

In Search of Self-understanding and Swaraj*

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I began my journey into the philosophical understanding (*anubhava, vicara and acara*) of Gandhi some twenty-five years ago—in Gandhi's centenary year, at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. In the hundred and twenty-fifth year, I think, in a certain sense I have completed the journey.

I am grateful to ever so many colleagues and friends and to God for helping me on the way. I do not claim any profundity, but I do want to claim usefulness for my efforts and I hope that I am right. I said I have, in some sense, completed my journey, but I must ask for forgiveness for the shortcomings of my presentation. However, may I make a virtue of this by saying that these make for the usefulness of the presentation.

I propose to talk about terms of discourse in Gandhi and suggest that these give us the terms of discourse in modern India. I shall discuss the terms of discourse in Gandhi with reference to Bhikhu Parekh's *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*.¹ In a very important respect, I am in agreement with Professor Parekh, namely that in the understanding of Gandhi's life and thought, Hindu thought or the Indian classical thought has a central role. However, I strongly disagree about what Indian thought is and the role it plays in Gandhi's life and thought.

I shall begin with the point of contact between Gandhi and Hindu thought—non-violence and truth, the foundations of Gandhi's thought. These are enshrined in two very widely known aphorisms: *satyameva jayate* and *ahimsa paramo dharma*.

But what is non-violence? Gandhi has considered this question in the context of a number of problems. However, there is no simple answer to this question, because he has accepted violence on several grounds and said that it is non-violence or almost non-violence: (i) unavoidable violence, (ii) violence of the surgeon's knife, (iii) violence of the Congress workers if they had been attacked with night-soil, (iv) violence of the Poles against the invading Germans.

But what are the grounds that make these examples cases of non-violence? Self-respect? Human dignity? Fairness? Justice? All these answers leave us rather vague and uncertain: unless we can relate them together. It is necessary to consider how Gandhi further specifies non-violence. I think that

*This is the draft of the article given by the author. He was soon to finalize it. Unfortunately and to the great sorrow of us all, he died in the meantime. We are publishing it as it was given except for copy editing and taking the notes to the end from the main text.

there is further specification when he considers the nature of non-violence in group relations. Considering the Anglo-Indians he says that nonlegitimate interest of any group should suffer; no group should claim any privilege.

What are the legitimate interests? The material and the moral interests. What is a privilege? Religious interest is substantial, but there should be no intellectual or material pressurization involved in conversion. The interest in prevention of cow slaughter or in opposing playing of music in front of the mosque is not substantial—it is a ritual interest; it cannot be forced. However, through mutual good-will both Hindus and Muslims could realise their interest. To take advantage of the weakness of others is to claim a privilege. (A very important point.) A legitimate interest extended beyond a point can become illegitimate, can become a privilege.

But what are the legitimate material and moral interests? The material interests are *artha* (wealth and power) and *kama* (pleasure). The moral interests—*dharma*; discipline, external and internal; discipline in relation to others and discipline in relation to oneself. Discipline in relation to others should leave space for all to fulfil their material interests—at least at the minimum level. This makes it imperative for one to be disciplined with respect to all creation. (Read Gandhi on vivisection.) Discipline in relation to oneself makes it possible for all legitimate inclinations and desires to have some space. Thus discipline is aimed at achieving harmony of material and moral interests of the individual, and harmony of society.²

The theory of *purusartha* (i) is a Hindu theory, (ii) but it is not a *religious* theory; it is common to all forms of Hinduism (the religion underlying all religions—*sampradayas*. (iii) But is not *moksa* a religious goal? Though different forms of Hinduism talk of *moksa* in different terms, in the context of the theory of *purusarthas* it means discipline, external and internal. (Perhaps the best account of this is the account of the *sthitaprajna* in the *Bhagavadgita*.) Of course, the idea of *moksa* could be referred to a specific form of Hinduism, but that does not alter the theory of *purusartha*. (There is some complication about ritual—ritual is part of *dharma*, but the role of ritual is not substantial and differs with the different *sampradayas*.) It is a commitment to the substantial part of *dharma*. (iv) Though discipline is mentioned in terms of *purusartha* in a number of forms of Hinduism, in other forms the terms used may be different, e.g., the Buddhist account of *dharma* talks of discipline only—it might be external and internal. (v) One might say that the theory of *purusartha* is the principle of unity; unity not only of the individual and the society, not only of the *prasthanatrayi* of understanding (the Upanisads), thought (the Brahmasutras), and action (the *Bhagavadgita*), but of all existence. (vi) The principle of unity is there not only in the forms of Hinduism but also in Christianity and Islam. In these cases, the principle unity is expressed in terms of Brahman, God, Allah. (vi) However, this unity is expressed differently—at least in two important ways. In the case of Hinduism there can be more than one exemplar.

In the case of Christianity and Islam, there is emphasis on one exemplar

and not an easy readiness to accept more than one—though it need not perhaps be ruled out. In fact, in both Christianity and Islam attempts have been made to put forward the possibility of other exemplars—but without success.

In the case of Hinduism, the unity is worked out through the unity of goals, a method which gives greater scope for change and variation with change of circumstance, but within a given framework. In Christianity and Islam, the scope for interpretation is narrower, because there is greater emphasis on imitation (though imitation need not be mechanical but it tends to be), and principles are given in terms of more specific rules, not in terms of goals and their unity.

Though in theory Hindu thought gives scope for wider interpretation, it is possible that in practice it may be narrow, generally or in some respect. However, someone can appeal to the wider scope of the framework more easily. Though Christian or Muslim thought gives restricted scope, in practice it may have wider interpretation in some respect, or in some region, or by some individual. However, a leader can appeal to the narrower framework more easily. (viii) I have gone into this discussion to say that the theory of *purusartha* can be considered a theory independent of religion.

How are we to understand Gandhi in the light of this account? Gandhi does not want to go back to the Vedic times and give up idol worship like Dayanand Saraswati; nor does he want to advocate widow remarriage because the *sastras* advocate it, like Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar. Gandhi does not want untouchability, does not want *varnasrama* as it was being practised, nor cow-protection as it was practised. He himself would not worship idols but he would defend with his life the right of those who worship idols. Thus Gandhi is not for tradition as it was practised, but he is for the basic principles, the theory of *purusartha*, of tradition. In course of time, through degeneration and change in circumstances, the practices no longer embodied the basic principles. However, new practices embodying the basic principles were to be brought up for use.

Gandhi and Religion

(1) It is important to understand Gandhi's approach to religion. According to him, even if there are other practices laid down in the *sastras*, they were to be given up. The *sastras* contain historical matters regarding practice. They cannot be accepted if they are against the fundamental principles of morality, e.g., contrary to truth and non-violence. Nor can they be accepted when the subject is a matter of reason, and the *sastras* are against reason.

Gandhi's response was of a *Sanatani* from the point of view of *dharma*, not from the point of view of *dharma sampradaya*.

(2) The acceptance of the theory of *purusartha* meant that all the four goals were together the goal, and it was not possible to dichotomise the material and the spiritual. It is not right, therefore, to say, as Bhikhu Parekh³

does, that Gandhi's thought displayed a strange ambiguity of spirituality vs. *purusartha*. Nor is it right to say that he equated religion but not *sampradaya* with ethics.

(3) Gandhi's understanding that *dharma* (the *purusartha*) is *dharma-sampradaya nirapeksa* explains Bhikhu Parekh's difficulty in the following statement: Gandhi's nationalism was neither secular like that of the Congress, nor Hindu like that of the Hindu militants, but inter-communal and based on amity between the major religious communities.⁴ It is wrong, therefore, to say: 'Here as elsewhere Gandhi was involved in the paradoxical situation of using the resources of his tradition to achieve objectives disapproved by it.'⁵

Gandhi and Tradition

In the light of our account, how are we to relate Gandhi to tradition? If someone gives up the traditional practice because it no longer embodies the principle of tradition, can one call him a critical traditionalist? Can one call him a traditionalist either? Insofar as tradition is constituted by principles, it is an independent perspective not based on authority. Insofar as *that* is so, one can understand the mode of understanding the *sastras* mentioned above. In the light of this, Gandhi cannot be fitted into any of the groups: traditionalist, critical traditionalist, modernist, critical modernist.

Ahimsa and the Theory of *Purusartha*

In the light of the basic theory of *purusartha*, the following cases were not regarded as cases of violence:

- (i) the killing of the calf,
- (ii) the killing of the monkeys to protect the crop,
- (iii) the use of insecticides,
- (iv) violence used to protect those it is one's duty to protect,
- (v) violence rather than cowardice,
- (vi) the violence of the 1942 movement (a response to the violence of the government),
- (vii) the violence of using the armed forces in Kashmir,
- (viii) the violence of the Poles against the German invaders.

These cases are not cases of violence because they avoid loss of legitimate wealth, power and pleasure; or they lead to the attainment of legitimate wealth, power and pleasure. (Here one may reduce the legitimate claim to the minimum in order to avoid violence and warfare.)

The inclusion of these and other instances of violence as non-violence is explained in a variety of ways. (i) Non-violence has to be understood as minimum violence. (ii) Sometimes it is explained as the influence of other religions, e.g., the distinction between positive violence and negative non-

violence. It is also said that in Hinduism moral theory has oscillated between providing an elaborate code of conduct and a set of highly abstract ideals.

The problem with these explanations is that the theory of *purusartha* is a method which is applied to particular cases. However, the problem disappears if we understand the cases in terms of the theory of *purusartha* itself: then there will be no need for this variety of explanations.

Modernity and Theory of *Purusartha*

According to Gandhi, modern industrial development and economic organization, etc., undermined the exercise of discipline in relation to others and in relation to oneself. He was, therefore, strongly against this mode of development. However, he soon saw that this phenomenon could not be wished away. And he tried to deal with modernity in terms of the theory of *purusartha*. At Ahmedabad, he devised procedures for negotiation between employers and workers; he advocated trusteeship. He suggested ways to maintain discipline in political parties, in relations between parties, between parties and the government, and so on.

Thus Gandhi's thought was not *ad hoc* in its nature; neither was it pragmatic or a matter of experience.

Gandhi and Modern Thought and Practice

I wish I could present the thought of some other reformers—say Tilak or Gokhale or Tagore.⁶ But I must say that most of them accepted modernity without examining it in the light of Indian theory, or without taking account of the price to be paid in the acceptance of the modernist theory.

However, it is more important to see the relationship of Gandhi's thought to modern thought; it is the challenge of modern thought and practice that the Gandhian approach has to face.

One way to characterize modern thought is that it seeks, implicitly or explicitly, to achieve unity by pursuing reason in a variety of ways. And we realise that unless there is a principle of choice, in the conflict between two language games reason breaks down, and that if a principle of choice is there, unity has to be theoretically given and to be hoped for in practice.

However, in modern practice unity is sought through freedom of expression, human rights, etc., with no principle of limit either individually or socially. At the same time, it is hoped that more and more of technology will make limitations unnecessary. In the meanwhile, the depletion of non-renewable resources, etc., goes on.

As against this, what has Gandhian practice to offer? If we are to have less technology, we would immediately be in a mess—how shall we support the population which is growing by leaps and bounds?

Whatever the theoretical impossibility of the modern thought, it keeps the world going and apparently going ahead. And whatever the theoretical

viability of Gandhi's thought, it is, in practice, unviable. It paralyses us right at the beginning. So, why not keep going and see if we can go on and on—hoping for the best? This, however, is a policy of drift. So far, some advance or the other has helped us. But how long will it offer us this help? What is more powerful—the possibilities of new technology or the villainy of the villains? What are human rights? Whose rights? Who will have the rights and who will pay the price? Not only does reason break down in the conflict of language games, life too breaks down.

Therefore, let us examine the possibilities of Gandhi's thought.

The Gandhian Perspective

It may appear that I have been presenting Gandhi as if he can do no wrong. Far from it, I have put that burden not on Gandhi, but on the theory of *purusartha*. And thereby, we have provided ourselves with a means of measuring Gandhi himself; and we have posed a challenge for all of us which we cannot easily meet. But before we begin measuring the failures of Gandhi (and our own failures), let us take note of some of the contributions of Gandhi.

(1) Gandhi made it possible for all of us to come out of the life of chaos and drift into an ordered and meaningful life, if only we would do it.

(2) He put in the simplest terms the way of understanding the *sastras*: (i) They contain historical material and one written by God or by 'God' through man. In any case, we need not follow the *sastras* if they go against the fundamental principles of morality—truth and non-violence (the theory of *purusartha*)—or against reason when the subject under discussion is properly a subject of reason. (There is support for this in the *sastras*.)

(3) He made an important distinction: the legitimacy of untouchability cannot be made a matter of discussion, the legitimacy of the *varna* system can be.

(4) In the matter of practice, he attempted to introduce the practice of non-violence in all sorts of human situations. (He introduced not practices, but principles.) Whatever we might think of particular instances, this is an important advance when technical and socio-economic changes are taking place so fast and altering the fairness of relationships between individuals and groups in matters of wealth, power, pleasure and discipline. The struggle for power is so great that there is a need for developing methods of arriving at a fair arrangement.

(5) Obviously, all this is a tall order: (i) The difficulties in the economic field. (ii) Consider the political-religions field—the test case of Hindu and Muslims. (iii) And Gandhi did not emphasize theory.

(6) What can be done?

(7) What about us ourselves?

Can anything that we do make a dent? Are we not depending on some miracles to help us? Or are we at the mercy of the 'villainy of the villains?'

Even if this were so, there could be nothing against trying the various possibilities that we can think of. And the miracle of miracles may happen. The deflection may become critically effective for take-off. And if this does not happen, one can die with dignity. But should one worry about it—after all one is going to die? But does not this worrying imbue the living also with dignity?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*.
2. For a detailed account of *purusarthas* and their inter-relationships, see K.J. Shah, 'Philosophy, Religion, Morality, Spirituality: Some Issues', *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, January-April, 1990. See also my 'Artha and Arthasastra', in *Way of Life: King, Householder, Renouncer: Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont*, T.N. Madan, ed. New Delhi: Vikas, 1982.
3. Bhikhu Parekh, op. cit.
4. Ibid., pp. 144-45.
5. Ibid., p. 177.
6. See the small, fascinating book published by Navjivan.