

Was Gandhi a Mainstream Anarchist?

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We have to learn, and to teach others, that we do not want the tyranny of either English Rule or Indian Rule.

– M.K. Gandhi

The literature on Gandhi is enormous. Hence it is surprising that only one commentator has made an attempt to take up Gandhi's claim that he was an anarchist. B.N. Ganguly pays heed to this Gandhian assertion when he asks "could it be that Gandhi belonged to the mainstream of anarchism?" He then goes on to say "one is constrained to give an affirmative answer."¹ Ganguly's is a lone voice and it is definitely not the received view on Gandhi. The most systematic presentation of the received view can be seen in the two other books which appeared, along with Ganguly's in the early seventies; one by George Woodcock – the best known historian of the anarchist movement – and the other by Tarachand – the official historian of the freedom movement. Woodcock's conclusion is that Gandhi was *anarchistic* rather than an anarchist, for Gandhi "never made the final step into the completely co-operative society."² Tarachand informs us that "although the ideal of Gandhiji was a stateless society. The bitter experience of the non-co-operation movement obliged him to make concession to realities and modify the ideal. . . ."³ If the received view (of which Woodcock and Tarachand are slightly different incarnations) is acceptable, then perhaps Gandhi-baiters might have some justification in dismissing Gandhi as a "proponent of resurrection of past glories, advocating a restoration of tradition as an alternative to modernity."⁴ However if Gandhi was a mainstream anarchist, as Ganguly claims, it becomes necessary to reevaluate our understanding of him.

I believe that Ganguly's claim is substantial. His thesis, therefore, deserves to be studied with the utmost seriousness. However the method adopted by Ganguly to justify his claim, though interesting, is not sufficient. He arrives at his conclusion by means of a simplistic comparison of Gandhi and Kropotkin. The thesis is too strong to be defended by a comparative study. Comparison makes sense only when the thesis is argued independently. Therefore in this paper I attempt to demonstrate that Gandhi was a mainstream anarchist, far subtler than Kropotkin himself.

I

In 1916, on the 6th of February, Gandhi made his first significant public appearance in India. The occasion was the opening of the Benaras University. During the course of his speech Gandhi, while attacking the extremists, said "I myself am an anarchist, but of another kind."⁵ This is perhaps the only public context in which Gandhi describes himself as an anarchist. As the context makes abundantly clear, he is using the term to demote the revolutionary terrorists of Madan Lal Dhingra's generation. In a popular sense, the word 'anarchist' signifies any terrorist. It is not clear whether Gandhi is using the term in this wide sense. He might possibly have been using the term to denote the terrorist activities of such groups as the Ghadr group revolutionaries, who drew their inspiration from the European anarcho-syndicalist movement.⁶

If we go by this conjecture, Gandhi, when he said that he was an anarchist of a different kind, is in fact distinguishing himself from anarchists who used violence but who shared the same political goal as he does. However, the Indian revolutionary terrorists, in a strict sense, were not anarchists. Their political aim like Gandhi's was *swaraj*. But by *swaraj* they meant "English Rule without the Englishmen"⁷ whereas Gandhi takes *swaraj* to mean a non-coercive social order. Therefore we cannot make much out of Gandhi's self-referential use of the term 'anarchist.' If on the other hand we consider a note Gandhi published in *Sarvodaya* in 1939, we will get a clarification. There he unambiguously described his political ideal and called it *enlightened anarchy*.⁸ One who upholds a doctrine of enlightened anarchy, is definitely an enlightened anarchist. Since the political ideal described in *Sarvodaya* was not different from the one which was advocated in the *Hind Swaraj* published in 1909, we can safely conclude that at least from 1909 onwards, Gandhi can be treated (by his own reckoning) as an enlightened anarchist.

II

But how deep was this commitment? If the commitment was not deep enough the fact that Gandhi described himself as an anarchist, would not be of great significance. But Ganguly's claim is that Gandhi's commitments were deep enough for him to be treated as a mainstream anarchist.

Before proceeding any further let me state, as clearly as possible, what anarchism is considered to be. For this purpose I intend to adopt and extend the criteria proposed by John P. Clarke. Thereafter I shall attempt to demonstrate how Gandhi's views synchronise with this criteria.

What is anarchism? The term *anarchy* derives its meaning – the absence of authority – from two Greek words “an” and “arkhê.” This does not mean that the anarchists reject all forms of social order. Their slogan is “organisation without authoritarianism.” The authority they reject is the authority which is imposed from above. The *Encyclopédie anarchiste* defines anarchism as “the negation of the principle of Authority in social organizations and the hatred of all constraints that originate in institutions founded on this principle.”⁹ Kropotkin in his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on anarchist, says that anarchism is “a principle or theory of life and conduct in which society is conceived without Government.”¹⁰ Definitions like these only tell us what anarchism rejects. It rejects, for example, authority, government, and the state. However they do not inform us what anarchism proposes. According to Bakunin, anarchism is “an organisation from below upwards, by means of federation.”¹¹ Nevertheless if we look at anarchists’ writings, we can discern many things other than mere rejections and proposals. These writings invariably contain ideas of a desirable social order, a critique of existing society, a view of man and means of passing from the old social order to a new one. It is because of this that John P. Clarke suggests that a full blooded definition of anarchism should incorporate in it all the above characteristics. To be fair Clarke’s proposed definition, is in fact a modified version of Woodcock’s definition of anarchism: “Anarchism is a doctrine which possesses a criticism of existing society, a view of desirable future society; and a means of passing from the one to the other.”¹³ To this Clarke added the idea of human nature, that of man as a fourth element. (Before I take up Clarke’s reformulated definition, let me insert an additional point here. This is important because the subject of our concern is Gandhi. Let me mention, therefore, that there is no direct relation between anarchism and atheism. Some anarchists are atheistic, while some are not. An archetypal atheistic anarchist was Bakunin. A contemporary anarchist, Herbert Read, though a non-believer argues that religion is an essential ingredient in our common life.¹² Obviously, however, all anarchists oppose any hierarchically organised religious set-up.) In order for a political theory to be called anarchism in a complete sense, according to Clarke, it must contain :

- i) a view of an ideal, non-coercive, non-authoritarian society;
- ii) a criticism of existing society and its institutions, based on this anti-authoritarian ideal;
- iii) a view of human nature that justifies the hope for significant progress towards the ideal;

iv) a strategy for change, involving the immediate institution of a non-coercive, non-authoritarian and decentralist alternative.¹⁴

I think (i), (ii), and (iii) above pose no problems. However (iv) perhaps requires clarification because of its ambiguous use of the word "immediate." This term has been used to distinguish anarcho-socialism from Marxian-socialism. Both socialist schemes aim at making the state non-existent. However they disagreed on one crucial issue. Marx and his followers believe that the establishment of dictatorship of the proletariat is necessary before the birth of a non-authoritarian society. The Anarchists, however, argue that since the means will invariably condition the end,¹⁵ dictatorship of the proletariat will end up, not in the establishment of a non-coercive social order, but in authoritarianism wrapped in a red flag. Hence the difference between the Marxists and the anarchists is the difference between an immediate and a mediated establishment of non-authoritarianism after a successful revolution. We can now understand the reason for the inclusion of the word "immediate" in (iv).

Further, (iv) also requires reformation because, as we have noted above, the anarchist always maintains that the means will invariably condition the end. If that is so then according to the anarchists' theory a non-coercive end cannot be brought about by coercive or violent means. This would logically entail that the anarchists, on their own admission, cannot use violent means as a strategy for socio-political change.¹⁶ Therefore we have to reformulate (iv) as: (v) a non-violent strategy for change involving the immediate institution of a non-coercive, non-authoritarian, decentralist alternative.

Let us say, therefore, that a theorist is an anarchist in the *strong* sense of the term if and only if he exhibits (i), (ii), and (iii), and (iv) or (v). If he exhibits only some of them he is an anarchist in the *weak* sense of the term. However, a theorist is a consistent or enlightened anarchist if and only if he exhibits (i), (ii), (iii) and (v). If he exhibits (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv), he is considered to be inconsistent, or a less enlightened anarchist. Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta were all anarchists in the strong sense of the term. Oscar Wilde on the other hand was an anarchist in the weak sense of the term. Nevertheless Bakunin and Malatesta were inconsistent or less enlightened anarchists for they did celebrate violence. Proudhon was an enlightened anarchist for he disowned violence.

In the rest of this essay I shall try and clarify how Gandhi satisfies (i), (ii), (iii) and (v). Therefore I shall argue that Gandhi was an enlightened anarchist in the strong sense of the phrase.

III

(a) *Gandhi's vision of the ideal Society:*
The first defining criterion

If Gandhi is to be termed an anarchist he should satisfy among other things our first defining criterion: I cite two writings of Gandhi for this purpose. The first one appeared in *Harijan* on 26th July 1942¹⁷ and the second in the same publication on 28th July 1946.¹⁸

Gandhi as these two documents clearly testify, envisaged a co-operative society. It is significant to note that such a society is formed by the "free and voluntary play" of human interaction. Such a co-operative society is called *Swaraj*. The term *Swaraj* is intriguing. In the whole corpus of Gandhi's writings, this term does not really complete, or define, itself. In other words, it is a context-sensitive term. However, Gandhi occasionally uses another term *Purna Swaraj*. We may believe that *Purna Swaraj* encapsulates the sense of the envisioned society more accurately than the term *Swaraj*, but this is palpably not the case. Gandhi's vision encompasses an ever-widening circle of inter-related federations of such self-sufficient communes; this vision underwrites a global possibility. Until the whole world becomes such an inter-related federation of republics, *Purna Swaraj* will continue to elude us. It is impossible to stress this point strongly enough. Correspondingly, if we discover the presence of the extraterrestrial, then *Purna Swaraj* by its own logic attains a cosmic dimension. As a theoretical construct, this play between *swaraj* and *purna swaraj* is amazingly subtle. However to bring out the complete nuance of these two concepts is beyond the scope of this paper.

Direct democracy is to prevail in these republics called *swaraj(s)*. They are to be governed by a *panchayat* of five persons, elected democratically. The law of "non-violence rules the individual and his government." There is to be no place for coercive forces like the police or the military in these republics. These communes are to be self-sufficient in all the basic necessities of life. Every activity in these *Swaraj(s)* is to be conducted, as far as possible, on the co-operative basis. Life, Gandhi says, would not be a "pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom." In other words, the governmental structure would not be one which is imposed from above and the society would be totally non-authoritarian. It is true that Gandhi gives only a very broad outline of his ideal society in these two writings. Nevertheless it is possible to fill the gaps by using materials drawn from his other writings and present it as a full-blooded, social order. That possibility is irrelevant. It would suffice to note that Gandhi's envisioned social order is compatible with our first defining character of anarchism.

(b) *Gandhi's critique of the present:*
The second defining criterion

When we now turn to Gandhi's critique of his times, we naturally converge our attention on one basic text, the *Hind Swaraj*. The text I follow is the revised edition of 1939 as published in 1989. One great advantage of this edition is that it documents Gandhi's opinions on this early work at various stages of his life. From these documents one can gather that Gandhi never descended from the views expressed in *Hind Swaraj*. In 1938 for example he said "I have seen nothing to make me alter the views expounded in it."¹⁹

Let me first admit its one and only weakness. It is ethnocentric. However one is not disturbed by this fact. It is the ethnocentrism of a colonial subject, qualitatively different from the arrogant and mindless ethnocentrism of occidental writers. *Hind Swaraj* is aimed at, among others, a soulless people who made attempts to convince Indians "that her people were so uncivilised, ignorant and stolid, it is not possible to induce them to adopt any change."²⁰ However what is really disturbing is the fact that Gandhi's ethnocentrism is perpetually misrepresented as advocating the glorification of the past and of the traditions of Hindu India. The past of India which Gandhi glorified, included the past of the Muslims, the Parsis and the Christians. In short, the glorified past does not go back beyond the date of birth of the Prophet. Let me repeat, Gandhi does not glorify *Hindu* India. His text contains the greatest appeal ever made for communal harmony. Let us be fair. It is not a book written either by a Marxist or a right-wing Hindu reactionary.

In the concluding part of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi makes a stunning declaration "We have to learn, and to teach others, that we do not want the tyranny of either English rule or Indian rule."²¹ It is a demand, as B.R. Nanda says to which, "neither Gokhale nor Tilak, nor indeed any politician of the day would have subscribed."²² For it is a demand asking one to make a clean break with the terrain of hierarchical society. The envisioned break, as it appears in *Hind Swaraj*, is so radical that Gandhi almost makes himself incomprehensible to the many who are hypnotised by the trappings of authority and power. In his analysis of the conditions which are instrumental to the continued presence of the hierarchical society, Gandhi singles out the industrial revolution – technology as the greatest single contributory factor. He then associates that technological culture with modernity and unleashes a devastating critique on it. Gandhi's critique of modernity, I submit, should be seen in the context of that anti-authoritarian declaration. For it is a demand asking one to

make a clean break with the terrain of hierarchical society.

The core of Gandhi's critique is that modernity is through and through, authoritarian, ugly and spiritually annihilating. Gandhi argues that in the first place it makes colonialism possible and then provides the colonizer with weaponry, the means of quick transportation, and all the other instruments of oppression. In other words, modernity is nihilism pure and simple. Gandhi says "But for the railways the English could not have such a hold on India."²³ It is now possible, Gandhi writes "to take away thousands of lives by one man working behind a gun from a hill."²⁴

Nevertheless, one might retort by saying that "modernity" also functions in a way beneficial to humankind. However no utilitarian rhetoric answers Gandhi's critique. His point is that "modernity" by its very nature, is authoritarian. Increasingly it makes the prospects of a non-authoritarian social order difficult to realise. Therefore Gandhi argues that a believer in the virtues of a non-coercive social order, for reasons of logic, ought to reject "modernity." Unless we can show that "modernity" is compatible with the non-authoritarian way of life, we do not even begin to answer the problems raised by Gandhi.

It is not my intention to work out details of Gandhi's critique of "modernity." It is sufficient to notice that Gandhi's critique arises, not from his love for tradition, but from his deep commitment to the ideal of a non-authoritarian social order. Once we grasp this fact, then Gandhi will become available to us. His critique of the judiciary, the medical profession, education and the rest, all arise equally from this one singular obsession. There are some attempts by the contemporary anarchist writers such as Guérin²⁵ and Bookchin²⁶ to demonstrate that "modernity" and anti-authoritarianism are compatible. They tend to argue that the growth of technology would finally make an authoritarian social order impossible. It may be true that the growth of technology is potent enough to make certain crude forms of authoritarianism questionable. One might interpret the recent developments in the so-called Marxist countries, as signs of the above claim. Nevertheless the chances of technological civilisation ending in more subtle and deadly forms of authoritarianism are equally real and this is what we might expect if, we go by Gandhi's analysis of modernity.

(c) Gandhi on human nature: The third defining criterion

If Gandhi is to be called an anarchist in the strong sense of the term, he should inter-alia satisfy the third defining characteristic of anarchism, viz. the one concerning the nature of man.

The concluding paragraph of George Woodcock's book on Gandhi contains the following observation: "The most important fact, of which he was almost willfully ignorant was the extent and reality of evil."²⁷ Had Woodcock admitted that Gandhi was an anarchist, perhaps he would not have entertained this view at all. For Woodcock, who was himself an anarchist until the 1950's, know that anarchists, universally, are optimistic about the human potential for voluntaristic action and non-violence.

However, Gandhi was certainly not foolish enough to believe that man was angelic. He realized that man, under the sway of "modernity," is no better than the fallen angel himself, "Modern" man, Gandhi argued, is simply demonic and a threat to everything that was civilised. Nevertheless the whole burden of *Hind Swaraj* is that even in this totally fallen state, man is better than Lucifer. Man can change or at least he is capable of changing. He is not totally soulless. For a theorist like Gandhi this optimism about man is a constituent part of his envisioned society. Gandhi once wrote "ideal must work in practice, otherwise they are not potent."²⁸ In order for the ideal of a non-coercive society to be potent, man should have the capacity to realise it. Gandhi's contention is that even a believer in "modernity" is capable of change and therefore the hope for *swaraj* is worth entertaining.

But he believed, equally, that the good in man flowers fully only in the context of mutual aid and he wrote, correspondingly, that "Even if we succeed in realising complete self-sufficiency, man being a social animal we shall have to accept service in some form or the other. That is man is as much dependent upon others as he is dependent upon himself."²⁹ The fact that man is a social animal and that he cannot flourish in a non-social environment indicates the presence of the potential that hides in man for voluntaristic action and non-violence. Therefore the ideal of non-coercive social order is realisable. From these considerations we can conclude that Gandhi's views on human nature are compatible with his vision of a non-coercive social order.

*(d) Gandhi's programme for change:
The fourth (and fifth) defining criterion*

Before we start discussing Gandhi's strategy for bringing about a total non-coercive social order, it may be necessary to consolidate our position by gathering the relevant facts we have hitherto noted.

- 1) Gandhi did describe himself as an enlightened anarchist.
- 2) He had a definite and clearly articulated ideal of a non-coercive social order.

3) His critique of 'modernity' was inspired by his deep commitment to his social ideal.

4) His views on human nature were totally compatible with his envisioned society.

These facts establish minimally that Gandhi was an anarchist in the weak sense of the term. Therefore, I shall hereafter use the terms 'anarchist' and 'anarchism' to describe Gandhi and his views respectively.

I have suggested in Section 1 of this study that a consistent anarchist cannot employ violent methods for social change. I use the phrase "violent method", to describe roughly, the destroying use of force against persons or things to bring about a change in the social structure. It is precisely for this reason that one cannot treat Bakunin, Malatesta and Berkman as consistent anarchists. Only if we grasp this fact can we realize the greatness of Gandhi as an anarchist. His non-violent method does not spring from some unknown 'spiritual' origin. If there is one reason for its adoption, then that reason is that Gandhi is a consistent anarchist. Nevertheless the fact that Gandhi used a specific anarchist method, in itself does not prove much. To satisfy the fourth defining criterion of anarchism, we have to show that Gandhi has a non-violent programme for change, involving the immediate institution of a non-coercive social order.

If we study the nationalist movement, we will see the presence of a dual programme – one designed to oust the colonial power and the other ostensibly designed to uplift the Indian villages. While the former is called the 'political programme,' the latter is referred to as the 'constructive programme.' The presence of this two-tier programme is well acknowledged.³⁰ But what is *not* acknowledged is the revolutionary nature of the constructive programme. Before I attempt to demonstrate this, let me state the obvious: while Gandhi played the most significant role in the removal of the "English Yoke," his role in the formation of the Indian State was insignificant. The man was conspicuously absent when the national flag was hoisted on 15 August 1947. A historian of modern India writes "Gandhi's unique personal qualities and true greatness was never more evident than in the last months of his life: total disdain for all conventional forms of political power which could have been his for the asking now that India was becoming free..."³¹

One need not labour hard to prove that Gandhi did not work for the establishment of the Indian State.³² The Indian State was the natural outcome of the political programme of the Indian National Congress in the formulation of which Gandhi did not play any role. Nevertheless, "if Gandhi had accepted the formation of the Indian State which sprang

from the political programme of the Indian National Congress and retired from public life, we would have hesitated in describing him as a mainstream anarchist. But this never did happen. By keeping the constructive programme alive, he had, in fact, been preparing himself to face this inevitability. It is a well known fact that as early as 1917 Gandhi started his attempts to put his constructive programme into practice.³³ From 1940 onwards his attention began to focus more and more on this programme. In 1940 he did something remarkable. Through a considerably lengthy article, appearing in *The Harijan* he introduced Vinoba Bhave as his most faithful disciple. Gandhi wrote that Bhave "has an army of disciples and workers who would rise to any sacrifice at his bidding." This "army of disciples" were the constructive workers. Their function as the article made it clear was to make the Indian villages independent. These facts would become significant only when we realize that Bhave was the leader of the *Sarvodaya* movement which, according to the historians of anarchism was an anarchist movement. Woodcock even thought that the *Sarvodaya* movement was one of the most important anarchist movements in the contemporary world.³⁴ *Sarvodaya* according to Bhave himself, "does not mean good government or majority rule. It means freedom from Government."³⁵

In 1941 Bhave published his *Swaraja shastra*, a pamphlet anarchistic through and through. Gandhi also published his pamphlet, in the same year, *Constructive Programme - Its Meaning and Place*. The aim of the constructive programme, Gandhi wrote in his introduction, was to attain *purna swaraj* - the self-governing federation of self-sufficient republic. It maybe true that Gandhi could not make the intentions of the constructive programme visible enough for people to recognise. Many things contributed to its invisibility. Apart from the glare of the independence movement, the presence of the Marxian shadow was also a contributory factor. But one cannot deny that the constructive workers were preparing themselves for the last phase of the struggle when their leader was most cruelly silenced by the agents of authoritarianism. As a matter of fact, just a day before his death, Gandhi had drafted a new constitution for launching the last phase of his programme for *purna swaraj*.³⁶

From what has been said, we can infer that the constructive programme was an anarchist scheme. But we may ask, how could it bring about the anarchist ideal? Let me pause here to remember a crucial observation made by the German anarchist Gustave Landauer. "The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we

destroy it by contracting other relationships by behaving differently.”³⁷ Landauer’s observation captures the deep meaning of the constructive programme.

This anarchist programme was designed to create a self-sufficient and therefore independent commune. Such an independent commune, it is assumed, would allow people to bypass the authoritarian initiations of State such as bureaucracy, judiciary, police, military, jails, etc. It is also assumed that within the limits of such a commune people would develop new relationships and unlearn the old habits which were not conducive to the development of the non-coercive way of living. The constructive workers are trained to help the mushrooming of such independent communes through totally non-coercive methods and organising them into a federation. It is believed that the ever-widening circle of such a federation of communes, would make the state and all other forms of power pale into insignificance. In short the constructive programmes envisions a casteless, classless, stateless participatory social order. It is a socialistic programme, if socialism means, among other things, the public ownership of the means of production. Is this programme, envisioned by Gandhi, realizable. Let Gandhi himself answer this question: “Given an indomitable will on the part of a band of earnest workers, the programme is as workable as any other and more so than most.”³⁸ Here lies the depth of Gandhi’s commitment to his anarchist ideal.

To sum up: Ganguly’s thesis is an enormously significant one because it is the only one which allows us to place Gandhi in a meaningful perspective. I have made an attempt to substantiate his claim that Gandhi was a mainstream anarchist. In this context among other things, I have tried to show that as an anarchist revolutionary, Gandhi was occupied, not only with the freedom movement but also with a constructive programme which was an anarchist scheme. I have also suggested that his method of non-violence was a necessary outcome of his commitment to anarchism. Also, we have established that his concept of man was compatible with his ideal of non-coercive social order. Nothing more is needed to show that Gandhi was a mainstream anarchist. However it is a fact which stands at odds with everything hitherto written about Gandhi.

NOTES

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