

Anthony J. Parel's contribution towards understanding Mahatma Gandhi

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Mahatma Gandhi introduced non-violence as a method of political struggle in India's anti-colonial struggle. This method was adopted as a considered choice in many later struggles in many parts of the world. Post-Gandhi, the method of evaluation of a political struggle has to undergo a necessary test on this new touchstone. Even the chances of violent struggles, except for few internal coups, have become almost bleak. Another difficulty in understanding Gandhi has always been, unlike other intellectuals and activists, Gandhi has never 'become' a final product, rather he was always and eternally in the stage of 'being'. Also, an intriguing phenomenon for many – he provokes extreme love, respect and veneration from some and, simultaneously wrath, abuse and ridicule from many others.

We know him as the chief architect of freedom struggle but what made Gandhi – the saint and the political activist, the two widely held opposite views to co-exist in him in due proportions deserved serious investigation. Like the publication of Marx's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" of 1844 in 1930s which offered fresh reading of Marx, Gandhi also needed an explanatory note from a philosopher to understand his varied stands on various issues, most of the times axiomatic, but yet antagonistic. In a correspondence with Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, it appears he left it to the philosophers to interpret him. To the charge that he contradicted himself, Walt Whitman, the American poet, once replied that it was not that there were contradictions in him, but the fact that he embraced multitudes made his critics to understand so. In the history of thought, Socrates, Marx and Gandhi present such paradoxes. They are contradictory because they embraced multitudes in multitudes.

Gandhi lost much of his ground almost in his own country, except for some Ashramite Gandhians. Marxists and all shades of Communists, Ambedkarites, RSS and other Pro-Hindu forces, and even Muslims for whose cause he derived the ire of Hindu organizations vilified Gandhi to such an extent that Gandhi regaining his ground in his mother country is almost uncertain as on now. There is one emerging Swatch Bharat icon Gandhi, a poster boy for only cleanliness on his own birthday. We have successfully and without remorse disowned a person who all through his life devoted his time and energies to the freedom of his country and people. Instead we started running after those who consciously acted against the freedom struggle, ridiculed it, or even derailed it on every opportunity. For Tagore he was "the Mahatma", or 'the great soul in beggar's garb'; for Winston Churchill he was a 'half-naked fakir' and a 'cunning fox'; for Jinnah he was a 'cunning fox', and 'a Hindu revivalist'; for Ambedkar he was "a blue-blooded Tory" and "a fanatic Hindu"; 'a mascot of the bourgeoisie' for Marxist Palme Dutt; 'the most important class collaborator within the nationalist movement' for M.N.Roy. Through his acts and gestures, writings and expressions, he fashioned his own 'sahasranama"! We can also see a convergence of thought – though emanating from various people representing various political ideologies! How could one individual be defined or understood in so many ways by so many people having divergent goals and political ideologies is a wonderful subject matter for another independent analysis.

Presently, we, who sincerely take pride in the role of the Mahatma, need to understand how Gandhi could combine a saint and a politician within himself, and how far his understanding is based on the traditional texts he revered and where he consciously differed in arriving at certain conclusions. In this effort, recently I came across the works of Anthony J. Parel, a Canadian historian, author and academic. It appears, he has so far written four books on Gandhi – (1) “Hind Swaraj and other Writings (1997)”, (2) “Gandhi, Freedom and Self-Rule (2000)”, (3) “Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony (2008)” and (4) “PaxGandhiana: The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi (2016)”. So far, I could lay my hands only on the first and the third one. Here, I prefer to present my initial impressions on my first reading of his work “Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony”. For this work, Parel constructed the philosophy of Gandhi on one of the important traditional concepts, “Purushartha”.

It almost begins with an anecdote when Gandhi was in South Africa, raged with so many doubts about his future course of action. “..... In 1894, in an attempt to meet an intellectual crisis that he was experiencing in South Africa, he wrote his famous letter to Rajchandbhai ... The letter raised twenty-seven questions regarding such grave matters as the nature of the soul, God, Moksha, the universe, avatars etc. As many as five of these questions were connected with moksha, the fourth purushartha; what it was and how it might be attained. Rajchandbhai’s answer was that moksha was the release of the soul from the state of ignorance and its involvement with the affairs of the world. Mystical knowledge and withdrawal from the world were the chief means of attaining it.” [p. 14] Gandhi accepted the first part of the advice, but not the second, the part that required the withdrawal from the world. Instead of withdrawing from it, he sought to engage with it. He decided to plunge into politics of South Africa – and the rest is history, writes Parel. Rajchandbhai was disturbed by the fateful turn that Gandhi had taken. He went so far as to warn him – “for the good of his soul – not to get too involved in the politics of Natal.”

What prompted Gandhi to understand the elements Hindu traditional texts and philosophy differently than others? In fact, it is not the first or the last that he contradicted the traditional wisdom. His many such conclusions violently differed with many so called experts of his times in his life. We find such stunning and unconventional deductions of Gandhi on various texts and issues, including “Yoga Vasishta” or “Bhagavad Gita”. Rajchandbhai had supplied him with an important reading list, for the resolution of his philosophical doubts, which included Yogavasishta, a lengthy philosophic poem, an account of conversation between a despondent Prince Rama of Ayodhya and the ancient sage Vaishta. Rama was not sure that he could combine his kingly duties “Artha” with the pursuit of “Moksha”. Vasishta advised him that he could, provided he exercised his “purushartha” in a proper balance. In Hindu philosophy, it is considered that along with ChaturVarna [fourfold class / caste], ChaturAshrama [Fourfold stages of life], thePurushartha[Fourfold aims and objectives of life] is also a defining attribute of human beings. One of the major obstacles that stood in the way of its proper exercise was the belief in fate. Yogavasishta’s position was that there was no such thing as fate, and that it existed only in the imagination of the weak and the indolent. This reading allowed Gandhi to actively involve himself in the social problems faced by the weak around him, while simultaneously continuing his endeavors for the Moksha, the liberation of the individual soul from the wheel of ‘samsara’.

Why Gandhi had chosen Gopal Krishna Gokhale as his “Political Guru”? Because he found in Gokhale more balanced understanding of this concept of purushartha. The author thus quotes the conclusion arrived at by Gandhi on this issue: “No Indian who aspires to follow the way of true dharma can afford to remain aloof from politics One who aspires to a truly religious (dharmic) life cannot fail to undertake public service as his life mission” [quoted from M.K.Gandhi, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 51:259 at p.20 of this book]. This leads us to the understanding of Gandhi that he attempted to redefine the concepts of ‘purushartha’ so as to suit the requirements of the current stage of human history. Writing in July 1930 from Yeravada jail, it appears, he asked for help from one of his female disciples to find a gender sensitive alternative description for this word “purushartha”. He did not accept the traditional interpretation as the correct interpretation. However, he took his clue from Gita [Gita V:13 compares the body to a city, in which dwells the spirit]. The spirit being gender-neutral, things done for its sake could have nothing to do with the gender of the ‘doer’. So, the word ‘purushartha’ has been retained as a gender-free concept. The most important contribution that Gandhi makes to our understanding of the concept of purushartha concerns its relationship to Karma and fate. Gandhi believed that the law of Karma operated in a universe subject to divine guidance and that God’s grace could therefore cancel the results of bad Karma. This is the result of the influence of Vaishnava philosophy on him. Arguably, the best known statement on the dynamic nature of the relationship of politics to moksha is found, according to Parel, in Gandhi’s autobiography. Those who aspire to moksha “cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics” [quoted from CW, 39:3 in this book pp.20-21].

The great thinkers of India, including Sankara and Ramanuja, supported the ascendance of “moksha”, the last of the purusharthas, over all the other. In fact, prior to these developments in Indian philosophy during the 8th century and onwards, saints or truth-seekers had never withdrawn themselves totally from mundane activities. All saints, thinkers, and philosophers from Vyasa, Vasishta, Sukra or even Satyakama Jabali to the last well known case of Kautilya did not restrict themselves to mere contemplative ashramite life. They were always consulted, and on many instances they actively participated in day-to-day affairs of the society. This asceticism as the only means of moksha, and moksha as the only important purushartha is the tendency that crept into Indian philosophic tradition much later. According to Parel, the achievements of Kautilya were rendered nugatory and, as a result, Indian political philosophy stagnated for nearly two millennia. Gandhi revived the original tradition of India i.e., of combining the four purusharthas into a lively dynamic relation.

Politics and Economics: In Part II of the book, Parel deals with politics and economics as part of ‘artha’, underscoring the significance attached to them by Gandhi. Historically, he says, the rise of the renouncer (Brahminic) movement compromised the importance of artha. Gandhi reversed this trend and restored artha its due place in the scheme of the four purusharthas. Artha, according to Gandhi, represents a positive human value and contributes to the material well-being of humans. Only when pursued ‘artha’ for ‘artha’ sake, alienated from the other purusharthas, it becomes harmful. Parel rejects the description of Gandhi by some as ‘utopian’ or ‘anarchist’, and considers him as a constructive political thinker.

Gandhi considered “Non-violent nationalism is a necessary condition of corporate or civilized life”. He had wholeheartedly embraced the modern idea of nation. According to Parel, Gandhi’s conception of nation was heavily influenced by the civic or liberal notion of nationalism notably that of Guuseppe Mazzini. However, he invokes certain specific Indic terms for constructing his idea. ‘Prajā’ is the specific word he used to convey the concept of ‘nation’. The State, according to Gandhi, is an institution necessary for the realization of the values of artha. Gandhi went far beyond Kautilya, says Parel, in identifying the basic functions of the State. For Kautilya, the State’s main function was external expansion through war and internal stability through punishment (danda-niti), but for Gandhi the emphasis is shifted from war to peace and from punishment to rights. Gandhi is criticized for idealizing Ramarajya, an often misunderstood connotation. “He certainly did not mean by Ramarajya a Hindu Raj. What he meant was “Divine Raj”, the kingdom of God in human hearts, the sort of thing Tolstoy meant in his work, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*.” (p. 63).

Dharma is another ‘purushartha’ that underwent fresh and independent interpretation in the hands of Gandhi. According to Parel, Gandhi used the concept of dharma in three senses: as duty, religion and ethics. The two famous institutions that depended on dharma as duty were the four Varnas – brahmin, kshatriya, vaisya and shudra, and the Ashramas [the four stages of life] – the brahmacharin (student), the Grhstha (householder), the Vanaprastha (the hermit) and the Sanyasin (the ascetic). The first one i.e., the Four Varna dharma was the most controversial of all Hindu Dharmas, which can provoke contentious debates in modern political environment. The Purusa Sukta metaphor, and its further explanation in Bhagavad Gita on “varna” origins continue to excite hostile debates. There is a need to re-appreciate Gandhi’s understanding on these issues to have a comprehensive evaluation of his philosophy. Gandhi considered that “Dharma does not mean any particular creed or dogma. Nor does it mean reading or learning by rote books known as shastras or even believing all that they say.” Dharma is a quality of the soul for Gandhi and is present, visibly or invisibly, in every human being. Through it we know our duty in human life and our true relation with other souls [P. 92, quoting from CW, 32:11].

What is implicit, Parel writes, in the above passage is that there are two kinds of dharma, the dharma that is found in positive sources such as revelation and tradition, and the dharma that is found in the quality of the soul, or the dharma that is discovered by the faculty of “buddhi” (intelligence and will). The first we may call “positive” dharma and the second “natural” dharma (P.92). Gandhi never wavered in his conviction that dharma and rights had to work in tandem. The obsolescence of the dharma of varna or caste and of stages of life, does not undermine the continuing validity of universal dharma. Dharma as religion: Being religious, according to Gandhi, is a means of achieving the supreme purushartha. While he adhered to the view that religion was necessary for the achievement of our purushartha, he also advocated the view that the State should be neutral in religious matters. In the understanding of Gandhi the neutral does not convey the meaning of irreligious or materialistic State. The State, being rooted in artha, had its own immediate ends, which were not the same as those of moksha. In the present context of the religious fundamentalism challenging the very goals of independence movement and the aims and objectives of the Constitution, Parel concludes saying: “The religious fundamentalism of Hindutva or jihadism is not the only intellectual force that Gandhi’s moderate secularism has to resist. It has also to resist the hyper-secularism of the sort that Orwell represents.”

Similarly Gandhi's views on the Art and Society were also elaborated in this work. The general perception of intellectuals, and even of some of his close aids, has always been that Gandhi has no perspectives of art. "There is no need to belabor the point: in assessing Gandhi's understanding and appreciation of the arts, there is one mistake that no one should make. No one should regard him as an ignoramus. He had settled views on art and aesthetics, although he did not write about them. The choice was deliberate, and the proffered reason was "ignorance" – i.e., Socratic ignorance" (P. 159). The point was made obliquely clear, says Parel, that in Hind Swaraj, by putting the works of two giants of art theory and art history i.e., of Tolstoy and Ruskin as Appendix I of Hind Swaraj, Gandhi had indicated the place of art and society in his scheme of things.

Moksha or Spiritual Liberation is the most important issue that tilted the balance of discourse of purusharthas at the end of the first millennium. Gandhi found in the Gita, all that he needed to know about the pursuit of liberation. "The pursuit of moksha supplied the force unifying all of Gandhi's different activities" (P.177). Parel refers to Margaret Chatterjee [Margaret Chatterjee, Gandhi's Religious Thought (1983)] and says, Gandhi "rethought" the philosophy of moksha. "Part of the rethinking involved making a crucial distinction between moksha as an achieved state of affairs and moksha as a pursuit". Gandhi approached moksha not as an abstract or imagined goal, but as a goal to be realized in history, in and through action in time. He fought against the traditional otherworldly approach ... (p. 178). Two of Gandhi's contemporaries, Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi were thought by many to have achieved the status of liberated souls. But they withdrew themselves from taking any active part in political life whereas Gandhi stood in the midst of the world affairs and considered active involvement with a sting of consistent withdrawal from the fruit of the effort, the 'sthitaprajna' of the "Karma Yoga" as the mode of liberation.

In charting his own course in the interpretation of the Gita, Gandhi wanted to avoid the doctrinaire secularism and the traditional asceticism. He wanted a course that would affirm the values of the world and the purusharthas on the one hand, and those of a world transcending spirituality open to every human being. "Karma yoga or action is the real test whether one is pursuing stable wisdom. Of the three paths mentioned in the Gita – those of action, knowledge, and devotion – Gandhi favored the path of action. Not that the others were ignored, but that he gave primacy to action. The reason was that the other two, if given undue emphasis, had a tendency to promote a world abandoning sort of spirituality" (P. 190). The concluding chapter of the book sums up various aspects of Hindu Philosophy and the appreciation of Gandhi on these aspects. "Participation in politics was for him one way of realizing the truth" (P. 195). "Very typically the spiritual life for Gandhi was inseparable from action in the world, from the active life in the fields of politics, economics and social reform. In this respect his spirituality differed radically from the spirituality of the yogis and ascetics of the past and the present...." (p. 196). "The political too has several meanings in Gandhi. In the first place, being a purushartha politics belong to the field of artha. As such it is the pursuit of legitimate self-interest, both individual and collective, attained through the exercise of constitutionally permitted use of force...." (P.197).

Under the heading “Gandhi faces challenges” (P.200) the author says: “Gandhi is fortunate to have many positive interpreters in the twenty first century.” Parel says: Indians who are committed to realizing the vision of Marx have splintered into different groups. They agree on their rejection of the Gandhian paradigm They do not seem to believe that there can be an independent Indian canon of political thought – which is in keeping with Marx’s own belief. ...“Gandhi was committed to social change, but, unlike the Marxists and the Neo-Marxists, he was able to integrate the idea of social change within the frame work of an independent Indian canon. If Indian Marxists and Neo-Marxists can follow Gandhi’s example here, they will have a chance of integrating what is still viable in Marx within an independent Indian canon. They can then take Marx in Indian terms instead of taking India on Marxist terms.” (P. 201).

On the issue of the relationship of Buddhism and Gandhi, Anthony J. Parel observes that “Navayana Buddhism”, also called “engaged” or “political” Buddhism, and its challenge to Gandhi comes from the resentment the Dalits feel against the stand that he took in 1932 against separate electorates for them. But questions as to how can one practice the politics of modernity (which is hostile to all religions) and live by the ethics of Buddhism, especially since the latter sees no positive value in artha” persist [p.202]. Parel further suggests: “Gandhi solved the problem of the relationship of artha, dharma and moksha thanks to his theory of the purusharthas..... If Navayana can find a way of integrating satisfactorily the anti-religious modernity with itself, it can have a political philosophy that can do justice to both politics and religion. And if it chooses to do that it will find in Gandhi a sympathetic model.” [p. 202] “A final question arises: is the Gandhian Paradigm still relevant, given India’s emergence as a major political and economic power in the world. The answer is plain it is more relevant now than ever before.... Indeed if they [Indians] do not follow this paradigm they may well lose their identity as a polity and as a civilization....” [p. 205].

I am deeply enlightened by Anthony J. Parel’s “Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony (2008)” on many aspects of Gandhi, and more specifically on the independent interpretations of traditional texts by Gandhi. I am more educated on how out of his independent reading and interpretation he reconciled the Purusharthas to construct a theory and practice that suits the social and philosophical requirements of the present. The reading created an urgent need to share my pleasure with all of you.