

A Study of Mahatma Gandhi's Vision for the Future of India

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ABSTRACT

Few would dispute the notion that Mahatma K. Gandhi was one of the twentieth century's transformative political and spiritual leaders. Among his many notable contributions, Gandhi is rightly credited with pioneering Satyagraha, resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience and vocalizing a transcendent message that helped the Indian National Congress acquire independence from the British in August 1947. Often forgotten or omitted by standard histories, however, are Gandhi's idealistic leanings that in fact compromised the universality of his appeal and confounded the ideological underpinnings of the Indian nation. His vision for India's future was highly unorthodox. In Gandhi's idealized state, there would be no representative government, no constitution, no army or police force; there would be no industrialization, no machines and certainly no modern cities. There would be no capitalism, no communism, no exploitation and no religious violence. Instead, a future Indian nation would be modeled off the India of the past. It would feature an agrarian economy, self-sustaining villages, an absence of civil law and a moral framework that would express the collective will of the people. In many ways, Gandhi's writings reflect anarchic principles in that they call for a pre-modern, morally-enlightened and apolitical Indian state.

Keywords : Civil Disobedience, Unorthodox, Capitalism, Anarchic Principles

I. INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's specific ideas on the subject changed slightly over time, as some of his writings on the eve of the Transfer of Power suggest, but still contain ample continuity to warrant this depiction. Some scholars have been reluctant to agree with this characterization of Gandhi because his musings about the future were ambiguous at times. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister and celebrated leader, remembered that Gandhi was "delightfully vague" about the actual form of government to be aimed for. Nonetheless, I argue in this essay that sufficient evidence exists to synthesize Gandhi's views about the future. The fullest expression of his ideas can be found

in the *Hind Swaraj*, published in 1909, which has been called "the nearest he came to producing a sustained work of political theory." While sometimes self-contradictory, *Hind Swaraj* nevertheless shows a systematic exposition of Gandhi's ideas on state, society, and nation. This seminal work, along with his autobiography, speeches, interviews, pamphlets and articles, offers a panoramic view of Gandhi's political desires. Together, these materials form a large corpus of thought known as the *Collected Works*, which runs into nearly 90 thick volumes. Considering this mass of knowledge, it is possible to cogently summarize Gandhi's plans for the future. This essay comprehensively examines the *Hind Swaraj*, and the *Collected Works* to a lesser extent, for articulation of

Gandhi's economic conceptions, political notions and social ideas, in order to substantiate the claim that Gandhi yearned for individualist anarchy – a social system opposed to state control and dismissive of private ownership. Gandhi did not advocate anarchy as an end to itself, but rather as one of a number of essential conditions for genuine self-rule or swaraj. India's most immediate task – before pursuing socio-economic or political change – was the attainment of swaraj. This required both self-rule over government and self-rule over one's mind and passions. By reducing greed, violence and communal strife, swaraj would promote increased prosperity, compassion and individual happiness. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi writes that India will have nominal "self-rule" when the British disengage, but will not have actual self-rule until India undergoes a spiritual regeneration. Reform of the soul was the precondition of any future Indian state, and this transformation could most effectively occur and persist within an anarchic environment. Spiritual renewal would make governance unnecessary: according to Gandhi, the trappings of civil government were superfluous because a life of bliss was possible in its absence. With the help of satyagraha (non-violent spiritual resistance), Indians could more promptly live the spiritually enlightened lives of their forefathers. Government was an impediment to a moral existence rather than a conduit to its attainment. Due to its links to modern civilization, government ipso facto ensured a future unfit for Gandhi's enlightened India of the past. Western government was both culturally chauvinistic and morally offensive. "It is not the British who are responsible for the misfortunes of India," Gandhi writes in *Hind Swaraj*, "but we who have succumbed to modern civilization."⁶ It was thus modern civilization with its prescription for a strongarmed national government that prevented Indians from limiting their wants and desires, attaining dignity in labor, and establishing a trusteeship of wealth. In 1929, Gandhi emphasized this point: "The Western civilization Joseph S.

Friedman 57 which passes for civilization is disgusting to me." Modern civilization fostered materialism, indoctrinated false ideals of merit and wealth, and led to violence and competition. In contrast, Gandhi said, satyagraha would bring about a life of simplicity in which people worked not for conspicuous consumption but satisfaction of their essential needs. Only through the moral resources available in her own traditions could India begin a new life as an independent nation. 'Real' civilization would be found in enlightened villages unfettered by modernity.

II. THE ECONOMIC OUTLINES OF GANDHI'S IDEALIZED STATE

One of the ways in which Gandhi envisaged a new India involved a fresh outlook on economics – a view that dismissed capitalism for its exploitative excesses and socialism for its connection to industrialization. In fact, Gandhi shunned the idea of capitalist society fraught with opportunities for exploitation and ceaseless competition, eschewing laissez-faire and Keynesian economics. No longer should India rely on a global market based on the freedom of exchange of goods and capital, argued Gandhi. Nor was socialism any more tolerable. In a 1940 interview, Gandhi explicitly stated his objection to socialism: "Pandit Nehru wants industrialization because he thinks that, if it is socialized, it would be free from the evils of capitalism. My own view is that evils are inherent in industrialism, and no amount of socialization can eradicate them. Capitalism and socialism—quintessential hallmarks of modern civilization—made man a prisoner of his craving for luxury and self-indulgence. Gandhi's postulations on the matter left I.N.C. colleagues, particularly Nehru, mystified. In his autobiography, Nehru wrote off Gandhi's economic ideas as "utterly wrong... and impossible of achievement." Despite this less than positive reinforcement, Gandhi continued to extensively publicize his unorthodox social, economic and political views. Having rejected capitalism and

socialism, Gandhi's speeches and writings suggest that he envisaged an Indian state grounded in unconventional economics advocating self-reliance. It seems that Gandhi desired a self-sustaining nation that embraced communal cooperation and manual labor. This is implied in the Collected Works, wherein Gandhi argues that society should be organized around the maximization of khadi (handspun cotton) production: "Khadi is the only true economic proposition in terms of the millions of villagers until such time, if ever, when a better system of supplying work and adequate wages for every able-bodied person above the age of sixteen, Mahatma Gandhi's Vision for the Future of India male or female, is found for his field, cottage or even factory in every one of the villages of India." Gandhi advocated the rejection of private property in favor of public ownership; owners would be trustees of public property managed in the common interest. Accordingly, each person within this khadi economic arrangement would be "paid" in kind. For instance, a blacksmith would be paid with food for fashioning tools, while farmers would be paid in equipment for laying seed, and so on. This type of pre-modern exchange would have far-reaching benefits. "I have no partiality for returning to the primitive methods of grinding and husking," Gandhi wrote. In fact, he suggested the return, "because there is no other way of giving employment to the millions of villagers who are living in idleness." With an emphasis on tradition, Gandhi promoted the spinning of khadi and manual labor as the ideal method to achieve genuine self-rule. Embracing an organic khadi-based economy would end exploitation, industrialization and modernization. It would overcome the moral hurdles preventing spiritual renewal, and hence create true swaraj. Machinery was a case in point and represented a departure from Gandhi's ideals. Through its allure of ever-increasing productivity and efficiency, machinery had serious ramifications that spoiled man's natural development. Gandhi believed machinery whetted consumers' appetite to the extent that it inevitably produced

exploitation, unemployment and ultimately, starvation. His solution was not to perfect industrialization but to eliminate the process all together. Gandhi writes: Instead of welcoming machinery as a boon, we should look upon it as an evil... It is not that we did not know how to invent machinery, but our forefathers knew that if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibers. They, therefore, after due deliberation decided that we should only do what we could with our hands and feet. ¹⁵ As this reference from Hind Swaraj indicates, Gandhi hoped that his homeland would follow a pre-modern trajectory notable for its emphasis on tradition. Indians should return to the virtuous, hard labor of their forefathers—who shrewdly rejected modernizing for a different type of progress. Joseph S. Friedman

III. THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF GANDHI'S INDIAN STATE

Gandhi's condemnation of modern economy – capitalism, socialism and industrialization – reflected his critical view of modern political affairs. Gandhi was particularly vocal about his criticism for contemporary political systems. He especially targeted Western democracy and the corrosive manifestations the system wrought. In Hind Swaraj, for instance, Gandhi calls the British parliament a "sterile woman" for not having "done a single good thing" and a "prostitute" because "it is under the control of a minister who changes from time to time."¹⁶ Gandhi felt passionately about the shortcomings of Westminster: "If India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined. Their condition is worse than that of beasts."¹⁷ Gandhi disparaged communism in a similar way. Certain aspects of Marxism were agreeable in theory, but he detested the fashion by which it was imposed and its propagation of atheism. In his words, "... in so far as it is based on violence and the denial of God, it repels me."

In practice, it was also tainted for its propensity to concentrate power in the hands of the few (i.e. the U.S.S.R.). Such a hierarchical power structure was anathema to Gandhi's conception of the state. This concentration of power was so harmful, according to Gandhi, because it destroyed man's individuality—the root of moral progress. 19 Gandhi therefore sought to distance India from both democracy and communism. He seems to have favored a political alternative that encouraged an absence of political institutions and political leadership altogether. Constitutionalism, he suggested, would be rendered unnecessary as the country moved towards enlightened anarchy. With hope, he said, "there will be a state of enlightened anarchy in which each person will become his own ruler. He will conduct himself in such a way that his behavior will not hamper the wellbeing of his neighbors." This theory of enlightened anarchy paralleled Gandhi's humble worldview in important ways. Gandhi did not believe that even he had the moral attributes worthy to lead the people in politics. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes that he unhesitatingly disliked career politicians; he also dispelled rumors that he had political ambitions. Praise "stings me", he wrote, and the title Mahatma (Great Soul) has "deeply pained me."

Because he dreamed of transforming society and eradicating modern institutions of the state – such as replacing currency and absolving national armies – Gandhi can legitimately be called an anarchist. Although Gandhi strove for an Indian state with as little government as possible, the Hindu leader did not specify how these changes would be implemented, or to what extent they would create society *de novo*.

In fact, modern scholars are unsure how Gandhi would have proceeded to reify his ideas had he gotten the chance (he did not, on account of being assassinated in January 1948). Historians agree that Gandhi wanted a moral framework to express the collective will, but they argue over what exactly that paradigm would look like in practice. Judith Brown

asserts that Gandhi desired Joseph S. Friedman 61 a state completely void of positive law: "truthful individuals leading a simple, cooperative life," she explains, "would need little outside regulation and would be able to manage their own affairs harmoniously." Rudrangshu Mukherjee, meanwhile, states that Gandhi wanted a state "where there was no gulf between ruler and ruled, where the former always expressed the collective will." Partha Chatterjee, for his part, believes that Gandhi would have enshrined the state with a titular head. "By his moral qualities and habitual adherence to the truth", writes Chatterjee, a symbolic ruler would "always express the collective will." It is unknown how ambitiously Gandhi would have pursued his idealistic propositions if the opportunity arose. Ambiguity exists, in part, because Gandhi subtly modified his views on the subject over time. For most of his life, he was averse to parliamentary politics. As late as the winter of 1945, only two years before his death, Gandhi pleaded with colleagues to desist from their service as I.N.C. ministers because of the inadequacies of democratic political activity. As the Transfer of Power became more of a reality, however, Gandhi was caught in a quagmire. For decades, he wrote about the future Indian state. Now that independence was imminent, it seemed unlikely that his ideas would come to fruition. How was he to respond? This was a painful dilemma for Gandhi since it represented a fundamental incompatibility between his political vision and the realities of running a state. 30 One way in which Gandhi tried to resolve this discrepancy was by conceding a very limited oversight role for government agencies. In the middle of 1946, Gandhi suggested a narrow scheme by which the government could play a role in society. It could help in three areas and three areas only: the production of cotton, preservation of cattle wealth, and the organization of hand-spinning. At a maximum, a government minister could go so far as to help invigorate new khadi schemes. When pressed to articulate a specific blueprint, Gandhi answered evasively. "The only

question for me as a minister [would be] whether the A.I.S.A. has the conviction...for guiding a khadi scheme to success” he responded. Any future Indian state, one would imagine, would be supported by these bedrock principles. One way of reinvigorating India religiously required wiping out Untouchability. In traditional Hindu belief, an Untouchable was a person who did not belong to any Varna, or one of the four classes of society in Hindu Scripture. Over the centuries, the concept became rigidly routinized in daily life. Both Hindu and Muslim Untouchables were excluded from normal intercourse and social interaction with Brahmins, Kshatryias, Vaishyas and Shudras (the scholarly community, the high and lower nobility, the mercantile and artisan community and the service-providing community, respectively). Gandhi believed that Untouchability represented a pernicious obstacle preventing millions of peasants from realizing their dreams and aspirations. It interfered with swaraj and the morally enlightened state which he so avidly sought. In this vein, in the 1920 session of the Congress at Nagpur, a resolution was passed which condemned Untouchability – a resolution inspired by Gandhi. The resolution called the tradition a ‘sin’ and urged religious leaders to reform Hinduism appropriately.

In an article from 1920, for instance, Gandhi explained why varna should be retained in a future society: “I consider the four varnas alone to be fundamental, natural and essential. The innumerable sub-castes are sometimes a convenience, often a hindrance. The sooner there is fusion, the better. But I am completely against any attempt at destroying the fundamental divisions.” The laws of the caste were eternal, providing social harmony. “I see very great use in considering a Brahmin to be always a Brahmin.”³⁵ In Gandhi’s future India, each village would be organized around these four-fold divisions. Joseph S. Friedman⁶³ Every member of society would perform his or her own duty in a cooperative framework. A complete system of reciprocity, Gandhi believed, would ensure no one actually felt status

differences existed. ³⁶ Perhaps the most important component of enlightened anarchy involved greater observance and tolerance. Gandhi made it clear that he wanted Indians to see themselves primarily as Indian citizens, but also as Indian Hindus or Indian Muslims. To borrow his phrase, India ought to be sunk in a “religious soil”. He believed that Indians had the potential to “unlearn what they learned in the past fifty years” and return to a pre-modern state where all sects lived in peace. Gandhi founded several communities in an attempt to work out these principles. In ashrams in Ahmedabad and Warda, he trained followers to adhere to a highly-disciplined life of labor and prayer within an inter-religious environment. They refrained from sexual intercourse even when married—following Gandhi’s example of modesty. By fostering unity among Indians of all faiths, and engraining simplicity through manual labor and self-limitations, Gandhi hoped to plant the seeds for a new society.

In this future Indian state, Gandhi envisioned religious observance in the foreground. “My first complaint is that India is becoming irreligious,” he wrote. We must stop “turning away from God.”

IV. CONCLUSION

Gandhi yearned for a future grounded in a rapid return to the past. Although the standard literature sometimes overlooks Gandhi’s more unorthodox notions, the evidence exists to substantiate the argument that he had firm ideas about the future of his homeland. At the crux of this ideology was the condemnation of modern civilization, including capitalism, socialism, democracy and communism. He detested the self-indulgent aspects of capitalism, as well as the industrializing tendencies of socialism. Similarly, Gandhi belittled the virtues of democracy, mocking the British parliament and minimizing its supposed representative effectiveness. As an alternative, communism was likened to a mere palliative, doomed for failure: it was violent in its connotations and atheistic in tone. What India needed,

suggested Gandhi, was to return to a path of purity, morality, and self-discipline. In the fall of 1945, Gandhi wrote a letter to Nehru explaining his dreams for the subcontinent. "I believe," began Gandhi, "that sooner or later we shall have to go and live in villages – in huts... Nobody will be allowed to be idle or wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to do body labor."⁴¹ By dis-

64 Mahatma Gandhi's Vision for the Future of India patching of modernity, Gandhi hoped, India would succeed in inaugurating a new era unhinged by the trappings of civil law. Today, six decades after his death, India stands proudly as the largest democracy in the world with a potent globalized economy. Independence, it would seem, has not paralleled Gandhi's vision, but has followed a "Western" model which Gandhi all his life opposed. True "self-rule" – as defined by Gandhi – remains confined to the pages of the *Hind Swaraj* and the *Collected Works*.

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