

---

## **The Simplicity of the Gandhian Discourse in Hind Swaraj (1909)**

---

Tamer Söyler, Humboldt University

### **Opinion Paper**

2009 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Hind Swaraj*.<sup>1</sup> In this little booklet, Gandhi launched his critique of modernity and ever since, *Hind Swaraj* has been treated as Gandhi's seminal work.<sup>2</sup> Gandhi attracted many scholars and there is a vast literature on Gandhi. For or against Gandhi, all agree on at least one aspect of the Gandhian discourse in *Hind Swaraj*: its simplicity. In the following paragraphs I will try to make sense of this simplicity. The consensus amongst the scholars on the point that *Hind Swaraj* is a very simple text tends to disappear when it comes to interpreting this very aspect. While according to some, Gandhi's message is simple as he was a weak thinker with a reactionary mind -which they argue, reveals his medieval and mystical ideology-; for others like Anthony Parel, such views are missing the point that it is very easy to misjudge the simplicity of *Hind Swaraj* with a casual reading (Mukherjee:1991; Parel:1997). Parel and his line of thought contend that since Gandhi sought simplicity in all things, unless the readers focus on the subtle messages of the book, they will be unable to grasp the deeper meaning of the text (1997: xvii). The literature is full of similar views from both sides. Although those views have nuances, they share one thing in common. They tell us more about the authors than Gandhi himself. In this essay, I am

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1909, between 13 and 22 November on his return trip from England to South Africa, Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj*. Excerpts of the text were first published in the Gujarati section of the *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi personally translated the book into English with a few revisions. Then, the text as a whole was published in book form in 1910. Gandhi translated 'Hind Swaraj' as 'Indian Home Rule'. All of my references in this essay are from the English edition of the book. Nevertheless, I still use 'Hind Swaraj' to refer to the book, not 'Indian Home Rule'.

not going to fall into a similar pattern and speculate on the nature of the simplicity of the Gandhian discourse but the impacts of it. We cannot know why Gandhi presented his messages in a simple form but we can discuss how this special genre served his cause. To do this, a simple question needs to be answered first: Why did Gandhi write *Hind Swaraj*? This is a key question to ask and it has a rather simple answer. Gandhi wrote the booklet in order to communicate. First to the Indians, then the rest of the world. Nevertheless, such an answer does not reveal much for us. It rather calls for another question: Why did Gandhi choose to communicate his ideas to others? To answer this question is hard if not totally impossible. It is self-evident that we cannot know why Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* as it is and make sense of his action exhaustively. If we try to do so, we will end up isolating one or more aspects of the Gandhian discourse from others which would give us a partial view. But, be that as it may, this is the only way to utilize a theory/model to make sense of any subject matter in social sciences. Keeping our reflexivity concerns, we still have to turn to *Hind Swaraj* and discuss why it may be that one or more reasons bear more importance than the others for Gandhi writing *Hind Swaraj*. In that sense, I think the words Gandhi carefully chose as titles for the Gujarati and English editions of *Hind Swaraj* reveal much. Gandhi named the Gujarati edition as *Hind Swaraj*. Later, he translated the booklet into English as *Indian Home Rule*. Without disregarding the possibility of over-interpretation, I argue that with those titles, Gandhi expressed the rationale behind the booklet: Promoting the cause of self-rule in British India. In Gandhi's collected writings there is enough evidence to back up this argument. This indeed cannot be the only reason for Gandhi writing *Hind Swaraj*, but perhaps this was the most important reason. Then, to make sense of the simplicity of the Gandhian discourse in this historical text, we need to ask how it served the cause of self-rule.

By his effort to communicate through *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi brought Indian self-rule to the attention of the world. Primarily, Indian people's attention. According to relevance theory, communication is mainly about relevance. By communicating to someone, we imply that the information

that we communicate is relevant to the communicated (Sperber&Wilson: 1995). In the world of 1910's, Indian self-rule as a topic was indeed relevant for both the Indians and rest of the world. No doubt, Gandhi was successful with the topic he had chosen. But claiming one's attention and getting it is one thing, keeping the attention alive and focused is another. The key element of Gandhi's call was its simplicity. The content of *Hind Swaraj* was clear and simple for Indians all coming from various backgrounds. Sperber and Wilson argued that "human cognitive processes [...] are geared to achieving the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible effort" (1995: pvii). Thus, Gandhi was able to provoke interest in Indian minds, and kept it alive by delivering his message in the simplest form possible. Lahusen contends that simplicity is prerequisite to success in a political campaign. The intention of campaigners is always "to guarantee the clarity of their statements and messages. This translates into the simplicity and parsimoniousness of sign production. Simplicity means the reduction of the political issue's complexity to a manageable statement" (Lahusen, 1996, pp. 259-260). This is not to claim that in Gandhi's or any other political movement, the only way to take the masses' attention and keep them focused is delivering political messages in rather simple forms. In different circumstances, facts can prove us wrong. Here then, without being exhaustive with my argumentation, I am trying to discuss that relevance theory is one good way to make sense of the simplicity of the Gandhian discourse in *Hind Swaraj*. Once we utilize relevance theory as such, according to the Organon model we could break down the Gandhian discourse into three main functions through which messages were addressed: Information, expression and persuasion (Renkema: 2004). First, as an informative effort, Gandhi wanted to clarify the meaning of *Swaraj*. With this refreshed, clear, simple definition, he aimed to inform and motivate the Indian people about freedom. Second, he built a direct contact with the people by expressing his opinions and feelings (ibid.). Third, he addressed the Indian people as his target group calling them for a mutual combat against the common enemy. He tried to persuade them to overcome their differences and act together. The conclusion we can draw is that according to relevance theory and the

Organon model, simplicity was the key feature of Gandhi's communicative success. Gandhi launched a political campaign and assured its comprehensibility by this simplicity. Many questions can follow this conclusion: How simple were Gandhi's arguments really? What do we mean by simplicity? Are we suggesting that masses could engage with the political system through only simple arguments?...etc. Whatever the answers to these questions would be, it should be a contradiction in itself to argue that as a mass leader Gandhi was successful, as a theoretician a failure (Dadhich, 1993, p. 56).<sup>1</sup> This elitist view would imply that Gandhi was incompetent at best and reactionary at worst. This is to separate the simplicity of the Gandhian discourse from Gandhi's role as a mass leader. Logically, this is a mistake for two reasons. First, if Gandhi had a 'failure', his failure cannot be separated from his success as the Gandhian thought and the Indian Independence movement are interrelated. Second, to imply indirectly that the masses could engage with the political system only through populist and sometimes reactionary discourses is anti-democratic and reactionary itself. Perhaps, then the Gandhian discourse wasn't that simple after all. Or maybe, there is nothing complex about the truth and therefore it is simple. Gandhi was perhaps of the latter opinion.

"I am aware that I am repeating what I have many times stated before and practised to the best of my ability and capacity. What I first stated was itself nothing new. It was old as the hills. Only I recited no copy-book maxim but definitely announced what I believed in every fibre of my being. Sixty years of practice in various walks of life has only enriched the belief which experience of friends had fortified. It is however the central truth by which one can stand alone without flinching. I believe in what Max Muller said years ago, namely, that truth needed to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, by claiming Gandhi was successful as a theoretician, I am referring to the areas that he had speculated on which were related with the Indian Independence movement. Especially the political sphere. I cannot and I am not claiming that Gandhi's theoretical success is valid for all spheres (i.e. Gandhian economics).

repeated as long as there were men who disbelieved it”  
(Gandhi Collected Works 91: 221-222).<sup>1</sup>

## References

- Dadhich, Naresh (1993): Gandhi and Existentialism, Jaipur : Rawat Publications  
Garrard, Graeme (2006): Counter-Enlightenments : from the eighteenth century to the present, London, Routledge  
Hergenhahn, B.R. (1986): An Introduction to the History of Psychology, Belmont : Wadsworth Pub. Co  
Lahusen, Christian (1996): The rhetoric of moral protest: public campaigns, celebrity endorsement, and political mobilization, Berlin : Walter de Gruyter  
McMahon, Darrin M. (2001): Enemies of the Enlightenment : the French Counter-Enlightenment and the making of modernity, Oxford : Oxford University Press  
Mukherjee, Subrata (1991): Gandhian thought : Marxist interpretation, New Delhi : Deep & Deep Publications  
Parel, Anthony J. (1997): Hind Swaraj and other writings, New Delhi : Cambridge University Press  
Renkema, Jan (2004): Introduction to discourse studies, Philadelphia : John Benjamins Publishing Company  
Sperber, Dan & Wilson, Deirdre (1995): Relevance: communication and cognition, Oxford : Blackwell

## Bio

Tamer Söyler has recently completed his MA degree from Global Studies Programme at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg / Germany and will be pursuing his Ph.D. studies at Humboldt University in the same country.

---

<sup>1</sup> Here the online version of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG) from Gandhi Serve is cited. Reference numbers are given accordingly. Although I am aware of the CWMG Controversy, the related parts that were cited in this essay are genuine.  
<http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>