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# CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIAN CULTURES

**Indian Philosophical Studies, I**

edited by  
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# INTRODUCTION

India is certainly one of the most important social experiments in the world today. It is testing out whether a highly diverse people, increasingly aware of its freedom, can manage to live, and indeed to thrive, together.

At the present time this question is even more specific, for the world is completing a long rationalist cycle in which the potentialities for strong centralism have been implemented not only practically, but theoretically. The result has been the development of crushing totalitarian ideologies, so one-sided and oppressive that they toppled either from external power (Fascism) or internal weakness (communism) within decades of their origin.

India then becomes a testing ground for the other major alternative approach which has been proposed for our times, namely a social dynamic which comes not from the top down, but from the bottom up; and not from the center to the periphery, but from the periphery to the center.

The chapters of this work analyze this both as problem and challenge, as possibility and hope. In the end the verdict is still out, but the reader can understand the issues much more clearly and draw upon the Indian -- especially the Bengali -- experience.

The Prologue by Asha Mukherjee introduces these themes by looking into the life and thought of Gandhi as the founder of the Nation and finds there basic themes with which India is still struggling. Indeed, progress or regression in these areas bespeak the flow and eddy of Indian life as a whole.

Part I is entitled "Principles of Civil Society in Indian Thought."

Chapter I by K. Bagchi, "Civil Society and Reason, Culture and Dissent," begins the work with considerable hesitation regarding civil society. He understands it more in an ideological sense as a new creation of abstract reasoning which would not allow for personal freedom. This concern regarding the depersonalizing effects of reason is shared broadly today. But the renewal of attention to civil society would seem to reflect the effort to reground social life in the concrete groupings of people as they face existential challenges. In this light Professor Bagchi joins the call for an expansion of the notion of reason by addition of further forms of awareness. This paper then is rightly placed first as it presents a critique of the notion of civil society and begins to point to way to elaborate the notion and the practice in

## 2 Introduction

a more adequate manner. The remainder of the work will build on this foundation.

Chapter II by Mrinal K. Dasgupta, "Pluralism vis-a-vis Cultural Conflict: an Eco-Sociological Analysis of the Future of Man," lays the foundations in biology and its lessons regarding evolution and its dynamics. This work shows how diversity is necessary and is generated from within, even as we develop common dimensions. From this he suggests the principles of such higher social unities as can constitute civil society within the Indian cultural traditions.

Chapter III by George Pattery, "Pluralist Society: A Gandhian Perspective," lays out a rich theory of civil society in the mind of Gandhi that is surprisingly contemporary. By giving priority to the village life of India Gandhi was able to conceive of small units extending indefinitely on a horizontal level in such manner that not only was there not a strong vertical line of power from above, but even horizontally there need not be a strong center controlling all the rest. Hence freedom or *swaraj* means on the social level rather self-reliance and self-sufficiency (*swadeshi*) for the welfare of all (*sarvodaya*). These proposals of *swadeshi* and *sarvodaya* by M. Gandhi which are not far from the notions of subsidiarity and solidarity in the modern Catholic social documents now central to the contemporary political theory of the European Union. Technologically they are the principles of the open architecture of the internet. In addition this chapter develops the significance of the body and of suffering in the thought and life of Gandhi and in social renewal.

Part II, "Classical Cultural Resources for Civil Society in India," moves from principles to the vision of the ancient schools of Buddhism and Jainism and to the hopes and fears of Rabindranath Tagore.

Chapter IV by S.K. Pathak, "Models of Civic Awareness in Ancient India," looks back into the roots of Indian culture for the materials for such a construction. Especially, he reviews the pre-Buddhist and Vedic roots followed by the Buddhist, Jain and Tantric.

Chapter V by Sibnarayan Ray, "Pluralism and Cultural Conflict: Rabindranath Tagore's View," begins with Tagore's very high poetic vision which he expressed with great and inspiring beauty. This was the picture of a peaceful world to which the Indian experience would make a decisively constructive

contribution. The chapter notes, however, that in the last ten years of his life the looming conflicts within Indian and throughout the world turned Tagore's bright hope into dark foreboding. Chapter VI by Shyamal Sarkar, "Rabindranath Tagore's Concept of Social Integration," continues the themes of Chapter V so that the two constitute a real pair.

Part III, "Civil Society and Modern Indian Political Life," turns to the political practice of modern India during both the colonial and the post Independence periods. Here the tendency toward centrism belies earlier traditions, but is being rapidly transformed in this post cold war era.

Chapter VII by Anupam Gupta, "Civil Society and Basic Needs in the Public Sector: Economics in India," takes a new turn. Where the previous chapters had stated the problem and the theory, this and the following chapters look more to concrete realizations. They note in particular that India has been strongly centralized, not only by the colonial powers for the purpose of ruling but by the post Independence power as well. Thus while there are local groupings these are held close by pervasive political powers so that they reflect not the varied local realities of their members, but national strategic goals and concerns.

Chapter VIII by Sanjeeb Muirerjee, "Civil Society and Western Societies: Tradition, Modernity and Communism," is a history of modern Bengali political movements. It shows the effort to achieve a politics that would have room for all as being less than successful. This is not only because of the classical stratification of the society, but because of the compromise of the socialist party which, though proposing the people as the legitimate source of power, in fact manipulates them in a way coherent with the centralist character of the nation.

Chapter IX by Dikshit Sinha, "Pluralism and Cultural Conflict in India," is concerned with the horizontal and vertical organization of Indian social life. In this context the importance of civil society emerges for assuring the bond between communities. In this regard the Panchayat system of old would appear to possess important lessons for contemporary life.

## PROLOGUE

# GANDHI AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERNITY: A POINT OF DEPARTURE

ASHA MUKHERJEE

The paper consists of two parts. The first part deals with the problem of modernity arising out of the individualism and places the problem in the historical, cultural sociological and political perspective in the West, as well as in the East. The affirmation of individuality has gone so far that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena is missing. Reason has undermined moral coherence, and ethical ambiguity is an intrinsic feature of the scientific method. Religion that gives sanctions to morality is reduced to a relativization of norms. Different projects of modernity are caught in a series of self-contradictions. Gradually, in the twentieth century polarization developed between transplanted modernity and defensive tradition. Gandhi<sup>1</sup> was one of the very few who formulated a critique of modernity. Most Indians began subscribing blindly to the political and industrial hardware of modernity.

The second part of the paper deals with the Gandhian point of departure where the contributions made by Gandhi are discussed with a view to the problems raised in the first part by emphasizing the idea of cooperative society which was supposed to be the basis of Indian psyche. An individual is understood basically in its relatedness with the other. He also argued for ethical universality and tried to align both means and ends.

Is it possible to devise a means for bypassing the negativities of modernism? The contention is that "Hind Swaraj still provides a point of departure" and we need to creatively capture and apply its spirit in the prevailing situation. In *Hind Swaraj*<sup>2</sup> Gandhi discusses the issues of freedom and violence in a wider and deeper understanding of the individual, society and the significance of human life. It emphasizes the primary human requirements of the 'responsible society' and enables us to take stock of the present and innovate for the future. At the end some guidelines are suggested to translate Gandhi into practice so as to achieve social transformation. An attempt is made to argue that the problem of modernity centers around the individualism of the

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West and *Hind Swaraj* suggested as an alternative point of departure. Its aim is not to arrive at what Gandhi would have said were he alive today, but creatively to capture and apply the spirit of his endeavor in the prevailing situation. Independent India did not pay much attention to Gandhi and suspended like Trishanku, midway between heaven and earth, he has been debarred from being a role model since he is considered as a supernatural human being. This paper aims at suggesting an alternative to solve the problems arising out of negativities of modernity.

### **INDIVIDUALISM AS A PROBLEM FOR MODERNITY**

The problem of modernity has historical, cultural, sociological and political perspective in the West, as well as in the East. Modernity has spread beyond its geographical and civilizational area of origin, primarily due to its military and economic dimensions. But modernity both solves and creates problems, producing at times unforeseen consequences. The muddy cultural waters that follow in the wake of the modernizing ship often dismay Third World modernists. Scientific, technological and economic progress does not come without some cultural baggage, the latter not as welcome as the former. Asians are beginning to question how much of the entire package, bright or dark, is suitable for absorption, and how much of it can be resisted. The seed of modernity were first sown in India through foreign imposition.

Historically, the Muslim invasion did not disturb the group ethos of Hindus even though syncretic experiments in the field of art, music, architecture and religion continued. But the European conquest did effect Indians in all aspects of life and they were made to understand that theirs was an inferior civilization. This understanding was derived from modern humanist Europe, which was brought into a sharp confrontation with the Hindus. The response was a mixture of rejection, accommodation and imitation. The affirmation of individuality has gone so far that a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena is missing. Actions are not seen in their total perspective and the consequences are not initially foreseeable. Reason has undermined moral coherence, and ethical ambiguity is an intrinsic feature of the scientific method. Religion that gives sanctions to morality is reduced to a relativization of norms. Different projects of modernity are caught in a series of self-contradictions. Gradually,

in the twentieth century a polarization developed between transplanted modernity and defensive tradition. Gandhi was one of the very few who formulated a critique of modernity, although it was not academic. Most Indians began subscribing blindly to the political and industrial hardware of modernity, and struggled with an understanding schizophrenically split between Indian philosophic ideals and western anthropocentrism. Removing Indian poverty was one of the central concerns of national movements, but Gandhi did not see economic problems overtaking the Indian dharmic or normative framework. He blurred the lines between knowledge and behavior not by force, but by 'a total change of being which is brought about by a long deep process of unselfing'. If we contemplate the developments in the economic and socio-political sphere in last century and a half, Gandhism appears almost irrelevant and the Nehruvian socialistic model has reached an impasse. Is it then possible to devise a means of bypassing the negativities of modernism? The contention is that "Hind Swaraj still provides a point of departure" and we need creatively to capture and apply its spirit in the prevailing situation. It emphasizes the primary human requirements of a responsible society and enables us to take stock of the present and innovate for the future, on the assumption that socio-political change is an ever present possibility.

India, for millennia has survived as a group society where all important decisions were taken by consensus, even during the waves of outsiders. Only when the imperial rule was introduced was the principle of individualism introduced into Indian society. The notion of 'One man, one vote' has no history in Indian society, but the republican traditions of group society was pervasive. Groups bargain, cooperate and compete amongst themselves for political and economic power. The theory of human rights as an unrelated individual, without social relatedness, is based on an undefinable entity, almost a non-person. Classes and kinds of people welcomed modernization as industrialization, science and technology. But tension persisted between modern individualist norms and the traditional group character of Indian society. The other element which the Indian political system could not absorb is that of 'opposition' and 'the right to disagree'. The Indian psyche has different sociological and survival techniques, which either politely consents or angrily dissents; it is hyper sensitive to loss of 'status'. In Asian societies in general, gentlemen do not openly disagree. Open disagreement,

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if not expressive of poor taste, may just be interpreted as a bargaining chip, as a gambit for opening negotiations, which will lead to eventual agreement.

These differences and the process of change in the traditional Indian society to liberal democratic institutions created utter confusion of principles and standards. There is no clear cut value or set norms, which could provide a coherent decision making apart from those of bare survival. The fractured policies gave rise to violence and opportunism. Only Gandhi was perceptive enough to take the warnings of the Western critics of modernization seriously, and adopt a principled position against it. For this he was regarded as both conservative and progressive. Awareness of larger civilizational interest at work amongst peoples, particularly in relation to conflict, have begun to catch attention of such political theorists as Samuel Huntington,<sup>3</sup> etc.

But the crux of the problem lies in interpreting 'the primary human requirements', 'responsible society,' the 'possibility of socio-political change,' nonviolence, etc. For example, it would not be out of order to revive the debate about the meaning of a nonviolent society in the modern world. True persuasion and civility could be effective ways of dealing with some problems of violence but this has very limited scope. Terrorism, militaristic attitudes, political violence perhaps cannot be stopped by persuasion unless they themselves have a inner sense of individual and social responsibility. Hence, the basic question remains unanswered as to how to achieve a non-violent society? On the other hand, if we reinterpret them in the present changed context we will see that they are so radically different from Gandhi's perception of them that it is almost impossible to see as how they will provide an alternative point of departure. But this does not restrain one from appreciating the sincere effort to work out a vision of social life utilizing the best of modernity and the Indian traditions.

Gandhi's contributions in this regard can be seen as a point of departure towards the problems raised by emphasizing ethical universality; that he wanted to align both means and ends through Truth and Nonviolence. Aurobindo<sup>4</sup> his contemporary also tried to absorb modernity in his evolutionary theory. He did not condemn it but placed it in a map of multiple or 'plural views of reality', knowledge systems and values. Aurobindo's vision was spiritual and cultural, where as Gandhi's was moral and socio-political. Social morality was the main concern of Gandhi, but not of

Aurobindo who was more concerned with the spiritual future of human kind.

## A GANDHIAN RESPONSE

Today it is only Gandhi to whom one can turn as a starting point for the ethical discussion. *Hind Swaraj* still provides a point of departure as it emphasizes the primary human requirements of responsible society, enables us to take stock of the present and to innovate future, on the assumption that socio-political change is an ever-present possibility. Gandhi has presented a critique of modern civilization in *Hind Swaraj* he discusses the issues of freedom and violence in a wider and deeper understanding of the individual, society and the significance of human life. This may be regarded as a Gandhian manifesto, which may not be practicable in its particular prescriptions, yet provides a point of departure for review and reformulation. In John Middleton Murray's words it is "the greatest book that has been written in modern times". The book is useful in providing a perspective on certain self-enclosing structures in modern society and on the unexamined assumptions which inform the self-contradictory logic of modernity's thrust towards greater control and manipulation of the individual under cover of enlarging the space of individual choice. *Hind Swaraj* also offers the reader an alternate vision of human dignity and freedom. It suggested nonviolent weapons for struggle, along with an ideal for community life.

Gandhi concentrated on Truth, morality and nonviolence to relate across religions and to extend religion through moral elements into social service and political activity. Truth for him is a fundamental reality, which has dimensions beyond the merely rational to the spiritual or divine. It is Being of the world and it is accessible to experience. The two senses of Truth: one for the sadhus who after withdrawal for self-development return to society as religious teachers, and the other for the majority who remain within the social nexus and are governed by the usual dharma. Gandhi did not totally reject this dichotomy, but reaffirmed the intrinsic relation between religion and social reform. In the Indian context, he extended dharma to politics. For him *God is truth* was not enough, but *Truth is God*. *Sat* is Reality or God and is the substantive Truth, but *satya* as truth can be brought closer to concepts of truthfulness and ethical behavior in general -- in speech, thought and action. Here truth is the

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guideline for the conduct of life. The various modes of truthfulness ultimately resolve into or stem from *ahimsa* or non-injury in thought, word and deed. This is the ethical implication of the vedantic ideal of identification with all that exists. Gandhi believed there is a moral situational truth in human exchanges perceived through a mix of reason and intuition or moral insight, which in principle is a subject of common, though conditional perception. A mere battle of right against wrong, and moral dilemmas remain conflictual, whereas a common striving for, or perception of truth, leads to harmony. The basis for this is Vyasa's principle of love by which one can arrive at a statement in which the fundamental interests of all parties are protected and none is injurious to the other. (Gandhi himself, however, could not arrive at statement in which the fundamental interests of all parties were protected after India's independence, and as a result had to withdraw from active politics.)

In the Kantian framework the slightest flavor of self-interest introduces radical evil, but in Indian philosophic environment it is not so. Rather, it allows for a graduated approach to Truth. Swadharma does not deny the oneness or relatedness of all selves. By religion Gandhi meant the pursuit of all-encompassing Truth and Morality. Essentially politics is about the good society and this is the responsibility of both civic society and the individual.

How to translate *Hind Swaraj* in to practice? In answering one can describe the role of NGOs who help in bringing about a transformation. Some of the steps to start with, it is suggested, are: Gandhi's 'bread labor' which could be transmuted into compulsory national service of constructive social work; Panchayats could be provided the status of autonomous republics; consumption could be controlled; economics could be enriched by ethics; privatization would help in regaining mutual trust and make space for a new kind of confidence; and a dynamic education system could induce morality and responsibility, etc. There are also problems in Gandhism which need to be reinterpreted. The communal problem and the problem of the corruption of human nature due to power. It would be interesting to draw upon the ideas of Tagore,<sup>5</sup> which relate very meaningfully to these issues.

### CONCLUSION

Today Indians stand at the intersection of four of the most

important debates facing the world at the beginning of the new millennium: bread-versus-freedom, centralization-versus federalism, pluralism versus fundamentalism, and globalization versus self reliance. In this context Gandhi's vision of India was very clear. He recognized the pluralistic character of India but like all great thinkers he managed to distill all their qualities and yet transcend their contradictions. But the principles he stood for - - *Satya*, *Ahimsa* and *Non-violence* -- and the way in which he asserted them are easier to admire than to follow.

His truth emerged from his conviction that meaning was not only what was accurate, but also what was just and therefore right. Truth cannot be obtained by "untruthful" or unjust means, which included inflicting violence upon one's opponent. Nonviolence was the way to vindicate the truth by the infliction of suffering not on the opponent, but on oneself. It was essential to accept punishment willingly in order to demonstrate the strength of one's convictions. The power of nonviolence rests in being able to say, "to show you that you are wrong, I punish myself". This may sound very difficult to follow in practice. It only shows that Gandhism has its limitations, which have been exposed over the years since 1947, but this is not to deny in the least the greatness of his vision and thought. In fact, India after independence can be regarded post-Gandhian India. It paid lip service too much to its Gandhian patrimony, while striking out in directions of which Gandhi could not have approved. But its central challenges remained the ones Gandhi identified: to develop the capacity to meet the nations basic needs, to promote among Indians the integrity and commitment he labeled "Truth". Perhaps the main reason for the failures have been that people very often give different interpretations to his basic principles so that the purity of his vision is lost and thus may not lead to the desired results.

Gandhi's model was optimistically grounded in man's moral nature. But morality and conscience have a propensity to become subversive to authority: political, social or religious. The lawlessness present in the Indian situation: bandhs, satyagrahas, dharnas, student indiscipline, all can trace their origin to forms of Gandhian protest. The society and government of modern India is by no means organized according to the principles of *Hind Swaraj* within which it should have been possible to conduct a moral dialogue. These protest movements hardly pass the tests of responsible citizen action as conceived by Mahatma. Gandhism

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rests on the assumption that man by nature is moral and left to himself will always know what is good, and that good once perceived by collective wisdom cannot be wrong. Village society was to guarantee human dignity for all and retain its group solidarity as the foundation which guarantees collective morality and achieves the so-called 'good' for all. The success or failure of Gandhi's experiment depends on the moral quality of the leaders, on a consensus for social and communal life, and on a high level of wisdom as the basis of judgement. In the present drastically changed scenario of decline in moral values and corruption the applicability of this theory needs to be worked out.

### NOTES

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