

An Inconsistent Mind: Exploring Rationality in Gandhian Thought

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Abstract: This paper re-explores the Gandhi-Tagore debate to investigate the play of rationalities within it. In the process, the paper revises the varied ways in which rationality has been studied and tests their efficacy in providing a conceptual framework to understand events like the aforementioned debate. The paper eventually tries to show that there is much more to reality than the sum of rationalities and irrationalities and argues that Gandhi opens the possibility of developing a method premised on inconsistency which may prove useful for social sciences to make sense of non-rational forms of knowledge.

Keywords: Rationality, Irrationality, Consistency

1. Introduction

In every human mind, whatever its intellectual development, there exists an ineradicable fund of primitive mentality... It is not likely that it will ever disappear ... For with it would perhaps disappear, perhaps, poetry, art, metaphysics, and scientific invention – almost everything, in short that makes for the beauty and grandeur of human life

-Lucien Levy Bruhl

Economists and sociologists have never been perceived to be the best of friends. At some juncture, somewhere, some economist had the audacity to comment that Sociology as a discipline is the '*science of the irrational and lacking a conception of rationality*'. Whatever the merits of that claim, such an assertion supposedly held enough offensive capacity to invite reactions from some sociologists who decided to respond to such allegations. Among them was Milan Zafirovski(2005). Reversing the offensive upon the economists, Zafirovsky listed out the various ways in which sociologists study rationality - conceptual and methodological pluralism, theoretical and empirical richness, treating rationality as a complex social phenomenon, differentiating economic and non-economic rationality, acknowledging the social character and foundation of (economic) rationality, and contrasting epistemological or scientific rationality and ontological or real life irrationality, including the revelation of the irrationality of extreme (economic) rationality (Zafirovski, 2005: 85).

Clearing the air once and for all, he asserts (quoting from Herbert Simon) that unlike what economists think, the 'assumptions of rationality are essential components of virtually all the sociological theories.' While enlightening us with this ultimate truth he nevertheless intends to maintain the uniqueness of sociology and hence intends to distance the discipline from economics which holds similar assumptions. For this, he takes refuge in the thoughts of Max Weber:

Much of classical sociology is predicated on rationalistic method, that is to say a conceptually pure type of rational action, with irrational, especially affective, variables being treated, for the sake of a typological scientific analysis, as factors of deviation from such a type ... (However) classical sociological theory is rationalist, as leading classical sociologists point out, only for the reason of methodological convenience and to that extent it is not legitimate to interpret this procedure as involving a rationalistic bias of sociology, but only as a methodological device (ibid. 86-87).

Starting from Comte's understanding of the 'logical laws of the human mind' to Spencer's Darwinian conception of the rational actor as that who is the fittest to survive, from Marx's understanding of revolutionary action as rational and theology, mysticism as irrational to Weber's four ideal types of rationality (Instrumental, Value rational, Formal, Substantive), from Durkheim's explanations of social facts being rationally founded on reason and truth to Marcel Mauss' observations about rationalism in modern times, Zafirovsky lists it all out only to conclude:

'The conception of rationality looks alive and well in classical and post-classical sociological theory. On this account, classical sociology can even be characterized as the science of the rational, albeit in a different sense, manner and degree than orthodox economics the key difference is that classical sociology investigates the actual presence and salience of rationality, or lack thereof, in social life rather than a priori assuming that rationality, especially its economic mode, is omnipresent (ibid. 107).

Without getting into the strength of the arguments presented by Zafirovsky, it nevertheless exposes the degree of affinity that the discipline of sociology has towards the idea, concept, and category of the rational. So much so, that an effort to distance sociology from the rational invokes strong reactions touching the realm of offense. I am interested in exploring precisely this aspect of the discipline of sociology. While identifying itself as a rational discipline, how equipped is sociology to make sense of social phenomenon that fall out of the realm of the rational as it has been defined? I intend to do this through an analysis of the debate between Mahatma Gandhi- Rabindranath Tagore with respect to the Bihar Earthquake.

2. The Debate

A massive earthquake shook the North Indian state of Bihar on January 15th, 1934 in which the death toll was estimated to be above 10000. The earthquake became the subject of a famous debate between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore who took a rather contrasting stance on this issue. The timeline of the debate stretches from 18th January 1934 to 19th May 1934, almost four months. The debate showcases both Gandhi and Tagore's 'belief systems, attitudes to life, and more specifically, their notions of what constitutes the relationship between natural phenomena and the realm of human morals within a broad Hindu framework of understanding (Paranjpe, 2011: 2). It is with the expectation of exploring the same, I intend to lay out the debate for the reader before I proceed.

On January 24th 1934, while on a tour down south to campaign against untouchability and collect funds for upliftment of Dalits (or Harijans), Gandhi linked the 'Act of God' with a manmade calamity of untouchability:

'For me there is a vital connection between the Bihar calamity and the untouchability campaign. The Bihar calamity is a sudden and accidental reminder of what we are and what God is; but untouchability is a calamity handed down to us from century to century. It is a curse brought upon ourselves by our own neglect of a portion of Hindu humanity. Whilst this calamity in Bihar damages the body, the calamity brought about by untouchability corrodes the very soul. Therefore, let this Bihar calamity be a reminder to us that, whilst we have still a few more breaths left, we should purify ourselves of the taint of untouchability and approach our Maker with clean hearts (ibid. 4).

In response, after seeking clarification from Gandhi, Tagore replied:

It is all the more unfortunate, because this kind of unscientific view is readily accepted by large sections of our countrymen. I keenly feel the inequity of it, when I am compelled to utter a truism in asserting that physical catastrophes have their inevitable and exclusive origin in certain combinations of physical facts. Unless we believe in the inexorableness of the universal law in the working of which God himself never interferes, we find it impossible to justify his ways on occasions like the one which has sorely stricken us in an overwhelming manner and scale (ibid. 5)

Tagore, taking forward his argument logically, questioned why several injustices and sins through history tend to go unpunished by God and suggested that holding such views was more suited for Gandhi's opponents, the traditionalists. This debate however was not just restricted to Tagore and

Gandhi. Gandhi was expressing his views openly in public speeches and also publishing his views in his newspaper Young India, which sparked significant public debate around the issue. Questions were raised about why the earthquake came only in Bihar when untouchability is nationwide problem. Questions were raised as to why god chose earthquake and not some other punishment. The burden of providing a proof for his assertion was also logically put on Gandhi. Replying to such interventions Gandhi comments:

Even as I cannot help believing in God though I am unable to prove His existence to the sceptics, in like manner, I cannot prove the connection of the sin of untouchability with the Bihar visitation even though the connection is instinctively felt by me (ibid. 6).

Expressing his inability to decipher laws in the workings of God, which might account for explaining why God chose a particular punishment and why Bihar was chosen, Gandhi argued that 'I am not God. Therefore I have but a limited knowledge of His purpose (ibid. 15). In his own admission, the connection that he drew between earthquake and untouchability was actually a matter of guess work (ibid. 15). In his effort to make sense of calamity, Gandhi refused to attach value to certainty of knowledge and instead laid more stress on ethicality:

This is not to say that we can with certainty attribute a particular calamity to a particular human action All that I mean to say is that every visitation of Nature does and should mean to us Nature's call to introspection, repentance, and self-purification I would even go so far as to say that even the recent earthquake would not be too great a price to pay, if it enabled India to cast out the canker of untouchability (ibid. 9). Apart from the non-certain and ethical content of his speeches regarding the earthquake what comes out interestingly is also Gandhi's refusal to reject Scientific explanations but simply relegating them to a position of relative irrelevance:

I would like you tomorrow to enter into the sanctuary of your hearts and examine the causes of this calamity. Geologists and such other scientists will undoubtedly give us physical and material causes of such calamities. But the belief has been entertained all the world over by religiously minded people, especially by the Hindus, that there are spiritual causes for such visitations. I entertain the honest and deep conviction that such visitations are due to the great sin that we have committed towards humanity and to God(ibid. 14). Lastly, Gandhi refuses to see the spiritual and causal connection he draws,between the earthquake and untouchability, as a connection of exclusive causality between two facts:

That my guess may be wrong does not affect the results named by me. For what is guess to the critic or the sceptic is a living belief with me, and I base my future actions on that belief. Such guesses become superstitions when they lead to no purification and may even lead to feuds. But such misuse of divine events cannot deter men of faith from interpreting them as a call to them for repentance for their sins. I do not interpret this chastisement as an exclusive punishment for the sin of untouchability. It is open to others to read in it divine wrath against many other sins (ibid. 16).

Based on the above account we can safely conclude that Gandhi preferred a non-scientific mode of understanding the world. However, such a conclusion is most probably bound to be refuted by anyone familiar with Gandhi's views on Science:

By its learning and research, science is real education. It applies the mind to the reality around us. It promotes objectivity and grounded in the rigorous and disinterested pursuit of truth, forcing out all prejudice and illusion (Govind, 2009).

Hence, the only conclusion we can safely draw is that Gandhi is, in practice and thought, inconsistent. Based on the data presented, how are we to make sense of Gandhi's conception of the causes of the earthquake? Is Gandhi's understanding of the earthquake a rational one? If not, is he, even more importantly, Irrational? Answers to these questions cannot be answered without dwelling a bit on how the Category of the Rational has been defined through history by scholars, and especially for our purposes, by sociologists.

3. Rationality: Definitions and Conceptions

One of the most popular theories around the concept of Rationality is the 'Rational Choice Theory' (hereafter RCT) which basically sees Rationality as one and universal. In this conception, all societies have same kind of rationality. It undertakes the following assumptions: It is possible to rank desirability of available outcomes; outcomes are weighed against each other before one acts; the likelihood of achieving what one desires depends upon the choice; one choice discards other choices; changes in goals may actually be explained in other ways (D'Avray, 2010: 31). RCT finds widespread expression in mainly economics, but also in political science and sociology, where the rational nature of an individual is determined on the basis of his/her choices. A rational individual ideally, after weighing his options, chooses that commodity that has maximum utility or produces that commodity that is likely to bring highest profit. This theory however, seems to fall in discomfort when it comes to explanation of irrational behaviour and is also accused of overestimating the extent to which rational

calculations explain social behaviour:

Rational choice theory does not provide much help with the explanation of behaviour apparently motivated by altruism and/or ideology. The problem is not just to explain altruism, for which evolution might account, but to make sense of the variety and content of ideological convictions that affect people's choices, overriding personal interest in different directions (ibid. 41)

Going by the above explanation, RCT seems inadequate in explaining Gandhi's linkage of the earthquake with the sin of untouchability. Did Gandhi weigh his options as to whether he should give scientific or metaphysical explanations for the tragedy? What made Gandhi link the earthquake to untouchability and not to other social evils present in Indian society? Did he calculate that a spiritual explanation will motivate more people to donate for the victims of the earthquake? Was donation a desirable outcome that Gandhi aimed at? If so, then Gandhi would be rational. And yet, we know, that more than a call for donation, his was an appeal for moral and ethical self-introspection. Also, he would have reasonably predicted adverse and contradicting reactions from other quarters, from leaders opposed to him, from scientists, from rationalists, and so had risked getting tagged off as a traditionalist and a promoter of superstitions. For a figure of that stature, such an attempt would amount to risking his public image. Rationality generally lies in reducing risk and promoting certainty of result. Hence, it can be said, with some conviction that Gandhi's linkage of Earthquake with Untouchability was not a rationally calculated choice but was rather an expression of a deep instinctual belief which remained unshakable in the face of strong rationalist opposition. In this case, is Gandhi irrational because he refused to change his views despite being presented with valid rational counterpoints? Tagging him as irrational would as such be hurried and improper at this moment.

The picture now becomes more complicated. While RCT treats rationality as universal, there are others who treat rationality as something plural. Maurice Godelier, for instance, holds:

There is no rationality 'in itself', nor any absolute rationality. What is rational today may not be rational tomorrow, what is rational in one society may be irrational in another In the end, the idea of rationality obliges us to analyse the basis of structures of social life, their reason d'être and their evolution (ibid. 50)

This contradiction between universal and plural conceptions of rationality allows us to divide scholars into two camps – the unifiers and the relativists (Tambiah, 1990: 115-116). Among the unifiers are identified – Alastair Macintyre, Peter Winch, Donald Davidson, Bernard Williams, Charles

Taylor and Stephen Lukes. Among the relativists are identified Ludwig Wittgenstein, Clifford Geertz, Barry Barnes and Ianhacking. Unifiers, when talking of rationality, usually 'refer to 'logical rules, and to the constraints of "consistency" "coherence" "non-contradiction" as they are used to articulate or theorise in abstract terms from a disengaged perspective, or to spell out propositions and to justify the rules of inference, both deductive and inductive, or to judge the appropriateness of means used to reach stated objectives' (ibid. 115). Rational choice theorists would fall under the category of unifiers. The unifiers hold that there is only one rationality which is based on universal rules of logic and inference although this theory is mostly developed in the west:

'This kind of 'rationality' has been, everyone will assent, most self-consciously formalised and systematised in the West, and the comparative question relates to the grounds and contexts in which, and the social and religious phenomenon to which, this conception of rationality can be used as a universal yardstick (ibid. 115)

Relativists, in response to the universalistic idea developed in the west, hold that there are multiple rationalities. Transcultural judgements are difficult to apply between cultures and run the risk of misapplication of rational categories to poetic, aesthetic and affective phenomenon. Going by this yardstick, testing Gandhi on the standards of rationality set by the unifiers, appears to be misplaced from the perspective of the relativists who would say that what Gandhi showcases is perhaps a different kind of rationality. This multiplication of rationalities, however, in my opinion, begs for multiple definitions of what those rationalities mean. Somehow, the number of definitions of rationality do not keep up with the number of ways in which the concept is used. Rationality, in short, has become a category that is used in a manner that is rather common-sensical. And as rationalities multiply, so do irrationalities. However, everything that fails the test of rationality does not automatically become irrational. Irrational is not the same as non-rational which then begs the question of definition of the category of irrational. Charles Tylor defines irrationality thus:

Logical inconsistency may seem to be the core of our concept of irrationality, because we think of the person who acts irrationally as having the wherewithal to formulate the maxims of his action and objectives which are in contradiction with each other (ibid. 117)

Rationality does not predominate and everywhere, universally, we can find some form of irrationality or diminished rationality. While the merits of the preference for the rational may not be beyond sufficient doubt, one can nevertheless understand that a discipline working in the rational

scientific epistemology finds comfort in searching for the concrete, the observable, the calculable, and the rational. Concepts have the power to shape world views and indeed create their own world. Thus, overdependence on the concept of rationality creates methodological problems and leads to an ignorance of the various shades of social reality.

It is here that one must discuss the case of Azande poison oracles, where the death of a chicken gives one answer and its survival another (D'Avray, 2010: 53). Evans Pritchard has pointed out how all death to Azande is murder by witchcraft. When this happens, the poison oracle is called upon to detect witchcraft and identify the guilty. Pritchard points towards the intellectual consistency and criticality of Zande notions, epitomised by the cross check system which is similar to the use of control samples western science. The process goes like this:

First Test. If X has committed adultery poison oracle kill the fowl. If X is innocent poison oracle spare the fowl.

The fowl dies.

Second Test. The poison Oracle has declared X guilty of adultery by slaying the fowl. If its declaration is true let it spare this second fowl. The fowl survives.

Result. A valid Verdict. X is guilty (ibid. 57).

This critical cross checking arguably saves Azande magic from being vulnerable to refutation by Western science. Azande activity appears so different to an individual trained in western rationality because the convictions and axioms are so different (ibid. 57). African cosmologies explain away everyday experiences in terms of actions of personalised gods which are theoretical constructs that stand for order and regularity similar to how modern science explains things through impersonal concepts like molecules and waves. The difference between the personal and the impersonal concepts can be summarised thus:

The African theoretical idiom is in a personalised mode because for Africans social relations are the main source of concern, and of their sense of order, while the world of nature is alien and beyond their control. The modern western scientific idiom is in a impersonal mode because the reverse is true – nature and its working are better understood, and they provide the idiom of causation even with regard to social relations, for these are less understood and less predictable (Tambiah, 1990: 90)

While these similarities are important, nevertheless African thought ends up getting the tag of inferiority to because it is ‘ignorant of the experimental method’ and cannot entertain ‘alternative conception to its dogma’. Even if this analysis is correct, it does not automatically apply to cultural contexts outside Africa. After all, neither the west nor the non-west is homogeneous. Does the explanation given, of African theoretical idioms, provide insights to look at Gandhi afresh? This paper argues no. While Africans supposedly cannot entertain alternative conceptions, we have noticed in the earthquake debate how Gandhi regularly engages with counterarguments coming from a rational scientific perspective and never outrightly rejects those explanations. On the point regarding the ignorance of the experimental method in African idiom, the following comment by Gandhi is a case in point:

... my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open; and I do not think that this fact detracts from their spiritual value. Far be it from me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments, I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist, who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, keeps an open mind regarding them. In experiments I come to conclusions which, if partly right, are sure to be in part wrong; if I correct by other experiments, I advance a step, my old error is in part diminished, but is always left with a tinge of humanity, evidenced by its imperfection (Govind, 2009: 57).

Here we facing with a scenario where the rationalised distinctions between the scientific and the non-scientific, which play out in western scholar’s analysis of non- western cultures, has been significantly dissolved to the extent that the defined concepts of science and rationality cannot possible produce explanations that properly fit the case. After all, while the laws of nature may have been beyond the control of the African, such a scenario did not definitely define the context in which Gandhi was giving his speeches. So his emphasis on a Godly explanation for the earthquake was definitely not a matter of compulsion but of choice. But was this choice rational? Based on the review of scholarship on rationality which we have done till now, perhaps it will be safest to say that Gandhi was irrational because, in sync with the definition of irrationality, Gandhi probably give himself a reason that is different from the ‘Real’ causes of the Earthquake. And yet, making this judgement would not be appropriate as yet for we now go on to look at Max Weber’s views on rationality.

Max Weber is known for his twin conceptions of instrumental rationality and Value

rationality. The former simply refers to 'putting two and two together logically and causally', i.e. matching causes and effects, means and ends. It is significantly close to the rational choice theory and is understandably seen as a universal form. Was Gandhi, in his linkage of earthquake with untouchability being instrumental? Was putting earthquake and untouchability together similar to putting two and two together? The answer is no. For Gandhi does not establish between the earthquake and untouchability a connection of direct causality. He instead draws two connections. One between untouchability and God, and another between god and earthquake. While establishing this intermediary link with God, Gandhi refuses to lay explicit any logical coherent (instrumental) laws that can explain God's choice of sins that He wished to punish and also the choice of punishments. With this recognition I move forward to Weber's more complex formulation of value rationality which he defines as thus:

A person acts purely in accordance with value rationality, when he or she acts without thought for the foreseeable consequences, in the service of his or her conviction of what seems to be demanded by duty, self-respect, beauty, religious teaching, piety, or the importance attached to a 'cause' of any sort whatsoever. In the sense attached to it by our terminology, value rational action is always action in response to 'commandments' or 'demands' to which the person doing the action believes that they must respond. Only so far as human action is oriented towards such demands do we wish to speak of value rationality(D'Avray, 2010: 61)

Does Gandhi, via this definition, appear to be value rational? Firstly, Weber does not clarify whether by 'act' he means only physical actions or does it also include physically static, mental processes of making sense of social and physical phenomenon. Let us assume that it does include mental process of making sense of the world. Secondly, Gandhi cannot be seen as acting 'without thought for foreseeable consequences'. A possible consequence, that we can safely accept he did give thought to, was the change in attitudes towards untouchability. Whether the consequence is actualised is another matter. Thought for this consequence automatically infuses a tinge of instrumentality in Gandhi's speeches regarding the earthquake. And yet, we know that an exclusively instrumental explanation is misleading. We may now ask, what are the convictions that Gandhi has? One clear conviction is that untouchability is a sin. However, identifying a conviction is not enough. Did Gandhi derive this conviction from religious teaching or was it simply an expression of his conviction in the desirability of equality? The causal explanation for adoption of a conviction is necessary. And it is here that Weber's theory fails. I would like to argue that while it may be possible to convincingly

argue that a certain action is guided by convictions, it is however extremely difficult to explain which conviction is guiding which action, especially when the actor does not explicitly lay it out. In such a scenario, a lot depends on the researcher's own convictions which play a role in interpreting a particular action as value rational. The impending broadness of the definition of value rationality and unclear vagueness of the process of making connections between particular convictions of an individual and his/her particular actions, allows the researcher to actually explain away the actions of individuals as value rational, without in actuality needing to explain much.

In addition to the above limitation, one must also keep in mind that convictions, on which value rationality is based, in themselves can fail the test of rationality. They may, for instance, be inconsistent and constantly changing, a condition identified as signifying irrationality. Gandhi incidentally was accused throughout his lifetime of being inconsistent, an accusation he embraced:

I must admit my many inconsistencies. But since I am called "Mahatma", I might well endorse Emerson's saying that "foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds". There is, I fancy, a method in my inconsistencies. In my opinion there is a consistency running through my seeming inconsistencies, as in nature there is a unity running through seeming diversity (Gandhi, 1971: 314)

This non insistence on consistency, which incidentally is identified as a bare minimum criterion for rationality, is also linked with Gandhi's lack of interest in developing a coherent theory or ideological system. Incidentally it is coherence and consistency that sociologists seek to exhibit in their works when they set out in the field to identify patterns of behaviour which can then be explained rationally. Stanley Tambiah points out, taking the cue from Lucien Febvre, how the use of the word 'system' started only in the mid seventeenth century and the word 'rationalism' was christened somewhere as late as the 19th century. He goes further to point out how from the vocabulary of those times all the isms such as Theism, Pantheism, Materialism, Naturalism, Fatalism, Determinism and Idealism etc. were all absent (1990: 89). Thus, the rise of isms can safely be said to be a modern post-enlightenment phenomenon fuelled by the triumph of reason and with it the fetishizing of logical rules, consistence and coherence of thought. Incidentally, Gandhi evaluated the existence of isms rather negatively and constantly distanced himself from what is termed as Gandhism:

I love to hear the word: 'Down with Gandhism. An 'ism' deserves to be destroyed. It is a useless thing. The real thing is non-violence. It is immortal. It is enough for me if it remains alive. I

am eager to see Gandhism wiped out at an earlier date. You should not give away yourself to sectarianism. I do not belong to any sect. I have never dreamt of establishing any sect. If any sect is established in my name after my death my soul will cry in anguish (Hardiman, 2003: 9)

Thus, in Gandhi we find, and he is surely not an exception, a method of making sense of the world premised rather on inconsistency as opposed to rational sociological methods premised on consistency and coherence. And as rational methods premised on, and trained to find, consistency, they are at best capable of tagging off inconsistent behaviour as irrational or, rather vaguely, conviction driven.

4. Conclusion

Based on the arguments presented above, this paper concludes that Gandhi's understanding of the Bihar earthquake clearly defies all definitions of rationality and while Gandhi may be tagged as irrational due to his inconsistency, he nevertheless hints towards the presence of a method which is premised on inconsistencies or rather short term non-fetishized consistencies marked by fluid flow of thought in all directions. It is in exploration of this method that may lie, for sociologists, the key to making sense of alternative systems of thought, alternative ways of making sense of the world and alternative motivations for action and organisation for society. It will also, perhaps, serve the purpose of putting a break on the ever increasing conceptions of rationality and end its commonsensical usage in academics, in the process paving way for newer concepts more equipped to make sense of this world marked as it is universally by lack of what is universally defined as rationality.

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