

# Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* as a Political Manifesto

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## Abstract

*Gandhi conceived of this text when discussing Indian politics with his friend Dr. Pranjevan Mehta in London in 1909. He recorded the discussions with him as a Socratic dialogue. While young Indians at that time turned to terrorism, Gandhi advocated a rejection of all aspects of Western civilization and the practice of strict self-control, which was required for non-violent resistance to foreign rule. He argued that the British had not conquered India, but the Indians had given it to them and still kept them in India by cooperating with them. Gandhi mentioned the reasons for his later non-cooperation campaign in this text. It thus was truly a political manifesto. While he had earlier devoted himself to the Indian minority in South Africa, this text was his first announcement of his future work for Indian freedom.*

## Writing a Manifesto

The most famous political manifesto is the *Communist Manifesto* published by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848. Gandhi did not call *Hind Swaraj* (1909) a manifesto and it was certainly a very different type of text but it was also written in order to convey the essential thoughts of its author. Gandhi had so far been the leader of the Indian minority in South Africa and he had not commented on the political fate of the Indian nation. This he now felt called to do as India was passing through a turbulent time. There was a coincidence of two currents of political events: the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the protest, which it aroused, and the victory of the British Liberal Party in the elections of 1906 and the hopes which India's liberal nationalists derived from this victory. The famous liberal political philosopher John Morley became Secretary of State for India in the new British cabinet and announced a reform of the Indian constitution. Gandhi's political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, was in the centre of the political events of the time. He was President of the Indian National Congress and Morley's main interlocutor concerning the reforms, at the same time he had to calm the National Congress many of whose members were upset by the Partition of Bengal and wanted to initiate measures of protest, which

could have stymied the reforms. This partition was originally an administrative affair, which should not have aroused political passions. The Province of Bengal contained at that time also Assam, Bihar and Orissa and was too large. It would have been easy to cut off these other three provinces and leave Bengal alone. But the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, wanted to spite the nationalist Bengalis, who had irked him, and deliberately cut off East Bengal from West Bengal, emphasizing that East Bengal would be a Muslim province. It actually paralleled Bangla Desh, which emerged in 1971. The British solicitude for the Muslims was then also expressed in the reforms when separate electorates were granted to the Muslims. Gokhale did not protest against this electoral operation as it had not yet any important significance at that time. The elected members had no powers, they could only criticize the government, but not affect its decisions. Only when the next reforms of 1919 introduced “responsible government” did the separate electorates become dysfunctional as the British themselves admitted. But they stated that they could not deprive the Muslims of them now as they regarded them as their precious right.

In 1907, even before the reforms were passed, the National Congress split. The “Moderates”, led by Gokhale remained the majority and controlled the organization, the “Extremists” led by Gokhale’s rival, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, rejected the reforms and also continued the protest against the partition of Bengal. The “Moderates” believed that India was not yet a nation, but had to strive to become one, for the “Extremists” India was a nation since ancient times and only had to shake off its fetters. Gandhi shared the views of the Moderates as far as the Indian nation was concerned, but in many other respects he was more of an Extremist. But when he was asked, whether he would start a third party in India, he said that he would serve both Moderates and Extremists. In trying to show how he would do this, he wrote his manifesto.

### **Socrates and Pranjivan Mehta**

Before writing *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi had translated the *Defence of Socrates* into Gujarati and published it in his journal Indian Opinion. The British authorities proscribed it as seditious literature, they did not mind the English version, which they thought would not reach the Indian people. Gandhi admired Socrates and called him a “satyagrahi”. He was also impressed by the Socratic dialogue and used it as the template for the text of *Hind Swaraj*. His Socratic sparring partner in *Hind Swaraj* was no other than his old friend Pranjivan Mehta. Gandhi has revealed this later on. In his Collected Works he stated: “I wrote the entire Hind Swaraj for my old friend Dr. Pranjivan Mehta. All the argument in the book is reproduced almost as it took place with him” (Gandhi 1978: 238). Gandhi put

Mehta perfectly into the role of the Socratic dialogue partner. He probably reported his views faithfully and did not just use his utterances as a literary device. Earlier readers of *Hind Swaraj* did not know about Mehta who was hidden under the anonymous designation of "editor" in Gandhi's text. In the present article Mehta has been acknowledged as the partner of Gandhi, who presented his own views, which were often at variance with those of Gandhi.

Mehta was in many respects important for Gandhi. He was a learned medical doctor but also a lawyer and a rich diamond merchant. Born in 1864, he was only five years senior to Gandhi. He had received Gandhi in London when he had arrived there as a young student in 1888. In 1906 when Gandhi gave up his legal practice at the time of the Zulu Rebellion and dedicated his life to public work, Mehta had provided for his maintenance. The white citizens had mowed down the Zulus with their guns. The Zulus were only armed with spears. Gandhi had organized an unarmed medical corps of Indians who helped both sides. He was so shocked by the brutal slaughter, which he had to witness, that he took a vow to change his life. He pledged to adopt chastity and to give up his work as a lawyer and work only for public welfare. Mehta admired him for that and looked after his worldly needs. He was his friend, philosopher and guide. His views, which Gandhi reported in *Hind Swaraj*, often differed from Gandhi's. Unlike Gandhi, he did not believe in absolute non-violence. This became very obvious when they discussed the Italian freedom struggle led by Mazzini and Garibaldi in *Hind Swaraj*. Mehta had recommended the Italian movement as a good example for India. Gandhi argued that Italy was not yet free. He praised Mazzini's political philosophy who had stressed the duties rather than the rights of man, but he did not favor Garibaldi's reliance on violence. Moreover, if the Indians wanted to follow Garibaldi, they had to take up arms to which they had no access. Gandhi reminded Mehta of this. It is very likely that the discussion on Italy was due to Mehta's initiative, who was by no means a passive partner of this Socratic dialogue.

### **London, 1909: The Background of Writing *Hind Swaraj***

Gandhi's visit to London in 1909 was entirely due to his role as leader of the Indian minority in South Africa and in this respect it was not successful. He could not gain anything for his clients in the debates on the constitution of South Africa, but the time he spent in London was crucial for the development of his political thought. This was a time of revolutionary terrorism in India. Young nationalists assassinated British officers. They also extended their activities to London. Vinayak Savarkar, who later became the leader of the "Hindutva" movement in India, was in London at that time and is said to have procured

the weapon for Madan Lal Dhingra, who shot Sir Curzon Wylie, an officer of the India Office on July 1, 1909. Dhingra had arrived in London in 1906 and studied at University College. He lived in the India House with Savarkar and other young revolutionaries who were incensed in those days by the Partition of Bengal. Their mentor was Shyamji Krishnavarma, who had established the India House and edited the journal *Indian Sociologist*. Dhingra was captured and sentenced to death. He was proud of his patriotic deed, denied the authority of the British court, but faced death courageously. British politicians like Lloyd George and Winston Churchill were impressed by his fortitude. Gandhi, however, disapproved of Dhingra's violent act and stated: "India can gain nothing from the rule of murderers" (Gandhi 1963a: 303). The discussions in London at that time must have sharpened Gandhi's arguments. The encounter with radical Indians radicalized him, too, but in a very different way. He was already an experienced satyagrahi, but now he began to think about applying his ideas to Indian politics.

### **The Lure of Western Civilization and Indian Freedom**

Gandhi's radicalization was expressed in *Hind Swaraj* in his vehement criticism of Western civilization. A modern reader would wonder why this should be of major importance in a political manifesto aimed at the freedom of India. But for Gandhi it was obvious that the Indians had succumbed to the lure of Western civilization and had thus lost their freedom. The British had not conquered India, the Indians had given it to them and were still keeping them in India by cooperating with them. Reading the critics of Western civilization like John Ruskin and Max Nordau, was essential for Gandhi for finding an antidote to British rule. He had come across Ruskin's *Unto this Last* in 1904 and had built his community in Phoenix Farm, following Ruskin's principles. He believed that everybody should earn his livelihood with the work of his hands and did this himself. This went against the grain of all educated Indians who were proud of not having to work with their hands. The most prominent representatives of these educated Indians were the doctors and lawyers. It was a sign of Gandhi's recent radicalization that he attacked them most fiercely in *Hind Swaraj*. He blamed them for the way in which they practiced their professions. Only a few months earlier he had praised the Indian doctors and lawyers of South Africa as the limbs of the Indian community. At that time the authorities planned to stop their immigration. Now he condemned them as worse than useless in keeping with his attack on Western civilization, which is central to his political argument. In this context the doctors, practicing Western medicine, and the lawyers practicing Western law, were the agents of Western rule.

Moreover, the doctors provided only symptom cures and did not really heal their patients. The lawyers were even worse, instead of helping their clients to settle their conflicts, they augmented them to earn more money.

Gandhi highlighted the contrast between Indian and Western civilization. Whereas the Western one was totally evil, the Indian one was splendid. This provoked Mehta's contradiction. He argued that Indian civilization also had many faults. Children were married in India and, therefore, many young girls became widows at an early age and had to live a miserable life. There were also prostitutes in temples. Gandhi did not deny that there are such faults, but argued that nobody would attribute them to Indian civilization. The Indians know about these faults and try to correct them, but the votaries of Western civilization regard its faults as achievements and will not give them up. This sounds like specious pleading and Mehta could have pointed it out, but he let Gandhi get away with it. Gandhi was eager to show in his manifesto that the Indians could regain their freedom by jettisoning Western civilization and that they could easily do this, because they could fall back on their own civilization.

In this context, Gandhi welcomed the unrest caused by the Partition of Bengal in India. He compared it to the first twitching of the limbs of a man waking up from sleep. He was particularly impressed by the Swadeshi movement. The Bengalis boycotted British goods and started to produce such goods themselves. They built workshops in order to make products in their own (*swa*) country (*desh*). This was a step towards one's own (*swa*) rule (*raj*). In 1920 Gandhi practiced that during his Non-cooperation campaign and hoped that the Bengalis would support him in this. But in Bengal of all places Gandhi found the least support for "swadeshi". The Bengalis were disillusioned by their earlier campaign which had collapsed very soon.

### **Hindus and Muslims**

Mehta's next challenge to Gandhi was his reference to the clashes between Hindus and Muslims, which made a united nation impossible. Mehta points out that the Hindus worship the cow and the Muslims kill it. The Hindus turn to the East while praying, the Muslims to the West. Even their proverbs reflect their differences, how can they be one nation? Gandhi replies that no nation contains only members of one religion. Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians must live together in their own interest. He argued that the common enemies had spread the idea, that Hindus and Muslims were hereditary adversaries. But Hindus had prospered under Muslim rulers, and Muslims under Hindu rulers. Only with the arrival of the British, they had turned against each other. Among

Hindus there were fights among the followers of Vishnu and Shiva, but nobody would say that they are not members of one nation.

Mehta then asks about the cow protection movement, which caused strife between Hindus and Muslims in those days. Gandhi said that he worships the cow, but also venerates his fellow human beings. In an agrarian country like India, the cow is of special importance. The Muslims would also understand that. But the cow protection movement had unnecessarily enraged Hindus and Muslims. The Muslims slaughtered cows the more they were protected. The cow protection movement had given rise to a cow killing movement. The British have added to the tensions. They are in the habit of writing history and like to trace conflicts. They are proud of their research. The Indians in their ignorance believe them and fall at their feet.

### **Machines**

Just like his criticism of Western Civilization, Gandhi was also adamant about his rejection of industrial machines and of the railways. In the course of the dialogue, Mehta also asks Gandhi about this subject. Gandhi deplores the exploitation of millhands and would rather return to the traditional handlooms, but he admits that it would be difficult to do away with industry all at once. Mehta then asks him why he does not object to the printing of his very criticism on machines. Gandhi calls this using an antidote to combat a poison. Again this is an issue where Mehta scores a point and Gandhi finds it difficult to controvert his argument.

Gandhi had *Hind Swaraj* reprinted many times and never revised his text. He remained steadfast throughout. In the 1938 edition, however, he suspended some of the demands he had made earlier, but did not change his arguments. He openly admitted that the Swaraj he had aimed at earlier could not yet be achieved. His followers wanted a “parliamentary swaraj” at present, and he had to adopt that goal. Similarly he stuck to his rejection of industrialization and machines, but would not enforce it now. Mehta had died in 1932, if they had discussed these matters in 1938, the dialogue would perhaps have been different.

### **Gandhi’s Quest to Counter Bad Deeds with Good Ones and Avoid Violence**

Mehta endorses this quest, but asks Gandhi to show him historical evidences for the success of his “soulforce”. Gandhi retorts that there can be no such historical proof, because history registers only conflicts and is thus devoid of evidence of love and soulforce. The daily equilibrium which makes up the flow of life is not noticed by history. Gandhi then discusses passive resistance and says, if one encounters an injustice one will refuse to support it. If one has to

suffer for that, one takes that upon oneself. This needs courage. A coward would not dare to disobey a law, which he regards as unjust. If one has that courage, one does not need any weapons, one must only control oneself.

### **The Uses of Education**

Mehta started the discussion of this subject by praising the Maharaja of Baroda for introducing compulsory primary education in his princely state. Gandhi praised the Maharaja, but doubted whether compulsory education would be necessary. The peasant does not need to know reading and writing for earning his livelihood. He gets along without it and behaves well with his family. The so-called educated are enslaved by English education. Gandhi said that our newspapers are printed in English, that we write to each other in faulty English – posterity will curse us for this. Every educated Indian should know his regional language and Hindi, and Sanskrit if he is a Hindu and Arabic if he is a Muslim. Some Hindus should also know Arabic and Muslims Sanskrit. Indians from Northern and Western India should also know Tamil. English books, which are worth it, should be translated into different Indian languages. If we do this we can drive out English soon. This is important for us slaves.

Mehta then asks Gandhi about religious education, and Gandhi confesses that it gives him a headache. The Indian religious teachers of all faiths are selfish hypocrites, we have to deal with them. We have to lead India back to its original purity and first of all we have to drive out Western civilization. Gandhi was keenly aware of the fact that as a member of the educated elite he was out of touch with the Indian people. Addressing the members of the elite he stated: “Those in whose name we speak we do not know, nor do they know us” (Gandhi 1963b: 38). He asked the members of the elite to travel to the interior of India, which had not yet been reached by the railways. There they could become patriots. Gandhi points out again and again that Western civilization is the main impediment to *Hind Swaraj*. This is the main message of his manifesto.

### **Gandhi's Indifference to Constitutional Reforms**

Conspicuous by its absence is a discussion of constitutional reforms, which should have been of importance considering the fact that *Hind Swaraj* was written in 1909, when those reforms were published. This neglect of the reforms was not accidental, but fundamental. Later reforms were also disregarded by Gandhi. He devoted his attention to the constitution of the Indian National Congress, which he regarded as the real parliament of India. While Gandhi sympathized with Gokhale and the Moderates in general, he shared the views of the Extremists with regard to the reforms granted by the British colonial

rulers. They only tightened the shackles, which held the Indians in bondage. Gandhi did not like it when the Congress politicians returned to the constitutional arena in order to turn agitational triumphs into success at the polls, but he had to give in to them out of political expediency. This is reflected in his remarks quoted earlier in his preface to the 1938 edition of *Hind Swaraj*. The National Congress had opted for “office acceptance” under the scheme of “provincial autonomy”. Gandhi had even acted as a mediator in order to make this option possible. This is what Gandhi meant when he stated that the members of the Congress wanted him to work for “parliamentary swaraj” and thus he had to suspend the demands made in *Hind Swaraj*.

Due to his disregards of British constitutional reforms, Gandhi was not interested in British public law and was not well read in this subject. This showed up very badly in his talks with Jinnah in 1944. Gandhi had conceded Pakistan to Jinnah, provided that the two new states would sign a treaty which guaranteed their peaceful coexistence before undergoing partition. Jinnah replied that such a treaty would be possible only after partition, because it would require two independent contracting parties. Gandhi had no answer to this and had to accept defeat. Ever since this event he avoided meeting Jinnah again. P.C. Joshi, India’s war-time Communist leader, a sincere patriot, published a pamphlet at that time: *They must meet again*. (Dec. 1944). But both of them were not interested in another meeting. Gandhi’s basic conviction, so clearly revealed in *Hind Swaraj*, that individual human endeavor was the path to freedom, prevented him from appreciating the institutional preconditions of political life. He could be an institution builder as shown by the reconstruction of the Indian National Congress or by his work for Phoenix and Tolstoi farms in South Africa and his ashrams in India, but when it came to problems such as the treaty discussed with Jinnah his mental equipment was more restricted. *Hind Swaraj* shows both the strong points and the limitations of his thought.

### **Gandhi’s References**

The references, which Gandhi has added to his manifesto, reflect the pattern of his thought. These are both bibliographical references and quotations from important persons. He begins with the works of Leo Tolstoi, whom he admires. He adds the book by Robert Sherard, *The White Slaves of England* (1854), which describes the horrors of early industrialization. He then cites Edward Carpenter, *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure* (1889), in which Carpenter calls civilization a disease, which human beings have to endure and to overcome. A similar author is the Zionist physician Max Nordau, who published *Paradoxes of Civilization* in 1896. He also called it a disease.



Henry David Thoreau, the American author, was important for Gandhi's campaigns of civil disobedience. He had published *The Duty of Civil Disobedience* in 1849 and *Life without Principle* in 1863. Giuseppe Mazzini's *Duty of Man* (1860) taught Gandhi that the rights of man are derived from the fulfillment of his duties. John Ruskin, a critic of Utilitarianism, was of special importance for Gandhi. He quotes his *A Joy for Ever* (1857) and his *Unto this Last* (1862). The title of the latter refers to the biblical legend of the workers in the vineyard of whom the one who arrived last got the same wage as those who started their work earlier. Gandhi translated this book into Gujarati under the title *Sarvodaya* (The Rise of All). This subsequently became the designation of his social programmes. Godfrey Blount's *A New Crusade* (1900) was also recommended by Gandhi. Blount was an artist, a painter as well as a maker of woodwork and woven hangings. He founded the Peasant Art Society at Haslemere. Gandhi's campaign for village crafts reproduced in India what Blount had done in England.

The *Defence of Socrates* was, of course, also listed by Gandhi. Finally he mentioned two works on Indian economic history: Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901), and Romesh Chunder Dutta, *Economic History of India in the Victorian Age*. 2 vols. (1904). He also added Henry Sumner Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West* (1880). It is interesting to note that he did not mention John Stuart Mill, the great liberal philosopher, who would have invariably been cited by most of Gandhi's contemporaries.

In addition to the bibliographical references Gandhi cited quotations from famous writers. He started with Seymour Keay, who had written in 1883 that the British had not at all "civilized" the Indians, because they had already a civilization, which was several millennia old. A similar quote was given from the writings of the French philosopher Victor Cousins. The German Indologist Friedrich Max Mueller, teaching at Oxford, impressed Gandhi and also Friedrich Schlegel, who had published in 1808 *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier* (On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians). The French missionary Abbé Dubois, who had visited Seringapatam in 1820, had reported about the competence of Indian married women, who excelled European women. Another witness, J. Young, was quoted with the assertion that the Indians were of great moral purity and also very frugal and after a hard day's work they were still in good spirits. Thomas Munro, the Governor of Madras, attested that the Indians had a good system of agriculture, their abilities as artisans were unrivalled and they had good schools in every village. Finally Gandhi quoted William Wedderburn, a friend of India, who had once been President of the Indian National Congress. He had praised the tradition of the Indian village community which for many centuries had proved to be a bulwark against political disorder.

Gandhi's references showed that he was well read and could locate testimonies for the issues which were close to his heart. They showed that many causes for which he worked later in life were already important to him much earlier. He was only 40 years old when he wrote *Hind Swaraj*.

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