

# Gandhi – The ‘Angel of History’: Reading *Hind Swaraj* Today

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Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* is more than a political text. It is an ontological drama staged by Gandhi, reflected in his treatises against “modern civilisation”, and his critique of “modernity”.

“The key to understand that incredibly simple (so simple as to be regarded foolish) booklet [*Hind Swaraj*] is to realise that *it is not an attempt to go back to the so-called ignorant, dark ages. But it is an attempt to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, voluntary poverty and slowness. I have pictured that as my ideal*” (emphasis added) (Gandhi, *CW* 70: 242).

A Klee painting named ‘*Angelus Novus*’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Walter Benjamin 1940).

## Being and Politics

It is easy to read Gandhi in general and *Hind Swaraj* (*HS*), in particular, as a political text. This is, in fact, the way Gandhi has usually been read and it is certainly not incorrect or illegitimate to do so, as Gandhi’s life work is shot through with politics and political concerns. But we might also legitimately ask another, somewhat different question. Was Gandhi really doing politics all his life? Was that all he was doing? True, he was in the thick of politics, of mass mobilisations, of negotiations, dealing with issues of colonialism, nationalism, religion, community, violence and non-violence, and above all *swaraj*. And without doubt, these are entirely political concerns.

But it is also possible to ask another question here: what exactly is Gandhi’s relationship to politics – in *HS* as well as in his other writings and texts or in his practice? Could it be the case that politics, rather than being the content of his life work, was merely the terrain, the stage on which he chose to enact his great existential/ontological drama of life?

At one level, Gandhi himself tells us that politics, indeed, was not his primary preoccupation. On a number of occasions he claimed that his “work of social reform was in no way subordinate to political work” and that when he saw that “to a certain extent my social work would be impossible without the help of political work, I took to the latter *and only to the extent that it helped the former*” (cited in Dalton 1998: 49, emphasis added). He also tells us that the “work of social reform or self-purification of this nature is a hundred times dearer to me than what is called purely political work” (ibid: 49). So, this is one level at which Gandhi himself tells us that politics was for him, a secondary concern. It is important that here and elsewhere, social

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reform itself was for him, a matter of “self-purification”, that is to say that he was careful not to position himself as a reformer who stood outside of the society (or community) that he wanted to reform in the manner of a vanguard. He is not the “enlightened reformer” looking dolefully at his society that is in desperate need of reform. By making social reform virtually synonymous with self-purification and thus implicating himself in the social practices he wanted to reform, he was assuming responsibility for them. This positioning by Gandhi should not be understood in binary terms as a choice between the “disengaged subject” and the “embedded agent”. In the first place, Gandhi was not articulating a philosophical stance but rather, enacting it. He was enacting it in the middle of what has correctly been referred to as his “active world-engagement” (Dallmayr 2002: 109). His interest was therefore in finding, intuitively, a way of dealing with the modern predicament and simultaneously reforming Hinduism and liberating India from colonialism.

This project clearly steers him away from a complete abdication of any leadership or “vanguard” role. In fact he is quite explicit about the significance of such “leadership” – though that is not his chosen word. He therefore claims that “all reforms owe their origin to the initiation of minorities in opposition to majorities” and asserts that majority opinions have often proved to be wrong (*HS*: 92). There is probably a more complicated, if eclectic logic at work here that seeks to combine some notion of an embedded agent with that of an “enlightened minority”, which needs to be made explicit. Further, in this insistence on social reform as self-purification, Gandhi was also claiming, contrary to what the social reformers of the 19th century had believed, that this task could not be accomplished by inviting the colonial state to outlaw these social practices through legislation. It had to be “self-purification”. There is therefore a double sense in which “self-purification” underlines a certain notion of subjectivity and agency: denying to the state (and not merely the colonial state), the role of the activist-moderniser, on the one hand and to a vanguardist enlightened elite on the other. This leaves us with a notion of community/society that is internally striving for change, for coming to grips with the modern world, where “the majority” must be brought to appreciate the need for change. There are important philosophical implications of this position, which we cannot go into here.

### ‘Self-Purification’

For the present, let me underline that this is not the sense in which I am suggesting we see Gandhi’s relationship to politics as secondary. In making the claim that politics was not Gandhi’s primary concern, I am not suggesting that he simply prioritised social reform over politics. After all, he does say that entering politics was indispensable to carrying out his social reform agenda. There is then a sense in which politics is critical to Gandhi’s enterprise. How might we see this indispensability of politics in the light of his denial of any agential role to the state? It seems to me that it is possible to understand this indispensability only when we recognise that “self-purification” of the community itself was contingent, at least in the context of colonialism, to its mobilisation for a larger cause. “Self-purification” at a mass level would be impossible if it were to be based on small, local efforts; the discourse of self-purification and social reform had to become a public, mass debate, which is to say, it had to be articulated

within the political realm. In this sense, then, social reform, self-purification and politics must be seen, in Gandhi’s view, to be inseparable. To that extent, this was possibly just another mode of doing politics, or carrying out politics at the level of everyday practices of the community. Thus it makes little sense to say that politics was secondary to Gandhi because social reform was primary.

Rather, we must understand what Gandhi was playing out on the terrain of politics. By this I mean that we must read the lines in the first epigraph to this paper carefully. Writing in 1939, three decades after *HS*, Gandhi explained in a passage that precedes these lines, that he had been recently asked to write a foreword to a new edition of the work which gave him the occasion to reread the book – and that he could not find a single idea that he wanted to revise. Astonishing for a work on politics – a work that was written three decades ago, in 1909. 1909, when the partition of Bengal was still on and the movement against it was “forging the nation” according to the text, was still six years away from Gandhi’s return to India and his fateful plunge into politics. 1909 was pretty much a period when “Indian nationalism” and the Indian National Congress (INC) were still struggling to find their feet and were confined to certain elites, the INC itself being little more than an annual forum (Sarkar 1983: 135). 1909 was really a long way off from 1939 and the near inevitable collapse of the nation-in-making. 1939, when Gandhi penned these lines, was after all just a few steps away from the famous “Pakistan resolution” of the Muslim League and presaged the failure of the most fundamental aspect of Gandhi’s political project – that of forging Hindu-Muslim unity. The three decades that lie between these two dates are decades of Hindu-Muslim polarisation and violence; they are decades in which Gandhi gradually realises, partly in course of his epic encounter with Ambedkar, the virtual impossibility of caste Hindu society reforming itself through his ways. These decades are also the phase of opportunism, government-making and the collapse of Gandhian principles before the lure of power.

### ‘Nothing to Revise’

If politics is fundamentally about intervening in the conjuncture (and who understood this better than Gandhi – the mass leader?), then it is a bit surprising that three decades later, in a radically different conjuncture, he would find nothing to revise in that text written long before he even began his journey in politics. Surely, three decades of political experience would have brought new insights into play, forcing as they usually do, a constant revision of political positions.<sup>1</sup> We know, for instance, that it was in the hurly-burly of politics in India, the mass mobilisations, the attempts to keep them in check and to find ways of building what might have been one of the biggest mass movements of all times, that Gandhi actually fashioned his political tools and even revised his understanding of social-reform and the caste system. None of that political experience prompted him to revise what he had written in 1909.

The answer to this apparent puzzle is provided by Gandhi himself, in the lines cited above. In these lines, Gandhi makes it abundantly clear that the key to understanding the text does not lie in the political questions that he grappled with all his life. In 1909, aboard the *Kildonan Castle*, what he penned frantically, without break (when the right hand was tired he wrote with the left, he later told us), and almost as if he was possessed, was a drama. He penned

what we might call an “ontological drama”, with all the meanings that one can possibly attach to this expression. It was formally a drama, at least in the form that he gave to it: a dialogue between two fictive characters, namely, “the reader” and “the editor”. But this form is only the least important part. For, the actual dialogues are not between the characters he brings up on stage. They are but the *nimitta*, the sign, the excuse and the modality through which a larger philosophical encounter is staged. And this encounter, let it be underlined, is not between the coloniser and the colonised, the imperialist and the nationalist but between two different ways of “being-in-the-world”, if one were to steal an expression from Heidegger. *HS*, Gandhi tells us, was not a call to return to “the so-called ignorant dark ages” but rather an attempt to “see beauty” in voluntary simplicity, voluntary poverty and slowness. It is the enunciation, in other words of a different aesthetic that rejects the narrative of progress and modernity. We could say, echoing Benjamin, “where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet”. Wreckage, ruin, catastrophe – all the metaphors of Benjamin’s “Angel of History” – become the tropes through which Gandhi describes modernity and its narrative of progress.

Indeed, Gandhi and the *HS* in particular, have often been read as retrograde and backward-looking. “His face is turned towards the past” but the “storm of progress is blowing him irresistibly into the future” – and Gandhi always had his back turned to it. He would like to awaken the dead, make whole what has been smashed but the storm will not allow him. *HS* can actually be read as an attempt to “awaken the dead” and to put together what has been smashed – not merely by British colonialism, as Gandhi repeatedly reminds us, but by modern civilisation. It is therefore dramatic, excessive and often deliberately provocative. *HS*, it seems to me, is a performative text.

Compare this – and Gandhi’s claim that he wanted to “see beauty in slowness and simplicity” with the following paean to the new aesthetic of the modern, taken from the *Futurist Manifesto*, published also in 1909:

- “Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.”
- “We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath – a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.”
- “We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicoloured, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts...”

Reading the *HS*, its savage attack on modern civilisation, speed, railways, one begins to have a strange feeling that Gandhi was not simply responding, in this tract, to prototypes of Savarkar and other political adversaries; he was indeed laying out the basis for a way of looking at the world that rejected modernity’s and

political-aesthetic modernism’s self-image. As against the beauty of speed therefore, he posits the beauty of slowness.

### Reading Gandhi

How do we read Gandhi, then? It should be evident by now that here I wish to steer clear of the standard reading of Gandhi as politician, as a nationalist or even as a political thinker. While the writings that deal with these aspects of Gandhi’s life and writings throw light on very significant dimensions of his life work, most of these writings (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006; Dalton 1998; Chatterjee 2006; Parel 2002; Parekh 1989; Pantham 1986) depend on a very literal reading of Gandhi. At one level, Gandhi instigates this very realist and literal reading with his accent on “satya”/“satyagraha” (truth) and “ahimsa” (non-violence), combined with his strange asceticism and moral piousness. How can such a character be taken as anything but literally? How can we take the saintly “Mahatma” to be anything but the worshipper of truth? And yet, it is Gandhi again who gives us the most vital clues as to his own ways. In a fascinating, though deeply flawed recent study, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have detected a part of this aspect of Gandhi – his “theatre”. They note, correctly, that much of Gandhi’s life is to be read through his enactments of his ideals, his politics and indeed, through the way he explicates his complex concepts. They misconstrue, in my opinion, his project and his style, as “postmodernist” and in some strange way, seek to reduce him and his thought into decipherable, recognisable categories of western social and political thought (as for instance their reading of his ashrams in terms of the Habermasian public sphere, its coffee houses and such like). I cannot go into this aspect of their misreading here but for the present, it is necessary to underline that their attempt comes closest to understanding Gandhi’s dramaturgy.

The Rudolphs’ attempt, however, stops at the point of demonstrating that Gandhi displayed considerable sophistication in interpreting complex ideas and texts, employing in the process, a hermeneutic that displaced the meaning from the written word of the text. Thus, in an important passage, they underline that Gandhi insisted on reading the *Bhagwad Gita* not as a sacred text or revealed immemorial truth but as a poem (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006: 10). Thus Gandhi:

Because a poet puts a particular truth before the world, it does not necessarily follow that he has known or worked out all its great consequences, or that having done so, he is able to express them fully. In this perhaps lies the greatness of the poem and the poet. A poet’s meaning is limitless... He continues: “On examining the history of languages, we notice that the meaning of important words has changed or expanded. This is true of the *Gita*...The author of the *Gita*, by extending the meanings of words, has taught us to imitate him (cited in *ibid*: 10).

It is certainly important, as the Rudolphs point out, that Gandhi is exceptionally sophisticated in his ability to deflect or displace meaning from authorial intention: the poet is neither able to know nor work out all the “great consequences” of his truth, nor even able to express it fully.

In the very same passage, Gandhi in fact, gives an example of the kind of interpretative difficulty one might encounter when reading such a text as the *Gita*. He grants that “according to the letter of the *Gita*, it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation

of fruit” but nevertheless asserts something interesting. He says: “But after forty years’ unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of *Gita* in my own life, I have in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of ahimsa in every shape and form” (Tendulkar 1961: 311-12).

Let us pursue this point a bit further. The limitlessness of the text’s meaning derives from at least two circumstances. First, that the poet has no prior knowledge of the social life of the text she produces. Languages change over time and words acquire new meanings, imparting to the text itself, retrospectively a range of possible new meanings. The time of production of the text and the time of its being read and received are two different times. A text like the *Bhagawad Gita* floats into Gandhi’s – or the nationalists’ – hands as a truly decentred text. Its meanings therefore are not to be found embedded in the text itself. The second reason why meaning is limitless has to do with the radical finitude of humans, so that no human being, even if she has access to some originary truth, is capable of knowing all the possibilities and potentialities contained within it. One way of understanding this would be to assert that truth, though immanent in the poet’s creation, is only something that will reveal itself in time – or when its time comes. It cannot be available all at once. This would be a highly metaphysical rendering of its meaning, of the kind that abounds in Indian tradition. But there is another, more plausible, sense consistent with Gandhi’s other assertions. This has to do with the point made earlier: truth, in this reading, is itself not something that is already there in the text; it is something that attaches to it in each historical context – in the context when it is read afresh and deployed in the social world to perform a particular function. In some sense, however, this access to what we might call its “existential truth” can only become possible if one is prepared to live it. After 40 years of living it, Gandhi can claim access to an existential truth that is not quite bound by the literality of the text. All this is there quite explicitly in Gandhi’s explication. Now, Gandhi does not stop here. He tells us something more. He tells us that “The author of the *Gita* has, by extending the meanings of words, *has taught us to imitate him*” (emphasis added) (ibid: 312) – a clue, right here, to Gandhi’s own relationship to his own text(s). *Hind Swaraj*, he seems to be suggesting, should be read as a poem and Gandhi as a poet, in the great tradition of classical dramas.

### Beyond Literality

We know that Gandhi deploys this mode of reading-beyond-literality to great effect, often completely subverting the manifest meaning of the text. He knew, for instance, that the context of early 20th century India and its resurgent Hindu-tinged nationalism provided an explosive context of the *Bhagwad Gita*’s rebirth. In the hand of nationalists like Tilak and many others, it became a powerful call to action and a veritable justification of war and violence. Gandhi’s poetic reading of the very same text transforms it into something entirely different. Thus he reads the *Gita* as an existential drama that discusses a fundamental predicament of the human condition. Thus he asks:

But whom does Dhritarashtra represent, and likewise Duryodhana, Yudhishthira or Arjuna? Whom does Krishna represent? Were they historical personages?...Is it likely that Arjuna should suddenly, without

warning, ask a question when the battle was about to begin, and that Krishna should recite the whole *Gita* in reply? (Iyer 1986: 82).

He then immediately proceeds to reply:

Personally, I believe Duryodhana and his supporters stand for the Satanic impulses in us and Arjuna and others stand for God-ward impulses. The battle field is our body...Shri Krishna is the Lord dwelling in everyone’s heart who is ever murmuring his promptings in a pure *chitta*... (ibid: 82-83).

May one take this interpretative move as Gandhi’s invitation to read him as well beyond literality, as an existential drama? May one take this as an invitation not just to read the text but the life of Gandhi as well as an epic theatre of existence?

It is worth bearing in mind that when he wrote *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi, far removed from the world of politics in India, had already set the stage for this lifelong drama. Reading John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* on an overnight train journey, his imagination had been so fired that he had decided to “change my life in accordance with the ideals of that book”. The Phoenix Settlement that emerged as a result, in 1904, was an agricultural settlement, which was to be followed in 1910 by the Tolstoy Farm on a much larger area of land. These farms or settlements were meant to instantiate and preserve a way of life that Gandhi, like his soul-mates Ruskin and Tolstoy, saw to be under threat from modern civilisation. To Gandhi, it was not “the West” as such that was his enemy, as we all know only too well today. He was always aware of the “other West” (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006: 17) – the West being destroyed by modern, industrial civilisation – and he was ever willing to establish the closest connection with it. The Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm were acts of the larger drama where Gandhi, determined to refuse modern industrial civilisation the satisfaction of consigning entire ways of life to the domain of “the past”, would ceaselessly struggle to find an aesthetic of slowness and simplicity.

It is as part of this ontological drama that we might also see Gandhi’s semiotic transformation of his own body: his donning the loin cloth and appearing virtually semi-naked in the presence of the mighty colonial powers. This act of his has often been read as a political manoeuvre, designed to establish an authentic connection with the masses. There is certainly no reason to underplay the political significance of this act but it can legitimately be suggested that to Gandhi, the political was the terrain where he chose to enact the drama. Once Gandhi decided to return to India and plunge into the anti-colonial movement, he had probably also decided that his terrain had to be changed. The larger point that his drama was meant to drive home could hardly be done through either the Phoenix Settlement or the Tolstoy Farm. Gandhi realised only too well that the task of transformation of the kind that he visualised was impossible without entering the world of politics. And it was here, in the public realm, that his now-transformed body was displayed as a living challenge to the arrogance of western modernity claiming to be “civilisation”. This may in fact be why Gandhi often referred to modern civilisation simply as “civilisation”, donning in clear opposition to it, the attire of the uncivilised and the unlettered. In *HS*, he actually refers mockingly to “wearing clothes”, as opposed to covering yourself merely with “skin”, as a sign of civilisation (*HS*: 35).

It is important to underline one commonly misunderstood point here. To see beauty in forms of life made illegitimate by modernity

and its discourse of progress, is not to valourise “ignorance” but to challenge the air of superiority that modernity bestows upon itself through its related claims of “scientific rationality.” There is nothing in the text as well as in other pronouncements by Gandhi to suggest that he valourises ignorance and so-called backwardness. In fact, if one goes by his own assertion in the epigraph above, there is every reason to believe that the kind of society he envisages for the future is based, not on the empirically existing villages of India but some notion of ideal villages. If we read Gandhi poetically, we will be able to see him actually attempting to carve out an alternative aesthetic of slowness and simplicity.

### Disenchantment, Alienation and Homelessness

The running theme of *HS*, widely commented upon by scholars, is its sustained attack on “modern civilisation”. “It is my deliberate opinion”, says Gandhi in an oft-quoted line, “that India is being ground down not under the English heel but under that of modern civilisation” (*HS*: 42). However, this must not be understood merely as a criticism of modern technology/machinery and industry; or merely as a critique of civil society. It is all this and much more. For Gandhi does not stop simply at making this statement. His point is the larger one about what Max Weber called the “disenchantment” of modern life: “Religion is dear to me and my first complaint is that India is becoming irreligious”. He immediately clarifies that he is not thinking here “of the Hindu, the Mahomedan or the Zoroastrian religion” but of the religion that “underlies all religions” (*HS*: 42). “We are turning away from god”, he adds. The way this “turning away from god” manifests itself is through the arrogation by “Man” to himself of the role of a new sovereign who is bent upon upturning the order of god. Gandhi’s attack on the railways or on technology and machines is precisely because they symbolise this newly acquired power of man. It has often been claimed that Gandhi is a humanist but if humanism is not simply about the well-being of humans but a way of seeing the world – as something made for human consumption and use – and a specific relationship to non-humans, namely, the spirit of world mastery, then Gandhi announces loudly and clearly that he is not a humanist.

Gandhi’s attack on the railways and technology seem outlandish and excessive on the face of it. It is not simply that the railways have helped the British to establish political control, which is only part of the problem. In a statement of pure excess, he goes on to say, for instance, that the “railways too, have spread bubonic plague” for “without them, the masses could not move from place to place. They are carriers of plague germs” (*HS*: 47). He even argues that they are responsible for famines as they facilitate long-distance movement of people and grains are now sold to far off places with the “dearest markets” (47). Similarly, in relation to machines and technology in general, he makes fun of all that is identified as civilisation and progress – better built concrete houses, tractors instead of ploughs, clothes instead of skins, guns instead of spears and so on (*HS*: 35, 36). It is possible to read all this very literally and assume therefore, as has often been done, that Gandhi was an inveterate enemy of any attempt to improve human lives and wanted human beings to go back to the caves. It seems to me, however, that all these are to be read in the manner of a poet’s attempt to dramatise the modern condition where

humans have “lost touch with being”. That having assumed the spirit of world mastery they have “forgotten” their place in the world, in the natural order or god’s order. Thus he says:

God set a limit to a man’s locomotive ambition in the construction of his body. Man immediately proceeded to discover means of overriding the limit. God gifted man with intellect that he might know his Maker. Man abused it so that he might forget his Maker (51).

Railways are thus responsible for taking man away from his maker, but (and here it gets worse), they take him to far off places where they must mingle with other cultures and religions. This last quote in fact appears in the chapter on Hindu-Muslim relations (chapter x). Here he further says, in a claim that can only appear bizarre, taken literally:

I am so constructed that I can only serve my immediate neighbours, but in my conceit, I pretend to have discovered that I must with my body serve every individual in the Universe. In thus attempting the impossible, man comes in contact with different natures, different religions and is utterly confounded (*HS*: 51).

The Gandhi, we must remember, who tried all his life to build bridges between religions and cultures, is seen advocating here, a kind of isolationism that can only be meant to provoke the readers to think about the far-reaching changes that modernity has brought in its train.

Interestingly, it is also in this chapter that Gandhi contests the understanding that Hindus believe in ahimsa while Muslims do not – that Muslims are therefore given to violence. But he makes such an argument in a novel way. He does this by first suggesting that this is a mere stereotype and that:

Going to the root of the matter, *not one man really practices such a religion, because we [Hindus] do destroy life*. We are said to follow that religion because we want to obtain freedom from liability to kill any kind of life. Generally speaking, we may observe that many Hindus partake of meat and are not, therefore, followers of ahimsa (emphasis added) (*HS*: 55).

He argues that such stereotypes are put into our minds by *shastris* and mullahs. Then comes the novel move where his frequent diatribes against “history” acquire the character of a more general epistemological attack. The finishing touch to this understanding, he says, is put by the English:

*They have a habit of writing history; they pretend to study the manners and customs of all peoples*. God has given us a limited mental capacity, but they usurp the function of the Godhead and indulge in novel experiments. They write about their own researches in most laudatory terms and hypnotise us into believing them (emphasis added) (*HS*: 56).

It is important to register what is going on here, not merely in relation to history but also in relation to modern knowledge in general. At a more specific level, throughout *HS*, we have Gandhi launching into an attack on “history” as a disciplinary body of knowledge. The burden of his argument there is that “history” is not the repository of truth. History merely records “the interruptions in the course of nature”. Hundreds of nations live in peace. Millions of families too. Their little quarrels in daily lives are all resolved through what he calls soul-force (*HS*: 89, 90). History does not and cannot record these facts – as they do not count as events, as something out of the ordinary. Truth therefore lies outside history. In the above passage, however, there is something more that is in question: the great humanist ideal that human knowledge can ultimately

conquer nature's (or god's, if you will) purpose and meaning. As against this, Gandhi asserts the radical finitude of man, while at the same time making a crucial point about representation or knowledge-as-representation. Because this passage is offered as an explanation of the prevalence of stereotypes about Hindus and Muslims, what it seems to be saying is that merely by studying and codifying certain traits and characteristics as peculiar to a community, or by extension, to any way of life, modern knowledge inscribes them as timeless truths about these communities and ways of life. They acquire the status of irrefutable knowledge, whereas they are merely, always, only partial representations of what they purport to study. They are bound to be partial – and this is not a “postmodernist” point that he is making – because god's purpose and meaning is beyond humans to decipher. Shorn of the language of intentionality (expressed in the use of terms like usurp, hypnotise, etc), this passage takes us to a radical and contemporary critique of the claims of modern epistemology, of the kind that we see in the writings of Martin Heidegger for instance (or in more recent times, Michel Foucault). This understanding would hold that knowledge-as-representation is not mere representation of a reality that exists independently of it; it is in fact constitutive of that reality.

It is tempting here to invoke a particular stance once outlined by Heidegger in relation to Marxism. Heidegger, we know, was no follower of Marx's but the philosopher in him (as opposed to the Nazi sympathiser?) could see that there was something truly epochal that was being expressed in Marx's thought. Thus he says:

No matter which of the various positions one chooses to adopt toward the doctrines of communism and to their foundation, *from the point of view of the history of Being it is certain that an elemental experience of what is world-historical speaks out in it.* Whoever takes 'communism' only as a 'party' or a 'Weltanschauung' is thinking too shallowly... (Heidegger 1993: 244) (emphasis added).

### The Gandhian Intervention

Whoever takes Gandhi, one feels like saying, echoing Heidegger, to be merely a political leader, or political thinker, representing a “worldview”, is thinking too shallowly. For it is certain that through the Gandhian intervention, something truly epochal – maybe even “world-historical” – speaks out. The Gandhian intervention was not merely an intervention in the specifics of the Indian political conjuncture at different critical moments; it was an intervention through which a certain “elemental experience” of epic proportions spoke out. It may have found its voices through the persons of a Thoreau, Ruskin or a Tolstoy, but it was the Gandhian intervention that provided them the modality of manifestation and expression.

Let me now turn to the historical consequences of this “disenchantment”, this “forgetfulness of Being”, and how Gandhi responds to them. Gandhi sees the coming of machinery and industry as of a piece and his soul revolts against them. He begins with the impact as it is felt in India. He tells us that he wept when he read Dutt's *Economic History of India*, for it proved to him that it was machinery that had impoverished India. “It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared” (107). In writing this at the time he did, he was so vehemently opposed to the coming of machinery to India that he even proposed that if need be, rather than set up our own mills, we may as well “use flimsy

Manchester cloth” – a position that, according to Anthony Parel, he modified by the time he wrote the preface to the Hindi translation in 1921. In this preface he argued that “in view of the present predicament of India, we should produce in our own country all the cloth that we need, even by supporting, if necessary, mills in India rather than by cloth made in Manchester” (108, note 219).

However, in my view, in spirit, Gandhi's position does not undergo any fundamental change. This new position is rather a somewhat resigned recognition that there is another logic at work which he has no control over and if industry is an imperative, we might as well have it here rather than send out profits to Britain. It seems important to recognise that Gandhi is not making an argument here for Indian, as opposed to British, industry but against industry as such, and against machine-made goods. He does not leave us in any doubt that he had a double critique of what he called “industrial civilisation”: First, it was the destitution and dispossession wrought by industry that destroyed traditional forms of living, especially the artisans. What concerned the later Marx as the process of “primitive accumulation” or the separation of the immediate producer from the means of production, clearly animated Gandhi as well. But where Marx assumed a certain inexorable historical inevitability to this process, Gandhi saw it as the task of the swaraj movement to reverse it. Swaraj or “freedom”/“self-rule” was impossible in this reading, if the destiny of the individual owner-producer was to become a slave in the mill:

The workers in the mills of Bombay have become slaves. The condition of the women working in the mills is shocking. When there were no mills, these women were not starving. If the machinery craze grows in our country, it will become an unhappy land (HS: 108).

The “proletarian” subject-position was to be resisted, not embraced as the outcome of a secular historical movement called progress. Politics and the political movement could be made to initiate a molecular resistance to this process by making the attainment of swaraj coterminous with “individual autonomy”. We must remember, of course, that “individual autonomy” here does not refer to the disengaged rational subject but as Terchek (2002), Dallmayr (2002) and other scholars have argued, a subject deeply aware of her moral obligation and duty. Swaraj, in this understanding, would have to be the freedom or autonomy of this agent embedded in a world of moral commitments. But it is not possible for this agent to act morally, without a certain modicum of freedom. “Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself” he says, but adds “slaves ourselves, it would be a mere pretension to think of freeing others” (HS: 73). In this sense, Gandhi sees the proletarian subject-position as one of slavery, as one not conducive to true autonomy. Thus when he says that workers in the mills have become slaves and women are starving, Gandhi also underlines that the former artisan, who had some control over his life and means of livelihood, was potentially a freer or more autonomous being. This is in fact a restatement in a different way, of his conviction that the destruction of the artisan (symbolised in the charkha) was fundamental to India's poverty.

Second, in making this stark statement about the slavery of the factory worker, Gandhi is also pointing out to what happens inside the factory. What the young Marx would have recognised as alienation or estrangement of the worker is intuitively

registered by Gandhi as well in these lines as the loss of autonomy. However, unlike what Marx thought, he would be inclined to see this as a more general condition of the modern world. Once again, Gandhi's notion seems to resonate with the Heideggerian reading of estrangement. Thus Heidegger observes:

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world. Hence it is necessary to think that destiny in terms of the history of Being. What Marx recognised in an essential and significant sense, though derived from Hegel, as *the estrangement of man has its roots in the homelessness of modern man* (Heidegger 1993: 243).

Estrangement, disenchantment and a certain loss of connection with humanity's fundamental relationship to nature seem to be constant concerns in Gandhi's dramatisation of the modern predicament. Ahimsa or non-violence is therefore often explicated by him, in *HS* as elsewhere, as a way of re-establishing that connection. It is this that speaks out in his sharp attack on modern medicine and medical institutions. "Hospitals are institutions for propagating sin" (*HS*: 63) he says, in a gesture of what might once again appear as a statement of pure excess. But in the sentence that immediately follows, we see where this condemnation is coming from: "For the mistaken care of the human body, they [the European doctors] kill annually thousands of animals. *They practise vivisection*. No religion sanctions this" (*HS*: 64) (emphasis added).

This repeated desire to reconnect with nature – of which human beings are but one part – underlines what is probably the most fundamental part of Gandhi's critique of modernity. Through this he seems to be repeatedly telling us that we have strayed too far from "home".

## In Conclusion

In staging this philosophical encounter between modernity (or "modern" or "industrial civilisation", as he calls it) and its other/s, Gandhi makes it very clear that it is not the colonised who suffers from some "lack" but rather, the colonising and imperialist power that is afflicted with the disease that is modern civilisation. He also makes it clear that this modern civilisation has not merely colonised others outside its domain, it has also destroyed forms of life within its domain. He

therefore has no difficulty in finding kindred intellectual souls in "the West" – in what the Rudolphs call the "other West".

In this ontological drama, empirical details do not really matter, for it was the "existential truth" of the modern condition that he was bringing out. It is not that Gandhi in 1909 had a first hand acquaintance with ordinary life in India. On the contrary, it is interesting that when he first enunciated the idea of the spinning wheel or the charkha as the emblem of "freedom" or swaraj, he had not yet "set his eyes" on it. Neither then nor in 1915, when he returned from South Africa, Gandhi himself tells us, had he actually seen a spinning wheel. He in fact tells us that "it was in London in 1909 that I discovered the wheel". "It was then that I came in touch with many earnest Indians... We had many long conversations about the condition of India and *I saw in a flash that without the spinning-wheel there was no swaraj*" (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> Anthony Parel cites from many different comments made by Gandhi at different points of time which show that Gandhi was in fact, not at all embarrassed by the fact that in *HS* he actually confused the loom with the spinning-wheel. It was the symbolism of the wheel that eventually mattered. The wheel of the artisan, rapidly being destroyed by both the British as well as the Indian textile industry, had to become the insignia of struggle. Politically, it stands to reason, Gandhi the astute politician must have clearly seen that everything he stood for was doomed to failure. Nationalism, a nation-state with a centralised power structure built on modern lines would not have seemed less inevitable to him than it did to anybody else. But this did not matter to him. For the challenge he was posing was hardly on that terrain. His was a refusal to play the role that modernity had assigned to him and other non-modern ways of life – that of disappearing into the dustheap of history. He was insistent that all these ways of life were legitimate and their legitimacy did not depend upon external criteria assigned by the moderns. It seems that his hope was that a big mass "nationalist" movement of peasants and artisans would make it possible to reverse the processes of mechanisation and factory production, as more and more people could be inspired to produce for their own consumption. The insistence that his followers should take to the spinning wheel was meant to do just this.

## NOTES

- 1 At one level, this could also be said of other texts, say, the *Communist Manifesto*, but it can be argued that the *Manifesto* too was much more than a political text – one that enunciated, like *Hind Swaraj*, a philosophy of history and life.
- 2 There are others, especially Marxists, who would criticise him for precisely these reasons. But their criticism would also be predicated upon a literal and straightforward reading of Gandhi.
- 3 See annotations by Anthony Parel in Gandhi (1997: 109). This visionary "flash", the fleeting revelation of an existential truth is once again, reminiscent of Benjamin.

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