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Pax Gandhiana: Is Gandhian nonviolence compatible with the coercive State?

Gandhi's nonviolence means different things to different people. To some it means a personal virtue, to others it means pacifism, and to still others it means living in small, isolated, stateless communes. There are those who believe that nonviolence means treating the state as the enemy or at least being ready to agitate against it at every turn. **A close examination of the evidence shows that it means something different from all this. It means first, a general principle of reorganizing society, polity and the international order; and secondly, a praxis that translates the principle into action through private and public institutions, most notably the state. Seen in this light, what he wanted to achieve for India was much more than its mere political independence. He wanted to introduce into India a new nonviolent social and political order, one seeking a new equilibrium between consent, coercion, nonviolence, and the state. Let us call this *Pax Gandhiana*, seeking to replace *Pax Britannica*.**

Juxtaposing *Pax Gandhiana* and *Pax Britannica* makes good historic sense. After all, it was *Pax Britannica* that created the historical conditions necessary for the possibility of *Pax Gandhiana*. Until *Pax Britannica* pacified India, the country remained more or less a collection of discordant, if not warring, political entities. But *Pax Britannica* was able to pacify India only by conquest, and the violence that went with it. In the striking words of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, *Pax Britannica* represented "peace compelled by force." Peace and compulsion came together, stayed together and worked together. The question is whether *Pax Gandhiana* can be maintained by consent, instead of compulsion.

Pax Britannica was of course following a pattern of history according to which when the discordant units of a region fight among themselves, only external coercion could pacify them. This role empires have always played, most notably the Roman Empire. The foundations of *Pax Romana*, Machiavelli tells us, were *arma* and *jura*, arms and laws, introduced in that order. *Arma* or conquest had to come first, only then could *jura* or laws enforce peace.

Given this pattern of history, Gandhi's attempt might seem idealistic if not quixotic. Is world history ready for a new equilibrium between consent, coercion, nonviolence and the state? There are of course two kinds of coercion: one based on conquest, the other on consent. Coercion based on consent is compatible with Gandhian nonviolence. Similarly, there are two kinds of state, one based on conquest and the other on

consent. The one based on consent is compatible with Gandhian nonviolence. To understand *Pax Gandhiana* then we have to understand the new equilibrium that is sought between consent, coercion, nonviolence and the state.

Although from the very beginning of his career Gandhi had an intuitive grasp of the kind of nonviolence and the kind of state that he wanted for India, it was only towards the end of his career that he felt the need to give a philosophic account of it. The late epiphany is not surprising. For only when a great historic movement has passed its apogee do we grasp its philosophy. This was true of Gandhi and the movement he initiated. The owl of Minerva, as Hegel reminds us, spreads its wings only at the dusk, not at the dawn. That is to say, only towards the end of his career did Gandhi make an effort to understand the philosophy of what he was doing.

So in 1946, barely two years before his death, he reminisced how a few years earlier he had attempted to write a thesis on nonviolence: **“When I was in detention in the Aga Khan Palace, I once sat down to write a thesis on India as a protagonist of nonviolence. But as I proceeded with my writing, I could not go on. I had to stop.”** (He does not tell us how far the writing had progressed or whether he left behind a manuscript of the incomplete thesis.) In any case, we have here one of the most remarkable statements found in all of Gandhi’s writings: the apostle of nonviolence finding himself unable to complete a thesis on nonviolence.

There is a hint, however, of why he stopped writing. He stopped because he realized that India in her present condition was not ready to become a nonviolent country, neither philosophically nor socially nor politically. This came as a shock to him. He saw with fresh clarity that Indian philosophy had made nonviolence such an esoteric virtue that the vast majority of the people were exempt from it. And so long as this was the case, there was no way India could ever become a nonviolent country, let alone a model for others. He explains: **“There are two aspects of Hinduism. There is on the one hand the historical Hinduism with its Untouchability, superstitious worship of stocks and stones, animal sacrifice and so on. On the other, we have the Hinduism of the *Gita*, the *Upanishads* and Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* which is the acme of ahimsa and oneness of all creation, pure worship of one immanent, formless imperishable God. Ahimsa which to me is the chief glory of Hinduism has been sought to be explained away by our people as being meant for *sannyasis* only. I do not share that view.”**

The story of Gandhi’s failed attempt to complete his thesis has a lesson for all those interested in nonviolence. The lesson is three-fold. **First**, if you want to create a nonviolent social and political order in India, you need a new philosophy of nonviolence, one that can bridge the gap between the life of the yogi and that of the average citizen. **Secondly**, you need a new cohesive India—a civic nation—one that is capable of unifying by consent all its discordant elements. **Thirdly**, you need a state that is coercive in some respects but nonviolent in others. Gandhi felt that India in 1940s had not met these conditions.

So the first thing India needs is a new philosophy of nonviolence, one that would bring nonviolence within the reach of ordinary Indians. Gandhi wanted ahimsa to be a civic virtue, and not merely a monastic virtue. This called for the de-saffronization of nonviolence or rescuing it from yogis and holy men.

Gandhi could bring about such a major change convincingly only if he had the support of Indian philosophy. For this he turned to the Bhagavad Gita. His voluminous writings on the Gita—commentaries, translations and concordance—are of critical importance here. **In his interpretation, its central teaching of the Gita is its ethics, the ethics of right action, action that benefits the agent and society, both materially and spiritually. An action, to be right, had to meet the following five conditions. First,** it had to restrain such vices as greed, aggression and egoism, and promote such virtues as detachment, devotion to duty, the work ethic and empathy for fellow human beings, regardless of religion or caste. **Secondly,** the action had to be good in itself, i. e. good according to the requirements of one's calling or profession (*swadharma*). **Thirdly,** the benefit that accrues to the agent should not be allowed to interfere with the good that might accrue to the public also (*lokasamgraha*). **Fourthly,** the intention had to be free of selfish motives, the focus being “not on the fruit of one's action” but on the goodness of the action itself. **Finally,** both the end and the means had to be good.

Now Gandhi firmly believed that action that met these conditions would ipso facto be nonviolent. There was nothing more that one needed to do to lead a nonviolent life than to practice the ethic of right action. This is a major break-through in the history of the philosophy of nonviolence. To act nonviolently, then, there was no need to be a yogi. The new nonviolence that he proposes is no longer a monastic virtue, but a civic virtue, the virtue of the good citizen and the good statesman. One acts nonviolently, whenever one's action meets the conditions necessary for acting well, irrespective of one's station in life, and irrespective of one's religion or ethnicity.

But Gandhi faced two major obstacles here. The first was the common belief that to act nonviolently one had to be a yogi who engaged only in other-worldly activities. Those engaged in this-worldly activities—the rest of humanity--were thought morally incapable of acting nonviolently simply because the activities were this-worldly. Gandhi repudiates the distinction between this-worldly and other-worldly activities as being totally irrelevant to today's conception of action. Besides, the common belief had no standing in the Gita. He writes: **“The common belief is that dharma and artha are mutually antagonistic to each other. ‘In worldly activities such as trade and commerce, dharma has no place. Let dharma operate in the field of dharma, and artha in that of artha’—we hear many secular people say. In my opinion, the author of the Gita has dispelled this delusion. He has drawn no line of demarcation between moksha and worldly pursuits.”**

The second objection was that the ethic of Gita applied only to the Hindus. Gandhi's response was twofold. First, if you could find an equivalent ethic in the religious texts of other religions, it would be

enough. **It was axiomatic to him that a common deep ethics underlay all historical religions.** Many distinguished Muslims such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan agreed with Gandhi on this.

Gandhi went even further: the Gita, as interpreted by him, taught a universal, non-sectarian ethics. Gandhi writes: **“This is a work which persons belonging to all faiths can read. It does not favor any sectarian point of view. It teaches nothing but pure ethics.”** What he means is that the deep ethic of the Gita, like the deep ethic of every great religious text, teaches a universal, non-sectarian ethic. As a universal ethics, it can bridge not only the sectarian divide, but also the secular- religious divide. Where universal ethic is involved, the distinction between the secular and the religious becomes meaningless. One is reminded here of St. Thomas Aquinas’ observation that the ethic of the Ten Commandments is comparable to the secular ethics of Natural Law.

Many non-Hindus agreed with Gandhi that the Gita taught a universal ethic. **Muhamad Currim Chagla, a distinguished Muslim,** was one of them. A jurist, diplomat, cabinet minister, and statesman, Chagla wrote the following in his *Autobiography*: “I have...never empathized with the sannyasi ideal...The better and more satisfying philosophy is the one that the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches—the philosophy of non-attachment. One must not give up anything, one must do one’s duty in whatever stations of life one is placed; and having done one’s duty one must remain indifferent to the results. The doing of the duty is in one’s own hand—the achievement of results one must leave to Providence or whatever power it may be that guides our destinies.”

But according to Gandhi the person who best implemented the new philosophy of nonviolence was **Gopal Krishna Gokhale**, his acknowledged political guru. It was from him that he learnt the art of engaging in public life. A college professor, editor of a learned quarterly journal, a member of the legislative council of Bombay and of the Viceroy’s imperial legislative council, president of the Indian National Congress, the founder of Servants of India Society, Gokhale spent his entire life in this-worldly activities. Yet in all this, he maintained the highest ethical standard. Because of this, he was able to cross the sectarian divides of India, and treat every Indian fairly, regardless of religion. Gokhale’s example, Gandhi claimed, had a normative value for every Indian. The yogis are no longer the models of nonviolence. The good citizen and the good statesmen have taken the place of the yogis.

Gandhi paid Gokhale the highest tribute when he pointed out that Gokhale’s ethics was comparable to the ethics of the 8th century BC **Hebrew Prophet Isaiah**. He concluded his encomium of Gokhale by citing two very famous passages from Isaiah. **“And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2, 4) and “the wolf and lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock” (Isaiah, 65, 25).** Writes Gandhi: **“Gokhale’s ideal in his life was to labor to bring about this state of affairs.”**

The two ethics—those of the Gita and Isaiah—Gandhi implies, can lead to comparable outcomes, viz., the reconciliation of historical enemies. The metaphors of the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the bullock, are applicable to today's Hindus and Muslims. The reconciliation between them is possible only under the new ethic of civic nonviolence. Only civic nonviolence can pave the way for *Pax Gandhiana*.

II

Pax Gandhiana in India required not only a new philosophy of nonviolence, but also a new cohesive Indian political community. Such a political community Gandhi called **a civic nation** (*praja*). A civic nation is different from a religion-based nation and from an ethnicity-based nation. Its basic unit is the individual considered as the citizen—a bearer of fundamental rights and a subject capable of swaraj, i. e., self-determination and self-development. The religion based nation regards the member of a religion as its basic unit; and in an ethnicity-based nation, the individual as an ethnic is regarded as its basic unit. There was in India a life and death struggle between these three forms of nationalism--civic nationalism, religious nationalism, and ethnic nationalism.

Not surprisingly, Gandhi found religious nationalism and ethnic nationalism standing in the way of *Pax Gandhiana*. . At the same time, he saw in the Indian National Congress a vehicle for civic nationalism. But he found the task of keeping the Congress faithful to its civic nationalist principles truly daunting. **“I can see my way of rebuilding the Congress with five true men, with whom there is neither Hindu nor Muslim nor any other. Religion is a personal matter. It ought not to affect the political field,”** he writes in 1941, in near despair.

This cry of the heart is a plea for both civic nationalism and a deep personal spiritual life. Only “true men”, Gandhi believes, can combine civic nationalism and deep spiritual life. By “true men” he means humans in whom true humanity has fully developed. True humanity or true humanism supplies the link between secular civic nationalism and deep spiritual life. To be truly free from religious prejudice, one has to be both truly human and truly spiritual.

Gandhi referred to the experience of his civic friendship with C. F. Andrews to make his point. **“Andrews found in me not only a live Hindu but a live Christian. That was the secret of his nearness to me. He shared with me his innermost thoughts on religion. And he said that he must at bottom remain a true Christian if he was to be a true Hindu and Muslim.”** What this tells us is that to be free of religious prejudice it is not necessary to embrace anti-religious secularism. The deep ethic underlying all historical religions is quite capable of nurturing genuine civic friendship across religious lines.

Here a distinction has to be drawn between the doctrines of religions and the deep ethics of religions. Doctrines tend to separate, ethics tend to unite. Doctrines are specific to religions, while the deep ethics is common to them. Doctrines belong to the private realm of belief, while deep religious ethics (which embodies the golden rule) belongs to the public realm of common practice. Here Gandhi falls back on his

axiom that a common ethic or the golden rule underlies all historical religions. It is this ethic that provides the moral foundation for civic fraternity and civic nonviolence.

Gandhi and Andrews were divided by race and religion. Yet they were able to become the best of civic friends; they were able to do so because they lived by the deep ethic of their respective religions. Presumably, Gandhi lived by the ethic of the Gita and Andrews, by that of the Sermon on the Mount. They were able to do this, because they were able and willing to distinguish between the doctrines and the deep ethics of their respective religions; and they were able to do this without undermining the integrity of the doctrines in which they believed. Doctrines were adhered to at the private, belief level, while ethics was practiced at the public, social level. It is when adherents of religion are unable or unwilling to make this distinction that civic friendship fails. And when civic friendship fails, nonviolence also fails.

The tragedy of **Jinnah and Savarkar** was that they were unwilling to make a distinction between the doctrines and the ethics of their respective religions. They looked upon religion as a seamless garment covering every aspect of life—ethics, doctrines, codes, customs, manners, dress, diet and the like. **This is the tragedy of modern South Asia too.** What Jinnah said in his famous 1940 Lahore speech is applicable to Savarkar too. Hinduism and Islam, he said, were not “religions in the strict sense of the word” but “different and distinct social orders.” Religion as social order encompassed practically everything. Therefore, Jinnah concluded, to place Hindus and Muslims under the same state—as Gandhi’s civic nationalism wanted to do—could only lead to their “final destruction.” Final destruction is a terrible, but accurate way of describing the outcome of the inability to distinguish between religious doctrines and religious ethics. **Where religion becomes a complete social order, it becomes less and less personal, more and more national, and more and more violent.** The final destruction of pluralistic societies inevitably follows. Only the civic virtue of nonviolence can prevent this from happening.

So far we have spoken of nonviolence as a civic virtue. But no account of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence would be complete without a mention his idea of heroic nonviolence—in his terminology, “nonviolence of the brave” or “nonviolence as creed”. Heroic nonviolence is based on the principle that sometimes it is better to endure violence, even when innocent, than to retaliate. Towards the end of his life, he spoke of heroic nonviolence more and more frequently. **“We shall never learn the art of mutual forbearance and toleration till some of us, though perfectly innocent, have staggered Indian humanity by losing our lives.”** Just three months before his death we find him saying the following: **“Today we have come to regard each other as enemies....But we do not want to regard anyone as our enemy, nor do we want to become enemies. I have already said that I shall do or die in Delhi. I have come here with that intention.”**

Gandhi said that he had discovered the idea of heroic nonviolence in what he called the Jesus tradition. **“The idea is that you appropriate to yourself and assimilate the essence of His sacrifice. His**

sacrifice is symbolically represented by the bread and wine of the Eucharist. A man who was completely innocent offered Himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies....Whether the Jesus tradition is historically true or not, I do not care. To me it is truer than history because I hold it to be possible and it enshrined an eternal law—the law of vicarious suffering taken in its true sense.”

I mention heroic nonviolence here mainly for the record. It must be emphasized that civic nonviolence, not heroic nonviolence, provides the moral basis of *Pax Gandhiana*. Heroic nonviolence is available only to rare individuals, while civic nonviolence is within the reach of the average citizen.

But there was another obstacle that was standing in the way of nonviolence and civic nationalism, viz., **Untouchability and caste prejudice**. Untouchability for him was a metaphor for what was wrong with the Indian society. Since the subject is well known, I shall limit myself to examining how Gandhi managed to overcome his caste prejudice and discovered his true humanity.

He approached the problem at the personal level and the social level. At the personal level he sought to overcome caste prejudice by overcoming its root cause-- fear of ritual pollution. To this end, he devised a very ingenious method: members of the Gandhi household would clean the chamber pots of house guests: and on one occasion it so happened that the guest was an Indian Christian of Untouchable descent. Mrs Gandhi strongly objected to this method, so strongly indeed that the fight that ensued threatened to wreck their marriage. This was in 1898, in South Africa. Two decades later, in 1915, in India, a similar thing happened, this time in his ashram. He invited an Untouchable family to join the ashram, to which Mrs Gandhi once again objected, and she was joined now by his cousin, and the deputy head of the ashram. They threatened to quit. Although the matter was later resolved amicably, the incident showed how difficult it was even for members of the Gandhi household and ashram to overcome caste prejudice.

At the social level the task was even more daunting. He had to face the criticism not only of Hindu Orthodoxy but also of **Dr. Ambedkar**, the great leader of the Untouchables. Even his own city of Ahmedabad refused to open its temples to Harijans. The same was true in Wardha and Sevagram, his adopted village. The barber in Sevagram refused to cut his hair in retaliation for his hiring an Untouchable as his cook. (So he learnt to cut his own hair). There was partial success in Travancore, where, thanks to the state, a few temples were thrown open to the Harijans. The conclusion was inescapable: the battle against caste prejudice could never be won without the support of the coercive state. Ethics alone was not enough.

III

Gandhi's distinctive contribution to the theory of civic nonviolence is that its effectiveness depends on the coercive state. The state and civic nonviolence are compatible for two main reasons. First, a coercive power structure is necessary for human well being. Without the state, civil society descends into chaos. Perfect nonviolence is possible only in the disembodied existence. In the embodied existence the state

is indispensable. “**All life in the flesh exists by some violence...violence is an inherent necessity for life in the body...None while in the flesh, can thus be entirely free from violence because one never completely renounces the will to live.**” “**No doubt, destruction in some form or other of some life is inevitable.**”

The second reason why civic nonviolence needs the state is this: it alone can make the peaceful enjoyment of human rights available to every citizen. Without the mediation of the state, the pursuit of rights leads to violence. The good state prevents this from happening. And the good state uses coercion legitimately, when coercion is based on consent, and when it is exercised by the institutions of representative government. But consent and representative institutions alone are not enough to give legitimacy of the Gandhian state. To be legitimate, the state should also recognize that the citizen has a spiritual soul and that citizens have the right to exercise soul-force in their dealings with the state. **Satyagraha is based on this assumption.**

This is an important stipulation, for it distinguishes Gandhi’s state from the Machiavellian and the Hobbesian state. **Machiavelli** boasted that he preferred the state whose citizens loved the state more than they did their souls. **Hobbes’** state had no room for the soul; it had room for everything else--the senses, imagination, the passions, speech, and instrumental reason, but not for the soul.

Gandhi’s reintroduction of the soul into political theory alters the theory of the state and the conception of politics itself. Consent makes obedience to the coercive state necessary. Soul-force makes disobedience also necessary. The reality of soul-force makes satyagraha a part of Gandhi’s theory of the state.

There are two things which cannot be done without the coercive power of the state. The first is the maintenance of internal order or the nonviolent enjoyment of human rights. The second is external security. What is perhaps most surprising to many is Gandhi’s endorsement of the right of the state to self-defense by military means.

Here two cases deserve mention. The first is his support for World War I and his active recruiting campaign for the Indian Army. He wrote two *Bulletins* explaining why he did this, for which he was heavily criticized most fiercely by his friends, including C. F. Andrews. Gandhi’s reasoning here is of great philosophical interest. **First**, there are certain things that make a country fit for swaraj, and the ability to defend itself militarily is one of them. **Secondly**, it was the absence of this ability that led India to the colonial subjugation in the first place. **Thirdly**, joining the Army is a quick way of acquiring this ability. **Finally**, and here he attacks the old philosophy of nonviolence: in the name of other-worldly pursuits, the old philosophy of nonviolence had put on shelf the duty of self-defense by military means. The political decline of India was the inevitable result. And unless this pseudo-philosophy was rooted out from the Indian soil, he asserts, there can be no lasting peace in the land. Wars in certain conditions may be a necessary evil,

and when that is the case, the practitioner of nonviolence does not have the luxury of standing by the side lines.

But his weightiest defense of the right to self-defense by military means comes from his formal statement at the **Second Round Table Conference** here in London in 1931. This is the only conference on a constitution for India that he ever attended. **“I think that a nation that has no control over her own defense forces and over her external policy is hardly a responsible nation. Defense, its army is to a nation the very essence of its existence, and if a nation’s defense is controlled by an outside agency, no matter how friendly it is, then that nation is certainly not responsibly governed...Hence I am here respectfully to claim complete control over the army, over the defense forces and over external affairs....I would wait till eternity if I cannot get control over defense. I refuse to deceive myself that I am going to embark upon responsible government although I cannot control my defense....That is my fundamental position.”**

Gandhi’s position on war and nonviolence changed considerably after World War II. Its horrors including the holocaust and the introduction of nuclear weapons forced him to rethink his position on self-defense by military means. **He began to think in terms of developing means of nonviolent national civil self-defense, and progressive disarmament.** Still, these changes did not mean any change in his belief in the right to self-defense. As a statesman and political thinker, he believed in the right to self-defense by military means, although as an individual, and as one capable of heroic nonviolence, he would no longer participate in any war.

For all his defense of the state, Gandhi was firmly opposed to the tendency of the modern state to over-extend itself and stifle individual initiative. He looked up this tendency, he said, “with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress.” He was a minimalist as far as the extent of state power was concerned. His “good state” (*surajya*) would share welfare needs with Non-governmental Organizations. Citing **Thoreau’s** dictum, “that government is the best which governs the least,” he asserted that a country that ran smoothly without much state interference was truly democratic and truly nonviolent.

Gandhi’s position on legitimate self-defense by coercive means sets him apart from traditional pacifists, including **Leo Tolstoy**. For Tolstoy the state was the big enemy of nonviolence. The members of his nonviolent society would live in small communes, isolated from the state. In other words, nonviolence for Tolstoy was a luxury that only a small spiritual minority could afford. Not so for Gandhi. He would engage with the coercive state and, with it as a partner, would seek to bring civic nonviolence within the reach of every citizen.

He saw the state as the indispensable building bloc of *Pax Gandiana*. A nonviolent international order should be an organization of independent but interdependent states, not warring one against another,

but cooperating with one another. If states were nonviolent in the sense we have described here, a coalition of such states would create a regional zone of peace. There is something in Gandhi's civic nonviolence that is comparable to **Immanuel Kant's** republicanism. Kant believed that a league of republican states could create a zone of regional peace. **There is something common between *Pax Gandhiana* and *Pax Kantiana*.** Each favors the creation of zones of peace in the international system.

IV

To conclude: I have been arguing that the success of *Pax Gandhiana* in India will depend on a new philosophy of nonviolence, on civic nationalism, and a limited coercive state. The greatest threat that it faces comes from prejudices that originate in religion, caste and ethnicity. To combat these prejudices we need a universal ethic that has the sanction of all historical religions.

I have presented *Pax Gandhiana* as a secular, social and political order, one that gives citizen identity priority over religious identity or ethnic identity. But a purely secular ethic can neither bring *Pax Gandhiana* into being nor sustain it. It can be brought into being and sustained by an ethic that has its roots in a transcendental source. This can be found, I maintain, in the golden rule that is common to all historical religions

But today's India, generally speaking, does not seem to see religious prejudice and caste prejudice as the greatest threats to peace and stability. This may explain why it is far easier for someone like **Anna Hazare** to mobilize the masses against the corruption of politicians than it is to mobilize them against the violence that they practice daily on the basis of religion, caste or ethnicity. Gandhi would remind them that even after the last corrupt politician has been punished, India will still remain an unstable and a violent society unless it can find 'five true Indians' "with whom there is neither Hindu nor Muslim nor any other", or with whom there is neither high caste nor low caste nor out-caste. *Pax Gandhiana* depends on them. May their tribe increase.

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