

Gandhism – An Antidote for Insular Nationalism*

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When we understand the call of Mahatma Gandhi's 'Sarva Dharma Sama Bhavana,' we derive a new definition for '*nationality*.' The suffocating barriers of geographical and cultural narratives in the modern 'nationalism' would be rent asunder. The contradiction between 'the particular' and 'the universal' stand dissolved. The definition of 'nationality' of Gandhiji is fundamentally different from the definitions of many of his contemporaries, and is also much wider in scope and content. Most intellectuals, including Ambedkar, Lohia, Savarkar, Marx et al., constricted the idea of 'nationalism' to the geographical or territorial. But Gandhiji saw it in Dharma (duty), and in culture, and more explicitly in the unity of duties, i.e., "sarva dharma sama bhavana' and in the great confluence of cultures. That is how Gandhiji alone could offer ideal answers to the quintessential questions of the dichotomy of colonialism and nationality.

In the eyes of Karl Marx, Indian subcontinent was an eternal prey for the aggression of the marauding armies and the one which could be beaten by all and sundry of the invading hordes. It might have lost to the British colonialist in the recent history, but it was no new experience. That was already a lost land. Why it had been the select prey for all the marauders, and all through its history? The same enigmatic questions were continued to be raised by Lohia, Ambedkar and Savarkar and answers were sought. Marx could locate the answer in that 'India' which had been changeless and fossilized in economic life. This was also the idea of the most intellectuals of the West and the apologists of colonialism; it was, in fact, a continuum of Marx. Other anglophiles and English educated intellectuals followed the suit (Ref. Marx's The British Rule in India).

The west emerged victorious at various phases of the history since it had welcomed change, as perennial. All previous people were victorious for the same reason. Because of their very quality of change, they advanced technologically and culturally. Since they advanced in

time, while India stagnated in the cesspool of custom, they could conquer it time and again. Why India remained so? Marx explained the causes of Indian stagnation as the result of its village system and the indolence of hereditary crafts and avocations. Lohia and Ambedkar termed the latter as 'caste' (Caste System by Lohia and Annihilation of Caste by Ambedkar). It is not that these stereotypes of the West's intellectuals and colonialists is limited to India; they imagined the other colonies like Africa also as pre-history and stagnant.

Gandhi defied these narratives. He denied, per se, the very logic of the victorious and the defeated. There is no space for this kind of historicity in his theory. Who won India? And who lost India? – were not questions in his scheme of things. He tried to transcend the dialectics of the winners and the vanquished. He refused the argument that the British colonialists defeated India. He located the cause for the British Raj in the greed and the fall of the Indians. The colonialists brought with them a sterile mercantile culture. Indians were fascinated by this already degenerated culture and were trapped by the satanic lure of money. The reason for India's loss lies in her loss of the self. The surrender of the Indian soul to the penetrating evil was at the bottom of India's exploitation. "The causes that gave them India enable them to retain. Some Englishmen state that they took, and they hold, India by the sword. Both these statements are wrong. The sword is entirely useless for holding India. We alone keep them. ... the English entered India for the purposes of trade. They remain in it for the same purpose, and we help them to do so." (Mahatma Gandhi's Hindu Swaraj).

This is no victory of the British. It is the enamor and the willing accommodation of the Indians that sustained the British civilization. This is in contra-distinction to the understanding of Marx, Ambedkar, and Savarkar et al. They considered the British modernity as an exemplar of their strength, capacity and dynamics. They exhibited a devotional apathy to colonialism (Hindutva by Jyothirmaya Sharma; Renade, Gandhi and Jinnah by Ambedkar). Their binary is: 'The Britishers were the heroes, and the Indians were zeros.' The Indians lost because of their submission to the lower rendering in this binary language. There's a value for the zero. Gandhi realized the value of 'zero' for this precise reason; he found the disruptive devastation behind the glittery industrial civilization and the tranquility beneath the Asiatic simple life. Gandhi

argued for not just the liberation of victims, but even of the colonial oppressor. Because, both turned the world into a vast wasteland in their blind pursuit of the mercantile civilization.

Gandhi was not interested in the chorological history as a description of wars, victories and losses etc., the documented Kaifiyats, and also the analytical history. He cautiously brushed aside the wisdom of the modern historians and their historiography, who looked at history as 'conflicts,' reasoning out and explaining these conflicts, and anticipating solutions in the very same conflicts. He saw in the course of history more of accommodative cultures, religions, ways of life, and the negotiated harmony in their interactions. That is why he travelled beyond binary opposites of Hindu – Muslim and gave the call of 'Hindu-Muslim Bhai Bhai' (Gandhi – A Hope in Despair by Dr. A Raghu Kumar).

The unidentified problem in the dialectical view of history is: there lies within us our enemy also. Hegel attempted to identify this internal enemy when he said that slavery is impossible without the acceptance of it by the slave (Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic – in Hegel's Phenomenology of spirit where he wrote: "The Master consciousness decides that the most important value is that of freedom. ... The slave makes the opposite judgment. ... Therefore, the conflict between the two is resolved as each takes up different kinds of consciousness, each embodying the recognition of the One as the Master and the other as the Slave. ..."). Even Gamsci, the Italian Marxist, considered the hegemony or ideological or moral leadership of the ruling class in two ways – coercion and consent (this consent forms the fundamental of the hegemony). According to him the ruling class, in advanced capitalist societies, rely heavily on the consent of the working class. (Gamsci's Prison Notes) Gandhi, instead, highlighted the inner harmony than the outwards contradictions. He identified the roots of colonialism, not in the chronology of the victors and the vanquished, but in the failing civilizations of the colonizers. In this process he came with the notion beyond territorial or geographical nation, and nationalism; it was the cultural nationalism.

What is India, after all? Savarkar's nation, and as a consequence his India, was the geographical or territorial idea of a majority culture (or religion). This is, in fact, imported from the Europe. This kind of idea of 'nationalism' played an important role in defining 'religion' as 'nation.' Protestant religion dominates America and it overwhelmingly allows only Protestants to be its Presidents. Savarkar, in tune with this western notion, considered India as the land of the Hindus. But the absence of a single religion, or on the contrary, the presence of plural religions, in India, became a stumbling block to model India on religious lines. Consequently he defined "Hinduism" in negative terms as all those who are not Muslims (or Christians) and the Indian nationality as the Hindu nationality. Ambedkar also rued about the absence of unity in Hindus vis-a-vis Muslims and Christians; he considered the difficulty in creating a nationhood on the foundations of the castes.

Gandhi's Love for his Country Crossed the Barriers of Narrow Nationalism: India is fortunate not to have one national religion. It allowed Gandhi to fill the vacuum with the idea of equality of all the religions. Because of this peculiarity, India could not get fossilized into fundamentalist state like its neighbors, i.e., Srilanka, Burma and Pakistan. Religion is the foundational principle of any territorial State. Territorial or geographical nationality reduces the humanity itself into a homogenous community pertaining to a region.

In Gandhi's 'nationality,' territorial or geographical constriction is not the primary parameter. It's culture that premised the construction of nationality but not the history of religion. The dialectical-historical narrative of "others" or "other cultures" invading and conquering the "I" or "We" or "My country," or "its masses" that dominate conflict theories found little space in Gandhi's conceptualization of culturalism or nationalism. Culture approximates among themselves over a time. Conflicts are temporal and contextual. This kind of construction of nationality facilitated Gandhi to treat the British not as enemies. He found a less violent path for freedom struggle when he beseeched the English to stop trade exploitation. He could, then, even accepted the possibility for the British to continue to be in the ruling position. This also allowed Gandhi to accept a Muslim as the Prime Minister of India, if the later could drop the partition plan. Ambedkar, on the other side, abhorred the presence of Muslims

in the Indian Army, because his nationalism was territorial and gave primacy to the security of 'his' territorial nationhood.

In Gandhian thought there are no permanent dividing-walls between nationalism and internationalism. He could, thus, derive the tenets of the orient through the occident or *vice versa*. It is very difficult to determine whether his "non-violence" is derived from the Bible or the Jain texts. He has no imposing walls. His nationalism is a seamless web without partisan partitions. For this very reason he could sing: "Eshwar Allah Tero Nam!" He could overcome the religious insularity while travelling through the path of religion or ordained duty of his own religion through prayers. He didn't deny any practice, faith or religion and conceived space for all practices, faiths and religions within. He abolished the chasm between faiths (In his Intimate Enemy, Ashis Nandy points out that Gandhi ... organized the Hindus as Indians, not as Hindus, and granted Hinduism the right to maintain its character as an unorganized, anarchic, open-ended faith.)

In Gandhi's cultural nationalism there is no place for words like invasion, victory and enemy. As the famous people's poet of Telugu, Vemana (1652-1730) once wrote, the earth gleefully chuckles at the one who claims it as mine. The earth doesn't belong to any one or any group. It has not been transferred to any one or any group. It has not been transferred to any one by a deed. All of us are migrants. The modern science fortifies it. Hence, even India cannot be defined as belonging to one race or religion. Even with all the genealogy of long-past ancestry, no one can claim absolute ownership of not just India, of any part of the earth. No other philosopher worth his claim, except Gandhi, ever realized this. Modernists like Jyothiba Phule and others created a history of the myth of Aryan invasion, and the idea of the demolition of natives without any scientific evidence. Savarkar for his part, invented another equivalent unscientific theory of the invading Muslims and extermination of Hindus. All these invented histories have their roots in colonial history (Jyothirao Phule's Gulam Giri).

Gandhi refused these nauseating historiographies. He simply brushed aside these histories of conflicts and their conjectural jargon. He invented certain different terminology like 'satyagraha' or 'noncooperation' beyond these pseudo-historical views. He introduced novel methods of encountering the enemy with love. Because there is no external enemy, he gave fresh form to the old "internal enemy" (Antassatru) of the Sanatana dharma. The enemy within is the external reflection of the enemy without. You have to conquer yourself first. Gandhi's political practices, thus, were inevitably incorporated into themselves, not ever-increasing needs and their gratification, but celibacy and control over the senses. He said that there is enough on earth for everybody's need, but not enough for everybody's greed. The rush of human beings towards this greedy and debased mercantile civilization is the epitome of the lost. Communists decry that there was any real independence. It is true even in Gandhi's view as he never thought it as freedom when the Britishers exit; it is only when we are free from the lust towards their trading culture.

To sum up again, it is never the 'territoriality' that forms nationalism. And in the same view, territorial liberation is no liberation per se. Our communists invited Ngugi wa Thiango, the Kenyan writer and the theoretician of decolonization, and felicitated him. But did they ever comprehend his idea of 'decolonizing mind'? How could Gandhi reduce the intervention of cultural impositions in his politics? Probably he constructed his struggle for freedom as a continuous struggle against all human evils and on one's own self. He synthesized the essence of spirituality with politics. The intersecting narrow walls of time and space got erased.

The commercial culture dethroned the 'duty' from the minds of men; it simultaneously debased the British colonialists. In the process of colonizing the others, they far removed themselves from the virtuous path of the Bible and its message of peace and love. It is their second fall (The first from the Eden to the Earth, *Paradise Lost!*). They have fallen into commercial civilization (Ngugi wa Thiango – Decolonizing the Mind).

Marx redirected the allegations of the Christians against the Jews to themselves. The anti-Semitic intellectuals were critical of the Jews that they were selfish, and that they were naked worshippers of money. Did all the Christians, similarly, underwent a metamorphosis like the Jews in the Capitalist societies? Who could save themselves from becoming nakedly selfish and individualistic to the core? Marx, thus, challenged the Christian society on its own values. Some Hindu-Buddhist texts call it as “vithanda vada,” questioning the question in its own *terra firma* (Karl Marx – On Jewish Question). Gandhi transcended the dichotomy of the oppressed and the oppressor. He could, in the process, cognize the fall in everyone. He created a counter-narrative to the “Bhusura” (the God-on-Earth), the well-known epithet for the Brahmins, through the coinage of the term “Harijan.” The Brahmin nurtured a deep consternation to Gandhi for this very reason.

Human thought has its own constraints. No scripture, no religion, and no race is sacrosanct and beyond fallacy. No one is sacrosanct and beyond ridicule. Hence, we all need to understand the other. It does not necessarily mean we abolish our identity in the process. In his dialogue with Rabindranath Tagore on “nationalism,” he accepted Tagore’s proposition for openly welcoming all the winds, but with a rider that, in the process, we need not allow ourselves to be upended. He counter posed the need for a rational compromise between the cultural specifics and the universals. Even while entertaining the critic of Ambedkar on Hindu religion, he desisted Ambedkar’s outright disregard for it. For Gandhi truth is always experimental. God is also subservient to the Truth; and thus, God is also experimental. There is nothing like absolute realization of either God or Truth in the time-space matrix of the world. As an extension of the same logic, ‘nationalism’ or ‘nationality’ is also a realization of human self and is always incomplete. It cannot be reduced to constrictive and territorial bounds.

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