a message of peace and good will to a groaning world. Non-co-operation is designed to supply her with a platform from which she will preach the message." [14]

On the other hand, he endorsed seemingly harmless and feminine principles of non-violence

and civility. While he adopted a method of resistance which could build bridges with the opponents, he refused to accept injustice. Whether it was the practice of untouchability by the higher castes, exploitation of the tribals or the marginalized he was extremely critical of conflicts based on the hatred of 'one' group by the 'other'. In resisting such divisions, Gandhi put his life at stake and eventually he lost his life to one who did not believe in the process of debate and dialogue. However, in the process, he forged a method which some describe as 'moral activism' and which would remain a guiding light for many men and women in later years. [15]

To Gandhi, co-operation and harmony rather than conflict and struggle constituted the fundamental law of the universe. Conflicts occurred more as temporary irregularities in the even and ordered flow of life, rather than as universal and ceaseless phenomena. Gandhian dialectic considers man as the centre of reason and provides for a technique of conflict resolution whereby one or both sides of a conflict can resolve the antimony into a re-interpretation. This is what is known as 'creative resolution of conflict'. [16] Gandhi believed that a conflict could be creatively resolved only when peace was taken to be a positive concept rather than a negative one.

However, Gandhi went beyond the standard western interpretation of the concept of conflict resolution by taking it a notch higher. Gandhi did not regard conflict as an antagonism between two individuals or groups, but takes it as a product of a faulty system. The means therefore, had to be developed to change the system itself thereby eliminating any possibility of conflict in future. When violent relationship was transformed into non-violent one and the energies of the adversaries were harnessed to achieve a higher goal then a creative resolution of conflict was reached. [17]

Some Indian nationalists were not happy with Gandhi's emphasis on winning over one's enemies. It was objected to more so because some thought it appeared to be like collaborating with the colonial masters. But for Gandhi conscience of the individual came before the will of the majority. Thoreau believed that principled resistance of even one person could make a great difference. His Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-violence which were keenly read by Gandhi laid emphasis on the imperative for the individual to act according to conscience, regardless of the consequences. [18] Even in matters of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi emphasized on individual choice.



In defence of patriotism, Gandhi said, “For me patriotism is same as humanity. I am patriotic because I am human and humane. It is not exclusive. I will not hurt England or Germany to serve India. Imperialism has no place in my scheme of things. The law of a patriot is not different from that of a patriarch. And the patriot is so much less the patriot if he is a lukewarm humanitarian. There is no conflict between private and public law.”^[19]

For Gandhi *swaraj* entailed above all what he called a ‘disciplined rule from within’.^[20] Discipline, in fact, had a dual character-it was both empowering and repressive. Non-violence could only be achieved through strong self-discipline. His *swaraj* allowed no such irresponsible freedom, but demanded rather a rigorous moulding of the self and a heavy sense of responsibility. Above all, it required *tap* or *tapas*-Hindi terms meaning an ascetic and rigorous self-discipline.^[21] Talking about *Tapas*, Gandhi talked about self-imposed restraint but as events unfolded later, he resorted to unqualified language of coercive discipline at certain historical junctures.^[22]

Gandhi did not find any contradiction between nationalism and internationalism. He wrote, “It is impossible for one to be inter-nationalist without being a nationalist. Internationalism is possible only when nationalism becomes a fact, i.e., when people belonging to different countries have organised themselves and are able to act as one man. It is not nationalism that is evil; it is the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil. Each wants to profit at the expense of, and rise on the ruin of, the other. Indian nationalism has struck a different path. It wants to organise itself or to find full self-expression for the benefit and the service of humanity at large.”^[23] That is why he said, “I want India’s rise so that the whole world may benefit. I do not want India to rise on the ruin of other nations.”^[24]

For Gandhi, Patriotism was not an exclusive thing. It was all-embracing. He vehemently rejected any kind of patriotism which sought to mount upon the distress and exploitation of other nations. “The conception of my patriotism is nothing if it is not always, in every case, without exception, consistent with the broadest good of humanity at large.”^[25] While talking about his respect for all living creatures, he said, “...my religion, and my patriotism derived from religion embrace all life. I want to realize brotherhood or identity not merely with the beings called human, but I want to realize identity with all life, even with such things as crawl upon earth...because we claim

descent from the same God, and that being so, all life in whatever form it appears must be essentially one.”^[26]

His emphasis on *swaraj* and *Poornaswaraj* had a strong tinge of morality. Gandhi wrote, “The *swaraj* of my dream is the poor man’s *swaraj*.” By this he stressed that ordinary amenities of life should be made available to everyone and not only the rich and powerful. About *Poornaswaraj* he said, “My notion of *poornaswaraj* is not isolated independence but healthy and dignified independence. My nationalism, fierce though it is, is not exclusive, is not devised to harm any individual. Legal maxims are not so legal as they are moral. I believe in the eternal truth of ‘*sic uteretur alienum non laedas*’ (‘Use thy property so as not to injure thy neighbour’s’).^[27] In a well-organised state, usurpation should be impossibility and it should be unnecessary to resort to force for dispossessing an usurper.

An element of Gandhi’s cultural pride and some of his profound disdain for modernism should be seen in historical context as an effective tactical riposte to the insults that were often hurled at ‘benighted India’ by the colonialists, and as a way of raising the self-esteem of the masses. Thus, Gandhi’s ideas about nationalism were not merely a tactic to bolster the freedom struggle. It was also a philosophy of how society should be organised and how people should live. It continues to influence the conscious and unconscious thoughts of much of India’s intelligentsia today.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- [21]. In a letter to Maganlal Gandhi in 1915, he translated *tapas* as discipline. **CWMG**, Vol. 14, p.385.
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