

Sheherezade And Hind Swaraj

Most of us have heard of the famous Persian (or is it Indian ?) Book of Fables, One Thousand And One Nights. I think Ghandi would have appreciated this particular anecdote concerning it: A very long time ago we had asked a colleague of ours, Albert Aghazarian, a history teacher at the time, but also an accomplished raconteur in his own right, to help us "brief" a visiting foreign delegation about the political situation under occupation in Palestine. Rather unexpectedly, he began by invoking that famous Book of Fables (sometimes known as Arabian Nights), which had been compiled in Arabic in the medieval period. While the different tales in the book were probably drawn from far and wide Persian and East Asian folkloric traditions, the frame story -of why and how all these tales came to be compiled and related as if they were all part of one larger and overarching tale- is supposed to have originated in India. This is about a ruthlessly sadistic king by the name of Shahrayar. Among his wicked acts he had the habit of betrothing every beautiful young virgin he found living in his kingdom. But it was known far and wide that the marriage would not last beyond the first night. As soon as day broke it was well-known the king would order the poor bride to be beheaded. This gruesome custom continued until one day it fell upon Shehrezade, a beautiful but as it turned out also a very resourceful young maiden, to be called to the Palace. That night, already prescient of the King's plan, Shehrezade began telling the king a fairy-tale, which was so magically enticing that the king, having stayed up all night literally spell-bound listening to it, simply fell asleep at daybreak, thus foregoing his routine order for executing the new bride. Having thus carried herself safely through the first daybreak, Shehrezade managed to reenact the procedure, each night producing a new fable which captured the

imagination and full attention of the king. It is told that Shehrezade managed to do this for the full length of one thousand and one nights, each night with its own new tale, until, finally, the king was so utterly wooed and won over, that, renouncing his villainous habit, he attached himself to this enticing raconteuse who became his life-long queen and lover.

Our friend, Albert Aghazarian, wished by telling this tale to the visiting delegation to explain to his listeners that, besides fighting with guns, also writing and story-telling may be a form of resistance, and that academics like himself were also therefore engaged in the battle against occupation, performing a duty appropriate to them, which is not less valuable than the duty being performed by their fellow guerrilla fighters. Perhaps he had in mind, by “writing” and “story-telling”, also the power of the media, and of public relations, seeing that one major weakness Palestinians had was that the “Palestinian story” was not being told, or heard enough, especially in the West. But whatever he had in mind, the example he used kept from year to year resurfacing in our discussions, eventually succeeding to present itself as a perfect paradigm of Ghandi’s Hind Swaraj!

Let us explain. One might be able to highlight three separate elements which are arguably intrinsic to Ghandi’s definition of Swaraj. We here first have a received reality of injustice -the element of an antithesis between an overwhelming, but also villainous and exploitative military power, represented by Shahrayar the King, and an unarmed and exploited civilian population, expressing virginal innocence, represented by Shehrezade the helpless maiden. This antithesis is a caricature of colonial India, and indeed of countless colonial and imperialistic situations, where political structures are defined by physical power or force. It is a caricature, likewise, of the occupation of Palestine by Israel -Jews wrested by force what became Israel not from Britain (it clearly wasn’t theirs to begin with) but from the country’s and region’s Arab inhabitants.

Secondly, we have, as a result of the above, the following situation: in the face of a realpolitik argument that the population has no choice but either to submit to its subservient destiny or to acquire a military power sufficiently strong to act as lever for political change, Shehrezade's choice represents a third way, one which changes destiny through non-violence. As we know, in Hind Swaraj, Gandhi's interlocutor constantly tries to address this issue with the international relations theory argument that, whether in India, or in other parts of the world, it is only force that can be brought to bear in order to bring about change. Gandhi keeps responding that it is the power of the soul, or of love, which is stronger -whether if brought to bear on one instance in political history, such as resisting British colonial rule, or as a pattern of historical development.

But thirdly, and perhaps most importantly -and this is what perhaps best expresses Gandhi's "non-nationalistic" Swaraj in declaring he would find Indian princes just as inimical to his independence project as British rulers, and, conversely, that he would find a British citizen of India who has come to adopt India's cultural values just as much of an Indian as the next Indian- what Shehrezade manages to do is to win, not by destroying the human being in whose person is embodied the evil which is the enemy, but by "delivering" the human being from that evil -not even "exorcising" it!- thus making that human being an ally sharing the same values. What we have here, it seems to me, is a process of "human liberation", or of identity-transformation, relevant to India then, as to apartheid South Africa later, as much as to Palestine today (where, arguably, "watering down" exclusivist self-definitions in favor of more universal human values defines the only way forward for reaching a just peace).

Summing up these three observations together we have, (a) an initial state of oppression supported by physical force; (b) a recourse to end this oppression

through means other than physical force; and (c), implied by the means deployed in (b), a process of human liberation- in South Africa, for example, a process by which “being human” comes out to define who one is in place of “being a supremacist White”.

It is a common mistake (which, however, assumes the guise of a very respectable theory in international relations and political thought) to assume that what (a) means is that the oppressor, being more in control of physical force, is therefore more powerful than the oppressed; and that, in consequence, what (b) tells us, namely, that it is conceivable, typically, or paradigmatically, to overturn an oppressor by non-violence is mere fantasy, or childish idealism, since only physical force is more powerful and can therefore neutralize, or overcome another physical force. Indeed, carrying on in this vein, it may further be argued, that, contra (c), human beings, and cultures, are fundamentally different from one another, to the point, often, of being inextricably at odds with one another. Winning over others (destroying them) is what counts in the real world, not winning them over to one’s side (transforming or liberating them).

The inherent error in such a line of thinking can perhaps be revealed by the following consideration: While it may be a fact that the distribution of power in the world is not even, it is not self-evident that this uneven distribution, whether among nations or individuals, both is and can only be expressed in a Shahrayar-like paradigm, where the physically or militarily strong, that is, oppress the weak -whether in order to become strong in the first place, or in order to remain that way. Shehrezade herself presented us with a different paradigm. One could have imagined her (in another scenario) colluding with some of the king’s guards and, grabbing the first opportunity in the king’s boudoir, to have stabbed him with a poisoned knife, as part of a prearranged coup d’etat, after which she could have declared herself queen. But that would easily have made her -like it made many a

military rebel, in fiction or in fact- another Shahrayar. Her chosen course, in contrast, drew upon a power other than brute force, one which in effect turned out to be more effective as well as more lasting. This is, in the context, a paradoxical observation, the initial assumption having been that the unevenness of the distribution of power was in Shahrayar's favor. What we now should conclude -given, of course, how the story is told- is that physical force, however insuperable and domineering it may at first appear, can well turn out to be an illusion. It wilts before the right story!

"But this is only a story", it may be retorted. "And a fairy-tale at that". True, but then, so is the Shahrayar paradigm. Returning once again to Ghandi's Hind Swaraj, and to his very perceptive observation in this context, human history -if one were to survey it very carefully and over its entire length- is far more that of interactions worked out through dialogue among human beings than through the use of physical force. It is neither physical force that propels human action, nor therefore that can block or contain that action.

This contention is not, however popular among would-be and actual world-powers. For them, physical force (i.e., its possession and the capacity to use it) is the mainstay of human history, as well as of human security. Indeed, peace itself is predicated, so it is believed, on the possession of such force -the more, the better. Commenting for example on President Obama's Prague speech in 2009 in which the President argued in favor of a nuclear-free world, NYT's columnist Roger Cohen points out (November 11th. 2010) that it is such a world that "brought us World Wars 1 and 2". But while this line of thinking (that physical force is the mainstay of security) is often traced (for "intellectual respectability") to the English political theorist Thomas Hobbes, what is often ignored is that Hobbes argued from the premise that each person has a right to defend themselves (by force), to the conclusion that such right is eventually

vested in a supreme authority which alone comes to be in possession of executing this right on behalf of all. But this conclusion is totally flouted by proponents of the physical force view as we observe nuclear Israel's Bibi Netanyahu, for example, egging on the United State (during his visit to Washington D.C. mid-November 2010) to take action to preempt by physical force Iran's nuclear designs. In this view, ultimate physical force (e.g., nuclear power) can only be the privileged possession of some nations but not of others. Neither the United States nor Israel argue, in Hobbesian fashion, for divesting themselves of nuclear power, and of "vesting it in the hands of an overall authority", such as the United Nations. In practice, in other words, proponents of this view content themselves with the Hobbesian portrayal of the world as a jungle, and go on to conclude that they should therefore be in possession of the strongest weapons in order to achieve security for themselves.

Scholars may debate whether the world is truly a jungle (in the negative sense) where human security can be procured only through the exercise of physical force, or is made one (again in the negative sense) by the very exercise of that force. But clearly, if Hobbes-inspired social contracts have succeeded in containing or putting the lid down on individual violence within States, that inspiration has not succeeded in reaching the world stage, where the threat to use physical violence remains the guiding principle of many of those States, and therefore of international relations. Here again, the question may be raised whether the mere existence of such State actors, as in the case of the mere existence of violent predators in pre-State situations, is the exception -therefore to be shunned- or the rule -and therefore to be emulated. Ghandi would have argued that the use of physical force by such State-actors does not constitute human history, but is a mere interruption of its natural flow. At the very least, therefore, such State-actors should be shunned rather than emulated. Some would argue that Ghandi's diagnosis describes perfectly the case of Israel- a matter which may well

be worth raising in the following concluding remarks:

There is a basic and widespread “gut feeling” many Arabs have -and which many Israelis are aware of and will point out as “proof” that, notwithstanding their statements about peace, Arabs have never accepted and will never accept the existence of Israel- that Israel is a mere “interruption in the natural flow of history” rather than being a part of it. One fairly innocent way to explain this feeling is by the simple fact that people normally tend to view violent events in their lives as fleeting episodes. Arabs may thus view Israel in like manner -as a violent “episode”, having come into existence by physical force, and continuing to sustain itself by such force. But in spite of its vastly superior military force it is neither perceived to have managed to have achieved its set goal of providing security for its citizens (whether in its own eyes or in the eyes of its Arab enemies), nor has it succeeded in normalizing its existence in the region through genuine peace treaties with its neighbors. Indeed, if one of the major reasons thought to be necessary for its creation was or is to provide security for the Jewish people, it is highly questionable, given their demographic concentration today in one geographic spot, coupled with the bellicose nature of their State, whether their present condition indeed provides them with the best safety. In other words, “mighty” Israel may paradoxically be a model-case proving the futility of physical force. A seasoned Israeli officer, commenting on this, once explained it by saying that Israel has indeed managed to win all its wars: it is just that they have all been the wrong wars!

Physical force, then, is not Israel's path towards a future of normalcy, or towards freedom from fear for the security of its citizens. The key to that freedom lies in the heart of the Arab peoples, wherein it has planted itself. Looking ahead, and inspired by Ghandi's observations of human nature, and the Sheherezade paradigm, it is reasonable to assume that the main challenge for Palestinians on the other

hand will be to discover and then to master the skill of eliciting or extracting the manifold non-violent resources of power available to them, and using these, to bring about the identity transformation (or liberation) of their enemies in such a way as to win them over, thus creating the political space in which Jew and Arab can live under one system as equals. Paradoxically, what this conclusion implies is that the real "masters" in the Israeli-Palestinian relationship, as in the Shahrayar-Sheherazade one, are the occupied Palestinian rather than the Israeli occupiers.

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