

The Gadfly as a Harbinger : Exploring Gandhi's Hind Swaraj and Oceanic Circles*

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Abstract :

This is only a first cut towards a theoretical statement : hence apart from loose ends, there could be chinks in the theoretical armour. On the basis of inputs to this, lacunae could be filled, even as the author is convinced of its essential message.

A motivation for this statement is the way Sanskrit grammar is supposed to have been born out of the Nada (musical sounds) of Lord Shiva's celestial dance (Maaheshwara Sutras). Gandhi's also was a unique life-time performance in action as well as in theory, with global significance. From out of his life-time work, a comprehensive political philosophy can be read which has several elements : a construct of the past with plausible validity ; a call for reverting to it through action around reining in Science and Technology, agitating some serious questions on the postulates of international trade, discussions on construction of civil society with emphasis on Gandhi-proposed trusteeship which nonetheless provides for entrepreneurship and enterprise, and securing human rights via those actions.

* I am writing these few pages through recalling from memory, rather than in a researcher's way.

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1. Introduction :

As belonging to the immediacy of the era of Gandhi, we are excited by the Gandhi Saga : his struggle to discover himself while a student in England ; the unfolding of *Satyagraha* following his being thrown out of the train with bag and baggage in South Africa : the non-cooperation movement for liberation of India from the British ; his famous exchanges with the sensitive British Magistrate when accused of sedition ; his dialogues with Romain Rolland ; his interface with Ambedkar and Jinnah ; the Quit India Movement ; and his final sacrifice for Hindu-Muslim unity. Any of these can detain a discerning student for a life-long reflection *around* that as a lead. But is there another way of comprehending Gandhi ?

2. Gandhi the Political Philosopher :

Prof. Kancha Ilaiah, the well-known Political Scientist, made a most innovative effort to view Gautama the Buddha as a political philosopher, moving away from Buddha the religious savant, and the effort was very rewarding. It appears that how we start off is critical while trying to understand great men. In the Ilaiah fashion, can we get away from the relatively easy anecdotal Gandhi --- each of the above, and any of the others besides, in Gandhi's life can end up as anecdotal even if epochal too --- and see him as a political philosopher ?

The task is tough but any beginning to handle this has to have its roots in Hind Swaraj to be fused with his ideas on Oceanic Circles. Such fusion of Hind Swaraj and Gandhi's

world views figuring in Oceanic Circles, we submit, brings out the quintessence of Gandhi the political philosopher. The outcome of such an effort gives us a crystal, which when turned gently gives us Gandhi's views on Science and Technology ; on civil society ; on human rights ; on international trade ; on earth care and environment conservation ; on entrepreneurship and trusteeship ; on commons ; and on any other brick that makes the edifice of his political philosophy.

3. Gandhi's *Jnana Netra* or the Seer's Eye :

Gandhi the seer did not need the backing of historiography for painting his larger picture. He was more guided by his wisdom (*Jnana*), and intuition, for his philosophy. Not that he was not well-read, but his reading fell short of a researcher's forays into history ; thus, he was not comparable to his great contemporary Ambedkar whose world views and treatises were encyclopaedic, standing the tests of historiography.

But we do not assess Hobbes and Locke through (merely) historiography to get insights on the path-breaking social contract theories or the state of nature. We suggest Gandhi's views too be elevated to the same high pedestal : and what follows here is a modest effort to start doing precisely that.

4. Oceanic Circles, a plausible painting of the reality of the past :

When we raise Gandhi's views to the level of those of a political philosopher, what that yields is a rich fare that includes potent methods and instruments to question so much that goes on in the present times and all that is commonly assumed today as axiomatic.

What then is Oceanic Circles ? In it, India (in fact, the world) consists of innumerable villages, vast in expanse, never ascending in power equations between the villages. Each village is a small society, self-sufficient by and large, atleast in essentials like food. But all the small societies are nonetheless linked with one another, and this is crucial in the Oceanic Circles idea. Each village, which is a small society, imports from a neighbouring small society, which is essential but not produced by it. There is no distant trade, nor a search for what is the cheapest source in the world to get an item that any given society needs but does not produce.

There could be obvious and simple explanations for thus being satisfied with the proximate, rather than scrambling for the distant. Lack of information is one, and secondly, lack of transport necessary for moving merchandise. One can use pejorative terms to describe this situation as primitive or as one in which virtue could be made of reality. On the other hand, this could be described as idyllic and having been the outcome of presumed preferences of communities (in some sense).

Gandhi doesnot clearly say whether he viewed this painting of his of the world as ahistorical or as merely the vision he prescribes for reconstruction of the world through conscious efforts. But it is here that we need to make something out of what we have from Gandhi, may be in bits and pieces, Gandhi's *Maaheshwara Sutras* as it were, to get at, and brush, his holistic political philosophy.

It is in that direction that we suggest the following elements may be considered :

- a) The essence of world reality, not merely the reality of India (with which Gandhi was always deeply concerned), was reflected by Oceanic Circles. Oceanic Circles could be seen as a reasonably authentic construct of the past, though this construct may not be adequately satisfying to a historiographer --- but then this is true of the theories of social contract on which so much of fulfilling political and philosophical discourses hinged.
- b) The Gandhian Oceanic Circles approximate to, or at least are not unrelated with, what is conveyed by the present day ideas of civil society. In so far as civil society consists of communitarian arrangements --- social and economic ---, entered into by citizens for their social and economic life, without dependence on state, Gandhi's Oceanic Circles could represent (in a way) civil societies of an earlier era. These arrangements had the virtue of possessing a built-in hedge against the destabilizing risks of international trade. As stated above, the civil societies constituting the Oceanic Circles were not devoid of inter-linking but did not have *integrating* arrangements, driven by comparative advantage-based trade. They did not suffer from general glut or lack of aggregate demand, as they did not function at all on the basis of aggregation --- the bane of the modern societies.
- c) The civil societies of olden times remained unintegrated until the time when the state, in the modern sense, came into existence and tended to weave those together. Application of science, which advanced in the meantime, played a

cementing role in this integration, loosening the commutarian arrangements. The slow methods of transmitting knowledge of the historic civil societies gave way to newer methods made possible by science and technology, over which members of communities ceased to have any control or say. While the unintegrated civil societies needed travelers and explorers to transmit knowledge, companies took over this role gradually, with modern science advancing fast. Trade started growing quickly, with companies all the time pushing for growth of trade. Small societies lost in the process their simplicity and gradually ceased to qualify to the epithet of Gandhi's Oceanic Circles, because comparative advantage considerations of the companies were the driving force behind trade now, not the test whether something was essential, or import of that militates against the presumed preference of communities. With revolution in transport facilities, distant trade became the order of the day. Small communities so integrated, each of those did not have any view over what its commerce could be doing in a distant community with which it was trading.

- d) The loosening of commutarian arrangements in small societies, and growing distant trade looming large, resulted in entrepreneurship coming to the fore. Demands were created where there were none, and all the pristine community preferences started getting by-passed by entrepreneurship and by companies-driven distant trade, aided by science and technology.
- e) Distant trade had serious implications to livelihoods, demand for some growing and some diminishing. New deployment of resources, to meet growing trade requirements, meant shake-up to communities, which were no longer masters of

themselves. Some livelihoods would disappear and new ones come up --- the beginning of risk bearing enterprises and the consequential business cycles. This meant the economies could expand for a while and contract later, with profound impact on community relationships and implications for human rights.

- f) What were the implications for human rights ? Waves of business cycles and counter-cycle policies led to scramble for control of resources by companies in their yearning for profit-maximizing. This control over resources for profits meant skewed income distribution and further control of resources for maintaining the higher income levels of the few. Uneven distribution of income and the intense desire of the few for this higher income status would always be accompanied by violence, overt or covert, whether by private persons or by the state which was clearly the protector of interests of ruling groups. Pursuit of growth *via* trade, cementing of integration of societies and unequal control over scarce resources meant inevitability of violation of human rights.
- g) Practitioners of human rights campaigns often ignore that their campaigns must question the uneven distribution of resources as the trigger to those violations, rather than restrict to the symptoms of the uneven distribution of resources. Violations that command the maximum attention of human rights workers can be grouped under :
- i) Imprisonments without trial
 - ii) Cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners, political and otherwise.
 - iii) Judicial and extra-judicial death penalties.

iv) Hegemony over groups through violent methods for resources.

It is naïve to imagine that campaigns against human rights violations can be effective without re-ordering of unabashed pursuit of growth *via* trade as that merely leads to greater and greater skewness of distribution of resources.

- h) In all the above, Science and Technology played a big role, and Gandhi's Hind Swaraj was most concerned about it. Science and Technology was accessed by profit-driven companies to whom state became a handmaiden. Once the hegemony of state and its apparatus deepened (say between 1600 – 1900 A.D) and Science and Technology became growingly important, the small societies lost all chances of remaining, or reverting to the status of Oceanic Circles because of the sheer size of trade.
- i) Gandhi advanced the idea of Trusteeship to counter all the above tendencies because he had to come to grips with the reality of, and the need, for entrepreneurship because of irreversible trends of the economies. But could entrepreneurs, who built private empires, function as the trustees of the society and expend their wealth for common good ? Further, can Science and Technology be made more accountable for people and not remain in the clutches of companies and MNCs for their profits, only for which trade on a maximal basis becomes the driving force ?
- j) In Oceanic Circles, there is a counter to aggregation and in them there is no general glut or the problem of deficiency of aggregate demand. There is thus

reality in the concept of Oceanic Circles as regards the past as also a craving to return to some of it whether for avoiding the risks of trade or for securing human rights. This is because the implications of economic pursuits are at home to be felt by everyone, not in distant places if we succeed in getting back to the Oceanic Circles.

- k) Gandhi realized that we have moved too far away from Oceanic Circles that may have existed earlier and suggested steps to restore some of it by
- i) the trusteeship idea
 - ii) reining in Science and Technology by conscious efforts.

The important point to note is that via trusteeship, Gandhi provided in his thinking for play of enterprises and entrepreneurship, and for accumulation, but ensured that accumulation is for social good by inculcating the spirit of guardianship and use of accumulated resources for common good. Will this work ? The latest researches lend hope that they still could work and lead to sharing resources equitably and democratically --- in other words to Commons, with all that this expression evokes. The global warming and the need to changing life-styles and reduction in consumption patterns to counter global warming may lead the world to turn to the rich ideas of Hind Swaraj and Oceanic Circles, that the political philosopher Gandhi left to us as his bequest, for pondering and action.
