

JPJRS 16/2 ISSN 0971-33315 July 2013: 10-24

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4284383

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4284383>

Gandhi's Evolutionary Hermeneutics: Reinterpreting Tradition, Development and Free- dom for Today

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Abstract: In this article the author begins by explaining the concept of development and its hermeneutical role with regard to tradition and freedom. This will take us to view the evolutionary contribution in an appreciative frame. In the light of these we shall review Gandhi's notion of development and its linkage with tradition and freedom. Wholeness/holon-movement/inter-dependence is the point of departure of the author. The choice of the model of development will define our understanding of tradition and freedom. Wholeness takes the evolutionary tradition forward. The author invites us to augment the fields of compassion so that *sarvodaya* and *antyyodaya*, as visualized by Gandhi could be reinterpret and appropriated.

The article argues that in the triptych of 'tradition, development and freedom', development holds the hermeneutical key to understand the terms. This is further substantiated in the light of the evolutionary studies and in the light of the perspectives given by Gandhi. We conclude to say that the inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of all with everything calls for a compassionate approach to life.

Key words: Evolutionary world-view, Gandhi, Holon, Inter-relatedness, Development, Swaraj (Self-rule), Swadeshi (rootedness)

The approach in this paper is integral in nature. It touches upon philosophical, religious, humanitarian and cosmic points of view

of tradition, development and freedom. As will be argued in the course of this paper, such an integral approach is called for by the evolutionary perspective given by science and is evidenced in the philosophy and thinking of Gandhi. We shall begin by explaining the concept of development and its hermeneutical role with regard to tradition and freedom. This will take us to view the evolutionary contribution in an appreciative frame. In the light of these we shall review Gandhi's notion of development and its linkage with tradition and freedom.

1. Development

In the triptych of 'Tradition, Development and Freedom', the middle term development seems to hold the key. This is the point of departure of my paper. Development necessarily has material and economic connotation to it, especially in today's market-driven economy and way of life. It is often related to the economic and social uplift of a person or community. In contrast, most of the Indian languages use the word development in the sense of an upward movement that is more holistic. 'Unnati' in Bengali language or 'Purogati' in Malayalam language could mean economic uplift, but can also mean an integral movement forward. It is part of a journey and it is a long journey.

1.1. Skewed Theory of Development

The model of development that is dominant since the modern era, and especially during the colonial times is derived from the philosophy of European enlightenment. It assumed that rational and empirical sciences are the roads to development. It presupposed a notion of culture and development that are superior and inferior, performative and folk-oriented. Especially since the time of Francis Bacon the neopositivist approach dominated the western-worldview. As Joke Schrijvers argued, "faith in the objectivity and neutrality of scientific knowledge, based on the strict dichotomy between the observer (subject) and the observed (object) is central to this approach" (Schrijvers 1993: 35).

Accordingly Europe, where modern science developed, is considered to be the centre of development. This led to an epistemological error of assuming that geographically Europe became the centre of development and the closer one is to Europe the more one is considered developed; temporarily, those who are ancient and away from the modern time, were considered less developed. In this colonial model of growth and technological advance, the political control led to the material development and in this road-map, the poor were considered a liability and the poor countries were to be colonized. It was then mistakenly assumed that the material and human progress would bring happiness to people. This has been seriously called into doubt particularly since the tragic experience of the two world wars, the planned and partly achieved destruction of whole peoples, and the looming of atomic peril. A naive mechanistic optimism has been replaced by a well-founded anxiety for the fate of humanity. The above concept of development does not, therefore, express the true meaning of development.

In our own time, Pope John Paul II critiqued this perspective when he asserted that “a mere accumulation of goods and services, even for the benefit of the majority, is not enough for the realization of human happiness” (John Paul II 1987: 28). Already *Populorum Progressio* had adopted that ‘integral development’ is essential for lasting peace. This being the case, the Church has adopted the phrase integral development to convey its concept of human development. The Social Teaching of the Church acknowledges that although development has a necessary economic dimension, since it must supply the greatest possible number of the world’s inhabitants with an availability of goods essential for them “to be”, it is not limited to that dimension (John Paul II 1967: 15-17). Increased possession is not the ultimate good of nations or of individuals. All growth is ambivalent. It is essential if man is to develop as man, but in a way it imprisons man if he considers it the supreme good. Thus it restricts his vision. The exclusive pursuit of possessions thus becomes an obstacle to in-

dividual fulfillment and to man's true greatness. Both for nations and for individual men, avarice is the most evident form of moral under-development. Integral human development is, therefore, a genuine move towards better human, economic, social, political, cultural, moral and spiritual conditions of existence. As Pope Paul VI expresses in *Populorum Progresso*, it is, "a development which is for each and all the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human" (John Paul IV 1967: 15-18). The less human conditions include the lack of material necessities for those who are without the minimum essentials for life, accentuated by the moral deficiencies of those who are mutilated by selfishness. Other less human conditions consist of oppressive social structures, whether due to the abuses of ownership or to abuses of power, which lead to the exploitation or abuses of workers or unjust transactions. Whereas more humane conditions enables the passage from misery towards the possession of necessities, victory over social scourges, the growth of knowledge, the acquisition of culture, increased esteem of the dignity of others, the turning towards the spirit of poverty, cooperation for the common good, the will and desire for peace. True humane conditions promote the acknowledgement of supreme values and of God as the source and finality of life.

2. Development from an Evolutionary Perspective

We are told that the universe is about 13.8 billion years old with a future of billions of years – about 100 trillion years – although the sun will die out long before then. Our own galaxy, one among the billions of galaxy, the Milky Way, consists of 100 billion stars and stretching about 100, 000 light years in diameter. This amazingly fine-tuned universe narrates its story through us the humans – in us the humans, the universe is coming to consciousness (Delio 2011: 17).

It is now established that in this magnificently evolving universe, humans like Mammals, have existed on earth for a relatively short time, only about 0.04 percent of the earth's 4.5 years

of existence. However through greater complexification and emergence of new forms, life increased and multiplied. Philip Clayton writes: “once there was no universe and then, after the Big Bang, there was an exploding world of stars and galaxies. Once the earth was unpopulated and later it was teeming with primitive life forms. Once there were apes living in trees and then there were Mozart, Einstein and Gandhi.”¹

In this long winding and exciting journey of evolution, everything in the universe is ‘genetically’ related; the universe is bound together in communion, each thing with all the rest. We are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. In this world, we humans are neither superior nor the centre of the universe, but we are part of a web of life; by nature we are interconnected. To be is to be related. Three characteristics define the systemic evolution. First, being is intrinsically relational and exists as unbroken wholeness in a system. Secondly the system is in movement – holon-movement – and is a dynamic reality (a whole that is part of other wholes). Thirdly as reality is in movement and in relationship, it manifests endless depth. Reality is not exhaustive; reality is beyond us. Wholeness, relationality and depth characterizes the evolutionary system (Delio 2011: 27).

First time in the history of the universe today we learn about the big picture and the tiny picture – that everything is inter-related and interdependent. We have the star-dust in us. The least particle of the atom is both mass and energy – visible and invisible- and we are told the entire universe is composed of such particles. The same pattern is repeated in the whole universe and is in holon movement. Everything is in everything and each is part and whole at the same time. We are at the same time part and whole. In this on-going forward movement, everything depends on everything. Development needs to take this inter-relatedness into account. The timeless conversation about how we and everything else are connected is now confirmed by western science. It is searching for its own unified field. At the level of our everyday

experience and at the quantum dimension, we and the fundamental units of creation are joined in ways we are just beginning to discover, certainly don't yet fully understand and in many cases, can't even imagine. The Universe is a space alive with a cosmic dance of Nothing hiding as Something, of the waltz of appearance and disappearance, of masked dark energies holding everything together. Clearly, space is not empty!

Our relation to the invisible dimension of space and our understanding of how we are connected to it and influence it is new territory. We need open eyes and ears to for this exploration, for it will shape our evolutionary journey and every aspect of our human experience. Ultimately, it will determine how we as a species shall take our position as citizens of the Cosmos.”² Brian Swimme adds: “The Universe shivers with wonder in the depth of the human” (Swimme 1984: 32).

This inter-connectivity and inter-dependence holds the hermeneutical key to the future of development, more specifically to the understanding of development in the present. Concept of development should take into account the inter-connectivity of all from the beginning. It can't dichotomize between the material and the spiritual. It is one whole. This is the point of departure of my presentation. If development is the hermeneutical key in this triptych, the inter-relatedness is the point of departure in our understanding and evaluation of development. The energy crisis and the conundrum of nuclear energy (powerful and destructive) confirm that the present model of development is skewed and that it is unsustainable. The Occupy Wall Street demonstrations and the Farmers agitations across the globe demonstrate that urgent response is needed to adopt a sustainable model of development.

2.1.Freedom and Tradition within an Evolutionary Perspective

If I am part of the holon movement – part and whole – then my freedom belongs to me as 'whole' where I am complete and ca-

pable of deciding in relation to the whole; if I am part of the whole, then my freedom is relative; my freedom is true when I am in relation with the whole – the holon movement. If the goal of holon movement is evolutionary infinite fullness, then my freedom is related to this future. Freedom is not fully in the present; it is future oriented; yet my freedom consists in acting in the present in tune with the holon movement. Freedom is the present in so far as I decide for and with the future. Freedom is the future in so far as in every act I am creating the future. Freedom is ever in the making; it is our possibility. From an evolutionary point of view, freedom is in going forward, taking holon-movement forward. It is only in ‘moving ahead’ and ‘together’ there is freedom and growth. Everything in the universe is a holon or whole/part. Nothing is a whole entirely unto itself, while nothing is a part separate from everything else. Everything is a whole/part. Cannato mentions that each holon has four-fold capacities of self-preservation, self-adaptation, self-transcendence, and self-dissolution (Cf. Cannato 2010: 151.) Through these capabilities each part is enabling the whole and the whole enables the parts.

For Teilhard “God is the unbroken wholeness in movement, and creation is movement toward God-centered wholeness” (Teilhard de Chardin 1969: 33). To be related to God is to become whole within the whole. We stand within God as it were – Wholeness in the light of the holon movement defines God-world relationship: “Whole person in the whole creation in the whole God.” God-world relationship is wholeness. God is inter-related depth and movement; God is the unbroken wholeness in movement. (Cf. Delio 2011: 33-34). In God we move and have our being. God is the ‘within’ and ‘ahead’ of evolution, calling it forth to its fullness.

Tradition is the accumulated wisdom of the past transmitted to us in an – ongoing way, and moves forward, enriching and enlivening the past. It is parambara = living organism. From an evolutionary point of view, tradition is alive and active in the

present. On the other hand evolutionary pattern shows unpredictability and disruption at the emergence of the new. Today we know that it is not the fittest and the mightiest that evolved. There is unpredictability and surprise at every stage of evolution. Unpredictable in its process yet evolution is carried forward in holon movement. In spite of and because of and beyond 'disruption' evolution is advanced; thus tradition is carried forward. Development as the hermeneutical key in the triptych has to take tradition as the flow of continuity into the debate. On the other hand, tradition is not an unqualified continuity, but a connectivity that is embedded with unpredictability in the past and in the future.

Development holds the hermeneutical key. It can take the holon movement forward and can advance the cause of tradition. In the process it operationalizes freedom. However the dynamics of freedom has to account inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of all. Decisions on development can either carry forward or retard evolution; to that extent it influences tradition and the exercise of freedom. When development respects 'Holon movement', tradition grows in an organic way – related to the origin and yet ever-growing. The type of development defines my freedom as my possibility to evolve the future of evolution.

3. Gandhian Hermeneutic

On hindsight, we could say that Gandhi saw 'development' from this evolutionary hermeneutical angle although he did not use the evolutionary language. However in the immediate context of British colonialism in India, his starting point was 'swaraj' or freedom for self-rule. His seminal booklet on *Hind Swaraj* (1908) repudiates not just the foreign rule, but modern civilization based on power and greed. Even after thirty years of stormy political life, Gandhi held in the revised edition of *Hind Swaraj* that he would not alter anything from it. For Gandhi any theory of freedom has to be rooted in the choice of the type of development. The ancient Indian wisdom articulated that for him. Accordingly

he said: “For ages the oppressed have cried for freedom and yet a thousand man-made statues have failed to give it to them. They can give it only to themselves; they shall find it only in obedience to the Divine Statues which are inscribed upon their hearts. Let them resort to the inward freedom, and the shadow of oppression shall no more darken the earth.” (Gandhi CW XXXVIII: 1). For Gandhi then, true freedom comes when one chooses the path of God-realization and when one orders one’s life accordingly. Ordering of life cannot be done without choosing the right type of development that promotes wholeness and purposefulness.

In this debate on genuine human freedom, Gandhi fundamentally challenged the man-machine paradigm of imperialism. He was not opposed to technology and modernity; he was confronting the technology-driven progress that was the yardstick of development in modernity. In fact spinning wheel represented for him the sum total of a healthy relationship with ‘technology’. “Indeed by redefining modernity and development, the Gandhian vision seeks to relocate the place of science and its practical uses in the overall terrain of human affairs where it can promote mankind’s holistic progress, and not be used for exploitation and violence” (Kulkarni 2012: 55). Human pursuits should be motivated by the divine law. ‘Charka’ (Spinning wheel) represented for him a non-violent machine that ‘helps every individual everywhere in the world’. However he saw the menace that is hidden in the western economic system totally dependent on technology, enabling colonial exploitation and seeking soul-less materialistic civilization. And the menace came true: “In World War II Auschwitz and Hiroshima showed that progress through technology has escalated man’s destructive impulses into more precise and incredibly more devastating form,” Bruno Bettelheim said. “The concentration camps with their gas chambers, the first atomic bomb ... confronted us with the stark reality of overwhelming death, not so much one’s own – this each of us has to face sooner or later, and however uneasily, most of us manage not to be overpowered by our fear of it – but the unnecessary and untimely

death of millions. ... Progress not only failed to preserve life but it deprived millions of their lives more effectively than had ever been possible before. Whether we choose to recognize it or not, after the Second World War, Auschwitz and Hiroshima became monuments to the incredible devastation man and technology together bring about.”³

Hence it is the ultimate search for the end in life – self-realization – that should determine theories of development. Gandhi’s critique of modern civilization should be located within the larger purpose of life – namely God realization. Modernist development ideology tends to curtail true freedom by disrupting the holon movement, and by denying the organic growth of tradition. Hence Gandhi talked about development that is based on *swadeshi* principle: rooted in the here and now, going beyond in an ever-widening oceanic circle, where centre and periphery are everywhere. “In this [*swadeshi*] structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never –ascending circles. 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, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle for which they are integral units” (Gandhi CW. LXXXV: 33).

The outer circumference in this design would not wield power to crush the inner circle but would give strength to all within and derive its strength from it. Machinery will not displace human labour nor their concentration of power in a few hands. Gandhi wanted India to strive for this ideal, and come to her own, rescuing the weaker section of the earth from the exploitation of the western civilization and from the narrow concept of independence. In this *swadeshi* model of many villages forming an ever-widening circle, Gandhi saw the ancient civilization coming alive through its traditions. It preserves its inter-connectivity

and inter-dependence in this ever-widening circle of relationship. To Gandhi, therefore, the kind of development that one chooses provides the hermeneutical key for understanding and advancing tradition. 'Khadi' and 'charka' represented this model of development. In such a model of glocalization, (instead of globalization), I am able to produce what I need. 'Charka' provided him with the tool of productivity at one's leisure and in one's surrounding. It shifted 'production' from the factory to home; it re-located the producer in his/her surrounding. In one stroke, 'charka' connected him with ancient traditions and it enabled individuals to be independent. It was a way of empowering the masses and introducing a new concept of cooperation.

Today many are rediscovering Gandhi as a prophet for the age of communication revolution. Interestingly modern means of communication finds a parallel in Gandhi. Kulkarni says:

Universal connectivity; emergence of new communities in the virtual space transcending the barriers of race, religion and nationality; social media on which new friendships blossom each day; participative democracy at international, national and local levels; steady progress towards inclusive development within nations giving rise to the real possibility of poverty becoming history throughout the world; trans-border collaborative scientific research; new tools to promote and preserve the heritage of arts, culture and indigenous knowledge traditions; the promise of new technologies to arrest and reverse the humongous damage wrought on the environment – all these changes prove how the Internet is promoting the 'khadi spirit'. For they will mean transition from globalization to glocalization, from centralization to decentralization; from power and prosperity in the hands of a few to many; from prosperity defined purely in material terms to that which gives primacy to the richness of culture and ethical values; from unhealthy competition to healthy cooperation; from exploitative attitude towards nature and its resources to an attitude of harmonious co-living (Kulkarni 2012: 56).

It is assumed today that the disconnect between economics and ethics which is dominant in the world since the colonial onslaught to conquering the distant markets will eventually be reduced with the new technology. Like 'khadi' the new technology should enable individuals to determine a mode of work/production that is 'locally rooted' and enhancing one's goal in life. New technology augments the exercise of freedom without distancing one from his/her immediate surroundings and yet it is capable of connecting with the rest of the world. New technology's connectivity is the true meaning of tradition. To see oneself in the web of connectivity from the origins to this day and to see oneself in holistic movement towards greater evolution is to retrace the true meaning of tradition. 'Charka' was intended to be an empowering tool for everyone to be self-sufficient and at the same time to connect with one's surroundings and traditions.

For Gandhi development is aimed at '*sarvodaya*' (development of all) and '*antyyodaya*' (development to the last/end). Development is development when it cares for all and to the last one. '*Antyyodaya*' could also mean development that takes into account the end or purpose of life – development to the end – a never ending process. Connecting *sarvodaya* with *antyyodaya*, one could speak of a development that is inter-connected, respecting the wholeness and aimed at advancing the original intent of all creation. *Antyyodaya* as the end or to the end could signify that end-purpose of all needs to be achieved in and through development.

Gandhian perspective could thus easily be accommodated in the evolutionary perspective. In an evolutionary context, development in its integral meaning has no limit; it is aimed at achieving the end/purpose of evolution itself which is growth and emergence of higher consciousness. That means we can always develop more, further, higher, and deeper. In Traditional Enlightenment, it's possible to become "fully enlightened." In Buddhism, they call it "cessation" or "the end of becoming." In

Evolutionary Enlightenment there is no final resting point – it is about infinite becoming for eternity. Hence the right type of development can guarantee infinite freedom enabling genuine growth of tradition in its full meaning.

4. Roadmap of Compassion

The triptych of development, tradition and freedom, when viewed from an evolutionary perspective, highlights the fact that they need to be viewed in their inter-connectedness. They need to attend to one another; they need to talk to one another; they need to respect one another. From the perspective of holon movement, fields of ‘compassion’ (for want of another term, we choose compassion though it might sound too religious!) is the road map of this triptych of tradition, development and freedom. The morphogenic fields of energy that is in and around everything needs to be approached in compassion. As the Dalai Lama said, compassion is the radicalism of our time. As Vimala Thakar says: “the challenge now is to create an entirely new, vital revolution that takes the whole of life into its sphere. We have never dared embrace the whole of life in all its awesome beauty; we’ve been content to perpetuate fragments, invent corners where we feel conceptually secure and emotionally safe ... Today ... we can no longer go on with this game of fragmentation” (as quoted by Cannato 2010: 161).

The new sense that is emerging is inter-relatedness. Compassion is the result of a sense of the whole. This new compassionate sense is both prophetic and mystic. The prophetic dimension of compassion engages the material and the universe and sees with clarity the whole and the significance of the part and builds them together. “Relationships are based on mutuality and respect and genuine concern for the common good and are inclusive of everyone, including Earth itself” (Cannato 2010: 163.) The mystic calls us for the incomprehensible holy mystery that is being unfolded in and through the evolutionary process, and is unafraid of grace (unpredictable) that is operative in the evolutionary pro-

cess. The prophetic and the mystic should surge into a unitive flow that embraces all and remains all. This happens when we receive the giftedness joyfully – the full acceptance of the power and energy that we are within this evolutionary holon movement – the blessing, the grace that we are; creation that is gifted to us. This reception and becoming the grace is possible in the fields of compassion, that includes a constant dimension of self-dissolution (dying) and enables us to face our every fear, including the fear of death, in freedom. We cannot be whole if we are not free; we cannot be free without self-dissolution. The opposite is unlimited consumption, uncontrolled production and the untold damage to the earth.

5. To Conclude

Wholeness/holon-movement/inter-dependence is the point of departure of my reflection. The choice of the model of development will define our understanding of tradition and freedom. Holistic development, as Amartya Sen argues, is genuine freedom. Wholeness takes the evolutionary tradition forward. We are invited to augment the fields of compassion so that *sarvodaya* and *antyyodaya* could happen.

Notes

1. This quote is from religion-online.org. accessed on June 2, 2012.
2. For details see Ron Friedman; Vistar Foundation Inc. www.vistar-foundation.org. accessed on June 4, 2012.
3. As quoted by Chris Hedge, “The Science of Genocide”, Monday, August 6, 2012 at Truthdig.com. accessed on August 9, 2012.

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