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Q3(b)

"State does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress." - Mahatma Gandhi. Elucidate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- Place **Gandhi's** line in **Hind Swaraj** and related writings: the modern state as a machine that crushes swaraj
- Explain individuality as moral self-rule, not consumer isolation
- Show how **satyagraha**, swadeshi, and a minimal or transformed state follow
- Elucidate; do not only praise

Revision summary

Gandhi treats individuality as moral self-rule, the root of progress, not as market isolation.

The modern state, allied to industrial civilisation, takes over conscience and livelihood and turns persons into administered subjects.

Hind Swaraj and the ideal of **enlightened anarchy** prefer a transformed, decentralised order to a powerful machine of good.

Satyagraha, ahimsa, spinning, and panchayats are methods for growing individuals who can resist unjust law.

Ambedkar's caution that the state may still be needed against caste must qualify any simple anti-statism drawn from the quotation.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi wrote that the state does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality, which lies at the root of all progress. The sentence is not an anarchist postcard. It is a moral theory of freedom. Individuality here is swaraj: self-rule of the person, without which collective swaraj is only a change of masters.

Body

What individuality means for **Gandhi**

Gandhi's person is a moral agent who must answer for means as well as ends. **Ruskin**, **Thoreau**, and **Tolstoy** stand behind this. The individual experiments with truth. Progress is the growth of that capacity, not the growth of railways, armaments, or a census of subjects. When the modern state - with its police, professions, and "civilisation" that Hind Swaraj (1909) indicts - takes over conscience, hygiene, and livelihood, the person becomes a cog. **Hobbes's** mortal god is, for **Gandhi**, a spiritual disaster even when it is efficient.

Individuality is not **Mill's** aesthetic eccentricity alone, and it is not possessive individualism. It is the courage to say no to unjust law, and the discipline to purify oneself before demanding that the world change. That is why fasting, spinning, and jail-going are political methods. They produce individuals who cannot be fully administered.

How the state destroys it

A centralised state claims a monopoly of violence and of welfare. It professionalises politics. It conscripts. It may even do good - plague control, famine codes - while teaching dependence. **Gandhi** feared **Western industrial civilisation as a partner of this state: wants multiply, character thins, and the village republic dies. He therefore preferred enlightened anarchy** as an ideal, and a minimally violent, highly decentralised order as a practical approximation: panchayats, trusteeship, bread labour.

He was not blind to order. Some state remains among imperfect people. The hierarchy of values is the point: when the state becomes the principal agent of progress, it has already destroyed the root of progress.

Political implication

- **Satyagraha is individuality in public:** suffering binds the state without matching its force. **Ahimsa** keeps the opponent's individuality intact. **Ambedkar** warned that saintly anti-statism can leave caste untouched. That criticism must sit here. **Gandhi** still names a pathology: the moral person absorbed into party, plan, and police.

Flow diagram

Modern state -> Destroys individuality
Individuality -> Swaraj as self-rule
Swaraj as self-rule -> Progress
Remedy -> Satyagraha
Remedy -> Village republic
Remedy -> Minimal violence

Conclusion

Gandhi's charge is that the modern state kills the moral individual on whom progress depends. Swaraj is self-rule before it is a constitution. The remedy is decentralisation, **satyagraha**, and a severe limit on what the state may do in the name of the people. The warning remains, even where a constitutional state is still needed to protect those whom village custom would crush.

Facts & figures

Hind Swaraj, 1909

Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation and the machinery of the Western state as spiritually impoverishing.

Enlightened anarchy

Gandhi's ideal in which each person rules himself so that the state withers in daily life, even if some government remains among imperfect people.

Satyagraha

Public self-suffering that asserts individuality against unjust law without destroying the opponent's humanity.

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