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Corporate and Business Ethics in *Hind Swaraj*

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Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* is a treasure of practical ethics for the growth of the corporate world and business community not only in India but on a larger global plane and intercontinental ethos. World is peaceful, growing and moving towards beneficial and fulsome development only when ethics and values operate and sustain the society and community where we live in.

Introduction

Every activity in this world, relating to an individual and a nation, moves on the basis of fundamental ethics, values and policy guidelines without which it is difficult to stand on one's feet and grow sensibly and meaningfully any further. In this matter, just see how really modern is Gandhi even in the opening statement of his *Hind Swaraj* about his perspective on the question of 'contradiction' in human affairs:

I would like to say to the diligent reader of my writings and to others who are interested in them that *I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent.*

In my search after Truth *I have discarded many Ideas and learnt many new things.*

Old as I am in age, *I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh.*

*What I am Concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, ... he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject.*¹

A fundamental continuity of **courage of conviction** is apparent in this explanation of Mahatma Gandhi about finding certain inherent contradictions in his writings and views from time to time.

After reading Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and *My Experiments with Truth or An Autobiography*, another essential *practical* principle is to be found in his stress on setting standards about *when to go for compromise and when not to compromise* in diverse human affairs. It is advisable, as such, for instance, ***never to compromise in matters of***

basic and fundamental principles relating to Truth while always remaining ***eager to compromise and adjust in matters of detail and daily routine*** etc.

Gandhi's *Panch Yama* – from Patanjali's *Yogapradeepa* – such as truth, nonviolence, nonstealing, nonpossession and brahmcharya or celibacy constitute the elementary requirement for any business and community to sustain and develop through the ages. Otherwise, the only alternative that remains is merely chaos and anarchy.

Business and Ethics Linkage

Even after reading a few opening pages of *Hind Swaraj* – written in 1908² -- what surprises most in this booklet is that it appears so deeply belonging to present day age and contemporary challenges of global society, politics and varied economic and professional concerns. What an element of visionary timelessness has Gandhi put into *Hind Swaraj*!

Values of truth, courage of conviction, paradigmatic growth of human vision and understanding and development in a self-respecting global civil society are very much an integral part of Gandhi's Hind Swaraj. No society can prosper without elementary values of nonviolence and peace combined with a number of other practical requirements of ethics and morals. Any type of social, political and economic activity needs basic and lasting support of ethical practices for growth and prosperity. Otherwise, what follows is widespread chaos, anarchism and massive violence leading to gross social misbehaviour, misconduct and massive violence. Such a situation is always highly detrimental not only to society in general but also to business and corporate world in particular.

Corporate and business world grow and prosper only in a primarily peaceful, nonviolent socio-political and economic setup. Truthfulness, honesty, efficiency, loyalty, determination, self-reliance, discipline and professional dedication are also practical *apriori* values necessary for a successful business and corporate activity and establishment.

It is common knowledge that development and prosperity is possible only in a nonviolent and ordered economic and political system. Peace is also a pre-requisite of the process of globalisation in the twenty-first century.

The Gandhian values in *Hind Swaraj* are such that they only help build a truly equitable, egalitarian and self-respecting world through real globalisation based on good governance and e-governance, global civil society and e-business and commerce.

*Despite utter condemnation of industrialisation and mechanisation in Hind Swaraj, Mahatma Gandhi has expressed umpteenth time that he is mainly against such industrialisation, mechanisation and technologicalisation which is harmful to ever expanding opportunities for livelihood, humanitarian concerns and ecologically balanced life styles.*³

Indeed, business prospers when peace prevails. What type of peace and what type of the corporate world for Mahatma Gandhi? In “A Word of Explanation” in *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi says:

It [Hind Swaraj] was written in 1908 during my return voyage from London to South Africa in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa. I came into contact with every known Indian anarchist in London. Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I felt that violence was no remedy for India's ills, and that her civilisation required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection. The Satyagraha of South Africa was still an infant hardly two years old. But it had developed sufficiently to permit me to write of it with some degree of confidence. What I wrote was so much appreciated that it was published as a booklet. It attracted some attention in India [too]. The Bombay Government prohibited its circulation. I replied by publishing its translation. I thought that it was due to my English friends [prohibition or ban on the circulation of Hind Swaraj] that they should know its contents.

In my opinion it is a book which can be put into the hands of a child. It teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate. It replaces violence with self-sacrifice. It puts soul force against brute force. It has gone through several editions and I commend it to those who would care to read it. I withdraw nothing but one word of it, and that in difference to a lady friend.

The booklet is a severe condemnation of ‘modern civilisation’. It was written in 1908. My conviction is deeper today than ever. I feel that if India will discard ‘modern civilisation’, she can only gain by doing so.

But I would warn the reader against thinking that I am today aiming at the Swaraj described therein [in Hind Swaraj]. I know that India is not ripe for it. It may seem impertinent to say so. But such is my conviction. I am individually working for self-rule pictured therein. But today my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of Parliamentary Swaraj in accordance with the wishes of the people of India. I am not aiming at destroying railways or hospitals, though I would certainly welcome their natural destruction. Neither railways nor hospitals are a test of a high and pure civilisation. At best they are a necessary evil. Neither adds one inch to the moral stature of a nation. Nor am I aiming at a permanent destruction of law courts, much as I regard it

as ‘consummation devoutly to be wished’. Still less am I trying to destroy all machinery and mills. It requires a higher simplicity and renunciation than people are today prepared for.⁴

Gandhi is for fully applying his philosophy of nonviolence and Satyagraha to our modern life styles. It is necessary for Swaraj and higher fulfilment of the aspirations of the people of India. Gandhi further says in his *Hind Swaraj*:

I have even seen writings suggesting that I am playing a deep game, that I am using the present turmoil to foist my fads on India, and am making religious experiments at India’s expense. I can only answer that Satyagraha is made of sterner stuff. There is nothing reserved and nothing secret in it. A portion of the whole theory of life described in *Hind Swaraj* is undoubtedly being carried into practice. There is no danger attendant upon the whole of it being practiced. But it is not right to scare away people by reproducing from my writings passages that are irrelevant to the issue before the country.⁵

Corporate Business and Democracy

Corporate business works its way up the ladder of growth in a given social and political setup. This must be recognised in any given situation in order to realise the necessity for needed community action programmes on the part of the business community and the corporate world as a part of their social and political and economic responsibility to the people amongst whom the business of the corporate world is flourishing.

Such functioning and performance on the part of the corporate world is needed for commitment and dedication to the cause of the people in general and challenges of India’s poor population in particular. One’s presence and continued business at a given socio-geographical area puts a corporate unit and even the elected government into a relationship of Trust to the people. Whenever this sense of responsibility and trust to the concerned people and population inhabiting a particular area is broken by the relevant corporate or business unit then it must be the business of the government and the people to see that such a corporate and governmental existence does not remain a source to fleece any common citizen or person.⁶ As such, corporate business and democracy stand and work as repository of *trust* of the people in them – either formally through a legal contract or informally and tacitly through inherent sense of responsibility to those upon

whom the growth, development and future of a company or corporation and government depends.

Gandhi's Talisman and Corporate world

It is a common knowledge that Gandhi has given to the world a “Talisman” for showing the path of truth and practical direction to those who face a situation of doubt and difficulty in dealing with taking a decision for taking a decision to act in a particular way at a given point of time. Gandhi's “Talisman” is as follows:

I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.⁷

For the corporate world, this talisman may be paraphrased as:

Whenever a decision needs to be made, or a policy needs to be created, apply the following test. Recall the face of the lowest grade employee who works for you, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.⁸

It is interesting to know how a top and successful corporate giant of India worked with Gandhi while reposing full trust in him for the upliftment of the poor population of India. This corporate magnate is none other than Jamnalal Bajaj – the founder of the successful Bajaj industries in India.

Gandhi was not yet a politician upon his return from South Africa to India in 1915. Jamnalal was first attracted to Gandhi's reformist trait and his achievement in South Africa. What impressed him most was that Gandhi practiced what he preached. By late 1915, Gandhi's austerity, self-discipline, and self-imposed poverty had cast a spell on Jamnalal. He began to visit Gandhi's ashram (ascetic's abode) regularly and donated generously towards building the ashram. He became a devoted follower and worked to take care of all his worldly needs. When Gandhi shaped his passive resistance movement as a tool for achieving justice for the poor and disaffected, Jamnalal and his followers were inspired. For them

Gandhi was a social reformer more than anything else. Inevitably, Gandhi became drawn into Indian politics. Although some criticized Gandhi's methods as well, the British government became increasingly concerned as Gandhi's popularity with the masses grew and his ability to mobilize them with words and deeds took force. Jinnah was unwittingly drawn into politics through his proximity to Gandhi, despite his lack of interest. When the government official who administered Wardha called Jinnah and asked him to stay away from Gandhi, Jinnah refused. He maintained that he was neither responsible for his friends' views nor would he abandon them for holding views contrary to his own. When Gandhi called for sacrifice for the sake of the nation, Jinnah was the first one to jump in. Gandhi called for renunciation and in response Jinnah gave up all associations with the British government, including a title that had been conferred upon him, and began focusing on how to make rural India robust.⁹

Management and Problem Solving

Modern corporate industrial houses are – among other things related to Gandhian ethics depicted in *Hind Swaraj* – also dependent on the communication channels and their process of solving organizational problems either through top to bottom system or its opposite. Although Gandhi does not write directly on the importance of “communication” in the corporate world, he has indicated in Chapters XIII, XIV and XVI of his *Hind Swaraj* on how corporate world – and rich and poor constituents of such a unit and industry – must act for its own benefit.

As such it may be said that the leadership in the corporate and business units need to turn over the pages of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* not only for day to day functioning, managerial approach, communication patterns but also for policy making and honest quality assurance while working in line with their employees and workers at every level of corporate behaviour.

Organisational behaviour is indeed a very significant part of modern corporate world. In this organisational behaviour perspective, communication, its nature and its line of flow become highly important for the sake of larger health of working environment of an industrial unit. However, upward communication is generally a neglected sphere of research in the area of leadership in organisational behaviour and functioning.

Communication from senior managerial officers to non-managerial staff is mostly considered to be the cornerstone of successful running of an organisation. This, however,

is not a reality because history is replete with examples of the most powerful organisations and chief executives perishing completely when adopting this one-sided top-to-bottom technique of communication alone. Leadership does not mean merely giving commands and rendering orders.

Effective line of authority and meaningful leadership evolve in an organisation when there are multiple types of information channels – even going much beyond the ‘two way flow’ of information within an organisation. There are at least seven ‘models’ and six types of ‘tactics and techniques’. Apart from all these, there have to be informal, non-formal and natural processes of feedback from non-managerial staff to managerial executives, which are necessary for ensuring a healthy and efficient work ethos and conditions.

Therefore, what organisations require is the ‘learning’ type of communication environment where there is not only upward information flow but also a critical upward communication (CUC) and feedback system – both formal and informal. There must also be a professional analysis unit for upward and downward communication from a ‘learning’ perspective. All communication must be professionally weighed at all levels of the organisation.

If, for instance, an educational organisation is devoid of this learning outlook, then neither teachers, nor the administration or students can ever be benefited. Multiple types of upward feedback are indeed a must for any organisation. Even one of the most powerful dictators like Adolph Hitler failed miserably, in the ultimate analysis, just because he did not bother to use this learning perspective of organisation while dealing with the problems of the state and politics.

A relatively young organisation like Microsoft has been so successful because it uses this ‘learning’ module of communication in running its business affairs. Therefore, Lord Acton’s phrase must always be kept in mind while running an organisation. For him, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Lack of proper feedback also leads to disruption. Hence, for the sake of success, efficiency, healthy working conditions and the continued existence of an organisation, upward influences and communication are necessary.

Conclusion

For Gandhi, learning and education throughout life is necessary. But one must not make a fetish out of it.¹⁰ Corporate world must, for the sake of its own prosperity and growth, also keep away from corrupt practices, bribery, use of brute force and exploitation of its employees and general public. Principles of loyalty and devotion to one's own duty are the most important themes for success of any type of business and corporate giants. Otherwise none can prosper perennially.

That is why Gandhi concludes his *Hind Swaraj* with the following words:

Let each do his duty. If I do my duty, that is, serve myself, I shall be able to serve others....

1. Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control.
2. The way to it is passive resistance [Satyagraha]: that is soul-force or love-force.
3. In order to exert this force, Swadeshi in every sense is necessary.¹¹

The Gandhian principle of swadeshi has now changed its perspective especially after India's independence and her emergence as an industrial giant in the larger global economy. Gandhi has expressed very interesting views in this context. He has said on different occasions about the need of engaging in foreign trade and export of various goods when necessary in the process of India entering into international economic activities and global trade.¹²

References and Notes

- ¹ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1939 (revised new edition nineteenth reprint), p. 4. Emphasis added through italics and paragraphing.
- ² M.K. Gandhi, n. 1 (a. a.), p.15 (last but one paragraph).
- ³ *Hind Swaraj* (a. a.), pp. 15-16. *Young India*, 17 June 1926; *Harijan*, 22 June 1935 and 15 September 1946; M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad: 1938, p. 08, Preface by Mahadev Desai. See also Raghavan Iyer (ed.), *The Moral and Political writings of Mahatma Gandhi: Truth and Non-violence*, Volume – II, Oxford, London: 1986, p. 181. Gandhi is against “destructive” and “exploitative” mechanisation only. *Harijan*, 16 November 1939. Ram K. Vepa, *New Technology: A Gandhian Concept* (New Delhi: 1975), p. 170.
- ⁴ M.K. Gandhi, n. 1 (a. a.), pp.15-16. Emphasis added.
- ⁵ P.16, *ibid*.
- ⁶ Gandhi’s idea of trusteeship. Any work on the political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi can be consulted in this matter. See also Anurag Gangal, *New International Economic Order: A Gandhian Perspective*, Chanakya Publishers, Delhi, 1985.
- ⁷ Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. VII, pp. 89 and 08 – 47. <http://www.mkgandhi.org/ggquots1.htm>, http://www.mkgandhi-sarvodaya.org/gandhi%27s_talisman.htm
- ⁸ <http://blog.emptyhead.in/2008/01/20/gandhis-talismantranslated-for-corporate-world/>
- ⁹ B. R. Nanda, *In Gandhi’s Footsteps: The Life and Times of Jinnah*, Oxford University Press, New York 2003, pp. 34, 37, 49.
- ¹⁰ M.K. Gandhi, n. 1 (a. a.), p.77.
- ¹¹ M.K. Gandhi, n. 1 (a. a.), p.90.
- ¹² S. C. Gangal, *The Gandhian Way to World Peace*, Vora, Bombay, 1960, p. 90, 100 – 101. G. N. Dhawan, *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1957, pp. 96, 284, 34i. Emphasis added. M. K. Gandhi, *Nonviolence in Peace and War*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1948, Volume – II, pp. 163 – 164. Emphasis added. *Harijan*, 16 November 1939. Quoted in Ram K. Vepa, *New Technology: A Gandhian Concept*, New Delhi, 1975, p. 170. S. C. Gangal, “Gandhian Approach to Disarmament” paper presented at a seminar on “Perspectives on Disarmament” held under the auspices of *Gandhi Peace Forum* (GPF), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 11 April 1978. M.K. Gandhi, *From Yervada Mandir* Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1933, p. 96 – 97. Anurag Gangal, *New International Economic Order: A Gandhian Perspective*, Chanakya, Delhi, 1985, pp. 29 – 30. N. K. Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad: 1948, p. 42. M. K. Gandhi, *Nonviolence in Peace and War*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad: 1948, Volume – I, Chapter – II and pp. 145, 324. *Encyclopaedia of Pacifism*, London, 1937, p. 100.