



Civilizational Gandhi

Rajni Bakshi

Gandhi Peace Fellow

Democracy and Nation-Building Studies

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About the author

Rajni Bakshi is a Mumbai-based author who has spent the last 25 years in the fertile ground between journalism and activism, chronicling struggles for more humane and ecologically sound ways of life. The last decade has been dedicated to listening to a wide range of innovators in business and politics who are exploring ways to re-engineer the operating system of ‘The Market’ so that its conversations are more inclusive and holistic.

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Above all, a special thanks to Gateway House for inviting me to work on this theme.

– Rajni Bakshi

From the central hall of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi to a statue at Union Square Park in New York, and across far flung corners of the world, M.K. Gandhi is loved and celebrated as an apostle of non-violence. Yet it is Gandhi's little-known work on what it means to be truly civilized that might be far more crucial to the future of our species. Gandhi's civilizational vision can serve as a new lens to understand contemporary global crises – identity-based conflicts, the failed promise of universal prosperity and the threat of ecological collapse. What we have here are not ready solutions but a framework which might help us to forge solutions.

Introduction

A British reporter, the story goes, once asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of Western civilization. Gandhi replied: “It would be a good idea.”

Gandhi’s words were accurately recorded. This moment, when Gandhi landed in Britain in 1930, is captured on film. It is the question that was twisted over several decades of retelling. What the reporter actually asked was: “Mr. Gandhi, what do you think of *modern* civilization?” [1]

It is unlikely that replacing ‘modern’ with ‘western’ was a deliberate, political act. Since modernity originated as a Western project, the terms are often used interchangeably. At times, Gandhi himself did so. And yet, the misquotation is unfair to Gandhi and a burden for our present and future. The ‘West’ that Gandhi encountered was indeed problematic in many ways. But Gandhi’s most incisive insights are about fatal flaws in ‘modern’ civilization.

Civilization, said Gandhi, is not about technology and material comforts. On the contrary, he insisted, true civilization is that which shows us the path of duty and anchors our life to a higher purpose. His radical critique was completely non-sectarian, anti-racist and trans-national.

A century has gone by since Gandhi dissected and analysed modern civilization. For much of this time, it has been commonplace to either ignore or ridicule his critique. He has been dismissed as a back-to-nature faddist who mistrusted machinery. Since the term ‘modern’ is also associated with human rights, adult franchise, and equality before the law, it seems patently absurd to suggest that the modern is no civilization at all.

So what then were Gandhi’s apprehensions about the ‘modern’ and why should that critique matter today?

Many of us are aware that Gandhi's approach to life is directly opposed to the "greed is good" culture that has been celebrated on Wall Street and in financial markets across the world. It is assumed that Gandhi took the moral high ground. What is not so well-known is that Gandhi recognised greed-is-good as a new phenomenon; he understood the historical and cultural roots of the veneration of avarice.

The 'modern' which Gandhi critiqued was a process by which knowledge, science and economics were wrenched from their ethical and spiritual moorings – and set asunder from moral philosophy.

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It was this historical process which led the epoch-shaping economist John Maynard Keynes to argue, in 1930, that "For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not." [2]

After the financial crisis of 2008, there has been widespread lamentation that the greed-is-good doctrine has gone overboard. However, our contemporary problems – social inequity, financial instability and environmental imbalance – are not just due to an *excess* of avarice. They are a consequence of something far more fundamental – the elevation of vices, notably selfishness and greed, to the status of virtues. This was the consequence of a cultural process which originated in Western Europe over the 17th and 18th centuries. This conversion of vice to virtue was, for Gandhi, the essence of modern political economy.

What Gandhi posed as a counter was not a model or an ideology, but a moral framework for being truly civilized. Essentially, he rejected the claim – made by communists and capitalists alike – that improving our material conditions is the supreme goal. Instead, he

argued that all efforts to improve the human condition are bound to fail unless they put ‘dharma’, or a moral framework and a sense of higher purpose, above the pursuit of ‘arth’ (wealth) and ‘kama’ (pleasure).^[i]

Gandhi’s view of civilization is thus a frame of reference, or a lens, which focuses our attention on fundamental questions: What kind of society do we want to build? What, essentially, is the good we seek?

A lack of attention to such fundamentals might explain why the global discourse on the many crises we currently face, seems to go around in circles. Within India, both the economy and polity are in a state of distress. More than six decades after independence, India remains at the bottom of the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI).^[ii] Twenty years of economic liberalisation have expanded the size of India’s middle class, but not raised the standard of living for the overwhelming majority of Indians.

Globally, people are becoming more aware that a time of reckoning is imminent. They are slowly acknowledging that the global financial system is fundamentally flawed and not just going through a cyclical low. We are also more sceptical now about the ability of the prevailing market culture to ensure even basic well-being for the seven billion people who inhabit the earth.

At the same time, the human economy and nature’s eco-systems appear to be critically out of sync. Despite an increasing urgency for trans-national cooperation, there are persistent fears about a clash of civilizations – primarily between the West and the Islamic world, but also within multi-ethnic societies in large parts of the contemporary world.

^[i] *Arth* refers to the domain of material resources, not just accumulation of wealth. Similarly, *kama* is not only the desire for the sensual, but desire per se, which can include the desire for others to be happy.

^[ii] The HDI is a composite of indicators such as life expectancy, education and income.

Viewing these realities through Gandhi's lens, we find not managerial or ideological failures, but a crisis of civilization itself. For Gandhi impels us to journey far up-stream of contemporary problems. Instead of merely pushing us to ask why development is slow, or why markets are not sufficiently inclusive, he draws our attention to re-examining the very definition of 'development' and 'progress'.

Gandhi's exhortation that the earth has enough for everyone's needs but not for everyone's greed, has become a mantra for environmentalists and other social activists across the world. Even in the mainstream of political and economic power, globally, there are now more people who recognise that a model of growth that requires an endless increase of consumption is probably doomed.

However, the core of Gandhi's concern was not the volume of how much we consume or how luxuriously we live. It is perhaps natural to want good food, clothes, comforts and pleasures. But is this what gives *meaning* to our life? Isn't it the development of our higher human faculties – a sense of duty, responsibility, love, compassion – that gives us an anchor and purpose, thereby enriching both individual lives and society as a whole?

If we work with this challenging frame of reference, then civilization cannot be equated with the invention of the wheel or sliced bread or the internet. Civilization, in Gandhi's perspective, is that which shows us the path of *swaraj*.

History textbooks in schools in India tell us that *swaraj* was Gandhi's term for home-rule, which would make Indians rulers of their own nation. This is only partly true. Gandhi tirelessly reiterated that the transfer of power from Britain to India was a relatively small and short-term goal. The essence of *swaraj*, or self-rule, is command over one's own passions. Civilization is that which shows us the path of right conduct or *dharmā* – and the essence of *dharmā* is command over one's self.

In the absence of such rule over the self, Gandhi insisted, we will not be in a position to fully develop the positive values

that have emerged out of the modern era – notably civil liberty, equality, rights, prospects for improving the economic conditions of life, liberation of women from traditional shackles, and religious toleration – all of which he deeply valued.^[iii]

Before venturing further into this exploration, it is important to draw a distinction between the historical Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who is a 20th century Indian persona, and the civilizational Gandhi, who is a global presence – a thinker posing discomfiting questions and challenges well beyond his lifetime.

The historical Gandhi was born into a trader's family in Porbandar, a small town in western India, in 1869. He was shot dead at point-blank range on his way to a prayer meeting in 1948 in Delhi. His 79 years, after a brief period as a lawyer,^[iv] were mostly spent not just in fighting colonialism, but also in various campaigns to reform himself and Indian society. Above all, Gandhi altered our concept of change by demonstrating how an opponent – internal and external – can be won over by eschewing hatred.

This global apostle of peace remains an inspirational figure today – though he is also criticised for various decisions and actions. Hindu nationalists blame him for not stopping the partition of

^[iii] Anthony Parel writes in his introduction to a special edition of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*: "A glimpse into Gandhi's Western intellectual sources should go a long way towards correcting the view held by some that the Mahatma was opposed to Western civilization as such. Such a view is so simple as to be false. As Sir Ernest Barker puts it, he [Gandhi] was a 'bridge and reconciler'. The breadth and depth of his knowledge of Western intellectual sources suggest that his attack was limited to certain unhealthy tendencies in modern Western civilization and that the attack was not motivated by any consideration of narrow nationalism or anti-colonialism. On the contrary, in *Hind Swaraj* he joins forces with many concerned Western thinkers in the defence of true civilizational values everywhere, East and West. He hoped for the day when England would reintegrate modernity within the framework of traditional British culture." [3]

^[iv] Gandhi was called to the Bar in London in 1891. From 1894 to 1914, he practiced law in South Africa. Gandhi was debarred from the Inner Temple, a professional association of barristers in London, in 1922, due to his leadership of anti-colonial activities. He was posthumously reinstated in 1988. [4]

India; Dalits blame him for being a patronising upper caste leader, and much worse.

No government office in India is complete without a token portrait of Gandhi. But his ideas are barely referred to, and certainly not adopted, in the formulation of economic policy. This is largely because Gandhi is perceived to be morally over-demanding, asking for too much goodness, and difficult to action in the “real world.”

It is time to set aside the image of Gandhi as a saint aiming for a utopia. Instead, let us focus on the civilizational Gandhi – a thinker who challenges our imagination, expands the realm of the possible and helps us to address chronic problems.

There are contemporary strivings for the kind of modern which would be a “good idea” – one based on a more creative amalgam of spirit and matter, *dharma* and wealth. Can these diverse endeavours contend with the will to command and wield power, which is also basic to the human condition?

“Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants.”

– M.K.Gandhi, 1921 [5]

I. Why is the ‘modern’ not a civilization?

“...They will learn the meaning of the world civilization when they come back home and truly understand what their great master, Lao-tzê, wanted to teach when he said: Those who have virtue attend to their obligations; those who have no virtue attend to their claims. ...Progress which is not related to an inner ideal, but to an attraction which is external, seeks to satisfy our endless claims. But civilization which is an ideal gives us power and joy to fulfil our obligations.”
– Rabindranath Tagore from a lecture on ‘Civilization and Progress’ delivered in China in 1924 [6]

During an extended stay in London in 1909, Gandhi engaged in intense conversations with budding young Indian revolutionaries living in Britain. He was disturbed to find that the aspiring revolutionaries expected that overthrowing British imperial power would alleviate their nation’s woes. They, in turn, were horrified to learn that Gandhi was more concerned about challenging “modern civilization.” It seemed absurd to them to doubt the miraculous powers and liberating potential of modernity.

In a twist of irony, one of the young men in that group of revolutionaries was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who, 40 years later, was to stand trial for participating in the conspiracy to kill Gandhi. It is well-known that Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, drew much of his inspiration and motivation from Savarkar, who had become a leading Hindu nationalist ideologue.^[v]

Gandhi’s encounters with young revolutionaries in Britain drove him to spend his return voyage to South Africa scribbling

^[v] Savarkar was tried for the murder of Gandhi and was acquitted by the court. Scholars have argued that this was due to a legal technicality.

furiously on the ship's stationery. When his right hand got tired, he continued with his left hand. The resulting tract, *Hind Swaraj*, did little to change the minds of those young people. On the contrary, Gandhi seemed to be going out of his way to outrage the sensibilities of most of his contemporaries, who welcomed the comforts and advances associated with the 'modern'. [7]

As a passionately polemical text, *Hind Swaraj* supplied ample evidence for those who dismissed Gandhi as a delusional faddist who was unreasonably opposed to modern machines. For instance, Gandhi wrote: "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization. It represents a great sin." [8]

In Hind Swaraj, Gandhi answers a query about the validity of even using a machine to print his words: 'This is one of those instances which demonstrate that sometimes poison is used to kill poison.' Why should we not simply discard a text that contains such hyperbole? Why does Gandhi's critique of modernity matter at all to our present and future?

Elsewhere he wrote: "Railways have also increased the frequency of famines, because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain, and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless, and so the pressure of famine increases. They accentuate the evil nature of man. Bad men fulfil their evil designs with greater rapidity...Good travels at snail's pace – it can, therefore, have little to do with the railways." [9]

Gandhi was not oblivious to the irony of these utterances. After all, he too benefited from the many uses of machines, and he was at that very moment on board a modern steamship. Gandhi's famed punctuality meant that he was ruled by his watch, a symbol of modernism. So it cannot be over-emphasised that Gandhi's critique of modernity was not a rejection of either contemporary innovation or the exploration of new technological vistas.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi answers a query about the validity of even using a machine to print his words: “This is one of those instances which demonstrate that sometimes poison is used to kill poison.” [10] Why should we not simply discard a text that contains such hyperbole? Why does Gandhi’s critique of modernity matter at all to our present and future?

Firstly, because getting lost in extreme statements distracts from the substance of Gandhi’s critique. And secondly, because in the remaining 40 years of his life after that steamship voyage, Gandhi’s various thoughts, writings and actions posed challenges that have ripened and now become urgent. Gandhi made a clear distinction between *swaraj* as *self-government*, democratic governance, a good State – and *swaraj* as *self-rule*, or the quest for self-improvement and command over one’s own passions.

Freedom from British rule gave Indians self-government – and made the historical Gandhi the “Father of the Nation.” Despite political freedom, self-rule remains elusive. Without a vibrant culture of rule over the self, it might be impossible to fulfil the promise of truly democratic governance and a good State.

Gandhi realised that conjoining the two concepts of *swaraj* is the basis of being truly civilized. This made him a futuristic thinker who is now urgently relevant to the entire world.

1.1 The crux of Gandhi’s critique

Gandhi rebelled against the specious claim that societies that are materially more powerful – with bigger factories and deadlier weapons – are at a higher stage of civilization. The England of Gandhi’s youth was a society in which colonialism was morally justified on the basis of superior ‘modern’ technology and institutions of governance. Sections of the Indian and Chinese elites had begun to concur with this view. The traditions of both these ancient cultures were often blamed for the material degradation that afflicted millions in this part of the world. This attitude persisted despite the knowledge that till the 19th century,

India and China had produced more industrial goods than any other part of the world.

The American historian Will Durant was so shocked by these attitudes that, in 1930, he took time off from writing his monumental work on the history of civilization to write a detailed account of why India was so poor. These conditions, Durant wrote in *The Case for India*, are not due to "...over-population and superstition, but to the most sordid and criminal exploitation of one nation by another in all recorded history." [11]

More recently, a study by the British economist Angus Maddison has shown that in 1000 AD, China's and India's combined share of world Gross National Product (GNP) at purchasing power parity was approximately 52%; it was as high as 49% even in 1820. A combination of colonial exploitation, de-industrialisation and the proliferation of Western modes of production reduced India and China to an 8% share of global GNP by 1973. [12]

Gandhi's attention was sharply focused on the misery caused by the de-industrialisation of Indian society, and how this made nonsense of the 'civilising' claims of colonialism. Rejecting the worship of material advancement as an end in itself was Gandhi's key insight. He argued that the modern version of material advancement is a regression rather than a higher stage of human evolution, because it displaces *dharma* from its primacy.

I. ii The role of dharma

Gandhi had been grappling with the somewhat elusive concept of *dharma* for much of his adult life. He took inspiration from his correspondence with Rajchandra Ravjibhai Mehta (1868-1901), a Gujarati Jain mystic who was born into a prominent merchant's family.

What Mehta helped him to grasp, Gandhi later wrote, was that "*dharma* does not mean any particular creed or dogma. Nor does it mean reading or learning by rote books known as *shastras* (sacred

texts) or even believing all that they say.” Rather, *dharmā* is “a quality of soul” present in every human being.

In other words, Gandhi defined *dharmā* not as religion or any denominational affiliation, but as a moral framework through which “... we know our duty in human life and our true relation with other souls...*dharmā* is the means [*sadhana*] by which we can know ourselves.” Therefore, no organised religion can claim to be a sole or special repository of *dharmā*. “We may accept this means [*sadhana*] from wherever we get it, whether from India or Europe or Arabia.” [13]

By writing *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi aimed to provide an updated conception of *dharmā*, suited for contemporary realities. The old notion of *dharmā* was closely tied to a rigid social and political hierarchy, which defined both duties and obligations. The present age needs not a preservation of the status quo but a guide to fulfil the aspirations of an inclusive democratic citizenship – a visionary new “civic humanism” as Anthony Parel, editor of a special edition of *Hind Swaraj*, puts it. [14] He writes:

“Gandhi felt that the time had come to redefine the scope of *dharmā* to include notions of citizenship, equality, liberty, fraternity and mutual assistance. And in *Hind Swaraj* he presents in simple language his notion of such a redefined *dharmā*, the vision of a new Indian or Gandhian civic humanism, one that the Gita and the Ramayana had always contained *in potentia*, but something which Indian civilization had not actualized fully in practice. ...‘This is not a mere political book,’ Gandhi writes. ‘I have used the language of politics, but I have really tried to offer a

The old notion of dharma was closely tied to a rigid social and political hierarchy, which defined both duties and obligations. The present age needs not a preservation of the status quo but a guide to fulfil the aspirations of an inclusive democratic citizenship – a visionary new ‘civic humanism’

glimpse of *dharmā*. What is the meaning of *Hind Swaraj*? It means rule of *dharmā* or Ramarajya. We may read the Gita or the Ramayana or *Hind Swaraj*. But what we have to learn from them is desire for the welfare of others’.”

Gandhi was also drawing on the concept of ‘*purushartha*’, which is the foundation of multiple spiritual traditions of the Indian sub-continent. The four *purushartha*, or pursuits of life, are *dharmā*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha*. *Dharma* is a moral and spiritual framework. This forms the basis for *artha* – the pursuit of power, property and security, and for *kama* – seeking pleasure and the avoidance of pain. The fulfilment of *artha* and *kama* on the basis of *dharmā* leads to spiritual enlightenment and liberation or *moksha*.^[vi]

The mind emerges as the key faculty in Gandhi’s political philosophy, *swaraj* being the rule of the mind over itself and the passions

[vi] Anthony Parel writes in a footnote to *Hind Swaraj*: “ ‘India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation’: This is the bedrock of Gandhi’s defence of Indian civilization in *Hind Swaraj* – that *artha* and *kama* should be pursued within the framework of *dharmā*. In modern civilization *artha* and *kama*, according to Gandhi, assert their autonomy from *dharmā*.” The concept of *purushartha* depends on a distinction between Self as *atman* – that is the imperishable, eternal, spiritual substratum of the being of every individual. And Self as *dehin* – the embodied spatio-temporal self, composed of body, senses, mind and soul. Parel writes: “The self that is directly involved in politics – in the pursuit of *swaraj* – is the *dehin*. Though the *dehin*’s ultimate end is self-realisation or *atmadarshan*, it is the intermediate ends of the *dehin*, comprehensively summed up under the headings of *artha* (power, property and security) and *kama* (pleasure and the avoidance of pain) that are the proper objects of the active life. The correct pursuit of these ends requires that they are pursued within the framework of *dharmā*. But the *dehin* can do so only if the mind maintains its freedom and exercises control over itself and the senses. Thus, the mind emerges as the key faculty in Gandhi’s political philosophy, *swaraj* being the rule of the mind over itself and the passions. The possession of a disciplined mind – free from an inordinate desire for property, pleasure and power – is the prerequisite for the proper practice of *satyagraha*, the non-violent way of achieving home rule. But, as Gandhi argued, the ideal of *swaraj* can be achieved in modern times only in a united Indian nation or *praja*. *Swaraj* and home rule must meet in a newly-constituted Indian *praja*.” [15]

I. iii The sword of ethics

Observe, Gandhi wrote, that it is the nature of the mind to seek more and more of what it craves and yet remain unsatisfied. Knowing that the more we indulge our passions, the more unbridled they become, Gandhi argued, our ancestors realised that voluntary limits on indulgences are the key to happiness – which, after all, is largely a mental condition.^[vii][16]

According to Gandhi, the Indic civilization was based on the knowledge that “...kings and their swords were inferior to the sword of ethics, and they, [our ancestors] therefore, held the sovereigns of the earth to be inferior to the sword of ethics, and ...to the Rishis and the Fakirs. ...This nation had courts, lawyers and doctors, but they were all within bounds.” [17]

This was why doctors and lawyers featured prominently in *Hind Swaraj*. Gandhi believed that modernity had ‘freed’ these professions from the restraints required by traditional morality. Doctors become complicit in a culture of over-indulgence and benefit from the resultant plethora of illnesses. Lawyers, instead of working as conciliators, benefit from the proliferation of disputes. In 1915, the Sinhalese philosopher and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy developed this critique in further detail by identifying a fundamental difference between traditional morality, with its spiritual anchor, and the modern view of politics:

“The modern politician considers that idealism in politics is unpractical; time enough, he thinks, to deal with social misfortunes when they arise. The same outlook may be recognized in the fact that modern medicine lays greater stress on cure than on prevention, i.e. endeavours to protect against unnatural conditions rather than to change the social environment. The Western sociologist is apt

^[vii] Gandhi’s use of the term ‘mental’ can lead to quite a philosophical muddle. Virtually all the spiritual traditions of the Indian sub-continent suggest that happiness (*ananda*) is our nature. Happiness cannot be sought from the outside but must simply be uncovered within. The Yoga Sutras are dedicated to removing inner obstacles to facilitate this uncovering of intrinsic *ananda*.

to say: 'The teachings of religion and philosophy may or may not be true, but in any case they have no significance for the practical reformer.' The Brahmans, on the contrary, considered all activity not directed in accordance with a consistent theory of the meaning and purpose of life as supremely unpractical." [18]

I. iv Cooperation versus competition

Gandhi identified a fallacious maxim at the core of modern political economy and the related development of technology. This fallacy, Gandhi wrote, was the idea that "might is right," which was validated by the claim that "survival of the fittest" is a *law* of the natural world. In the early 20th century these were

Gandhi's diagnosis was that false assumptions, like survival of the fittest, lie at the heart of modern culture. Dynamism is lauded as an end in itself, which leads to a corresponding undervaluing of any higher goal

pervasive and seemingly all-powerful concepts. The 'law' of competition was deemed to be the best because it ensures the survival of the fittest. Vast concentrations of wealth and power, with their concomitant and crushing inequities, were actually lauded as evidence of the inevitability of "survival of the fittest" and "might is right." In a relatively subtler form this idea is still alive – for example, compromises on human rights and environmental standards are justified because dominance in the global marketplace is given primary importance.

Gandhi was not alone in challenging this Social Darwinism in its various forms. Peter Kropotkin, the Russian geographer and philosopher, worked extensively in the field in the late 19th century, and exposed the falsehood of these popular beliefs. After examining wildlife in Siberia for five years, Kropotkin wrote that he had failed to find evidence of the bitter struggle for the means of existence which Darwinians claimed to be the dominant driver of evolution. Kropotkin found ample evidence for natural selection, but he said

its driving force was cooperation, not competition. Those who are most inclined and able to cooperate and adapt are the 'fittest'. [19]

Gandhi's diagnosis was that false assumptions, like survival of the fittest, lie at the heart of modern culture. Dynamism is thus lauded as an end in itself, which leads to a corresponding undervaluing, or complete neglect, of any higher goal.

Therefore, Gandhi described modern culture as being 'centrifugal' in nature. He said, "A civilization or a condition in which all the forces fly away from the centre must necessarily be without a goal, whereas those who converge to a point have always a goal." [20] By contrast, Gandhi regarded the civilization nurtured on the Indian sub-continent as centripetal – inwardly contemplative and adaptive.

Above all, Gandhi traced the darkness at the heart of modern systems to the de-linking of means from ends. He realised that means are never just instrumental, they are always ends-in-the-making. In Gandhi's time, the physical and economic violence of colonialism was justified in the service of a higher goal – the absorption of supposedly blighted parts of the world into modern civilization. Today, the social and environmental destruction caused by the misconceived projects and policies of development is still justified as a necessary evil to facilitate growth and progress.

Therefore, Gandhi condemned the practice of vivisection, or surgery conducted on living organisms for experimental purposes. He was convinced that a system of science and technology that deliberately inflicts pain on living beings can only lead to violent outcomes. The killing factories of Auschwitz and the brutality of Hiroshima-Nagasaki were, for Gandhi, not aberrations but the inevitable outcome of the modern paradigm of science. Our species has a long history of cruelty, but there is no precedent for cold-blooded killing-factories or for the experimental use of weapons of mass destruction on entirely civilian populations. [21]

"I abhor vivisection with my whole soul. I detest the unpardonable slaughter of innocent life in the name of science

and humanity so-called, and all the scientists' discoveries stained with innocent blood I count of no consequence. If the circulation of blood theory could not have been discovered without vivisection, the human kind could well have done without it. And I see the day clearly dawning when the honest scientist of the west will put limitations upon the present methods of pursuing knowledge.

“Future measurements will take note not only of the human family, but of all that lives and even as we are slowly but surely discovering that it is an error to suppose that Hindus can thrive upon the degradation of a fifth of themselves or that peoples of the west can rise or live upon the exploitation and degradation of the eastern and African nations, so shall we realise in the fullness of time, that our dominion over the lower order of creation is not for their slaughter, but for their benefit equally with ours. For I am as certain that they are endowed with a soul as that I am.” [22]

Gandhi's clarity on the relationship between means and ends is now seen as one of the most important contributions to libertarian theory – which gives primary importance to freedom, liberty and voluntary association, and envisages a larger role for society than the State.

British philosopher and historian Peter Marshall has examined the implications of Gandhi's assertion that if we concentrate on the right means, the desirable ends will automatically follow: “By acting here and now as if we are free agents capable of self-rule, we actually bring about the free society rather than seeing it as some distant goal. His [Gandhi's] non-violent revolution therefore does not involve the seizure of power but the transformation of everyday life and relationships.”^[viii] [23]

^[viii] Gandhi is now regarded as an anarchist philosopher who drew on India's spiritual traditions, which hold the human being to be an inherently divine being, capable of perfection through the rigorous practice of moral norms. In this frame, the eternal life was not an eternity in time but instead, as Sant Kabir says, “More than all else, do I cherish at heart that love which makes me to live a limitless life in this world.” [24]

I. v **Unto this last and universal principles**

His clarity about the importance of means over ends formed the basis of Gandhi's diagnosis that the modern was an *asuri shakti*, a demonic power. He found the utilitarian ethic of aiming to seek the greatest good of the greatest number inherently flawed, for it would always demand that some minority must pay the price of progress. The only worthwhile goal, Gandhi insisted, is Sarvodaya – the welfare of every last person. This conviction was partly based on the British philosopher John Ruskin's^[ix] book *Unto This Last* – reading this book was a turning point in Gandhi's life.^[x]

Gandhi was confident that Sarvodaya is an attainable goal, because he emphatically rejected the idea that the natural human state is “nasty, brutish and short” as claimed by Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century British philosopher. On the contrary, he had a deep conviction that the natural state of human beings is to cooperate, cohere and live in peace – wars and conflicts are breaks in the working of “soul force.”

Conventional historiography offered a record of the rise and fall of empires, with all the associated brutality. Gandhi looked at the past of our species differently – he detected at the core of every culture a longing for higher freedom. It was on the basis of this intuition, rather than scholarship, that Gandhi outlined universal foundational principles for being truly civilized. He offered a contemporary definition of *dharma* – self-knowledge, duty (*farajj*), morality (*niti*) and mastery over the mind and physical senses. [26]

[ix] Ruskin's was not a lone voice. Many of the poems and paintings by William Blake lamented the suffering unleashed by modern industry and the corresponding loss of spirit. Gandhi's seminal achievement was in elaborating this critique and making it the foundation of his political action.

[x] Gandhi translated *Unto This Last* as Sarvodaya and paraphrased the key principles as: (a) The good of the individual is contained in the good of all; (b) A lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work; (c) A life of labour, as a tiller of the soil or a handicrafts-maker, is the life worth living. [25]

This true civilization, based on *dharma*, is clearly not possible if we let the profit-motive decide everything, nor is it possible by forcibly mandating equitable distribution of assets or by turning all factories into public property. The failures of both unfettered market capitalism and state-communism are now well-established. But much of the contemporary discourse is still stuck in negotiating spaces between markets and State – and more recently there is some celebration of “social enterprise.”

Sarvodaya as universal well-being remains a widely lauded goal in principle. But most people think it is unattainable, and Gandhi's definition of *dharma* is not credited as being a practical basis for engaging with real-life markets or politics, for various reasons:

Firstly, Gandhi's view of human nature is considered overly optimistic; secondly, the distinction between self-government and self-rule is accepted but regarded as being difficult to put into action; thirdly, asserting the primacy of *dharma* and means over ends triggers fears that one would not be able to survive, let alone thrive, in the fiercely competitive realities of our times.

Let us examine these fears.

One, there is now an open disquiet about the deeply negative view of human nature which is at the base of contemporary market culture. The quest by Microsoft's founder, Bill Gates, for a more “caring capitalism” is one small indicator of this unrest. Terms like “creative capitalism” and “conscious capitalism” now have a fledgling presence in the global discourse, because there are both individuals and companies which now reject selfishness as the basis of progress. Some of these are new enterprises – like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's in the U.S., Marico and Fabindia in India, and others are long-standing enterprises like the Tata group. [27]

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's work at the interface of economics and ethics has helped to prepare the ground for these gradual shifts. Sen has traced many of our contemporary woes to the fact that conventional economic theory defined rationality not so much as internally-consistent choices, but as a maximisation of self-interest.

“Universal selfishness as actuality may well be false,” Sen wrote in his book *On Ethics and Economics*, “but universal selfishness as a requirement of rationality is patently absurd.” [28]

Two, the distinction between self-government and self-rule is not quite as lofty as it might seem. At one extreme, a longing for self-rule gives rise to initiatives such as the Voluntary Simplicity movement, which originated in the U.S. and has adherents across the world. This is a loose network of individuals and groups seeking to limit their attachment to material belongings and to anchor their sense of happiness in community activity and wider social goals.

Such efforts are also a response to the fact that affluence has not reduced emotional and psychological maladies. Instead, the maladies are reaching epidemic proportions amid material plenty – denying people basic happiness even in the here and now, let alone in a longer-term *moksha*. According to the World Health Organisation, depression afflicts an estimated 121 million^[xi] people worldwide and is expected to be the second largest cause of disability by the year 2020. [29]

The Wikipedia entry on Voluntary Simplicity credits both Gandhi and David Henry Thoreau as two of the major inspirations for people treading this path. The movement derives its name from a 1981 book by American activist-intellectual Duane Elgin titled ‘Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich’. [32]

Supporters of this approach have pointed out that Voluntary Simplicity is not about advocating or romanticising poverty, or even a denial of bodily comforts. It is about living with balance – a balance between our needs and wants, and between what we consume and its impact on other people’s lives and on nature’s

[xi] According to a 2011 report by the National Center for Health Statistics, the rate of anti-depressant use in US among teens and adults (people ages 12 and older) increased by almost 400% between 1988–1994 and 2005–2008. [30] The global anti-depressant drug market reached sales of almost \$11 billion in 2008. [31]

eco-systems. However, the key motivation is not conservation of nature, but a reaffirmation of what really matters in life. Elgin expresses this by quoting Thoreau: “The price of anything is the amount of life you have to pay for it.” [33]

Since the early 1990s, Schumacher College at Devon in Britain has become a hub not only for thinkers and activists of this grid, but also for people from different walks of life who are seeking holistic answers. Politically, some of this energy has also begun to converge at the annual Degrowth conferences in different parts of Europe. These conferences attract a wide range of radical academics as well as activists, who are all seeking a model of economic well-being that would not depend upon endless growth in Gross National Product (GNP).^[xii]

This partly explains why there is now so much interest in concepts like Gross National Happiness, first formulated by the King of Bhutan in the early 1970s. In the West there is growing interest in developing Genuine Progress Indicators (GPI) as a measure of actual social and psychological well-being, and asserting the primacy of this measure over the conventional growth metric of GNP. [35, 36]

[xii] Research & Degrowth is a Barcelona-based academic association dedicated to research, raising awareness and organising events on the topic of “degrowth.” According to their website: “Sustainable degrowth is a downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet. It calls for a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed through new forms of democratic institutions. Such societies will no longer have to ‘grow or die’. Material accumulation will no longer hold a prime position in the population’s cultural imaginary. The primacy of efficiency will be substituted by a focus on sufficiency, and innovation will no longer focus on technology for technology’s sake but will concentrate on new social and technical arrangements that will enable us to live convivially and frugally. Degrowth does not only challenge the centrality of GDP as an overarching policy objective but proposes a framework for transformation to a lower and sustainable level of production and consumption, a shrinking of the economic system to leave more space for human cooperation and ecosystems.” [34]

Struggles across the world – from Tunisia to Egypt and even Occupy Wall Street – invoke Gandhi when they demand self-government. But most of these societies are finding that the much harder work begins after colonialism or some other kind of repressive regime has been overthrown – the arduous work of fostering a civic culture in which people are as, or more, passionate about fulfilling their responsibilities, their larger social obligations, as they are about asserting their rights.

For example, a new anti-corruption law in India might be useful. But serious change clearly depends on a social and cultural movement which inspires people to shun corrupt practices in their daily life. Much of this everyday corruption is driven by a survival instinct – by an argument that if I don't use whatever power I have to my advantage, someone else will take advantage of me. That may explain why the most oft-quoted words of Gandhi are now "Be the change you want to see" – many people seem to wistfully long to live by this inspiration.

Three, the primacy of means over ends can be asserted more as a practical imperative rather than a moral mandate. A poignant illustration of this is the end of Gandhi's life. Did Godse succeed? Or did his means undermine his goal?

In political and practical terms, Gandhi's assassination put Hindu nationalists on the defensive for at least four decades. Killing Gandhi may still prove to be a permanent hurdle for those who want India to be a Hindu state, as opposed to a secular state.

It is only partly true that the assassination was a crime of passion born out of Godse's rage over Gandhi's alleged favouritism towards Muslims and Pakistan. On the basis of his scrutiny of Godse's

The primacy of means over ends can be asserted more as a practical imperative rather than a moral mandate. A poignant illustration of this is the end of Gandhi's life

testimony in court, the sociologist and psychologist Ashis Nandy has offered a different explanation.

As a self-avowed rationalist and modernist, Godse felt that Gandhi's idea of a soul force and morality in politics was anti-scientific. Godse acknowledged that by killing Gandhi he committed patricide and did so unwillingly. But he was also convinced that eliminating Gandhi was necessary to secure the modern project of statecraft and rationality, without which the newly-independent India might perish. [37]

Godse need not have bothered. Both India and the world were clearly not ready for the challenges posed by Gandhi. Sixty-five years after the historical Gandhi's departure, India is a society and economy in the throes of pursuing material gain as an end in itself; yet dreams of India becoming a major economic power on the world stage seem, at best, fragile.

In India's entrenched pyramid of social and economic structures, the majority of people remain at the bottom, and a poverty of mind, body and spirit is rampant at all levels of the pyramid. Secondly, and more importantly, the template on which India is striving to succeed in the global economy is inherently flawed. Keynes' exhortation that foul must continue to be fair for another hundred years was based on the assumption that the human species would solve its economic and material problems in that period.

Yes, there is a larger middle class in the world today than ever before. But most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) are likely to miss their deadline in 2015 – even though the MDG's 2012 report showed a decline in the number of people living in extreme poverty – for the first time since global records on poverty began to be kept. [38]

At the same time, the 2011 Human Development Report of the UNDP noted that even in countries where living standards have been rising over the last few decades, there are signs of reversal because environmental deterioration and social inequalities

continue to intensify.^[xiii] [39]

It is critical to note that the future of those at the middle or top of the global pyramid is also uncertain. Everyone will have to confront the consequences of climate change and an acceleration of environmental crises. In this context, people are more willing to doubt the claim that economic dynamism depends on greed – or even narrow self-interest.

In 2006, the British economist Nicholas Stern identified climate change as the biggest “market failure” in history. In other words, everyone single-mindedly pursuing their own interest, without a higher purpose, has not led to a sustainable optimum outcome.

Most of the mainstream global discourse in response to both the financial and environmental crises, is still rotating around either managerial issues or the intricacies of the equation between markets and the State – with a sprinkling of philanthropy and NGOs thrown in. That is largely because for more than two centuries modern

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thinkers – adherents of Smith and Marx alike – have convincingly argued that human betterment requires not moral effort but an alteration of the material conditions of life. Altering this mindset may be the most critical shift that is now required.

It is vital to note that Gandhi is not a loner on this journey. The longing for an economically and morally efficient social system is

^[xiii] According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), “About 1.7 billion people in the 109 countries covered by the MPI – a third of their population – live in multidimensional poverty. That is, at least 33% of the indicators reflect acute deprivation in health, education and standard of living. This exceeds the estimated 1.3 billion people in those countries who live on \$1.25 a day or less (though it is below the number of those who live on \$2 or less).” [40]

ancient. Keynes too was preoccupied by this concern. In 1930, at the peak of the Great Depression, he looked wistfully into the future and hoped that:

“We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues. We shall be able to afford to dare to assess the money-motive at its true value. The love of money as a possession – as distinguished from the love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life – will be recognised for what it is, a somewhat disgusting morbidity, one of those semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease. All kinds of social customs and economic practices, affecting the distribution of wealth and of economic rewards and penalties, which we now maintain at all costs, however distasteful and unjust they may be in themselves, because they are tremendously useful in promoting the accumulation of capital, we shall then be free, at last, to discard.” [41]

Challenging and then reorienting the relationship between means and ends is the essence of Gandhi’s vision. What if pursuing economic necessity as an end in itself never works? What if it keeps us perpetually stuck with the “distasteful and unjust”?

II. Peace

Sometime in October 2001, a laminated letter appeared on the gate of a small park in downtown Manhattan. The letter-writer had lost her husband in the terrorist strike on the World Trade Centre a month earlier. Please, let there be no more killing, she pleaded. The letter had been published by the Chicago Tribune and posted at the park's gate by an unknown person.

Even in that moment of deep personal loss, this widow seemed to be equally anguished by the claim that bombing another country back to the stone age would serve as justice.^[xiv] Her plea echoed the phrase made famous by Gandhi: “An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.”

Her conviction must have resonated strongly with others bereaved by the 9/11 attacks, for many subsequently joined a campaign to establish a Department of Peace within the U.S. government. Many also rallied together in 2006 to celebrate a hundred years of Satyagraha – it was on September 11, 1906, that Gandhi first made a public appeal for non-violent civil disobedience. [43]

Gandhi is now a natural inspiration and inevitable symbol for humanitarian efforts in favour of peace and non-violence across the world. But we must look closely at the deeper challenges he posed. Do we want a peace born out of tolerance – perhaps even driven by exhaustion with violence? Or do we want a peace that is the *means* for a much greater purpose – enabling mutual creativity of diverse races, faiths and nations in the onward journey of civilization?

[xiv] The idea or imagery of bombing a country back to the stone age was commonly referred to in conversations among ordinary people. In 2006, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan said in an interview that after the 9/11 attacks U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage had threatened to bomb Pakistan “back to the Stone Age” unless it joined the fight against al-Qaeda. [42]

Working for such a greater purpose is possible only if we do not equate civilization merely with identity, with affiliations which give us a sense of ethnic belonging. We could instead experience civilization as a framework which enables us to define and explore ‘purpose’.

ii. i A different kind of dialogue

In January 1993, I visited the temple known as Krishna Janmasthan in Mathura, along with a young activist of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organisation. Right beside a relatively small structure that houses what is believed to be the birthplace of Lord Krishna, stands a temple four or five floors high, built perhaps in the last 50 years. Directly behind this edifice is a mosque of older vintage and somewhat grander proportions.

It troubled the RSS activist that the sight of an imposing mosque beside the temple did not bother me. On the contrary, I attempted to explain, it is a reassuring sight. For me, the adjacent houses of worship represent the richness of overlapping cultures and co-existence that is the essence of India. But just as I could not understand the outrage of that young man, he could not fathom how I could view those neighbouring houses of worship as a symbol of beauty and cultural strengths.

At the time I schooled myself to accept that each of us is wired differently – what for me is the beauty of multicultural co-existence is to another a symbol of humiliation that motivates revenge. A few months later, there was a buzz about a new phrase – “The Clash of Civilizations.” Its proponent, the American academician Samuel Huntington, seemed to be saying that the future was going to be driven by that young man’s outrage. Huntington wrote:

“It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal

conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.” [44]

When the World Trade Centre was attacked on September 11, 2001, many people in the media and in politics saw it as a validation of Huntington’s predictions. The tragedy of the terrorist strike was made even more poignant because it occurred in the very year that the United Nations had designated for a Dialogue of Civilizations. This was quickly obscured as the “War on Terror” came to be presented as a defence of the more civilized versus the barbaric. Avowals by senior American public figures in favour of multiculturalism do not alter the reality that this war is perceived as a conflict between the modern (also Christian and Western), versus the relatively ‘backward’ elements of the East, who tend to be anti-modern and also Muslim. [45]

In this context, what is the challenge of peace? It is easy enough to look wistfully towards Gandhi and his reaffirmation that “love and non-violence” are as old as the hills. This truth clearly did not save the victims of 9/11, or those who have died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or in terrorist attacks across the world — like the one that shook India in November 2008.

And yet, it is deeply significant that the practice of non-violence has acquired a global resonance in our times. From the streets of North Africa to Wall Street, the efficacy of non-violence as a mode of dissent and protest is powerfully established – even if many of those engaged in these activities do so more out of pragmatism than moral conviction.

From the streets of North Africa to Wall Street, the efficacy of non-violence as a mode of dissent and protest is powerfully established – even if many of those engaged in these activities do so more out of pragmatism than moral conviction

Violent protest inevitably invites much more violent retaliation by the State, whereas even the harshest regimes find it daunting to suppress non-violent protest.

Protestors across the world are tapping into this generic truth and drawing on the methods developed by Gandhi. In that sense they are inheritors of the strategies initiated by the historical Gandhi.

Over the past few decades, there have been 67 transitions across the world from authoritarian regimes to varying degrees of democratic governance. A study by the Washington-based think-tank Freedom House indicates that the vast majority of these transitions were the result of non-violent action and other forms of civil disobedience deployed by democratic civil society organisations. ^[xv] [46]

But what is the relevance of Gandhi's vision in the face of intractable conflicts within a society and between nations – be it Hindu-Muslim, Christian-Muslim, Shia-Sunni, Iran-USA, India-Pakistan? Invoking Gandhi in such situations seems unrealistically

[xv] Another study of more than 300 struggles for self-determination against colonialism, military occupation, and colonial rule over the past century has shown that non-violent struggles have a much greater likelihood of success. This study, by Maria Stephan and Erica Chenowith, published in the journal *International Security*, shows that major non-violent campaigns have been successful 53% of the time, compared with 26% success for violent resistance campaigns. Stephan and Chenowith offer two reasons for this: “First, a campaign’s commitment to non-violent methods enhances its domestic and international legitimacy and encourages more broad-based participation in the resistance, which translates into increased pressure being brought to bear on the target. Recognition of the challenge group’s grievances can translate into greater internal and external support for that group and alienation of the target regime, undermining the regime’s main sources of political, economic, and even military power. “Second, whereas governments easily justify violent counterattacks against armed insurgents, regime violence against non-violent movements is more likely to backfire against the regime. Potentially sympathetic publics perceive violent militants as having maximalist or extremist goals beyond accommodation, but they perceive non-violent resistance groups as less extreme, thereby enhancing their appeal and facilitating the extraction of concessions through bargaining.” [47]

idealistic not merely to those in power, but also to many ‘ordinary’ people. Gandhi’s prescriptions are dismissed as being too morally and psychologically demanding.

In these deeply troubled times, a Dialogue of Civilizations seems like an obviously good idea. And yet, oddly enough, such a dialogue might be counter-intuitive. This is because the key problem is not a clash of civilizations, but a false and arbitrary partitioning of civilizations. In the dominant discourse, civilization is that which defines “weural identity – it is that which enables us to process foundational questions: “Why am I here?” and “What is the purpose of life?”

In our times, the quest for peace, within societies and between nations, takes us to the spaces between these two very different approaches. It also compels us to look beyond the comforting and saintly presence of Gandhi as an apostle of peace, love and non-violence. It might even empower us to grapple more defiantly with seemingly intractable conflicts.

ii. ii Civilizations as merging oceans

Soon after the attacks of 9/11, the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said wrote a scathing article titled *The Clash of Ignorance*, in which he criticised Huntington for being more of an ideologist and less of a scholar. This resulted, Said wrote, in overlooking the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization:

“.. or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. No, the West is the West, and Islam Islam.”

Civilizations and identities, Said argued, do not take shape as sealed-off entities, they are a consequence of myriad currents and counter currents. History is marked as much by wars of religion and imperial conquest as exchange, cross-fertilisation and sharing.

Said, who was a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, urged that we visualise history as an ocean instead of trying to divide it with artificial barriers:

“These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis.”[48]

Gandhi was convinced that contact between different cultures is healthy and mutually beneficial. In essence, this is why he was killed

Similarly, Amartya Sen has cautioned us about the danger of seeing people as belonging to one civilization or another. He writes: “Civilizational partitioning is a pervasively intrusive phenomenon in social analysis, stifling other – richer – ways of seeing people. It lays the foundations for misunderstanding nearly

everyone in the world, even before going on to the drumbeats of civilizational clash.”

Moreover, Sen said, “Theories of civilizational clash have often provided allegedly sophisticated foundations of crude and coarse popular beliefs. Cultivated theory can bolster uncomplicated bigotry.” [49]

Gandhi was convinced that contact between different cultures is healthy and mutually beneficial. In essence, this is why he was killed. Nathuram Godse, Gandhi’s assassin, said his action was necessary because ‘Hindu’ India would otherwise have had to face two enemies – Pakistan outside and Gandhi inside. Godse and his fellow conspirators also wanted free India to be a modern European-style nation-state based on a singular categorisation of the entire subcontinent as a Hindu nation. From their perspective, Gandhi’s insistence on honouring, even celebrating, spiritual and ethnic diversity, and intensive cultural interrelations, was anathema.

ii. iii A mind not ‘halved by a horizon’

Multiple, overlapping identities have continued to thrive in India after Gandhi. It is also true that since the late 1980s, many Hindus and Muslims have become more polarised. And yet dialogues, like my exchange with the RSS activist in Mathura, are also a reality. Such conversations aim to draw upon the strengths in our cultural and spiritual heritage. More recently the Mumbai-based civic group Citizens for Peace (CfP) has expanded the scope of such dialogue through an initiative called ‘PeaceTalks’.^[xvi]

How does all this help us to grapple with the harsh realities of the world we live in?

One, dialogues can be fruitful if they are based not on defining peace as the absence of violence, but rather as necessary and universal well-being and mutual creativity.

Two, when we expand the space for recognising and appreciating overlapping identities and affiliations, there is a greater chance of finding some common ground. This can potentially be the ground for addressing points of conflict and disagreement.

Three, it is important to firmly oppose all forms of retributive vengeance. Across the world, societies do, in principle, acknowledge the futility of “an eye for an eye” model of justice. But what do we do in situations where the people of one group have been brutally oppressed and abused by another group?

The post-apartheid regime in South Africa offered an answer to this question. Instead of opting for a Nuremberg-style court of justice, the South African leadership instituted a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Some South Africans challenged this decision, which they felt would short-circuit formal justice. A reconciliatory approach was also antithetical to the conventional

[xvi] PeaceTalks is a part of CfP’s Secular Rethink project – a dialogue-based process of asking how we, as Indians, can live our lives peacefully alongside others who eat, speak, think or pray differently from us. [50]

approach to human rights, which is based on a simplistic division of victims and perpetrators.

Two decades later, the TRC is acknowledged as one of the key steps by which post-apartheid South Africa avoided a protracted civil war. The TRC approach is certainly complex. Both in South Africa and in Ireland, where it was also applied, it has not fully healed the wounds of deep injustices. But it did open spaces to acknowledge wrongs and move on to a future in which the injustices can be corrected.

For instance, Amartya Sen's life was shaped by his experience of murder and communal riots in Bengal in 1944. As an 11-year-old boy, Sen recalls, he could not do much for Kader Mia, a mortally injured Muslim stranger who stumbled into Sen's family's garden. But that experience inspired in Sen a life-long commitment to resist the miniaturisation of human beings: "I imagine another universe, not beyond our reach, in which he (Kader Mia) and I can jointly affirm our many common identities (even as the warring singularists howl at the gate). We have to make sure, above all, that our mind is not halved by a horizon." [51]

It used to be argued that it takes a leader of Gandhi's moral stature to deploy non-violence as a 'weapon'. But that has been proven to be untrue by struggles across the world

Injustice can never be undone by returning hatred. Therefore, Christ's insistence on "Love Thy Enemy." Of course, the opposition to this ethic seems to be as strong today as when Christ lived in Jerusalem. Societies across the world are grappling with groups and individuals who foster hatred between different communities. In that context, it is particularly inspiring to pay close attention to how Gandhi arrived at this conviction — because this also explains his confidence in the power of overlapping spiritual traditions and cultures.

Christ's Sermon on the Mount was one of the key inspirations

in Gandhi's life. He encountered the sermon directly from the Bible and also through Tolstoy's book *The Kingdom of God is Within You*.^[xvii] Yes, the "Love Thy Enemy" approach to dealing with conflict seems to be much harder to work with. But it might help to recall that at the beginning of the 20th century it seemed 'impossible' that colonialism could be defeated or that non-violence could be a political instrument powerful enough to help overthrow empires.

It used to be argued that it takes a leader of Gandhi's moral stature to deploy non-violence as a 'weapon'. But that has been proven to be untrue by struggles across the world in the 20th century and in the opening decades of the current century.

Similarly, shifting the focus to the core civilizational questions of purpose and meaning and moral wholeness might seem difficult today. The idea that a clash of civilizations and cultures is inevitable and natural is definitely in the air. But so is the awareness that to be locked into this assumption would be a failure of spirit that diminishes human potential.

It is not enough that peace be the goal. It must also be the means.

[xvii] In *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Tolstoy presented Christianity not as a dogmatic religion or even a revealed religion, but as an ethical system grounded in the development of our conscience. It confirmed Gandhi's conviction that returning hatred for hatred, violence for violence has been tried and has failed over and over again. Christ's exhortation to love thy enemy is thus the only remaining course of action. Gandhi made Tolstoy's book mandatory reading for all members of his first *ashram*, the Phoenix Settlement in South Africa.

III. Prosperity

“I look upon an increase of the power of the State with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimising exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress. We know of so many cases where men have adopted trusteeship, but none where the State has really lived for the poor.”

– M.K. Gandhi [52]

Business plans that aim to serve the “Bottom of the Pyramid” are now aplenty. At a time when “inclusive markets” and “inclusive growth” have become well-established mantras, it seems almost rude to ask “inclusion into what?” But this question is vital and urgent.

All the ongoing well-meaning efforts to generate livelihoods and reduce poverty may be futile without challenging the pyramid-like structure of the economy.

Gandhi’s civilizational vision posed precisely this challenge in ways that ran counter to the two competing dominant doctrines of the 20th century – capitalism and state-communism. Both these systems assume that accumulation of assets and productive resources must necessarily take the form of a pyramid – with a few at the top holding the bulk of assets, a middle class, and the ‘masses’ at the bottom with little or no surplus accumulation. Capitalism favours people scrambling to find their place in this pyramid; state-communism put the State at the top and aimed to serve the interests of the middle and the bottom.

A conventional understanding of history dictates that the pyramid structure of political economy is both ‘natural’ and inevitable. Gandhi was not blind to the evidence which supported

this view. But he was far more interested in how we might organise the future differently – thus his passion for production by the masses, instead of mass production.

This led some of his most affectionate contemporaries to dismiss, or even condemn, Gandhi for propagating an idealism that teetered on the edge of the impossible. That was understandable in the mid-20th century, when modern industry and mass production were seen as harbingers of universal plenitude – a promise that has failed a majority of the world’s population.

But now the digital revolution and innovations in decentralised renewable energy, for both industrial and domestic use, have created unprecedented opportunities for altering the pyramid structure.

The digital revolution and innovations in renewable energy have created unprecedented opportunities for altering the pyramid structure

In this context there is merit in examining the core values and principles underlying Gandhi’s passion for production by the masses. Was this perhaps an operational detail in a template, or a vision that might be far more relevant now?

III. i The search for an ideal economic system

A search for answers to this question may require us to move away from a black and white view of Indian development. That tends to force us into false choices like Gandhi or Nehru, modern or traditional, state socialism or capitalism.

Instead, the economist Raj Krishna, best known for coining the phrase “Hindu rate of growth,” recommended an evolutionary approach. With such an approach, according to Krishna, we can appreciate that the priorities pursued by Nehru immediately after Independence were inevitable and necessary. In later decades, Krishna added, there was a need to shift the focus to the goals emphasised by Gandhi. [53]

Unfortunately, Gandhi's priorities have been misrepresented as an obsession with simple village life and an avoidance of machines. In fact, Gandhi's wish-list is remarkably similar to what are now basic goals for anyone committed simultaneously to democracy, markets and basic human dignity.^[xviii]

These are:

- An economic system that ensures that no one suffers from want of food and clothing – instead of one that structurally fosters disparities and then keeps a large segment of the population dependent on government doles.
- A healthy economic system would thus be one in which every working-age person is able to engage in sufficiently productive work.
- This is possible only if the means of production, for at least the elementary necessities of life, are within the vicinity and freely available – instead of being controlled by a few private entities or handed out by the State.
- Monopolies must not be formed either within a country or internationally. [54]

Firstly, production by the masses was not a mantra for Gandhi. He was quite happy to let all of India's wants and needs be produced by a small number of people, if the rest of the population was not rendered idle and unemployed. Gandhi's vision included electricity,

^[xviii] Gandhi wrote: "According to me the economic constitution of India and for that matter that of the world, should be such that no one under it should suffer from want of food and clothing. In other words everybody should be able to get sufficient work to enable him to make the two ends meet. And this ideal can be universally realized only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses. These should be freely available to all as God's air and water are or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle of traffic for the exploitation of others. Their monopolization by any country, nation or group of persons would be unjust. The neglect of this simple principle is the cause of the destitution that we witness today not only in this unhappy land but in other parts of the world too." [55]

ship-building, iron works, machine-making and the like existing side by side with village handicrafts. This required a fundamental shift in the nature of political economy. “Hitherto industrialization has been so planned as to destroy the village and the village crafts,” Gandhi said. “In the state of the future, it will subserve the villagers and their crafts.” [56]

The spinning of *khadi* and other constructive activities were designed to tap the instinct for self-help – to counteract a heavy dependence on a welfare State. Gandhi’s basic premise was that the key initiatives must come from within society, not from the government. He did not deny the important role for the government in some areas, most notably agriculture. But he was deeply suspicious of programmes that relied on government aid without building up internal strength. So Gandhi resisted any solution that made people depend more on the government, while not placing the real power of initiative and creativity in the hands of the people. [57]

**Social enterprises
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In this context, the contemporary excitement about “social enterprise” needs to be examined more closely. At present, a lot of work in this sector is focused on making life at the bottom of the pyramid more liveable. Given the magnitude of poverty and indignity, any expansion of livelihood opportunities is a noble objective – as a short-term goal.

But social enterprises can alter the future only if they foster dispersed industrialisation through forms of ownership that promote surplus accumulation at what is now the ‘bottom’. Unless they challenge the very structure of the pyramid, social enterprises will remain a palliative, not become a cure.

Secondly, knowledge and skills have to be anchored in civil

society rather than being dominated by organised science – which is inevitably driven by either the market or the State, and their combinations.

Gandhi's *asbrams* were a veritable laboratory for what he himself referred to as “scientific and prayerful experiments.” The *khadi* movement was designed to involve a large number and wide range of people in research, and it also trained and oriented them for that task. Many of the inventors and innovators who engaged with Gandhi in improving *charkebas* were themselves spinners of yarn.

‘By emphasising that all science could be had from one’s immediate neighbourhood, Gandhi denies science the status of an esoteric quest to be followed by a few’

“By emphasising that all science could be had from one’s immediate neighbourhood, Gandhi denies science the status of an esoteric quest to be followed by a few,” writes Shambu Prasad of Xavier’s Institute of Management, Bhubaneswar:

“The unique concept of ‘science for sacrifice’ was Gandhi’s and the *khadi* movement’s original contribution to science in civil society. ...The focus of science policy in India has been emphasizing physical resources. In contrast, in Gandhi’s methods lack of resources could not be an excuse for not practicing science. He was clear that physical resources could only stand on the stronger, moral fundamental base of the scientists and he therefore wanted from them sacrifice and dedication first. This principle was highlighted in the *khadi* movement’s attempt to continue the tradition of *prayog* after Gandhi as well.” [58]

Unfortunately, these crucial details have been obscured by the popular narrative about the freedom struggle – which is largely preoccupied with Gandhi at the picket-lines. *Khadi*, as a textile and its institutions, is seen only as an inefficient, semi-charitable activity to aid the hapless Indian artisan. It is true that the scientific experimentation and zeal for innovation which imbued the original

practice of *khadi* is long gone from the formal government-run *khadi* institutions. But the commitment to honouring the innovative capacities of not just traditional crafts persons, but also other people, is now informing the work of both individual innovators and activist networks.^[xix]

Thirdly, both cooperation and private capital must be respected. This requires an ethical basis for economic theory as well as actions in the marketplace. Without private capital there would be no progress, Gandhi said, but it is equally important that “business men will have to give fair wages to their employees, make arrangements for old-age pension, sickness allowance, proper housing, and so on.” [60]

This was not just an appeal to business people to be more socially responsible. It was a philosophical framework which challenged how classical economics had divorced morality from business and relegated issues of justice and equity to be solved by politicians and social workers. Gandhi wrote in 1937:

“True economics never militates against the highest ethical standard, just as all true ethics to be worth its name must at the same time be also good economics. An economics that...enables the strong to amass wealth at the expense of the weak, is a false and dismal science. It spells death. True economics, on the other hand, stands for social justice, it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest, and is indispensable for decent life.” [61]

Gandhi’s asceticism in later life tends to obscure the fact that he often reminded people that he is a “vanika putra,” the son of a *baniya* (merchant). Clearly, Gandhi understood the importance of

^[xix] To mark the centenary of *Hind Swaraj*, a group of Indian academicians and activists collectively drafted a document titled ‘Knowledge Swaraj: An Indian Manifesto on Science and Technology’, which essentially explores what self-rule in science and technology would mean today. According to the introduction to this document: “This Indian Manifesto on Science and Technology argues for Indian self-rule of its science and technology, for a knowledge democracy that draws its agenda for research and technology on the richness of Indian culture and the needs of the Indian people.” [59]

the merchant, trader and entrepreneur in a sustainable and creative society. He concurred with the view of conventional economics that everybody does not have the capability to create wealth. Whereas capitalism turns this capacity into a justification for limitless reward to the entrepreneur, Gandhi saw this talent as the basis for greater responsibility. For Gandhi, Trusteeship was the only way for wealth to be held and used.

To be trustees, merchants and producers of goods must have the freedom to acquire and dispose private property. The key element of Trusteeship is not giving away what you accumulate, but rather the fairness of means used to create that wealth.

As Sudarshan Iyengar, a Gandhian scholar and Vice Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth, points out: “Business was not to be driven primarily by greed, and excess of it was simply unacceptable. While Gandhi was clear that the state had either no business or very little business in conducting the economic affairs of the society, he was also very clear that the wealth creator would adhere to norms. In his entire discourse on sustainable society, the fairness of means is extremely important.” [62]

Today there is an emerging consensus about this on most global public platforms. The United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have given institutional form to the view that something urgently needs to be done to ensure that everyone, has at least the basics – *roti, kapda, makan, swasthya, shiksha* (food, clothing, shelter, health-care and education). All 193 member countries of the United Nations have committed themselves to the MDG which have, among other aims, set targets for eradicating extreme poverty and ensuring universal primary education as well as healthcare. Most of those targets will remain distant if India does not achieve the basics for its people.

So where do we go from here? Some answers can emerge from examining how Gandhi’s critique of modern political economy is now informing both dissent and work on alternatives. Let us explore the prospects for Sarvodaya and Trusteeship.

III. ii Sarvodaya: Welfare of all

On a bright and chilly morning in December 2010, hundreds of farmers from different parts of India gathered at the place where Gandhi's mortal remains were cremated on the banks of the Yamuna river in Delhi. They came to renew a pledge to make Sarvodaya a living reality for all Indians.

That solemn gathering at Raj Ghat marked the culmination of the Kisan Swaraj Yatra, which had begun three months earlier at Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. Traversing 20 states of India, this march resulted in the formation of an informal network of 400 activist groups who now call themselves ASHA – hope (Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture). Their slogan is equally evocative – “Food, Farmers, Freedom.” [63]

The alliance's basic demand is that resources like seeds, land and water, which are crucial to the livelihoods of people, must not be controlled or dominated either by the State or by a few powerful private entities. This resistance is in no small measure a response to the fact that a staggering number of Indian farmers have been killing themselves due to economic distress. According to the National Crime Bureau 2,70,940 farmers have committed suicide since 1995. [64]

This agrarian distress is a consequence of complex overlapping factors – including failures of public policy and the market mechanism. Governments, both at the centre and in the states, have enormous power to decide which types of agricultural technology and inputs will receive subsidies and credit support from nationalised banks. This power, which was meant to protect farmers, now often serves the interests of agro-industry.

In addition, corruption is rampant in the acquisition of agricultural lands for either private industry or development projects. In many cases, forcible acquisitions have been passionately resisted by protest movements, including the anti-big dam struggles on the banks of the Narmada river in western India, and the opposition to

the Tata's proposed factory for Nano cars in Singur in West Bengal.

Movements like Kisan Swaraj and ASHA are neither against industrialisation, nor do they oppose profits and rewards for innovators and entrepreneurs. What they militate against are command and control business models which are undemocratic and anti-market. The vast concentrations of power in these models undermine the freedom for fair exchange – which is the essence of a healthy market culture.

ASHA has adopted a four-pillared 'Kisan Swaraj Neeti' and wants the central and state governments to do the same. The four pillars are income security for farmers; ecological sustainability of agriculture; people's control over agricultural resources like land, water and seed; and access to safe, healthy and sufficient food for all. [65]

Chemical intensive industrial agriculture, which gave large yields in the short and medium term, has caused large-scale degradation of soils across the world... The prevailing forms of industrial agriculture, controlled by a few large companies and governments, cannot deliver food security

There can be no dispute about that last demand – everyone must have sufficient food. It is the question of 'how' that puts networks like ASHA at odds with agro-industry – in opposition to the technology it promotes and its business models, whether private or state-owned.

Chemical intensive industrial agriculture, which gave large yields in the short and medium term, has caused large-scale degradation of soils across the world. In 2008, the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and

Technology for Development (IAASTD), a multi-stakeholder exercise sponsored by the United Nations, pronounced a grim prognosis. [66]

The prevailing forms of industrial agriculture, controlled by a few large companies and governments, cannot deliver food security.

“If we persist with business as usual, the world’s people will not be fed adequately over the next 50 years. Business as usual will result in further degradation of the environment and further widening of the gap between those who have and those who don’t,” Robert Watson, the Director of IAASTD, said.^[xx] [67]

The quest for Sarvodaya is undermined not just by certain forms of industrial agriculture but also by command and control business models. For instance, farmers in many parts of the world are being monitored by the “gene police” of large corporations, in order to enforce patents that prevent farmers from saving seeds and re-planting them. Some varieties of industrial seeds are now deliberately designed for one-season planting, making the farmer perpetually dependent on the manufacturer.

Networks like Kisan Swaraj find common ground with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the U.S. and other parts of the world. The term ‘CSA’ is used to describe a wide variety of business models through which consumers form links with local farmers – sometimes by paying in advance for produce. Growers and consumers share both the risks and benefits of food production – which is often organic and includes varieties of fruits and vegetables that cannot be found in the mass production supply chains of supermarkets.

These initiatives have become stronger with support from the international peasant movement known as La Via Campesina (LVC), which was founded in 1993 by farmers from four continents. LVC includes 150 organisations in 70 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas – who together claim to represent approximately 200 million farmers. This network, with a secretariat

[xx] Professor Robert Watson also said, “We are putting food that appears cheap on our tables but it is food that is not always healthy and that costs us dearly in terms of water, soil and the biological diversity on which all our futures depend. At present more than 850 million people in the world are hungry or malnourished and 4 million more will join the ranks annually. The reason is not a lack of agricultural production, but rather a lack of access and delivery to the poor, as well as the effects of trade distortions such as subsidies and tariffs.” [68]

in Jakarta, is committed to defending “small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. It strongly opposes corporate driven agriculture and transnational companies that are destroying people and nature.”^[xxi] [69]

Underlying all such campaigns is a rather basic and dark question: can civilization survive if food and its related technologies are completely subordinated to the profit motive and subsumed in a model of commerce that leads to vast concentration of power?

The global commercial seed market is now estimated to be more than \$27,400 million annually. Ten companies own 73% of this market’s share, with just three companies controlling more than 53%. Monsanto, the world’s largest seed company and fourth largest pesticide company, now controls more than one-quarter of the global commercial seed market. In India, Monsanto and its subsidiaries command approximately 45% of the seed market.

Networks like ASHA and CSA also challenge intellectual property rights (IPRs), which put still more power at the top of the pyramid. IPR regimes of the last two decades have reversed the core principle of granting such rights – to reward inventors for putting knowledge in the public domain. Instead, IPRs are now being used to lock away formulas and exert ever greater control over the products created with that knowledge.

But it is vital to note that campaigns that focus on “food, farmers, freedom” are not merely an opposition to agro-industry’s command and control business models. Fundamentally they are driven by the quest for a society worth living in – one based on Sarvodaya, even if many people in these movements do not use this term.

Michael Pollan, an American activist and noted scholar on the political economy of food, has emphasised that the food

^[xxi] La Via Campesina describes itself as “an autonomous, pluralist and multicultural movement, independent from any political, economic or other type of affiliation.” The Indian Coordination Committee of Farmers’ Movements (ICCFM) is the Indian counterpart of LVC, and is an active member of the ASHA alliance. [70]

movements are essentially about community, identity, pleasure, and, “carving out a new social and economic space removed from the influence of big corporations on the one side and government on the other.” Pollan goes on to make a deeper observation:

“...The modern marketplace would have us decide what to buy strictly on the basis of price and self-interest; the food movement implicitly proposes that we enlarge our understanding of both those terms, suggesting that not just ‘good value’ but ethical and political values should inform our buying decisions, and that we’ll get more satisfaction from our eating when they do.” [71]

Another dimension of this striving is evident in people’s struggles to challenge the dominant paradigm of knowledge and claim space for knowledge systems that have been ignored or devalued. Anil Gupta of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, is well-known for his seminal work in identifying and honouring grassroots knowledge and innovation. Gupta’s ‘Shodh Yatras’ have become a legend. These are group tours in different parts of rural India, to identify local knowledge about eco-systems and also to locate innovators creating a wide variety of gadgets and devices that enhance livelihoods – and usually also reduce drudgery. [72]

At the more radical and ideological end of the spectrum, the Lok Vidya Jan Andolan brings together activists, farmers and artisans seeking to honour those who are usually derided as the “ignorant masses.” The Andolan is anchored at the Vidya Ashram in Sarnath near Varanasi. This network emerged from a series of conferences on traditional Indian sciences and technologies, held in the 1990s. Lok Vidya, literally “people’s knowledge,” refers to the knowledge that people have acquired from elders, from peers, in the community, at the site of work, through experiments over generations and by their own genius – but which is granted no status by the modern science establishment, universities and the State. [73]

Similarly, the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, Gujarat, is an

unusual centre of learning, which aims to build “a new outlook to development by underlining tribal values of self-reliance, self-confidence, hard work and building capabilities to survive against all odds by rescuing their dignity and respecting their cultural heritage through festivals, organizing cultural performances, theatre, songs, dances, rituals, documenting folklore and promoting modernizing tools in their languages.” [74]

In Udaipur, a non-governmental organisation called Shikshantar is engaged in being a ‘People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development’. Its aim is to bring about a “systematic transformation of education in order to facilitate Swaraj-development throughout India.” Shikshantar works on the premise that education systems across the world serve to stratify society, glorify militarism, devalue local knowledge systems and languages, manufacture unsustainable wants, breed discontent and frustration, stifle creativity, motivation and expression, and dehumanize communities. In response to this Shikshantar offers an alternative to the “factory-schooling” which stands in the way of building organic learning societies for the 21st century.^[xxiii] [75]

There are numerous such initiatives in India, and they are in solidarity with a wide range of alternative networks across the world. For example, Schumacher College, is a centre for scholars

[xxiii] Shikshantar’s Mission Statement says: “After fifty years of so-called development efforts, and despite great scientific advancements, India (and the rest of the world) finds itself mired in a paralyzing socio-cultural, environmental and spiritual crisis – overwhelming in its scale, intensity and rate of growth. While education has been framed as the cure to this crisis, in reality, the factory model of schooling is part of the problem. *The 19th-century model of factory-schooling today stands in the way of building organic learning societies for the 21st century.* [Emphahsis in original]....Rather, communities must engage in new modes of lifelong societal learning which grow from a larger understanding of and respect for human potential and human dignity, dynamic learning processes and relationships, pluralistic identities and cultural contexts, the human spirit and its connection to the web of life. The challenge before us then is to engage in processes of transdisciplinary reflection, dialogue, vision-building and experimentation in order to: provoke, challenge and dismantle factory-schooling and construct and connect new open learning communities.” [76]

and activists who are engaged in forging mechanisms that would make Sarvodaya possible. A London-based think-tank called the New Economics Foundation (NEF) is engaged in action-based research which offers ways to alter the pyramid structure of the economy. [77, 78].

When the NEF was founded in 1986 it was quite radical to challenge the stranglehold of conventional economic thinking. But over the last 20 years the space for such challenges has grown. In the year 2000, economics students at the Sorbonne in Paris launched a movement called Post-Autistic Economics, which rejected much of what they were being taught for being out of sync with reality. This led to a web-based platform called Real-World Economics which now has thousands of members. [79]

**These changes are
a reaffirmation of
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as a commodity**

More recently, in response to the financial crisis of 2008, the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET) was founded in New York – with philanthropic support from the legendary hedge fund manager George Soros. INET is dedicated to funding a fundamental shift in economic thinking because, says its website, “the havoc wrought by our recent global financial crisis has vividly demonstrated the deficiencies in our outdated current economic theories, and shown the need for new economic thinking – right now.” [80]

New political imaginations are also emerging in Latin America. When Ecuador rewrote its Constitution in 2007, it recognised the Rights of Nature. These changes to the Constitution were ratified by a referendum in 2008. In Bolivia, a sustained movement by the indigenous people led to a similar law granting nature equal rights with humans.

These changes are not only aimed at restoring the environment, they are also a powerful reaffirmation of indigenous people's *lok*

vidya, which has never regarded nature as a commodity. These changes are a validation of indigenous knowledge systems that are more synchronised with nature than with modern systems. The developments in Bolivia and Ecuador have been widely welcomed as indicators that humanity can shift to a new paradigm.^[xxiii]

The sharper edge of this restlessness is still restricted to radical activist formations, but this does not mean that dissent is limited to the margins of global society. Some of the most profound but subtle challenges have become manifest at the core of the mainstream – in the world of finance, in the realm of software and within the discipline of economics.

In this context, what are the prospects for Trusteeship?

III. iii Trusteeship: Oceanic circles of co-ownership

In August 2006, the United Nations' Principles for Responsible Investing (UNPRI) were launched with fanfare at the New York Stock Exchange. The immediate driver of UNPRI was the work of the UN's Global Compact initiative, through which major corporations have attempted to align their quest for profits with a framework of greater social and environmental responsibility.

The deeper origins of this historic development lie in the emergence of Socially Responsible Investing (SRI) as a parallel track in the mainstream of international finance. By the time the UNPRI were launched, it was estimated that \$3 trillion of global investments are based on SRI criteria. The net worth of companies who are signatories to the UNPRI is estimated to be \$30 trillion.

SRI has no direct link with Gandhian thinking. However, many of its original promoters were driven by an outrage about the

[xxiii] The Indigenous Knowledge and Peoples Network (IKAP), based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is also working to ensure that tribal communities are able to participate fully in their country's development by utilising indigenous knowledge and perspectives. IKAP also fosters mutual support and cross-border relationships between indigenous and tribal peoples and communities throughout the region. [81]

disconnection between business and a social responsibility that is based on a moral framework. They have crafted elaborate social and environmental metrics which enable businesses to measure the value they generate on a “Triple Bottom Line” – people, planet, profit.

Many SRI investors may still see themselves as ‘owners’ and not custodians or trustees of the assets in their portfolio. Within India too, Gandhi’s vision of Trusteeship is still widely regarded as too idealistic – a utopian concept that could threaten our material ambitions. This view persists despite the fact that the bulk of shares in Tata Sons, one of India’s largest and most respected industrial houses, is owned by charitable trusts set up by the Tata family in earlier generations. Sixty-six percent of the profits of Tata Sons flow into the philanthropic endeavours of the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Sir Ratan Tata Trust and other trusts. [82]

In essence though, Trusteeship is not only an act of giving away accumulated wealth. It encompasses the wider values which imbue the creation of the wealth. At a dialogue on Trusteeship in 2010, this view was richly manifest. The event, hosted by the Udaipur-based NGO Seva Mandir, brought together some of India’s leading development workers, academics and one representative of the corporate sector, from the ICICI Foundation. The dialogue unfurled some hopeful possibilities.

Almost all the 55 participants agreed that Trusteeship is not a burden or moral obligation that has to be fulfilled by denying yourself. Instead, Trusteeship is meaningful only if it is experienced as a form of freedom, an act of self-expression and self-fulfilment.

Ideally, the term Trusteeship is closely identified with the values of cooperation, compassion, co-ownership, transparency, equity – values which balance individual interest with the larger common good. In this sense, Trusteeship is a concept that applies to everyone – not just those who wield large surpluses of capital and other assets.

The dominant opinion of course still maintains that human

nature is essentially combative and Trusteeship is for dreamers. But as a participant said at the dialogue in Udaipur, “The notion that pragmatic people don’t look at utopian values, is false. Everyone is searching. The question is — where do we go from here?”

We could begin by reaffirming Gandhi’s insistence on seeing business-industry as an integral part of the ethical revitalisation of society, of *samaj* – a veteran social activist, Kishore Saint, said at the Udaipur conference. This may require some degree of faith in the possibility of *hridaya-parivartan* (change of heart) and consciousness, Saint said, “from unfettered self-interest to need-based common good.”

Ironically, most people are unaware that the world-wide web is a consequence of an approximation of this approach. It is a triumph of the Free Software and Open Source movement which emerged in the mid-1980s. Tim Berners-Lee, who designed the concept of the web and the protocols that make it possible, chose not to patent his designs. This was the only way that the web could be developed as a free and open space to serve the common good.

Richard Stallman, a software programmer who founded the Boston-based Free Software Foundation (FSF), has famously said that his mission is the “freedom to cooperate.” Sharing is essential to society, Stallman says. For over a quarter century, the votaries of the Open Source movement have shown that they are not anti-commerce. They simply don’t derive satisfaction by controlling large concentrations of money or resources. The overwhelming majority of servers worldwide now run on open source software.

So what? the sceptic might argue, the software giants of the global market work to maximise monetary profits and selectively use open source technology while negating its values. Does that not reinforce the impossibility of Trusteeship? In the short to medium term that might be true. But the development of the world wide web and the Open Source ethos are epoch-shaping events of incalculable significance. They breathe life into core civilizational values – cooperation, co-ownership, transparency, equity – in ways

that Gandhi may not have imagined.

So how do we journey across the short and medium term when the will to power, the grab-and-rule ethos, is in a pitched battle with the potential for Sarvodaya and Trusteeship?

As a first step, we could acknowledge that the cultural and political actions of the last two centuries have given rise to the present dominant mindset. It follows then that counter actions in the present can create and nurture a different construct for the future. During the past two centuries only persistent effort has made such shifts possible – for example, the abolition of slavery, the revolt against colonialism, the adoption of adult franchise, and the rejection of racism.

Secondly, parallel to the excitement about innovation in technology and business models, we can celebrate and reward innovation that gives a moral anchor to our actions in the marketplace. We could begin by highlighting the experience

We need a combination of restlessness and patience. Restlessness will drive the efforts to anchor our actions in a moral framework, patience will imbue us with staying power and the requisite persistence

of those who have already done this – however mixed their successes. This affirmation could extend from the older Tata Sons to the newer, smaller and radical work of Fabindia, which works with craftspeople and other producer-owned companies to market their products through a single nationwide brand. [83]

Thirdly, and most importantly, we need a combination of restlessness and patience. Restlessness will drive the efforts to anchor our actions in a moral framework, patience will imbue us with staying power and the requisite persistence.

In 1947, Gandhi expressed the hope that in 50 years there may be enough innovation to create employment for everyone on the basis of modern technology. [84] Theoretically, that is now possible. It is widely recognised that we now live in a time when technology has

the potential to bolster unprecedented democratisation. The world wide web, cell phones, and decentralised renewable energy are just a few examples of this potential.

The challenge lies in working out how both technology and business models can be positioned to alter the structure of the economy – transform it from a pyramid to what Gandhi visualised as ‘oceanic circles’

Today, more than ever before, we have the means for dispersed production, for production and services by ordinary people that are state-of-the-art and not merely remnants of old crafts and skills. The prospects for large-scale change may not look good right now because ‘growth’ is measured in aggregate terms, and efforts are focused on growing various industries in absolute numbers and

only then worrying about ‘inclusion’.

So the challenge lies in working out how both technology and business models can be positioned to alter the structure of the economy – transform it from a pyramid to what Gandhi visualised as “oceanic circles” – a dynamic of interdependence based on cooperation and creative competition.

Here is an illustration of this dream: In the old paradigm of industrialisation, the cotton crop is sold by farmers to merchants who pack it into bales for transportation to large-scale processing factories and yarn-spinning mills elsewhere. In the new paradigm, a collaboration between the Hyderabad-based Decentralised Cotton Yarn Trust (DCYT) and Vortex Engineering, a private company based in Chennai, has led to the development of a “micro-spinning” machine to process raw cotton and spin yarn, locally. [xxiv]

[xxiv] The DCYT crossed the pilot stage two years ago. In June 2012 it had four functional units running. Three more units are expected to come up by 2014. At present, the DCYT units produce 36,000 metres annually. The yarn is sold by the Malkha Marketing Trust. Sales increased from Rs. 36 lakhs in 2010-11 to Rs. 62 lakhs in 2011-12. [85]

Cotton farmers as well as handloom weavers, who suffer due to a lack of affordable and reliable supply of cotton yarn, benefit directly. This innovation is much more than the on-site value-addition enabled by hundreds of social enterprises. It is a potential structural shift that, if scaled up, could alter the pyramid itself – to a form or shape which is as yet unknown.

“Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom, but it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals...the outermost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle but will give strength to all within and derive its strength from it.”

– M.K.Gandhi [86]

IV. Environment

Gandhi's observation that there is enough for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed, is perhaps his most-cited quote. What if the challenge of environmental sustainability is not just a matter of containing greed and curtailing consumption?

At the core of Gandhi's civilizational concepts is a critique of how we define value. As long as 'value' is measured entirely in material and monetary terms, in terms of price equals value, it may not be possible to align nature's eco-systems and the human economy.

iv. i Moving from profits to the priceless

In 2007, shortly after he was appointed to the I. G. Patel Chair at the London School of Economics, Nicholas Stern visited India to promote the idea of low-carbon growth. This was a logical follow-up to Stern's well-known report for the British Treasury, which concluded that climate change represents the greatest and most wide-ranging market failure in history.

At a panel discussion in Mumbai, Stern spoke passionately about how imperative it was for Indian businesses and the government to adopt low-carbon technologies. Anand Mahindra, chairman and managing director of Mahindra Group, who was also on that panel, reminded the people who had gathered there why Mahatma Gandhi had been against India adopting the western model of modern development. Long before the term eco-footprint became current, Mahindra said, Gandhi knew, even in the 1940s, that it would take several earths for everyone to live as a few western nations were living.

Then Mahindra narrated a story which captures the essence of the contemporary challenge. A village in Goa grew exquisite watermelons. For a long time, the fruit-growers followed a tradition.

The best-looking melons were not sent to the market. They were given free to the children of the village. In return, the children only had to save the seeds of the very best melons from this already select lot. The farmers then planted those best of best seeds – thereby ensuring future multiplication of the tastiest melons.

After some time, some farmers decided to maximise their cash profits and started selling the most perfect melons – which fetched a much higher price. The tradition soon fell apart. Gradually, the quality of melons declined – to the point where the village no longer had melons worthy of selling.

Neither the story, nor its message, is new. Mindless and short-term maximisation of profit is a dead-end street. Everyone agrees on that in principle. The conventional wisdom of our times dictates that individuals, communities, companies and countries should be able to detect the threshold of self-destruction in time.

As a development economist it is Stern's job to demonstrate how livelihoods can be increased while reducing ecological footprints. But can this be done only by shifting to low-carbon growth? After all, excess carbon is one part of a much wider process of ecological decline. Stern called climate change the greatest market failure in history because the pursuit of need and greed has not optimised outcomes but rapidly and increasingly deteriorated the natural base, without which the human economy cannot survive, let alone thrive. But awareness of the ecological crisis has only slightly dented the fundamental assumption of market-driven globalisation – namely, that with an appropriate regulatory framework the price mechanism and the profit motive ensure efficiency and growth indefinitely.

Deeper enquiry and introspection are still limited to a few sections of academia and civil society organisations. For instance, the American economist Duncan Foley has identified what ails our age. He calls it “Adam's Fallacy” – the idea at the heart of the ‘modern’ era, which has ruled the West since the 18th century. This refers to the belief, common since Adam Smith, that the economic sphere of life can and should be separated from the rest of social

life. And that in the economic sphere the pursuit of self-interest will be guided by objective ‘laws’ to create socially-beneficial outcomes. [87]

That tale about watermelons told by Mahindra did more than illustrate the dangers of this fallacy. It brought to the table the mere hint of a radical idea – that in its pre profit-maximisation stage that community in Goa was perhaps organised around intrinsic values – such as enriching children’s lives and at the same time growing the tastiest melons. The joy of those best melons was ‘priceless’— that is, deliberately placed outside the price mechanism.

The difficult question to be asked then is this: is responding to climate change a managerial and technological task, or is it a civilizational challenge? If it is a comprehensive challenge, can it be addressed without restoring the importance of intrinsic value and, even in the material realm, not limiting the definition of value to price?

iv. ii What is the purpose?

Gandhi’s civilizational lens encourages us to look for ways to assert the primacy of values, for an ethical framework which gives purpose to life. As an illustration, let us consider some aspects of the famous Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) or Save Narmada Movement, which got little attention in the mainstream. [xxv]

The NBA came to life around the slogan: “We want development not destruction.” During 10 years of intensive struggle, which was

[xxv] In the 1970s an elaborate plan was drawn to build a series of dams on the Narmada river, which flows east to west across central India. At that time, it was the last major river in India still in free flow, dams had been built on most other big rivers. In the mid-1980s work on the first mega dam over the Narmada, the Sardar Sarovar Project, went into full swing. Soon the approximately 250,000 people affected by the construction of the dam, protested. Some refused to be displaced from their traditional ways of life, based on river-fed agriculture. Others objected to the inadequate, in many cases non-existent, resettlement and compensation package.

extensively covered by the mass media, the NBA succeeded in bringing the issue of displacement to public attention in India and making it a human rights issue.

Technologists and social scientists also gave vital inputs to the debate about big versus small dams. Some of this work also posed a fundamental critique of the technological paradigm of damming the river. However, the Narmada projects were pushed through even when evidence was growing in other countries about the poor cost-benefit ratio of mega dams and the enormous damage they cause to human settlements and the environment. At about the same time the Three Gorges Dam project on the Yangtze river in China was similarly pushed through despite intensive local and international opposition.

The dams on the Narmada, many of them now completed and operational, remain a powerful symbol of modernity, progress and development. The critique of a paradigm of technology which cannot harness the benefits of water without destroying the river, has found no space in public discourse in India.

The deeper questions generated by the Narmada movement failed to resonate in the public mind for two reasons. Firstly, knowledge about the dynamics of watersheds and related ecosystems is still not given enough importance. As long as the river can be harnessed to provide water and electricity to urban centres, environmental damage is deemed to be a price worth paying.

Secondly, dams do not last for ever – siltation and structural decay limit their life. Proponents of the dam do not seem to care that they are creating a benefit for just three or four generations, but in the process perhaps irretrievably destroying the river as a perennial resource.

Once purpose has been reduced to economic growth, as defined by cusecs of water and megawatts of electricity, there is no space for re-examining that fundamental question: what is the good that we actually seek? Is it just water and electricity *now* or sustained and widespread benefit for all time to come?

On the fields and uncultivated lands on the banks of the Narmada, amid the natural foliage, you might see three trees in different stages of carefully-nurtured growth. Bamboo shavings form a protective guard around a fragile *peepal*; a few feet away, a similar makeshift fence protects a *neem* plant; and a little further away there is a fledgling *banyan*. None of these trees bears a saleable fruit, but each of them has properties which enrich the eco-system and have multiple benefits in medicine, agriculture and livestock-rearing.

Planting this trio of trees and bringing them to maturity is an ancient custom, a code for success, an act that gives a sense of purpose. If you ask the villagers of this fertile agrarian belt to explain, you might get a range of answers.

Some might cryptically say that completing this tree task is a way of justifying one's existence – a payback to the bounty of nature. Others might poetically explain that the planting is a way of being anchored in what really matters; and that all other success – in making money, raising a family, pleasure seeking – rotates on this fulcrum.

Contrast this with the assertion that the factors fuelling climate change can only be altered to the extent allowed by market forces. In this oddly inverted argument, “the market” is an intransigent, unconquerable force of nature – and the human capacity to create and live by ethical and spiritual norms is regarded as relatively unreliable.

iv. iii An economy of permanence

It was this displacement of a moral and spiritual anchor that led Gandhi to conclude that the modern is not a civilization at all. Across the world now there are struggles to reclaim the socially-embedded *bazaar* from the socially-disconnected ‘market’— an amoral entity outside and above ‘society’. Essentially, these are efforts to recover what the philosopher and economic historian Karl Polanyi referred to as the “organic society” and the “moral

economy” – which was superceded by the rise of the modern market in the 18th and 19th centuries. [88]

Gandhi’s disciple, J.C. Kumarappa, studied the possibilities of a holistic connection between nature, society and the political economy. A graduate of Columbia University who was once an accountant, Kumarappa augmented Gandhi’s vision by drawing economic principles from nature half a century before the term “bio-mimicry” was coined.

Human systems, Kumarappa observed, need to learn from nature, where every being fulfils its necessary role in the cycle of life by performing its own primary function. Nature, Kumarappa observed, “... enlists and ensures the co-operation of all its units, each working for itself and in the process helping other units to get along their own too – the mobile helping the immobile, and the sentient the insentient. Thus all nature is dovetailed together in a common cause. Nothing exists for itself. When this works out harmoniously and violence does not break the chain, we have an economy of permanence.” [89]

Kumarappa was confident that the arrangements of daily life could be “regulated in accordance with the dictates of our better self.” This was not a utopian fantasy. On the contrary, Kumarappa argued, an economy that is based purely on monetary or material standards of value is out of tune with reality. His reasoning was more logical than moral.

If nature’s economy and the human economy are to be synchronised, observed Kumarappa, the standard of value must be based on something other than the individual doing the valuing. Individuals, after all, are perishable themselves. It follows that a valid and sustainable basis for determining value would necessarily have to be detached and independent of personal feelings – be it generosity or greed. Value needs to be based on an objective understanding of the “permanent order of things” – the interdependence of all species with the biosphere and atmosphere.

Kumarappa set the bar high, but this vision of interdependence

between nature's economy and the human economy has a greater presence in the global discourse now than it did in Gandhi's and Kumarappa's time.

For the Rio+20 summit held in June 2012 the UN chose the theme of 'The Future We Want.' When launching this campaign, the UN Secretary General said, "We need to imagine a different future. What would our world look like if everyone had access to the food they need, to an education, and to the energy that is required to develop? What would our communities look like if we created a vibrant, job-rich, green economy? This is the future we want." [90]

The 'we' being represented here is ambiguous. Many social and environmental activists have condemned Rio+20 for defining a "green economy" in terms that suits existing and dominant business models. But the idea of a "future we want" is worth rigorously exploring from many different perspectives.

Above all, the future may depend on addressing a fundamental question – how do we decide what is priceless? Gandhi's ideal of a civilized society offers markers which help us to process this question. This vision acknowledges that greed and the will to grab power are part of the human condition. But these are not necessarily our most dominant traits. Human behaviour, like water, fills the spaces created by the rules we frame. So why not frame the rules on the basis of a more holistic view of the human condition.

Epilogue

“The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern, I am on its side, for I am modern. ...If you want to reject me, you are free to do so. But I have my right as a revolutionary to carry the flag of freedom of spirit into the shrine of your idols – material power and accumulation”
– Rabindranath Tagore. [91]

Revolts of the spirit against material might are not new. Over 2000 years ago, a group of Jain philosophers annoyed Alexander of Macedonia simply by ignoring him. When asked why they were indifferent to the great conqueror, the Jain contemplatives replied:

“King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth’s surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, travelling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others! ... You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.” [92]

The historical Gandhi was called a ‘Mahatma’ – a great soul – because he was so clearly an inheritor of this spiritual legacy, with all its inherent defiance. But this became an excuse or justification for most of us to convince ourselves that only saints remain fearless when faced with the threat of power and they alone can resist its seductive lure.

But there has always been, in all times, a vast and fertile ground between the will to power at one extreme, and renunciation on the other. Gandhi’s civilizational critique helps us to creatively explore this rather inviting and habitable middle ground and grapple with the ever-lively dynamic between the will to power and the urge to cooperate, to nurture and share.

If this seems to be extraordinarily difficult, that is because we

live in an age which encourages us to be sceptical of everything except scepticism. And particularly to doubt anything which places demands on our higher self, on the finer human qualities.

Can we as individuals, and in collectives, assert the power of those higher faculties – in time to resolve the multiple crises we now face? Natural and inevitable as this question is, I am inclined to ignore it because futuristic speculation is a waste of time.

It is far more energising and inspiring to focus on even the most slender evidence of *dharmā* as civic humanism, and to attend to all the many ways in which it can be expanded.

The field of possibility is richer and more complex than can be conveyed here. What matters is that a wide range of people all over the world are asking these fundamental questions, grappling with the complexities, and slowly but surely turning glimmers of hope into beacons.

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