Text and Context of Hind Swaraj

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Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has attained an iconic status in the world and in history is undisputable. About a hundred volumes of his collected works have been published by the Government of India, more than three thousand five hundred books have been written on Gandhi, and his symbols and words continue to inspire and encourage. As we celebrate a hundred years of his acknowledged magnum opus Hind Swaraj, it is time to reflect on the importance of both the text and the context of this renowned work. Hind Swaraj is a seminal and a foundational work, and it is widely seen as the bible of non-violent revolutions as well as providing the blueprint of all kinds of revolutions. Though Gandhi wrote extensively, Hind Swaraj was his earliest text, in which he questioned the accepted myths and the truths of his times. The text is not only a tract on political methodology, philosophy or political movements; it is a statement of faith. Therefore, its relevance goes much beyond the time frame in which it was written.

Gandhi wrote this short tract in 1909 originally in Gujarati on a return voyage from London to South Africa.
He completed the work in a short period of ten days, and when his right hand was tired he wrote with his left hand. It appears that the ideas in the book were written in a state of frenzy, and that these ideas formulated faster than his words. The text consists of twenty short chapters, cast in the form of a dialogue between Gandhi who is called the ‘editor’ and his interlocutor known as the “reader.” The style is similar to the Socrates dialogue in Plato’s Republic and the Upanishads. Writing 275 pages, Gandhi struck down his original words only ten times. Such was the vision and passion with which he wrote this text.

Despite the fact that the work is shot through with complex philosophical ideals, arguments, and values, doctrines of action, and notions of self rule or swaraj, Hind Swaraj is an easy book to read, because it contains neither theories, nor jargons. In fact, Gandhi thought of Hind Swaraj as a book that could be “put into the hands of a child.

Hind Swaraj was serialized in two installments in December 1909 in the Gujarati Edition of Indian Opinion, the weekly published by Gandhi in South Africa. In January 1910, it was published as a booklet in Gujarati. In March 1910, the British Government proscribed it along with other publications on the plea that these writings contained seditious literature. Gandhi then translated the booklet into English. In fact this is the only text which he
himself translated. In this paper I wish to reflect both on the issue of the context as well as the text of HS.

II

What is a Classic and How do we Read it?

_Hind Swaraj_ can rightly be regarded as a classic; a unique testimony of a man who tried to translate his vision for human freedom into mass action. But then the question arises, what is a classic and what is its value? There are roughly two sorts of answers to this question. Hegel held that classics embody the spirit of their age. On the other hand, Quentin Skinner argues that a classic is a work that goes against the spirit of its age. Howsoever we define a classic, we know a classic when we see one, for the richness of its ideas, the lucidity of its prose, and the continuing relevance of its ideas. We read classics for pure intellectual satisfaction, and because we are seekers of knowledge. But more importantly, we read classics because we know that all good political thinking has to have knowledge of the past. We read classics to understand where we come from, how we have reached where we are at the present, and what were the roads taken and the roads not taken. In sum, classics not only tell us how we should live, but also illumine our path with their wisdom, and thereby provide solutions for our current predicament. For our knowledge of the past helps us to come to terms with ourselves. As the philosopher Santayana was to comment insightfully, “those who condemn history are bound to repeat it”. The past then is not another country; it is part of the present. For instance
the ‘present’ of Indian society is the product of our past, i.e., colonialism. Our language, our ideas our vocabularies, our texts and our critical thinking have been constituted by colonialism.

But we also know that it is impossible to reconstruct the past because we approach history from the vantage point of the present, what is called a ‘presentist’ conception of history. Moreover, our interpretation of the past is determined by our current concerns. For instance how many of us go back to the nineteenth century because we grapple with problems of imperialism, casteism, gender imbalances or poverty? We read history and classics from the point of view of our current concerns, worries, preoccupations, and our desire to understand ourselves. Above all we read classics to save ourselves from getting lost. This does not mean that we do not understand history as it was, but to be conscious that we often understand the past from the vantage point of the present.

Of course there are different ways of understanding history through narratives, travelogues, events, novels and studies of processes. Political theorists, for example, understand the history of ideas through classics, not only because they condense the spirit of their age, but because they raise normative and ethical questions that remain relevant for us till today. Classics like *Hind Swaraj* not only tell us of the ethical and normative issues that marked that time, not only do they
address the crisis of their age, they ask deep questions about the spirit of those times.

Now, the eminent historian Quentin Skinner is of the view that classics are time bound, and that we should read them keeping in mind that they address specific historical needs. Skinner has been associated with a group of philosophers who have had a shared link with Cambridge and are known as the Cambridge school. They chose not to emphasise a particular text, but to focus on the intellectual political and ideological contexts within which these texts were written, and the languages that both shaped the context of their writing, as well as those that were shaped by these contexts.

On the other hand, the textual approach adopted by the political theorist Terence Ball is concerned with reading a theory out of the text, and reconstructing it for our purpose. The autonomy of the text, holds Ball, is the necessary key to its meaning. The idea of reading a classic is to recover timeless elements or dateless wisdom that has universal application and continuing relevance. Broadly speaking an emphasis on the social context cancels out timelessness, and the textual approach emphasizes texts that answer questions which are timeless, universal, and transhistorical.

There is however another way of reading a text. The answers given to the central questions may be time bound—what is justice, what is freedom, what is the
nature of imperialism? But the questions are relevant and transhistorical, therefore, classics are relevant. Secondly classics help us to provide a critique of our present understanding, because they question, probe and challenge existing systems of power, legitimacy, and ways of being. That is why leading political philosophers have been persecuted, even executed for their ideas like Socrates and Gandhi. Their ideas were threats to existing ways of understanding the world. Philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire did not create the revolution. But they expressed the discontent and the tensions underlying society. They understood that dispriveleged classes were making claims on society that could not be fulfilled unless society was changed.

When we come to *Hind Swaraj*, we realize that it is a classic. Not only a saga of hope and loss; *Hind Swaraj* embodies a struggle over competing ideas. This struggle over ideas acts as a whetstone to sharpen our understanding, helps us raise new questions, and also aids us in drafting out the answers. Like all political philosophy, *Hind Swaraj* is public spirited for three reasons: one, it critiques social and political arrangements, secondly it searches for what is right and the good, and, thirdly it makes us aware of the fact that individual wellbeing is dependent on social wellbeing. Simply put *Hind Swaraj* gives us an alternative way of understanding how and why we think of ourselves and of society in a particular way. Like other classics *Hind Swaraj* condenses the spirit of its time both through documentation
and critique. At the same time, it reaches beyond its age, stimulates minds of later generations, and provokes them to ask questions.

III
What was Gandhi trying to do in Hind Swaraj?

Having given a brief theoretical background to what constitutes the text and the context of *Hind Swaraj* this paper seeks to find answers to the following questions that are in the main inspired by Skinner.

A) What was Gandhi doing in writing a text in relation to other available texts? The answer to this question will define the ideological context of *Hind Swaraj*. HS was a text written in response to violent, militant, revolutionary methods adopted by a group of Indian nationalists. Gandhi advocated non-violent methods rooted in the ethical-moral advocacy of politics. The political philosophy of Aurbindo, Raja Rammohun Roy, Vivekananda, Ravindranath Tagore and other thinkers of the time had addressed issues such as colonial subjugation, nature of civilization, and the perennial search of human beings to live nurtured and fulfilled lives. *Hind Swaraj* as a reappraisal of theories of the nature of Indian civilization and as an ethical-moral response to political issues provided an alternative way to thinking about politics compared to existing theories and philosophies.
B) Why was it written and for whose benefit? Gandhi was apprehensive that an emerging new leadership of the anti-imperialist movement would legitimize the use of violence. This had become painfully obvious during the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the communal riots that followed. Seeking to counter the cult of violence present in some sections of the nationalist movements as well as in the practices of the colonial power, *Hind Swaraj* teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate, and replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It pits as Gandhi said, “the soul force against brute force.” (p.15) *Hind Swaraj* embodied Gandhi’s blueprint of an ideal society and the state. And towards this end he in *Hind Swaraj* addressed his own countrymen as well as the British colonial power.

C) What was its practical context? The British colonial government had treated rigid *Shastric* injunctions and traditions of Indians, at par with British law, and judged them on grounds of rationality. The British also used the “civilization” debate, to legitimize their rule in India. It was in this precise context that Gandhi resolved to reconstruct the rich cultural heritage and the traditions of his country. This he did in *Hind Swaraj*. His ultimate objective was to emancipate his people both from (a) obsolete traditions and (b) unquestioning imitation of modern civilization. The linguistic vocabulary of that period defined his ideology in *Hind Swaraj* as *Swaraj*. *Swaraj* was a concept extensively used by Gandhi’s contemporaries such as Aurobindo, Tilak and Tagore. *Hind Swaraj* permeated this ideology with a theory of
political action. *Swaraj* thus acquired a unique meaning in Gandhi’s philosophy.

**IV**

The Objective of Hind Swaraj

Let us now come to the crux of the argument; that is the relevance of the classic. Classics like *Hind Swaraj* can be understood in terms of its context as well as in terms of the perennial relevance of its arguments and insights. The core ingredients of *Hind Swaraj* are constituted by deep philosophical reflections on *Swaraj*. *Swaraj* is an Upanishadic word found in the *Rigveda* where ‘*Swa*’ is self and ‘*raj*’ means to be able to shine on its own. In other words the concept stands for mastery over oneself through control of one’s senses or ‘*indriyas*’. In short, *Swaraj* denotes the internal governance of oneself, or more precisely of one’s being. The concept sensitizes the reader on how to humanize and govern oneself before humanizing and governing the society. Gandhi argues in this text that the self governing society is best suited for liberated individuals who master self-restraint. If needs match possessions and there is no greed, their will be no need for a police state.

Some of the main arguments of the text of *Hind Swaraj* are as follows:
A) Political life has the potential of becoming the highest form of active life, if it is practiced within the framework of updated *Dharma*, making it suitable for modern times.
B) Civilization can help or hinder progress and a nation’s rejuvenation will depend on its ethical orientation.

C) Swaraj is rule of praaja (subjects) viz. self-rule within appropriate political community of a nation state. Gandhi sought to resolve Hindu-Muslim hostilities on this basis.

D) Self government requires transformation of the self, which includes not only the refusal to use violence and coercion but also adopting virtues like temperance, justice, charity, truthfulness, courage, fearlessness and freedom from greed, which would reinforce political ethics.

E) Gandhi differentiates between religion as formal organization and religion as ethics and spirituality, which teaches unconditional love for the neighbour. Within these arguments Gandhi gives reasons to support tolerance which later culminated into Sarvadharma Samabhava as a state of human consciousness.

F) A modern state without Swaraj will replace British Raj with Indian Raj. In Hind Swaraj Gandhi refers metaphorically to all modern states as tiger. He wrote, “you want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englistan.” (p. 26) His argument is that all tigers seek prey and there is no difference between the white tiger and the brown tiger in the absence of Swaraj.
G) Lasting lesson of *Hind Swaraj* is non-violence where Gandhi relates Non-violence to the debate on ends and means and points out a) that violence destroys life, b) violence comes from intention to harm and violence is better than cowardice. He discusses the relative moral superiority of Non-violence in terms of Love, Truth, Compassion, Suffering, Justice and triumph of soul force over brute force. Soul exercises these naturally if mind can control passion. Therefore, the success of Non-violence depends on the state of soul and mind.

H) This also requires an appropriate system of education and technology. Gandhi pointed out that fascination of India for modern western civilization arises from uncritical attitude of Indians towards modern education and machinery. (Later in 1921 and 1928 he modified his opinions on these issues).

I) Science, Technology and machinery that meet the needs of Indian masses is not condemned by Gandhi but science, technology and machine which reward the skilled and the powerful and marginalizes the poor and the weak is what he discards. He wanted appropriate technology and machines which improved material welfare for all, not only the rich and educated. Hence the debate was on the kind of technology, science and machines that were required for human survival. He accordingly supported technology if it is linked to human good. Though an ascetic himself, he does not glorify poverty, instead he wanted well clothed, well-groomed, well read people
living decent lives and if science can help us to achieve this, it is to be welcomed.

Lastly Gandhi’s agenda was to establish a link between the local and universal. One cannot enjoy the comfort of air conditioned rooms and support agitation against the Tehri dam and become a silent spectator to the destruction of eco-systems and fauna and flora. Secondly, for Gandhi human being is not only body but also a spirit and the two have to be harmonised. However, this does not at the same time mean that the body is negated or denied. Gandhi also emphasized that unbridled individualism will lead to consumerist culture where the greed will replace need. Gandhi’s talisman is his ultimate agenda because when in doubt, Gandhi advices that one must recall the poorest and the weakest man one knows and ask oneself, if the action is going to be good for him and if it would restore dignity to the hungry and spiritually starving man.

V

To conclude I will leave you with few ideas to reflect upon. The text of Hind Swaraj is constituted both by colonialism as well as by the practices of the nationalists. In deriving a response to the current debates, Gandhi engaged in philosophical reflection on not only political choices but also the morality of politics, the end of political practices, the good life and how it can be achieved and the development of human beings as moral beings.
In writing _Hind Swaraj_ he drew upon the notions and the concepts used by his contemporaries and gave them a new meaning, mainly by making these the source of political action. Politics itself he did not see as divorced from ethics.

At the same time the text of _Hind Swaraj_ is concerned with the connection between the personal self and political self. For him spiritual quest meant social responsibility and not a retreat into otherworldliness. Thus the _Hind Swaraj_ cannot be understood without reference to both text and context.

**References**


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