

My Response to Krishna Gandhi

GSR

August 24, 2025.

One of the first lessons to students of sociology is the distinction between human and animal society. Students are told that there is something very unique about humans that even the closest cousins to Man in the animal kingdom lack is CULTURE. We then define culture as creating a double reality in human society viz., what is and what ought to be. That is, only human society has norms, values, morals etc. So only we have what is legitimate and what is proper; what is right and what is wrong. This is essential to not only understand human behaviour but to explain why we behave the way we do. That is, we have to explain our social actions more in terms of the normative reality than our instincts or drives, as is the case with animals. All this elementary lesson in sociology has become necessitated because Gandhi attributes to Nature what is perhaps a human value. The normative order that is unique to us is responsible for our strength as well as our suffering! Today we eat not when we are hungry but when it is lunch time or dinner time. This is true of many other things, the most regulated of our instinct being the sex drive that is found responsible for most our psychological problems by Sigmund Freud in his 'Civilization and its Discontents'. Be that as it may.

Swaraj as an idea is in my view a human creation that may well be against what is often called human nature! Hierarchy perhaps is what is 'natural'. The great human value of 'equality' that has driven us from the French Revolution is cultural and civilizational. The fundamental mistake of Krishna Gandhi seems to be that he assumes as natural what is eminently social. Emile Durkheim was the first to argue that the social reality created by human collectivity is logically prior to the individual and hence cannot be explained by the individual or the biological. He dubbed such biological and psychological explanations as reductionism, that is reducing a higher level of reality to a lower level. He showed, for instance, that explanations offered by Max Mueller or Tylor and others about the origin of religion in man's fear of the unknown and such natural phenomena as lightning or thunder as reduction of what is eminently social. He argued that religion is born in the notion of the 'sacred' found in all societies, even among the most primitive Australian aborigines. If there is nothing 'natural' about religion, then the idea of Swaraj cannot be attributed to Nature.

I must end this note by saying that the urge to show Swaraj as natural and therefore inviolable is rather specious. Swaraj can always be shown to be a very desirable ideal of mankind, less violent to Nature, more 'human' than others, like capitalism or socialism.