CHAPTER V
Discovery and Swaraj: Nehru’s Political Spirit and Gandhi’s
Moral Concerns of Nationalism

In this Chapter we would finally compare the ways in which Nehru and Gandhi have formulated their ideas of nationalism. Let us straightaway capture the differences in which their writings appear.

The two main texts associated with Nehru’s idea of the nation and Gandhi’s essential principles of nationalism are of course The Discovery of India and Hind Swaraj respectively. What immediately strikes us about the difference in the two works is how Nehru’s is an historical account while Gandhi’s is a moral manifesto. Nehru begins his ‘journey’ of discovering India as part outsider and insider, being sensitive about the distance that separates him not only from India’s history but also its present rootedness in that history. Nehru sees himself more as an alien interpreter of India’s history and culture, though being an Indian he also finds that all routes to understanding India and belonging to it aren’t closed. For Nehru then, the idea of belonging to a nation doesn’t need categories of immediate historical and cultural access as the relationship rests on an imaginative engagement where both the self and the nation are simultaneously invented vis-à-vis each other. For Nehru, both nation and the individual belonging to that nation are categories of imagination rather than any a priori identity with fixed meanings of being. Nehru was aware that under modernity, a certain unexplored zone of identity had emerged both for the individual in history and his country, where both had to be imagined into existence and made meaningful for each other. The question of the meaning of a nation as well as the individual self had opened up in the new space of modernity as Nehru understood, and required new
ways of imagining. In fact, what Nehru perfectly understood in an intellectual sense was the world breaking up into new ways of existence with science and technology and growth of industrialism corresponding to an epistemological change in the way one understood society and the human being. Nehru termed this entire new episode unfolding in history as ‘the spirit of the age’.

Gandhi on the other hand, is not very much interested in drawing historical relationships with the past. For him the past was fixed in an idea of ethical life from where one has to choose those elements which dissociates itself from the technologically and materially driven modern society. It was the desire for a primitive society where social relations belonged to an immediate sphere of small communities where the face-to-face community reveled in its daily life of simple chores. It’s an idea of society where the concerns were immediate and not mediated by impersonal institutions. For Gandhi, the idea of primitive society is drawn as a starkly radical defiance of modern society and all its manifestations, and hence he gave as much of a defiant picture of it as possible. So he leapt across time and settled for a symbolic representation of the past in the shape of Ramrajya. Since he wasn’t interested in history anyway, the ideal of a primitive society was realizable in a more symbolic manner rather than in any historically feasible explanation.

In India of course, this spirit of modernity entered through colonialism. It is at this juncture that one needs to point out the first difference between Nehru and Gandhi: Nehru’s optimism about modernity was part of his antagonism to colonialism as he saw the latter as an exploitative block in the ushering in of modern, revolutionary changes in Indian society. He formulated his general
principles against colonial rule and his love for modernity by making a
distinction, firstly, between the exploitative intentions of colonialism and the
liberating possibilities of modern ideas. He did not go into conceptual matters
regarding how colonialism might be a cultural product of modernity itself,
something that Gandhi was sensitive to in his understanding. To Gandhi,
modernity was an even greater evil than colonialism itself per se, as to
Gandhi, it is the cultural mores of modernity that was behind this entire
enterprise of colonialism. Gandhi saw no good in modernity and his anti-
colonial battle was primarily aimed at getting rid of the entire edifice of
modernity, with the political victory over colonialism being only the part of a
larger aim to achieve. All those social and cultural problems which Nehru
thought would improve under the aegis of modern principles was to Gandhi
recipes for those very problems getting even deeper. So at this fundamental
juncture, Gandhi and Nehru lay diametrically opposite in their angles of vision.

Let us however begin to look at the differences in their approach from the way
their principal texts, *The Discovery* of Nehru and Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, were
written.

Nehru’s *The Discovery* was written more than thirty years after Gandhi’s *Hind
Swaraj*. Nehru was aiming a double discourse in The Discovery: one, he
wanted to solve the question of belonging to his country’s cultural past, and
two, he wanted to formulate the ideals of the nation state to be. It’s a part
historical and part normative narrative, with Nehru trying to fuse in a political
history through the two mentioned discourses going hand-in-hand. Gandhi on
the other hand, was trying to formulate a moral manifesto by arguing against
popular criticism on his ideas. Gandhi’s approach is comprehensive only
within specific concerns linked to his critique of modernity and the various contexts through which modernity shows its face. Unlike Nehru, Gandhi is not interested in history, political or cultural. His idea of the past is static in nature, from where only certain precepts were taken for the sake of ethical and moral guidelines to be offered to society in the present context. For Gandhi politics or history actually begins under modernity and his response is aimed at the complete erasure of all modern phenomena, and in this sense, is a negative and reactive sense of politics, where the positive elements are those methods of struggle whose values lie supposedly outside modernity. Precisely because Gandhi neither has a cultural nor a political view of history beyond modernity his idea of culture, like his idea of politics is separated in two clear zones: one, where culture is taken as a fixed baggage of ideas and practices which form a static view of culture itself, two, a culture of modernity which has replaced this earlier culture and which needs to be driven out. Though the interesting thing in this is how Gandhi chooses and rejects traditional norms and ideas according to the needs of the modern context and seeks to build a new cultural situation. Nehru, on the other hand, treats the question of culture historically but blames the decadence of Indian culture for its static elements, of its inability to change across time and thus regressing.

Nehru's idea of India's cultural unity as mentioned lies in the cultural heritage of the past. This heritage is of course historically drawn over time and evaluated according to its ideological and aesthetic values. For Nehru, the 'past' is a category in itself, which connotes to both history and culture at the same time. It is this notion of the past to which Nehru links the nation's sense if unity and its own normative of culture along which the entire plural fabric of
the nation is built. In 1950, speaking in Aligarh Muslim University Nehru says something which clearly brings to light how Nehru planned the relation between the Hindu and Muslim communities with regard to culture and history:

"You are Muslims and I am a Hindu. We may adhere to different religious faiths or even to none; but that does not take away from that cultural inheritance that is yours as well as mine. The past holds us together, why should the present or the future divide us in spirit?" ¹

For Nehru historical narrative of culture is what settles the question of the normative idea of the cultural unity among different religious communities. For him, both Hindus and Muslims had the same rights and equal stakes of this cultural past, which they have built together in the course of history. The two communities are thus linked to this very cultural process which can flower presently only on the basis of a national unity which is not religious in character. It is interesting to note that Nehru inspite of his historical understanding of culture refuses to draw it in any form to the political sphere; in fact as we have seen, he not only leaves culture out of the political sphere but also treats the entry of culture into politics as a retrogressive phenomenon. Though he gave lot of aesthetic importance to culture he was also suspicious about cultural sentiments entering the political sphere. Somewhere Nehru says:

"The bulwark of communalism today is political reaction and so we find that communal leaders inevitably tend to become reactionaries in political and

economical matters. Groups of upper class people try to cover up their own class interests by making it appear that they stand for the communal demands of religious minorities and majorities.\(^2\)

For Nehru it seems, when the issue of culture gets divorced from the issues of political and economical issues, it becomes a narrow issue and takes the form of communalism. But a communal issue for Nehru is not an authentic issue at all as it cloaks under the issue of political power on religious lines which is unacceptable for Nehru. So culture in itself cannot be a political issue with demands, etc. Cultures are entities with economic and political aspects which for Nehru are the real issues to be addressed both by society and the state.

For Gandhi on the other hand, the political and economic issues are central only in terms of how a particular society would finally evoke the ethical culture of non-violence and truthful living, with a true regard of the other and his place within one's own nation. For Gandhi, cultural animosities have to be addressed most urgently as they might take on wrong, political proportions which would hinder the most important goal of unity among people of various religious communities. So according to Gandhi, the question of communal disturbances have to be addressed within politics so that every group is pacified and suspicion between them is removed so that they can all unitedly join the process of running the nation together. Gandhi's idea of politics does not have the separate sense of issue which Nehru has, in terms of economics, politics and cultural aspects. In fact even the notion of class is seen by Gandhi in the more traditional framework of the poor and the rich. For Gandhi, ideological aspects were never a conscious part of his politics as he

\(^2\) Ibid. p. 17
felt he was involved only with the issues of truth in politics and nothing besides. For Gandhi, the issues of economics, politics and culture were all linked to a unified idea of a moral and ethical society which he wanted to build in India. Since the issues were taken as a whole within this overall moral picture of society, Gandhi never backed away or complained of communal politics but rather always went ahead in negotiating with it. In other words, he gave communal politics the seriousness it demanded so as to conquer this malice through gestures of goodwill. He urged communities to break away traditional hatreds and suspicions by coming out of their grooves and embrace the other, be sensitive about the other and treat the other’s problems more seriously than one’s own. Nehru wanted all these issues of cultural differences to be blown under the carpet for the sake of economic and political progress. For him, as we have seen, cultural issues were raised mainly by middle class people for the sake of their own economic benefits and behind their desire to gain political power under the garb of community sentiments. This modern notion of the middle class wasn’t Gandhi’s category. He looked at society from the point of view of communities and groups essentially cultural in character, with cultural problems that are somehow linked to troubles in the economic and political sphere. Because for Gandhi, the ethical society needs to be addressed at the cultural level for gaining benefits at the economic and political levels. Of course Gandhi did, as Parel has pointed out, have a conception of modern groups according to professions but this was a conception where people had to give up the ills of the profession and so the idea was more with regard to institutions rather than society.
Another difference in Gandhi and Nehru in terms of politics, something which Partha Chatterjee has separately pointed out and we have mentioned before, is how for Nehru the ultimate objective was the gaining of power for the Congress party, while for Gandhi the idea of political struggle of the Congress party was essential as a oppositional force with regard to British rule while internally it was meant to act as an organization which was primarily responsible in bringing the right kind of social, economic changes in society. For Gandhi the Congress represented a political movement while for Nehru it did not end there. The ultimate political objective for Nehru was the Congress playing a role in the formation and running of the state. Nehru thought that real changes in society could only be brought through political power of the state and hence wanted to lay down the principles of the modern, independent Indian nation state as a bulwark of change in society. For Gandhi change had to be brought through social transformation which needed voluntary work rather than piecemeal reforms through state activities. In this sense, we mentioned, Gandhi can be seen as having a more anarchic view of politics which he must have imbibed from the writings of Tolstoy and others. For Nehru, the political views mostly came from the law making principles of the English liberals and the Marxist notion of the state. Though Partha Chatterjee has pointed out how Nehru did not have a conception of Marxist politics but merely selected the Marxist ideas of the state and wanted changes, so to say, from above. It was more of a bourgeoisie politics desiring to incorporate Marxist ideas with regard to statist changes but turned away from real social transformation through political struggle which Nehru of course desired as his writings showed but was curtailed by the bourgeoisie framework of the Congress party which never allowed him to make those
changes. At the level of principles however, we have mentioned Sanjay Seth's defence of Nehru in terms of an emerging modern, political consciousness in a country where objective and historical conditions weren't suitable enough for Nehru to launch a Marxist politics. Nehru felt that without the Congress, the entire freedom movement would fall apart and it was necessary under any condition to be with the Congress party. Here of course Gandhi and Nehru were of the same opinion because both worked throughout under the political umbrella of the Congress. The difference in views between Gandhi and Nehru were thus not at the level of the centrality of the Congress party but in the methods of working.

Both Nehru and Gandhi stood for secular principles but in quite different ways again. Gandhi wanted a secular society where tolerance would have to be worked out in real terms by each community trying to build up reassuring moves towards others and getting down to actually working for others and sharing their modes of work. This was in the context of the harijans. For Nehru, secularism was more of a state affair where granting of rights and special provisions were needed to primarily solve the problems between communities and groups. Outside this sphere Nehru sought an optimistic desire of people to just turn secularists in their minds and show tolerance towards different religious groups for the sake of a common history and past. Interestingly, though Gandhi did not show any interest in history, he wanted a historical and political solution of the problems between communities through ethical principles of toleration whereas Nehru who was more inclined to historical readings gave no importance to the historical nature of differences between communities and turned problems into pathological constructs. In
fact for Nehru the real historical problem was the gaining of modernity and modern state principles and social norms where cultures would emerge as new entities, hence all questions of historical differences were merely a thing to turn things backward. For him, history at the present moment was about scientific and social changes where cultures could even perish in their old forms. Nehru was quite harsh in this respect. More specifically however, when Nehru did address the issue of culture he drew on the glories of the past and wanted emotional unity of the Indian people under the feelings of that past glory. So though Nehru drew an importance and a normative of the cultural past, he however minimalised it to an emotional zone and kept it outside the space of political and social change in the historical sense.

Though Nehru dismissed the question of culture at the political level, it has been mentioned that Nehru did have a cultural normative in the context of the nation state. Let see how conceptually Nehru draws this cultural normative in the context of his ideas of social and economic changes in society. Nehru tied to foster all material changes through culture while on the other he tried to argue for cultural progress through material changes in society. It is a mutually complementary idea of progress where both culture and materialism would help and improve each other's character. Sometimes it appears that though Nehru made culture the constitutive part of social change, he wished to subsume culture by the material change occurring in the modern world out of scientific and industrial revolutions. For Gandhi, on the other hand, material changes were a part of the overall structure of cultural thought where, once the ethical principle of good culture, free from the ills of modernity, takes place, the material changes, which by themselves are part of a constitutive
idea of society, would by themselves happen and foster Ramrajya. For Gandhi, the ideal of khadi and home made goods were linked to both material and cultural aspects as a whole, where culture stands for a more unique phenomenon, bounded by civilizational norms which are traditional yet open-ended and open-minded, and thus the fostering of material forms of society are in a way part of its cultural ethos of maintaining its unique identity as a culture. So for Gandhi we find a more culturally situated argument even when it comes to the material sphere.

In terms of political principles let's see how Gandhi and Nehru stand vis-à-vis each other. Nehru, in his insistence upon giving both the question of individual liberty and the question of egalitarianism their due weightage can be said to follow such a principle. This principle in Nehru's case is the principle of democracy. It was the fundamental principle, which he felt addressed the twin issues in question in the most equitable manner. Nehru wasn't bothered about the imperfections of the system. Rather, he bothered himself in upholding an imperfect system, which however guaranteed the possibility of two core political values: liberty and equality. Nehru believed in the principle of liberty through equality but also made liberty the precondition of any project of equality. For Gandhi, the question of individual or group, of individual freedom or social change, was hinged upon primarily, the question of 'relations'. What Gandhi sought was good relations between individuals and groups, where the interactive principle is one of non-violence and tolerance. Gandhi didn't really bother much about defining individual or group rights in modern terms, liberal, Marxist or any other. He stood for a socially harmonious idea where people who shun the lures of modern professions, will settle their differences directly
and not through third party interventions, outside the registers of law, and build a more communitarian idea of mutual sharing. Gandhi, hence, saw the questions of liberty and equality from a communitarian standpoint. But the community is not to be understood as any particular religious or traditional idea. The idea of the community in Gandhi is of an experimental nature where questions of value regarding human interactions and regarding the question of self growth are paramount, where the individual would be of course free within any community, but without any need of political definitions for his identity as such.

We now come to the idea in Nehru and Gandhi about how both saw national identity in its relationship to Indian society as well as vis-à-vis the world. Nehru put forth the views of Indian identity being a common cultural identity, which transcended respective religious identities. He held it as a crucial formation of identity with regard to the tendency of various religious identities to conflict with each other. So he presented this pan-Indian common cultural identity as an objective good, as everyone had a reason to pursue it. It is the conception of a shared ideal. This identity is also of a political nature and forms the common identity of a political community. However, within this shared ideal of a political community, the private moralities of various cultural communities are made to exist in the respective private spheres of the community, thus recognising the heterogeneity of the cultural sources of values. Yet these private spheres of cultures too are not regarded as self enclosed in any manner and the common objectives of social change would affect these internal cultural spheres from outside and which can, or rather had to be, adopted from within. There is both a national as well as universal
thrust in Nehru’s objective goals which however is based on the recognition of the plurality, not only of cultures within the nation, but of different national cultures as well. So it is a universality based on plurality. In this regard, the desire for synthesis between cultures that makes the plural come together as a universal community is regarded as a value by Nehru. for Gandhi, national identity was put into two different brackets. The first, in the political sense, is the idea of the praja which means the particular lot of people who are under British domination and who desire home rule. The other definition is of the ethical community with culturally unique features and under a transformative process. The political idea is confrontative but, and here is Gandhi’s twist on the question of a national community in the political sphere, that though the problem is political and has to be fought at the political level, the aim however isn’t merely political as political battles have to be fought with serious cultural and ethical principles where the notion of difference between the colonizer and the colonized would show its mark. For Gandhi, national identity in this sense of an approach is very much an idea based on cultural difference with the outsider, with a political movement which is negotiable with regard to political freedom and at the same time a refusal to culturally hold on to any principles of the colonizer in power. For Gandhi, a national community is essentially a civilizational community where the question of self-dependence is linked to the unique idea of one’s own culture, though individually differentiated across societies in terms of one’s own ways of making choices and reaching goals. This is the modern addition to Gandhi’s otherwise traditional conception of the community as upholding old values.
Lastly, we end with an overall comment on Nehru's and Gandhi's overarching imagination of the nation-state. Nehru's conception of the nation-state creates values which are not always derivative, in the sense that they are not always values springing from internal perceptions is also guided by principles which cater to its own objectified reality and whose values transcend particularistic notions. These values are regarding the common good. It is a kind of integrative ideal. For Gandhi, the nation-state is not any idea from above, and hence isn't linked, as we saw, to any idea of statehood. For Gandhi, the nation-state is more of an emergent entity, constantly in battle against prejudices between human beings and suffers for its idea of truth. For Gandhi, the nation is never free from social evils and political freedom would only mean a chance to solve differences and problems together. For Gandhi, the main question is that of justice, and the nation state stands for achieving justice between people, for the desired goal of unity. Like Nehru, Gandhi's idea is also integrative but it isn't a priori. It rather rests upon an organic means of sorting out the questions of justice among various communities.