

Was Gandhi's Idea of Freedom Anti-democratic? -Reading through his *Hind Swaraj*

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ABSTRACT

This article critically analyzes idea of freedom in the book, *Hind Swaraj* written by Gandhi in 1933. It as an attempt to prove that the idea of freedom he puts forward I this book is purely anti-democratic as it contradicts with the ideologies of the modern day democracy. It is however true that he changed his stance on many ideas he propogate in this book later on.

Gandhi was indeed a charismatic leader, for he could attract, influence, and inspire devotion among people. But charisma, the ability to influence and inspire people, does not presuppose that the policies of a leader possessed of it necessarily serve the interests of the people. *Hind Swaraj* was one of the most thought provoking book that Gandhi has written no matter how his ideas were. His *Swaraj* was a self-regulated society and not the present day 'western' democratic system. The idea behind his objection of western or modern civilization was nothing but an attempt to take back the society to pre modern times. Gandhi was so obsessed with rural life, a life style based on limited needs. But it can easily be found out that this idealized version of rural life did not exist in any part of the world.

Gandhi imagined a society where a person rules himself and never hindrance to his neighbor. It is also known as State enlightened anarchy where representation becomes unnecessary.¹ He prefers anarchy than the orderly rule by the British.² Human being is a social animal and his/her life is very much associated with public and it is not possible for a person to live a life without depending on others. Such a society like enlightened anarchy, lacking any central coercive authority, would quickly degenerate into violence and chaos. Therefore it is pointless to argue against established democratic systems which have the capability to look into the needs and problems of the society.

Gandhi was not only against the parliamentary government but practically against any government in any form. Gandhi calls the English parliament a sterile woman or prostitute.³ Through attacking English parliament he rejects the idea of parliamentary democracy. Gandhi says the governments have very little to do with our happiness which depends upon self control or soul force. It may be acceptable to people who believe in state enlightened anarchy. But Gandhi makes it as a doctrine from the alleged failure of Parliamentary government in England which makes no sense. England, at that time, was a colonial power which had

controlled many parts of the world. The decisions regarding national and international affairs cannot be taken at a village panchayath or village meeting. It has to be discussed in a larger representative body like parliament. For him, the works of the parliament can be done by a few good men.⁴ No country could isolate itself from the world as it has to deal with external affairs, defense, and internal affairs and so on. Discussions are needed to take any step regarding any of these issues. The people who believe in democracy cannot expect a decision without debates and discussions in the parliament. But at the same time it is unfair to say that its members are merely talking in the parliament. Only healthy discussions could lead to a good a decision or making of legislation. Such decisions cannot be taken by 'few good men'. Gandhi does not say that how could a "few good men" represent the people of the country. But he was completely against the parliamentary democracy with absolute powers in his *Swaraj*.⁵

By proposing the above mentioned idea he puts forward an anti democratic doctrine. In a democratic country it is necessary to lend our ears to everyone as there are different opinion among people but the attitude of 'only we (I) are right' is wrong. Gandhi himself has proved he was anti democratic when he was stubborn about Subhash Chandra Bose's election as the president of the Congress Party in 1939. Subhash Chandra Bose won the election by a handsome margin defeating the candidate proposed by none other than Gandhi. But Bose, who had got the mandate of majority of the congress workers, had to resign because of the non cooperative attitude of Gandhi and his group.⁶ This is not the only instance for his undemocratic acts in Congress party. He showed a tendency to ignore party resolutions when they went against his wish and to work without consultations in the party forums. He always showed an authoritarian attitude in his

¹ . Young India, July 2, 1931, p.162

² . M.K. Gandhi , *Hind Swaraj or Home Rule*, G. Natesan and Co, Madras, 1921, p.101

³ . *ibid.*, p.16

⁴ . *ibid.*, p.17

⁵ . C. Sankaran Nair, *Gandhi and Anarchy*, Tagore and Co., Madras, 1922, p.27

⁶ . Sekhar Bandhopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, Orient Blcswan, Hyderabad, 2012, p.411

political life and family life as well and talked about individual freedom at the same time.⁷

Gandhi makes his attack against Railways, lawyers, courts, doctors, education on Western lines, machinery of every kind of manufacturing industries, and parliamentary government which have polluted the Indian Civilization, according to Gandhi.⁸ These institutions do not find a place in Gandhi's Swaraj. According to him all these taught India immorality which was once a hub of spiritual civilization. Gandhi attacks railways which really connected the people across India. In a way he was against modernity and development which were the main features of Modern Democracy.

He keeps talking of Rama Rajya as an ideal social order and also pinned his generous faith in effectiveness of Ramayan. The attempt here was to bring religion into politics with blind faith and irrationality. Religion and politics are different entities. While talking at the inaugural meeting of Benares Hindu College, he said "I myself am an anarchist but of the other type".⁹ His ascetic's robe influenced the Hindu people powerfully in India. His holding on to a mythical past, the Ram Rajya had an immense appeal to the religious people. But the believers of other religions and atheists suspected him as they believed that they did not have any place in his Swaraj. Gandhi tries to spiritualize the Indian politics by arguing that the Ancient civilization had a lot of spiritual value. All these interpretations do injustice to India's rich history of secular pursuits, scientific and rational thinking, and so on. Gandhi makes his own contribution to the western view about India. Intermingling of politics with religion is a not good thing for democracy though it happens very often.

Gandhi was concerned only about religious people in his Swaraj where as a democratic system is inclusive to all kind of people. He condemned the practice of untouchability but supported the *Varnasrama Dharma*. Democratic system offers freedom and equality to all its subjects. By supporting Varna system Gandhi also supported the caste based occupations and other features of it and proved that he was anti democratic again. Democratic government gives freedom to its citizen to choose what kind occupation he/she wants to do. Gandhi wanted to continue with old system while the democratic governments made steps forward to abolish such systems. The success of these attempts is a different question. What is important here is that they did make some attempts to remove the inequalities that prevailed in the society before.

Gandhi says people without history are happy by quoting an English proverb.¹⁰ While the Jewish plight was on, he said "*The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me.*"¹¹ This shows his ignorance towards the

plight of a group of people who were scattered around the world. Again he asks them to use 'soul force' or 'love force', which is the way to his Swaraj. Soul force alone should be relied upon, according to him. No resistance should be offered to violence. In a democratic system everybody has equal rights. Therefore no one has any superior right over others. If injustice is done, the victims have the right to resist it. But what Gandhi says here is purely anti democratic. His argument is that one should bear all injustice done to him/her which is solely against the basic principles of democracy. In democracy one has the right to resist or act against injustice or inequality.

Self control is the central point of Gandhi's swaraj. Gandhi was an anarchist, as mentioned above, but belonged to the ascetic type. He took the vow of celibacy at the age of 37. Brahmacharya was one of the preconditions for his first non violent resistance campaign. According to him only those who could rule themselves the sense of self restraint- could rule themselves in the sense of controlling their political universe. The idea of only self mastery over oneself could help to live an ideal life in Swaraj is strange. Gandhi wanted to establish ascetic life as a social order which is against the modern day democracy. In his social order everyone has to renounce the worldly pleasure. Here again it is a question against individual freedom. Observing celibacy is not the only way for one to control self and the environment as well.

The glorification of poverty also invites attention in this regard. Scholars differ on his emphasize on poverty. But many of them accused him as a person who glorified poverty.¹² The idea that happiness only exists with poor men is unjustified. It indirectly says that one must become poor to achieve happiness in life. It is contradicting that Gandhi himself has said in his other writings that poverty needs to be eliminated from the society. And here he says "millions will always remain poor."¹³ He himself cannot justify this idea.

He wants women to be confined to households and not to wander in streets. According to Gandhi woman should be 'Queen of the households'.¹⁴ The extremists in the society cutting across nations also put forward, more or less, the same argument. By this argument it is clear that women do not have a proper place in the Swaraj. This argument put forward the idea that women do not have the freedom to work according to their choice. Personal freedom is absent here in this argument.

Gandhi could not accommodate all the sections of the people into his idea of Swaraj. Most of the ideas themselves are anti democratic and anti-political. Swaraj was exclusive to the people who participated in the process. Here participation means 'performing duty' and therefore the individual can attain political freedom only by performing his/her duty towards others. By using the words participation or process he does not mean election process or voting rights. He simply means the ethical and moral living of the people who live in his Swaraj. Through the ideas of Swaraj, he restricts the individual freedom of the people in every sense.

⁷ . Lou Marin, Camus and Gandhi: Essays on Philosophical in Hammarkjold's Times, Dag Hammarkjold Foundation, Uppasala, 2008, p.26

⁸ . M.K. Gandhi, *op.cit.*, pp.34-36

⁹ . Banaras Hindu University Speech, February 4, 1916, <http://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/gandhicomelive/speech2.htm>, accessed on March 20, 2018

¹⁰ . M.K. Gandhi, *op.cit.*, p.75

¹¹ . Homer A. Jack (Ed.), *The Gandhi Reader: A Source Book of His Life and Writings*, Grove Press, New York, 1956, p.318

¹² . Anthony J Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p.68

¹³ . M.K. Gandhi, *op.cit.*, p.55

¹⁴ . *ibid.*, p.24